

Sweet, Sweet Devil

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Sakura knew there would be a culture shock moving from the warmth of California to the cold streets of New York. What she didn't know, however, was how easily she would find herself falling for this stranger despite every instinct in her body telling her not to. But the truth is it cannot be helped once you've become the targeted prey of this sweet, sweet devil.

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Chapter 1

Hello, old friend. It's been some years and I have finally decided to come back! This is a work that has loosely been taunting me for some time and I felt would be good practice to get back into fanfiction. Please enjoy and feel free to share your thoughts, feelings, desires and overall feedback. Nothing is set in stone after all.

She let herself lean back in the armchair and busied her fingers with the throw pillow in her lap. It was an interim solution to mask her jittery nerves. This was an inevitable feeling since she was, after all, surrounded by new people she was being acquainted with through a new co-worker... who she met through her new job... in a new city. She decided to give herself a pass and quietly let out a breath as she tried to focus in on what was being said on the couch in front of her.

Her co-worker was narrowing her eyes at the man on the floor between them. "You promise you won't take it out on me if you don't like what you see then?" Her tone was playful but her expression hinted at her lack of tolerance in that moment. She shuffled a deck of ornate cards, her blood red nails grazing their edges.

The man let out a childish whine. "Just read my cards, Ino!" He drummed his hands in his lap and ended up jamming his elbow into the coffee table next to him, causing his beer bottle to shake. "Ack!"

"You idiot! You're already a drunk mess, it's not worth the trouble. Sakura," she turned her dark blue eyes onto the quiet girl in the chair, "come help me pull together some more snacks." As she rose from her velvet couch she placed the neat stack of tarot cards onto the table and sent a warning glare at Naruto, who was still nursing a bumped elbow.

"Does anyone need more to drink?" Ino led Sakura towards her kitchen, her kimono-esque robe gliding gracefully behind her. Sakura knew right away Ino was a stylish woman from the moment she first met her, but the silk slip dress and plum lipstick let Sakura know there was more to this woman's lifestyle than she would have initially guessed from working with her at the clinic. She wasn't generally insecure, but couldn't help but feel a little plain in jeans and her grey chunky knit sweater next to this moody bombshell.

"Just bring out the two wine bottles we brought, less walking back and forth." This was Shikamaru's suggestion, who sat in the chic armchair next to Sakura's.

"I'll come with you to grab some water," Hinata quickly tagged along, not wanting to burden anyone with bringing her a glass. She was a friend of Ino's from a previous job at a posh store in the East Village years ago and now shared this apartment with. She was so sincerely kind-hearted and reserved Sakura could hardly make sense of their friendship. That said, she immediately felt a connection with her.

The women migrated to the cozy kitchen hardly out of earshot from the living room. It wasn't that Ino's apartment was small, but it was New York, and space was at a premium. The fact alone that she had a separate bedroom was a luxury in itself. Sakura had just moved into her studio apartment two weeks prior and was barely accepting the reality that was her 400 square foot box. Before moving she had watched tiny house shows in pure disbelief and now was wishing she had taken some notes. Ino's apartment felt like a retreat by comparison. Maybe 'retreat' wasn't the right word here. 'Indulgence' is more fitting when you take in the deep luxe fabrics, warm candles, and lights strung on the windows. It was something out of a catalogue with glittering crystals and stones displayed on her bookshelf and plant vines draping whimsically from gilded pots around the space.

"So do you hate us all yet?" Ino was scanning her fridge as she asked, but Hinata timidly watched for Sakura's reaction from the sink.

"What! Not at all!" Sakura knew Ino was mostly joking, but suddenly felt self-conscious of her lacking contribution to the conversation back on the other side of the apartment. "I'm slow to warm up, I'm sorry I'm a little lame in that way."

Her blonde host handed her a brick of cheese and small stick of salami. "I'll let you cheat your way in by having you cut up these guys for us. Naruto will be begging to walk you to the train later, I'm sure of it." She stuck the tip of tongue out between her teeth in a coy fashion and Sakura felt herself shed a layer of anxiety in that moment.

"I'm really happy Ino invited you over," Hinata's voice was small but warm. "It's hard finding people in a new city."

A knock on the door was heard over the music someone had put on moments earlier. Ino slipped around the two women to answer it.

Her ears perked as the melody revealed itself to be one she knew too well. Sakura recognized the song playing as one she had heard at a concert back in college on the West coast and then played for weeks on repeat after to relive the moment. Her mind suddenly filled with the glittering confetti raining on the crowd that warm night and remembered how fearless she felt about her future there in California, with her internship, her oceanside apartment, with Kiba-

"Sasuke, this is Sakura who I was telling you about." She found herself unintentionally directing her dumb blank stare at this new guy Ino had just let in. Her face heated as she tried to recover from her thoughts and this gorgeous tower of eye candy was no help at all.

"Sorry, I completely spaced out there. I'm Sakura," she extended her hand towards him. He held his stare on her as he offered a firm handshake.

"Sasuke." While he didn't really smile or anything, his eyes told her he was in some way amused.

"Sasuke and I went to college together here in the city, so we go back a bit." Ino nudged him, but he ignored her attempt at sister-like banter and took his black coat off to hang. Sakura eyed his equally black jeans, thick cashmere sweater and leather boots. He was a vision out of a catalogue yet inspired a thread of a certain feeling down her spine to her heels... what was it? More anxiety? No, this was different, more instinctual. Fear?

"What the hell are you doing here, bastard?" Naruto yelled, throwing a pillow at the taller man. He caught it with little effort and turned to his attacker with a devious smirk.

"You mean you didn't miss me?"

"Not even if you were gone for five hundred years!" He met the smirk with his own and pulled Sasuke in for a hard hug.

Sakura felt her neck was still warm from her awkward introduction, but noted the small flutter in her gut while she watched Sasuke recline on that couch. He fit too perfectly on it and quickly made himself at home with his arm extended across the back. Ino already had a glass of red wine in hand for him. It was clear he was a frequent guest of Ino's and she wondered what the exact nature was of their friendship during those years in college.

Before her mind wandered too far into the dark rabbit hole, she took to the cutting board to prepare the platter. Hinata saddled up next to her with a smaller cutting board to help with the cheese.

"He's scary good looking," The pixie cut woman whispered, not looking up. "And fully embraces it."

Sakura's face warmed once again, feeling like a child who was caught trying to hide a stolen treat.

"What does he do?" She tried to keep her eyes on the salami as she finished slicing but couldn't help stealing one more glance.

"Finance," Hinata answered, oblivious to Sakura's sneaking line of sight. "But I wouldn't say he fits the Wall Street stereotype. He can be pretty odd."

As Sakura greedily stole yet another look at him, she was met by hooded black eyes and thick lashes over a half empty wine glass. He held the stare even as he put his glass down on the side table next to him and formed a smirk that sent her eyes darting straight back to the cutting board.

The two women brought out their assembled charcuterie board, grabbing the room's attention. Hinata also brought out a dip with crackers and reminded Ino of a few other finger foods they had for later. Ultimately they would be serving up more than a dinner's worth of food, but if you don't label it dinner, you don't need to set a table.

"I see we were reading cards tonight?" Sasuke asked, taking a bite from the platter.

"I was going to, but I decided against it when I remembered how awful Naruto is when he doesn't like what the cards say." Ino explained with a dismissive hand. Naruto groaned on cue.

"You should read Sakura's cards then." Ino sent him a skeptical glance but Sasuke gave no sign of acknowledgement. "Have you ever had your cards read before?"

"No, can't say I have." She shifted in her seat completely caught off guard and aware of everyone looking at her. Surely she had a loose idea of tarot cards being a mystical way to tell your fortune, but only for fun. "I'm guessing you have?"

"All the time. It's something Ino and I got to know each other very well through, didn't we?" Another smirk graced his lips and Sakura's curiosity only amplified.

Ino sighed, then pointed her attention at Naruto. "Since I know you'll just be asking later, I'll do one reading for you. Sasuke, you shouldn't

push anyone to have their tarot read. If Sakura wants me to do a reading for her she'll ask herself."

"I don't push anyone to do anything." The dark haired man clicked his tongue and Naruto made no effort to hide his excitement.

Sakura watched on as Ino dropped herself to the floor in front of the coffee table and had Naruto identify three cards. He was seeking guidance regarding his current apartment situation and was trying to determine whether to stay where he was or move to a new place with new roommates. Ino helped him pull three cards: Two of Cups, Six of Pentacles, and the Emperor - Self, Situation and Challenges.

Everyone leaned in to examine the ornate cards, especially Naruto. Sakura looked around and wondered exactly how seriously these people were taking this.

"It seems you're finding yourself filled with love and idealism. I would think as you and Hinata are becoming more settled in your relationship you are finding a sense of completeness in yourself." Hinata burned bright red and immediately turned her face to the window. Naruto giggled and nodded with pride.

"The Pentacles tell us you're strained by an imbalance," His toothy grin faltered. "There is someone in your life too dependent on the other and-"

"That's why I need to move! It's that damn kid Kohonamaru!"

"The challenge is The Emperor card," Ino finished, weighing her cheek on her fist. "You have to find a way to balance what you want with what is overall best for the situation."

"ARGH! Why do I have to be responsible for him? He's so annoying! I just want to dip and move somewhere else." He crossed his arms with defiance and Ino rolled her eyes.

"What a drag," Shikamaru sighed and collected the deck to shuffle himself.

"This is exactly why I didn't want to do this." Ino huffed and knocked back the rest of her wine.

The familiar pop of a wine bottle being uncorked sounded through the room and Sasuke swiftly began pouring the red liquid into his host's empty glass. "Then let's just drink instead."

It was a good hour or so later that Sakura had tried to determine if she had consumed what could equate to a whole bottle's worth of wine by that point. She hadn't moved much from her arm chair and wondered if when she stood to walk if anyone would notice a drunk sway. Her bladder didn't care and if she didn't get over herself soon, she'd have much worse things to be embarrassed about.

Ino was lounging on her side almost to the point of laying down on the couch. She gestured widely with her wine glass as she ranted about how the clinic's receptionist was too nice and needed to not expect any interactions before coffee was consumed. Shikamaru was half listening from his arm chair and Hinata was snacking and giggling with Naruto over a plate of hummus and carrots.

Sakura couldn't help but feel grateful for Ino's invite and lucky to feel so welcomed by these people that very well be her first friends in New York. Sure, they were a bit odd, but she had her own quirks that would find their way out eventually.

"Need a little more?" She looked up to see Sasuke towering over her chair with the last of too many wine bottles in hand.

"I think it's best I say no," She smiled sheepishly, her bladder still fresh in her mind.

"Hn," He tipped the remaining wine into his own glass. "Do you eat?"

"O-of course I eat, what do you mean?" If he had any awareness for how close his hips were to her face, he must have been determined to ignore it. She didn't like talking to him from this angle and he showed no sign of leveling himself more appropriately with her.

"You couldn't have eaten more than two slices of cheese since you've been here."

Sakura didn't know how to respond since she realized that was all too true and made her feel all the more foolish after all that wine. He was also clearly observing her. A small smirk formed on his lips that she didn't notice.

"I'm going to pick up a pizza around the corner for everyone. Come with me."

"Well," her eyes traveled over to Hinata who tilted her head to the side.

He leaned down next to her, "The fresh air will probably help clear your head a bit." Add another blush to the list that night.

With that and what she would chalk up to liquid courage later, she slowly stood. Ino immediately took note, "You're not leaving are you?"

"We're going to pick up a pizza to bring back." Sasuke responded smoothly.

"I'm going to run to the bathroom first." Sakura excused herself and Ino locked eyes with Sasuke.

"So I take it you're already making moves to ruin this friendship for me?" She sat up and crossed her arms below her breasts with a scowl.

His face revealed something sinister. "What in the devil would make you say that?"

Chapter 2

I'm getting warmed up and want to make sure I don't get impatient myself and ruin this story for all of us, myself included. That said, I'm hoping for some feedback so we can all get what we want with this story. Without any further ramblings, Chapter 2.

It was cooler out than when she had arrived at Ino's apartment earlier that evening. One would consider this a classic chilly October night, but Sakura was still adjusting from her California beach breeze and not handling the sharp wind that scraped at her cheeks. She somehow hadn't checked the time the whole night but figured it was pretty late since there weren't that many people out walking around. They were at the very outskirts of Williamsburg, a neighborhood gentrified to its core. Sasuke walked silently beside her, unbothered by the cold and hands resting in his coat pockets.

The cold fortunately sobered her a bit. She decided to give conversation a go. "Hinata told me you work in finance?"

"I do."

"Where do you work?"

"Do you actually care to know that?"

She was stunned by his curt response and couldn't tell if he was teasing or being straight rude. Her face took on an expression of annoyance, as did her tone. "I'm sorry, I was just trying to get to know you."

They walked in silence until he gestured to turn a corner. "I hate small talk, it's nothing personal."

Soon, but by her measure not soon enough, they made it to the local pizza spot. There were one-dollar slice shops along the way, but

Sasuke considered the high majority of them trash and knew exactly what kind of pizza he wanted. In a last minute decision, he opted for two pies instead of just one.

"I'm a bit of a glutton when I drink." He explained, his grin not sharing an ounce of shame.

"A little bit of an ass, too." She regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth and she cautiously looked at her companion. To her relief, he had a wide smirk and an amused eyebrow lifted in her direction.

"Hn. I'll take that as a compliment." He pulled out a thick band of bills from his inner breast pocket and peeled off what she believed was a hundred dollar bill for payment. The man behind the counter gave a small salute of appreciation and the pair started their walk back.

"Um, how much were the two pizzas?" She hesitantly asked, not comprehending what she had just seen.

"Are you offering to pay me for them?" He grinned at her nonchalantly and she felt a wave of disbelief and slight annoyance pass through her. He could see her patience running thin and found it was just too easy to tease her. "Are you feeling more composed now?"

She looked away for a moment. "I don't appreciate the judgement, alright?"

A couple of young guys were walking in their direction. As they were about to cross paths Sakura felt a large hand on her arm coax her in front of him as they continued walking. They were back at Ino's building and Sakura jammed the buzzer for her apartment.

"I found it cute," he shrugged, holding the apartment building door open for her once it unlocked. "But you're cute now, too."

She blushed and thanked him for the door, walking ahead of him on the stairs up. Her jacket rode up just enough towards the small of her back. Not that having any witnesses would change his behavior, he let himself appreciate her fitted jeans. His fingers twitched around the cardboard.

Ino would not be pleased with him.

"Yes! Finally!" Naruto cried out, half getting up and then finding himself back on his floor cushion.

Sakura spotted a tumbler glass of brown liquor in front of him and matching ones in the possession of the others. Without a doubt she was all the more grateful she had gone for the walk. Hinata helped clear the coffee table so Sasuke could put down the pizzas. The drunk blonde hovered over her without any regard for personal space, eyeballing which slice he would snatch first.

"How was the walk?" Ino asked, lightly nudging Sakura when she sat next to her on the couch.

"Colder than I was expecting," She offered, unsure if she was referring to the weather or her companion. Ino tried to read her new friend's face but Sakura got up to grab some much needed water from the kitchen.

Sasuke saw Ino raise an eyebrow at him but he only responded by raising one of his own. He hung his coat back up and leaned around Naruto to grab a slice before the guy could inhale half the pie. "Did you not eat lunch or something?" He griped with a side eye.

"Shut it, bastard. I'm a growing boy!" Naruto grumbled without swallowing the slice filling his mouth.

The raven-haired man took a seat in the open arm chair next to Shikamaru and pushed his sleeves up to avoid any sauce conflicts. When Sakura came back she quietly thanked Sasuke for the pizza again and took a slice on a plate to the couch. It was more of a

statement of fact than opinion to say Sasuke was attractive. There was something off about him, but he was hauntingly handsome. Looking over at him, she noticed a black serpent's tail twisting along the outside of his arm and crawling up his sleeve. Once again, he caught her in the act and she felt the weight of shame hit her stomach. She abruptly turned her body to face Ino. Her mind's eye was branded with his stare and she wanted nothing more than to claw it away.

"I think I'm gonna have to head home soon." Her green eyes expressed true guilt but also something else Ino couldn't place. She restrained herself from sending a glare at that very moment to Sasuke.

Shikamaru narrowed his eyes in their direction. Ino was always annoyed by Sasuke's tendencies, but this seemed to hit a different nerve. A real one.

"I suppose I can't force you to stay forever," The blonde propped her elbow on the back of the couch and leaned her pale cheek against her fist. "How are you getting home?"

"I'll probably get a car, I don't think I could figure out the trains this late." Sakura pulled her phone from her back pocket to pull up her app. Within a few minutes she gauged it was time to head down.

"I'm so happy you made it," Ino cooed, standing to pull her friend into an embrace. "We're hanging out again soon." She gave her arms a quick squeeze before passing her to Hinata for hug.

"Get home safe," Hinata was smiling but Sakura could have sworn something in that smile was less than happy in that moment.

Naruto pulled himself to his feet to fold her into a tight hug but both Shikamaru and Sasuke remained in their seats, so she gave a little wave before departing. The front door clicked shut behind her and a silence filled in. Sasuke lowered his eyes to the glass in his hand

and paid no mind to the burning glare from Hell his host was directing his way.

Ino was used to his antics, his patterns, his lifestyle. It was how they came to know each other in college and why their paths became so intertwined. She thought back to the gritty venue in the middle of the Bushwick warehouses. It became a second home with all the time she spent there seeing secret shows and finding one-night romances. It was also where she first set eyes on Sasuke. The door to the space opened to a steep set of narrow stairs usually with a guy at the top checking IDs. The walls inside had a mix of odd and mediocre photos, graffiti and framed posters. Some string lights from Christmas sales years ago were some of the only lights along the perimeter of the room and over the windows. A small bar sat in the back below a fake stuffed marlin.

She couldn't recall the band that played that night, but she could remember the grungy crowd and angry guitars. Her friend Gaara had introduced her to this place and had her join him that night. He said he was expecting to see a few other friends there she would like. Her first two years of her college social life had been mostly comprised of stereotypical parties and regrets, but also her ongoing at the coven she had joined soon after moving to New York. It was how she met Gaara, an asexual man with a polar opposite personality type but deeply similar interests. He had nodded at Sasuke when he spotted him near the bar and brought Ino over to introduce them. Sasuke had been a childhood friend of his and a close friend of their coven.

When the band took a break, Gaara went to the toilet and Sasuke invited Ino out to the balcony for some air. They each held their cheap liquor in their plastic cups and leaned over the railing to create some privacy from the others crowding the filthy ledge. The Manhattan skyline was in sight behind the many rooftops and glittered in the summer haze. He asked how deep her beliefs ran, which caught her off guard for a moment. She let him know her mother and father raised her on Wiccan beliefs since she was a baby. Sasuke asked if she practiced magic and although she was

used to the question, there was something lurking in his words that she couldn't see. Almost as soon as she said 'yes' he chuckled his cup down to the street and grabbed both her hands in his. Her breath seemed to have been robbed from her lungs in that moment, the feeling was unreal. His energy was like a smoldering black hole she would never have fathomed encountering before and she wasn't sure if she ever should want to have. This was right when Gaara came outside and with just a glance knew what Sasuke was up to.

While the raven-haired man was a close friend, he warned him not to try and take advantage of Ino's good nature. He would never hurt her, the man promised with his word, black eyes unblinking. Sasuke never broke a single promise to Gaara in the years they had known each other. He just needed some help, he explained. He needed help with something, a favor, and a Witch's seal was the most tangible solution he could ask for.

Ungrateful beast, Sasuke Uchiha.

"I asked, just this once, if you thought you could behave. Just this once." Ino whispered. It was mostly to herself at this point. She felt the edge of her sink press wickedly sharp into her back and put more weight on it so as to punish herself for letting Sasuke even meet Sakura.

The corner of his mouth turned upwards. "I thought I was being pretty good."

Shikamaru could hear their conversation and groaned. "Oh fucking can it, Uchiha. You couldn't have been more hungry even if you starved yourself for a week-"

"What the hell would ever persuade me to do that?"

"I like her." Everyone looked at Naruto, his fingers coaxing the last slice towards him across the box. "She should hang out with us again." Hinata was sitting on the floor next to him and silently rested her cheek on his shoulder.

"Until Sasuke ruins everything as usual, sure." Ino spat, fuming as she picked up the last soiled paper plates and lip-stained glasses.

Naruto turned to Hinata, still chewing. "You liked her too, didn't you?"

She nodded fervently, "I did, I just..."

Naruto stopped eating for a moment and looked her directly in the eyes. "What is it?"

"She reminds me of something odd I can't place. I'm not sure, I might just be projecting so it could be nothing." She shrugged it off. Naruto tried to as well, but wasn't completely satisfied with her answer.

When he turned his attention back to the room, he noticed Sasuke's chair was empty and the man was by the door grabbing his coat again.

"Leaving so soon?" He bit out.

"Since I apparently have such an insatiable appetite, I'm going to go take care of it." Sasuke sneered, stepping into the kitchen where Ino was washing plates.

He stood right behind her and placed his hands on both corners of the sink. There was no reason to hide her feelings in the slightest, so when she turned around to face him with cold eyes and no nonsense he met her with a sinister smile.

"You look like you have something on your mind you'd like to share." The backs of his fingers grazed her arm.

"I hate you." She grit out.

He winked and backed away to the door. "See you,"

The room was dimly lit by a red light emitting from a lamp in the corner. A robe of some sort of scandalous material was draped over

it and was surrounded by other lost garments on the floor below.

The bed was rocking and rocking and rocking, each jolt slamming into the wall mercilessly. A woman cried out for her god, over and over and over. But there was no god in this room.

Her wrists were strapped down and her legs spread as far as they could go, equally restrained towards the edge of the mattress. Long scarlet hair tangled across the black silk sheets. His broad shoulders blocked most of the filtered light and his sinful form cast a dark shadow across her nakedness. His eyes greedily took in all the marks she had craved and accumulated that evening.

"That was insane," She gasped for air, coming down from her unholy high.

He smirked and brought himself over her. "Then let's do it again."

The bed was rocking and rocking and rocking, and she screamed for the god that was not in that room.

Because it was just her in there, and Sasuke.

Thoughts/feelings/concerns? Please review and subscribe! :)

Chapter 3

I had to make some plot decisions that I'm going to need to commit to in this chapter, so let's see where we go. Double the chapter length this time! Please enjoy and, if I may shamelessly ask, please leave a review. It would mean a lot.

The clock seemed to strain more than usual today to push its hands forward. Sakura's eyes burned in protest, exhausted by the screen she had been glued to since the early morning. The rain had been unrelenting since she had woken up and no amount of coffee seemed to be enough to fully snap her awake. The sign-in sheets remained untouched in their clipboards. Not a fingerprint blemished the marble reception counter. She yawned. It was a slow day so she had been tasked with auditing their patient database and noting any discrepancies. Thrilling work, truly. She easily slipped into autopilot and let her mind wander.

The glittering confetti returned. She was nineteen and dancing, her hair was longer and full of split ends and tangles. If there was a time that she had been happier before that moment, it was long forgotten that night. His hands were firm on her hips and turned her from the stage to his chocolate eyes. They were sparkling with the lights behind her, a private show just for her. The red paint on his cheeks was blurring with sweat and time. "I love you," He declared. Her heart was pounding and jumping up her throat. She pressed her mouth hard against his, giving that heart only one route to escape. Into this man she already had promised it to.

"Wow, the poster child for productivity."

Sakura blinked back to reality and was met by Ino's smug face on the other side of the desk. She let out a sheepish laugh, but knew the blonde wasn't actually being serious. Ino herself had been

shamelessly filling her online cart across a variety of sites between all two of her acupuncture clients the first half of the day.

"I'm not expecting my next appointment until two, do you want to go get some hot ramen? One of girls in the back can sit up here." That sounded like the perfect meal, but that meant walking a few blocks in the most upsettingly cold rain she had ever experienced. Before she could even open her mouth to say anything, Ino was already buttoning up her coat and walked Sakura's over to her.

"Sounds great."

The sky had been a heavy grey since dawn and the clouds loomed close overhead, holding the skyscrapers and sun hostage. The pair kept a fast pace to spare themselves from as much of the needling rain and wind as possible. Once they reached the ramen spot, their shoulders melted in the warmth and the smell of broth that bathed the restaurant. There were only three tables but the one by the window was free, so they shed their coats and squeezed into the cozy nook. One waitress was overseeing the whole restaurant and idly chatted with the chef. She had darted over as soon as the women put their menus down and in record time presented them with decadent bowls of noodles.

"I wanted to thank you again for inviting me over last week, that was really nice of you since I'm so new still." A small blush powdered the California girl's cheeks.

"You're awesome and everyone loved you, so don't think that was a one-time deal!" Ino flashed her a dazzling smile in between slurps.

"Ino," Sakura started, her tone already letting the blonde know exactly what was about to come next. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

"You were reading tarot cards, is that something you... believe in?" She fiddled with her chopsticks and tried to keep her tone casual.

"I read my tarot everyday, it's part of my spirituality." Ino shrugged and propped her chin on the heel of her palm to look at Sakura. "I was raised by Wiccans, actually."

Sakura's eyes widened just a fraction. She had suspected something along those lines, so she wasn't sure herself as to why this still surprised her. "So do you consider yourself a Witch?"

Ino pulled a pendant necklace out from her blouse. It was a silver pentacle. "Until the day I die!" She laughed with little consideration for the rest of the restaurant and then took a moment to take a bite of the pork belly floating in front of her. "Do you know anything about Witchcraft?"

Sakura didn't know what to say and admitted to not knowing much. So Ino sighed, ordered some tea for table and proceeded to illustrate her beliefs for her. She spoke of her God and Goddess, the change of the seasons, nature, and of course the practice of magick. She told tales of their deities, and her adoration for the moon. It was through her religion, Ino explained, that she found her inclination to pursue natural medicines and more recently ended up at the clinic offering acupuncture.

"So," Sakura chewed the inside of her cheek, unsure how Ino would react to her ultimately inevitable question. "Do you practice magic?"

"Sometimes." Ino nonchalantly sipped her tea. "But to be clear, nothing like in the movies. It's practical and magick with a 'k'."

The pink-headed clinician was itching with curiosity. "Do you cast spells?"

"Sure do." Her long red nails clicked on her mug as she gauged Sakura's reaction.

Sakura sat back in her seat to digest all of this. In California she definitely encountered a lot of spiritual people and crystal collectors, but something about Ino told her this girl was doing more than a few self-care rituals involving salt lamps and herbal baths. Ino believed.

"I don't think I can say I've met a real Witch before," She smiled and gave a small laugh.

The blonde laughed right back, "Let me know when you want to meet a few more, I'm part of a friendly coven, y'know."

They were cutting it pretty close to when they were supposed to be back, so they begrudgingly subjected themselves to the rain again. Sakura clutched her umbrella close and buried her nose in her knitted scarf against the wind. She recalled the tarot cards as they approached the clinic and wondered what Ino would be able to gather about her if she did a reading. Would she be able to tell her what her true path was? Did she make the right decision to move out here? Before she could even open her mouth to ask, the Witch disappeared into the back of the clinic. Sakura resumed her position at the front to pick up on her task for the day. This time, at least, she had something far from the realm in which Kiba existed occupying her mind.

It felt like another century had passed but the day finally did come to an end. The heels of Ino's boots clacked on the tile as she came to lean on the front desk once more.

"Hey," She greeted, a lopsided smile on her face.

"Hey you," Sakura logged off of the server and sighed heavily.

"You look like you need a drink. May I interest you in a hot toddy or spiked hot chocolate?" Her blonde eyebrows wiggled with temptation.

It was tempting, but sweats and fuzzy socks were top of mind at the moment. "I think I should just head home, today was just too much."

"Come on! Whatever you have waiting for you at home is not going to be nearly as great as I am." She popped her hip out as an invitation for pushback. Sakura mulled the thought over for a moment and silently agreed; her socks would just have to wait.

"Okay, okay," She held up her index finger. "But just one drink."

It wasn't by any means packed, but the duo were not the only ones who were looking to mark the end of Monday with a toast. Ino had shuffled them to a cozy spot in the neighborhood: Grey Dog. It felt quite home-like and even had an assortment of pastries at the counter where you'd order. When they picked their drinks, Ino made sure to take a fat chocolate chip cookie to share.

The steam of the amber beverage caressed her cheeks and she took a moment to close her emerald eyes. In the darkness of her mind, onyx stared straight through her.

"Ino," She lowered her voice with a mixture of embarrassment and paranoia. "Can you tell me more about Sasuke?"

She was met by a cheshire cat grin. "Interested in that devil, now are we?"

Sakura felt her ears and cheeks burning but continued. "I'm not sure," She paused. "He's different, though."

"Well, if it colors your opinion at all, he and I met through our mutual interests."

Is he a Witch, too? If she had to guess, the rest of Ino's friends were probably Witches as well. She was one of the farthest from knowledgeable on this belief system, but understood it wasn't a malicious one. Of all the people in this city I could have befriended, I managed to find a group of Witches. Of course.

"Is he a part of your coven?"

"Um," Ino stirred her chocolate and poked the dissolving marshmallow. "No. He's not a Witch."

"Oh, is he just interested in it?"

"He's a Satanist, actually."

Sakura sat back in her chair. Images of hellfires, animal sacrifices and kink-saturated orgies flashed through her mind and a disturbed shiver crawled through her.

"I know exactly what you're thinking and I promise it's not that serious," She paused thoughtfully. "Or at least violent, is more of an accurate statement. Actually I don't know what you're thinking. But! I'm going to guess you're not all that familiar with the Church of Satan?" Sakura shook her head side to side. "They believe the so-called sins Christian churches abstain from are meant to be indulged in instead of being the reason people are burdened with endless guilt. I don't mean to butcher it down, but all in all Sasuke is pretty harmless. Just don't think he's looking for a commitment or settles for the missionary position."

"I-I didn't mean I was interested like that!" Sakura's face reddened further with mortification.

Ino laughed, "It's totally fine, he's a complete babe." She stared at Sakura and took a deep inhale through her nostrils. "I guess I'm just a little afraid he's going to ruin our friendship. He has a track record."

"Woah, let's slow down here. I literally met this guy once and you're saying he's going to come between us?" Ino was someone she automatically felt compatible with, but she was escalating something out of nothing. It is nothing, right?

Ino waved a dismissive hand in front of her. "Let me round out my description of him for you. He's working at a hedge fund and taking full advantage of the lifestyle he can afford there. We met through a friend in college and both liked to go to the same shows and parties,

so we became pretty close. We did a list of terrible things you'd rather not know about." She shrugged. "He's a good guy in my opinion, but can be a total womanizer."

Sakura leaned in. "You can't just say you did terrible things and not tell me what you mean, Ino."

Her eyes averted Sakura's and she shifted in her seat. "We did hook up at one point for a bit,"

"Why are you friends then..?" Skepticism weighed heavy in her voice. She wasn't giving her the full story.

"It's... It's hard to explain, but he's like a brother to me. He's gone through a lot so I understand him a little differently and can't simply toss him away as much as I want to sometimes."

"So you're worried he's going to seduce me and leave me with the ugly aftermath that will wreck any chance of a real friendship...?"

"I don't keep too many friends, so when I find someone I like I take that friendship seriously. I'm all about that girl gang life." Ino made a quick hand gesture that Sakura believed was a poor attempt at a gang sign and shook her head.

She chuckled, "I'm all for 'sisters before misters' too so please don't let this become a thing. I'm still learning how to get home from work, so I don't think I'll be attempting that from someone else's bed at whatever hour anytime soon."

"Just let the record show I warned you," Ino sang with a face that didn't believe her for a second.

Sasuke had taken up too much of her energy at that point and she was done talking about this guy. "So tell me about everyone else!"

This seemed to brighten Ino up, "Since you asked, Hinata and I have been roommates since college and joined the coven with me."

Sakura's eyebrows raised, but she didn't interrupt. "She's probably the sweetest person I've ever met to be honest. Naruto and her met about a year ago through one of the dating apps and have been pretty inseparable since. And Naruto..." Ino rubbed her temples to tame herself. "Naruto is an idiot. Well-intentioned, but an idiot. He's kind of all over the place, but somehow became pretty close with Sasuke, so they hang out a lot for better or worse. And Shikamaru is my boyfriend, we've been together for a couple years now. Not a Witch either, but that's fine."

Sakura smiled. "I really like Hinata, I want to hang out with her more."

The sky continued to darken as the night pulled in, but the rain finally stopped. A sly grin crept onto Ino's face. "Want to go see what she's up to? I'm sure she'd love to grab dinner."

"I don't know...." Despite (or in spite of) the lack of enthusiasm, Ino shot her friend a quick text and almost instantaneously got a response back.

"Done! Let's wrap up here and head to the East Village. It's close to the trains you need to get home eventually, so consider it on the way to Brooklyn." Sakura narrowed her eyes at her, but still did as she was told and knocked back the rest of her whisky.

The fastest way down was actually to walk since traffic was still clogged by commuters and they were too far from a train to go underground. As they made the trek it seemed, Sakura noticed, no one could just simply walk by Ino. The pair was walking side by side, but all eyes were trapped by the sight of the blonde. Her hair was impossibly glossy, her skin was always glowing like the moon. It was more a matter of fact than anything that Ino was a beauty her friends back on the West coast would pay thousands and thousands to look like, but this shameless ogling seemed too ridiculous. Maybe I should think this Witch thing over more.

"Hinataaaa!" Ino announced with all the excitement you'd save for a sports game. The introverted woman smiled, waving from the side of the restaurant outside.

"Hey, Ino. Sakura, I'm so happy you're here." She gave the pinkette a light hug and sincere smile.

"I'm happy to see you too." Not that Ino left much of a choice. Her fuzzy socks were still tragically out of reach.

As the dark violet-haired beauty pulled back, Sakura couldn't help but think back to what Ino had told her. This woman was also a Witch. The concept didn't spook or irk her in the slightest, but something deep inside her was unsettled. What was she afraid of?

"Naruto's going to join us, if that's okay? He's just getting out of work and wanted to eat something." With her bright pale eyes shining, there was hardly a chance to say no.

Ino shrugged. "I wanted to get us all some girl time but we can always make that happen another time."

"I'm sorry, I-"

"SAKURAAA!" The women all flinched as her name echoed violently from across the street.

"Naruto-" She couldn't even finish her sentence before the boisterous blonde lifted her in a bear hug like none other.

"We didn't scare you away Friday? This is awesome!" He put her down without skipping a beat leaned over to plant a kiss on Hinata. "Hey, lady." He looped his arms around her in an embrace.

Sakura stood there half in shock half in pain from being lifted so aggressively. Ino barked some insults at the guy-with unspoken consent from Hinata-and placed her hand on Sakura's back to walk her into the restaurant first. They were at a burger spot Ino swore by

and Sakura was already dreading the additional bloat on top of their ramen splurge at lunch. Her sweater was loose enough that she could probably get away with unbuttoning at the table without anyone noticing. There would have to be a salad in her very near future.

"I'm already over this week, they're having me come in extra early everyday and then stay late Friday. Can you believe that crap?" Naruto slammed his hand on the table and Ino was back to rubbing her temples.

"No, Naruto," She deadpanned, "It's unspeakable."

"Where do you work?" Sakura inquired, picking at some of the shared fries on the table.

"There's a French spot around here, I'm one of their cooks but at this rate I'm gonna need to find a new restaurant if I want to sleep ever again." He scooped a bunch of fries and jammed them into his mouth to smother his anger. "I'm sorry, I'm just hangry at this point."

Hinata rubbed his back to soothe him further, "Is there anything you want to do this weekend to look forward to?"

"That's a great idea, hmmm...." He tapped his chin in deep thought for a moment. "Oh! Do you guys want to go to Fat Cat?"

"You want to get loaded and play pool?" Ino clarified with some skepticism.

"Not just pool, Ino! They have live jazz and ping pong, y'know."

Sakura thought that sounded pretty fun, actually. "I'd love to go."

Naruto's smile stretched from ear to ear. "Let's do this!"

Just when she thought she understood the weather, New York seemed to throw a sucker punch directly to the face. Her hands clutched at her coat under her armpits and her shoulders did their best to protect her neck. *Dress cute, she said.* Sakura scoffed at her own foolishness. *Dress cute and the line will move fast, I promise, she said.* Despite wearing her longer coat, her legs were seconds from trembling under her tight jeans more suited for summer back home. A chunky scarf was at least protecting her chest, otherwise exposed in a blouse cut with a plunging neckline. The string of people before her hadn't moved in quite some time and she debated giving up and pretending she had forgotten her ID at home. She looked around and saw girls (this was mostly a spot for college kids, it turned out) wearing much less or thinner layers than she was and had to guess they were already drunk. There was no other way they were unbothered by this ungodly chill.

"Waiting for me?" A deep voice asked from behind.

She turned to see none other than Sasuke looming next to her. He had on a flawless black coat with a matching black scarf poking from the inside of his collar. His hair was perfectly disheveled and she had to clear her throat to find her voice again.

"I didn't know you were coming." She sidestepped to make room for him in the line.

"And miss the cheap beer and college girls?" She rolled her eyes at this.

"Hey!" A guy shouted a few heads back. "You can't skip the line, man!"

Sasuke ignored him and smirked at Sakura who looked a little nervous.

Another voice added, "Come on, we've been waiting here. Go to the back!"

"Sasuke-"

"I'm only being generous to keep you company." She shot him a death glare at that.

"Wow, what a nice guy. How could I ever repay you?" Had her teeth not chattered at the end, she may have sounded a little serious. Sasuke was about to tease the woman when a finger jabbed at him suddenly.

"Hey, man." It was the first guy that yelled at him. "You gotta go to the back."

Sasuke glared at this man who had intruded on his conversation. He was half a head shorter, probably rushing with adrenaline. "I do, huh?" He turned to fully face him and saw the man take a slight step backward. "Would you be so kind as to make me?" Sasuke whispered as he stepped into his personal space.

The man balled up his fists and Sasuke could feel his nerves radiating off of him. "I will," he quickly announced before stepping off towards the unseen entrance of the bar.

Sakura grabbed his arm. "Sasuke, he's going to get you kicked out of line."

His inky eyes looked down at her with flecks of mischief across his irises. Another smirk graced his lips and she felt a flutter in her stomach.

"Until that happens, let's warm you up a bit." Before she could ask what he meant, he opened his coat and pulled her into his chest.

"Sasuke!"

He held the wool coat around her in an embrace and she suddenly let out her breath she didn't realize she was holding. Warm relief flooded her system as her hands pressed into his sports jacket. He

hummed in approval and she told herself she was beyond feeling shame in that moment; it was just too cold. She inhaled, her lungs filling with an addictive sandalwood musk. It couldn't have been more than a minute, but Sakura felt as though her entire chemistry had shapeshifted into a lonely parasite wanting nothing more than to freeze time and never let go. *Why does he have such an effect on me?* Under the layers she could feel his hard chest under her cheek and closed her eyes. ' *Womanizer.* '

"Alright sir, let's move." She opened her eyes and saw a bulky man next to Sasuke, the smaller man from earlier a short distance away.

"I'll move, just as long as it's inside." His voice vibrated deep in his chest and she tried to pull back but his large hand fanned across her back to prevent her from doing just that.

"My girlfriend's cold so please let know how I can fix this."

"You need to take it to the back of the line." The man flatly responded, his tone a hair more annoyed this time.

"Let me clarify," Sasuke reached around her head and she watched his hand slip into his jacket.

He retrieved a few bills and held them to the bouncer, who wordlessly took them from his hand and stared at the pair for a moment. Through her lashes she could see Sasuke grinning and he pushed her further against his body. She felt the edges of his belt buckle on her stomach and tried to keep all pressure off anything below that.

"Follow me," The bouncer instructed and Sasuke finally pulled back to separate them. He didn't bother buttoning his coat back up but did send one last smirk at the man who would inevitably return to his own place in the back of the line.

Sakura followed them both, clutching her coat closed and encouraging her heeled boots to catch her up to the men's long

strides. They were met at the front entrance by another bouncer who immediately stamped their hands and ushered them in without any further interaction. *Is this just what happens when you have money to burn?* She couldn't accept that was all it was.

"I hope you don't mind not waiting out there any longer." He teased, bending slightly to bring himself closer to her height. She blushed and averted her eyes.

Fat Cat was a musty T-shaped basement with the entrance and a long bar along its column. A number of pool tables, ping pong tables and a small stage spread out in the back. There were a few vinyl booths lined the walls and littered with pizza boxes and beer steins. As she had suspected from the line, the crowd was mostly college kids. Her eyes scanned the back and could make out some older looking groups surrounding the pool tables and near the jazz band.

"We're over here!" Ino shouted, half standing in the booth next to first pool table.

Sasuke led his companion with his hand on the small of her back and she felt her breath hitch. As they grew closer, Ino's eyes followed Sasuke's arm behind her and narrowed for a moment. However quick it was, Sasuke saw her expression change and snaked his hand around her waist. "I found her waiting in line and had them spare us another decade outside."

Naruto got up from his seat next to Hinata and locked Sasuke's hand in a powerful grip. "Let's go get some shots, bastard. I want to kick your ass at some pool after." He was met with a curling grin.

Everyone else already had a drink in front of them, so Sasuke turned his attention to Sakura and caught her gaze. "What do you want to drink?"

"I can get it myself," She countered, very aware of Ino watching them.

"I'm already going to the bar with this idiot, no need." He didn't give her much time to respond and gently directed her to the booth.
"Think of something or it's going to be the cheapest beer they have."

"Fine," She gave in, pulling off her coat. He drank in her form and delicious cleavage. "Rum and coke."

Naruto clapped his hand hard on the taller man's back. "Let's do this!"

"Hey guys," Sakura breathed, finally sitting down with the group as the two men made their way to the crowded bar. Ino held a raised eyebrow and Hinata kept darting her eyes everywhere except in Sakura's direction.

"How troublesome," Shikamaru muttered before taking a swig of his beer.

The butterflies were only a few and swarmed in small waves in her gut. It was familiar, but not exactly how she would describe the butterflies she would experience in her early romances. There was something darker mixed in, something instinctual. Was it just a response to what Ino had said about him earlier? She saw him naked in a tangle of faceless bodies, red wax and blood dripping across them, fertile soil underneath.

She realized Ino had been saying something and forced the images to the back of her brain. Hardened blue eyes scanned her through thick lashes and generous black eyeshadow. "Did he do anything out there?"

Sakura blinked. "What?"

This time she got an eye roll. "Did he *do* anything?"

"Oh! No, definitely no!" Sakura blushed with discomfort.

"It's weirding me out how overprotective you're getting. He is your friend, right?" Sakura hoped to lighten the mood and lucked out when Ino rewarded her with a lopsided smile.

"You're right, I'm sorry. We're here to have fun, I don't want to totally wreck the night." She took a gulp of her drink. "At least not yet."

Sasuke and Naruto eventually found their way back with their hands full. Sasuke had both his and Sakura's drinks while Naruto snickered behind a small tray of shots. A lot of shots.

"Naruto! What the hell!" Ino gawked at the tray centered on their table.

"What?" His tone feigned complete innocence but that good for nothing grin remained in place.

Sakura thanked Sasuke as he passed over her drink and sat himself close next to her. His body heat rolled onto her and she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stiffen. He pushed up his jacket sleeves and rolled the cuffs of his black button up. That snake she had peeked at before was still there and more beautiful than she could make out from a distance.

"A toast," Naruto announced, gesturing for everyone to pick up their first shot. "To good friends, better mistakes, and the best stories!"

"Cheers!"

Had she been leaning on that wall two drinks earlier, she would have been repulsed by the tacky grit against her skin. Her bare shoulder tops were scrunched up and her violet-painted lips pouted. Shikamaru placed his hands over her crossed arms, caressing the velvet covering them. Even when she was brooding she was as enchanting as ever.

"Ino, tell me what's going through your head."

"It's shit like this that makes me truly hate myself," she muttered darkly, her line of sight targeting her newest and most clueless friend. She was laughing with Hinata at something Naruto had said, but Ino was really focused on Sasuke, who kept his hungry gaze on Sakura.

Shikamaru sighed and pulled her towards him for a hug. "There's no point in wasting energy on regrets."

"But what if this is just another mistake?" She pulled away and looked at him with tears dangerously on the edge of falling. "What if she gets hurt? I can't handle knowing I brought her into this mess." Although he didn't say anything, or maybe because he didn't say anything, she knew she was right. It was the price she was bound to pay for making a deal with the devil.

Across the underground bar, Naruto and Sasuke each knocked back their countless round of shots that night and prepared to duke it out at the pool tables. "Let's make a bet," Naruto suggested in a hushed tone so Hinata couldn't hear him.

"You sure you want to do that, Stupid?" Sasuke knew Naruto was a victim of liquid courage, but he made himself too easy sometimes.

"Bet!" Naruto shouted back.

Hinata's ears perked at this from the bar and turned around. Did he just say 'bet'?

"Fine, have it your way." He adjusted his sleeves, pushing them further back. "What's the wager?"

"If I win, I want a paid week off from work!" His fist pumped into the air with excitement.

Ino caught just enough of what the loudmouth was yelling to know what was happening.

Sasuke withheld his full smirk. "And if I win, you get half a week off-"

The two women pushed their way through the crowd to get to them.

"What!?" Naruto threw his hands up.

"-Unpaid."

"You bastard!" Naruto shouted with a feral grin. "It's a deal!"

"Naruto..!" Ino and Hinata screamed, both barely reaching the pair as they shook hands. It was too late.

"What the fuck are you thinking?" Ino seethed, complete disbelief written across her face. Sakura was in the restroom and only heard the tail end of the bet in complete confusion.

"Chill out, I'm a beast at this." The blonde man bragged and brushed his shoulder with pride.

"But this is Sasuke, Naruto..." Hinata hissed at him, her fingers digging into his arm.

"Hina, I got this!"

Sakura couldn't understand what the big deal was. The two were going to play a drunken game of pool, that was it. She must have misheard the wager, since she couldn't understand how Sasuke was going to get Naruto time off in either scenario.

They circled the open table and racked up the solids and stripes in their neat triangle.

It took approximately thirty minutes for Sasuke to work his way to the last ball, which he tore his eyes away from just to wink at Sakura before flawlessly sinking it in the hole.

"Nooooo!" Naruto cried out, taking himself down to his knees in defeat. The champion stood next to him and held a hand out to help

him back up. Begrudgingly, he accepted it. He was finished. "I'm ready to go."

Even as they all filed out onto the sidewalk, Sakura felt completely left in the dark as to what had happened. She could feel Ino's temper boiling under the surface and Hinata was clearly deep in thought. Both were locked by the arm with their partners. She looked up at Sasuke, the only one who seemed to be in a decent mood. He appeared rather smug in that moment and she just couldn't shake the damn feeling she had missed something.

"So when is this unpaid shit going to happen?" Naruto grumbled.

"That's a great question. It's too bad you didn't specify when yourself." A wicked smile formed on Sasuke's face. "I guess you'll have to be ready for the surprise."

"Bastard..."

"Well, despite that piss poor game you two played, I had a good time tonight." Ino stretched a tired smile. "I need to go lay down, so we're going to catch a taxi." She passed out hugs to everyone and gave a small wave before she and Shikamaru hailed a cab at the end of the block.

Hinata looked to Sakura expectantly. "What are you going to do, Sakura?"

"I guess I'm going to head home, too. I know I'm going to start crashing from all those shots any minute now," she laughed.

"Hina, let's go get food. I need to kill my angst with something fried." Naruto half-drunkenly tugged on her coat sleeve and she gave Sakura an apologetic smile.

"Will you text me when you get home?" She asked, trying not to shoot a look at Sasuke who was looming next to her.

"Of course." She smiled back, entertained and equally annoyed by Naruto's antics. The couple waved as they departed towards the subway.

"My apartment is a lot closer than yours," Sasuke informed her.

"Not a chance." She started walking away and Sasuke had to scoff. Stubborn girl.

He easily walked ahead of her and blocked her way. "Join me for a slice of pizza before you go, then." She glared. "Come on. My treat."

So? Any guesses as to where this is headed? I hope you're enjoying the pacing, I'm trying not to rush this but also don't want to bore anyone off the story. I haven't really been getting much feedback, so please warm my little heart with a review if you plan on continuing through. On the other hand, if you're completely done with this I'd also be grateful for your thoughts. :) Thanks so much guys!

Chapter 4

Hey everyone! I want to start by thanking everyone who was kind enough to leave a note after reading the last chapter. I burned through that first wave of steam so now I'm trying to find my groove. It inspires me to read how excited you are about these less common elements I'm taking a chance on, so I hope for more after this particular chapter... Enjoy! ***Thank you to those who let me know about the formatting issues! Reposted****

CH4

As she was getting ready for her run, her mind found itself fixated on him. It was early dawn, the sky was pale and the city was in its rarest form: quiet. She thought back to that night and couldn't keep her brow from furrowing. It had been about a week since, but just the memory had her palms clamming up and her pulse borderline erratic. She ground her teeth and knotted her laces tight. The question kept coming back, why did she feel so on edge yet sincerely drawn to him? It was a sickness.

She made her way across to Prospect Park and slowly took her still waking body through her stretches, pulling one arm across her chest with her other hand. The autumn trees were glowing like slumbering embers as the sun reached out. Despite this, her breath fogged the air before her. Winter was threatening to make an appearance and seemed to be a fan of reminding her every morning lately. When her fingers came into contact with her bicep she recalled his touch, as he placed his own hand on that arm. He had guided her that way into a pizza spot after they left the bar, somehow convincing her to generously accompany him. Honestly, she knew she wasn't really considering not to.

"Hey Sakura!" A woman called out, jogging up beside her. "Are you wrapping up your stretches? I'm all warmed up and ready to go!"

She tightened her pink ponytail at the back of her head and signaled she was finally ready to get moving. The pair started off in a synchronized jog through the park, their feet the first to pass through a layer of freshly fallen leaves.

Looking back, it was the odd combination of his teasing eyes and stoic face that captivated her the most. He asked about her life in California, if she was dating anyone without any shame in his voice at all. She could be convinced he didn't know the meaning of the word. When she narrowed her eyes in response, he didn't appear the least bit phased. "No stories, no boyfriend, no tan," she had to bite her tongue at that one since it was always something she was teased about as a kid, "nothing interesting for me to learn about."

Her face had reddened with a cocktail of anger and embarrassment thanks to his comments. She briskly let him know she had a pretty great life and didn't ask for his opinion on it. Things were great, she wanted a change and made it happen. The end. He turned his attention back to the slice in his hand. It was clear he hit some sore spots and uncharacteristically decided to leave it alone.

Tenten reminded her just how out of practice she was on their jog about fifteen minutes but was grateful when the woman met her pace to keep light conversation the rest of the way. They met at the clinic when Tenten came in for an appointment a few weeks back and again when she had her follow up while she had to wait an unusually long time for her doctor. Back in California, with all of the beautiful nature trails along the cliffs and beaches, she usually went for hikes with her friend Temari. She hadn't really gone for a proper run since moving to New York but Tenten did a good job of not rubbing it in... too much. They celebrated their successful morning afterwards with a light breakfast at one of the cafes on the edge of the park before parting ways.

On Sakura's way home she couldn't help but wonder if Sasuke even thought about her once after he got home that night.

Golden lashes flickered gently against the soft stream of light that filtered through sheer curtains. A long tanned arm drifted through waves of blankets across the bed and noted the vast emptiness it found, as it usually did this early in the morning. He rolled over and automatically looks to a particular corner of her room he knew she would be facing. An intimate shrine for one framed her petite form, her back to him. He watches her quietly as he always did while he watched her work through her morning ritual. On certain days, like that day, she would follow her routine with a spell. He noticed a few new herbs and stones in play and intently watched her. She was always so enchanting to him. He admired her silver silk slip bunched up at her thighs, her uncombed hair resting at her back, her toes and feet folded so neatly underneath her. When she was done and finally turned around, he asked what the spell was for. It was a protection spell, she said, for Sakura.

From across the apartment, Ino's phone vibrated on her nightstand. If someone had walked into her room at that moment, they would have been easily fooled into thinking no one was home. Like the dead emerging from fertile soil, Her manicured claws emerged from deep within her duvet. They preyed on the disruptive device and dragged it across her bed to her. She cracked one eye open to check the preview and growled before tossing it away. 'Sasuke: Reservation tonight.'

Having just sent his text, he was ready to get his day moving. The fine black sheets rolled off his body as he rose out of the bed. Pale feet met flawless hardwood, long fingers combed through disheveled tresses. He was wide awake but his body was completely drained. The last few nights he found himself unable to settle his mind and had turned to his books for a resolve. Next to his pillow was his midnight reading, the words Paradise Lost peering through tangled sheets.

His form rose from the bed finally, his black sweats low on his hips as he made his way to his kitchen. He fixed himself some coffee and

stood by his tall windows while the caffeine sank in. There was something strange happening to him when he was around this new girl. He became acutely aware of his stomach churning and was unusually invested in her presence. Was it her guilt, lack of confidence, or something else beneath the surface that kept her at a frustrating distance? Whatever the cause, the deep secret, it was fascinating and he wanted to figure this puzzle out before he could have his well earned dessert.

He heard the faint buzz of a text reaching his phone, most definitely Ino. His mouth turned into a wicked grin in his coffee.

That said, there was nothing holding him back from at least enjoying himself in the meantime. the night ahead not rolling in soon enough.

Visit the Financial District any day of the week and it will be teeming with walks of all life. You have the careerists, dressed in freshly dry cleaned suits and sharp skirts with a uniform gait that only a fool would dare step in front of. These people were staples Mondays through Fridays. On the weekends the sidewalks are threaded with frustratingly slower creatures: the tourists. And during the summer you can find locals heading to the pier to board the ferry, striving to live a Gatsby-esque adventure. Sunday nights, however, remained untouched. They were the forgotten hours during which no one had any business in that part of town. There was no soul, no culture, nothing to seek out or to find... unless you had an invite.

Shikamaru leaned against the brick exterior with his arms crossed and a joint pressed between his thin lips. Looking up, the towering behemoth of a building had only a few dimly lit floors but he knew no one was there. The janitors had probably cleaned the offices Friday night and worked until their commute home was mixed with drunk young people looking for their next bar. He was pretty certain it was almost ten at that point, but was too lazy to check his watch to confirm. A slow trail of smoke escaped from the side of his mouth and he closed his eyes to focus on his patience. He knew she'd be late, despite being the one to invite him. She always was.

A small car rolled to a stop a few yards from where he was posted up. He ground out what was left of his joint on the brick and pulled his body upright. The back door opened slowly and her knife-like stiletto reached the pavement. His eyes were glued to it. As she fully emerged and shoved the door shut behind her, she smirked at him. She could feel his energy even from a distance and relished in the effects she had on this man. Although this wasn't what she originally had planned for the night, hardly anything she wore made her feel quite as invincible as that fitted black velvet dress and her thigh high stiletto boots. The harness straps framing her aggressively molded chest contrasted against her white flesh and Shikamaru felt a stirring inside him. Sauntering over like the predator she was that night, she kept her smoky eyes locked on his until she was just a breath apart from him. She waited for him to say something.

"You're late."

"You're already sporting a hard on."

They glared at each other until he broke first and let his slanted smile out. "As troublesome as you are, I'll always wait for you."

She giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck to give him a proper kiss. His hands gripped her full hips and he couldn't help but let out a small groan. When she pulled back, she thumbed the plum lipstick she left behind.

"If you're done, I'd like to go in now."

Ino glared at the wall behind her partner and exhaled through her nose. "Good to see you, too, Sasuke."

He smirked at her and shoved his hands into his slacks that were similar in style to those Shikamaru had on. Similar, but meticulously tailored to his figure like all his other clothes. He had on a sharp jacket and black button up, both matching his obsidian eyes. It wasn't an issue that he was gorgeous, it was more that he relished in it far too often, even by Ino's standards. Low self esteem was just

something he never experienced but she was sure as hell he could afford to.

The pair joined him as they approached what appeared to be a service entrance for deliveries. What set it apart from any other side door on the block, however, was the inconspicuous red heart no bigger than a dime that was painted upside down in the middle of it. After a series of particular knocks, the door cracked open and Sasuke flashed a scarlet card at the hidden figure inside. It took only a few seconds for it to be scanned and then the door quickly opened so the trio could swiftly enter the building before it shut behind them.

The familiar heady aroma of jasmine and musk enveloped them immediately. The entryway was pitch black but an abundance of wax candles paved the path the three weren't strangers to. From a distance, bass vibrated in their chests and before long, they had reached the main room they were looking for and were well aware they weren't the only ones with the same plans in mind.

It wasn't much larger than her apartment, Ino figured. She welcomed the red light bathing her from the breathtaking chandelier overhead. A dozen mattresses were strewn across the marbled floor, endless silk sheets and fabrics draped across them. Bodies clad in leather, lace and velvet arched with carnal hunger across a few and others were only more than happy to offer their services in return. Along the perimeter were a number of loveseats and couches for the few voyeurs and socializers, some regulars, others shy first-timers. And of course, a well stocked bar was set up in the back and had a healthy number of patrons that three would soon join as they always did.

Shikamaru let his hand find the small of Ino's back as they shared their first round of drinks. Her tongue was in a playful mood and toyed with the straw in her glass. He couldn't help but watch it twirl the plastic around and around, causing a similar effect inside of him like before. "Do you like watching me?" She cooed, her pointed nails crawling up his chest. He nodded, his throat thick with need and unable to find the right words to express this. It wasn't an issue,

though. She knew exactly what he wanted and was more than happy to give it to him.

A few drinks down the mahogany bar, Sasuke only half paid attention to his companions and instead entertained the idea of indulging the woman saddled up beside him. She seemed undecided and cautious with her hand fidgeting on the bar. He closed his eyes and grinned to himself. There were generally two types of people at these events: those who made their move and those who didn't know how. Depending on his mood, he would be partial to one over the other, and tonight he was very open to the latter.

A hesitant hand approached his arm and he swiftly caught it in his own. "Is there something I can help you with?" He asked, his hand letting go and traveling up an arm of goosebumps. She blushed and stuttered out some sounds as he moved close enough to her that she felt the heat rolling off his body. "Or maybe there is something you can help me with?" She dared to look up at him and felt her breath catch when she realized just how close he was.

The couple beside them had given into their first wave of wanting and began making out against the bar. Impatient hands found heated skin, knees pressed in between thighs. Ino's bewitching charm was intoxicating and Shikamaru was willfully drowning in her. He would beg if he had to. When she pulled away, a final suck to his bottom lip practically made his legs give out from under him.

"Do you want to watch me some more, Shika?" As the words rolled past her plump lips, he nodded like before. She pulled him towards the center of the room and presented him with an empty loveseat. Small hands pushed him by the chest and onto the cushions, a knowing grin forming on his eager face. The Witch looked at him over her shoulder and sauntered to the mattress just a few steps in front of him. He was growing more restless but knew he couldn't rush her... or them.

Out of the corner of his eye Sasuke noted the two had moved to the beds and decided he was ready to play. The girl in front of him stood

in her lace bodysuit and tights, completely dependent on him to make the next move. Fortunately for her, he was more than happy to oblige. It was the nature of the beast. "I didn't hear you answer my question," he whispered in her ear, "and I want to hear you now so I know I can count on you to beg me later."

An even deeper blush than before colored her face and she pushed her chin towards her chest with embarrassment. "I-I want you," She managed to stammer out.

"You want me to what?" His finger lifted her chin and forced her eyes to meet his.

"I want you to do whatever you want to me."

She could have sworn his eyes had become a burning crimson in that moment, but would later conclude it was just the lights around the room. He revealed a wicked smile and a sweet mixture of fear and excitement filled her veins immediately. His hands caressed her arms slowly and dragged their way up to the soft angles of her shoulders and neck. One slipped behind her head and into her thick hair, ghosting her tingling scalp. Gentle eyes fluttered closed as she relished in his soothing touches.

YANK.

Those same eyes shot wide open and her breath caught hard in her throat. He had pulled her head back by a fistful of hair and had a growing grin plastered across his lips. "I want to fuck you," he whispered again, "hard."

In what couldn't have been more than a few seconds he lifted her by the backs of her thighs and pushed her against a wall with the force of his groin. She could feel his erection pressed hard on her leg and whimpered. He made no acknowledgement of this and instead snapped her arms into place above her head as his tongue plunged into her trembling mouth. Two hands on her wrists became one and she squirmed with her legs around his sculpted waist. There was a

short metallic jingling and then the unmistakable pressure of shackles. He took a few steps back and forced her legs down. Standing on her toes, she was able to alleviate the pull of the metal on her wrists, chaining her to the wall. He watched her struggle for balance and even shoved her hip with his fingers to throw her off balance. The small cry she emitted gave him nothing short of delight.

He painfully twisted her puckered nipples and flicked them to hear her yelp. The chain binding the shackles was simply hanging across a hook mounted on the wall. If she were just half a foot taller, she could probably jump the chain off the hook to release herself. Height, however, was not on her side. Even in her heels she was far from granting herself an escape. But, after working up the courage to approach this man, she wasn't in any rush to get away anytime soon.

The sweet torture continued on and slowly heated up. He peeled off his jacket and tossed it onto an open bar stool. His pinching of her nipples transformed into short slaps to her breasts. Sleeves were pushed to his elbows as he watched her flesh swell and darken. His rough kisses came with a brief but suffocating hand against her throat. When he decided he was bored of this, he twisted her around to face the wall and a few spectators hung around to watch him flay her with a cat of nine tails he had in his jacket. Her delicious cries echoed off the wall and sweet tears spilled down her cheeks. He kept this up until he couldn't hold himself back any longer and stalked up behind her tender form. Long fingers grazed that burning flesh and she was conflicted by her desire to pull away and push into him at the same time. Trembling, she felt him trail over her stomach and down to the soaking fabric between her thighs. "I hope you're ready to beg."

Back across the room, Ino had splayed herself on the bed as Shikamaru watched her every move. Her glossy hair spilled across the satin sheets and her hands groped and teased her own most feminine parts. "I can see you getting hard for me again," she teased, releasing her breasts from the top of her dress. He propped

his cheek on his fist and leaned onto the arm of the sofa. His expression was firm, possibly bored, but inside he was worshipping the woman performing before him.

A pair of men approached her, looking down at the embodiment of pure temptation. She tore her committed gaze from Shikamaru to look up at them. "Are you going to join me or just stand there?" Without any further direction needed, they brought themselves down to their knees and crawled to this blonde goddess waiting for them. She was gorgeous, her voyeur thought from afar. She was gorgeous, and troublesome, and nothing short of his personal top shelf poison.

Hungry hands grabbed at her supple flesh and especially her small but firm breasts. He watched them insert their fingers deep in her wet mouth and soon after inside her slick core. One and then the other released their hard shafts and presented them to her with intention. She didn't hesitate to take one in each hand and then soon took turns deep throating them as she sat on her knees between them. Shikamaru felt his own hardness becoming too much and decided it was time to let himself fully enjoy the show she was putting on for him. They locked eyes once more and she moaned under his gaze.

Ino saw him drag his closed hand down his length as he watched her and felt her opening grow warmer and wetter. Not wanting to disappoint him, she went back to pleasuring her playmates until her neck and hands grew tired of the back and forth. The bulkier of the two pulled her more to the center of the bed and down on all fours. Her dress was bunched around her waist and her heart beat powerfully through every point of her body. His hand cupped her chin and guided his leaking cock into her mouth once again. This time, she felt an expected pressure from behind and moaned on that cock as the other sank inside her from the other side. As they pumped inside her from both ends, she watched her lover's motions grow more erratic and urgent. A small squeal escaped when a surprising sensation pressed into her tighter, more forbidden opening. She

moaned again, pushing back against the new pressure of a thumb in her.

Moments later, she heard a familiar grunt and once more locked eyes with Shikamaru as he came into his own hand. Her gaze lingered on his twitching length and didn't even flinch when the man in front of her came hard into her mouth. His friend soon reached his climax as well and they all slumped in exhaustion. "So troublesome," he muttered, unconsciously milking himself one last time.

A black towel appeared in front of the blonde's face almost as soon as her companions shifted off the blankets. Grateful for the offer, she only half surprised to see it was none other than Sasuke offering the help. Shikamaru brought himself down to her side with two glasses of liquor on hand, no doubt something strong enough to wipe her tongue clean of any lingering remains.

"You always did love to be the center of attention," Sasuke noted, looking elsewhere when the two began cuddling in front of him.

Ino chose to ignore the comment. "Did you have your fun?"

"Hn," he grinned. "Of course I did. And I'm ready to go."

It was much closer to dawn than dusk at that hour, so they gathered their belongings and shuffled back out of the service entrance. The street was still empty, but not for all that much longer.

"So are you going to try to see her?" Ino asked him while Shikamaru called for a car.

Sasuke made his way to the curb and lifted his arm for an oncoming taxi. "You'll just have to wait and see."

So? How are we feeling? I wanted to create another layer to some relationships here, but felt myself spending too much time... so here we are! Next chapter will bring more plot progression ideally, but I'm

dying for thoughts on this one and hope I didn't lose anyone! Thank you again in advance for your review. :)

Chapter 5

Hey all! Sorry for the longer than anticipated wait for this chapter, I was traveling. I feel like I was burning this a little too slowly, so please enjoy some momentum below to warm things up a bit in terms of what happened in the past and what may be coming up in the future... As always, any and all feedback fuels me so I'd love to hear from you after!

CH5

Three years ago

The grit of the roof bit into the delicate flesh of her palms, but she made no acknowledgement of it as she pressed her weight onto her arms, leaning back to take in the cityscape. It was the height of the summer and a perpetual layer of sweat was the only accessory she had on that night to pair with her frayed denim shorts and black cropped tee.

Sasuke reclined beside her, far enough to not suffocate her anymore than the dead July air but close enough to sense her inner turmoil. Dark eyes neglected the glimmering view to examine the blonde witch. Her deep blue eyes were searching, but he knew better than to think she was looking anywhere but inside herself. Was this what she truly wanted? He didn't need the answer to be yes, he just needed her have enough desire and curiosity for what could be hers to get what *he* wanted.

"Shall we get started then?"

The black water was so soothing across his floating body. Slivers of ivory flesh broke through and caught the silver moonlight only to quickly be submerged once again. He was calm and the world was

quiet. As he tilted his head back to let the water cover his face, the moon disappeared from his sight and he inhaled the darkness as deeply as his lungs would allow him. Everything became warm, it soon was impossible to tell the water from the air, eyes closed and open, his body from his spirit. And then it began to burn. It was inside him and spreading. His body was lost in the blackness and everything hurt, he was everything. He tried to scream but there was no outlet for the sound and the pain remained contained but was bursting from the intangible boundaries of his endless being. He couldn't die.

His body shot up soaking and out of breath. It took him a few seconds to recognize the foot of his bed and his room in front of him. Eventually he was able to slow his hammering heart and dared to close his eyes. He was still of flesh and blood, but his dream reminded him that this was just his current state of being. He had not forgotten what it was like to not be. God would never let him forget.

He let himself fall back against the mattress and stared at the blank surface of his ceiling. Everything was soft in the final moments of the early twilight. It had been some time since he had dreamt like that and it stirred the demon inside him terribly. He needed to placate it, to feed it. But he also wanted to feel more human. He wanted to see her. Feel her.

A smirk formed at his lips.

He would do both.

She winced as she tried to stretch out her stiff neck. Not only was she exhausted from her late night out with Shikamaru and Sasuke, but she had messed up her neck and slept on it wrong. Fortunately for her, today was mostly paperwork and organizing in the back. The few clients she had that day were in the morning and the clock was mercifully telling her it was a quarter to three.

A series of rushed clicks approached the back office she was in from reception. "There's a *really* hot guy up front looking for Sakura. You all should definitely try to sneak a peek if you can!"

Ino looked up from her screen and stared at the blushing intern. Her knees were pressed desperately tight together and she knew this girl was feeling all sorts of things that could only have been induced by none other than Sasuke Uchiha. She sighed and made her way to the front to see what this menace was doing there before someone yanked Sakura from whatever she was doing.

She found him reclining in one of the waiting room seats, lazily scrolling through his phone. He was dressed in one of his many tailored black suits, his white button down without a wrinkle or blink of age.

"What are you doing here, Sasuke?" She stood by the reception desk and raised a fine eyebrow at him.

"I had a client meeting nearby," He rose to his full height with a smirk and adjusted his jacket. "I'm here to ask Sakura out for dinner tonight."

She scoffed, "Are you serious? Less than twelve hours ago you-"

"Sasuke?" Sakura's voice called from behind Ino.

The man in question grinned as the pinkette stepped from around her friend and into his full view. Her shoulder length hair was twisted behind her in a short braid but a few wisps of delicate baby hairs framed her fair complexion and bright eyes. She sucked in a quick breath, unable to stop herself from taking in what looked like the ultimate GQ Magazine model.

He didn't miss this brief moment of weakness she had but decided not to acknowledge it since Ino was still there. "I've been thinking about you quite a bit and don't think I made the best impression

when we spoke last," Sakura immediately recalled his dismissive tone with her.

He asked about her life in California, if she was dating anyone without any shame in his voice at all. She could be convinced he didn't know the meaning of the word. When she narrowed her eyes in response, he didn't appear the least bit phased. "No stories, no boyfriend, no tan," she had to bite her tongue at that one since it was always something she was teased about as a kid, "nothing interesting for me to learn about."

Her eyes had hardened and he knew she had not forgotten. "I'd like to take you out for dinner tonight and ask for your forgiveness."

Ino crossed her arms and Sakura stood there silently. No one said anything and Sasuke actually wasn't sure what she was thinking.

"When were you thinking?" She finally asked.

"Seven, tonight. I have a reservation in the West Village." He casually shoved his hands into his pockets as he struggled to read her face.

"That's so soon, and I'd have to rush home to Brooklyn to change."

"I'll have a car pick you up and bring you home."

"Sasuke, I don't think I can-"

"How about we go somewhere in Brooklyn, then? I'll find a place closer to you."

Ino's jaw dropped at that. Sasuke was not one to compromise ever, so what was this about?

Sakura pursed her lips for a moment while she mulled it over.

"Alright, I can do that."

Broad shoulders slacked with relief by just an inch. "I'll have a car pick you up half past six. Ino can text me your address. Sound good?"

"Sounds great," She couldn't help the blush dusting her cheeks. This was new and unexpected and she wasn't sure what to make of all of this.

Sasuke's trademark smirk returned again. "Hn. Great. See you soon, then." He broke his gaze from her emerald eyes to give Ino a quick glance before departing.

Once he was out and walking down the street, Ino grabbed Sakura's hand and pulled her past the clinic staff shamelessly standing nearby from where they had watched the entire exchange. The pair entered an empty examination room and Ino locked the door behind them.

"Do you really want to do this?" She asked Sakura, her eyes penetrating hers.

"Ino, I'm still not exactly sure what this is," She perched herself on the examination chair. "Is he asking me on a date?"

The blonde leaned against the door and crossed her arms. "It sure looks like it," She sighed, "and I can tell you right now he's not the wine-and-dine type so I'm pretty confused as well."

Sakura hung her head and Ino stared at her inquisitively. "Ino," She started.

"Hm?"

"Is it bad if I say I'm kind of excited?"

Ino closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the door. She almost had to laugh. Sasuke was cruel, twisted and the embodiment of darkness. She was bound to him through their sick friendship and had previously done everything she possibly could to keep him away

from any of her friends out of fear of losing them once he was done with them. But here she was, watching him work his magic once more, and letting him do so. Hell, she basically connected them in the first place when she had invited Sakura to her apartment that night!

And what was up with Sasuke, after all? Just the night before he had been ramming a woman up against a wall with her hands chained above her head, screaming with insanity. Barely a shower later, he was there asking this woman who wouldn't even offer him a hug to get dinner with him in *Brooklyn* . What was he up to?

She opened her eyes and smiled. "No, Sakura. It's not bad. I can't say Sasuke is necessarily good boyfriend material, but he definitely isn't one to disappoint."

Sakura hopped down and pulled Ino into an unexpected embrace. "Good, because I'm seriously nervous now."

"Nonsense! If anything this devilman has no idea what kind of vixen he has just put himself at the mercy of."

They laughed and Ino gave her a strong hug back before they walked back out to the floor. On their way to one of the communal desks, someone burst out of the exam room next door and brushed by in a heated strut.

"Hey!" Ino yelled, rubbing her banged shoulder. "Karin, watch it."

"Sorry," The practitioner muttered in passing. "Rough day."

The full moon glowed through the slender clouds out that evening and sat in the corner of Sakura's apartment windows. A pile of blouses, pants and skirts from every drawer and shelf had finally stopped growing on her petite couch. The only lights were coming from the lamp by her bed and from the bathroom, where she was currently standing.

A steady pinky dabbed at the corner of her eye, a subtle smokey eye being set in place in the mirror. She took a step back and examined her work, satisfied with the quick day-to-night adjustments she had made. The biggest, of course, was just changing her clothes. She had swapped her clinic uniform for dark jeans and deep rouge silk camisole and black cardigan. It was a look she had nervously texted to Ino for final approval and was consoled by a block of heart and flame emojis.

Looking at her reflection once more, she gave herself a brave smile of reassurance. This was her first date since she had last seen Kiba and she needed to be okay with this. Whether or not anything came of it, she deserved to go out. She was going to have a great time. She was going to have a great time with Sasuke.

A new text popped on her screen with a buzz. It was a notification for her ride that would be there in just a few minutes. Taking a deep breath, she zipped up her heeled boots, and grabbed her purse and jacket from her bed before heading out the door.

"You need to calm down already," Ino response, Ino shot a glare at Shikamaru from the couch. He was in the kitchen putting together their dinner, but had caught her long stare out the window. "Troublesome..."

Ino had called him on her way home to tell him about Sasuke's surprise visit at the clinic. She was jaded by the whole situation and the feelings only seemed to intensify as the hours wore on. "She's on her way to meet him now, you know."

He brought two plates over, her wine and his beer already on the coffee table. "Okay, and they're going to order some food. He's going to make some flirty moves and tell her how beautiful she is, and then what? You said it yourself that you think she's too reserved to go home with him on the first date so what's the point in worrying yourself sick?"

"Because she's on a date with the fucking devil!" She yelled, her voice cracking.

He was unphased. "And you don't think she's been on a date with a man with a less than pure agenda before?"

Ino rubbed her fingers into her temples. "You're right, but it's still Sasuke."

"Exactly. It's Sasuke, who you partnered with-"

"Made a deal with,"

"-To help him find his humanity. This could be it."

"I'm home," Hinata nudged the front door open with her hip, her hands occupied by a few grocery bags and an assortment of other plants and goodies Ino recognized as supplies for their full moon ritual they'd be performing later that evening.

"Hey Hinata, Shika made some dinner if you want some."

She busied herself in the kitchen to put away groceries. "Thank you, but I already ate with Naruto on my way home. We had some ramen downtown."

The raven-haired witch took the remaining brown paper bags of herbs and unseen purchases to her room to be prepared for later.

Ino put her fork down and gave her boyfriend a look of complete disbelief. "You think this is it?"

He shrugged. "You did say he was willing to meet her for dinner in Brooklyn."

Three years ago

Candles in an array of hues circled the room and were braided with a heavy snake of salt. Inside this circle of light, there was an altar of crystals, cleansed animal bones and a curated collection of plants. A nude Ino focused on her incantation while an equally bare Hinata finished the carefully measured tea blend needed for this spell. A pentacle was drawn using the ashes of burned herbs and ready for him to his place in the middle of it. The him, being Sasuke. He dropped his black robe to his feet and approached Hinata to take a sip of the ceremonial tea. It was earthy and slightly bitter. She and Ino took a sip as well before continuing.

The blonde's hands began to shake as she took a small out a small vial of her blood collected from her most recent menstrual cycle and dipped a written spell into it as she recited its words. Sasuke took the bloodied note and dipped it into a vial of his own blood he had collected before handing it back to her. Together the three of them recited the spell as they brought it to a flame and watched it incinerate.

Sasuke took his place on the ground in the center of the pentacle. The two witches held hands at the base of the drawing and felt the room suddenly grow warmer. Sasuke remained unmoved and outwardly calm. Hinata glanced at Ino and saw a film of sweat coating her body and a strained expression on her face as her eyes remained screwed shut.

Their chanting grew louder as Sasuke began to shake beneath them. He choked back a yelp and they continued on. The air continued to heat to the point of generating steam off of their skin. Burning the hottest was still Sasuke, though, his form now recklessly emitting screams of pain as his true form bent to their incantations. The two witches chanted even louder, fighting to be heard above his tortured noises. Voices cracked and the smell of burning flesh scarred their nostrils.

Then, all at once, the candles snuffed out.

Everything became quiet.

Ino collapsed to her knees under a curtain of wet, matted hair.

"You did it," Hinata whispered beside her. "He's bound to his human body."

"And I'm officially damned."

"Well aren't you dressed to kill," Sasuke commented, offering his hand to Sakura when her car pulled up to the restaurant. She stifled a blush and accepted his hand as she got out. His eyes shamelessly drank her in head to toe and she half glared when his eyes finally met hers. "I should just eat you instead."

She swatted at his arm and looked away.

"Let's get inside, I hope you're hungry." She nodded and followed him to the door. There was a line but she decided not to ask how they were skipping ahead inside. Once in the warmth of the rustic restaurant, they were escorted to a table towards the back away from the chaos of the larger tables.

"Thank you for inviting me out tonight," She mentioned as she busied herself with the menu.

"Good meals deserve to be challenged by better company." He grinned at her and this time won the blush he had been craving. "Let's get a bottle of wine for the table. Do you have a preference?"

"Oh, just a red," she skimmed the list and found herself distracted by the prices instead of the complex descriptions.

As the waitress met them at their table, Sasuke wasted no time in starting their order. "We'll have a bottle of the Cabernet Sauvignon, please," He looked at Sakura before continuing, "Do you trust me?"

She felt put on the spot and suddenly confused. Trust him to do what? "Do you trust me with the appetizers?" He clarified with a

playful smile.

"Oh, sure,"

"We'll have the artichoke hearts and wine braised octopus as well."

As the waitress pulled away to get their order started, Sakura took a moment to look around the restaurant. It was not what she was expecting him to pick. The walls were all solid brick and lined with warm strung lights and quilted art. The air was thick and fragrant with meat and rosemary. Her stomach rumbled and she finally turned her attention back to her date who looked completely amused by her.

"How did you get a table so quickly? I've tried to come here before but the line is always so long."

The waitress came back with their wine and poured them each a healthy glass.

"I helped someone out with a favor," He shrugged.

"Are you in the mafia or something?" She half-joked.

"Hn. Is that the scariest organization you could think of being indebted to?" He held up his glass to propose a toast. She mirrored him, allowing the subject to change. "To nights worth living for."

His onyx eyes locked with hers and she felt a chill down to her core in that moment. "Cheers."

To be clear, Sakura was not someone who was low on self-esteem. She knew she was intelligent, smart and proud of her body. But sitting across from a man like Sasuke had her completely at a loss. What was he doing thinking about her on the weekend and taking her out to dinner as soon as he could the next week? He was a god in finance allegedly and she was a servant in healthcare. She just couldn't see what he could possibly want in her that he didn't already have at his immediate disposal.

"Since you haven't been here before, it would be an honor to split the Ax Handle Rib Eye with you." He reached across the table and pointed to the steak on her menu.

"Sixty ounces...? Who else is joining us?" Not only was it ridiculously huge, it would cost the same as her usual run of groceries.

"I'm pretty insatiable." His eyes twinkled and he shared a wicked grin with her.

She was relieved from having to respond thanks to the timing of the appetizers. Sasuke put in the rib eye order, first as rare, but then medium rare at Sakura's request.

"Mmm, this is so good. Thank you, Sasuke." She savored every bite of the artichokes and octopus and allowed herself to indulge on her wine a bit more.

"It's me who should be thanking you for agreeing to come out with me," He stopped eating for a moment to continue. "I know I was a little dismissive last time we spoke."

"It was no big deal." Sakura reddened again, not wanting to talk about this.

"Tell me about your passion. Why did you leave California for New York?"

"Well," She took a full sip of her wine. If she was going to truly tell him the story, then she'd need to amp up the liquid courage. It also didn't hurt that this was probably one of the best wines she had tasted. "I have always wanted to get into healthcare in one way or another since I love helping people. But that's not exactly why I moved all the way here,"

She stopped herself and looked him dead in the eye. "Are you asking to patronize me or because you really want to know?"

He snorted. "I don't patronize. I want to know."

"While I was trying to decide what I was going to do exactly in college, I was dating this guy who was extremely supportive of my aspirations, encouraged me to reach for the stars and promised to be there with me all the way through."

Sasuke leaned his cheek onto his fist. He could probably guess how the rest of the story went, but didn't want to upset her.

"I had never been in love before, and being someone who has always put my career first, I was afraid to fall in love. So when he did tell me he loved me, I was completely at a loss as to what to do." He narrowed his eyes as he noticed the water glassing up her own. He folded his hands in front of his mouth and bit back any comments.

"I'm sorry," She dabbed her eyes with her napkin. "I feel like an idiot telling you this right now. I haven't been out with someone in a really long time so I forget what's okay to talk about."

"I don't care about that crap, so you don't need to apologize," He refilled their glasses. "You told me you would explain how you got here, so I want to hear the rest."

She was a little shocked by this, but obliged. "Well, cut to our final semester and graduation, we were making plans to move in together in Southern California where I could work at some strong non-profit organizations I had been made offers at, and he all together just disappears."

Sasuke perked at this. "Was he murdered?"

"No, but for a while I wished he had been. We graduated and the next week I was literally confirming details with the moving company and he was completely gone. I was texting him, no response. Calling him, voicemail. I was blocked on social media, unable to get an answer from any of his friends and I was left completely devastated."

"I was so embarrassed, everyone knew. There I was, completely in the dark, and alone. I couldn't move into the apartment we had budgeted to share, everything reminded me of him and I just wanted to get away from it all."

She fingered her wine glass and straightened her back. "So I researched organizations on the East Coast that were focusing on things I was interested in and found the one Ino and I work at. And here I am now."

"Hn," He smirked. "That's definitely a story."

"I didn't say I was proud-"

"I think that was really brave of you to make the move like that. And," He took a deep sip of his wine, "If I ever see him in hell, I promise to make it the most tortuous disappearing act he'll have ever performed."

Sakura laughed and lifted her glass to clink with his.

"And you?" She asked, a simple question he should have seen coming.

"My family has roots here. I'm here to simply work hard and indulge harder."

With that, their steak came out on a wooden cutting board Sakura guessed she could barely wrap her arm around. It had a glorious crust and smelled like heaven on Earth. When Sasuke took the toothy knife to its edge, her mouth watered at the solid pink meat that seemed to give like butter against the blade.

"Exhibit A, enjoy."

Even with the two bottles of wine and monster steak inside of her, she still shivered in her jacket when they left the restaurant. Sasuke

seemed unaffected, but turned to her with intention.

"I know I said I was going to get you home after dinner, but I don't feel done with you yet."

"I'm not sure what you're asking me," She was having a great time with him and was surprised by how much of a gentleman -for the most part- he had been the whole evening so far. If this was the catch she had been anticipating -

"Let's get a nightcap somewhere nearby and I'll have a car come take you home after." She looked up at this stupidly gorgeous man and barely resisted the urge to run her hand down his hard chest. She remembered how warm he was that night they were in that line outside in the West Village and suddenly wanted to press herself against him again.

"One drink."

He smirked, very aware of the inner debate she just concluded. "Let's walk off some of that steak and wine so we're in good shape for the next place. There's a nice bar a few blocks this way,"

His hand found the small of her back and she blushed despite the layers separating his hand from her flesh. She couldn't help but imagine his strong hands passing over the rest of her body. As they walked down the sidewalk, she leaned slightly into him. When he looked down at her with a knowing grin, she sobered slightly, pulling away and muttering an apology.

It was a dark and sort of dingy place, but still had its charm. There were tea candles on the small tables and he let her pick which one they would sit at. She scoot onto the booth of the corner table and he nonchalantly hung his coat on the chair across from her but sat right beside her. The heat from his body was hot on her arm and leg instantly.

"What can I get you?" A waiter asked, popping in.

"I'll have a White Russian," Sakura smiled.

"I'll have the same."

When the waiter disappeared, Sasuke turned his complete attention to Sakura. It was as though he had levels of barriers up to hold himself back from overwhelming her and the first few were being taken down. He slipped her hand into his on the table and drew on the delicate tops of her fingers with his thumb. Goosebumps quickly formed on her arm and he grinned mischievously.

"Does that feel good?" He asked, just wanting to tease her.

She nodded and leaned back into her seat but not far enough to pull her hand from him. Their drinks were brought to their table and Sasuke pulled a long sip of the mixture.

"Sasuke?" He looked over at her and licked the cream from his lip slowly.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" She watched him over the light of the small candle and felt her stomach twist as his eyes met hers.

"By all means."

"I've mentioned to me that you are, uh, you practice Satanism?" Suddenly ashamed with having asked, she moved to withdraw her hand but Sasuke locked his fingers in hers and brought it to his lips.

"Did she now?" His breath was hot on her skin and he moved his lips to her first knuckle to kiss it.

"I'm sorry if that's too personal or I shouldn't have asked," He moved to the second one.

"What do you want to know about it?" The third.

"Um, I'm not sure. Do you do those sacrificial rituals?" The fourth and final.

He smirked against her skin. "No, that's not real. Ask me more questions."

"Do you worship Satan?" His leg pressed against hers under the table.

"I worship myself," He gently turned her hand over and stared at her wrist before pressing his lips to it. "And my desires."

She squirmed in the booth and felt the heat inside her building up. She pulled her hand away and took a few long sips from her glass.

"Sakura," He purred, his fingertips just a hair from grazing her thigh. "What is it that you desire?"

She could smell his intoxicating cologne and still feel the heat rolling off of him. "I-I need to pee, sorry," She quickly freed herself from his gaze and scuttled to the back to find the bathroom. He couldn't help but let his grin grow wider, absolutely devouring this moment.

In the bathroom she covered as much of the toilet seat as possible before plopping herself down on it for a breather. Her head cleared a bit after she peed what was left of that bottle earlier, but she was still burning inside, wanting to feel him. She decided to indulge herself for just a second and closed her eyes to imagine herself under him. She pictured him shirtless and hungry, his hands gliding up her thigh to her breast to her wrist, capturing her under him before plunging himself deep in her drenched core.

This was not helping.

She flushed and gave her cheeks a few light smacks at the sink. She needed to pull it together. This was just a first date. And a Monday. A motherfucking Monday.

"Feeling better?" He teased, a hand finding its way to her knee.

"Yeah, I just needed a minute," She admitted, leaning on her elbows for support.

"You don't have any other questions?" He asked, his fingers exploring the tender skin inside her knee.

"Sasuke, I um, I don't want you to think I'm misleading you," She put her hand on his to stop it from exploring any further. He immediately obliged.

"You're not attracted to me?" He frowned, his gaze on her lips.

"No, no, I mean, I am, I just haven't been on a date really since Kiba disappeared, so I'm not trying to rush anything."

His hand slipped out of hers and ran up the outside of her thigh, up her arm and stopped at the back of her neck. "I wouldn't dare rush you into anything, especially when the anticipation is this good."

She blushed once again and smiled at him. There was so much she didn't understand and so much she was afraid she needed to know about Sasuke, but there was no denying their attraction. He had let her bring her walls down just enough for her to accept what she was feeling between them and she was curious to explore what that could be.

"I need to be up early tomorrow, so I think I need to get going." She felt him give her a small squeeze before pulling his hand back.

"I suppose it's getting late." He sighed and dropped a few bills on the table before getting up to pull his coat on. "I'll call you a car."

They made their way outside to sober up in the chilly night and wait for the car he ordered. She let him put his arm around her as she looped her arm around his waist under his coat. This was heaven for them. When the right car pulled up, he opened the door slowly.

"May I kiss you?" He asked her, his hand already cupping her cheek.

"Um," She reddened worse than before and he felt her anxiety building. He sighed and leaned in, but only to kiss her cheek.

He gave her one last smirk before helping her in the car. "Wait for her to get in her building before pulling away," He instructed the driver.

She smiled at him as they drove off. He growled at the delicious desire eating at him from the inside.

Until next time.

Thoughts/feelings/concerns? I can't wait to hear from you and if you feel this is moving too fast, too slow, or in the wrong direction all together. Maybe we've hit a Goldilocks situation? Please let me know, and thanks for reading and writing your review! :)

Chapter 6

Surprise! Back to back chapters, and this one is twice the length of the last!

CH6

"So this is what I'm thinking for your look," A phone with a Pinterest board of women in flower-laden costumes was forced into her line of sight, so she reached out to grab it and create some distance.

"These are really pretty, Ino. And you said you want them to be real flowers?" Sakura sipped at her coffee and scrolled through the curated board, trying her best not to be overwhelmed.

"Absolutely! I'm not showing up to my own party looking like a tacky sorority crew. We're going to do this right. And you said your friend...."

"Tenten,"

She flipped her hair dismissively over a shoulder. "Right, Tenten, is super down? We can't show up as the three seasons, that just won't work."

October was closing in on its final days and Ino was preparing for her annual Halloween party. That's at least what some of her friend's referred to it as. In truth, it was the day of Samhain, the Wiccan holiday celebrating death's place in the natural world as a necessary process. She and Hinata invite their circle of Witches over for an autumn dinner party and then afterwards the rest of their friends would join them for a more secular Halloween party. Ino is the type to use any excuse she can to get dressed up so she always was happy to host.

This was Sakura's first Halloween in New York, but she had no interest in the chaos that would be the bar scene that night. When Ino invited her to not only join her for her party but also dinner, she graciously accepted. She was still running with Tenten once a week and knew she didn't have any serious plans, so she had asked Ino if she could extend an invite. Ino was happy to open her home to Tenten, but only if she would join in on the group costume idea she had been toying with. Between herself, Sakura, Hinata and Tenten they would be the Four Seasons.

When Sakura had explained all of this to Tenten, she was hesitant at first but agreed to the conditions. It didn't hurt that Sakura downplayed Ino's ambitious outfit schemes already in the works.

"I'm going to head to the florist shop in the morning while Hinata's at the grocery. If you want to come by at say, seven-ish, everything will be basically ready to eat for dinner. We can get dressed up afterwards before everyone else shows up at nine."

The afternoon sun streaked across the tiny table they shared and was caught in the steam coming off of Ino's latte. This had become a ritual for them, to take a coffee break around the corner once or twice a week when they had a mutual break in their day. Sakura smiled at Ino and took a moment to appreciate how quickly the two of them had become such close friends in a matter of weeks.

"Are you sure it's okay that I'm there? I don't want to intrude on your dinner or anything,"

The blonde scoffed and twisted her face in mock-annoyance, "Sakura, it's my dinner and I'm inviting you. It's not like some sort of Illuminati gathering."

"Okay. Well, I'm excited for it." She knew both Ino and Hinata were pretty good cooks and was a sucker for roasted squash.

"We *will* be performing a ritual before dinner, if you wanted to join for that," she reached out to touch Sakura's hand. "But only if you

wanted to. I don't want you to feel pressured, they're just really nice and flow straight into dinner."

"If that's okay? I'd love to, even if just to experience it!" She grabbed Ino's fingers with a big smile.

"Yeah, it's not like you're declaring anything or doing anything weird, I promise. No demon summonings." They both laughed at that. '
Since the demon is already here. '

It had been a little over a week since Sakura had seen Sasuke on their date. The next day she had given Ino a summary of the whole night in exchange for his number. What Sakura didn't know, however, was that Ino had been texting him every hour on the hour asking for updates until Shikamaru had taken her phone away for bed. The only response she had gotten came in around midnight and it was just a lone apple emoji.

"I just don't get it," She had admitted over their coffee date that afternoon. "I don't understand what he sees in me."

He and Sakura had a small text exchange going starting that next day. She was the one to initiate it to thank him again for a great night. He had responded not much later, 'We'll have to do it again sometime soon.'

He was oddly formal in his texts and only was first to text her that Thursday to ask if she had weekend plans. She was flying back to California for a quick weekend visit with her parents, but she did let him know she'd be at Ino's party the following weekend and asked if he would be as well. 'Wouldn't you like to know', was the response she got. Ino rolled her eyes when Sakura told her this.

"He came by once two years ago, but even then left after an hour or so in to go to another party." She had explained, leaving out the details of exactly what kind of get-together he was at afterward. Judging by Sakura's uncomfortably tense form, she figured the woman was making a loose guess that was on the right track.

Ino sighed. "If I had to bet on it, I'd say he's going to make an appearance this year. And who knows," she smirked. "He may even be so inclined to stay the whole night."

Sakura blushed and looked out the window. Across the street was a small park lined with trees full of burning red leaves. She imagined herself strolling through them with a cup of hot cider and Sasuke by her side. This snippet of a daydream was quickly interrupted by her unanswered questions. Would he even want to do something as mundane as take a stroll with her through a park? Was there something more 'indulgent' or 'desirable' he'd rather do instead? She had this gut feeling he was looking for something more, something that he truly needed and she couldn't provide. She couldn't be enough.

"You okay?" Ino's warm voice pulled her back to the cafe and out of her own head. She had a furrowed brow and was clearly trying to read her thoughts.

"Yeah, sorry. I just can't shake this weird feeling about him. I've never dated anyone like him before so I don't really know what to do." She tried to shrug it off casually but Ino's face didn't change.

"He's a weird guy, Sakura. To be honest, I don't think he has ever dated anyone like you before either, so I'm sure he's just as confused."

"I don't understand," The redhead spoke slowly and remained unblinking. "What are you hoping is going to come of this?"

"It's not that I'm hoping for anything in particular, it's just a new sensation and I intend to see it through." He smirked and leaned across his desk. "It's exhilarating."

Behind him the sun was glittering off of the neighboring buildings that were a few floors shorter than the skyscraper Sasuke's office was in.

It was an especially clear day and you could make out the ant lines of people on the sidewalks below on their way to lunch.

"So you're going to Ino's this year?" His eyes still hadn't moved and Sasuke held his gaze.

"I am. I'd like for you to meet her yourself. Plus, Ino said you had told her you were thinking of coming by anyway."

Gaara sat back in his chair and slid his line of sight to the silver coiled snake paper weight at the edge of Sasuke's desk. "I'd be delighted to."

The rest of that day went on with the typical agenda to guide him through the remaining hours. He met with a client for a late lunch, sat through two dragging meetings and sent out a few financial forecasts for review. He was about to text Sakura to see what she was doing that night when he received one asking the same question. It was from Karin though, and he had to mull it over in his mind for a moment. As much as he wanted to see those emerald eyes and blushing cheeks, he was also feeling a bit restless. He still hadn't even kissed Sakura, and he wasn't feeling particularly patient that day. He'd be seeing her that Saturday regardless.

He typed out a quick response without a second thought, 'Be ready for me. I'll be there at six.'

The staff at the clinic all sat around in the waiting area by reception, their last patient of the day having just left fifteen minutes prior. They were all going to take advantage of the fact that they were caught up on their paperwork and stock room organizing and go out for drinks together after work.

Karin looked down at her phone and smiled before standing up. "Sorry, I actually can't make it. Something came up so I need to head out," She apologized to the group, not wasting any time grabbing her coat.

"Aw, that's lame, Karin!" One of the nurses whined.

"Next time, I swear! Have a good night!" And she was out.

The familiar slapping of skin meeting again and again echoed off the walls of her apartment bedroom. A hand wrapped around the front of her throat as he pounded into her recklessly from behind. He admired the collage of handprints and welts from his belt across her back and ass. She had streaks of mascara running down her cheeks and bleeding into her panties he had gagged her with earlier. Her pussy was shamelessly soaking his length and dripping onto the bound woman underneath her with every thrust.

And it just wasn't enough.

Pulling out, he pushed Karin onto her back and positioned the helplessly hogtied woman on top of her. The wad of soiled lace was removed from her mouth. Without any instruction needed, both knew he wanted them to eat each other out. He crawled over to where Karin's head was and inserted himself into the vagina she was tending to. She winced as he rammed in just an inch above her face with little concern for her being there.

He slammed into her harder, forcing a yell from the woman's drooling mouth. Without slowing down, he twisted her around so she was on her back and held her ankles apart as he watched her breasts bounce to his unforgiving rhythm. He bent over her and placed his sloppy mouth at Karin's opening and sucked and licked up the juices leaking from her. He wanted more, so he rolled the woman off of Karin and looped Karin's wrists that were bound by his leather belt over his head and around his neck. His hands quickly scooped her up by the backs of her thighs so he was carrying her against his chest while he was still buried to the hilt in her. He pushed her hard against the closest wall and she lost her breath while he continued on his war path. The wall soon became the floor and she could tell he was getting desperate. Her back burned as she was forced harder and harder into the wood panels. His hand found its way to

her throat once more and she knew he was finally reaching his release. His eyes were bright red and her vision began to blur as his grip continued to constrict against her throat. Just as she was starting to lose consciousness, he yelled with his climax and let go of her. Panting, he pulled out of her almost immediately and sat back on his knees.

"Fuck," He muttered under his breath.

Once she mustered up enough energy, she pulled herself up just enough to look at him. "Sasuke?" She called to him, sensing something was off. The sex had been savage and absolutely divine, but she had a pit in her stomach.

"It's not enough." He said, his voice clear as day.

He quietly got up and untied the woman still on the bed. Without looking at either of them even once he put on his clothes and adjusted his collar in the mirror. Once he was satisfied with his appearance, he turned to Karin, still on the floor and barely able to get up. He reached down and slowly helped her get up to walk to the bathroom. They didn't say anything as he turned on the water to her bathtub to fill it. She sat on the toilet as he leaned against the sink in silence.

He waited until she gingerly stepped into the full tub and submerged her beautifully tarnished flesh into the water.

"It's not enough," He said again.

"I heard you the first time." She bitterly bit out. He looked over at her and she had lowered herself up to her nose. Red locks floated around her like angry snakes in the water.

"I need to figure out what I want, but this isn't it anymore."

Before she could even respond, not that she had anything to say, he walked out of the bathroom. "Finish her up however she wants

before you go," She heard him say to her neighbor who was still on her bed. She listened for him to close the front door behind him.

Without skipping a beat, she rose from the water and re-entered the bedroom with a path of water dripping all around her. "You need to go home."

"You sure? I can-"

"Go. Now." Karin's voice boomed, no longer feigning control. The confused girl rolled off the bed and pulled her black t-shirt dress over her remaining bondage bindings before quickly shuffling out.

Once alone, Karin let out a deep and angry sigh. She turned to her cluttered dresser. There were knots of necklace chains, stone pendants scattered all over, colorful perfume bottles and vials of oils. She reached around a jewelry box and pulled out her phone that had been propped up behind it. The screen lit her tear-streaked face as she played back the video it was recording. It was only then that her lips curled at their corners.

This would be enough, at least for her.

"Door's open!" Ino yelled, her eyes and hands preoccupied with the root vegetables she was scrubbing in the sink. Beside her, Hinata was cutting up a bowl of apples to cook in the bacon fat that would later perfume the apartment.

"I'm sorry if I'm too early," Sakura wandered into the kitchen with a bottle of wine in one hand and a small pumpkin in her other arm.

"Oh, did you bring those for us?" Hinata asked, reaching to relieve Sakura of the gourd.

"Yeah, Ino mentioned you might put a gourd on your altar so I figured I'd pick one up from the grocery while I was there." She gave a sheepish shrug and was met by Hinata's soft smile.

"That's so thoughtful of you. We can go set it up in its place right now." She guided Sakura through to the living room and over to the altar they had set up in the corner.

Immediately she was taken aback by its beauty. A deep orange fabric was draped over the small surface and pooled a foot in front of it. Elegant branches with vivid autumnal leaves framed the assortment of candles, gourds, and framed photos Sakura later learned were loved ones who had passed. Hinata reorganized a few of the candles and the gold chalice to make room for Sakura's pumpkin.

"Perfect," she commented as she joined Sakura's side to admire the final composition.

Ino padded over with a loaf of bread topped with what Sakura immediately recognized as pumpkin seeds. "This is Samhain bread," She explained as she placed it on the ceramic dish on the altar. "All ready!"

Both Witches were dressed in deep autumnal colors and Sakura could only admire how much the pair looked like true goddesses in the candlelight. They decided to open the bottle of wine Sakura had brought while they waited for everyone else coming to observe Samhain.

"Knock, knock!" A voice called from the open front door. A woman with black, spiky hair and sharp eyes came flouncing in. The three women in the room turned to the less than subtle entrance.

"Anko!" Ino cheered, not missing the bottle of home-spiced rum she was promised in hand.

"And Neji," Hinata noted, as the tall man entered behind her. While Anko made herself at home and rummaged in the kitchen, Hinata gave Neji a hug he gently returned.

"This is my cousin, Neji. Neji, this is Sakura." The man extended a formal hand and Sakura noted how firm his grip was.

"I've heard a good amount about you, Sakura. It's nice to meet you." He only expressed the faintest smile and she couldn't tell at all if he liked her, hated her or had no opinion at all.

"I hope only good things," she joked, giving a nervous scratch to her own arm.

"Of course," he responded coolly.

"Well aren't you adorable. I'm Anko," The boisterous woman standing then before Sakura was a lot to take in. She struggled to maintain eye contact and not ogle at her ample chest contained by a fishnet top. Her leather jacket seemed to be the only thing shielding her nipples and framed the silver pentacle dangling between her breasts.

"Anko and Neji both live out in Queens so they usually take the train or Neji drives them when we all meet here," Hinata explained, paying no mind to Anko as she shamelessly examined Sakura head to toe.

"We took the train, figured Neji would probably want a couple drinks tonight. Maybe get laid...?" She gave Sakura a hard nudge, causing her to turn bright red while Neji was fortunately chatting with Ino about dinner preparations.

The Witches and Sakura settled around the coffee table as Ino finished the place settings at their dining table. It was a half glass of wine later that a final knock sounded from the door and those gathered turned to see who had arrived.

"Sasuke..?" Anko whispered in honest disbelief. She cocked her head to the side and shot a skeptical glance over at Ino, who ignored her. Sasuke gave a curt head nod of greeting to the hosts, who then promptly entered the room.

"Since we're all here, we can get started." Ino walked everyone to the corner of the room to form a semi-circle around the altar. Hinata turned off the lights and brought over a kettle of fresh tea brewed specifically for this night.

Sakura tentatively stood next to Anko who winked at her while Ino ground an unseen mixture of leaves, herbs and resins into a small cast iron cauldron on the ground surrounded by candles. Sensing someone on her other side, she turned to see Sasuke there. As usual, he looked devastatingly handsome and particularly dark in a way that made her heart beat a little faster. Tonight he was dressed in a black long sleeve cashmere sweater and black jeans. The sharp creases of a black button down poked out against his neck. Even the entirety of his watch was black, she noticed. While she herself probably wouldn't try to pull off such a look, she had to admit he always did so better than anyone she could imagine.

Hinata sprinkled a handful of berries and dried leaves across the altar. "Tonight we are celebrating the end of the Summer and the beginning of the coldest part of the year. The crops and vegetation will die off and return to the Earth at the hands of the Winter's unbiased breath and we will meditate on this annual transition. It is also a time of remembrance for those who have passed and an opportunity to honor them and all their memories we cherish."

The room filled with an aromatic smoke coming from the cauldron Ino was working with and she began chanting:

Fire red, summer's dead

Yet it shall return.

Clear and bright, in the night,

Burn, fire, burn!

Everyone joined hands behind Ino as she continued to burn herbs and aromatics to fill the air and chanted a response only Sakura

didn't know:

Dance the ring, luck to bring,

When the year's a-turning.

Chant the rhyme at Hallows-time,

When the fire's burning.

Sakura looked to Hinata as she passed a heavy jar of the fresh tea to Neji on the far side of the room, Ino starting the next chant:

Fire glow, vision show

Of the heart's desire,

When the spell's chanted well

Of the witching fire.

Sasuke squeezed her hand in his and she couldn't tell if it was the smoke or him getting to head. His touch was also a lot colder than she had remembered.

Dance the ring, luck to bring,

When the year's a-turning.

Chant the rhyme at Hallows-time,

When the fire's burning.

Anko released her hand to drink the tea and passed it down to her next. She sniffed at the mixture with hesitation, but heard the woman murmur a word of encouragement. It smelled of cloves and something soft like chamomile.

Fire spark, when nights are dark

Makes our winter's mirth.

Red leaves fall, earth takes all,

Brings them to rebirth.

She passed it down to Sasuke, who made sure to lock her in a smoldering stare as he accepted the tea. In the dim light of the room, his eyes seemed to glow a bright red which caused her breath to catch for a moment.

Dance the ring, luck to bring,

When the year's a-turning.

Chant the rhyme at Hallows-time,

When the fire's burning.

He kept his eyes committed to hers and she found herself unable to look away. Ino turned to them and witnessed the wordless exchange. She started her last verse of the cantation louder than before, drawing Sasuke's attention away from Sakura.

Fire fair, earth and air,

And the heaven's rain,

All blessed be, and so may we,

at Hallows-tide again.

The blonde Witch joined hands with Sasuke after taking the final sip from the jar and together the room recited the last verse one final time.

Dance the ring, luck to bring,

When the year's a-turning.

Chant the rhyme at Hallows-time,

When the fire's burning.

It was then that the room was swallowed in silence as they each fell into their individual meditations. Sakura carefully looked around to observe each of the Witches as their heads remained bowed with focus. After a few moments more, Ino separated from them and carefully opened the window across the apartment for the smoke to escape. Hinata broke apart to go into her own room and do the same, creating an air path to clear the air faster. Within minutes, there was just a lingering aroma of cinnamon and sage.

Ino returned to the room after also opening her own window. "Thank you to everyone for participating. I know we all practice our crafts a little differently so I wanted to keep tonight light and let each of us reserve our personal touches for our own rituals at home. Now," She clapped her hands together, "let's eat!"

Back in the kitchen, Neji helped Hinata and Ino bring out a parade of platters that reminded Sakura of something close to a Thanksgiving feast. There was halved and roasted squash, a sautee of apples with bacon and brussel sprouts, a few loaves of rich homemade bread, a small ham and of course, a few bottles of wine. Some sweet pumpkin bread could be seen on the kitchen counter for later, courtesy of Neji.

Everyone gathered around the table and took a seat, leaving one head of the table empty for those who had passed. Ino guided Sakura to an open chair near her own and Hinata sat on her other side. Sasuke narrowed his eyes into a glare and settled for sitting across from Sakura beside Anko.

"It's been how long since I've seen your perfect little ass, huh?" The Witch asked, unceremoniously engaging him.

"Not long enough," Sasuke responded, pouring himself a glass from the closest bottle.

She chuckled as she took the bottle after him. "If my memory serves me right, it was during a Frost Moon last Fall. That ass of yours was thrust-"

"Anko," Ino interrupted quickly, "Are you going to be dressing up with us after dinner?"

A cheeky grin took over her entire face. "You know I love a good game of roleplay!" An elbow planted itself without grace on the table as she leaned in. "I'll be honest, I didn't have much time to prepare a whole new look so I'm using one of my work getups."

"What do you do?" Sakura asked, missing the measured look Ino sent Anko.

"I'm a dominatrix," her eyes twinkled and her smile twisted to the side. "And I'm always open to new clients."

She felt her cheeks running hot again and wasn't sure what to say to that. Fortunately for her, Hinata placed a gentle hand on top of hers and chimed in. "What did you think of the ritual, Sakura? This is your first Samhain, right?"

"Oh," She blinked, still fighting her blush back. "It was beautiful, and that tea you made was really nice. Is it something you can drink outside of the ritual?"

"Of course," She smiled. "I'll give you the recipe later. It's pretty simple to prepare and will make your whole house smell wonderful."

The meal continued on until the platters were almost completely bare and the bottles were long empty. As the table was cleared by a combined effort, Sakura offered to wash the dinner plates in the sink. Her back stiffened as a hand grazed her lower back, just below the hidden dimples behind her hips.

"May I?" A deep voice asked from her shoulder.

She looked down and saw his hand holding a dry dish cloth. "Sure," she answered, passing him a clean plate.

"You know," He spoke again, his voice only loud enough for her to hear. "You look gorgeous by candlelight."

She kept her eyes concentrated on her hands in the sink. "You don't need to say that, but thank you."

Fingers tilted her chin in his direction. She was trapped by his smoldering stare and unconsciously held her breath. His thick lashes were lowered as he did little to hide the glimmer of lust behind them.

"I wouldn't be me if I were to help myself otherwise, Sakura."

He released her chin and she eventually returned to the sink with a pounding heart. They finished the dishes together without another word between them. Ino had put on a classic retro-inspired Halloween playlist to inspire a spooky and playful mood while they got ready for their party that was about an hour away.

"I'm taking her now," Ino announced, pulling Sakura towards her bedroom.

The rest of the women followed them in. Anko had brought in another bottle of wine, but no glasses. She pulled a long sip directly from the bottle before offering it to the others. No one seemed to be interested in the moment, so she shrugged and cozied up in the armchair with it.

Across the bed were four neat piles of fabrics and bags of flowers and plants. "This is all yours, Sakura." Ino pointed to the white satin and pale pink chiffon. In the bag on top of it was a lush flower crown of white daffodils and dandelions, pink roses and lush violets and a few lilies.

Hinata reached across the bed and picked up her own set which was a similar white satin chemise top but was paired with a dark navy

blue skirt that cinched at her waist and pooled at her toes. The crown she had made for herself was a skillfully braided assortment of delicate twigs that represented the barren winter coming in the upcoming weeks.

"Do you need anything, Anko?" Ino asked, stripping to just her black underwear.

"Nope," she pulled her jacket off to reveal two black X's masking her nipples under the fishnet top and pulled out a leather harness she lazily slipped across her torso and around her breasts. She spread her legs and rested her elbows on her knees as she fished through her bag. From it, she produced a short leather whip. "All done."

The blonde shimmied into a deep orange dress of pure velvet. It cut a plunging V down her chest and skimmed her hips to her ankles. She donned a flower crown of dark red roses and rosemary.

"Is your friend on her way?" Ino asked, thoughtfully selecting a few gold necklaces for herself and Sakura.

"Yeah, she should be here any minute." Gingerly she stepped out of her jeans and slid the flowing pink skirt up to her waist. "She lives pretty close so I let her know when dinner was wrapping up."

Hinata and Ino stood by the mirror and began tapping glitter to their cheeks and lids and traced their eyes with sultry charcoal liners.

"Can I do your makeup, Sakura?" Ino asked, smudging a maroon shadow into her smokey eye.

"Sure," The woman sat on the edge of the bed as she quickly pulled off her sweater and replaced it with the white silk chemise.

Her new friend got on her knees in front of her and smiled. "You're so pretty, Sakura." Without waiting for a response, she placed her makeup palette on the seated woman's lap and began swiping a neutral smokey eye around her emerald eyes and an opalescent highlighter to her cheekbones. She finished her face with a rosy

blush and sat back on her heels to examine her work with pride.
"Honestly I may have done too good of a job here."

A faint knock was followed by what Sakura recognized as Tenten's voice. "Oh, hi, is Sakura here?"

Hearing her own name, she quickly stepped out of Ino's room to meet her friend. "Tenten!"

The runner had been let in by Hinata's cousin, who had opened the door but not yet let her in. Upon seeing Sakura inside, she ducked under the towering man's arm and greeted her friend with a tight hug. "It smells great in here, and you look like a vision!"

Sakura pulled her into Ino's room before the men in the living room could get a true look at her outfit. Once hidden back in the bedroom, Tenten gave herself a bright introduction to the women inside. Sakura had already explained that this was a true Witch gathering on their last run and Tenten was all in.

"This look will be perfect for you," Ino cooed, passing Tenten a green velvet shift dress and crown of brilliant sunflowers. Without even asking for permission, she slid a gold cuff onto her bicep. "I'm too good at this," Ino commended herself, a smug grin plastered to her face.

"We're here..!" A signature voice boomed from outside the bedroom. A few more voices followed his own that Sakura didn't recognize, but she guessed Naruto had brought a few friends with him. The music was soon at twice the volume and Anko took that as her cue to stand up.

"I'm going to move my ass out there and see what fresh meat walked in," She announced, leaving her bag but not the bottle of wine.

"Thanks for having me over," Tenten bowed in Ino and Hinata's direction.

"Don't mention it! We needed a fourth season, after all." Ino playfully stuck her tongue out and Hinata rolled her eyes behind her.

The four of them left to join the others and see for themselves who had come in with Naruto.

Sakura scanned the room and saw Shikamaru was settled into armchair she had seen him in the first time she had been to the apartment. He wasn't wearing anything particular, just some pants and a flannel button down. By contrast, Naruto was taking up more than enough space on the couch with bright red contacts and bold whiskers running across his cheeks. She was impressed by the black claws he had fixed to his nails, none of which seemed to impede on his ability to throw back the drink he already had in front of him. There was a larger guy wearing a furry hoodie resembling a bear eating from a tray of chips on the floor next to Shikamaru and then a few others she didn't recognize filling the room. By one of the open windows was Sasuke. He was sharing what looked like a joint with the man turned away from her. He had bright red hair and had Sasuke's full attention with whatever he was saying.

"You all look like a bunch of goddesses!" Naruto exclaimed, grasping at the air in his girlfriend's direction.

"This is Chouji," Shikamaru interrupted, gesturing to the man next to him in the bear costume. "And that's-"

"Lee, and the pleasure is without mercy all mine." A man who had just a second ago been hidden next to Naruto on the sofa was now on one knee in front of Sakura clutching her hand in his. "You are breathtaking. May I get you a drink? Offer you my hand in marriage?"

Sakura blinked the shock away and looked down at this startling man with a bowl cut. He had on a traditional samurai's garb and what looked like a real sword to match at his hip.

"Um, hi," She started slowly, still working her brain beyond his incredibly bold haircut. "I'm actually going to see what the drink options are myself. Thank you, though." She pulled her hand from his and forced a smile to her face.

"Very well. Next round!" He pumped his fist in the air with determination and then turned to Tenten next to her. "Pardon my wording, but you look very fit. What kind of training do you do?"

Tenten perked at this. "I'm a personal trainer and teach boxing classes in Park Slope part-time, if you're ever interested in getting your ass kicked."

"Consider that an accepted challenge, Tenten!"

Sensing the start of a new friendship, Sakura excused herself to figure out her own drink situation. Hinata had set up a bar cart complete with a steaming pot of spiked cider and an assortment of beers in ice. She opted for the cider and poured a cup into a glass mug. As she tested a sip of it, she scanned the room once more. This time, she spotted Anko sitting on the arm rest of the couch on the opposite side of Naruto. Her arm was slung across the shoulders of an incredibly handsome man who looked closer to Anko's age than her own, if not a little older. He seemed unaffected by her lush chest just inches from his half-masked face and was in conversation with both Anko and Shikamaru. The armchair next to Shikamaru was empty, so she decided to make her way there to sit. This had her walking past Sasuke and the man he was smoking with, so she didn't miss his eyes following her once she crossed his path.

"Well, hello." The grey-haired man greeted, his uncovered eye crinkling with what she imagined was a smile. "Are you the charming Sakura that Anko was just telling me about?"

"I am," She reached out to shake his hand and smiled back.

"You wouldn't happen to be Tsunade's niece, would you?" Her eyes widened unexpectedly.

"You know Tsunade?" Her aunt lived way up on the Upper East Side and she had only seen her once for brunch since moving to New York.

"I do, quite well in fact. We had dinner just last week and she was telling me about her lovely niece who recently moved all the way from California. And, from how she described you," He gestured to her hair. "I had to ask and see if it was you."

"She looked at apartments for me while I was getting ready for the move, I couldn't have done it without her." The man nodded in understanding and leaned back into the couch.

"Oh," He started again. "How rude of me. My name is Kakashi." He ran a hand through his untamed hair.

"How do you know Tsunade?" Sakura asked, trying to pay little mind to Anko's long nails drawing mindless circles on his chest.

"It's a funny story, really," he leaned in across the coffee table. Sakura followed and leaned in as well. "I work in the law firm on the same floor as her practice." He tilted his head to the side in thought. "I suppose that's not very funny."

"Oh, okay." Sakura answered politely. "And the two of you?" She asked, referring to both Anko and Kakashi. From her side, she heard a loud snort.

"Chouji," Shikamaru warned.

Anko grinned and turned to Kakashi to scratch the underside of his chiseled chin. "He was a client of mine."

"O-Oh?" Her mind immediately filled with all sorts of obscene situations in which Anko was dominating this seemingly reserved man. "And you still..."

"Yep," Anko chirped. "It's my livelihood and keeps our fire burning. It's our normal, you could say." She cupped his cheek and brought her head down to capture his lips as she peeled down his mask to his chin. The kiss made Sakura wiggle uncomfortably in her seat, feeling as though it was something she wasn't supposed to see. Everything Anko did was more erotic than any porn she had seen. She turned her head to the window and took a gulp of her cider, a mixture of the heat and alcohol burning down her throat.

"Sakura," A familiar voice called from behind her.

She craned her neck to see it was Sasuke calling to her. The man beside him was looking at her as well and she felt her stomach knot up. As she got up and smoothed her long skirt down, she took another heavy sip of her drink before walking over to the brooding pair. Despite the window being open, she could smell the weed on them immediately.

"Hi," She greeted, her voice higher than intended.

Eyes a shade lighter than her own stared at her through thick rings of black eyeliner and dark bags from what she assumed was a serious lack of sleep. He didn't offer his hand or anything and she shifted her weight with uncertainty.

"This is Gaara. He's a close friend of mine from Church. He's how I met Ino a few years ago." Sasuke took a last drag from the joint and ground it out in the ashtray he perched on the window sill.

This man didn't give a single hint of an expression and Sakura could only wonder what he and Ino had in common. He gave off a weird energy that didn't incline her to warm up to him at all. And by comparison, Sasuke also didn't give off a warm and cozy vibe, but this guy was colder and seemed..off.

"It's nice to meet you." He finally said, and clearly didn't have any intention of saying a word more.

"Gaara, Naruto and I sometimes go together. I figured it would be worth introducing him to the woman who has been holding my attention these days." He smirked and Sakura shot him a glare of embarrassment.

"What is it that you believe in, Sakura?" Gaara asked, her eyes meeting his once again.

"What do I believe in? I guess I believe in a greater good," It wasn't a subject she spoke about often, mostly because she wasn't too certain she knew what to believe in. If anything, she believed most people had similar beliefs, just interpreted a little differently.

"How vague," His voice was cold and dismissive.

"Would you rather hear her proclaim an undying love and devotion for Christ or some false god?" Sasuke argued back.

Gaara narrowed his eyes at the taller man. He couldn't care less about what this girl thought or spent her time believing in. What was Sasuke doing with her? From what he could gather, she wasn't even giving him physical gratification.

"I'm going to find something to eat." He announced, shoving off the wall to go to the kitchen.

"So I'm guessing he's my new best friend?" Sakura asked, letting her back be supported by the wall Gaara was just on.

Sasuke smirked took a step closer to her. "I promise you wouldn't enjoy him all that much."

She looked up at him and realized he had a white tab looped under his collar. "Is this your costume?"

His grin grew more smug and he straightened his collar a bit. "I'm a clergyman. Scary, aren't they?"

"If you say so," She laughed. Across the apartment she could see Ino and Gaara speaking in the kitchen. Not that she knew what his version of 'happy' was, she knew Ino was not displaying hers.

"What do you think they're arguing about?" She asked quietly, but already knowing the answer.

"You," Sasuke's answer was blunt. There was no reason not to be honest with her. "He thinks you're going to distract me too much." A hand was at the small of her back again but this time ghosted over her ass. "I think he's just jealous." Her eyes shot up to his and he brought his hand to the space between her shoulder blades.

"I don't know what to say to that," She admitted. His cologne, radiating heat and the lingering essence of weed enveloped her.

"I don't need you to say anything to that. Just don't feel you need to hold anything back." His fingers slid inside the top of her blouse and burned against her back. His pinky found its way under the clasp of her bra and she pulled her spine up straight and away from his touch.

"Sasuke," She warned him with her tone and a side glare.

"Do you want to go to Ino's room and repent for your sins?" She shivered as he leaned in even closer, his breath tickling her neck.

"Tenten!" The trainer turned from the bar cart where she was grabbing a beer and made her way over to her friend and this tall drink of temptation. Without needing a proper introduction she sent Sakura a knowing look of approval but allowed her to introduce them anyway.

"Sasuke, this is Tenten. We go running together on the weekends." He took his time trailing his eyes down her body and Sakura almost gawked at this shameless act. Tenten uncharacteristically blushed.

"Hn, nice to meet you." He watched her squirm under his hungry watch.

"S-same. Um, Sakura said you work in finance?" She nervously tugged at her dress hem.

"I do," He looked past her shoulder and saw Hinata's cousin watching them from across the apartment. He could recognize that look anywhere. "Have you met Neji yet?"

The man in question immediately knew Sasuke had brought him up when he saw the bastard grin in his direction.

"No, I don't think so?" She turned to follow Sasuke's line of sight. A divine man in black jeans and a structured Japanese button up was walking towards her. She blushed for the second time that night as he stopped just in front of her.

"Neji," His voice was so soft but full of authority.

"Tenten," She breathed.

"Let's go talk." He took a step back for her to pass him.

"Um, sure." She gave Sakura a look of excitement under wraps and walked toward the empty candlelit dining table with Neji.

"If I didn't know any better, I would say you were trying to create a buffer between us, Sakura." Sasuke purred beside her.

She turned to look out the window to ensure no one could read her face which she was certain was revealing all sorts of inner thoughts and feelings. He stood behind her and in the reflection of the glass she could see his devious smile behind her head. Long fingers wrapped around her upper arms and she let her head rest against his chest.

"Did you not think a cunning devil like me would see through a simple trick such as that?"

She looked out past herself and across the piles of buildings stacked in the endless streets outside. She imagined herself in one of those apartments with the lights on and Sasuke alone in there with her. What would he do with her if she allowed him to have her like that? She pictured him pinning her to a wall, his hard body flush against her. He would still have that damned clergyman collar on, but it wouldn't fool anyone. He was the embodiment of sin as she knew it. She imagined his lips scorching her flesh as he slowly sank to his knees and pulled her skirt to her chet. He would keep his glowing eyes on hers as his long tongue would dip deep inside her and feast on her juices.

Her breath hitched and she was brought back to reality when his lips met the crook of her neck and remained there on top of her rising pulse.

"Do I make you nervous still, Sakura?" He asked, his breath hot and wet on her skin.

"Yes," She admitted and felt him smile into her.

"You couldn't imagine the delicious torture I want to bring you for affecting me like this, Sakura." She turned her head to meet his gaze.

"Sasuke..." He saw the fear in her eyes and savored it.

"Sakura," He growled. His eyes looked straight through her. "I would worship you."

She stood speechless and couldn't formulate a single thought after that. It was Ino who approached them after clearing her throat and offered them two fresh new drinks in exchange for whatever they were working on in their glasses. "I'm cutting up the pumpkin bread Neji brought. Sakura you *have* to try some. It will be the death of me."

Sasuke pulled himself away from her and slowly retreated to the couch. Naruto had saddled up to the bar cart with Anko who was helping him to the spiced rum she brought. The unholy clergyman sat next to Kakashi in his ninja costume and tilted his drink back down his throat.

"Care to share?" The lawyer asked, not bothering to look his way.

"Hn," He grunted. "I think you already know."

"I wasn't sure if you were going to take her right there through the window or not, to be honest. I was almost certain Anko was going to win the bet." He turned to the quietly simmering man. "Who knew a devil like you could be so sweet?"

He glared back instantly. "You know I don't do sweet."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night. But, look at Anko and tell me she doesn't do sweet either."

Naruto was yammering on about whatever nonsense he saw on the train that day when she felt him staring at her. She looked over her shoulder and saw Kakashi's loving face smiling at her through his mask. So badly she wanted to climb on top of him and wrap her whole being around the man in that moment. He accepted her and completed her in ways no man or outlet ever could. She was vulnerable with him and everyday learning more and more about what it meant to be grateful to live.

"I don't know if I can do this," Sakura breathed out, suddenly exhausted.

"What?" Ino put the empty glasses down on the kitchen counter and grabbed Sakura's elbow. "What did he do?"

"Nothing! He's just," She fumbled with her nails. "Intense. I guess I'm not accustomed to someone so... passionate."

"That's one way to put it," The Witch mumbled. "I'm not sure what he's up to, but can you promise me you'll let me know if anything weird happens?"

"What do you mean by that, Ino? It sounds really ominous." She crossed her arms and watched her face carefully.

She sighed and put her hands up. "What I mean is, he's into some freaky things, and I don't take you for the kind of girl that would want to play his games. That's all." She had hoped that would be the end of it, but she should have known better.

"What are you considering 'freaky'? Like handcuffs and spanking?" She asked, determined to get her answer.

"He's not Christian Gray, Sakura. I don't think it's my place to blow up his spot like that though. I know that sounds wrong since I'm the one who has brought this up again, but I'm sorry. If you ask him I would like to think he'd tell you." She looked over at the man glaring into his glass they were discussing. "He has to."

Aaaa

"Byeeee!" Ino waved off Chouji and Lee as they staggered out to find their way home.

She shut the door and sighed with clear exhaustion written all over. The only people left were Shikamaru, Sakura, her friend Tenten, Neji and Sasuke. She would count Naruto, but Hinata had taken him to lay down in her room after he drank too much and started to fall asleep. Speaking of the Witch, she hadn't seen her come out since...

Her boyfriend had migrated to the fire escape to smoke a cigarette while everyone else was lounging around. The lights were quickly turned all the way down with the exception of one dim run of string lights and the candles lit all across the apartment. The collection of bodies and peaceful faces glowed around the coffee table.

"I'm going to bed, what do you guys want to do?"

Sasuke, Sakura and Neji were all on the couch and Tenten was resting her back against Neji's shins from the floor. The Uchiha had one arm slung over the back of the couch and Sakura was gently leaning into him. He shot a mischievous look at Neji, who instantly glared back.

"No foursomes."

Ino rolled her eyes at this. "I'll help you all decide. Time to go."

Slowly, the group got on their feet. Ino handed both Sakura and Tenten bags with their clothes in them. "If you don't feel like changing now, you can just bring me everything Monday." Sakura nodded with gratitude. She was just too beat to even think about changing in that moment.

"This was really fun. I'll see you next week," The two co-workers hugged, followed by a hug from Tenten.

"I'm so glad I got to meet everyone," She smiled at Ino.

"I'm sure you are," She laughed, making eyes at Neji who just looked away.

"I'll walk you home," He offered the brunette.

Sasuke received the usual warning glare from Ino as he walked with everyone to the door and to the stairs.

Soon enough, it was just the two of them in the living room.

"Frightening, isn't it?" Shikamaru asked from the window. "Not being able to cast a spell to get her out of this, only being able to watch them like a car crash in the making."

"Shut up."

"You want to find another drink?" Sasuke asked once Neji and Tenten turned down the street in the direction of her apartment.

Despite being as tired as she was on the couch moments ago, Sakura found herself almost aimlessly wandering down the block outside Ino's. The streets were quiet. Children had stopped trick-or-treating hours ago and anyone still out was either on the train home or glued to whatever bar they were passing out in.

"I don't think so," She thought out loud, pulling her coat around herself tighter.

"Afraid we'll get carried away this time?" Without having to see his face she knew he was grinning.

"We?" She challenged. He was the one pushing her buttons after all.

"I've been nothing but a complete gentleman with you. Trust me, I'd rather not be." His hand ghosted at her waist and rested on her upper arm as someone passed them on the sidewalk.

"Sakura?" A voice called from behind them.

Both Sasuke and her turned, him with a stiffness because he already had the voice placed.

"Karin?" She blinked, only recognizing her co-worker once she pulled the cloak down that had been shielding her face. "Small city, huh?"

"Too small," She commented, fixing her gaze on the man next to her. "Is this the guy that everyone was freaking out about at the clinic?"

She looked up at Sasuke as well and wondered why his expression had suddenly darkened so much. Was he upset they were interrupted..?

"Yeah, this is him. We were just leaving a party. What about you?"

The red head clutched her cloak closer to her body. "Same here. Just some close friends." Her eyes were back on Sasuke and Sakura knew something was going on but didn't have it in her to ask.

"Well, have a good night, Karin." Sakura finally said, putting her hand on Sasuke's arm.

"Have a good night, Sakura," She said back, taking the cue to turn back towards where she was headed. When the pair were seemingly out of earshot, she amended her statement. "Good night, Sasuke."

Having heard her, Sakura turned around. Karin was already gone, most likely having turned the corner behind them.

"Do you know her?" Sakura asked, confusion and a trace of anger evident in her voice.

Karin was generally an okay co-worker, but Sakura found the woman to be easily provoked and ill-tempered when she was proven wrong or just didn't get her way. She always irked her in a way that kept her instinctively at a distance. She needed to know how they knew each other.

"Not well." He spoke, his eyes still fixed on the spot she had been standing. "We had an arrangement for a bit, but that's over now."

"An arrangement," Sakura repeated back.

"I was fucking her." The sudden directness shook her and she had to look away from him to save herself from the shame she inexplicably felt pooling inside.

"Cool," She spoke, unsure and quiet. "I'm going to go home I think."

As she started walking towards the trains, he grabbed her arm. "So that's the breaking point for you? Finding out I slept with someone?"

"No," He could hear her fighting down her true emotions. "I don't know."

He laughed. "Sakura, we haven't even kissed and you're upset to see the living proof that I'm not some fairytale virgin prince waiting for you?" He ran his hand through his hair and let out a deep breath. "If I or anyone else who knows me hasn't made it clear enough for you, I'm not a saint. I'm a greedy, selfish creature, Sakura, and I don't intend to change."

Her eyes began to water and a few tears splattered on her phone screen as she tapped to request her ride home. Sasuke let out frustrated noise split between a growl and a yell and Sakura looked up with surprise and fright.

"You knew this already. You knew this is how I am."

Sooner than expected, the car pulled up. "I figured most of it, I just didn't think you were this heartless."

Anything catch you off guard here? I've been trying to be patient with getting to this point, so I hope I still have you all with me. Not to be a spoiler, but I'm hoping to answer some of those open questions that have been adding up in the next chapter. Please please please leave a review before you close this out, though, I rely on them for some motivation and it validates what I'm doing here for me. Thank you so much!

Chapter 7

Hey friends! I want to start by thanking everyone who reviewed last chapter. I haven't been able to reply to all of you, but want you to know I read everything and took all your feedback into consideration when putting this chapter together. I'm hoping this gives Sasuke a more rounded character and keeps you engaged. As always, I hope you enjoy this and thank you for reading. Warning: Totally did not keep a sharp eye out for typos or grammatical misses when I was doing some light edits.

CH7

Friday morning.

" The polar vortex has its eyes set on the Northeast, state officials are encouraging residents in the area to ensure they have enough food and water for one week per household and expect mass transit to be shut down starting Monday at midnight-"

Sakura was running on automatic that day, completing patient reports and double checking lab results that had come in that morning. The news coverage had been nonstop and seemed to be broadcasted everywhere the past few days. She should have known better than to expect anything different at work this week.

" Record high winds and snowfall for New York City and potential power outages are being anticipated-"

"Have you put any thought into it?"

She looked up and blinked at Ino a few times before recalling what she was talking about. For the past few days people had started accepting this less-than-there version of Sakura that had taken up

residency. Except Ino. "I still don't know, I forgot to call my aunt and see what she was going to do."

"It would be so fun, though! Naruto and Shikamaru already stacked half the living room with cases of water and Hinata and I are working on a killer chili and sandwiches to take us into next *month* . Plus, come on, booze."

When Sakura still didn't react, she sighed and rested her hand on her hip. "I still haven't heard from him either, if you're wondering."

It had been two weeks since Ino's party and Sakura's fight with Sasuke. While Sakura was doing a piss poor job of hiding her broken heart, Karin hadn't even bothered to say 'boo' at work. Meanwhile, Sasuke hadn't been seen by anyone since that night. There was a steady wave of texts and calls from everyone but Sakura, but no one got a single response.

"Fuck him," Tenten had said, trying to help her friend channel her emotions into running more.

"Was I overreacting? I think I was overreacting. I just was so surprised by how he took it to the next level. I was hoping he wasn't that kind of guy." Sakura had told her over their breakfast ritual. "He's definitely a bastard, but I'm the fool for trying to make something happen there."

She wanted to see the good in him, she wanted to believe there was something in him she could find more of herself in. But, she was wrong. Just like she was with Kiba. She wasn't enough on her own to bring him around. And if not her, then who? It came in waves, her rollercoaster of confidence and cocktail or unanswered questions. Bigger than Sasuke was her own sense of self that was a dark pit inside her. Was moving out here too big of a change? Instead of taking control of her future was she just making one mistake after another?

"Sakura," Ino called to her again. It was the end of the day and a Friday. She couldn't handle seeing her friend like this and needed to take action. "This isn't a request, so don't think you can say no. We're performing some of the strongest magick tonight to help you."

As predicted, she took the bait. "What kind of spell are you planning?"

The Witch smiled. "It's not a spell, it's a sleepover."

Friday afternoon.

He refused to answer his phone, he barely touched it unless absolutely necessary these days. But from across his desk, he could see the screen light up and then eventually go silent before adding another voicemail to the running list he hadn't responded to yet.

' *And you say I'm the idiot!*' Naruto's voice rang in his head, as it had been on loop without mercy for the last few hours. The moron had convinced him to meet for lunch earlier that day. Since Sasuke had been MIA far beyond what Naruto deemed acceptable, he said he either needed to meet him for lunch or expect an ambush at his office. Not having the energy to prepare for the latter, he accepted his fate and met him at the Japanese restaurant Sasuke would go to whenever he needed some quiet. The irony was not lost on him in the moment.

"Explain to me why you haven't reached out to her," The blonde extended his chopsticks to Sasuke's plate and helped himself to an eel roll.

"I told you already. I didn't do anything wrong." He glared across the table.

Naruto sat back in his chair and folded his arms. "You, Sasuke Uchiha, didn't do anything wrong. Right."

Sasuke sighed. "It's not like I told her I was searching for my fucking *wife* . I only took her on one date. We didn't even kiss. She has no right to be upset with me."

"That's where you don't get it!" He slammed his hand down, causing his tea to splash onto his plate. "This isn't one of your devil deals. These are emotions and feelings, Sasuke. This is what I've been telling you for years you need to pay attention to. You're both at a loss now and you need to fix it." He grit his teeth, his canines sharpening as his own emotions heightened. "This is bigger than you or this girl feeling better. This is your chance to prove to Them you should *stay* ."

Them. The two who let him break free of his eternal duties Down There. How long had it been since he had spoken with Them last?

Sasuke stared at him with a completely impassive face. His companion remained hunched over the table, his hand planted to the table with a desperation to be heard. Eventually, his shoulders softened as well as his eyes. "You're going to listen to me one day... Have you thought over what you're gonna do for the storm?"

"Hn," The brooding man drank the rest of his tea and poured the last of the kettle into both their cups. "I'm not changing my mind, I'm staying at my place to work. I'm not going to trap myself in an apartment with you and everyone else trying to interrogate me about something that shouldn't concern them."

Naruto rolled his eyes but there was no humor in them. "Whatever, dude. You're the one who wanted to be human and I'm just trying to help you since I'm the who succeeded."

When they parted ways, Sasuke could feel the sickly warmth in his eyes as he made his way back to his office. Sleep was never an incredible priority, but he had started avoiding it the last week or so. It left him too vulnerable to this new thing Kakashi had told him was his conscious when he first surfaced in the human world. Naruto wasn't wrong, he did want to be human. He took a lot of pleasure in

these indulgences he had available to him. Most recently, alcohol seemed to be his vice of choice. There was never a shortage of bars in the city, so he had taken to blindly wandering into a new one each night. When the liquor alone wasn't cutting it, he headed to the Financial District to that inconspicuous door he knew so well, sometimes with Ino and Shikamaru, sometimes without. This was what it meant to be human, he thought, tangled in a bed of limbs and hot mouths. He would have called Karin, but she was at the root of his problems so she might as well have been dead to him. Still, whether it was Karin or the next warm body, it just wasn't proving to be enough anymore.

Had it ever truly been to begin with?

He tried to place himself back in time just weeks earlier when he and Sakura were outside in that damned line and he could feel a heart racing. That heart was his own, he admitted. It was like he had been submerged in a frozen lake and dragged out to face his world with new, uninvited clarity. She had been his damned undoing.

With the exception of Naruto at lunch, he hadn't spoken to anyone else directly in days. People he worked with were doing everything in their power to avoid him like the plague. He was a monster in a suit sulking like a lion with a sword through his paw. He was most recently rumored to be unshowered, but even when he was, he was a menacing cloud you hid in conference rooms from. All communication was through emails and all deals were signed off on without a hand shake, just an e-signature.

An email he had been waiting on hit his inbox late in the day when everyone else was packing up to go home. The order of groceries he had set up had been delivered and the doorman had placed them inside his apartment at his request. With so many people wrestling to collect last-minute supplies, he was in no mood to take on the grocery store madness and was grateful for his scheduled delivery. It was more than enough to probably feed a family through the next week, but no one would ever accuse Sasuke of leaning on the conservative side. It also didn't hurt if he could prolong his isolation

away from anything and anyone that would drive him to murder in his current mood.

Grabbing his jacket some time later, he felt some relief when he noticed he was last to leave the office. Deciding the fresh air may in fact do him some good, he made the executive decision to take the long walk home before locking himself in his apartment until his own internal storm had passed.

It was oddly quiet outside. For the most part the sidewalks were empty and Sasuke didn't think until then to check the time. It was closer to nine than it was eight, but he shrugged it off. He was working and being productive, he decided. He concentrated on the cold air in his nostrils.

" I just didn't think you were this heartless."

He shook her voice from his head and trudged home a little faster. Once he reached the marbled lobby signalling home, he gave a quick nod to the doorman and shot up in the elevator. A breath he didn't realize he was holding escaped his lips.

The quiet was only amplified after he closed the door behind him. He took a few minutes to rustle through the groceries in their neat bags and relished in the busy work of sorting and storing the meats and produce. The building had two backup generators inspected just the day prior and the management company had emailed all the tenants a vote confidence for the storm ahead. His industrial fridge could without a doubt fit a few bodies and was guaranteed to keep them at the perfect temperature, even if Hell did rise up to freeze over.

Once he could sort no more, he migrated to his home computer set up by a wall of glorious windows overlooking the Williamsburg bridge. Headlights and tail lights glittered in the lanes of traffic going either way down below in the distance. After the first browser failed to connect to the internet, he restarted his router without wasting even a second. When that didn't work and he was taunted by a blank screen, he checked his TV and was faced with pure static. He called

the internet and cable company only to be greeted by a recorded message letting him know his area was experiencing an unexpected outage. His brow furrowed at that, but his eyes began bleeding into an acidic red when he heard crews wouldn't be able to investigate until potentially the next day.

" Heartless."

Teeth sharpened into fangs and ground against each other. With speed faster than what that world would ever understand, he stormed into his room and began throwing shirts, underwear, pants, and other articles from his drawers and closets into a duffel bag. He couldn't stay there if he couldn't work. He needed something else to keep his mind busy. He needed distractions. A toothbrush and some toiletries were thrown in after.

The kitchen was targeted next. He opened his black leather backpack and strategically piled in his vegetables, some potatoes, deli meats and bread. His office desk drawer had a few cans of soup he kept as his 'in a hurry' solution. Calculating the meals he could make from the contents of his bag, he zipped it up with set intentions and headed back out the door.

Friday night.

"Alright, I give up, I'm feeling better!" Sakura laughed, her mouth full of dark chocolate and raspberries. "For the most part. I may need more chocolate."

"We didn't say this would fix everything, no magick can do that. We're helping you get there yourself, is all." Ino lounged across the bed next to her, stealing a few berries from the bowl between them.

After Sakura signed her evening away to Ino, they braved the chaos that was the pharmacy by her apartment in Brooklyn and raided the shelves of all its best sour gummies, decadent chocolate bars and shiny nail polishes. They were pulling out all the stops, Ino

explained, packing a few ice cream pints in her basket. Hinata had been quick to respond to the group text and stopped at their corner store for fruits and extra candles to really make sure they hit their marks. This night, Ino had explained, would be a love letter to themselves. Because they deserved it.

"Hot chocolate's ready," Hinata called, both hands balancing a tray of mugs and a dish of marshmallows. Ino rolled off the bed to help her roommate set up the tray in the middle of the floor and threw some pillows on the ground around it for them to gather on.

"Thank you both so much," Sakura spoke, reaching for a marshmallow in front of her.

"It's the least we could do." Ino sipped her mug thoughtfully. "Did you have a chance to call your aunt yet?"

"I did," Sakura tried to sip the cocoa herself and the chocolate burned the tip of her tongue, so she opted to cradle the mug against her chest. "She's already in Florida. I forget she spends Thanksgiving down there some years, so she had flown down earlier this week for a long holiday."

Ino's face lit up. "So you mean you're staying over Monday?"

Sakura sighed in defeat, feigning disappointment. "It looks like you lucked out."

The blonde squealed and fist pumped the air multiple times. "This is going to be the best snowpocalypse ever!"

Sunday morning.

"We can make it quick, I swear! One power hour and that will get all the endorphins pumping before we're all trapped inside for the week!"

"First of all," Sakura started, putting her finger in Tenten's face. "It's not going to be a whole week. Second of all, I don't have workout clothes in my bag." She bounced her overnight bag on her shoulder as though this would allow her over-excited friend to see right through it.

"I'll lend you a sports bra and shorts! Come on! Don't make me do this alone." She whined, clearly restless in her own skin.

"Okay, fine. It's just an hour, right?"

"Yes, yes! I'm only few blocks from here. We can change, catch the last class and then you can take the train to Ino's."

Sakura sighed in defeat, already drained from this workout class she had only heard about. Tenten would owe her, although she swore Sakura would be thanking her later when she was all cooped up.

The studio was on the top floor of a six floor walk-up downtown and had floor to ceiling windows that gave way to a breathtaking view of the city. The snow had started coming down as the lightest dusting but wasn't going to stick to the ground until much later in the evening. Sakura found a space next to Tenten and texted Ino about her detour that afternoon. She wondered what all these other people were thinking, just hours before the storm of the decade was scheduled to take the region. It had been about seven years since she had seen snow last and couldn't gauge if the storm was expected to live up to the hype on the news or if it would just close schools the next day. Either way, the instructor was already barking. Snow or shine, the instructor yelled, she was going to break a sweat.

Sunday evening.

His eyes were red, but not just in his irises. No, it was the white of his eyes that were bloodshot. He smelled of sweat and depression, but was too invested in his own denial to notice. At best, he would acknowledge it as a form of frustration. Staring at his inbox, he

waited for an email, any email, to call for his attention. None came. He scanned his spreadsheets, his reports, the spreadsheets based off of his reports and the reports exploring the data in the spreadsheets. There was nothing left to dissect or disseminate and he was at a loss. He had nothing left to do. And it had only really started to snow a few hours ago. The latest weather update claimed the true storm hadn't even made its way across state lines.

Being so caught up in his own head, he hadn't noticed the slow and steady crumble of his human form. From deep inside him, his demon self was bubbling to the surface. He ran his hand through his unbrushed hair and winced. His nails had grown long, darkened and formed sharp claws. He took a deep breath to steady himself as he stared at his hands that were starting to resemble those of his former self, the one locked inside.

Bzzt. Bzzzzt.

' Sasu stop ignoring me im serious'

Another one of Karin's texts came through in a preview on his phone, but like the rest, remained unopened. All weekend she had been relentless, the barrage only ceasing for a few hours out of the day. He growled with annoyance and flipped his phone over.

Was Sakura as distraught over this mess as he was? The irritated whites of his eyes grew dark like his nails, but he chose to ignore it.

His heart clenched and its beat began picking up speed. He checked his email inbox one final time. Still nothing. A pained groan echoed from his chest and across the office, through the vacant floor. If he had already exhausted his list of tasks in the two days and nights he had been there, what would he do with himself through the storm?

Bzzt. Bzzzzt.

' You cant just say its not enough. You cant do this to me'

Her green tear-rimmed eyes burned through his thoughts and he covered his face with his hands in a desperate attempt to hide himself. His hair began to bristle slowly and lengthen a few inches down his neck and back. Reality was setting in, his human self was coming undone and he needed help. If this storm couldn't give him his time with her like he had originally intended, then he would at least use it to figure out how to rectify this situation he had been at least *somewhat* at fault for putting them in.

An undiluted panic overrode his innate pride and he began stowing his belongings back into his duffel bag, and then ran.

Bzzt. Bzzzzt.

' Youll regret this.'

"This fuckin' sucks," Naruto groaned. "If this storm ends up being as legit as we think it is, I could go a week without pay!"

He fell back across the couch dramatically. Ino rolled her eyes and pushed off the armchair to busy herself in the kitchen. She sensed a mini tantrum and wanted nothing to do with it. Hinata sighed and began stroking his hair, which always had a calming effect her demon boyfriend. She looked out the window and noted she could only see three buildings into the distance when an hour earlier it was four. The sun had mostly set then and the final rays of sun barely filtered through the thick clouds of snow rolling in without any sign of stopping.

Shikamaru was leaning against the partial wall that divided the kitchen from the living room. He chewed the inside of his cheek, a foggy memory nagging at him. It had something to do with Naruto, but he just couldn't place his finger on it...

"You don't really think it's going to last a full week, do you?" Ino asked, only partially pulling the man from his thoughts.

"Hm? Nah, I heard it's only going to be a day or two..." His eyes widened as his words suddenly caught in his throat.

Across the underground bar, Naruto and Sasuke each knocked back their countless round of shots that night and prepared to duke it out at the pool tables. "Let's make a bet," Naruto suggested in a hushed tone so Hinata couldn't hear him.

" You sure you want to do that, Stupid?" Sasuke knew Naruto was a victim of liquid courage, but he made himself too easy sometimes.

" Bet!" Naruto shouted back.

Hinata's ears perked at this from the bar and turned around. Did he just say 'bet'?

" Fine, have it your way." He adjusted his sleeves, pushing them further back. "What's the wager?"

" If I win, I want a paid week off from work!" His fist pumped into the air with excitement.

Ino caught just enough of what the loudmouth was yelling to know what was happening.

Sasuke withheld his full smirk. "And if I win, you get half a week off-"

The two women pushed their way through the crowd to get to them.

" What!?" Naruto threw his hands up.

" -Unpaid."

" You bastard!" Naruto shouted with a feral grin. "It's a deal!"

"Fucking troublesome," Shikamaru rubbed his temples, "Half a week at worst..."

A fury of knocks on the door shook everyone and their heads spun in unison towards the noise. Ino, being the closest, shuffled over to take a look through the peephole. "What the fuck," she muttered before unlatching her locks. "Sasuke-"

The towering mass of frosty layers burst into the apartment. Ino took a few steps back, unsure of what was happening. He unraveled himself from his coat and scarf, his body hunched and panting. His raw demon eyes were trembling. "I'm changing," his voice cracked. "Help me."

"Oh no," Hinata whispered. Naruto squeezed her hand and hunched his torso over in front of her protectively.

At that moment Sasuke was straddling two worlds in his now half-mortal body. His hair was thick and untame, a tinge of midnight blue shining against the backlighting of the kitchen. Blood red eyes scanned the room and were wild with need. Ino knew without a doubt he was taller than when she saw him last and swallowed hard at the sight of his talon-like nails. Not a complete demon, but clearly ripping at the seams of his human binding.

He turned his gaze to his Witch and furrowed his brow. She was biting her lip, literally chewing on her response.

"Ino," His voice deepened in a way she had only heard when he was discussing deathly serious matters. "Please."

Ino stepped towards him with her arms up to usher him backwards. "You can't be here right now, you have to go-"

He stood his ground and straightened his back. His lip curled to reveal the full length of his fangs. "Are you serious? Have you forgotten our deal?" Naruto stood up reactively and ready to put himself between Sasuke and the others.

"It's not that, it's just-"

"You need to *help me..!* "

The front door behind him opened, still unlocked, from his untimely entrance. The room froze in a collective helplessness as they watched the chain of events unfold before them. Sakura's coat was already open as she appeared in the doorway with her sweatpants hanging just below a loose crop top. She had on her face, at least for a moment, a carefree smile. But as she pulled her headphones out from her ears and looked up, everything changed.

Sakura's eyes were completely wide with terror. Her mouth opened as she was on the verge of screaming. "What... What is... Oh my god..!" She suddenly sobbed into her hands, unable to look away. There was a man, or what she believed was part man, standing closest to her. Everything about him was sharp, predatory, and setting off every innate alarm in her to run. It was so clearly Sasuke, she realized, but not. The blood had already drained from her face and she couldn't feel her legs. Everyone else remained paralyzed, except for one. Ino hurried to the shell-shocked woman and grabbed her by both arms.

"Sakura, look at me."

"I-I, oh my god, what....Ino..!" Her eyes jumped from Sasuke to her friend over and over.

"You're safe. Everything will be okay, I need you to trust me. Can you trust me?" Her big blue eyes locked with Sakura's wildly panicked ones.

" *Get away from me!* " She ripped herself from Ino's grip and ran back out the door.

"Sakura, stop!" Ino yelled after her, her eyes brimming with tears.

Silence swallowed the apartment again.

Before a full thought could be formed, Sasuke shot out after her. His long arms slashed through the air as he flew down the hallway. The elevator button was still lit and he knew she had taken to the stairs, hearing her frantic steps echoing below.

"Sakura!" His voice resounded behind her, but she didn't slow down. "Sakura, listen to me!"

Although she didn't know what in the hell Sasuke was, she knew he was just behind her and impossibly faster. Her heart was in her throat and she ran out of fear of the fangs she imagined latching into her flesh. She didn't know what had happened to him, or what he was, but she knew it was only a matter of seconds she had to escape or she would more than find out what he was going to make of her once she was captured.

She could see the landing of the first floor approaching and she tried to will her body to move faster, to just reach the damn door and keep running. His boots slammed the stairs just two steps behind her and she couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't stopped her yet. Still, her adrenaline sent her hand for the front door and just as she pushed at the handle and felt the lock retract-

" SAKURA!"

Looking back, she wasn't able to figure out if it was that she knew he was inevitably going to catch her, or that she was shocked into stillness by the booming volume of her name ripping from his throat, or if she had cracked and wanted to see what he had intended to do. Whatever the reason, she had released the handle and turned to face him.

He stood on the last few steps above her, white-knuckling the railing but not at all out of breath. He looked unnaturally controlled with the exception of that one detail. By contrast, she was on the verge of hyperventilation, shaking, and pressed hard against the door. Black and red eyes locked with petrified green ones. Neither said anything.

She sucked in a breath, a failed attempt to steady herself. "What do you want from me?"

"I just want to talk," He tentatively let go of the railing and watched her eyes follow his hand.

"Talk..." She repeated back, testing the word. "If you want to talk, you need to start by telling me what... what you are."

"Hn," He sat down on the stairs and sighed. "Let's go back upstairs and I can-"

"No, Sasuke. You're telling me right now. I-I don't know what's going on and I'm *terrified* ." A few hot tears streamed down her cheeks and he watched them bleed into the collar of her shirt.

"Fine. We'll sit in this fucking stairwell and I'll tell you. Will you come back upstairs after?" He didn't want to deal with her running out into this storm and he knew Ino would only be that much harder to convince to help him if she did.

Sensing she wasn't in danger anymore, she slid to the ground and hugged her knees close to her. "Okay, I will."

Sasuke took a deep breath to center himself and to will some hope upon his wretched soul.

"I'm a demon, Sakura." He finally confessed.

As he said this, her eyes widened again and he heard her breath suck in. "I served in Hell until a few years ago when I was given a chance to find my ultimate fulfillment in my own humanity."

Her head grew foggy for a moment and she had to ground her nails into her arms to bring herself back. "What?" She was beyond incredulous. "Hell..? Like... Satan? That Hell?"

Sasuke chuckled, which did not comfort her. "Yes," He smirked at her and Sakura leaned in. "I technically *am* Satan."

He watched her pale and held up a hand as if to pause her racing mind. "There isn't a single 'Satan'. We demons work in a hierarchical system, using rank and Sin to determine which Circle we work in."

At this point, she knew she had to suspend her disbelief and focus on not fainting from the sheer shock of it all. "Sin?"

"The 'Sin' that lives in you, not too far off from how you relate to your astrological sign or natural element. People like to use these primal inclinations to control others, but it's what drives you towards your deepest desires." He watched her swallow and so terribly wanted to run his fingers down her throat. "I encourage you to explore them more."

Sakura looked back at the time she knew Sasuke and the lifestyle he pursued... and his personal brand of Satanism. He was consistently seeking and chasing pleasure, stopping at nothing to achieve it. It was a quality of his she privately admired.

When she looked up at him she noticed his grin had faded. He was looking down. She followed his gaze down to his hands, claws and all, and felt a wave of sympathy for him.

"I thought once I had figured out what my true source of fulfillment was, the thing that would serve my soul, I'd be set to live the human chapter of my life..." His expression darkened. "But then I met you."

' *What?*' She felt her stomach drop and didn't know what to say.

"Sakura," The way her name rolled off his tongue sent a shiver down her spine. She dared herself to meet his gaze. "You've made me feel some things I haven't felt before."

"I don't think I understand.." She tensed as he slowly rose from sitting.

"I don't either," He stepped down the last of the stairs and squat on his knees right in front of her. His thumb extended to her cheek and

wiped away tears still silently rolling down her face. "It's absolutely terrifying."

She felt her lip quivering again. "Sasuke-"

"I'm sorry, Sakura." He was looking directly into her eyes. "I'm sorry for being so selfish and careless about your feelings."

She broke her gaze and lowered it to her knees. "I just thought you wanted something more than sex from me."

"That's just it, though." He chuckled again. "For the first time in my life I think I do. Listen," He took both her hands into his palms, careful not to nick her with his claws. "I want to show you the real me, all of it. I don't want to promise you anything because I just don't know what is going to happen, but at the very least I want you to be able to trust me to be honest. Do you think you can do that?"

She felt his palms underneath her and studied his large hands holding hers. Could this truly be Satan himself in such a vulnerable state? No, she realized, because he wasn't Satan. At least not the one she had in her imagination. This was Sasuke, and although she didn't know him all that well-certainly less than she would have guessed that morning-she believed he had a good heart.

"We can make a deal," She offered with a small smile. "I'll help you figure this human thing out however I can, but I get the couch."

He grinned and held his hand up to shake hers. "Deal."

Those left in the apartment decided it was best to wait for one or both of them to come back instead of interfering. That was the unanimous decision at first, but Ino decided she couldn't handle just waiting and left to stand at the top of the stairs. She sat down and pressed her temple to the railing, listening as best she could to what they were saying.

"What do you want from me?" She heard Sakura half-cry out.

"I just want to talk," His voice was different, and not just because of his transformation. He sounded afraid.

She continued listening from her hideout, a small sense of relief rushing through her when she realized he wasn't yet going to tell her how it all happened yet. It seemed she'd have a chance to explain herself, after all. After some time, their footsteps soon started up again so she quietly retreated back into the apartment and whispered to the others that they were coming back up.

"Great," Naruto flopped back down again. "Sasuke gets to just walk in and make things weird, we're all still trapped inside, and I'm still gonna be broke."

Hinata's eyes suddenly shot up to meet Shikamaru's tired face. He knew she had figured it out as well but gave no further indication of this. They would find a time to discuss it later.

Sakura peered into the apartment from the open door, picking up her duffel bag that had been abandoned in the hall.

"Hey again," She smiled sheepishly as she stepped inside.

Ino ambushed her with a full body embrace and then cupped her face with both hands. "I am so sorry, Sakura. Please forgive me for all of this, I promise we'll explain everything."

Sasuke's intimidating form emerged from the dark hallway and he sulked through the apartment and over to an open seat.

"So what gives?" Shikamaru asked, not waiting for the demon to settle in.

"Hn." The creature sat back and closed his eyes.

"I know you're the real reason this storm is here." Sasuke looked up and smirked upon hearing this. He turned to Naruto and scoffed at

his oblivious expression.

"Why am I not surprised the idiot who bet me in the first place hasn't figured this out yet?" Naruto, being the person in question, had bunched up his face in a pout but was no less confused.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" He sat up in a rush, immediately pissed he was out of the loop.

"The bet you made at the bar, dumbass. Remember? A half week off and unpaid?" Shikamaru pressed his hands together as if to pray for Naruto's realization.

"Oh yeah!" He shouted, finally up to speed. "I can't believe this is how you're cashing in on this! Were you hoping for a blizzard orgy or something?"

Sasuke shrugged. Sakura looked at Ino for answers. She stayed quiet for the moment.

"Exactly how you intended? Or an accidental final hoorah?" Shikamaru taunted behind his stony expression.

Sasuke's smirk faded into a grim line. He deflated then and cast his gaze out the windows. It would be completely black out within the hour. He wondered if that was going to have been his last day in this world. He wanted to laugh. Weeks, just a collection of a couple hundred hours ago, he was happy. How ironic was it that a serpent like him had fallen to a fate at the hands of his own forbidden fruit? He wasn't exactly sure why the spell Ino placed on him was coming undone, and at such a vicious rate. What he was most sure about, his thoughts becoming grave, was that magick like this had a sickening way of completing its cycle. It was a simple concept, one children even knew: With every action follows an equally awesome and terrifying reaction. It was time to pay the price and fate was looking right at him with an open palm extended.

"I'm going to take a shower," Sakura excused herself and vanished down the hall.

Once alone in the small room, she exhaled deep from inside her and dropped her bag to the tiled floor. From her peripheral she caught a glimpse of her face and turned to take in her blotchy cheeks and puffy lids. She ran the faucet and scooped some cold water to her face to soothe her skin and clear her thoughts.

Bzzt, bzzt, bzzt.

She recognized the alarm as a work email notification and decided she'd check that another time, as more pressing things were on her mind.

As she closed her eyes she pictured Sasuke in his completely human form. She felt the ghost of her stomach butterflies and wondered if they would ever come back, if she even *wanted* them to. As she warmed up the water she shed her coat and workout clothes. Her fingers traced the lengths of her arms and clutched at her shoulders. Could she let him touch her again like he had before?

The mirror began to fog with steam and she climbed into the claw foot tub, under the beating force of the shower. There was an assortment of shampoos, conditioners, oils, rinses, potions and mud masks lining every possible surface in there. Opting for a rose scented bottle, she lathered her hair and inhaled the intoxicating aroma. This one was probably Ino's, she figured. Feeling like she deserved a mini spa moment, she slathered on one of the mud masks from a jar. The label was scrawled in Ino's handwriting that she had grown to recognize. The mixture smelled of honey and oats, spreading easily across her skin. A breath resembling some form of relaxation echoed off the shower tiles.

All of Ino's apprehensive behavior surrounding Sasuke was all starting to make more sense. Clearly she had befriended this devil, but she wondered just how much she trusted him and what she was

trusting Sasuke not to do to *her* . Was Ino a demon, too? And what about Hinata and everyone else?

Her heart began pounding again and her head was swarming. Quickly she washed all the accumulated oils, washes and masks from herself and shut off the water. She took her time drying off and stood in the center of the bathroom deciding what she was going to do. It was too late to attempt traveling anywhere else and calling the police felt oddly irrational. She was going to stick out this storm, but all bets were off the minute it was safe to leave. For now, she concluded, she would trust whatever goodness she felt was in Sasuke's heart and hope the others would do their part to fill her in on the rest.

Back in the living room, Hinata was lighting some candles and had turned on a few lamps across the room. Ino was tending to a large pot of chili on the stove and keeping an ear open for Sakura.

"So she's okay with this," Shikamaru asked with heavy skepticism.

The satanic man nodded. "She knows I'm not trying to hurt her."

Naruto scoffed, standing above them on the couch as he fiddled with a projector shelved high on the wall. "You're not a threat to anyone."

"Oh yeah? That's interesting, coming from someone who ranks below me." The demon sneered.

"What!" The blonde jumped down and brought himself face to face with Sasuke. "You know that's not true! I was top dog in my Circle! And you-"

"I was the Alpha in my Circle, the deepest one, responsible for overseeing the most treacherous souls of them all." He looked smug and Naruto only reddened with anger. "Careful, I don't think you want to actually try to take me right now." He bared his fangs at Naruto, whose smaller ones were poking past his lips.

"Sakura, do you want some tea?" Ino asked, signalling to the men to cool it.

"That would be great, actually." The human padded out into the room as Naruto grumbled to himself on the far side of the couch. Sasuke watched her carefully as she decided to seat herself in the armchair farthest from him. He so badly wanted to feel her next to him, but restrained himself.

"So I think I have some questions," She stated with intention. "If that's okay with everyone."

Hinata joined them and sat next to Naruto, pulling his hand into her lap to calm him. "I think the least we can do is that."

"Ask away," Ino chirped, handing Sakura a mug before sitting on a pillow between her and Shikamaru.

"I guess the first question I have is if anyone else is a demon." She scanned the room and saw a smiling Naruto shoot his hand up.

"Just me! And for the record, I'm a way better one than Sasuke." He snickered, completely ignoring the death glare he was getting from across the couch.

She felt some relief knowing Ino and Hinata weren't demons, at least. "So you're human now? No demon transformations?"

"I wouldn't say I'm *all* human. I still have my moments." He scratched the back of head sheepishly.

Hinata patted his hand in her lap. "What he means is, at his core he is still a demon and nothing can change that. He is now able to live his life as a human, but certain demon qualities remain since those are in a way what make him Naruto."

"So like your fangs," Sakura wondered out loud, eyeing his grin.

"Only when he gets too excited," Ino answered, sending a less than subtle look at Naruto who immediately sealed his lips.

"Are there others? Like from your party?" Sakura looked to her blonde friend below, who was leaning her shoulder against her knee.

"Anko was the only one."

"But what about-"

"Gaara and his family have always been involved, but are human." Sasuke interrupted, his voice deeper but sounding more like what she was used to.

"How does a demon become human, then?" With this question Sakura felt the energy in the room change and everyone averted their gaze or shifted in their place.

Sasuke broke the silence. "We know a deep-rooted desire for a new purpose or way of life is where it starts. We become less satisfied with our lives in Hell, less fulfilled. This usually happens once you have completely mastered and dominated your Circle, and then you find yourself here."

"So you just wake up one day as a human?" Sakura found this a little too far-fetched and looked to Hinata who only shrugged.

"It requires an invocation of sorts, which is where people like Gaara come in. They sense this change in the demonic energies and performs a ritual to bring us to this realm of existence." The sun had completely blacked out and Sakura watched the shadows dance across his face. He was still beautiful, she realized, just a little scarier maybe.

"But once human, demons have an uncertain amount of time to find what it is that will truly fulfil them and anchor them. Otherwise, they will have to return to Hell and their lives out there." As Sasuke

finished this explanation, his gaze fell to his lap, attempting to hide the sadness he felt.

The blonde Witch sighed beside Sakura. "When Sasuke first realized he hadn't anchored himself, he went to Gaara for help. Gaara was good friends with both Sasuke and I at the time, so he introduced us but chose to leave out that *tiny* detail about the demon situation... Long story short, Sasuke eventually asked for my help. In return for performing a black magick spell to ground him, he granted me some of his demon powers in the form of divine energy to make me a more powerful Witch." Her tone was dry towards the end and Sakura suddenly felt the tension between her and the troubled demon.

"You knew what you were getting into, Ino." Sasuke added, his tone by comparison more defensive.

"I didn't know you would hold this over my head! Look where it got me, Sasuke! Essentially blackmailed by my deal with the devil, forced to just stand back and watch you take whatever and whoever you want to please yourself. And now," She blinked back unshed tears. "Now you're back where you started and I'm going to probably lose all my divine abilities I have been working on my whole life."

Shikamaru bent down to rub her back and she shielded her face with her hand. Sakura looked at Sasuke, who hid his thoughts and feelings behind a stoic face. Nevertheless, she knew it was probably eating at him.

"So!" Ino sniffed back her tears and snot, forcing herself to smile. "I'm hoping with all of us here, we can help figure this out. Naruto somehow found his way, so surely Sasuke can too."

She shot up to her feet so as to not give her tears another opening to break free. Sakura turned a critical eye on Ino, observing how her friend put on a strong face. "I'm going to say the chili is probably ready, so let's eat! Afterwards, we can watch some movies if that sounds good."

"And drink!" Naruto amended with a very unnecessary volume.

They piled in around the table and Ino lugged out a giant pot to the table. As she lowered it to the trivets, the table creaked under its weight. "I figured we could reheat the leftovers with some eggs for breakfast," She explained to her friends who were slack-jawed by the sheer volume of chili she had prepared.

"So what movies are we gonna watch tonight?" Sakura asked the room, passing the packed bowls around the table.

"Well..." Naruto gave a nervous laugh. "When I was picking them out last night I obviously had no idea what was going to happen today, so..."

"What did you bring to watch?" Shikamaru deadpanned.

The blonde slid down in his seat. "Devil-centric horror movies?" He squeaked.

Ino groaned and Sakura winced. Not only were these movies going to call all the attention to the demonic elephant in the room, Sakura was deathly afraid of horror anything. Fortunately, Hinata was quick to step in.

"We can use my Netflix account to pick something," She offered graciously.

"And to think the storm hasn't even officially hit yet." Shikamaru mumbled.

With a little group effort, the dishes were all quickly cleared and dealt with in as little time as possible. The furniture was mostly pushed aside and the two Witches pulled out all the extra blankets and pillows so everyone could stretch out on the floor for the movie. Ino eventually pushed the guys aside to arrange the pillows herself and Sakura stood by one of the windows to watch the storm roll in.

"Here," A familiar voice offered behind her. She looked down and saw a glass of red wine being handed to her and smiled.

"Thank you, Sasuke."

She could smell the musky fragrance of Ino's soapy potions he had used in the shower wafting off of his warm skin. He stood beside her and watched the snow fly by with her. It was simultaneously the most uncomfortable yet peaceful experience he could recall as he looked down at this human woman who had affected him so seriously. She was wearing a worn out mens sweater and wondered if it had belonged to her ex-boyfriend. Mentally he took inventory of what he packed Friday before he decided to camp out in his office and couldn't remember, but he made a mental reminder to see if he brought one of his own sweaters he could offer her. At the very least he knew his would be better quality.

"It's funny," Her voice pulled him from his thoughts. "I should probably be a lot more afraid of you than I am right now."

He watched her grin, still staring out the window.

"But honestly, I feel like I'm less afraid of you now than I was the last time we stood here together." Her grin stayed on her lips as she brought the glass to them. He wanted to find reassurance in her words, but couldn't. Maybe his transformation was clearing the fog that had settled in when he came to the human world, he wondered. How had he overlooked the genuine fear he had instilled in this woman?

"Why were you afraid of me?" He asked, not fully understanding.

It was then that she faced him. "You were acting like a predator. And I was the prey."

"I didn't mean to actually scare you." He tried defending himself, but couldn't even convince himself, much less Sakura.

"Then tell me what you were trying to do, besides end up in my bed?" She jut out her hip and waited for a response. He hadn't seen this bold side of her yet and wasn't exactly regretting it.

"It's all I know, Sakura. I'm trying to learn." He was tired of all of this restraint and just wanted to a sliver of satisfaction. His body inched closer towards her and the extra height on him forced her to tilt her head back to keep eye contact. "I want you to teach me."

One of those quivers she should have started to expect rolled down her spine. Since he was so clearly giving himself permission to look at her this way, she figured she could quickly take him in from this close proximity. He was only in a fitted black shirt with long sleeves rolled to his elbows. It was a finely ribbed fabric and looked incredibly soft as it stretched across his hard chest and well built biceps. His snake tattoo was almost completely exposed and she internally strangled herself once her brain registered that she had actually reached out to touch it. Her hand recoiled almost instantly as though burned by the contact.

"I got it with Gaara one of the first nights we went out," He explained, flipping his arm over so she could get a better look at it. "I won't beat a dead horse and explain its symbolism to you."

She laughed at that and he felt his heart swell in his chest. It was that feeling, he was starting to understand, that he needed to chase.

"Is everyone okay with *When Harry Met Sally*?" Ino half-shouted to everyone who had spread themselves all over the apartment.

They all collected across the comical number of pillows as Naruto turned on the projector. The lamps were shut off and the apartment was submerged in darkness, with a smattering of candles in small clusters in the corners and windows. Sakura could see Shikamaru already laying his head on Ino's lap and Naruto bundling Hinata into a quilt with him.

"Do you want to sit with me? I brought the rest of the wine with me." Sasuke asked, lifting the open bottle as proof.

"I'd be a fool to say no to that," She joked as she took the spot beside him in front of the couch for back support. "This is one of my favorite movies, by the way."

He turned to look at her but didn't say anything. The candles by the window created a halo behind her head and he smirked at this angelic imagery he was witnessing. "I'll make sure to remember that."

A few times during the movie, everyone shifted around a bit. Shikamaru was definitely asleep and Sakura and Sasuke were working down that bottle like it was water. She wasn't sure when exactly it had happened, but found herself during the infamous fake orgasm scene resting her head on Sasuke's shoulder with his arm loosely wrapped around her. She had felt him stiffen while Meg Ryan's character began moaning and she looked up to see him glaring at the movie projection.

The wiser half of her brain convinced her to not ask if he was okay because she knew he absolutely was not. He was wired to seek pleasure and he was sitting in this candlelit room in a sea of pillows with her and a bottle of wine, and Meg Ryan faking a very convincing orgasm on the giant projection. Hell, even she was starting to feel antsy and she was almost positive he was just contagious.

So, when a hand gently grazed her outer arm over her sweater, she shouldn't have been so surprised. "Is this okay?" He asked, his throaty voice vibrating in his chest and warming her ear. She nodded, her throat too thick with nerves to speak.

He began running his hand down the length of her arm and only let the backs of his fingers barely come into contact with her thigh before running back up to her shoulder. His touch felt good and she suddenly wanted more of it. She allowed herself to lean into his side

and rest her head more on his chest. She felt it rumble with a low sounding noise of approval at this and blushed.

"This feels good," He half purred. "I feel so foolish for not discovering this sooner."

They stayed like that for the rest of the movie. As Billy Crystal barged in on the New Year's Eve party and confessed his true feelings, Sakura was as far as she could be from concerning herself with her own situation at hand. She wasn't reflecting on her still fresh heartache or the fact that the man at fault was a living devil. No, she stayed there wrapped in Satan's arms, sharing this moment while watching one of the greatest rom-coms of all time.

Sasuke dipped his chin and let his lips rest in her soft hair. His lids lowered and he let himself take in her presence next to him. It was a foreign sensation, to be so still with another, and so satisfied. When he eventually looked up, he found he was being watched by a sneaking blue eye in front of him. When she realized she was caught, her head jerked back around to face the movie and he grinned.

When the credits began scrolling up the wall, Naruto stood to let out a dramatic yawn and stretch. "I'm ready for bed!" He announced. Hinata was already rubbing her eyes, having fallen asleep towards the end of the movie. She wished everyone a good night and shuffled off to her room with Naruto in tow.

Ino had shaken Shikamaru's shoulder to stir him so he slowly lifted himself off her lap to sitting straight. "Do you want to go to bed, too?" She asked him. He barely nodded back.

None of this had unfolded at all as she had predicted. First of all, Sasuke wasn't even supposed to have been there in the first place. She was hoping the storm was going to be an easy-going couple of days off for her and her friends to lay around, play some board games and drink too much just feet from her bed. But there he was, and with Sakura almost all to himself. Her trust in him was always

complicated, but was more mercurial in the last few hours than it had been throughout the entirety of their relationship until that day. Was he sincerely looking to find expose his vulnerabilities and risk his ego to secure his chance at being human or was he cutting his loses and about to go out in flames, taking down powers and Sakura's heart with him?

"Um," Ino shifted her weight, standing between her door and where Sakura was on the couch. "You already have all the blankets and everything, so I guess we'll see you two in the morning?"

Sakura gave her a reassuring look, knowing she was worried about her being alone with Sasuke all night. "Thank you, Ino."

If Sakura was willing to take a chance, so would she.

"I'll keep her safe from any monsters you have around here," Sasuke added as he put out some of the candles. Ino didn't look all that amused but brought herself to her room anyway. When the door reluctantly clicked shut, the remaining two guests could only stare at each other.

The wind had picked up quite a bit during the movie and was blowing snow horizontally past the windows. Sasuke stood in the haze of the moonlight and turned to watch the storm carry on. His skin seemed to be glowing, Sakura noticed, watching his emotionless silhouette. It was hard to look away, even when his shocking red eyes were on her again. She could see him taking her in, cataloguing her entire body. There was a pooling heat in her core and she imagined him laying her out on the couch to feed his hunger and indulging her own. In reality, he held his distance and she remained seated in the corner of the couch.

"I want to tell me more." She asserted as she straightened her back.

He arched an eyebrow. "I'll get us another bottle, then."

He glided across the apartment and seemed to melt into the darkness in the kitchen. She heard him pushing a few things around until he emerged with a new bottle of wine. Her eyes never left him as he approached her with a new glass ready for her to take.

He sat facing her on the couch with a stoic face and his arm thrown over the back of the couch. "Tell me what you what you would like to know."

It was a simple statement but she had no idea where to start because she wanted to know everything. Logic was no help in trying to understand what this creature from another world. She let out a long breath and decided to just jump into whatever crossed her mind. Sasuke had no shame, so there wasn't much to lose.

"Let's start with what you did in Hell." She could've sworn he smirked for a second, but it was so quick and the room was too dimly lit to be certain.

"Did you ever read Dante's *Inferno* ?" She nodded affirmatively. "While not entirely accurate, the basic architecture and ongoing in each Circle are pretty spot-on. A key difference from the literature and reality is that each Circle has devils overseeing the controlled chaos in them. Naruto, for instance, was once in charge of the Seventh Circle of Violence." He sipped his glass before going any further. "Specifically he was in the First Ring, ensuring all those who were there for violence against their neighbors were eternally boiling in the blood of those killed."

Sakura shivered. "That sounds miserable,"

"Maybe for a mortal, but it was what he was born to do." He shrugged. "It's a job."

"You didn't tell me what you did," She reminded him, her brow creasing.

A glint could be seen in his eye and he ran a hand through his hair. "I was in the Ninth Circle of Hell for Treachery."

He continued to drink more from his glass as he watched the wheels turn in her head. "Isn't Lucifer himself supposed to be trapped in the Ninth Circle?"

"Very good, Sakura." He grinned. "Another misleading detail. There a few devils down in the Ninth, each tormenting their own batch of damned souls frozen in the lake. The highest ranking devil, the one synonymous with Dante's Lucifer, stays posted at the center of Hell with the most treacherous souls."

Even in the dark he could see her pale. Despite the fact that this was guaranteed to scare her away, he couldn't stop himself from enjoying this delicious fear he was evoking from her. "Ask me your next question."

"What... what was your position in the Circle?" She stammered.

"Come on, Sakura," He feigned disappointment and leaned in close. "I think you can do better than that."

She steadied herself. "Were you Lucifer?"

His smile was damningly beautiful and most wicked. "Yes, I was."

As she recalled the details of the classic poem, a hard one to forget, she tried to imagine Sasuke at the literal center of all the unspeakable torture described. The same Sasuke who was just cuddling her as they watched When Harry Met Sally and unsettled by Meg Ryan's moans.

"Was that all you wanted to know?" He asked, his arrogant tone not going unnoticed.

"No," She straightened herself up again and he pulled back with some surprise. "I'm just getting started."

He smirked, deciding he was happy with this unexpected reaction. "Help yourself, I've got all night."

And so she continued on, rattling off any and all questions that crossed her mind. Was there a Heaven? Yes, but he felt it was hyped up too much like kids who obsess with Disney parks. How old was he? He existed for a few centuries by her measurement, but he didn't relate to time in the same way. Did he have horns, a tail or wings? The horns and wings, yes. The tail was a not real, but he did have a long and sharp tongue. She blushed when he slid it into his glass.

They continued in this fashion for a few hours as the remaining candles burned down almost to the ends of their wicks. She asked him about famous names and if they had been sent to Hell. He told her about the otherworldly politics of the Circles, how the most cunning rose in the ranks and the on-goings for when the devils weren't tending to their duties. The bottle was finished and Sakura got up halfway through to fetch another. There were multiple cases, and she figured Ino couldn't get mad at her because, well, everything.

"So," She continued with the help of her refilled glass, "what do you like about being human?"

"It's a more interesting existence," He offered at first.

"Conscientiousness and the temporal world. There is just so much more to experience, like love and loss."

"Have you found anything you love yet?"

The effects of the alcohol were weighing on her more than they were on him, so he recognized she wasn't asking that with a hidden agenda. Still, he was taken aback for a moment and mulled it over. As he did, he let himself enjoy the flush across her cheeks and how unguarded she had become. Yes, the wine was without a doubt playing a role in this, but he knew as she was collecting information

and normalizing his existence in her mind, she was genuinely more comfortable around him.

"I thought I had, fully embracing my carnal desires." He watched the wine flush darken and she averted her gaze for a moment. He wondered how red he could make her if she would let him show her what kind of dark magic his hands could perform on her body.

He figured he had at least earned the right to ask her a few questions now. "Have you ever explored your carnal desires, Sakura?"

Completely red in the face, she couldn't even get a sound out of her throat. A finger lifted her chin and forced her eyes to align with his. "Do you want me to help you?"

"S-Sasuke," She stammered, her mind flooding with unimaginably sinful images of him offering more than just a helpful hand.

"There really is no reason to be afraid of me, Sakura. Don't you think if I was going to hurt you I would have done so by now?" She then hesitantly looked at him through her lashes. "I told you. I would *worship you* ."

So where are we at? How are we all holding up? Please let me know what you think, because it's your feedback that helps me keep the plot moving and shaping the story to best entertain us all. :) I appreciate you!

Chapter 8

Hey friends :) Chapter eight is here and I hope you're ready for some HinaNaru lovin'. I don't treat myself to enough of them, but what a cute weird match.

anyway, enjoy, and I hope to hear from you at the end!

CH 8

"She'll be okay," Hinata whispered to herself. As she was shutting the door behind them, Naruto was already pulling his shirt from over his head. She let her eyes follow his back muscles as they rippled under the scattered tattoos that she had lost count of. Like Sasuke, Naruto was born from the black flames of Hell but wanted more for his existence than what he was responsible for down there. Despite his ruthless duties and the atrocities he was overseeing, he was her best friend and lover, and there was no one else she'd trust more to sleep beside at night.

He turned to her with his sweatpants low on his hips and a familiar look in his heavy-lidded eyes. His demonic roots were not severed when he became human. The truth was he never really gave up his devilish self, he was just dressed in new mortal skin and relieved of his eternal tasks in the other realm. Humans and demons craved the same things, it was just that demons weren't taught any shame to associate with them.

"Hinata, I'm hungry," His tone was slick with mischief and she blushed knowing fully well what he wanted to eat.

"I thought we were ready to sleep-"

"I'm not tired now," He stalked towards her with devious smile still plastered on his face. She knew there was no point in fighting this

and resigned herself to drinking him in as he made his way closer.

Naruto was by far the most gorgeous specimen the Witch had ever laid her eyes on. His broad shoulders blocked the light from her bedside table but his eyes glowed like blue flames threatening to swallow her and the rest of the world. Her own gaze ran down his arms and drank in his long muscles that ended at the 'V' dipping into the band of his sweats. She swallowed heavy as he eyed her like the prey he intended to make of her.

"Sakura and Sasuke are in the other room-"

"It'll give them some inspiration." His arms snaked around her waist and he craned his neck down to lick at the pulse in her throat.

She pressed her lips together painfully and willed herself to keep silent. "Please Naruto,"

It was serendipitous when the two of them met back when she was in school. She was attending a local moon ritual held by a community witchcraft center and was positioned across the semi-circle from him. What she would recall the strongest was that penetrating gaze he held on her the entire night. Had it been anyone else, she would have been entirely unsettled if not threatened, but her intuition told her he meant no true harm. When the ritual concluded, he wasted no time in taking long strides across the room before she could collect her coat and introduced himself in a surprisingly chipper tone. He told her he needed to take her out and asked if she would let him treat her to a milkshake and fries at the diner he knew nearby. Long story short, they shared a vanilla milkshake but their relationship that grew from that fateful night was far from such a descriptor.

He pulled away to guide her to the edge of the bed and held her hands as he fell back with her on top of him. "I told you, I'm hungry," He placed both hands fully on her ass and let out a lazy groan as he gave it a firm squeeze. "Let me have you, just a taste."

Their chests were pressed together and she hid her face behind her silky locks. His thick erection pushed against her thigh and she felt herself stirring in response. "I don't think we should,"

"Then you can just sit back and let me take care of it."

She knew this was a losing battle and gave little resistance as he pulled her upright on her knees. He helped himself to her clothes and peeled off her pants and underwear. Her eyes were lost in his as he laid himself back down and slid in between her legs so his nose almost grazed the dark hair down there. There were no more words left to exchange and she could only watch as he ran his tongue across the length of her slit. He moaned beneath her and used his hands to pull at her thighs so she would be forced to sit on his face. He opened his mouth and let his greedy tongue lap at her delicate wet flesh.

"N-nnnnmmm.." She fought back the noises her body was making but failing against the waves of pleasure Naruto sent coursing up her spine.

Back when they were on their third date, they had shared their personal philosophies with each other and he started to pry at her thoughts on the existence of evil beings. To his wonder and relief, she let him know she didn't believe someone was either good or evil but instead continuously fighting the eternal battle between the two. On date four he took her to one of his favorite spots in the city, the botanical gardens in Brooklyn, when he confessed he wasn't truly human but instead a demon who had sought fulfillment in the human world. They were sitting on a bench in the rose garden and there was a light breeze relieving them of the summer's humidity. He had tried to find her eyes when she didn't immediately respond, but the wide brim of her floppy black sun hat hid them. Desperate and suddenly full of self-doubt, he grasped at her hand next to him and felt his heart skip a beat when she looked up at him with the softest smile he had ever seen. She told him that didn't matter to her, and she had figured he was somehow different because his energy was clearly something of another world. That night was the first night they

shared together and under the silver moonlight he shared with her his more demonic nature and desires. He was pleasantly surprised by her goddess-like grace and fluid openness to explore each other as that first night led to many others.

He opened his eyes to soak in his lover's involuntary shakes above him. He was rock solid and straining terribly against his sweats, but he could spend hours lapping at Hinata's core before he couldn't stand the ache any longer. And that was exactly what he intended to do.

"Hinata," He breathed, his face covered in her juices and his mouth burying itself in her after her second orgasm.

She looked down at him, her body at that point completely naked and coated in sweat. She was panting underneath her messy curtain of hair. "N-Naruto... I don't think I can keep going like this,"

The blonde devil gave one final lick across her clitoris and pulled himself out from under her. Before she could open her mouth again to ask what he wanted to do next, he had swung her down underneath him and hovered over her with that same familiar grin he had on before.

"Now I'm going to really give it to you, baby." He ripped off his pants and let his hardened length bounce out between them.

She wondered if it would ever *not* make her stomach flip when she'd see how large he was. He was certainly hoping not, loving her expression whenever he was aroused. He dragged it across her hips and leaned in to kiss her softly, letting Hinata taste herself just a bit.

It was then that he spread her thighs with his knees and sunk into her drenched opening with little warning. She gasped as she always did; a small yelp escaped afterwards when he immediately pulled back out to begin pumping himself. He had been eating her out for at least a half hour, after all, and had barely snuck a hand down to touch himself in that time.

He soon began pounding into her and the slapping of their skin echoed off her walls. She pushed her hands into his chest to slow him down, begging him to be quieter. Naruto knew she was just worried about Sakura and chose to ignore her. It would be one thing if Hinata was personally uncomfortable but it was totally beyond his concerns if it was just Sakura's discomfort in the other room she was trying to avoid.

"You're so tight, Hina!" He growled and pumped himself even faster after he lowered himself to his forearms. Hinata gave into the immense pleasure and could barely form thoughts beneath him.

Naruto fisted her hair and pulled her head to the side so he could get better access to that delicate spot between her neck and shoulder he adored. He wrapped his lips around her flesh and bit into her just short of breaking the skin with his extended fangs. She moaned again under the sweet pain as he finally came inside her. His hips eventually came to a complete stop and they tried to catch their breaths together.

After things quieted down, dread set inside her gut. "I have to go to the bathroom," She whispered, squeezing her thighs together to keep the new liquids inside.

He laid on his back with his hands folded behind his head. "So what? They're probably making out by now. They won't notice you."

Hinata sighed and got off the bed to slip on her silk robe. She gingerly made her way to the door and slowly turned the knob in an attempt to sneak out. There was a half-bathroom directly next to her room and a short wall blocking both doors from the living room. With a held breath, she knew she couldn't wait any longer and went for it.

' I would worship you.'

His voice echoed in her mind and she wasn't sure she would ever know how to respond to a statement like that. Was it a statement? Or

was it an offer? She wasn't sure, it didn't matter. But he was a devil, formerly Satan himself, a custodian of ultimate treachery, and he was telling her he'd worship *her* ? Sakura Haruno, complete mortal and occasional hot mess from California. It just didn't make sense.

A lecherous moan broke the silence and Sakura flinched out of surprise. It was coming from Hinata's side of the apartment and she covered her mouth out of embarrassment. Sasuke appeared completely unphased and possibly a little annoyed to have her attention pulled away from him.

Another cry sounded from the closed bedroom and Sasuke could only sigh in defeat. "Hn... I would say that could be you, but I don't think that's going to work to my favor at the moment."

Sakura laughed at this, which surprised him. "That's a very solid assessment."

He relaxed a bit and instructed himself to cool it with his sexual invitations for the time being. Naruto was without a doubt using this opportunity to rub it in his face that he was absolutely enjoying himself with his mortal partner while Sasuke was stuck in his own weird limbo with Sakura. Another glass of wine was naturally the next step.

"Can I ask a more personal question?" Sakura asked, bringing his focus back to the room and away from the waves of mewls coming from across the apartment.

"But of course," He poured the last of the bottle into their glasses, nearly filling them to the top. Sakura was incredulous to her ability to still talk straight with all the wine in her, but figured once she dared to stand up she'd know *exactly* how much she had that night.

"You're very sexual," She started out saying, pulling her legs underneath her. He raised an eyebrow, curious as to where she was going in her mind. "Do you, or I guess devils in general, do anything weird?"

He gave a faint smirk, holding back a chuckle so as to not discourage her curiosity. "You're going to need to explain what you're considering weird."

"I don't know," She began fidgeting. "Like do you sacrifice virgins or something?"

"Hn," His smirk grew a little at this. "Are you asking if I sacrifice virgins as offerings to myself?"

Her blush returned and she looked down at her glass. "I guess that wouldn't make sense,"

"We do whatever feels good. Humans and demons derive pleasure in similar ways, we just were never taught to think of anything as taboo or forbidden." He watched her carefully as she processed this, hoping she'd dive deeper into this rabbit hole with him. He had just told himself he wouldn't go down this path but how could he *not* ?

The unmistakable sounds of a bed hitting the wall and shameless slapping of skin against skin interrupted them. Sakura reddened further and Sasuke just kept drinking. It had been days since he last had sex and was pretty certain it was a new personal record. At the very least he figured he could take care of himself in the bathroom, but knew that wasn't going to do much. He'd only be back where he was now an hour later. Caution was thrown to the wind regardless.

"Sakura," He spoke, calling her attention back to him. "Are you trying to find out what sex with me is like?"

"Wha-um..!" She was completely flustered and judging purely off of this reaction, he knew he was right. It was delicious to witness and he wanted more.

He adjusted himself on the couch so he was fully facing her and his shin was pressed against her knees on the couch. He leaned in, his elbow weighing on the back of the couch. Pure hunger reflected in

his eyes. She could smell musk and deep need wafting off of him and was trapped in his gaze.

"Let me ask you this, Sakura," The moaning continued but he was done letting Naruto steal his thunder. "Have you ever truly been fucked?"

"Sasuke-"

"Let me ask that better so you can answer appropriately," She leaned back as he leaned in. "Have you ever been burning with need through every appendage on your body," He ran a finger down her arm, halting her breath. "Had your mind completely wiped of thought and reason, entirely overcome by pure carnal desire?"

"Well-"

He interrupted again, his eyes unwavering. "Were you oblivious to the world around you, unconcerned by how disheveled your hair was or how foul your bodily fluids smelled in the smog of sex in the air? Did you only care to feel and be filled? Taste flesh and spit and cum and thirst for more, losing yourself entirely in that moment?" The devilman appeared to have been borderline possessed with this animalistic yearning and was dangerously close to her at this point.

She felt her heart thrumming in her chest and felt exposed as he read her face. "That's what sex with a demon like me is like," He gestured to the source of the noises. "Just ask Hinata."

"I think I got the picture.."

Sakura wanted nothing more than to just melt into the floor and off of that couch just inches from this man who essentially described in illustrative details what he would give her in bed. She wondered how many women he had treated to this unholy bliss and if it ruined missionary for them forever or sent them begging for just that and nothing more. Her head was spinning and she knew it was a combination of the wine, exhaustion and Sasuke's shameless tactics

all coming to a head. Her face paled and he blinked himself back to reality.

"Are you okay?" He asked suddenly, a warm hand on top of hers. He realized he had lost himself in his selfish annoyance with Naruto's antics and let Sakura take the brunt of this. Internally he berated himself and racked his brain for a solution, but the damage had been done.

"I've had a pretty long day," She managed to say, pushing herself off the couch. As she had expected, her balance was almost completely shot and Sasuke swiftly stood beside her for support.

"Careful," He chided her.

"I blame you for this," She muttered, looking towards Ino's side of the apartment.

"I'll get you some aspirin and water, why don't you sit down?" He tried to guide her back to the couch but she stood her ground.

"I need to pee and brush my teeth." She straightened her back and prepared to walk to the bathroom where her toiletries were stacked. She was plenty capable of handling all this herself, but Sasuke held her close for support and escorted her to the bathroom.

"I'll be back in a minute after you're done peeing." Before she could respond, he closed the door and disappeared to get the medicine.

"What the fuck am I doing," She muttered to herself, falling onto the toilet with little grace.

When she was done expelling as much of the wine as she could, she brought herself to the sink and stared at herself in the mirror. Fingers that were surprisingly steady and not shaking gripped the counter edge. Just that morning her biggest concern regarding Sasuke was whether or not he could take her seriously. Hours later she found

herself wondering if she was testing fate and risking eternal damnation in Hell.

A knock on the door brought her foggy brain back to reality and she let Sasuke in. Even in the bright incandescent light of the bathroom, he was as frustratingly beautiful as he was when he was trying to seduce her on the sofa.

"Take this," He instructed, handing her some gel capsules and fizzing water she figured was Alka Seltzer. "It'll at least help a bit when you wake up."

She thanked him, past the point of being ashamed of how drunk she had gotten alone with him. He stood in the doorway, his dark figure looking out of place in the cluttered feminine haven that was Ino's bathroom. His eyes had softened, she noticed. The burning red was muted to a deep oxblood. In a rare moment he didn't seem to look at her with any hidden agenda or thirsty intentions. He was there to help her and that put a small smile on her lips. She could work with that.

"Hey," He spoke with an unusually sort tone. "I'm sorry I was so intense in there. I'm going through what I'll qualify as... growing pains, and Naruto is only making it worse."

"It's okay," She offered as she fiddled with the oils on the counter. He heard the sincerity in her voice and promised himself not to be so foolish again. She, on the other hand, was holding back an eye roll over his toss of the blame at Naruto.

They walked back to the living room, Sakura then a little more sober and Sasuke trusting her to handle herself. She jumped, however, when she noticed someone standing in the middle of the room.

"Did you finally finish your performance?" Sasuke bit out.

The blonde was in just his sweats and Sakura could see a hint of bronze pubic hair peeking out of the shamelessly low waist band.

Both he and Sasuke were so clearly two versions of temptation personified and she wondered how Ino and Hinata normalized this. He was grinning like a child and she could tell Sasuke was annoyed.

"I can't help it if the walls are too thin and I'm just too incredible in the sack," He shrugged, two glasses of water in his hands. "You know, Sakura, you can always ask Hinata if she'd let you test drive me. It would be my pleasure to show you what good sex really is."

Sakura turned red for the millionth time that night and Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose. "Naruto, we're going to bed. Please go to yours."

"Fine, but don't think we won't continue this in the morning!" He sauntered off to the bedroom, winking at Sakura before he fully disappeared.

The door clicked shut and the two were back in their awkward silence. Sasuke busied himself with collecting the floor pillows to arrange into a mattress-like mass for him to lay on while Sakura draped a blanket across the sofa to sleep on and another to cover herself.

"I'm going to use the bathroom and then I'll put out the rest of the candles," He whispered, heading back to the bathroom.

She stretched out on the sofa and closed her eyes for a moment to collect herself again. Without a doubt she would have a hangover in the morning, but that would hopefully be the worst of it. From there it was just a simple waiting game until the storm was cleared and she could get back to a relatively normal life. She supposed she'd have to recalibrate since demons would fall into the new definition of normal.

Her eyes opened again when she heard Sasuke shuffling around to put out the few candles still burning in the room. She pulled the blanket up to her eyes as she watched him, now shirtless, even more breathtaking than Naruto was. As he bent over to take care of

the candles by the window his back muscles lengthened and contoured in the light. While his divine physique was enough to run her mind blank, she observed the tattoos she could see and wondered how many others were still hidden on his body. There were six black stripes, probably less than an inch wide each and a little more than half a foot long, on each of his shoulder blades. The serpent she had seen before was still coiled around his forearm and a pentagram was inked over his heart on a developed pectoral muscle.

"What are the tattoos on your back?" She asked, still behind the blanket. She didn't trust that he couldn't see in the dark.

"They're for my wings. I was a bit sentimental about them I suppose." He walked towards her just as her eyes adjusted. The only light source was the faint glow of the salt lamp Sasuke left on. She figured he left it in case she got up again while it was still pitch black out.

"Your wings," She mumbled to herself as he stretched out on his makeshift bed below her.

"Mhm," He settled in and laced his hands behind his head. His biceps flexed and she blushed. Another tattoo had been hidden on the inside of his bicep, a black pitchfork. "They were beautiful.." His voice was uncharacteristically wistful.

"You had twelve of them, right?" She asked, poking her head over the edge of the couch.

She could see him grin and his eyebrows lift a fraction. "You know an impressive amount more than I would expect,"

"I read a lot," She shrugged.

"Ah."

The next few minutes were spent in uncertain silence. Sakura was drained to her core and already starting to feel the ghosting sinus ache from the wine, but could sense Sasuke was still mulling something over.

"Sakura," He called to her, his voice so quiet she barely heard him.

"Yeah?" She looked down again and waited.

"Thank you," He said, pausing as he worked to verbalize the rest of his thought. "For trusting me."

"You're welcome," She responded, a smile forming out of his sight.

"Good night, Sakura."

"Good night, Sasuke."

Bzzt. Bzzt bzzt.

There was some light clanking, a hissing sizzle and bubbling simmer. The familiar smell of butter and eggs wafted around her and convinced her eyes to flutter open. A dull pounding behind her eyes made itself known. It was light out, but mostly from the sunlight reflecting off of the snow. She had never seen the apartment during the day before and couldn't help but admire the amount of light that the tall windows let in.

Her line of sight moved further back into the space while her body remained as still as the dead. Shikamaru was sitting at the head of the dining table in front of his laptop. Sasuke sat perpendicular to him, facing Sakura head on. He wasn't looking at her, however, but instead into his coffee mug as he listened to Shikamaru read off his screen.

"The first wave brings the Northeast to a stop and the second wave is expected to knock them off their feet." He huffed. "It looks like we have a few hours until this pocket of clear skies passes by."

"I could use a walk outside." Sasuke commented, quietly taking a sip of the coffee.

To her surprise, he seemed to be completely human again. His claws receded back into neat and filed nails, his hair was still wild but no longer looking like a beast's. He was still wearing his black pants from the night before and no shirt, but had put on what looked to be a black silk robe. She also noticed a sliver of the pentagram revealed itself from the neatly sewn hem of the silk. It suited him, she decided, in a gothic bachelor kind of way. He also hadn't tied it shut at all, so she was eye level with his stomach.

'I didn't see that before,' she thought to herself, admiring a narrow path of black hair trailing below his navel. As her eyes followed his form back above the table, she found herself caught in the act by Sasuke himself. He had an amused eyebrow raised at her and the ghost of a smirk on his smug face.

"Good morning, Sakura." Hinata appeared and to her good fortune was blocking Sasuke.

The raven-haired beauty looked too stunning to have just woken up. Her long hair rested in waves that looked to have been undone from braids. She was also wearing silk kimono robe that made no effort to hide her gracious curves. *'It has to be some sort of magick thing.'*

"Um, how did you sleep?" She fiddled with her hair behind her back, looking uneasy.

"Really well, but that may have been the wine at work." Sakura laughed at herself and sighed at the inevitable headache that was nestled behind her forehead.

"Oh, um, I'll make you some tea for that and get you some medicine." She disappeared almost as fast as she had come in.

Sakura eased herself up and remembered her phone had gone off while she was falling asleep. In fact, if she recalled correctly, it had also gone off when she was taking a shower. The device was on the coffee table, so she took a look at it. There were a few texts from family, but what struck her as odd were the two emails from Karin.

"Chili and eggs, come and get 'em!" Ino shouted, causing Sakura to wince.

Her stomach rumbled at the sight of the chili bowls topped with a perfectly poached egg in each. Without another thought, she approached the table like a zombie and plopped down just as Ino put a bowl down for her. Sasuke was still staring at her, his eyes back to being as black and untelling as the first night she had met him.

"Here you go," Hinata placed a mug of her homemade herbal tea in front of Sakura with a few more tablets of Advil. The hungover girl looked up to thank her, but she had scurried back to the kitchen.

"She's embarrassed about last night." Sasuke informed her, reading the confusion on Sakura's face.

"Oh, right." She blushed as she recalled her friend's private moment echoing out of the bedroom.

"Just forget about it, it happens all the time and they just don't realize it carries to Ino's room as well." Shikamaru commented, his eyes still scanning news articles.

The two women of the household sat down with the others and Naruto came out in his dangerously low sweats right after. Sakura averted her eyes but Sasuke narrowed his a bit after seeing that.

"So are we gonna go outside? I want to see this snow for myself!" The demon blonde half-shouted before shoveling his mouth full of

chili.

Ino shrugged. "I guess we could. I'd like to get some fresh air." She was adorned by a grunge band tee shirt and leopard pajama shorts, but still looked effortless and flawless. Sakura tried to casually smooth down her bed head and thumb some dried drool from the corner of her mouth. There just wasn't a point in trying to compete, especially in her current state.

"It's not going to start up again until four or five, but I suggest we don't waste too much time." Shikamaru added.

This gang of the young and restless wrapped up their meal quickly and left the bowls to soak in the sink. Ino took Sakura to her room to change while Hinata went to her own.

"I heard you had some live entertainment last night?" She teased, shimmying into her jeans.

"It was really bad, Ino..." Sakura lamented, falling back on the bed. "Sasuke was getting pretty intense and I was a lot more drunk than I meant to be-"

"Did he do anything?" She interrupted, freezing with a sweater in hand.

"No, he was actually really helpful and got me some water and Advil." Sakura smiled and Ino couldn't help but smile back. Maybe he was figuring it out after all.

She pounced on the bed and brought her face inches from Sakura's. "Did he kiss you?"

Her face flushed. "No,"

"But did you want him to?"

The question had to be mulled over for a moment. So much had transpired in a day, but as crazy as it was, she felt her heart fluttering

at the thought. She was admittedly smitten with this devil and bit her lip trying to hold back a bashful smile.

Ino watched her facial expressions and sat back on her heels once she realized her friend was actually falling for Sasuke. On the one hand, she was delighted because love is such a powerful force and would help Sasuke anchor his humanity... along with her own darkly enhanced divine abilities. The other side of it was that darling Sakura would be involved with Satan, which could not go anywhere without his baggage. It had been a little while since she had accompanied him at their usual underground club, but that did nothing to neatly square away Sasuke's deeply dark and rooted interests. Interests Sakura knew nothing about and probably wouldn't be all that open to, given the shock just hearing Naruto fuck Hinata gave her.

"I can tell he's trying," Sakura then said.

Ino's lips thinned into a grim line. "He can try the rest of his life, but that won't make him any less of a devil. Do you think you can handle that?"

"At least he's upfront about his problems. I can't say that about anyone else I've dated." She was half joking, but Ino didn't laugh. Something was off. "Ino, what are you not telling me?"

"I just think you're underestimating-"

Sakura sat up abruptly. "The fact that my friend essentially set me up with the Devil?" Ino was silent. "I'm still working through that, yeah."

"Sakura,"

"I'm not mad, I'm just exercising some faith in myself. It's been some time since I have."

The Witch softened herself and looked down at her lap. "I never meant to put you in a compromising position. In the little time I've known you I feel like I have found someone I could consider a sister.

For that reason alone I feel terrible and torn between wanting to see you be happy and wanting to protect you from even the tiniest sliver of pain." She reached out and grabbed Sakura's hand. "I trust you and support you."

"Argh! I just want to go outside!" Naruto whined, punching at the partial wall of snow outside the front door.

"Use the shovel, idiot." Sasuke muttered from his perch up on the stairs. Sakura held back a giggle from his side as Naruto whined even louder and begrudgingly took the shovel from Shikamaru.

Everyone sat as the blonde's audience while he single handedly demolished the icy barrier keeping them inside. He managed to leverage a little demonic strength, but still found himself half as energetic as when he started. His companions didn't necessarily find that to be a bad thing, not even Hinata.

Once a path had been cleared, the bundled squad ventured outside and into the urban tundra. Every car, fire hydrant, garbage heap and concrete crack was cloaked by obscene blankets of snow. No one else on the block had stepped outside yet, so it remained completely untouched and perfect.

"We should collect some fresh snow for our spellwork," Hinata suggested, some excitement clear in her tone.

Ino snapped her attention to her with matched energy. "Absolutely." The pair ran back upstairs to bring down some jars they had.

Shikamaru laid down where the sidewalk was buried and Naruto started molding snowballs. It was just the moment he was waiting for, so Sasuke didn't want to waste a second more.

"Would you like to go for a walk with me?" He asked, catching Sakura lost in her own thoughts.

"Hm?" She blinked in his direction and then realized he was talking to her. "Oh. Sure, um, lead the way." He offered her his arm and she smiled up at him as she looped hers through.

He decided to take her down the street with the older buildings that had ornate details on their facades. He figured for someone who didn't see snow often like her, it would be nice to see the winter dusting all the decorative work.

"I realized in all the hours we've been talking, it has been about me." He stated, looking at her just from the corner of his eye.

She smirked. "Do you think it could have something to do with the fact that you're a devil and not just an asshole like I had suspected?"

He also smirked and shrugged. "Regardless, I don't know that much about you and I would like to."

She felt heat building in her cheeks mostly from feeling put on the spot. She focused on their boots crunching the virgin snow under them.

"Well, what would you like to know?"

He mulled this over for a moment and adjusted her arm in his. "What are your aspirations?"

She had no chance of hiding her surprise. "You don't want to know what my favorite food is first?"

"We can discuss that when I take you on another date," he reasoned, his bicep tightening.

"Hmm.. You really jumped right in there." They kept walking and she watched the grey clouds feathering above them. "I want to help people. When I'm doing that I think I'm at my happiest."

"Do you get to do that at the clinic?" He watched her light up next to him.

"All the time. Whenever someone comes in not knowing what's happening to their bodies, I love getting to empower them with that understanding so they feel stronger." She met his eyes then. "I think that's why I'm not really afraid of you. You're trying to help me understand."

"Freeze, you bastard!"

Out from around the corner came Naruto with not just one, but an armful of snowballs. He held a wide stance with his loaded hand pulled back overhead. Sasuke stood his ground and was completely unimpressed if not annoyed. Poor Sakura took a step back, wanting nothing to do with this. As the amped blonde cocked back his arm she could only hold her breath.

Sasuke's acute vision picked up on his sloppy aim and knew he had no chance of getting hit. "What do you think-"

SMASH!

Sakura only felt a sprinkling of ice on her cheek. When she dared to open her eyes, her line of sight was blocked by Sasuke's hand. Slush remnants from the snowball crumbled to the ground in front of her.

"You're such a fucking idiot," He growled out, starting to stomp towards Naruto.

"My aim was off, I was trying to hit *you!* " The man pulled back another snowball to keep the livid devil away.

"I'm going to murder you." Sasuke clawed up a pile of snow into his hands and crunched it into a large ball. It was then that Naruto chose to run.

"Are you okay?" Hinata ran up behind Sakura after seeing the incident from a distance.

"Yeah, Sasuke blocked it. Are *they* going to be okay..?" Sakura gestured to the two demons throwing snowballs violently at each other from a very short range.

"They're fine, no worries. If anything, it'll tire them both out so we'll have a quiet evening."

They stood together as the two demons continued to attack each other in the street. Sakura watched as her companion's fingers fidgeted and her weight shifted at a rate that was all too unnatural. Hinata eventually spoke up again.

"I'm sorry about last night, I feel really weird about it." The Witch was bright red and averting her eyes.

A strange sense of relief washed over the confused woman. "You shouldn't! I swear it's fine, I don't want you to be upset about because I'm not. One day I'm sure we'll laugh about it," She giggled and gave the blushing girl a nudge. "I actually find it kind of funny now."

Hinata smiled, newfound peace evident on her face. "I'm glad." For a moment they let the satisfaction settle in. Then there was a pause. "Ino told me you're thinking you may have some feelings."

"Yeah," She sighed, not very surprised. "That, or I'm just in shock still."

"When Naruto first told me about what he was, I also needed time to process. Even for me, it was beyond the realm of what I thought was possible. There was a lot of adjusting for both of us, because he wasn't raised in a world that cultivated love. Obviously it's not to say he didn't seek it out, but it was Hell after all."

Sakura chewed on her inner cheek and tried to imagine a life driven by pain and suffering with no one to love and no one to learn how to love from. Her thoughts then turned to Naruto. He was still trying to dodge Sasuke's attacks and wasn't exactly doing a great job. His

snowball stock was long gone and Sasuke was just faster. While they were much rougher with each other than she could handle, she could tell they were practicing some form of restraint. As much as Naruto tested Sasuke's limited patience, she knew he wouldn't actually hurt him. They were friends, and if she were to dare a guess, she would say Sasuke cared for Naruto. They were friends, as much as he'd probably try to deny it. He could learn to love, but the question came down to whether or not she could consider loving *him*.

His dangerously built physique and air of mystery only romance novels could illustrate sent chills down her spine. There was no way around it, she wanted him and wanted him bad. Her sense of self preservation was anchored in the back of her mind and she just wasn't ready to let her guard down. She looked back at Hinata as she watched the demons continue with their antics. She was clearly happy with Naruto and fulfilled in all the ways she could only hope to be in a relationship of her own one day. So was that day sooner than she expected, and with a demon she could call her own?

"It seems surreal, but this is our reality." Hinata's voice sounded so matter-of-fact, Sakura almost felt bad for feeling so overwhelmed.

"It's still a lot to take in."

"You're doing a good job, if that's worth anything." Hinata looked over her shoulder and saw her roommate a block away. "Ino made some hot tea, so I bet she has that in a thermos over there. do you want to go have some?"

"That sounds great," Sakura coaxed herself into a more relaxed state as they turned to walk back. "Speaking of reality though, I keep forgetting to check these damn emails."

She pulled out her phone from her jacket and jumped to her inbox. Those two emails from Karin were still there. It was odd, she thought for a moment, that Karin was emailing her. They barely collaborated

on anything so there wasn't anything she could think of that would call for not one, but two emails... And during the storm..?

They were just a few steps away from Ino and Shikamaru when she opened the first one. Hinata heard the gasp beside her and turned to see Sakura had stopped in her tracks. Pink hair fluttered across her frozen face as she brought the screen closer to it. Jade eyes were wide with shock and her mouth was gaping as she stared down at her screen. She wasn't certain but she could've sworn she saw tears welling up in the corner of her eyes.

"What is it?" Hinata stepped over to see what she was looking at and in that instant felt her blood run cold.

There were bodies bound in thick, unforgiving rope. Torn fabric hung from dominated forms. There was mascara and sweat stains on blotchy cheeks. Angry red handprints and welts. Strings of saliva. Ravaged flesh and raw knees. There was probably six recordings, Hinata counted. The videos were edited together and on a never ending loop. It was footage of women, including one she recognized, submitting to this filthy sex in the most ungodly sexual ways. Each cut showed the women beside themselves with raging waves of pleasure and pain, the balance unclear. But despite all of this, it wasn't the graphic imagery that was most arresting. It was the sadistic force in each clip. That force of nightmarish nature was none other than Sasuke Uchiha.

Sakura was paralyzed by confusion, and fear began to choke her. He had claws, all long and lethal as a dagger to the heart. His eyes were entirely black and his irises glowed with red hunger and cruelty. When just the day before she saw him in his regressed form, she thought that was the devil in the flesh. But now her naivety was shattering and she felt she was putting eyes on just a sliver of the real Satan whom she just slept a breath away from. By the time Hinata swiped the device from her trembling hands, the damage had already been done.

"Sakura, who sent this to you?" Hinata's voice was slightly shaken as she reached out to the poor girl beside her. She could only imagine what was going through her head, since she herself had only seen Naruto so deep into his demon form once before. He had promised her after that night he would never put her in such a position ever again.

She didn't respond. Suddenly Sakura began backing away, tears now falling onto her jacket. Hinata reached out again, but the frantic woman had already forced distance between them. When Ino realized something was wrong, Sakura was already running away.

"Sakura..!" Ino yelled, grabbing the attention of Sasuke and Naruto.

"Let her go!" Hinata begged before Sasuke moved to charge after her.

They all collected around Hinata to see what had happened. She reluctantly played the video on Sakura's phone and the three of them could only stare in utter shock and horror.

"Fucking hell," Sasuke whispered, his hand shooting into his pocket for his own phone. He opened up the scrolling list of messages from Karin and felt his rage bubbling once he realized he had been so foolish. He could have stopped this. He could have spared her.

"I'm going to go get her," He said as he turned in the direction Sakura had run off.

"Are you kidding me?" Ino squawked, her eyes still glued to the horrifying footage of his demon self viciously fucking all those women. "You are the last existing creature on this damned planet she needs to see right now." She slammed the phone into Sasuke's hand and took off to find Sakura herself.

Sasuke grit his teeth, but remained planted in his place. He so badly wanted to chase after her and explain himself and those videos. He wanted to tell her how that was a different version of himself, one

that didn't yet know the joy he could receive from just a conversation or a look. He wanted to tell her he didn't know he find himself entranced not just by a body but by a mind and soul. He wanted to tell her he'd take back every night he spent aimlessly seeking touch and release if he had known the overwhelming warmth of her presence. He wanted to tell her he wished he could scrape the memory of those images from her mind if he could. He wanted to tell her he was sorry. He wanted to tell her he needed her forgiveness.

But he stood there.

Ino was right, he admitted, as much as it pained him. He had no choice but to trust her and let her take the lead.

I have more written but I didn't want to wait longer to get a post out! Please let me know what you're thinking (too fast, too slow, missing something!?) and I'll try to get the next one done soon. Thank you all, your support is super heartwarming. :)

Chapter 9

Hey friends, thanks for the patience. I hit a super rut and finally got over it, so I apologize for the wait here. Please enjoy!

CH9

Naruto's eyes hardened. He knew without asking that whenever either of them were on the cusp of regression, they could place a dark spell on another so they wouldn't be able to see what was happening. But in this case, someone had recorded him and there was no spell that could have altered that unaffected video. "Sasuke, this is bad."

"You think?" Sasuke snapped back, his eyes flaming red and his fangs extending.

He would find a way to deal with Karin, he knew that. It was the fact that he was so careless as to not realize she had been secretly recording him that was driving him mad. He pocketed Sakura's phone and took his out to go through. From just the video alone that he saw, he knew she had not only recorded them in her bedroom but also found him in the sex club only Ino and Shikamaru knew about... or at least *thought* they were the only ones to know about it. He flipped through the exhausting list of texts Karin sent him and audited every single one for pictures she had dropped in. His heart clenched looking at the compromising photos of him absolutely dominating the other club members in every possible way. If it weren't for the circumstances, he'd be smitten with the work. He stopped at one photo in particular that caught his attention. He was sitting in an armchair and there were two women on their knees by his feet. One was licking his balls while the other was sucking on his length. He was leaning down in that moment and had a hand wrapped hard around the throat of the second woman, choking her as she pleased him. He tried to imagine what Sakura would make

of this if Karin were to send this to her? A second passed and he realized she may already have done so.

A growl rumbled from him as he looked down the street where Ino had followed Sakura. It took everything in him to not take off as well to just get a second to explain himself. He wasn't going to deny his enjoyment in those captured moments, but he wasn't going to ever pressure Sakura into anything like that against her will. Fucking Karin, and just when he had gotten to a point for Sakura to trust him.

Sakura wasn't hard to find, seeing as her tracks were the only ones in the street. Ino felt her palms growing clammy as she turned the corner Sakura was around and spotted her on a stoop. She was sitting on the bottom of the snowy stairs, her torso folded over her lap. There was no doubt she was crying as her back jerked with every silent sob.

"Sakura..." Ino called under her breath. "I'm so sorry you saw that."

Her sobbing subsided and she looked up at Ino through puffy lids.

"What was that?" She half-cried.

Ino opened her mouth to answer but nothing came out.

"Ino, I can't do this." Tears came down in streaks. "I thought I was okay, I thought I understood him, but I was wrong. He wants to *hurt* people."

Ino cleared some of the snow next to Sakura and sat down. "This is a lot for anyone to take in. And you know what? He's not a fairytale prince. He was Satan. But, he wants to be more than that."

Sakura couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Did you not see any of that video?"

"I did, and-"

"He wants to hurt me and he will enjoy it, Ino. How are you not freaking out?" Her head was pounding again and she felt sick to her stomach recalling even a glimpse of what she had seen. His wretched grin as he wrapped his hand around Karin's throat drowned her mind. She envisioned herself screaming for mercy helplessly underneath him with no hope of escape.

"Are you okay?" Ino asked, placing a hand on Sakura's shoulder as she suddenly gripped the icy step.

Her headache was unrelenting. The pink-headed woman's body lurched forward and she vomited onto the snow in front of her boots. It was just too much, it was all just too much. The demons, the magick, the lust, the fear, uncertainty.

Ino rubbed Sakura's back and pulled a few loose locks back from her face.

"This is absolutely insane, I know." Ino began collecting the rest of her hair down her back and started a braid. "I just don't want you to take the easy way out and discount what you know of Sasuke from your own experience."

Sakura looked up with a pained expression, her exhaustion as clear as day. "What do you mean?"

Ino leaned forward. "He's a dark guy, by nature. But he's here because he has a good heart, Sakura. That's the only way he had a chance to forfeit his position as King of Hell."

She knew what Ino was saying rang true to her, but that didn't make it any easier to digest. She also knew she was only now starting to truly get a grasp on this new reality she only thought she understood before.

"Besides," Ino shrugged, "you can't tell me you haven't dated a bad guy before, a common wolf in sheep's clothing. At least Sasuke is open about his baggage, and that must count for something."

Sakura unexpectedly laughed at that and fingered the braid at the back of her neck. "I think Satan is a little more extreme than an asshole."

"Look, Sakura," Ino started again, her tone more serious this time. "He only knows pain, so it's not that he wants to hurt you. This world and all his feelings are new to him. He just needs to be taught how to be gentle and I guess, vulnerable. You're someone who can do that. You don't owe it to anyone, but he clearly has feelings for you."

She nodded, her gaze on the melted patch of snow where she threw up. Her boots shuffled snow on top to bury it.

Ino reached for Sakura's hand. "I want to be honest with you, too." Sakura looked up at Ino, concern written across her face.

"That video Karin sent you... The cuts of Sasuke at that club with all those other people..." She averted her eyes and took a deep breath before finding the courage to look at Sakura again. "Shikamaru and I have gone there with him. I want you to know that because I can vouch for what I've seen. He never did anything someone didn't want done, for what that's worth at least."

"You..um, wow." Sakura brought her hands back to her face. This was not at all comforting but at the same time she wasn't angry. "Was that a sex club or something?"

"Pretty much," Ino admitted. "I know it's not something you want to get into now, but we can talk about it whenever you want to."

Holding her head in her hands, she met Ino's eyes with the hopes of some clarity for her own emotions. While Ino was more... eccentric, than her usual friends, she had no doubt in her mind she cared for her. It didn't matter what Ino's beliefs were, she just knew the woman had a great heart. So on that same line of thought, why couldn't she say the same about Sasuke? He was trying, and when he did say something he shouldn't have, he showed remorse. And Ino had an interesting, albeit insanely flawed point: was she better off dating a

guy who seemed perfectly kind and flawless, only to find out about his buried issues later? Or was it worth taking a chance on someone who is open about their weaknesses right out of the gate and willing to work on them?

Even if it's the Devil?

"Keep pacing like that and you'll clear the whole block."

The snide remark didn't slow Naruto down, but it did earn Shikamaru a glare. Sasuke massaged the bridge of his nose beside him as Naruto continued to track like a caged animal.

"I told you," the angry blonde grumbled, "I told you so many times. You can't be so reckless! This isn't your world to run!"

"I fucking know that, Naruto!" Sasuke yelled back. He grit his teeth and glared at the demon with pure fire in his eyes.

The crunching of snow caught their attention and all three men turned to see Ino walking towards them. Sakura was a few steps behind her. Hinata ran over to them and Ino stopped in front of her, searching both her and Sakura's face for answers.

"We're going to go upstairs, Sakura's just going to need to lay down for a bit. Get some space, y'know?" Ino explained, nodding her head back at the woman coming up next to her.

"Of course," Hinata responded after a moment, watching Sakura's masked expression. "You both can head up first."

She turned to the others and held her arms out to corral them away from the entryway. Practicing some self-restraint, they stayed silent and still as Sakura and Ino walked past them.

"The apartment door is open," Ino explained, unlocking the building door. "Go ahead and make yourself at home in my room. We'll be up

in a bit."

Sakura gave her a soft smile of appreciation. She didn't have anywhere else to go, so she was grateful for the space Ino was making for her. At the very least she could brush her teeth in peace.

Once she was at least a floor up, Ino turned to her friends and held a dark stare on Sasuke. "We need to let her breathe."

"I need to talk to her." Sasuke stated, authority in his tone.

"Oh, okay. And say what?" Ino bit back, not faltering at all in her glare. "That you don't fuck like that anymore? It was the old you?"

The grey clouds started rolling in with more weight above them, the already faint sun slowly dimming. Sasuke lowered his eyes but his shoulders remained rigid. The others quietly stood by, not at all looking to get involved in his exchange.

"The truth is, Sasuke, that is part of who you are. And that scares her. I know it's killing you, but you need to be patient and let her process all this shit, like the fact that you're the Devil, and then talk to her."

The clouds were still coming in a little darker and a light feathering of snow had started up again.

Shikamaru clapped a hand on his shoulder. "We can go up and have a drink in the meantime."

Without wasting another moment in the bitter cold, Ino opened the door again and they all filed inside. As they ascended the stairs, Shikamaru squeezed his girlfriend's hand and gave her a reassuring smile. She was so strong, he thought to himself.

When they reached the apartment, it was as silent as the street outside but at least warmer. Sasuke noted Ino's bedroom was closed and pressed his lips into a fine line as he forced himself to turn into

the living room. He wanted nothing more than to walk in and tell Sakura exactly what was on his mind. If only he could get her to understand what he was feeling, everything would be fine. As he stood in front of the window, observing the storm that he had invoked, he knew that it wasn't so simple.

"At least the power hasn't been knocked out," Hinata offered, sitting on the sofa.

Shikamaru nodded across the room, half occupied with a bottle of brown liquor on the bar cart. "You're not wrong. And by this time tomorrow the snow plows will be working their way through the streets to get us out of here."

"We'll all go back to our regular day-to-days," Ino pulled a set of glasses from the kitchen and he began pouring a few ounces into each for the room. "One way or another."

Back in Ino's room, Sakura was curled up in the cozy armchair by the window. Her eyes were as soft as her cheeks, void of tears that still left stains running as far as her throat. She was watching the snow perform its encore as her mind swam with a mixture of images and snippets of conversations. How had she ended up in this situation, she wondered, of all the people in this world? What would she expect anyone else to do in her place? A soundless sigh left her.

She could just wait it out until tomorrow and end things. When she managed to take a step back, she realized she had only gone on one date with Sasuke. In truth, she had ended relationships with guys she had seen half a dozen times without more than a day of upset. This would be different, but didn't deserve more heartache than what she already allowed for herself.

But is that what she really wanted?

She looked over at Ino's bed, the blankets perfectly scattered and intertwined on top of a cloud-like duvet. She imagined Ino and Shikamaru coming home after a night at the sex club, collapsing

onto this bed still fragrant with the sweat, fluids and perfumes of others. Had Sasuke ever slept in this bed with them? With Ino?

It was a surprise to herself, but she wasn't exactly upset about the idea of them all going out and participating in such lewd events. It was more that she felt completely in the dark about them despite Sasuke's claims to be so open with her. She wasn't sure if she could believe him, and ultimately trust him.

Yet there she was, picturing his eyes, sharp as daggers, seeing right through her without a glance of mercy. She wanted to see him look at her again, just like he did on their date. She wanted to feel him hold her, have his warmth bathe her. She wanted to get to know him more. She wanted him to just be a man, not Satan. She wanted this to be easier.

A soft knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts. She called to the knock and was relieved to see Hinata and Ino. They came in with drinks in their hands, Hinata with an extra glass for her.

"We wanted to check on you and see if you wanted to talk," Hinata explained, sitting on the edge of the bed with Ino.

"I'm sorry for earlier," Sakura spoke, running a hand through a lock of hair that was loose from the braid Ino twisted.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Ino assured her, leaning onto her knees.

They all sat there in a comfortable silence, the snow the only movement in that moment through the window.

"Can I ask what you're thinking, Sakura?" Ino asked as she swirled her drink. There was a twinge of apprehension the other two caught.

"I can't say I'm too sure," She replied honestly. "I think I'm still trying to understand what's going on and how I feel about it."

"What specifically?" Hinata asked her, shifting off the bed to sit between the women on the floor.

"All of it, really, but if I were to assume that's a life behind him, I'm trying to understand what Sasuke's looking for in his human life."

"You mean if he's looking to have orgies and engage in BDSM sex?" Ino's blunt comment brought a blush to Sakura's face but she nodded.

"Is that bad that's what I'm worried about right now?" She asked, still red with shame.

"Does that mean you have feelings for him? Hinata asked, a delicate hand taking Sakura's.

"I'm not sure."

"When Naruto and I started dating, I couldn't deny that I was attracted to him. But, there was a learning curve. He was crude and uncensored, didn't understand how to be loving outside of just physical interactions." The pale-eyed woman squeezed Sakura's hand. "I look at Sasuke and see the same struggle. He looks at you in a way that I recognize as the same expression Naruto has when he looks at me."

"But what about that physicality? The things he was doing in that video-"

Ino raised a hand and interjected. "-Are the only things he knows. He doesn't know what it means to be tender and *make love* ."

All three of them blushed but made no comment on that. Sakura mulled the thought over as she drank her whiskey. She cringed at the taste, not one for the drink. Still, she welcomed the soothing calm she knew it would bring. She took a long look at the two Witches and braved herself to ask about the elephant in the room.

"I want to know about the sex club."

The deafening silence swallowed them. Everyone froze and for a moment Sakura regretted asking, but could do nothing to suck the words back into her mouth.

"Well," Ino started before taking a generous gulp of her own drink. The alcohol ran hot down her throat. "Let's try to get you some answers, then."

Sakura's brow furrowed in apprehension.

Ino sighed. "Sasuke, Shika and I go together to that club sometimes. We go as guests with him. What do you want to know?"

Sakura looked up at her. "Why does he go?"

The two Witches then looked at each other, Hinata to see what Ino would say and Ino looking to Hinata for the right words.

"I can't say exactly why he goes, but I know Shika and I go because it's fun." She chewed her cheek, still working on her explanation. "It's how we explore our sexuality. It's not a necessary component, but we like going and I think Sasuke sees it as a safe space for him to engage in what feels comfortable for him."

"Would you want to ask him about it?" Hinata asked gently.

"I guess I should," Sakura mumbled. She wasn't ready to talk to him yet, much less about his sex club escapades.

"If I can offer some advice, Sakura," Hinata pulled Sakura's forgotten phone from her pocket. She had collected it from Sasuke while they were waiting outside. "I think you should delete all the things Karin sent you. He should be the one to tell you everything, not her."

Sakura got up and squeezed her way onto the bed next to Ino. Hinata watched as Sakura took the phone from her hand and stared down at the dark screen. She looked herself straight in the eyes in its

reflective glass and then unlocked it. Hinata was right, and those images served no purpose or good for anyone. She pulled up her emails and sent them to the trash, only wishing she could physically burn them instead of just tapping them away.

All three of them relaxed after they were gone, and it was Sakura who raised her glass. "To open minds and open hearts."

Ino and Hinata smiled back at her as they raised their own glasses. "Cheers, ladies."

The darkness of the early evening cloaked New York in a cold blanket outside, only the glittering lights of the countless apartments breaking through it. Sasuke stared down into his drink, trying but failing to ignore Naruto across from him.

"What are you going to do about Karin?" He asked, his eyes glued to Sasuke's phone in his hand as he flipped through the photos Karin had sent him. He was struck by the sheer mass of them. The brooding devil had no shame in the footage of himself, never having been raised with such an emotion. When Naruto asked to see what Karin had sent, he had only shrugged before passing him the phone.

"There's nothing to do." He answered with a flat voice.

"But," Naruto scratched his head, "she has these videos and stuff. Don't you care if that gets out?"

Sasuke looked up at him. "No one in the videos can support the footage, they all were under the illusion I casted on them and didn't see my form change. If she dared to release any of it, people would think it's doctored. It's too incredulous. Besides," He rested his temple on his fist. "This is all she wanted to do. She just wanted to wreck me so I'd come back to her."

Sasuke reached over and took his phone back. Naruto began fiddling with the candles on the coffee table, pinching the flames.

"And you're not going to?"

Sasuke looked up and met a stone faced Naruto.

"Never again."

A click of a door knob turning caught their attention and the three men looked up expectantly. The two Witches appeared but closed the door behind them. Sasuke's shoulders dropped a hair with disappointment.

"How is she?" Shikamaru asked, guiding Ino to sit with him. She perched on the arm of his chair as he rested his hand on her lower back.

"Surprisingly good," She looked over at Sasuke. "But she still needs some time."

He scowled and looked away. Ino rolled her eyes but couldn't help but smile, nor could Hinata. He was anxious to talk to her, and that was at least a good sign.

"Should I start making the mac and cheese?" Hinata asked the room.

"Mac and cheese?!" Naruto practically yelled from beside her.

She cupped her ear. "Y-yes, and we have tomato soup to go with it."

"I'll help! Let's go!" He shot up and pulled Hinata with him to the kitchen, not leaving any room for another opinion on the matter.

"That answers that. I'm going to go find some board games for us to play, lighten the mood up." Ino made her way to the hall closet on Hinata's side of the apartment.

And with that, there were two.

Sasuke looked over at Shikamaru and found himself being observed, which was nothing out of the norm. He still shifted in his seat.

"I'm not going to say it's a good idea, but it's too troublesome for me to try to stop you," The man of few words explained.

Sasuke smirked and without responding, quickly got up. Shikamaru only sighed as he busied himself with his glass. Sasuke snuck over to Ino's door, only looking back into the living room once before he gave a knock. By the time Ino could turn and see where he had gone, Sakura had responded and he slipped inside the room.

"Oh," She straightened in her place on the bed. It was obvious to him she was expecting someone, possibly anyone else. "Sasuke."

He didn't walk any further into the room and stood still by the door. "Do you want me to go?"

"It's okay. Come in."

The room was too dark, Sakura realized, watching him silently approach her. He looked like a predator slowly stalking his prey even though he was simply crossing the room. She had become so lost in her own thoughts she hadn't thought to turn on a light or anything. A street lamp wasn't too far away outside and its soft glow entered the bedroom window at least. Sasuke sized up his options and decided to sit on the edge of the bed facing her.

Silence swallowed them both and Sakura wondered if anyone in the living room was listening. It was as if her thoughts had been read in that moment because she then heard music start up from the projector's speakers.

"I want to apologize," Sasuke offered, the words tasting foreign on his tongue. "I know this is hard for you."

Sakura noticed his air of confidence seemed less potent in that moment. There was something along the lines of remorse on his

face. Her stomach had been churning the whole afternoon after seeing Karin's emails, but his remorse seemed to settle it a bit. It was validating in a way.

"You know I want to understand, Sasuke. But it *is* hard." He wanted to grab her hand, but she kept both tight in her lap.

"What can I do to help, then? I'll tell you anything you want."

He wasn't begging, but she could have sworn it was borderline pleading. She sat back and searched his face for any sign of deceitfulness. It wasn't that he had lied to her before, because he really hadn't, but she was still wary.

"I don't know if you've caught on yet, but I'm not as big of a presence in the dating scene as you are."

"You're more reserved, I know this." He raised his brow slightly, wanting her to be more direct.

"Ino told me a few things about that sex club." Sakura offered, watching him for a reaction.

"She and I have some good memories there," He was trying to inject some humor but it fell flat. "I take it you wouldn't be interested."

"Probably not." She responded, causing his ears to perk. It wasn't a hard no, he noted to himself. He pushed the thought aside. It was far from the right time to discuss that.

"Tell me what you want to know," His eyes met hers with his usual assertive glint. "I'm an open book."

She changed her position on the bed, mostly to hunker into this conversation but also to cover the fact that his stare was getting to her. If he noticed, he gave no indication.

"I think I need to say something first," She started off saying. "I'm not trying to judge you for anything. I'm just trying to understand you."

His eyes softened a fraction and she pulled her bottom lip into her mouth to sooth her nerves. It was the truth, she really wasn't judging him. She was still obscenely confused and wanted to get to the root of Sasuke to truly feel like she understood him.

She cleared her throat. "So why do you go?"

"It's somewhere I can easily get what I want and not have to worry about explanations or..these strings, that humans love to fall into." She watched a faint smirk grow on his lips. "I'm hard to let go of."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "So you go for easy one night stands?"

"Don't put words in my mouth. It's more than the sex." His gaze lowered to her neck and she started to feel oddly exposed. "It's one of the few ways that make me feel like myself, like how I was before."

She pulled her knees up in front of her chest and crossed her arms on top of them. He brought his attention back to her guarded face. "When you were in Hell, you mean?"

"Yes," He responded, eyes suddenly on the floor. "It was my comfort zone, as hard as I know that is for you to fathom."

This was even more confusing and he was right, she thought to herself. How was sex with strangers a source of comfort? What kind of solace could a place like Hell bring someone?

"What about it makes you feel... at home?" She struggled to complete her question, the concept just too odd.

But when he slowly looked up at her again, he almost didn't need to explain himself. The answer was simmering, humming, slithering under the surface. Her heart began to pound in her ears as his smoldering gaze looked to burn right through her. She couldn't move. His hand shifted to situate itself next to her feet and he leaned into it, his presence that much closer to her.

"The domination." The firmness of his tone sent shivers down her spine.

The effect his words had on her didn't go unnoticed. He felt his body stirring and fought hard to practice self-control. She remained stiff and unmoving and wanted nothing more than to feel her melt under his touch.

He wanted to feed the beast. "Ask me another question."

She slowly forced herself to take a breath, shocked by how difficult this had become already. Sasuke moved to sit fully on the bed and face her directly with his legs crossed in front of him. Her own legs tried to press harder into her chest to keep her toes from touching him. "You like to dominate others sexually?"

"In every way," He wove his fingers together and rested his chin on the bridge they formed, his elbows planted in his knees. "It was my job."

Would the effect he had on her ever wear off? Was this a sign of true attraction or hell-bent lust?

She continued down the rabbit hole, head first.

"Do you like to tie people up?"

He smirked again. He was surprised by this bold turn she took and wanted nothing more than to stir the pot. "Are you asking if I like bondage?"

She kept her face firm. "I am."

"I do."

"Do you like to cause pain?"

"Yes, but it's a mutual feeling."

"Do you like degrading your partners?"

Sasuke raised an eyebrow and she straightened her back as though to challenge him.

"It sounds like you're projecting a bit, Sakura."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "It sounds like you're not answering the question."

"Sakura," The way he whispered her name brought every hair on her body to attention. He ghosted the back of his hand down her shin. "As hard as it may be for you to grasp this, I don't force anything on anyone sexually."

Her shoulders slumped and she dropped her back against the headboard, not realizing how aggressive her posture had become. "I'm sorry."

He leaned forward and brought himself off the bed's edge to stand. "I have to say, I'm a little hurt you haven't asked me one particular question yet."

She watched him wander towards Ino's altar. His fingertips grazed a column of smoky quartz so delicately she wasn't certain he was actually touching it.

"You haven't asked me if I like to give pleasure."

There was a shift in that very moment, she noticed. She no longer felt her body on edge, although that molecular attraction was still just heightening her senses. He continued to trace lines across the crystals on the altar as she remained seated a few feet away. She wasn't sure how to respond to that. For better or worse, he didn't feel obligated to wait for her to speak up.

"Sakura," His voice sounded a little strained and when he looked back at her this time, she could see the faint crease on his brow.

He walked back to where she was and stood so close she had to force her head all the way back to look up at him. For a second, he stayed just like that and looked down at her unblinking. She could tell he was searching not just her, but himself in that moment for answers.

"I would give you pleasure in whatever form or through whatever means you desired." She felt her breath hitch not just at his words but when he brought himself down to his knees in front of her. His face was so close she could count his eyelashes if she had the focus to do so.

"Sakura," He breathed, "I would do anything for that opportunity, even if it meant letting you dominate *me* ."

His heart was pounding and he found himself stunned by his own confession. And while he was horrified, he found he could not have been more honest with her then. There was something possessing and driving him towards this woman, and he had no desire to fight this force within himself.

Meanwhile, Sakura was completely stunned. She remained frozen solid in her seat, a deer in headlights.

"It's my turn to ask questions." He stated in his deep voice that she couldn't imagine a single soul challenging. "What are you thinking?" He put his hand on her arm, shocking her out of her paralysis.

"I-I don't know, Sasuke. That's a lot for someone to take in." His body heat and male redolence started getting to her head more than the alcohol had. She suddenly felt unsettled on the bed and got up to pace across the room for some sense of separation. A hand latched onto her wrist. Her head whipped around, "Sasuke-"

"Do you have feelings for me?"

She didn't dare to look up from her wrist, completely certain he would take one glance at her face and melt her entire resolve. Her

throat felt thick with words she couldn't identify. Instead she focused on the frayed trim of the rug below her feet. The deep, slow bass from the living room was the only thing they could hear besides her own heartbeat.

Sasuke was running completely on automatic. It was funny, he'd reflect much later, how the only other time he would let his body lead before his mind was during sex. But there he was, far from successfully seducing this woman, and he wasn't even considering sex in that moment. He was frantic in his own skin, the sight of her walking away immediately classified as unacceptable. She needed to stay with him. He needed to tell her.

"I..." His grip slackened but he still held the contact. He had never felt such nerves before and fought hard to speak. The words finally came out. "I think I'm starting to have feelings for you."

Her stomach dropped but her heart was fighting to escape up her throat. She was equally terrified and electrified by this and she had no idea what to do with herself. She still hadn't looked at him. After saying a small prayer to whatever thread of reason she was depending on inside herself, she turned to look at the man who had just confessed to her.

He wasn't glaring or trying to burrow through her skull with his gaze. His pupils were perfectly round and gentle, his lips the slightest bit parted and his cheeks possibly dusted with a blush, but she could have been imagining that last detail in the dark room. His shoulders and broad chest were unnaturally still and she suspected he was holding his breath. This was the effect she had on him, but he was the only one between the two of them that recognized this.

"Sasuke," she breathed out his name. Her voice was so small, he barely caught it. "I don't know what to say."

His hand closed on her wrist tighter, but this time he brought his other hand across so he had both her wrists.

"Just don't say no yet."

She searched his eyes for any sign of deceit and found none.

"I won't, not yet."

He blinked a few times as he processed her words. Eventually the corners of his lips turned upwards into the most angelic smile she had ever seen in her life. She was bewildered, questioning if this was truly the same man in those bawdy images she had just deleted earlier that evening.

"I deleted all those things Karin sent me," She informed him as she sat back on the bed.

He let go of her wrists but stayed at her knees.

"I really am sorry you had to see those, Sakura."

"Please just sit next to me," She patted the bed next to her, finding him down there to be too flustering. Her gaze fell to her lap. "I don't think I understand what you want from me."

His fingers guided her chin in his direction and she was forced to meet his eyes. They were endless pools she suddenly felt she had fallen deep into. "Just a chance."

After all that had happened in just that day alone, on top of the last month, she had to think this over. If this was just a question of sexual attraction, she'd be a complete goner. But that wasn't what he was asking of her, as she was then realizing. He wanted her heart.

"Just a chance."

Sasuke leaned towards her and she froze once again. He brought his lips to her ear, his cheek just barely touching hers. "Thank you."

As he pulled back, she remained frozen with her breath hard in her throat. He placed a soft kiss on her cheek and she immediately was

scorched and blushing.

"Sasuke..."

"Ino is probably worried I'm corrupting you, so I'm going to go back out there." He threw her a tiny grin and swiped his thumb over her bottom lip before walking to the door.

It was just as the lock clicked that she flopped backwards on the bed and regained her breath. She wanted to say it was some sort of dark magic he had trapped her in, but she knew that was not the case. If anything, he would be the one accusing *her* of some sort of magic and it was him who was under her spell.

DONE! At least for this chapter. Please let me know your thoughts, I was a bit lazy on the editing. I'm hoping this brought a new side to Sasuke people were looking for. I'm curious for some feedback on this angle this is taking. Thanks everyone! :)

Chapter 10

Hey friends! Sorry for the longer than expected wait and relatively short chapter ahead. I had a huge writer's block on this one with where I was going to bring the plot friction, but I think I got it figured out. Enjoy and please remember to send any feedback 3

CH 10

Sasuke closed the door and embraced the small smile that he couldn't shake. As the lock clicked he wanted nothing more than to run back into the room and smother the girl, but he knew that was the last thing he should do. If anything, he needed to wait for her to come to him now.

"You fucking snake," Ino whispered, suddenly in front of him as he turned towards the living room. "You weren't supposed to bother her."

"Relax, Witch." He brushed past her and made his way to the bar cart to fix himself a drink. "I apologized."

The blonde's hostile stance slackened and she cocked her head as though she hadn't heard him properly. She couldn't have.

"Apologized?" She asked slowly, the word not sitting right.

Sasuke turned to Ino and the others in the room with his glass in hand. He was still grinning. "She's going to give me a chance."

The others gawked at him in disbelief. If he was anyone else, he would have taken offense at this.

"How'd you swing that?" Shikamaru was skeptical and had a hard time believing the horror-struck woman in the other room was so quickly persuaded.

"I told you, I apologized." The Satanic man sat next to Hinata on the couch and enjoyed his beverage. The rest of them sat in silence.

"Well," Ino spoke, "I hope everything works out." She sat next to Sasuke on the other side of the couch and locked eyes with Naruto across from her, who looked uncharacteristically solemn.

Naruto cleared his throat and held his glass up. "This is good news. To Sasuke's new heart,"

The others lifted their glasses as well and Sasuke grinned at his old friend. "To Sasuke's new heart."

Her eyes fluttered open and were met by darkness. She wondered how long she had fallen asleep for, but figured everyone else must have still been up since she could hear the muffled sounds of a movie in the other room. Slowly she pulled herself upright and scratched at her bedhead, trying to smooth it back into a manageable state. She wanted to be back in her own apartment where she could have real space to process things, but that would have to wait. At least from what she knew, she'd be able to head out in the morning when the snow would have stopped and the city would be working on clearing the streets. Until then, she was going to continue hanging with the demons and Witches that were trying their hardest to define this particular chapter in her life. And probably drinking. And eating something, her growling stomach reminded her.

She slid off of the bed and grazed her cheek with her fingertips where Sasuke's lips had kissed her. She shivered and felt her lids slide closed at the memory. He had somehow managed to make such a chaste kiss sinful and she could only imagine how else he could make her feel if she allowed it, if she dared to play with this fire.

Again, those images flashed in her mind of him that Karin sent her. His features had been morphed into something more reminiscent of his demon roots than his human aspirations. His eyes were

completely dark and dilated, nails long and hardened into black talons, that long pointed tongue... She now knew he wasn't human, but he was trying to be. The question was, would she ever be able to look at him as just Sasuke or would he always be the retired Satan now known as Sasuke?

She sat back down on the bed. What the fuck did she even *want* ? Her mind drifted to the gold confetti showering her and Kiba, his lips pillows on hers. Young and in love one day, then alone without any direction or answers the next. He left her with all the cruelty baked into the most unexpected ghosting she had ever experienced. She shook her head. She had spent far too much time giving that old heartbreak space in her life and she had to accept that maybe she didn't know what she wanted anymore. She learned first handedly that what seemed like the right romance and direction for her was not, so what did she want? What was right for her? Now was definitely not the time to tackle that question, that was at best a problem for tomorrow. Or sometime later.

She braved leaving the bedroom and found the others enthralled by a fight scene. The projector was the only light source, one of the latest action movies playing up on the far wall in front of her. Ino was closest to Sakura and looked back to see her standing nearby. She shifted out of her entanglement with Shikamaru to get up and pulled the girl into the kitchen with her. She could barely see and Ino was only silhouetted by the movie.

"Are you okay?" She asked, her voice barely louder than the projector.

"I'm fine, Sasuke came to talk to me earlier." Sakura leaned against the counter and could see Ino's expression tighten in the dark.

"That's what I mean. He snuck in when I told him to give you space... The bastard..." She shook her head. "What did he say to you?"

Sakura blushed and Ino leaned in expectantly. "We talked about the videos a bit, but he basically just told me he has..." She began fidgeting with her hair.

"Has what?" Ino asked impatiently. She didn't know what she was hoping for Sakura to say, but would take anything over this unknown nonsense.

"He has feelings for me," Sakura crossed her arms and hesitantly looked up at Ino, unsure what her reaction would be.

To her relief Ino was grinning so wide she thought the Witch's face would crack in half.

"Sakura..!" She whispered with barely contained excitement. She gripped the blushing woman by the arms. "What did you say?"

"I-I'd give him a chance, I'm still a little uncertain, as you could imagine." Sakura let herself smile back, Ino's energy was just too contagious.

"He mentioned something about that, I'm just so happy to hear it from you. How do you feel about it?"

Sakura sighed and slid down to the tiled floor. Ino followed her down in the narrow kitchen, their knees bumping.

"It's still so much to take in. But, despite my better judgement, I'm trying to stay open-minded."

From the living room, Sasuke could practically feel his ears burning. He knew the two of them had gone to talk about him and wanted nothing more than to hear what Sakura was saying. Rejection just wasn't his thing and he would be lying to himself if he said he didn't have a thread of worry about what was being discussed. Beside him, he could feel Naruto staring hard at him.

"What do you want?" Sasuke spat, not in the mood to deal with this hyperactive idiot.

"Are you sure about this?" The blonde whispered, trying not to disturb Hinata who was pressed into his opposite side.

"Are you questioning my judgement?" His words carried the weight of a threat and Naruto didn't miss this at all.

"I'm trying to make sure you're ready for all of *this*," He nodded over in his girlfriend's direction. "It's a big change." "I don't think she's going to be cool with your sexcapades that you love so much."

"No shit, dumbass." His features darkened.

"I just mean," Naruto sighed. "Look, I know you're thinking you're okay with this one-eighty in your life, but you better than most humans don't change that easily. Creatures of habit."

"I'm fine. And you don't know what she likes." He looked over in the direction of the kitchen, where Ino and Sakura were walking over from.

"I'm sure you think you do," Naruto grumbled under his breath.

"What did we miss?" Ino asked in her usual chipper tone. Naruto turned back to the movie with a sour expression, but she chose to put that to the back of her mind.

"It'd be too troublesome to catch you up, just sit down." Shikamaru mumbled, tugging on her hand.

She snuggled back into his arms and got comfortable. Sakura looked around for a spot to settle into and saw Sasuke's glimmering eye looking at her. As tempting as they both knew he was, she opted for the vacant sofa behind him and climbed on. His discontent was hard to miss but he made the mature decision to face forward and let her settle in without any grief from him. Once the rustling behind him

came to an end, he leaned his head back onto the edge of the sofa and let a strong exhale out from his nostrils. He was by far and large well aware of his self-imposed dry spell and was itching for physical contact. He knew he had to be patient.

It was then that he felt a set of dainty fingers gently comb through his hair and he looked back in disbelief at the owner of those digits. Sakura gave him a shy smile and stopped, clearly unsure if the touch was unwarranted or not. He leaned his head back even further, reaching for her hand. She looked a little surprised but understood and continued to rake through his raven locks.

His hair was incredibly soft and silk-like, she noticed. The sensation was addictive, how the tresses just glided through her fingers so effortlessly. As her nails scraped gently at his scalp, Sasuke let his eyes roll back into his lids and let a small groan escape. From her low recline on her side, she heard the noise and stopped. Red flooded her face and neck. No one else moved, so she figured she was the only one to have heard him.

"Don't pull away," he whispered. He reached over for her hand that was hovering close to her chest and brought it back to his hair. "It feels nice."

Still blushing hard, she continued running her fingers through his hair. She found herself enjoying the sensation and also enjoying how Sasuke seemed to melt into her touch. It felt right.

The movie soon came to an end and she reluctantly withdrew her hand from his hair to her lap. Naruto stood with an exaggerated stretch and then quickly brought his hands together for a deafening clap.

"Last night of the storm, what's next?!" He asked the room, rousing everyone against their collective wills.

"I could do a nightcap," Shikamaru offered.

"That sounds good, I'll make some drinks?" Ino stretched her own back out and made her way to the popular bar cart.

The wind had died down at that point. Snow was still falling in even sheets but wasn't screaming through the windows like before. The moon had even made a sliver of an appearance. Sakura felt a wave of calm take her as she grew more confident in tomorrow and her time to herself she would have. Her gaze fell to Sasuke's broad shoulders and strong neck leaning against the sofa. She pictured her nails digging into his flesh, his beautiful body above hers. The distance would be good.

"Here you go," Ino brought her from her heating thoughts and passed her a tumbler of liquor.

She smiled up at her with gratitude, taking the glass and almost immediately taking a generous pull from it. As she did, Sasuke shifted to stand and placed a hand on her calf for "support" as he stood.

"I can smell your discomfort," He whispered as he walked to the bathroom.

He didn't look at her but she was flaming red, which Ino noticed. She had finished passing around drinks and sat next to Sakura with her curiosity written plain across her face. "What happened?"

"Um," Sakura started, unsure of how to ask her question. "Can demons... sense... emotions?"

Ino's brow furrowed. "Just spit it out. What did he say?"

Sakura looked back to the bathroom to make sure Sasuke was still gone. She leaned into Ino. "Can he sense arousal?"

"Oh." Ino straightened. "I don't know."

Sakura deflated. "You don't?"

"He's probably teasing you, Sakura." She rubbed her friend's arm reassuringly.

The latest set of candles the Witches had lit earlier in the evening whittled down in sync with their consumption of their last drinks of the night. They all lingered as the conversation slowed but eventually it came time to wish each other a good night. Ino and Shikamaru shuffled off to her bedroom while Naruto followed Hinata into her room.

"What now?" Sasuke asked, getting up to sit with Sakura on the sofa. They stared at one another.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Sakura asked, surprising both of them.

The snow was only going to continue slowing down and her cabin fever was only getting worse. She figured if she was stuck with Sasuke, she might as well tire herself out so as to fall asleep rather than stay up all night minutely aware of his presence inches away. He raised a skeptical eyebrow in her direction, but made no verbal objections. They put on their coats and boots, grabbed keys off of the table and slipped out into the hall.

In the dim light she swallowed hard watching Sasuke quietly shut the door behind them. Just hours ago she had run past him and down the very stairs she was now asking him to follow her to. He stood there in his usual all black attire and watched her emotions play across her face. He struggled with his inability to change her feelings towards him and crossed his arms as he waited for her to take the lead.

"Ready?" She asked, her attention coming back to reality instead of her internal debate.

"Are you?" He was teasing but she still shot him a glare.

As they descended into the stairwell, their steps were the only sounds echoing around them. When they hit the third floor, a heavy darkness pooled below them. The lights were out, most likely a leak from the storm had shorted them. Sakura hesitated and all together stopped before going any further.

"What's wrong?" Sasuke asked from behind her.

She turned and looked at him directly. Her lips were pressed into a thin line. "It's going to sound stupid since I know who you are, but the dark freaks me out."

He blinked a few times and then the corner of his mouth finally turned upwards. He continued down the stairs until he was just a few inches from her. His fingers intertwined with hers and he grinned at her. "You have nothing to be afraid of with me around, Sakura."

His hold on her didn't lessen as they continued down the next flight of stairs. She kept her fingers locked in his and didn't make any attempt to insert space as their arms brushed. When they finally reached the ground floor, he reluctantly loosened his hold when he felt her let go of his hand. Despite the moonlight that cut through the window in the front door, she didn't see the frown taking his lips for a moment.

"We survived," he joked, poking fun at her childish fear.

She pushed his arm playfully and he opened the door to let her out. The crisp air pricked at her skin and she welcomed the promise of a world outside that apartment she had been stuck in. As they crunched through the layers of snow, Sasuke offered his arm for Sakura to hold for balance and guidance. Everything was so quiet. A few apartments were still glowing with soft lights inside them. She looked up and admired the fresh snowflakes falling around them like confetti.

Her mind drifted to Kiba and she wondered what he was doing. Was he enjoying the sunset on the beach in California? Taking some

other girl to dinner at their favorite restaurant he used to default to picking all the time? Maybe he was camping in the state park he always promised to take her but but never did. Her heart clenched hard inside her and for a moment she was certain she'd throw up she was so overwhelmed with grief.

"Sakura," Sasuke's velvet voice whispered. She could tell he noticed her change in demeanor but refused to look at him. He frowned and stopped in his tracks, holding her arm so she would too. "What's wrong?"

Looking up at him in that moment, she was taken aback by how helpless he looked. She figured he really didn't have any experience working with human emotions far outside of lust and anger, so he was lost as to what to do with her then. After she took a deep and calming breath, she met his dark eyes.

"I'm just feeling overwhelmed again, I'm sorry."

He wrapped her hands in his and gave a strong squeeze. "I am, too."

They stayed like that for a moment and didn't say anything else. He was new to every element at play here and she so quickly forgot that. She felt oddly guilty not telling Sasuke she was being absorbed by her memories and longing for her familiar partner. She tried to picture Sasuke sitting with her on the beach at sunset, or in a cheesy restaurant in anything but his tailored shirts and pants. She forced her hands to slip out of his.

"Let's keep walking."

The silence resumed but neither found it all too uncomfortable. Sasuke wanted to know what it was Sakura was thinking, just a hint, and Sakura wanted some inkling of insight into what her future held.

"A lot of pressure has been put on you. I owe you an apology for that." The devilman explained, his hands deep in his coat pockets.

She only glanced at him for a moment before looking back at the snow in front of them. "It is a lot. Why are you pushing so hard for me to give you a chance?"

He didn't answer right away. He could be completely honest and tell her he's depending on this exploration of a relationship with her may be his final chance at anchoring his soul to the human world... Or he could act in his own interest like the cunning man he was. He had no choice, regardless of his feelings.

"I've never felt this way before," he admitted truthfully. "I don't know what it means but it completely eclipses what I thought it feels like to be enamored with someone."

Sakura was the one to frown this time. She kicked up some snow in front of her. "So you're just fascinated by your emotions? Like an experiment?"

"Hn. Don't be annoying. I told you I have feelings for you and I meant it. I want you in my life, Sakura." He reached for her hand and was relieved when she let him hold it.

They fell back into their silence once more and made the final turns necessary to loop back onto Ino's street. When they reached the front door, she thanked him for accompanying her and he responded with a gentle smile that made her heart ache. Why couldn't he just be a normal man? Things would just be so much simpler if he wasn't born from the pits of Hell.

"Think you can sleep now?" Sasuke asked as he returned from the bathroom in his black sweats and no shirt again.

Sakura swallowed hard, asking herself why he insisted to play this game. He was intentionally trying to tease and tempt her, right? She focused on fixing the sheets on the couch for herself and stretched out on her back. To her surprise, the cushions dipped near her waist and her eyes shot open to see him sitting there. His eyes were soft again like they were in Ino's bedroom. He brought a gentle hand to

her temple and guided a lost lock of hair behind her ear. She focused her attention on the pitch fork inside his arm and didn't say anything.

He eventually got up with a quiet sigh and brought himself down to the floor cushions to lay down. "Good night, Sakura."

The next morning Sasuke woke up particularly early. The sun was not fully roused awake yet so the light was faint and just a thin veil in the room. He turned over from his side and winced when his shoulder ached from being pressed into the floor. As he did, he looked up at the couch and saw it was empty. The blankets and sheets were neatly folded up and stacked on the back cushions. Her bag that was by his head last night was gone. He slowly lowered his head back onto his pillow and drafted a text in his mind he would send later in the morning when he was less hurt by her sudden departure.

It was just as quiet and still in the morning as it was the night before. There was only one or two other tracks of footprints in the snow but there was no one in sight. She let her shoulders fall instead of keeping them on edge by her neck. She was alone with her thoughts.

Finally.

The familiar screeching and clanking of the subway was a relief. The underground trains were running almost immediately that morning and she was grateful for the opportunity to head home as soon as she woke without a delay. Once she boarded the car, she sent a quick text to Ino and Hinata apologizing for the sudden exit and hoped they would understand. After a few stops she climbed out and welcomed the sight of the streets she last saw before she knew Hell was a real place. She tried her hardest to push that thought aside and not let it spoil her sanctuary.

There were more tracks in the snow in this area. The deli nearby was open, it seemed, so she decided to treat herself to a hot sandwich. She'd draw herself a nice bath, set up some mindless reality TV on her phone and shamelessly kill that sandwich while she soaked.

After all the drinking she had been doing, she opted out of a quick visit to the beer fridge in the back and decided some nice tea at home would be the best move. A light physical detox along with the mental would do the trick.

Turning the corner, the layered tracks from the increasing foot traffic subsided and the snow became less and less tarnished by those who had emerged from their homes. Curiously she noted there eventually was just one set of tracks she was left to follow as she continued on her way to her apartment. The farther she walked the more her brow furrowed. Something about this brought a pit to her stomach. She would be foolish to think the tracks would lead to-

"Kiba," she breathed.

There we go! I didn't think I was going to take this turn in the story but I made some executive decisions. Still deciding how I'm going to play this one, but it's something to work with. Of course, please leave a review, it means a lot and truly inspires me on the pages ahead. Thank you for reading! xoxo

Chapter 11

I'm alive, I'm back! Thank you everyone for your patience, I'm so sorry for the long wait. I just finished moving and started a new job so there was a lot going on behind the scenes on top of a lack of direction here... But! I have since given myself a loose outline of where to go next with the plot so it's not aimless. This is a short chapter, just a couple pages, but I hope to get some feedback on the setup I'm doing here.

CH 11

' Let me take you out for dinner'

It was an exceptionally dismal day that was finally coming to a close. Icy rain stained everyone's coats and jackets, souring the city's mood more than the dead of winter could be counted on doing on its own. After the record storm, Sasuke had texted Sakura that first evening he was home from Ino's. It was a simple ask, a request to get dinner with him. She responded almost an hour later.

' I'll text you tomorrow when I know what my schedule looks like'

The next day came and went, but he didn't hear from her. For being such a ruthless place, New York seemed to need a minute to catch its breath after the storm. Businesses collected themselves the next day, grocery stores could hardly restock fast enough at the rate customers were rushing in, and the unblemished snow inevitably morphed into dark, thick pools and sludge piles along the sidewalks. He seamlessly returned to work the next day, picking up where he left off in his manic state alone in his office. Sitting at his desk and looking through the glass door into the bullpen of associate employees, he focused on his breath and leaned back. A pen flickered between his fingers as the only external indicator of his agitation.

Why didn't she say anything? Was she still marinating in the mess Karin put them in? The morning drifted by as expected, paperwork slowly stacked on his desk for review and as a lone distractor from his thoughts. When the stack was whittled down to the polished mail tray and the office crowd dwindled around the lunch hour, he picked up his phone to call Ino and asked if she knew anything. Ino seemed caught off-guard and surprised. The blonde promised to let him know if she found out anything about it, but said Sakura was acting completely normal and untroubled at work, just busy. She asked if he wanted her to let Sakura know he was asking about her. He immediately say no, but then snarled in frustration and thanked her before hanging up.

' I want to do something this weekend'

He had texted Sakura again on the train home from work the following week, letting that take his mind off of the humans pressed shamelessly close to him. His brow twitched not from pain, but out of temptation to kill the man next to him that kept losing his balance and stepping on the toes of his boot. A wet fang dared to show itself although no one was looking. The train doors closed and his mind trailed back to jade eyes and parted lips.

He had no way of knowing this then, but he wouldn't hear back from her for yet another week.

"Welcome, how can I he-"

"Tell Sakura she needs to come up front right now." Sasuke bit out, startling the receptionist who was suddenly wide-eyed with confusion.

"I-I'm sorry, who are you?" She managed to ask as politely as she could.

The devilman narrowed his eyes, not satisfied with her decision to ask him questions and started walking towards the back of the clinic where he knew Sakura had to be.

"Wait! You need to wait up here!" The woman frantically yelled, jolting from her chair. He gave no indication he had heard her and was already yards ahead. "Please stop!"

With all the commotion, a few clinicians in the back poked their heads out and saw this tall and handsome man with clear purpose walking their way.

"Sasuke? What do you think you're doing?" Ino appeared suddenly before planting her hands on his chest to walk him backwards. She was only successful in negotiating a few steps.

It was then that she took in his features and paled whiter than her ghostly porcelain complexion usually called for. His irises were so red and eyes so glassy she could only think of pomegranate seeds and the forbidden fruit this poor soul was desperate to taste again. Familiar fangs edged out from his lips and a deep, animalistic growl unearthed itself from his hard chest.

"Ino-" She grabbed his hand and ran him down the hall and into the very last examination room. The light was off and she wasted no time on finding the light switch and instead worried about getting Sasuke far enough into the room for her to shut the door behind them. The lock clicked into place and the only sound to be heard was Ino breathing solely through her nose to ease her heaving chest.

Eventually she turned away from the door and faced Sasuke in the dark. His eyes glowed like quiet embers, barely hiding their scorching heat. He didn't say a word, but he kept her directly in his sight. With the sudden patience of a being that has existed for centuries beyond the imagination, he approached her. It was moments like these, when his Satanic authority made an appearance, that she would become literally paralyzed by fear. A clawed hand traced her cheek and trailed to her delicate throat. Her pulse was violent and he savored this rare side of the generally outspoken and brash Witch. His hand continued to the center of her chest, directly over her heart. Claws pricked at the skin just below

her throat and her breath hitched while her eyes remained trapped by his.

"You seem to forget who I am, and frankly," he leaned in close enough for her to see the flaming storms spinning in his irises, "I am *sick of it.* "

She pressed back as hard as she could into the door. "I'm sorry, Sasuke," she whispered.

He released her and drifted back a few paces. She could hear the exam chair give under his weight as he perched himself on it. "I'm going to give you one chance to tell me exactly why you're trying to get me out of here."

Ino sighed and shifted over to where she could sort of make out a chair in the corner of the tight room. "I don't want you to find Sakura right now."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "And why would that be?"

"Sasuke..."

"Are you testing my word, Ino?" She could sense him straightening in his seat.

She swallowed her fear and foreseen consequences. "She's seeing someone right now."

"A patient?" He made no effort to hide his confusion.

"No..." She cringed, anticipating an outburst.

Silence swallowed them whole as did the darkness when he closed his hell-given eyes. The room slowly began to heat up but Ino's intuition told her to resist the urge to call to the devilman. After a few minutes of beading sweat and swelling fear, the temperature seemed to drop to a more reasonable state and she dared to approach him.

His eyes opened, and despite the devastating hue still glowing in them, they seemed to have simmered down a bit. "Why would you hide this from me, Ino?" He reached for her chin and searched her face for an answer. She couldn't believe how calm he was acting when he'd otherwise throw a rage-filled tantrum.

"I was trying to figure out what to do," She confessed, letting him hold her face still. "I'm sorry, Sasuke."

He let go of her and leaned back. "I need you to help me control my demon self."

She could barely contain a relieved grin as she made her way to the light switch to brighten the room. Once she did, she swiftly moved to the cabinets all locked next to him. Her back bent to bring the farthest, lowest one into view. She produced a small key and creaked open the cabinet to reveal a small collection of herbs and liquids. A secret stash.

"Now, you'll have to help me quickly put this together and lend me some of that Satan energy of yours and we'll get you back to where you need to be," she explained with a chipper tone.

"Or at least somewhere close."

The clatter of her shoe echoed off of the wood flooring but went unattended, as did the rejection of her cotton blouse and then her tweed slacks. Large hands cradled the back of her ribcage while his soft tongue lapped at the irresistible cleavage granted by her lace bra. Her neck gave out and she let her head fall back over the arm of the couch, her hair spilling out of the loose bun she had crafted while tackling paperwork earlier that afternoon.

His touch was warm but hungry, almost feral. She could feel his excitement raging within him, reminding her somewhat more of her first time when she was a teenager than when she was with him last in college. "Kiba," she moaned, feeling his tongue and skillful hands

knead her flesh lower and lower. "I haven't showered since last night,"

Sharp brown eyes met her misty green pair while his fingers hooked into her underwear. "I couldn't care less, Sakura."

She watched as he looked down at her with barely any control over his desires. As soon as he had her underwear rolled off, his mouth could not have been buried in her faster. Her breath caught at the contact and his deep moan sent shivers of pleasure rolling down her body. She brought her hands to his heavy shoulders and felt the muscles ripple under her touch as he gripped her hips to bring her flesh impossibly closer to his mouth.

"Oh God," her voice cracked.

They eventually rolled onto the floor, almost bumping into the coffee table she had just purchased over the weekend. Kiba had helped her bring it upstairs, one olive branch before many to follow. Days later, those same hands that carried the second-hand furniture was then guiding her supple body in front of his and he swiftly entered her from behind, not that unexpectedly. "Ah!" She yelped, not out of pain but out of surprise. It wasn't unwelcome in any way, just still a shock in some ways.

Back on that day that she had woken up on Ino's couch after the storm started with a laundry list of emotions she wasn't ready to understand, much less dive into. The sky was mostly clear and it had stopped snowing. Sasuke was fast asleep just beneath her on the floor, his arm folded back behind his head. She remembered staring at him for quite some time, finding it too easy to picture herself resting on top of him and under that blanket he had covering his tempting body.

It was too much to unpack, too much to deal with then. She slipped off over the arm of the couch and quietly folded up her blankets before taking her bag to the bathroom to get dressed to sneak out.

She needed some time, and space, to process all these new feelings... and that tiny detail about Sasuke being Satan in the flesh.

When she had gotten home, she found a piece of paper taped to her building door. His terrible handwriting and name boldly scrawled at the bottom of it immediately caught her attention and made her lightheaded.

' Sakura - I finally found you, please call me when you're home. - KIBA'

How early had he come by? How did he find her? What did he want? Did she even want to speak to him? She must have paced her apartment one lap short of wearing a path into the flooring before she decided to call.

And did it really matter what he had said, when she made that call? The fact was she had called him. He asked to meet for a drink. They had three. He then walked her home. She let him in. And three weeks later he was well past feeling at home and back in Sakura's life, where he promised her he would stay.

It was unusually still, Sasuke had decided. He padded across his apartment and looked out the window at the unbothered streets below. It was late, somewhere between 1am and when his alarm would go off that morning, and he couldn't get himself to sleep. Something was off, but he was unable to place the source of this shift. He sighed as he watched a few guys shuffle down the sidewalk towards the subway. An ambulance siren echoed in the distance but was soon completely out of earshot. He could see the traffic on the bridge was nonexistent, cars were trickling across without any delay. He sneered. Maybe it was just him.

He gave up trying to reach her weeks ago soon after seeing Ino at the clinic. They met every Wednesday to perform their latest ritual to keep him bound to the human realm and his flesh and blood. The binding at first seemed hearty if not flawless, but the last two

recitations of the spellwork felt less impactful and more like a gummy bandaid than an iron lock. He tried not to dwell on this, since he knew inevitably it would one day fail. He was just buying time until he could figure out how to fully earn his humanity.

"We just need to wait until the honeymoon phase is over, then it'll be easier to break them up," Ino explained, preparing for their second round of binding.

"That may not do anything," Sasuke admitted. "We don't know for certain if a relationship with Sakura is what will save me, or if it's in the cards for me at all."

"But Sasuke--"

"I can't cheat my way. This has to be done right, with or without her."

His hands dragged across his face in an unsuccessful attempt at wiping off his exhaustion. He brought his body to the sofa to at least lay down, if that was the closest thing he could get to sleeping. The moon had an irksome yellow glow that night. He stared out at it, observing it for any indications of mischief or otherworldly issues that would concern him. Eventually, the moon outlasted him and his eyes lowered shut for the night.

Free from his skeptical eye, the moon continued to bask the city in its oddly warm light. The cars and pedestrians dwindled down to hardly a single soul for blocks. The air became somewhat still and heavy. Shadows became more opaque, thick like mud. The celestial body's tint evolved from a cream hue to that of poisonous yellow reminiscent of a snake eye. New York seemed to flatten under the lunar light, the world was saturated with it.

It was deep within Central Park that there was a stirring. One may have thought there was a sacred space unscathed by this surreal event but in truth it was fueled by it. The ground quivered, soil turned itself over. Rotting birds and rodents untangled themselves from the roots veining through them. Skin hydrated by the damp earth but

pale from decades following death emerged. A desperate gasp for air was the only sound to be heard in that moment. Sharp yellow eyes found the moon that resembled them and stirred up a sick grin.

"Well done, boy."

And there you have it! Some direction for where I want to take this next. Thoughts? I'm anxiously looking for some feedback, so please let me know what's working, what's annoying and how you feel about where I'm pivoting.

Thank you in advance!

Chapter 12

Hello everyone! Thank you for your patience and thank you so much for all the feedback last chapter! It definitely helped me tailor the direction I decided to go with this chapter, so I hope to find out how this sits with you after such a brutally sudden twist with... no clarity... haha..ha.... Anyway! This is a longer one and hopefully brings things into the light. What's going on with Kiba? What kind of nonsense is happening in Central Park? Who the hell is emerging from the ground? When is Sasuke going to see Sakura again!? Enjoy :)

CH12

" Well done, boy."

His body lurched up and forward out of his sleep, a cold layer of sweat covering him. He was panting, his pale green eyes wide open but not seeing anything in front of him. Instead, he at the mercy of his mind's eye which was stuck on his dream... Or what he wanted to believe was just a dream. The alarm clock next to his bed read around 3am, but this only fueled his resolve to call the one man he knew he needed to reach right away. It was his duty to do so.

A few rings kept him waiting until a groan replaced them. "Hn... What do you want, Gaara?"

The demon's friend looked out his window and swallowed hard when he noticed the off-putting glow of the moon. "Something has happened," he stated gravely, "something has been summoned that should not have been."

Sasuke pushed himself off of his couch and felt the sleep immediately evaporate from within him. Clutching the phone close to his ear, he took long strides to his window and stared directly at the

moon with eyes as wide the celestial body. Gaara let the silence sit between them and knew better than to speak up again.

"I should have recognized this," Sasuke sighed. "I couldn't sleep and I should have realized there was more to it than trivial mortal factors at play."

His red haired man ignored the latter end of the comment. "We need to figure out who is behind this as well as *what* this is exactly."

They both glared into the midnight sun, one festering with a bitter drive to find the one who dared to step into his turf, the other marinating within the acceptance disguised as the discovery of his vulnerability. Sasuke threw on a shirt and pants along with his long black coat and made a swift exit of his apartment. He may have been in his human flesh, but his demonic sensibilities were still comparable to his days of reigning power. The unsettling vibrations were almost palpable, but he could not determine where they were coming from. He met Gaara at one of their old haunts, an old Greek diner downtown. They had a table they always were seated at and tonight was no exception. It was far in the back, despite the establishment being mostly empty with the exception of a few lone patrons at the counter. Sasuke lit a cigarette and the tired but familiar waitress turned her attention elsewhere. Gaara arrived not late after him with shadows as dark as ever under his eyes.

"It is sickening," he muttered, showing no interest in the coffee Sasuke ordered them. "This has never happened before, a hell-risen being, crossing over without a summoner."

A television in the corner of the diner had the local news streaming. Despite the odd hour, a reporter was out in the city talking about the strange lunar behavior.

Sasuke's lip twitched with annoyance. "It may not be a mortal summoner." Gaara watched Sasuke carefully as he took a drag from his cigarette and closed his eyes for a moment. There was something he wasn't telling him but he could see the obligation

wearing on him to explain himself. "Someone in Hell may have opened the Gates."

Pale eyes widened. The Gates of Hell opened? "Are they still open?"

"No. I would feel it. While I don't know what it is we're looking for, I can sense it is a single entity. Why it's here makes no difference, we need to end it and send it back before it causes too much damage."

"What do you propose we do in order to find this creature?"

Sasuke smirked and sighed. "We'll need to make a few wake up calls."

It was hot and wet on her neck and a warm weight slid across her midsection. She moaned as she stirred awake. "Mmm..Kiba..?" Sleep coated her words but her eyes slowly fluttered open. A hard, warm body pressed against her with need from behind. The room was dark with the exception of a few slits of light coming through the blinds. Kiba was latched onto her neck and she leaned back into him. She looked down to his strong arm across her but found herself on pins and needles with horror upon seeing not his tanned arm but instead a giant python. When she looked up for help, it wasn't Kiba, but Sasuke and his red eyes who was behind her.

She woke up gasping for air and fisting the blankets around her. ' *It was just a dream, just a dream,*' she kept repeating in her head as she tried to bring her heart rate down. The bed was empty beside her, but when she looked across the room she could see Kiba's silhouette by the windows. His form was bathed in a surreal yellow light.

"Kiba," she called to him with a little more than a whisper.

He remained frozen facing the outside and Sakura cocked her head out of confusion. "Kiba, are you okay?" Nothing.

Tentatively, she rose from the bed and approached him. When she put a hand on his arm, he jumped. "Fuck!" He shouted. Sakura immediately withdrew her hand. "I'm sorry, you startled me." He quickly offered before turning back to the window.

"What are you looking at?" She brought herself beside him.

Kiba's eyes remained locked up at the sky. "That," he said, pointing up at the moon. As he continued to stare unblinking, Sakura felt her stomach turn with unease. She continued to observe him in his almost trance-like state for another moment before bringing herself to the loveseat next to her bed. He remained unmoving.

She looked down at her arm and noted the goosebumps that seemed more present than not these days and tried to take a careful breath to ease the unsettled state of her stomach. She wanted to tell Kiba about it, but that would go nowhere good. Ever since the storm and her revelations about Sasuke's true identity, she had been plagued by the most sinister nightmares *every night*. The dreams were all very similar. She would find herself either waking in bed, dozing under the trees in the park or sometimes even reliving that unforgettable night with Kiba at the show years ago. Regardless of the setup, the turn of events were painfully consistent. In a state of comfort, she would nuzzle to the touch of Kiba only to find it to be Sasuke and some other terrifying element upon her such as the most recent serpent. Fortunately his face was more often his human one than the devil face she was initially haunted by. Still, the amount of under eye concealer she was forced to cake on to avoid concerned questioning had become criminal.

For the first week or so of Kiba miraculously making his way back into her life, she thought it was her rippling trauma from learning she had met the Devil that made her uneasy in her day-to-day interactions and resurrected relationship. And while she knew that most certainly was playing a role in this, over the following days and weeks she found her twisting emotions softening when at work or while she was out... but out of sorts and on edge when she was with Kiba.

Was she associating him with this supernatural trauma? She found that hard to believe, since she was doing no such thing with Ino who was more closely tied to this matter than anyone else in her life. So why was Kiba causing her so much inner turmoil?

A knock on her door brought her out of her thoughts. While she put on her robe to answer it, she noted Kiba still hadn't budged or even flinched. Through the peephole she was surprised to see the very Witch herself she was just thinking about.

"Ino, what are you doing here?" Sakura opened the door to her friend who stood hesitantly in the hallway.

"I... had a weird dream and wanted to check on you," the blonde confessed as her eyes turned to the man in the back of Sakura's apartment. "Especially with this ominous moon at play tonight."

"Um," Sakura turned to see she was looking suspiciously at Kiba. "Thank you for checking on me. I'm okay." Ino carefully searched her friend's eyes and decided to bite back any further comments. Sakura noticed in that moment how out of place Ino looked in a hoodie and her coat with a baseball cap on. "Did you want to come in?"

"No, that's okay." She took one last glance at Kiba before turning to leave. "Get some sleep, you've got some crazy bags you need to rest off."

The room was filled, but dead silent. The damned moonlight was glowing through the windows, but was drowned out by the warm halos clustering around the candles inside. If one were to have walked in at that moment, they would have thought they had stumbled upon an adult slumber party of sorts given the attire of those present. The reality of the gathering, however, was far from jovial.

"You're certain this can't wait another couple of hours?" Naruto whined. He was slumped in an armchair, an exhausted but stubborn

glare fixed on his face. His hair was impossibly more wild than usual and could only have been bothered to put on sweats and not anything more when Sasuke had arrived with Gaara.

"Which Circle of Hell did your lazy ass work in again?" Anko spat, perched on the arm of the chair Kakashi was sitting in.

"The Seventh! Who's asking?!" The blonde demon shouted back.

Shikamaru groaned, clutching his coffee mug close to his mouth. "Ugh..No one cares, please shut up."

Naruto began growling and his eyes melted into a flaming red. Hinata covered her face from the sofa across from him.

Kakashi reached over and clapped a hand onto Naruto's shoulder in the next chair. "As much as I would like to argue on your behalf, I will have to ask you to be quiet right now."

It was still completely black out with the exception of the sinister moonlight. Sasuke stood in front of the crowd of demons, witches, and mortals before him. A sense of déjà vu washed over him as he recalled only being in a similar position of meaningful authority in Hell. "Let's quickly run through the territories and teams before we all head out."

A projected map of Manhattan lit up behind him. Ino and Anko worked together to sense where this unwelcome entity existed. For better or worse, they deduced it was within Manhattan and not yet across either river East or West. Those gathered paired up and waited for instructions from the former Dark Lord. Their marching orders were simple: find the wretched soul that dared to emerge from the earth and keep it out of trouble until Sasuke could get there. With no wasted words, they dispersed like mist across the island of Manhattan. Some by train, a few by taxi, others by bike and a couple on foot.

"What's wrong, Kakashi?" Anko asked as she watched the unusually quiet city pass by from the back of the taxi. "Not that I'd expect you to be cracking jokes, but you seem tense."

He looked over at his demon lover and knew better than to try to sweep this under the rug. She studied his face with a tenderness reserved exclusively for him. "I don't have a good feeling about this."

She didn't say anything at first, despite his comment being a most obvious statement. She was also unsettled, if not disturbed. For a soul to claw its way back to this world from that which it was meant to be spend eternity requires the utmost supernatural interference. The universe had a delicate balance to maintain, despite the chaotic and sometimes malicious methods it preferred to rely on to achieve such a balance. The slightest kilter in this messy craft always left a mark. Tonight was a jagged slash in that veil of order and that piss-yellow moon was the burning evidence.

"Neither do I."

"Kiba," she called once more, after however many times since Ino had left. This effort produced the same results as before: nothing.

She cradled her cheek in her palm and stared with unblinking eyes at her boyfriend paralyzed by the window. He was responsive a few of the more aggressive attempts she had made, but the last dozen went without notice. Maybe months earlier she would have thought this was something of a condition following a concussion or other brain trauma, but that night her gut told her it was something more sinister, more unnatural. Possibly... not human.

Her phone lit her face with its blue glow as she pulled up her contacts. After a few rings she felt herself release a breath she didn't realize she had been holding.

"Ino?" She whispered. "I was wrong. I need your help."

The group text remained untouched, minus a few check-ins to confirm nothing out of the ordinary had turned up yet. Anko and Kakashi were up in Harlem and getting ready to head potentially further North. Sasuke and Gaara were raking through Lower Manhattan and were coming up fruitless as well. Naruto and Hinata were covering Midtown while Shikamaru and Ino were finishing the Upper East Side and migrating into Central Park.

"Sakura, what's wrong?" Ino asked while staying as vigilant as she could as she followed Shikamaru deeper into the park. When her friend remained vague, she knew it had something to do with that weird boyfriend of hers. "You have my key, go to my apartment and I'll meet you there later."

Shikamaru listened until he heard her sigh, knowing the call had ended. "What's up with her? I thought you checked in."

"I did," They followed a winding path towards the meadow at the heart of the park. The crunching of the snow beneath them was the only sound to be heard. "But it sounds like Kiba might be the problem."

He was about to comment on the troublesome situation Ino was putting herself in when he noticed fresh tracks in the snow coming from a wooded area sloped ahead. "Ino, look."

They rushed to the tracks and Ino immediately crouched down with her coat pooling around her. "Barefoot?" She asked as she took a picture to send to everyone on the hunt.

Her partner looked up towards where the trail was coming from. "Let's quickly see where they're coming from and let Hinata and Naruto meet us to follow where they go if it turns out to be worth it."

Ino stood slack-jawed as he started up the hill. "Worth it? Shikamaru, there are fresh barefoot tracks in the middle of the park."

"It could be a homeless person, you don't for sure if this is what we're looking for."

As they followed the trail, Ino felt a cold churn in her gut and dropped any of the fight she was going to put up. They pushed aside scraping bushes and stiff branches, negotiated careful steps over sharp rocks and terrain designed to be unwalkable to keep pedestrians on the meticulously beaten path. Then, after what felt like a lifetime in itself, their efforts eventually paid off, for better or worse.

"Shikamaru..." The Witch's voice shook.

He didn't respond, they just stood close together as they looked down at hole in the ground before them. An empty grave.

A silent breath left Sakura's lips as she watched her phone revert back to the home screen after she hung up. Her hand ran through her frazzled hair as she turned to the bathroom door, knowing exactly what Kiba was still doing out in apartment but simultaneously clueless as to what was going on with him. She tried to push down the feeling that something wasn't right with them... No, with *him*...

The surprise check-in from Ino was the final straw needed to unravel her denial and she knew she needed to get out of there. With her mind set on going to Ino's she couldn't help but feel she was racing a clock of some sort. Back in the main space, Kiba was stiff as a board by the window. Sakura felt her heart start to race and kept telling herself to keep calm as she started collecting clothes and her bag to bring with her.

She quietly placed it by her feet next to the door. "I-I'm going for a walk, do you need anything?"

To her dreaded surprise, he cocked his head to the side but remained facing the moon. "Escape," she heard him whisper.

Her jaw opened to respond and her heart continued pounding at an alarming rate in her ears, but she wasn't sure if what he said was a request or a warning to her. "Okay, um, I'll-"

His body spun around to face her with a desperate and violent speed. " GO..! "

"Definitely a man, definitely out of our reach for now." Anko shrugged, rising from her kneel beside the snowy tracks.

The group collectively deflated. They had found where their supernatural situation had originated, but there was no sign of where he had gone. There was no choice except to wait for a sign, however terrible that sign may be.

"I'm not giving up!" Naruto declared.

Sasuke snarled in the demon's direction. "No one said we're giving up, Naruto."

"We only have another hour or so until dawn breaks, and at that point we'll need to take a break until night again." Anko reminded them, choosing to ignore the biting tone of the two Hell children beside her. "A fresh body won't risk much exposure even in the daylight, no matter how dim it may be."

"What are we waiting for? Let's get moving!" Naruto shouted once more with a face strained by impatience. Shikamaru sighed and the others seemed to have the same thoughts cross their minds: a desire for bed and an acceptance of their moral duty to follow Naruto's lead. As they began to edge out of the park, Ino grabbed Sasuke's arm.

He looked back at her with some annoyance but let it go when he saw the worry knitting her brow. "Sasuke, I need to tell you something." She waved the others on and Shikamaru intuitively knew what she was holding him back for, so he continued with the others.

"What is it?" He asked with a mixture of sincere concern and limited patience.

She shifted her weight before meeting his eyes. "I had a strange dream... about Sakura." He narrowed his eyes, daring her to finish. "There was a lot of adrenaline, and foliage and, um, blood. But she's okay..!" She added quickly at the end when she saw Sasuke tense at the word 'blood'.

"Where is she?" He growled, towering over her.

"She was home, I was there just before you called me. I don't know if I spooked her or if it was that Kiba was acting strangely, but she called me about a half hour ago and I told her to let herself into my apartment."

He stepped towards her with wide eyes. She barely had room to put her hands on his chest for distance. "What do you mean he was acting strange?"

"He was just staring up out the window at the moon and didn't even turn when I-"

Ino had barely finished her sentence by the time Sasuke was dragging her out of the park to the street. "Sasuke, what are you doing!?" She stumbled behind him and tried without success to get her arm back.

"We need to get to her," he ordered. "Now."

"Hey!" She barked, ripping herself out of his grip. "Tell me what you think is going on!"

Sasuke didn't pause even for a second. He called to her over his shoulder. "Possession, Ino. He's probably possessed and has something to do with this other creature we're hunting."

Ino blinked with disbelief before running to catch up with him. He had already hailed a cab and swung the door open for them both to climb in. After she gave her address, she sat back and stared skeptically at Sasuke for the first few blocks.

"What?" He finally bit out once her annoying glare became unignorable.

"Why are you so certain he's possessed?" She crossed her arms and kept her eyes locked on him. He only spared her a quick but cold glance from the corner of his eye.

"I was the Lord of Hell, Ino, are you questioning me?"

"No, *Dark Lord*, " she answered, sarcasm dripping in her tone. "I just don't understand why you're so certain Sakura's boyfriend is possessed, of all things, when we're out here looking for what is almost certainly a demon-possessed corpse roaming around New York City."

The cab driver met eyes with Sasuke in the rearview mirror but quickly returned his focus to the road. For however many minutes it took them to make it through Midtown and all the way to the Lower East Side they rode in silence. They were gliding through the streets and approaching the Williamsburg Bridge. Its white lights along the cables let the structure glow and seem almost completely unaffected by the disastrous events of the night. They both knew, however, nothing was truly safe. Sasuke looked over at Ino again, but this time without the bitter intent.

"Ino, you know better than most how nearly impossible a summoning is. Gaara and his family are just a few in a million humans that are able to successfully do so. For a demon or otherworldly creature to do the same isn't much easier. So when I learn of not only an unexpected summoning just blocks away from where I am, *and* have reason to believe this serendipitous arrival of Sakura's ex from years ago is not a pure alignment of the stars, I feel entitled to some educated assumptions."

"They were just dreams, Sasuke-" Ino argued.

"They were visions." The car rolled to a stop. Sasuke paid the driver and followed his Witch companion out to her building.

She was just about to put her key in the door when she paused to face Sasuke. "Something still doesn't feel right..." She folded her arms across her chest once again but this time looked at him with apprehension that was unseen before. "What aren't you telling me, Sasuke? Do you know who would be behind this?"

He let his shoulders slacken. She was inevitably going to ask for more and he was only kidding himself if he thought he was going to get much farther without answering. "I do," he started. "His name is Kabuto."

When the heavy bolt locked into place behind her, she knew she should have felt a wave of relief, but her heart was still hammering under her coat. She pressed her forehead to the door and let out a shaky breath with a cringe. ' *Kiba*, ' she mourned his name in her head.

Eventually she turned to the dark and empty apartment and dropped her bag near the couch. Like a ragdoll, she let herself fall back onto the velvet couch. Ino hadn't said when she'd be back and that lack of knowing only added to her restlessness. Almost as quickly as she had laid down she rose to make herself some calming tea. While the water began to rupture into a boil in front of her, Kiba's wild eyes swam in her thoughts. They were unsettlingly familiar and not because they were Kiba's but because they looked like someone else's. Sasuke's.

Tears began to fall from her eyes and she gripped the counter to the point of turning her knuckles white. Her heart was aching and she so desperately wanted to break through her ribs and rip it out just to make it stop. For just a moment she thought her life was mending itself and she was moving beyond her mundane heartache and supernatural encounters, but there she was, right in the middle where both seemed to be on a collision course. She just wanted it to be over. She wanted out. She needed it to just stop, stop, *STOP... !*

It wasn't until the water was boiling over that she realized her heart was raging even harder, that she was hyperventilating, and that she was spiraling into a panic attack. Shaky fingers jerked the stove knob around to turn off the gas before she pressed herself against the counter next to her and slid to the tile. Violent sobs racked her body, shaking the cabinets behind her back. A cry broke from her throat with a desperate yell. Was she cursed? First, Sasuke and then Kiba... Did she commit some sort of cosmic-grade sin? Was God punishing her? Tears continued pouring down her cheeks and her nose leaked down to her chin.

Her head began to grow hazy and she quickly realized she might just faint unless she pulled herself together... just enough to gain control of her breathing at least. As she counted out loud with a trembling voice, her breathing slowed along with her heart rate.

' For now,' she warned herself.

Giving up on the tea, she carefully brought herself to her feet. A bath seemed like a good idea, maybe. She left the light on in the kitchen but didn't bother with any others until she got to the bathroom. While the tub slowly filled, she took the time to close her eyes and focus again on her breathing. Yes, she was facing otherworldly trauma, but she was going to get through this. She didn't truly know what was going on with Kiba, so she-

A loud thump out in the living room pulled her attention back and she spun around with her heart pounding in her ears again. She couldn't feel her legs but they took her to the bathroom doorway to peer into the apartment. Nothing. "Hello?" She waited a few minutes in complete stillness. Nothing moved.

Eventually she gave in and returned to the bathtub to continue filling it. It was probably something in the apartment next door. She took the liberty of lighting a few candles and using some bath salts. She shifted out of her clothes and stepped carefully into the dreamy bath. Her body seemed to melt below the water and she made a mental note to do this at home more often. She felt at peace...

... Until she didn't.

Her heart began to beat with rapid fire speed and her eyes shot open just above the waterline. There was a door creak, and this time she *knew* it could not have been just a neighbor. Should she hide in the bathroom or confront whatever man or beast was creeping in the apartment?

Unfortunately for her, the decision was made for her as the light in the bathroom suddenly flicked off. Glowing eyes stared directly at her from the door.

"Mmhmm, hello darling,"

Her piercing scream echoed from above and both Ino and Sasuke looked up in horror. There was no doubt in either's mind Sakura was in trouble. Ino struggled with the key a second longer than Sasuke was willing to wait so he kicked the metal door in with his inhuman strength.

"Sakura..!" His voice boomed as he practically flew up the stairs. He pictured Kabuto's shit-eating grin and soulless stare, Sakura's trembling form at his mercy. He could feel his canines growing and his unholy transformation partly underway.

When he reached Ino's apartment he saw the handle was missing and the door ajar. Storming inside he quickly rounded the corner to follow the splashing sounds from the bathroom. Once he did, however, he froze. It wasn't Kabuto. It was his own former mentor.

"Let her go, Orochimaru." He ordered the resurrected corpse. The man turned his yellow eyes to Sasuke, not bothering to hide his amusement in the least. Sakura thrashed desperately in the bath, completely naked, her limbs restrained by snakes, and her mouth gagged by a washcloth. Sasuke met her eyes and saw the fear breaking her to her core.

"Hello, Sasuke. Did you miss me?" Orochimaru's long tongue swiped under his chin, his shameless hunger written all over his face.

For a moment Sasuke was submerged in his memories of from eons prior. Before he took the throne as the reigning Satan, there was Orochimaru. While every Satan naturally has an inclination to submit any guilty soul to their due punishment, Orochimaru took a particular pleasure in it. Demons through the ranks were responsible for administering these punishments, but Orochimaru sometimes wandered through the Circles to take over some portions of them himself. As time went on, Sasuke studied and trained under him to take his place so Orochimaru could seek his own personal fulfillment. But he didn't want to leave his place. He felt his title as Satan, the King of Hell, was his personal fulfillment. What new and creative ways could he show the damned just how wrong they were? How far could he push a soul to not just break, but completely crumble apart? It never sat right with the rising demon, but Sasuke didn't feel it was his place to make a judgement on him. Instead, he knew he would just run things differently in his time. When Sasuke realized he couldn't move forward with his own ambitions with Orochimaru refusing to budge, he had no choice but to challenge him for the throne. The battle shook the entire realm. It raged on for years in mortal time, but when Sasuke brought the snake demon crashing to the bottom of the frozen lake in the Ninth Circle, Orochimaru finally resigned to seeking his fulfillment in the mortal realm, leaving his seat as Satan to Sasuke... but not before promising to ensure they would one day cross paths again.

He was brought out of his thoughts by Sakura's muffled shriek as Orochimaru dragged a jagged claw down the center of her chest. Sasuke didn't waste a second more and lunged at him. The intruder swiftly evaded his slashing talons and escaped under and around him into the living room. Sasuke ripped through the bathroom tile after the miss and growled at his own error. His focus then turned to the poor woman in the bathtub he had been missing all these weeks.

"Sakura," he breathed, inevitably taking her whole body in, including the cut that was inflicted on her otherwise unmarred skin. Crouching beside her outside the drained tub he examined her for any wounds or bruises. There were none, but she was shaking, completely paralyzed. Sasuke began whispering in what Sakura would have then described as tongues and moments later the snakes loosened their grip and slithered out of the tub. He pulled the washcloth from her mouth and covered her with a towel.

"Are you okay?" He asked, his eyes demonic but sincere. Sasuke pulled himself away when she meekly shook her head that she was fine. She wanted to say something, to tell him how relieved she was to see him, but couldn't coax a word from herself. A deafening crash from outside the bathroom followed by Ino's scream filled the air.

Sasuke ran out into the living room and upon seeing the latest layer to be peeled back on this shit show called on his Satanic form to envelope him entirely. Webbed hands ruptured from his back as demented wings and his face morphed into something that could only be described as a vision from a night terror. Ino was pressing herself flat against the farthest wall from him and not one, but the two demonic creatures that had broken into her home.

"Where is she?" The newest intruder barked at Orochimaru, his upper body patchy with rough fur and teeth more feral than Sasuke's. His eyes were murderous and bloodshot, drilling into Orochimaru as he held him on the floor amongst the crumbled remains of the now-broken coffee table.

The pale stranger smiled maniacally, reeking with condescension. "Oh, you poor mess of creature. You think I have her?" He lifted his head from the floor, his hair wet behind his head with black blood that oozed into the rug underneath him. "It's Sasuke who has done unspeakable things to that girl in the tub."

The wolfish man jerked his head in Sasuke's direction. At first his eyes shook with shock as he took in this devilman's form, but almost

immediately sank into his unhinged rage and bared his canines. "You're Sasuke," he spat with malice. "I'm going to kill you!"

He charged at Sasuke with lightning speed, but missed when the ancient demon dodged him gracefully. As he twisted away, he grabbed a furry shoulder and pulled him away from the bathroom where Sakura was hiding.

"Are you Kiba?" Sasuke asked him as he stumbled back.

"Look out!" Ino cried out as Orochimaru lunged at the two fighters.

They turned just as Sasuke's former mentor summoned a barrage of giant serpents from his throat, a technique Orochimaru had taught Sasuke ages ago when he first took him on as a tutee. Sasuke unleashed his own attack from within, a burst of flames from his own mouth that not only incinerated the snakes but caught Orochimaru's right side.

Ino gasped upon witnessing such a horrific exchange. Pushing past the initial panic, she held her phone to her face as she called Shikamaru. "They're here, tell everyone to hurry!"

"Two can play at this game, Sasuke my dear!" Orochimaru turned his head towards the blonde and erupted with his own flames. Sasuke spread his featherless wings to block Ino from the assault, but the demon kept the stream of fire going as he changed his focus to the rest of the apartment and furniture.

The air was starting to fill with smoke and rising flames. The smoke alarms sounded and the sprinklers kicked in, but did nothing to combat the hellish flames the devil had created. Despite his burning wounds, Orochimaru was laughing. Other residents in the building began shouting 'fire!' as the hall began to fill with smoke. The stairwell was soon saturated with clambering footsteps as they all evacuated.

"What a wonderful reunion this has been," Orochimaru cackled. "But the games must end now."

The wolfman Sasuke was still assuming to be Kiba leaped from just behind him at Orochimaru, but was sent straight to the floor by the snake summoner's fist. He tried to get up but could only cough up blood in front of him. Orochimaru barely dignified him with a glance.

"Sasuke, my dear," Orochimaru cooed. "There is a decision I need you to make," He walked towards him and stopped with his foot pressed into the back of the injured mutt he had taken down in a single move. "And you!" He yelled, calling to Ino as she was trying to sneak to the bathroom Sakura was in. He summoned yet another snake from his burning sleeve and it wrapped around Ino's legs, bringing her to the floor with a painful thump.

"Now then," he continued as Sasuke grit his teeth. "I need you to make a decision. Either you will help me take over this guilt-ridden mortal world or I'll be forced to send you back to Hell to serve me there."

Sasuke felt his own eyes widen. "What?"

The flames spread farther across the apartment and Ino began sweating from behind Sasuke. She didn't know who this demon was, but she knew he was serious enough that Sasuke, Satan himself, was holding off on an attack. Still, if they didn't make some moves soon, she and Sakura would certainly die in the fire.

"It was quite fulfilling, helping you dominate the Circle so you could take over as Satan after me. But while I had my fun up here, I realized my truest desire was not ascend in Hell but to *expand* it." A wicked smile spread across his face. "Kabuto finally found me as I was trudging my way back after my expiration as a mortal and helped me regain most of my former glory to send me once again to this world to begin. The only problem I could foresee myself running into is you." He placed his foot on the fallen creature's throat, causing him to choke a bit.

Sasuke maintained an unphased expression on his face. "So you think my options are to either help you take over this mortal world, or go back to Hell? To be ruled by Kabuto and you?" Sasuke couldn't help but picture the slave work he would inevitably be tasked with if he were to be sent back under such terms.

"I'm so glad you understand, now-"

"No." Sasuke interrupted.

Ino watched from behind as the fingered wings flexed on Sasuke's back and he stood straighter with a dark aura permeating off of him in waves. A shiver ran down her spine. It was just like the one she felt when she first shook hands with Sasuke the night Gaara introduced them.

"No..?" Orochimaru repeated back, his amusement absent from his voice.

It was then that the window exploded inward and an ambush in the form of another demon came crashing on top of Orochimaru. He was taken down under the sheer force that was suddenly upon him and even cracked the wall his back made contact with.

"We're sending you back to Hell, believe it!" Naruto roared, his demon self fully on display. Orochimaru spat up more black blood. Naruto kept his merciless grip tight on his throat. The snake demon wasn't grinning like when he was before and Sasuke knew his resurrected semi-mortal form had some clear limitations. He had underestimated Sasuke yet again.

"How!? How are you still able to transform? You found your fulfillment, this shouldn't be possible..!" Orochimaru yelled.

Naruto gave him a toothy grin. "There are some benefits to knowing the Witches and Summoners of this world, bastard."

Anko came up through the front door a moment later, her body only half morphed into her former self. She scanned the room and took inventory of those she recognized and the one creature she did not, who was lying wounded in the middle of the room.

"I need you to get Ino and Sakura out of here," Sasuke yelled at Anko. "You're not in full form so I think it'll be less damaging for Sakura to see you."

She looked around for Sakura for a second before Sasuke gestured towards the bathroom behind him. Without a second wasted, she pivoted and swiftly spoke in tongues to the snake trapping Ino and then ran to the bathroom to find the shaking Sakura wrapped in towels in the tub.

"Anko!" She cried through the towel over her mouth. Despite being partially transformed, Anko's face was mostly human and not nearly as horrifying as the others currently. The demon hushed and scooped her up so she could ensure their escape from the chaos outside. Nearby fire truck sirens could be heard over the screaming alarms as they approached.

Ino was right behind her. "There's a fire escape in my room right next door!"

Together Anko and Ino raced with Sakura out and into Ino's room. Sakura gasped behind the towel as she saw the nightmarish scene that had unfolded, including Naruto and Sasuke in demonic forms. From behind Sakura could only focus on Sasuke's morbid wings. As she was pulled into Ino's room, she caught the side of his face and felt some shock and the sense of not fear, but relief that washed over her then.

There were two other demons to note. She recognized the terrifying man Naruto had ruthlessly pinned into the wall, but couldn't see the face of the creature on the ground. His tattered clothing looked familiar though... Could it be..?

As the women ran, Orochimaru's sharp eye caught them and he made one last summoning. A supernaturally sized black serpent slithered from his charred garb and darted after the women. Sasuke was unable to catch it.

"Anko, he sent a summoning!" Sasuke yelled after them.

Turning back to Orochimaru, he knew he couldn't leave Naruto alone with him, even in his broken state. "You underestimated us, you piece of shit." Naruto spat.

"As much as I want to relive the glory days and savor your demise before returning you to Hell, you've given us little time to do so." Sasuke explained, his voice devoid of any emotion.

"Yes, because those humans are just so important and irreplaceable," Orochimaru spat.

"Exactly," Sasuke smirked. "Which is why this is goodbye." And with that, Sasuke grabbed his old mentor's head and twisted it without any mercy until his neck snapped and his soul was sent without any doubt back to Hell.

There was no time to waste, and at this point the apartment was almost entirely engulfed by the flames. "Grab him," Sasuke instructed Naruto, pointing to the wounded wolf man on the floor.

He stormed ahead into Ino's bedroom and through the thick smoke saw the serpent cornering the three of them. Sakura's green eyes desperately met his across the room. As skilled as Anko was, this hellish creature was specifically summoned for its unreal speed enhanced by the curses of Hell. Being who he was, Sasuke knew he was faster. Before any of them could blink, he had the beast pinned to the floor boards and its head severed by his claws.

"Let's go!" Anko shouted, ushering Ino out the open window while shouldering Sakura in her bundle of towels.

"You're going to be alright," Sasuke assured Sakura as she silently lingered under his gaze. She felt her heart lurch and find her way into his arms instead of Anko's. Despite not having her unspoken way, she trusted his word. He would make sure she was taken care of.

"Come on," Anko interrupted, tugging on Sakura to leave. Once Sasuke saw they had started their descent down the fire escape ladder, he turned to Naruto who was carrying the wolf man. Not wanting to go out towards the street where the public was, they busted open the second window on the connecting wall that faced the alleyway.

"I can take him and fly out," Sasuke reasoned, grabbing the half-conscious creature from Naruto's arm. "You can climb up to the roof and make a run for it until you can change back."

"Where are you going to take him?" Naruto asked, stealing a glimpse at the growing crowd outside.

"Hn... There's a construction site a few blocks away. Now go."

Naruto shot him a quick glare but did as he was told to escape. Once he was gone, Sasuke secured the man he was still assuming to be Sakura's boyfriend before leaping out the window to fly away. Morning light was filtering into the alleyway but no one saw them. They were all instead focused on the incineration of the building many of them had called 'home'.

"Make yourselves comfortable," Kakashi gestured for the group to collect inside. "I'll go grab some sheets for the pull out couch. I think we all need some rest."

As they filtered in, Sakura stood there feeling completely out of place in Shikamaru's coat and the sweatpants the hospital gave her. Once they had made their way to the ground level off the fire escape, she and Ino were taken to the hospital for medical cut on her chest was

patched over with a thin bandage and they were administered oxygen to help with the smoke inhalation. Anko refused care all together, for obvious reasons, but met them at the hospital with Kakashi, Shikamaru and Hinata. Naruto met them outside after finding his way home to change.

They ended up at Anko and Kakashi's apartment to recover from the early morning events and debrief on exactly what had happened. Despite the importance of what was being said, Sakura could only think about one thing, which was Sasuke.

Her heart clenched painfully as she recalled the look on his face when he found her in the bathtub. She wanted nothing more than to find him and apologize for disappearing on him and letting her fear and emotions keep her away. Yes, she needed to work through things after what he had revealed to her, but that didn't change the fact that he seemed to really care for her... and she left, just like Kiba had done to her.

"Sakura?" She was pulled from her thoughts and looked up at Kakashi who had called her name.

"Yes?" She answered, eyes wide and oblivious to what was being discussed.

"Did you want any tea?" He asked with a sympathetic crinkle in his eye.

"Oh," She answered, sitting back into the couch. "That would be nice. But, um..." Everyone looked at her, causing a flush to form. "Is Sasuke coming back?"

"Ugh..." He groaned, his hand slowly finding his aching head. Every part of his body seemed to be on fire and he could barely bring himself to open his eyes. "Sakura?" His voice croaked.

"Sakura is safe." A voice nearby announced.

Suddenly everything came back to him. The moon, the transformation, Sakura's distressed energy, the fight.... *the demons...* !

"Hn. Don't hurt yourself, lay back down," the voice sounded again. Despite being told to lay down, he tried to up through gritted teeth, but his arms were tied behind his back and made it impossible to do so in his current state of exhaustion.

Looking around, he could tell he was in some sort of unfinished building. There were just concrete floors and columns, nothing else. From what he could tell, it was early in the morning, so it couldn't have been that long ago that he was in that apartment building. Daylight was coming through the open windows, but it seemed they were high enough from the street that it was pretty quiet. He stiffened as footsteps echoed nearby. A man stepped out from around one of the columns with a dark look in his eyes that he recognized from earlier. One of the devilmen he fought. Sasuke.

"You're Sasuke." He stated, still puzzling together what he knew.

"And you must be Kiba." Sasuke deadpanned, his hands jammed into his ruined pants.

"Where did you bring me?" He asked slowly. The devilman appeared all too human in front of him but carried some healing burns across his bare torso.

"Hn," Sasuke grunted as he leaned on a column. "I asked you a question first."

Kiba bristled and narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, that's me. What do you want with me? Where is Sakura?"

"That's a lot of questions for someone who isn't in much of a position to be calling the shots."

Sasuke held a measured expression despite his annoyance bubbling under the surface. This kid didn't seem very out of the ordinary to him, but he knew he had shapeshifting abilities. He needed to get to the bottom of where he was from, why he was there, and if he needed to be... dealt with.

"Just tell me she's okay," he begged Sasuke with a determined stare. Sasuke sighed and nodded.

"I made sure she was taken somewhere safe."

Kiba visibly relaxed for a moment before continuing. "What about that other guy, the attacker?"

"I took care of him," Sasuke responded with a short tone and walked to stand directly in front of Kiba with his boots just an inch from his face. "No more questions from you. Tell me how you became a shifter."

He stared into his beer with disdain, his bright and charismatic self nowhere in sight. He knew he should have been on his way home at least an hour ago, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the bar. There was a graduation party downtown at someone's house with a deck and grill, but he couldn't care less. The idea of seeing all these people and talking again and again about what they would be doing in the future... He took a heavy chug of his beer to finish it and raised his hand to ask for another.

"I'll have the same," someone said beside him.

The bar was mostly empty, so there was no real reason for someone to sit so close to him unless they wanted something from him and he was not in the mood in the slightest.

"Thinking about running away?" The man asked.

Kiba cracked a grin and took a sip of his refilled IPA. "I don't run from anything."

"Hm," he mused. "Then where are you looking to run to?"

"What do you-" Kiba's sentence caught in his throat when he turned to look to the man next to him. His red eyes caught him off guard and something deep inside told him they weren't contacts. "Um, what do you want?"

"That was really what I'm trying to ask you. What is it that you want, Kiba?" The man held Kiba's gaze without so much as a blink and he found himself unable to look away.

"How do you know my name?"

"Tell me what you want."

Before he could even consider the question in his mind, the words were already falling past his lips. "I want to get away from everything here and have some space for a while to figure out what I want."

The man finally blinked and turned to his own beer, the same as his. "I see." After taking a slow sip he looked at Kiba from the corner of his eye and said, "Let's make a deal, then."

The graduating senior felt his heart rate pick up but leaned in, ignoring the alarm bells going off in his mind. "I'm listening."

"I'll help you get away for a bit so you can regroup, and when the time comes I'll just ask you to make a visit for me."

Kiba narrowed his eyes. "Are you asking me to run drugs for you?"

He scoffed, finding the accusation sincerely comical. "Not at all. I just need you to check on someone for me."

Still not truly understanding but no less interested, Kiba leaned back in consideration. "How would this work? Is there a program or something you're involved with?"

"It's not important," the man stated, his hands folded neatly on the bar. "Do we have a deal?"

Kiba shrugged. "Sure," He chuckled and reached out to shake the man's hand suddenly in front of him. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Itachi."

Sasuke growled out of frustration and then shouted as he punched a hole straight through the column next to him. How could he be so stupid to have not realized Itachi had something to do with this?

"So you blindly agreed to eventually do Itachi's bidding, which was to visit Sakura, after he fulfilled his part of the deal?" He bit out, pacing across the empty floor.

"I was desperate! And how was I supposed to know I was talking to some form of Satan?" Kiba shouted, his voice cracking with anger. "He made me into some werewolf-

"Moon shifter."

"- *Moon shifter*, which forced me to go live in the fucking woods so I wouldn't kill anyone!"

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose to center himself. Kiba was clearly emotional over the whole exchange and he was personally not feeling his best self to deal with this either. Regardless, he needed to find out what the fuck Itachi was up to so he could put a stop to it before anything worse happened.

"He took my soul, Sasuke."

The devilman stopped dead in his tracks. "What did you just say?"

Kiba's eyes glazed over with clear shame and looked down into his chest. "He said as a fee he would take my soul. I don't know what I was thinking, I-

" *You fucking idiot!* " Sasuke shouted, his voice booming so loud Kiba cringed. He charged towards the cowering man and lifted him by his hair. "Do you know what you've done?"

Kiba shook his head violently, witnessing that dreaded red pool into Sasuke's eyes. "When you die," Sasuke grit out, "you will have no choice but to go where your soul is being stored... in Hell."

End scene! How are we feeling? Better, worse? We have some answers behind Kiba's seemingly random reappearance, witnessed two Satans battle it out in a poorly executed scheme to infiltrate the human world AND Sakura is starting to see Sasuke beyond his devilish side. I'm hoping to get the next chapter rolling faster than this one, so every bit of feedback helps here! Thanks for reading and reviewing!

Chapter 13

Happiest of Tuesdays to you all. I tried to keep the momentum going on my end and was able to crank this chapter out (lucky 13) a lot easier than some others. I will admit, I didn't proofread this as well as I probably should have (not that I have necessarily done so previously...), but I felt any errors would be negligible at this point after combing through it once or twice.

Anyway, we follow our friends in this chapter just after the apartment fire and Orochimaru's battle with Sasuke, Kiba and Naruto. If you remember from the end of the last chapter, they ended up making their way to Kakashi and Anko's place to recover. Let's see how they all shape up..!

CH 13

Everything about Anko and Kakashi's apartment was soft, to the point of feeling unreal. Sakura looked around at the bamboo coffee table, linen throw pillows, the smiling faces framed on the wall... How could this be the same world where such painfully harsh creatures exist? Her eyes closed, just for a moment, but that was all it took to recall the sharp claws, wet fangs and hard flesh. When she opened them she saw Naruto cradling Hinata's head in his lap. His warm lashes shaded the calm oceans in his eyes as he combed his fingers delicately through her silk locks. No, she reasoned with herself, they weren't any worse than any of the atrocities born of human flesh and blood. They just had a different way of expressing their darkness. For a moment she wondered which was more dangerous.

A yawn broke free from deep inside her just to remind her of how tired she was. It was hopeless to try to sleep, at least for the time being. Her mind refused to slow down and ran her through the past few hours on loop without any sign of slowing down anytime soon.

When Sakura politely declined Anko's offering of her bed to take a nap in, Ino pulled Shikamaru in with her instead to catch some sleep. She was weighted by the loss of her apartment and needed some time to come to terms with this. Despite the tragic outcome of the demonic events, Sakura preferred to be out in the living room with company in that moment over being alone in a quiet room with her thoughts. At least on the couch there were distractions to soften those edges.

"Have some tea," A steaming mug hovered just below her nose and when Sakura looked up she saw it was Kakashi offering it to her with a gentle smile. "The chamomile will calm your nerves a bit. I also have whisky over there if you'd prefer that."

She laughed and took the mug from his hand before he sat next to her on the couch. Anko was in the kitchen preparing a soup for later and the apartment was already fragrant with caramelizing onions and butter. Sakura felt Kakashi looking at her and decided to acknowledge the shameless staring.

"It gets easier," he assured her. The skeptic in her wanted to scoff at him, but something inside her truly believed him.

"I need it to be. This is just so hard..." He watched her eyes glaze over as she went back to that nightmare in Ino's bathroom, the snakes rendering her completely vulnerable to the horrible demon that attacked her.

Gaara sat in the unusually deep window sill within earshot. He turned away, not wanting to involve himself in the girl's emotions. Kakashi paid him only a glance before bringing his attention back to Sakura.

"I've known him for quite some years at this point, and I can tell you quite honestly I always knew Sasuke had a good heart... But seeing him struggle to handle himself around you must have really humbled him. He has changed no doubt for the better because of you."

Sakura flushed. "I'm actually-"

The door throbbed with a few sobering knocks and everyone's heads turned to see who was waiting. The exhausted medic felt the heat on her face magnify when she saw not only Sasuke, but Kiba as well walk into the apartment.

"What..?" She gasped under her breath.

It was already strange enough that she felt like she was witnessing her two worlds collide, but something was definitely off-kilter. Sasuke's expression felt unfamiliar and distant, much like when she first met him that fated night at Ino's apartment. Kiba looked drained and unfocused, his mind clearly elsewhere but certainly nowhere good.

'And those clothes,' she noted. He was wearing a black sweater under a particularly nice coat, both without a question outside of his price range... also not his style. Her eyes darted to the devil beside him and she realized those clothes were not Kiba's, but Sasuke's.

"Kiba," she shot up but didn't move after that. It was a reflex on her part to go to him, her beacon of comfort. But after everything she had just gone through, including his petrifying outburst, she wasn't sure what to do.

Sasuke set his lips into a thin line, pushing down the jealousy bubbling in response to the acknowledgement the dog beside him was getting. He watched her brow crease with concern and wondered if she even for a second worried for him. Kiba stiffened when she said his name and he couldn't help but wonder why.

"Hey, Sak," Kiba forced some levity into his voice but was fooling no one. "Crazy night, huh?"

She folded her arms over her chest as though to physically protect herself from whatever awful discussion was to follow. She knew Kiba had something to do with the demon that attacked her and was

determined to get it all out in the open right then and there, no matter the cost.

"What's going on, Kiba? Why are you wearing Sasuke's clothes?" Her voice was louder than she meant it to be, but she was beyond worrying about being considerate. She was tired and deserved answers.

He opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated to answer the loaded question. Gaara sighed before chiming in. "He knows, Sakura."

Her eyes widened despite her intuition telling her she already knew he must have. Her weight shifted to one side and she looked down at Kakashi for direction but couldn't read his face. Next she turned to Naruto and was immediately struck by the guilt smeared all over him. *'So did everyone but me know?'* she thought to herself.

"Tell me what the hell is going on. Someone..!" She shouted.

Her boyfriend desperately approached her and enveloped her hands in his own to soothe her. "I want to tell you everything, Sak. But you need to understand why I didn't tell you outright, okay?"

She nodded, her heart aching once again. "Just tell me."

He gestured for her to sit back down and he brought himself to his knees in front of her. She took a deep breath and saw him for what felt like the first time since he had come to New York to her. Sasuke stood back against the wall watching this all unfold with his dark eyes. A bitter taste filled his mouth as he observed this man cursed with monstrous abilities literally crawl on his knees before this girl. He wanted so badly to mock him in that moment, but knew that would only render him to be a hypocrite. As much as he hated to admit it, he sympathized with Kiba. It wasn't all that long ago he had been feeling exactly the same desperate panic at the thought of losing Sakura after Karin had sent her the photos and videos of him their last time having sex in his demon form. He remembered the way his heart had been hammering when he snuck into Ino's room

where Sakura was hiding out. He had wanted to give her space, but he couldn't help himself. The threat was too much.

" Sakura," His voice sounded a little strained and when he looked back at her this time, she could see the faint crease on his brow.

He walked back to where she was and stood so close she had to force her head all the way back to look up at him. For a second, he stayed just like that and looked down at her unblinking. She could tell he was searching not just her, but himself in that moment for answers.

" I would give you pleasure in whatever form or through whatever means you desired." She felt her breath hitch not just at his words but when he brought himself down to his knees in front of her. His face was so close she could count his eyelashes if she had the focus to do so.

" Sakura," He breathed, "I would do anything for that opportunity, even if it meant letting you dominate me ."

Yes, he had been talking about sex, but they both knew it meant so much more than that. He was willing to render himself completely vulnerable to her if that meant having her with him in his life. He reeled himself back to Anko and Kakashi's apartment and the all-too-familiar groveling before him.

"You've always been so ambitious, Sak. In school when we were dating, you always were the one to make plans, put pins in the map, set up your savings and job interviews... And I couldn't even decide if I wanted to graduate to begin with." Kiba let out a shaky breath then. "So when I was approached by this guy who was offering me this unreal chance to just get away from it all and figure myself out, I couldn't say no."

He forced a dry chuckle and Sakura felt her stomach twist. "I felt like I had control over my life for the first time. Everything seemed so much more alive and energizing. You remember when I started

getting back into hiking again?" She nodded and without knowing why, her eyes began to water. For a split second she saw that boyish, carefree grin on his face, but it quickly dissipated.

"There was a night soon after that the sky was particularly clear and I remember falling completely in awe before the moon. It was incredible..." He let go of her hands and lowered his eyes to his lap. "And that's when I found out the caveat to this new lease on life. I was transforming into a monster, like a werewolf. I couldn't control myself, and wanted to just run away more than ever."

SMACK!

Hot tears rolled down her face as he held his scolding cheek. "Why didn't you talk to me? I could have helped you!"

"I had been turned into a fucking beast, Sakura! I could have killed you!"

"You idiot!" She yelled in his face. "I mean before that, when you were feeling so lost! You were supposed to trust me, and instead you go and tell some stranger everything to make a deal with the Devil?"

"What's going on in here?" Ino barked, emerging from the bedroom. Her eyelids were swollen from her own distress over the apartment fire. When she took inventory of everyone in the room, her mind quickly put together what was most likely being discussed.

Suddenly Sakura audibly gasped and turned to Sasuke. "Did you do this to him?"

His eyes burned straight into hers with what she could only describe as pure disgust. He remained slouched against the wall with his arms crossed. "You think I'd make such a cheap deal as that?"

She glared back at him. "If not you, then who?"

Sasuke scowled and closed his eyes for a moment. "Itachi," He growled. "My brother."

It wasn't just Sakura who suddenly looked to be in complete shock. Everyone else except Kiba became wide-eyed and confused.

"Your... brother?" She repeated back.

"What kind of bullshit trick is that!? Shouldn't he be long dead and rotten?" Naruto shouted from the side.

"No shit. He was granted his mortal life after he passed his title to Orochimaru." Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose, not at all interested in breaking this explanation down for the room.

"Orochimaru?" Sakura asked after her temper simmered down.

Sasuke looked over at her again but this time with a softened but remorseful eye. "He was who attacked you this morning. He was my predecessor in Hell."

Sakura sat back down and Ino brought herself deeper into the room to sit between Sakura and Kakashi. "So the Satan who trained you?" The Witch clarified. Sasuke nodded. "And your brother was the Satan before *him*?" He nodded again.

"This makes no sense, then. He would have been sent to live his human life centuries ago and died well before any of us were born. How did he and Kiba meet?" Gaara chimed in with crossed arms.

"It's simple," Anko spoke as she emerged from the kitchen. She slung an arm over Sasuke's shoulders and earned herself a glare from the devilman. "He didn't die. He had supernatural help."

Ino and Hinata shared a worrisome glance and just before Sakura could ask once again what the hell was going on, Ino grabbed her hand. "She means a Witch helped him."

Kiba reached for Sakura's other hand, pulling her attention to him. He meant to bring her back to him so he could rectify the wrongs, but her wheels were still turning and she was cataloguing everything from the fight. "Was that you I saw on the ground this morning during the fight? Is that why you and Sasuke came in together just now?"

"He came after you to protect you." Sasuke interjected, his voice deadly even.

He watched as Sakura's shoulders dropped from their tense locked state at her neck. The mutt brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it, calling bile to the top of Sasuke's throat. Everything burned. But he did nothing.

At least in that moment.

And not for the days, nor the chilling winter weeks that followed. He just stood by, from a distance, and let her be happy.

March

"I can't believe Neji's taking this so seriously," Sakura panted as she trotted to a stop at the end of the bridge pathway. Tenten stopped a few feet ahead of her thanks to an extra pep in her step.

"Me either, I feel so spoiled!" She gushed.

The pair walked side by side down to the street and savored the moment they caught their breaths. It was only slightly warmer than the bitter month of February, but the sun was out, so Tenten deemed it a good time to start taking their runs to the bridges. The icy winds kept the pedestrian path clear, but Sakura interpreted that as a sign they shouldn't be running there at all. She made a note to offer another running option for next time... at least until the temperature picked up another ten degrees.

While Sakura was rekindling her romance and trust with Kiba, Tenten had been stacking log after log in the burning fireplace of her relationship with Neji. Her birthday was just a day away and he had been planning a surprise party for her. When Sakura caught wind of his planning through Hinata, she immediately shut it down, warning him of her violent disdain for surprises... especially surprises involving crowds. Neji, stubborn as always, compromised and waited until a week before her birthday to let her know what he had planned. A fair amount of notice, just the right amount of surprise.

"Is Kiba coming?" The beaming athlete asked, opening her jacket for some fresh air.

Sakura knew the question would eventually come up, but it still brought a good amount of shame. "He's going to be away, actually."

Tenten hummed to herself. "For a freelancer he sure travels a lot."

The pink haired practitioner shrugged and changed the subject as she always did. "I'm going to head home. I have to get my laundry taken care of or I'll be stuck going commando tomorrow. I'll see you tomorrow?"

Tenten blinked a few times before responding. "Oh, okay, yeah. See you then!"

Turning the corner, Sakura let her face fall with the disappointment she had been masking. The subway stairs brought relief from the bitter wind on the street and she suddenly felt her exhaustion hit her like a wall. She did have to do laundry, but not as urgently as she made it seem. A nap was more accurately at the top of her priority list.

After the incident at Ino's, Kiba swore to make up his time away to her. He cooked for her when she came home from work exhausted, brought her laughs with the dumbest of his jokes, and made sure they had great sex. And by great, she would define it as... a lot. Both

in the frequency and the urgency he prescribed to it, she found it harder and harder to keep up.

When the moon was close to its fullness or when the sky was forecasted to be particularly clear, he had to make a run for it. It was a gamble as to whether the beast in him would force its way to the surface on its own or not, but Kiba learned that by regularly coaxing it out during the full moons he reduced the inner howls and scraping for escape without notice. This meant for days on end Kiba would be gone, at least half a day of travel out of the city and then a few days in the woods, then another half day of traveling back. When he came back, he had other needs he desperately needed to satisfy. One of those needs was sex. It took some time for him to come down from his animalistic transformation, which meant sometimes he was unintentionally a little too rough. It was like having sex for the first time as a young teen again. A little awkward, extremely passionate, and not always as steamy as imagined.

"You really need to start using lube," Ino chastised her when she offered to examine Sakura after a particularly uncomfortable night with Kiba. "You've got some micro-tears in here that could easily be avoided."

And Ino was right. The lube did help when she couldn't get wet enough in time, or even wet at all. There were occasional days when she decided to just bite the bullet and slathered herself in lieu of even bothering to get herself aroused.

But Kiba was wonderful and he was worth it. She would figure this out and they were going to make it work. It was fate that they had been brought back together. She was going to be his forever.

"I want to do something special for you tonight," Kiba declared loudly as she was walking out of the shower.

She grinned and padded her way to where he was stretched on her couch. "Oh yeah?"

He let his eyes slowly take her towel-clad form in as she stood in front of him. "Yeah, let's go get dinner at that Thai place you love and I'll take you to see that weird documentary you've been blabbing about."

Her grin softened to a half smile. "You're leaving tomorrow, right?"

Kiba gently pulled her to the couch and sat up to make room next to him. "I'm going to head out tonight after the movies."

She pulled back a little stunned and then scanned to the wall to find the lunar calendar they pinned up. He squeezed her hand and she looked back with a tightly furrowed brow. The moon wasn't going to be bothersome until tomorrow, why was he leaving early?

"He's getting restless," he said as he referred to the animal inside of him. "It's something about the seasons getting close to changing." He gave her knuckles, still damp from the shower, a delicate kiss. "I can't risk something happening."

"I know," she muttered. "I just miss you."

His bright smile returned and he grabbed her chin to pull her into a loving kiss that tasted of study dates during finals and salty ocean breezes over the West Coast sunrise. "I'd rather you miss me than tire of me." She blinked away any sour feelings and he wiggled his eyebrows the way he knew she'd giggle at. "Come on, get dressed and you can show me how much you've missed those thai noodles."

They followed their choreographed ritual like they had quickly learned to adopt. There was the arm-in-arm stroll to the train, the nuzzling all the way to their stop, the teasing jokes over the table and then soda-sharing at the movies. Eventually they made their way home and were left standing speechless in the middle of the apartment, a single block of moonlight painting the edge. She tried to not look at it but couldn't help but feel as though it was slowly stalking them until would inevitably steal him away.

His warm hand caressed her stomach as he stood tall behind her. She stiffened, her mind not in the space she'd need it to be to make *it* happen that night. "Kiba," she whispered as she pulled his hand away from her shirt.

"You okay?" He asked, leaning over her shoulder with concern.

"I'm just really tired, Kiba..." She threw on a lopsided smile and leaned back into his hard chest that she knew would always catch her.

He kissed her forehead and unraveled himself from around her. Once she had readied herself for bed, she found him lying on top of the covers in his travel outfit she knew he'd be storing somewhere in the woods upstate for his return. She crawled up beside him and stretched out.

"Aren't you going?" She asked him.

He pulled her against him before answering. "I just want to spoon you a bit before I do. You know how much I miss sleeping next to you out there."

She welcomed the embrace and let her eyes drift shut. His warmth soaked into her back and her feet intertwined with his calves. And then the hand returned, as it usually did, across her stomach and wanting more...

Her heart ached for him, which was what she let justify nights like those. He was suffering, so the least she could do was physically comfort him before his lonesome trek out of the city. If all the situation was asking from her was a little soreness that always went away in time, she would happily (or just willingly) do it again and again to make his life a little more bearable.

Kiba would eventually hold her for a few moments after, stroking her hair or her cheek, whispering promises of more thai dinners and movie snack binges. Those nights sometimes were bookended by a

bath if she had the energy after he was gone, but most of the time she would just close her eyes and let a dreamless sleep take her in. Every once in a while, however, they weren't dreamless. Under the watch of the roundest moons, she dreamt of *him* .

It was never anything particularly scandalous. She would see him in the endless darkness of her subconscious, a cold cave only then illuminated by the warm glow of the rubies in his eyes. No matter how many blankets she cocooned herself in, she would always wake up cold the next morning.

When Tenten's birthday rolled around, she decided to indulge in some wine she had sitting on the far back of her counter while she got ready. It would be that same damned wine she would later blame for looking past the sweater dress she had originally picked out to wear in favor of a short sleeved bodysuit with a daring 'V' that framed her entire sternum. A long but curve-hugging skirt slid perfectly on top and paired without question with her chunky heels. As she looked back at herself in the mirror, she couldn't help but smile and admire the sex appeal she was putting out for herself in her all-black ansamble. Wine included.

Neji had picked a bar that was always a win with large groups like theirs. It also didn't hurt that they were willing to hold tables for them without a minimum, not that there was a concern they wouldn't be able to reach one if that were the case. It was a beer garden complete with long picnic tables, warm string lights draped from overhanging trees, and much appreciated heat lamps. There was a bar outside for all their beers on tap and another bar inside for beer and everything else you could expect or need.

"Well check this hottie out," Tenten greeted Sakura as she approached the cluster of tables Neji had claimed. The majority of those that were gathered were Tenten's friends that she didn't quite know, but she did spot Ino and Shikamaru. After the fire, Tenten let Ino know about a two-bedroom apartment in her building that was looking for a tenant, so she and Hinata jumped on it.

Sakura blushed and gave her a friend a tight squeeze. "Happy birthday, Tenten."

Ino waved Sakura over and passed her a glass of golden beer. "When the wolf's away, am I right, Shika?" The blonde teased, wiggling some suggestive eyebrows at her friend and not even earning a glance of acknowledgement from her boyfriend.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ino, but I'll take the compliment." She took a chug of the beer and wiped the foam that caught above her lip.

"So you didn't get all cute and sexy for a particular devil tonight?" Ino asked as she topped off Sakura's glass.

"No," Sakura started as she sat down across from the tipsy blonde. "And please don't keep filling my glass like that. I eventually need to find my way home."

"You don't have your guide dog around to bring you back?" Sakura looked up to see it was the very devil they had been talking about standing right behind her.

"When did you get here?" Sakura asked, trying to distract herself from how good he looked in his leather jacket and unassuming black shirt underneath.

"I came with that drunk pair in front of you and was at the bar getting a few more pitchers to go around." She turned her body to see that he was in fact carrying two overflowing pitchers before he leaned around her to put them down. As he did, she was caught in his cologne and straightened her back to pull herself out. "Do you mind if I sit next to you?"

She shook her head and he kicked a leg around the bench so he was straddling it and facing her straight on. It was a bit intimidating so she pulled her chunky cardigan around her a little tighter. She did not miss his eyes making a quick lap down her body.

"I still unsettle you." He observed with an onyx stare.

Sakura sent him a glare from the corner of her eye and decided to take another sip of beer instead of answering him. He was the Devil, of course he unsettled her.

"I'm going to go chat with Tenten, I'll catch you guys later." Sakura announced as she pulled herself out from the table.

It was Shikamaru that leaned in after she left. "What did you do?"

Sasuke's eyes had never left her as she walked across the venue, not even slowing when she walked past the birthday girl. He got up and grabbed his beer. "Nothing yet."

The couple still at the table shrugged and clinked their glasses together before knocking back their contents. The night was young, after all, and they honestly were down to let Satan take the wheel.

The devilman followed the general direction he had seen Sakura go towards the indoor portion of the bar. She had slipped in between the packed bodies and he couldn't get a visual on her, but that didn't discourage him in the slightest. Slowly he edged his way to the bar's edge and smirked when he saw she was just a few heads away from him. The music was pulsing through the space so he couldn't hear much. She was ordering a shot of something, and from what he could tell it was the cheap stuff.

Before she could bring the tiny glass to her lips, he grabbed it from her hand and secretly revelled in the way her nose wrinkled with annoyance. "What is your problem?" She demanded, yelling over the music.

Sasuke swiftly got the bartender's attention and ordered not one, but two shots. She watched as one of the highest bottles was brought down for them and rolled her eyes. Quickly two small glasses her filled in front of them. The dark and handsome man lifted his glass and waited for her to do the same. "To good choices," he said just

loud enough for her to catch before they both knocked the liquid back.

"Come on," he soon after instructed, grabbing her hand to lead her out of the crowd. Her heart fluttered and she wondered if he could feel her pulse in her palm and fingertips against his skin.

"Where are we going?" She asked once the music wasn't directly in her ear. They passed by one of the tables Tenten had friends at, but none that they knew. Sasuke grabbed a pitcher and some glasses then kept walking. For reasons not completely known to her, she followed without protest. They were making their way towards the edge of the venue where she couldn't quite make out where the wall was since the lights were not reaching it as well as they should. She felt eyes on her back and didn't dare turn to see if it was Ino or Tenten. Instead, she followed Sasuke down the path less taken and was surprised to find a small table just at the lip of the shadows.

He expected her to sit down as he started pouring into the glasses and raised an eyebrow when she didn't. She stood a few feet back, shifting her weight with uncertainty clear as day on her face. At the same time, she was taking him in behind her mascara-laden lashes and wondering what this devil was up to.

"Would you prefer champagne instead?" He asked as he coolly hid his hands in his jacket pockets, reclining in his seat.

A small blush tinted her cheeks. "Sasuke, I don't know if this is a good idea."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You say that as though I'm going to do something to you."

"Well," she started to say, "you can't say you haven't tried to do something before."

He folded his hands in front of his sinful lips and kept his merciless stare on her. She inevitably felt uncomfortable and looked over her

shoulder to gauge where her friends were. Sasuke audibly sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I just want your company."

Sakura turned back around with round eyes and parted her lips to say something, but didn't know what she wanted to express. She tried reading his face again and while she couldn't deny the attraction she felt towards him, something rang as the sincere truth in his voice and she knew she'd be denying him a deserved kindness if she didn't sit down. He did save her from that monster, after all.

"I guess we can have a beer," she cautiously decided.

A mischievous grin took his lips like a child who had negotiated candy before dinner as she sat across from him. He knew he couldn't have her since she had her heart set on that dog beast, but with her so close, he couldn't see himself just letting her walk away. Being around her just felt necessary.

They sat in silence at first, just people watching to the side while the music threaded through the dozens of conversations around the tables. Sasuke slowly dared to take a look at her from the corner of his eye and watched her idly fiddle with her delicate bracelet. She was nervous and he wasn't sure if he was proud or felt guilt.

"No questions?" He asked, lifting his glass for a sip.

She looked at him in clear confusion, not following him.

"You used to ask me all sorts of questions about Hell and all that, are you no longer curious about the other world?"

"You used to ask me about my life and all that, are you no longer curious about me?" Sakura bit her tongue as soon as the words came out, not meaning to sound so... upset.

The raven-haired man observed her for a moment, not missing her reaction. "You stopped answering my texts."

Her eyes fell to the table and she eventually nodded. "Kiba came back and it just felt easier to focus on our relationship rather than face the Devil." She looked up with a hardened expression. "It was a lot to take in, Sasuke. It still is."

He nodded. "It was selfish of me to not think about that more," he admitted before leaning in. "I'm sorry, Sakura. I never meant to hurt you."

She wasn't exactly sure why, but her eyes prickled with the threat of tears upon hearing him say that. He looked so devastatingly handsome staring at her then. His dark and endless eyes were fixed on her, the string lights softly illuminated the aristocratic angles of his face and the fluttering in her chest became impossible to ignore. She had to remind herself he was created to draw out temptation, a divine design. Still, she trusted him.

"I missed you, too, Sasuke."

He gave her a glimpse of one of his rare smiles in that moment when he heard her say she missed him. At least the feelings were mutual, he thought to himself, and he could count on her keeping him company for the time being. As much as he wanted to, he resisted the urge to reach across and touch her.

"Let's play a game," he suggested with a devious grin.

"What do you have in mind?" She prepared herself for something obscene and had her 'no' waiting patiently on her tongue.

"Truth or lie. We'll tell each other something about ourselves and the other has to take a drink if they get it wrong. If you get it right, the other has to drink. When we finish the pitcher I'll release you back to your friends with a nice buzz."

"You're very selfish," she commented, tucking some hair behind her ear.

He smirked, his dark eyes glittering. "So you want to play?"

Sakura shrugged. As much as she wanted to seem indifferent, she knew she was fooling no one. She was happy to sit in his company and a small, smug part of her also enjoyed the glances from jealous women nearby who she could only assume had been watching him from the second he got to the bar earlier.

"I'll start. When I first arrived in the mortal world, I refused to eat anything but tomatoes my first week as a human." He rested his lips behind his hands and waited for his companion to decide.

"Tomatoes..?" She looked puzzled and scanned his face for any clues. "False, that's too random, even for you."

He smirked and her jaw dropped. "Take a sip, and don't be delicate."

She pouted but did as she was told. He couldn't help but relish in his victory and wanted to reach out to bite her bottom lip that was wet with beer.

"My turn, then." She took a moment to think it over and then put on her best poker face. "In college, I cheated on my final exit exam to make sure I was going to graduate with the scores I wanted."

Sasuke scoffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "You, Sakura Haruno, would never."

"Kiba had left me and I was a mess!" She argued, hands flat on the table.

He narrowed his eyes, his smirk still in place. "Are you seriously trying to deceive me? Do you think I would forget this story from our first date?"

She blushed all the way to her ears. She knew she had explained exactly what had happened when Kiba disappeared but she didn't expect him to remember. He was probably going on dates every night of the week.

"You finished school before he left, so you were perfectly fine during your exams." His eyes locked on hers and her blush refused to fade. "Take another sip, Sakura." He purred.

She brought the glass to her mouth again and let a generous amount of beer pour in. "Off to a great start," he taunted.

"Just go," she muttered.

"I'll go easy on you, Haruno." He was smug and she was bitter. "I was counting on you being here tonight."

She cleared her throat and didn't say anything. He took a hold of his glass and didn't sip, but instead chugged its contents. "There," he said, "one more from you and we'll be even."

From a few tables away, Ino nervously picked at her nails as she kept stealing glances at the pair at the table for two. Shikamaru sighed and grabbed her chin each time to turn her back around. "Don't be a drag, Ino." He deadpanned.

"Are we supposed to let this happen? Should we stop them?" Her blue irises darkened with self-doubt.

"You think you're able to stop them from doing whatever it is they're doing?" Her boyfriend asked, daring her to clarify.

"I suppose not," she sighed. "And I don't think I want to."

"Then let's get back to finishing our drinks and let them... do whatever it is they're doing."

Back with Sasuke and Sakura, they were soon down to their final glasses. Sakura had stepped her game up and challenged Sasuke

with a few fun facts about her childhood hobbies and he gave her some surprisingly humanizing details of journey as he rose through the ranks of Hell in his past life. It was possible one had been ahead of the other, but after a few rounds, they stopped counting and just kept talking.

"What would you do when you weren't working?" She asked, her cardigan long shed and bare elbows supporting her on the table.

"Hn," he grunted before turning to his beer. "I barely remember having free time. No rest for the wicked and no rest for those charged with torturing them."

"But when you did?" She pressed, letting curiosity take over.

He grinned. "I sought out life's pleasures where I could."

She found herself mostly unphased, since she realized she could have guessed as much on her own. "Right, orgies and all that." She finished her beer and thanked the alcohol for the nonchalance she found in herself. She didn't, however, notice the flicker of surprise on his face when she didn't blush at the racy implication.

"And you?" He asked, catching her off guard. She tilted her head in confusion, not understanding the question. "What did you do when you weren't working in college?" He clarified.

"Oh," she blinked. "I mostly was studying, honestly. Kiba would take me camping and to some parties and stuff."

He studied her face that was slightly unarmed by the beer. "But what did *you* do? That's what *he* did and you joined in."

She bristled, the judgement in his tone evident. "Does it matter? I enjoyed doing those things. There's nothing wrong with not being the one to push to go out and do things. It was nice having someone take me to do things outside of studying."

Sasuke bit his tongue and mulled over what she had said. He always wanted to be the one calling the shots and making decisions, never following someone else's plans, but maybe handing the compass over every once in a while wouldn't be so bad.

"Balance," he suddenly said.

She blinked again at him, her annoyance fading. "Yeah, exactly. It's important to have balance."

Sakura watched the demon process something, his mind clearly somewhere else despite his gaze falling on her. It didn't last long, though. He snapped back in a matter of seconds and then turned to their empty pitcher.

"I'm nothing if not a man of my word, so I believe it's time I bring you back to your friends."

" *Our* friends. Don't act like a loner now, Ino will kill you." Sakura chided him as she grabbed her cardigan and he his leather jacket. They made their way to the picnic table of familiar faces and got there just as Ino was coming around with a tray of shots.

"Seems like she's looking to expand that friend circle," Sakura muttered as all of Tenten's friends cheered for the blonde passing around the countless glasses.

"Thank Sasuke for leaving his card open!" She yelled over the crowd, bringing a dark scowl to the man's face. Ino just winked at him and Sakura figured it must have been some deserved payoff. Sasuke quietly also thought the same, having surely wronged Ino too many times over since they had first met years earlier. A small price to pay.

A few glasses found their way into Sasuke and Sakura's hands and she looked up at him with a shrug. Why not, she thought. As she knocked it back she saw the corner of Sasuke's mouth twitch for a

second but didn't pay much more mind to it and instead searched for the birthday girl.

"Sakura!" Tenten shouted, grabbing her shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were sparkling. "Dance with us! You too, Ino!" Both women were sucked into the small bundle of female friends they had been introduced to at some point (or maybe not, it was irrelevant) and made their way inside the bar.

It was darker and louder, the speakers having been turned up once the crowd became more intoxicated and uninhibited that night. The beat and familiar songs persuaded their hips to drop and sway as the ladies jumped and danced around each other. Sakura ran her hands through her now messy hair and felt the sweat start to build on her skin. She had felt so pent up, she was realizing, and needed this.

Ino grabbed her hands and pulled her closer to drunkenly dance alongside her, some gestures more sensual than others, but Sakura didn't mind. She was feeling herself in her outfit that night and, all men be damned, she was going to fucking enjoy herself. A few men did try to intrude on the female circle, but none succeeded. From the sidelines, Sasuke was watching with the company of Neji and Shikamaru.

"Troublesome woman," Shikamaru grumbled into his drink.

"What's wrong?" Neji asked, perplexed by the comment. The women were all having a great time by the looks of it, Ino especially.

"When Ino gets too excited from drinking, she likes to pick fights," the ponytailed man explained. "Most of the time with me."

"I've seen you two fight," Sasuke spoke, his monotone voice deceptively hiding the tenseness building in him as Sakura began dancing more intimately with Ino. "She's going to want to fuck you and then it's all fine."

The pale-eyed man shot a confused look at the other two. Why did Sasuke have that knowledge?

"You have any interest in coming over later?" Shikamaru asked as he shoved his drained gin onto the bar next to them. Sasuke shrugged and Neji stiffened.

"What are you two saying?" He asked, convinced he must've misheard them.

"I was asking Sasuke if he wanted to come over to give Ino what she needs," Shikamaru nonchalantly explained, leaning closer to the suddenly shocked man.

Neji looked up at Sasuke, expecting something that would indicate it was a joke, but he was as stoic as ever.

"No? No problem," Shikamaru shrugged. "I guess I'll just deal with her later myself."

Neji was usually well composed, but this exchange caught him by surprise. As Shikamaru turned to go find the bartender, he leaned in to Sasuke. "Are you sleeping with Ino?"

Sasuke held his stony expression, sensing the judgement in the man's tone. What did it matter to Neji what he was doing with Ino and Shikamaru between the sheets? He didn't respond right away and instead turned his gaze to the women a few yards away dancing. Neji seemed to pick up on Sasuke's lack of intent to dignify him with a response and straightened up.

"I'm sorry," he offered. "I just don't think I could ever see myself finding any interest in having that sort of arrangement with Tenten. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't want her sleeping with anyone else and I don't see myself with anyone either."

"Hn," Sasuke grunted. His eyes followed Sakura as she spun Ino around with an infectious smile on her face. "It's not the craziest

thing I've heard."

"She's still with that guy from college, right?" Neji asked, trying to abstain from having accusatory tone.

Sasuke shot him a glare. "Yes."

"It's a shame," Neji shrugged. "From what Tenten tells me, she isn't exactly happy with all the work travel he does."

The devilman maintained a straight face, not exactly certain where Neji was trying to go with this. He knew Sasuke had been pursuing Sakura a while back and that Kiba's "random" move to New York put a stop to it. But after that tense commentary on monogamy, was he trying to see where Sasuke sat on the subject of faithfulness? And this was his friend?

"Neji," Sasuke turned his head to the man next to him. "You mean well, so I'm going to ask you to shut up now." He was stunned, but said nothing.

The unruly man in black started walking away without saying anything else. Sasuke's eyes were following Sakura again and his body started to do the same. She had just been approached by a man he didn't recognize and accepted his invitation to dance with him. If she was going to be dancing with a man that wasn't her boyfriend, Sasuke knew it sure as hell would at least be him.

Sakura felt a hand guide her waist to turn her away from the young man in front of her and into the arms of someone more familiar. "Sasuke," she breathed, his heat and cologne enveloping her as he took her hands between them. With all the grace of a true gentleman, he led her into a box-step rhythm.

His eyes were smoldering and seemed to hold her completely captive. "Would Kiba have approved of you dancing with that bar leech?"

She laughed and he pulled her closer. "Do you think he'd approve of a devil like you instead?"

He leaned in so his lips grazed a few of her wild flyaways, his broad shoulder filling her vision. "I don't care."

Sakura felt his wicked grin and her face subsequently flush. She became minutely aware of his one hand splayed across her back and the other holding her own in the small sliver of space between them. He waited for her to push him back, to tell him to stop messing with her, but she didn't. He found her eyes again as stood straight again. She looked so small in that moment in front of him. She was so human, he thought to himself, so raw and vulnerable. It was contagious.

"You're so full of it!" She yelled with a grin, smacking him in the chest.

He threw a similar grin back at her, making the decision not to tell her he'd happily fill her with him. He was just getting in her good graces again. His thoughts drifted back to the winter storm and that last night the two of them ventured alone, inspiring a sudden confession from him.

"A lot of pressure has been put on you. I owe you an apology for that." The devilman explained, his hands deep in his coat pockets.

She only glanced at him for a moment before looking back at the snow in front of them. "It is a lot. Why are you pushing so hard for me to give you a chance?"

He didn't answer right away. He could be completely honest and tell her he's depending on this exploration of a relationship with her may be his final chance at anchoring his soul to the human world... Or he could act in his own interest like the cunning man he was. He had no choice, regardless of his feelings.

"I've never felt this way before," he admitted truthfully. "I don't know what it means but it completely eclipses what I thought it feels like to be enamored with someone."

Sakura was the one to frown this time. She kicked up some snow in front of her. "So you're just fascinated by your emotions? Like an experiment?"

"Hn. Don't be annoying. I told you I have feelings for you and I meant it. I want you in my life, Sakura." He reached for her hand and was relieved when she let him hold it.

She cocked her head slightly, not sure why he was just staring at her. He noticed her inquisitive eyes searching his face and pulled himself back. "Are you ready to go home?" He asked suddenly.

"Oh, uhm," she stammered. Was he seriously trying to get with her then?

"I ask because your apartment is on the way back to my place. We could share a car." He explained, seeing the panic take her.

Everyone around them was still dancing, but they remained in their bubble. Sakura looked around at her friends and then shifted her weight between her feet to gauge how sore they were. "I think I want to stay longer, we didn't sing happy birthday to Tenten yet."

He let his breath exit out his nose. He could leave in that moment and she'd certainly find her way home just fine, but he didn't want to. He couldn't bring himself to walk away while she was still there. He wanted to savor every last moment of her that night, unsure of when he'd be able to again.

"I'll wait, then."

She raised an eyebrow and put a hand on her hip. "You'll wait 'til I'm ready to go? Just to drop me off?"

He looked away from her, suddenly feeling strangely affected.
"Would you rather I not?"

There was a light pressure on his forearm and he saw it was her hand. She had a warm smile across her face. "I'd appreciate having a ride back. Thank you, Sasuke."

Wanting to rid himself of that foreign sense of insecurity, he made his way back to the bar and hunched over a pour of whisky. Sakura returned to the gaggle of women who were soon after done with their dancing and retreated to their tables. Sasuke glared into his drink as though it was the source of his sudden self-doubt.

He was Satan, for fuck's sake! He had no room in his past life to hesitate or hold back. He was the deliverance of justice for the wicked and the best one the pits of Hell could conjure. He felt his eyes heat to red and swirl with his restlessness. How was something as trivial as a romance bringing out these flickers of weakness?

To his side he watched Neji linger by the bar with the birthday girl. He spied on their private moment as he caressed her cheek before leaning down to place a tender kiss on her lips. Sasuke's eyes cooled back to their onyx hue and he centered himself. This wasn't about weakness, it was taking a chance to find happiness.

Eventually Tenten's friends all gathered around the tables. Neji produced a small cake and carefully lit a few candles he had stowed away in his pocket. Sasuke lingered along the back of the circle as they began singing 'Happy Birthday', observing those around him. They were all a little out of sync, undeniably drunk, hardly any properly in tune, but it was heartwarming nonetheless.

The cake was cut and the crowd somewhat dispersed. The devilman felt a presence beside him and looked down to see a slightly disheveled head of pink hair. "Does the offer still stand?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and tilted his head as though to consider her question. "Since you begged me to wait-"

" *Begged?* " She repeated, throwing her hands aggressively on her hips.

"-I'll bring you home now under one condition-"

She slapped her hands against the outside of her thighs in frustration. "Why isn't anything easy with you?"

"-which is that we stop for pizza."

Sakura halted her exasperated antics. "I guess that would be acceptable."

He let a small smirk appear and leaned down to grab his leather jacket and her chunky cardigan they had abandoned hours earlier. As she put the knit article on, she absently wondered just how late it was.

"I'm gonna head home," Sakura said as she leaned in to hug Tenten goodbye. The athletic friend eyed Sasuke behind her with a mischievous grin on her tipsy face. Sakura immediately added that he was going to share a car with her and drop her off on the way home himself.

"I'm not sure how she would have managed without you, Sasuke." Ino taunted, approaching to give the pink-headed woman a hug as well.

"It seems we won't have to worry about finding out," Neji quipped, holding his hand out for Sasuke to shake. "I'm glad you were here tonight, Sasuke."

The two stoic men shook hands and Sasuke nodded. When they released, Sasuke wanted to instinctively bring his hand to Sakura's back but refrained. The departing pair finally turned to re-enter the bar area and navigate the crowd that was only now beginning to thin enough to see the door. Sasuke trailed behind her as she swiveled

through the bodies, again fighting the temptation to grab her and effortlessly push everyone else out of their way.

Sakura wrapped her arms around herself, no longer protected by the warmth of the heat lamps and close knit bodies out back. Sasuke quietly ordered a car from his phone before producing a cigarette from inside his jacket.

"Those are terrible for you, y'know," Sakura remarked.

He blew a cloud of smoke away from her. "You think smoke will hurt me?"

"When you become fully human, won't it?"

Sasuke quickly averted his gaze and glared at the curb. Sakura inwardly cursed at herself, realizing she had hit a sore subject. She had prodded the subject once at lunch with Ino weeks ago while she was in her honeymoon phase of sorts with Kiba.

"Is he any closer to finding his humanity?" She had asked her blonde friend.

Ino had hesitated, not sure exactly how to answer the question. After all, she herself was under the impression Sakura held the key to unlocking this salvation for him, despite Sasuke having convinced himself otherwise.

"He hasn't given up," she had vaguely responded. "The good and bad news is we don't know how long he has."

Back outside the bar, Sakura hesitantly put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry."

His black eyes found her emerald ones and recognized the helplessness he felt surfacing in himself. He pushed down the feeling and took another drag from his cigarette. "Sounds like a problem for the future," he shrugged. A car slowed down in front of

them and he flicked his cigarette to the curb. "For now, you just need to worry about holding up your end of the deal."

She stared at him quizzically as he opened the back door for her. He smirked and gestured for her to get in. "Pizza."

And there we go! I've got a lot of travel ahead of me the next two days, so I hope you can send me a few reviews to soften the edge of cramped plane seats.. How are we feeling about Kiba and Sakura's relationship? If I'm being honest here, I'm not trying to portray him as a bad guy, just not this dreamy wonder from her college years. And Sasuke and Sakura? (Always looking for your words on those two, or what's the point?) Thank you all in advance for reading through and I look forward to chatting with you in the reviews!

Chapter 14

Welcome back and thanks for the patience! I come bearing a little tidbit of sasusaku and some callbacks to previous chapter details below. I don't know about yall, but I sometimes forget bits and pieces when I'm reading longer stories, so I get worried about that sort of thing happening in my writing. Anywho, thank you to all those who have stuck through from the beginning and to all the others who are just jumping in. I appreciate you all!

CH 14

They were so dark and haunting, two adjectives that would normally have her running, yet all she wanted to do was dive straight into those deep black oceans that he commanded before her. His eyes, the way he looked at her, there was just no other experience to compare it to. No one had ever looked at her the way he did and she was certain there wasn't even a runner up Hollywood moment to compare him to so she could watch it again and again on her screen whenever she would find herself alone in the dark. It brought a shiver down through her entire body when she remembered that moment, how all-consuming his presence was as he loomed above her and made her tilt her head back to look at his beautifully shadowed face as they stood outside her door.

She unconsciously gnawed on the pencil hard enough to entirely warp the metal holding the eraser on and immediately shoved it in her desk drawer when she realized what she had done.

'Enough!' She berated herself.

The heels of her palms pressed into her eyes as she willed herself to calm down. A deep breath helped, but she knew it was only temporary. Her whole week thus far had been plagued by thoughts

of a particular dark and brooding devil, making concentration a thing of the past. All she could do was press her thighs together and pray.

"Your boyfriend's here," one of the nurses informed her as they walked by.

Sakura stood from her chair and smoothed out her hair and uniform, as though that would tame the restlessness plaguing her. She made quick work of the distance between her and Kiba, who was waiting up front to take her to lunch. It was the first time he she had seen him since he had left five days earlier, right before Tenten's birthday. As he entered her line of sight, she couldn't help but blush. Whenever he returned, his features felt more wild and sexier than usual. No sane heterosexual female of any type would deny wanting to be thrown up against a wall by him.

"C'mere, Sak," he growled out, a toothy grin on full display. The early afternoon sun lit his unruly chocolate tresses with a divine glow.

As soon as she was in arm's reach, he snatched her close and held the back of her head as he plunged his tongue deep into her mouth. He was hungry, just not in the way that one would think if they were expecting to go on a lunch date. She pulled back as soon as his grip loosened on her and without even having to say anything, he apologized. He always did.

"Where do you want to get lunch?" She asked as she wiped a trail of spit off her mouth.

His grin returned wider than before and she felt all that unfulfilled desire from her daydream dry up. Of course he'd want to squeeze in an afternoon quickie. She should have expected as much, but none of that mattered. Kiba laced his fingers with hers and guided her out to the street as they made their way to a diner not too far from her clinic. Her chin dipped into the buttoned up collar of her coat not because she was cold but because she wanted to just hide in herself. She knew he was happy to see her, but she couldn't help but feel this excitement was uniquely derived from her.

As they made their way down the block, the unfiltered sun reflected off the sidewalk and windows they passed by. It was a gorgeous day and not even all that cold, so it felt criminal to be in such a mood while outside.

"Kiba," she suddenly called to him, interrupting his description of the beautiful views he witnessed up in the Northeast corridor around Connecticut while he was away in his beast form. "Do you think we could actually eat first?"

He blinked at her before letting a small and sheepish smile out. "Of course. I'm sorry, I just got so excited when I saw you. I have to remember you're still completely human, and you."

Her brow creased. "What do you mean I'm me?"

The cursed man shrugged. "You always have been a little less sex-driven than other girls," he offhandedly said. When he saw her expression sour he realized how big of a foot he had put in his mouth and jumped to suddenly be standing in front of her.

"Sakura, I didn't mean it like that."

"Tell me how you meant it, then." She stood her ground and crossed her arms.

He growled, more at himself than anything and ran a hand through his unruly hair. "Some people are just more into sex than others, that's all. You have a lot of great priorities and ambitions, it's not a bad thing. I mean it, Sakura."

She sighed and let her shoulders fall. "Okay, I'm sorry."

His chocolate eyes noted her crestfallen demeanor and lovingly rubbed her shoulders. "Let's get that lunch you want. We should also make sure to save time for a slice of that strawberry cheesecake you like, too."

Less than thirty minutes later, she was being pressed into the hard tile of one of the diner bathrooms in the back. It was a busy lunch hour as usual, so no one noticed when the two of them slipped into the same single stall. His tongue was in her mouth again, but she could tell he was practicing a bit more restraint this time as he lifted her above his belt by the backs of her thighs. It felt good, she admitted, to feel so desired. It was empowering in a way. Her mind drifted to another man she knew felt strongly for her and found herself thrusting her hips down onto Kiba. Why did it feel different between the two? Why did Sasuke affect her so deeply while she at times felt herself just tolerating Kiba? Both were passionate, raw, and damned. What was the difference?

Kiba groped at her ass and within seconds was rolling down her tights. The last time they were in this position he just ripped them off of her, which wasn't appreciated since she had to go back to work afterwards... He remembered, at least! She guided her hands across his muscular shoulders and behind his neck to trace the rippling muscles within reach. The familiar jingling of his belt caught her ear and the sobering sensation of him thrusting into her grabbed her full attention. She was still a little wet from her desk dreaming, so it didn't hurt when he entered her. In fact, she found herself able to enjoy it. Kiba was objectively good at sex, she'd never deny that. It was just a question of whether he would make it good for her that made the difference.

A short yell escaped her lips as he hit a particularly pleasurable angle inside of her. "That's my girl," he cooed into her ear.

He finished shortly after and helped seat her on the toilet while he fixed his jeans. She stretched her cramped legs and adjusted her clothes so no one at the clinic would ask questions like they did when she came back without tights that one time.

"I'll walk you back," he offered, pulling her to her feet.

He claimed to need to be somewhere to meet someone, so he couldn't walk her back to the clinic. He gave her a kiss on the

forehead before walking away, not looking back once as she was left standing there. A familiar emptiness crawled up her gut and nested below her sternum as she finally got herself to walk back to work. The feeling threatened to fester, but she was relieved to see a lineup of back to back appointments to distract her. With an hour to go until then, she made her way to her desk and slumped into her chair that she was daydreaming in just an hour earlier.

"What's wrong, Sakura?" The receptionist asked, walking to the front from her break.

The out of sorts practitioner masked her face and looked up with a beaming smile. "I didn't get the cheesecake I was promised, just being a bit of a baby."

"Make sure this gets back on my desk finished before the end of the day," Sasuke instructed, his unspoken warning heard loud and clear.

The associates in his office quickly scuttled out when he waved his hand dismissively at them. Once alone, Sasuke swiveled his chair to the floor to ceiling windows behind him and sighed. The air was particularly clear today and granted him a priceless view of the city before him. Windows glittered against the sunshine and a few pigeons were gliding in the distance, letting the smooth breeze do most of the work. The aloof man tasked long fingers with loosening his tie a fraction and he suddenly felt the urge to flop onto his bed at home. In that moment, his mind wandered back to just the other night when he had done just that after dropping Sakura off.

Tenten's birthday kept him out plenty past the hour he intended to leave at. In full honesty, the devilman had expected Sakura to have been accompanied by the mutt his damned brother had cursed, so he was only planning on a brief appearance. As unexplainable as found his attraction to Sakura, his repulsion for Kiba was distracting at best.

It wasn't jealousy. Or at least not entirely. When he had taken Kiba to the construction site after their fight with Orochimaru, it took every ounce of self control to not spit on him after what he confessed. Yes, Kiba seemed remorseful for his foolish deal with Itachi, but it took a particularly spineless type of person to dupe a kindhearted person such as Sakura. There was always the chance Kiba had been waiting to better understand his condition to return to Sakura, but Sasuke wasn't big on that theory. Deep down in his old, old soul, he knew that wasn't the plan. Kiba didn't mean to come back and if he had to wager a guess, he'd say the guy didn't look back even once.

So when Sakura showed up to the beer garden all alone, Sasuke found no shame in monopolizing her time for as much as she'd allow him to. At the end of the night it had been so late and he should have just taken her straight home, but he was allowing himself this selfish decision to steal just a little more time with her.

They had taken a car to a pizza spot with one of the best sauce recipes in the city, appropriately named Sauce. "Did you have a good time?" She had asked him after they put an order in for a pie, margherita style, at their tiny table for two.

He merely grunted as he took a sip from his beer. Sakura rolled her eyes and sat back in her chair with her arms crossed. When he looked her way and saw the discontent smeared across her face, he cleared his throat. "Tenten is a well-liked woman."

"But did you have a good time?" She reiterated, genuinely curious.

He had thought her question over for a moment. He did enjoy the night out, he admitted to himself, but not necessarily because he cared to be there for Tenten's birthday. The event was trivial at best in his opinion. That particular type of crowd, which comprised of fitness enthusiasts and frat types alike, was not his favorite to be around be a long shot. His tried and true friend, Alcohol, made their interactions with him all the more bearable, but it was Sakura's presence that made the whole ordeal worth it.

"You're good company," he commented.

She felt her entire face heat at that, and even as he recalled that evening from his office, he could feel the corner of his lips turning upward at the memory of her searing blush.

The pizza was quick to make its way to their table a beat later, but he wouldn't have minded it taking longer so he could watch her squirm uncomfortably against his compliment. When she turned her attention to the slice in her hand, he silently watched the cheese catch on her lips in delicate strings that she then wiped with her fingers. Without thinking, she sucked the cheese off the side of her finger and felt a wave of embarrassment when she saw Sasuke watching her as though she were demonstrating a skill.

"Can you not watch me like that? It's creepy," she complained, her cheeks still on fire.

"You're just too amusing to look away." He folded his slice and took a precise bite without getting any cheese on his face, much to her chagrin.

"Sasuke," she spoke up again after they each finished their first slice. He looked up for a moment, indicating he was listening. She seemed to hesitate to continue and he felt some impatience building, but forced himself to wait for her to find her words. "Do you think there is a way for Kiba to be cured?"

He snorted. "Cured? He's not sick, Sakura." Her face fell as he seemed to brush off her question and he forced himself to level with her. "He made a deal with the Devil, a retired one, but a devil no less. A deal's a deal." She pressed her lips together and nodded.

They finished what they could and Sasuke had the rest boxed up for Sakura to take home despite her reflexive protesting. The ride to her apartment was an odd type of quiet, the kind that twists stomachs just enough to make one forget what it ever felt like to crave food and clam up palms with lukewarm sweat. He could tell she was deep

in her thoughts but chose not to disturb her. When they eventually pulled up to her building, she was surprised when he asked the driver to wait while he got out and handed him a twenty. Her raven-haired companion then got out and walked around to open the door for her and without saying anything, walked her to the door of her building.

"You didn't have to do that," she said as she gripped the pizza box between them, unsure if she was grateful or not for the foot and half of distance enforced by the cardboard. "Thank you for getting me home."

Sasuke looked down at her and felt the tightening in his chest he didn't think he'd ever get used to. "Don't mention it," he responded, turning to leave.

"Wait," she called out suddenly. He stopped and looked over his shoulder to see what it was she wanted, which was most likely what she was thinking about in the car ride over. Her mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out at first. After a quick breath, she tried again but with more success. "Would it be possible, um, for us to..."

He narrowed his eyes, a gnawing and otherworldly intuition telling him exactly what it was she was trying to ask. "What do you want, Sakura?" He turned around to face her fully and his voice was cold.

She opened her mouth to speak once more, but her voice failed her yet again. The dangerously beautiful creature in black approached her until he was essentially above her. "You have to say it out loud, darling." He whispered in her ear, sending shockwaves through her.

"I want to make a deal with you."

He pulled back just enough so he was staring straight into her eyes. While her delivery was shaky at best, he could see nothing but complete resolve in her. It was a look he recognized from his interactions with many souls before her that used to sicken him...

Pure selflessness. A willingness to do whatever it took. She was not going to change her mind.

"You want to make a deal with the Devil?" He clarified out loud. She nodded. The heat from his body was suddenly warm on her face. His eyes never left hers. "Tell me what you want."

"I want to get Kiba his soul back." Just as he expected.

"And what will you do for me in exchange for such a lofty ask?"

As he continued to replay the night in his mind, his back sank in his desk chair. He pressed his thumbs into the inner corners of his eyes as he closed them to recall exactly how she answered him.

"Anything." Sakura had whispered.

A knock on his door pulled him from his thoughts. He reluctantly straightened his tie and swiveled around to see who it was that was bold enough to bother him. "Come in," he ordered the unseen intruder.

"Sorry to disturb you," his secretary apologized. She side stepped into his office and closing the barely door behind her. He raised an eyebrow at her and darted his eyes to his intercom through which she usually pestered him. "Since it's a personal matter I didn't want to announce it on the open floor where others could hear me," she explained.

"Well, what is it?" He asked impatiently. He folded his hands in front of his mouth as he waited for a response.

"Your brother called."

Ino slammed her hands on the table. "Are you fucking crazy?" Hinata placed a hand on her shoulder, but was shrugged off immediately. "You asked Sasuke to make a deal with you?"

Sakura remained unmoved across from her two Witch friends, despite one completely losing it and calling attention to their table in an otherwise peaceful restaurant. She was absolutely terrified, but she'd be damned if Ino were to see that. "You made a deal with him, too, didn't you?" She retorted.

Ino scoffed. "I did, and now I'm bound to that bastard for the rest of my life!"

"I think it's a very selfless gesture," Hinata piped in. "but let's not forget that nothing has come of it."

"Yet." Ino amended with a glower.

"I know," Sakura sighed.

Ino continued. "You are so fucking lucky he didn't take you up on that, do you know that? He could have had you exchange your soul for Kiba's, or made you his slave."

"Ino-" Hinata tried to calm her roommate down, but she was too upset.

"He's a sex-driven, selfish, devious and merciless demon. You are so, so, so lucky." Ino seethed.

It was true, nothing did come of that conversation. After Sakura put herself out there for Sasuke to take full advantage of, he said he'd think about it.

He'd think about it.

She offered her mind, body and soul to this man and he might as well have thrown an egg at her face. Embarrassed, swamped with rejection and aching with shame, she abruptly stood from the table.

"I get it, Ino. I'm lucky he couldn't think of one thing he could possibly want from me, so I can't help Kiba and am useless. Thanks." She bit back tears as she pulled a few bills from her purse. "Here," she

slapped the money on the table. "I'm going home. See you at work tomorrow."

As Sakura stormed out of the restaurant, Hinata turned a glare at Ino. "What is wrong with you?"

The blonde stabbed the broccoli on her plate. "She has no idea what she's dealing with,"

"But she does. She knows what he is, Ino, and she still asked him to help Kiba." The dark haired woman's face turned pensive. "I just don't understand why he didn't act on it."

Ino's eyes softened as she bit into the speared vegetable. "I would be willing to bet he's asking himself the same thing right now."

Intoxicating jasmine and musk clouded the lofty room and danced with the sweat forming on the warm bodies that were collected between the couch and fireplace. Limbs crossed, tangled and caressed each other in the illumination of the candlelight around them.

His hooded eyes barely registered who exactly was beside him as their tongue entered his mouth. His hands buried themselves in their hair and he pressed his body into them as another rubbed up against him from behind. He didn't know why he hadn't immediately jumped on the opportunity when Sakura asked him for a deal, but he realized he was wasting too much time and energy teasing himself with her. Enough was enough and he needed a release. A hand gripped him confidently between his legs and he growled with appreciation. He jerked his hips forward and found a cock within reach to busy a hand of his own with while he basked in the attention his own body was getting. Sad green eyes cut through his mind's walls and he removed himself from the configuration he was in.

'Keep moving,' he instructed himself.

Sasuke twisted around and found a new woman with short black hair and icy blue eyes within reach. His body ached for contact and he narrowed his eyes at her. "Tell me what you want me to do to you," he breathed, his deft fingers tracing the pulse on her exposed throat beside him.

She stretched and arched herself in front of him, giving him full access to her ample chest as it came closer into view. He watched her puffy lip redden under the bite of her teeth and her lashes bat seductively in his direction. "Anything," she whispered.

It was unbelievable how one word had become so explosive and triggering. It was as though the river of alcohol he had inhaled earlier had evaporated from his blood and he found himself deathly sober and all too out of place in his own home. And the cruelest joke in the book was that he could be exactly where he wanted to be... all he had to do was make a deal. His teeth ground together and his lips pulled back into a snarl. She was willing to give anything to save that scum's soul, so why was it so hard to just get what he wanted in exchange for her companionship? He would have her and in turn have his happiness he was certainly hunting for all this time. Simple as that.

But he couldn't. He pictured her round, empathetic eyes pooling with tears. The branding of captivity incinerating her soul from within.

He just couldn't do it.

The answer to all his problems and he couldn't pull the trigger.

He couldn't fucking do it.

His irises boiled with bright red rage. The sultry woman next to him became confused and then all at once fill with fear as he ripped himself away from her. His glare caused her to claw her way backwards just as he yelled, startling the mass of strangers in his apartment.

"GET OUT..!"

Everyone froze and then quickly scurried to their feet, snatching up any clothing they could find. Hands and feet competed to get to the door first and then raced to the elevator and stairs. Within a matter of minutes, he was alone.

He remained crouched on his floor, naked, his hands fisting at his hair while his face hid between his knees. His whole body shaking.

"Anything, Sasuke."

Another one done! I feel like I've been really testing the limits of the slow burn and am intending to make some plot moves in the next chapter, so again, thank you for your patience. Honestly, thanks to those of you who have been reassuring me that it hasn't been complete overkill... or at least leading me to believe that.

As always, please be kind and leave a review! This is a passion project, not a paid one, so your support keeps me going. 3 Until next time! xoxo

Chapter 15

Back again, hello one and all! I want to start with a not so secret confession: I am terrified I am dragging this slow burn out too much! But this morning I thought to myself, hey, why am I not giving readers credit here? Some of you have been sticking with me since the beginning and for that, I bow down. I write this for you! I won't give much away up here, but I promise (or hope) you'll be pleased with this chapter. Also, sidenote, we're officially over 200 pages in! Woohoo!

CH 15

"For fuck's sake, did we even have a Spring?" Ino whined, ripping her kimono-style shawl off as soon as she stepped outside.

Sakura rolled her eyes. It wasn't cold by any means, but it certainly wasn't anywhere near hot enough for such a theatrical gesture.

"What are you going to do when it's actually Summer, Ino? Melt?"

Blue eyes narrowed in her direction. "Was that a Witch joke?"

Sakura paled and brought her hands up defensively in front of her chest. "No, no, no, I-"

Ino grinned like the sick brat she was and wrapped an arm around her flustered friend as they continued down the sidewalk to the train. "I'm just messing with you, relax."

It was about halfway through April and New York was teaming with florals, morning strolls before brunch and the promise of warmer days and vacations. While Ino was being a bit dramatic, Sakura couldn't say she was personally excited for this glimmer of Goldilocks weather to pass by. She was about to experience her first New York Summer and all the wonders that included: sweltering hot

subway platforms, steaming garbage piles, armies of tourist zombies and best of all, thigh chafing. None of this was known through first-hand experience, but Ino's storytelling abilities really twisted a knot in her core at the thought of the quickly approaching season of sunshine.

The pair dropped into the nearby subway station and sprinted to catch the train just before the doors closed. After they steadied themselves in the car, Ino busied herself with ordering delivery to her apartment and texted Hinata so she'd know she and the food were on their way home. The two co-workers fell into silence as the train pulled out of the station and into the dark tunnel. The air conditioning cooled the car and filled in for the lack of conversation between the two. Eventually, daylight filtered in as they re-emerged above ground and up over the East River.

"You know," the blonde started, pulling Sakura from her long stare at the Manhattan skyline from the Williamsburg Bridge. "I want to make sure I say I'm sorry for what I said to you a couple weeks ago."

Sakura bit the inside of her cheek and averted her gaze back out the window. Ino recognized the hurt her friend was trying to hide and reached to hook her finger into Sakura's. "I was upset and afraid, but I wasn't thinking about how saying all that would affect you. Do you think you can forgive me?"

This time the pink haired woman looked at her with a somewhat playful grin. "I'm not going all the way to your apartment just to be upset at you."

Ino suddenly pulled her into a full on embrace, completely compromising their stability as the train pulled into the first station. Sakura was the one to offer a stream of apologies to the strangers the stumbled into, but she couldn't help but laugh while doing so.

Ever since that ill-fated dinner when Sakura revealed she had asked Sasuke to make a deal with her, she and Ino had been out of sync with one another. The first day at work afterwards they didn't say one

word to each other. The days following they slowly seemed to fall back into their normal routines until someone on the outside wouldn't be able to tell something had been wrong at all to begin with. It was like rolling out a new carpet over some busted floorboards. If you were to visit the house for a dinner party, you probably wouldn't notice the disfigured wood beneath the plush material. But the residents, Sakura and Ino, they knew. Day after day they'd drag their feet across the carpet, minding their own business, until their toes would bump against the raised edges of the floorboard under the carpet. They did that again and again, wearing the carpet down until they had to order more. And then they'd begin bumping into that damned edge all over again.

And that was when Ino invited Sakura over to hang out with her and Hinata, when she was tired of jamming her toes into this 'deal with the Devil' situation. Judging from her reaction, Sakura was just as relieved to pull back that cheap carpet and fix the floor with her.

"How many people were you intending to feed tonight..?" Sakura asked, counting the containers Hinata had stacked on the table before they came in.

Ino shrugged. "I like having leftovers."

The trio of women arranged their plates with mountains of noodles, chicken, and spring rolls before retiring to the sofa together. Hinata put on a *Housewives* show that was supposedly extra dramatic this season as they tackled the feast before them. Ino was first to go back for seconds.

"You'll be proud of us, Hina," Ino mentioned as she plopped back between her two friends. "Sakura and I made up on the way over today."

Hinata's eyes widened and she quickly forced the food in her mouth down her throat so she could congratulate them. "That's wonderful!" She paused for a moment, suddenly remembering something. "Ino, do you want to invite Sakura to join us for our trip?"

"Trip?" Sakura asked curiously, turning to look at the blond while she shoveled more food in her mouth.

Ino took a break from her plate and criss-crossed her legs as she turned to face Sakura directly. "The end of the month is Beltane, on of our Sabbats. A lot of Witches get together for this huge celebration signifying the onset of Summer, fertility, and fun stuff like that."

"It's one of the most important holidays, but we prefer to celebrate on our own and go camping to do so." Hinata added.

"Is this the one with the May pole and flowers?" Sakura asked, conjuring up some of her own research. Both Witches smiled, appreciative of their friend's curiosity.

"And bonfires. Can't forget the bonfires." Ino smirked.

"Sure, I'd love to go with you. I haven't gone camping in so long, just tell me what to bring!"

The women proceeded to finish their meals and then poured over a map of the wilderness upstate where they would be headed. Naruto and Shikamaru would be joining them, so Kiba was definitely invited as well. It was a sensual holiday celebrating fertility, after all... But, at worst, the boys would be helpful for setting up the tents and carrying things.

"This is so exciting, you're going to love it. I make the *best* spicy red curry." Ino gushed.

"With some help," Hinata clarified.

"Okay, so maybe I need assistance with the food, but the rest of the ritual stuff I have down pat." The blonde wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"What other ritual stuff?" Sakura asked, cocking her head to the side.

Ino grinned. "I guess you'll need to go do some more research."

15 DAYS UNTIL BELTANE

That Sunday, both Kiba and Sakura headed to the Lower East Side to indulge in some bagels with lox and stroll around Tompkins Square Park in the morning. A soft breeze threaded through the trees and put Sakura's denim jacket to use. It was a luxuriously lazy day for the pair and they welcomed the time they had to spend together while Sakura wasn't working and Kiba wasn't away for a full moon trip. They headed towards the dog park and leaned against the fence as they ate their bagels and watched the variety of purebreds and mutts race around.

"I wish I could get a dog," Sakura sighed, her eyes following a clumsy german shepherd puppy as it chased a tennis ball.

"Am I not enough?" Kiba joked. Sakura nudged him in his side with a smile.

"Oh," she said suddenly, having completely forgotten to bring up the trip invitation from Ino and Hinata with Kiba until then. "Will you come with me and my friends to go camping at the end of the month?"

"The Witches go camping?" Kiba asked, raising an eyebrow.

"They do, and they invited us to join them and their boyfriends to celebrate Beltane."

The cursed man turned back to the dog park as he continued chewing on his bagel. Sakura couldn't help but feel slightly dejected at his less than enthusiastic response so far.

"Isn't that their orgy fest thing?" He asked, still looking ahead.

Sakura reddened. "It's not an orgy. It can be romantic, though, and symbolizes divine marriage and love, which is why I want you to go

with me..."

Kiba didn't say anything right away after she trailed off and Sakura began to regret her wording immediately. Just when she was about to tell him to forget it, he turned to face her with his classic Kiba smile. "Sounds fun. I'll be away a few days before for a full moon but I should be back in time to go. Let's do it."

13 DAYS UNTIL BELTANE

"Sasuke, you have another-"

He didn't hear the rest of his secretary's message through the intercom because he had shot out of his chair and swung the door open to storm out onto the floor. She had just released button on the speaker when she felt the air shift out of the way for her boss, who now towered over her.

"What did I say about messages from my brother?" He asked, his voice deceptively calm.

"I-I'm sorry, Sasuke, he's just-" the woman stammered.

"He's to be *ignored*," he hissed, hands slamming onto her desk as he brought his face in front of hers. "Do not make me repeat myself again, Miss Tayuya."

The young secretary nodded furiously, her voice completely scared away. She watched with frozen wide eyes as the dark-haired man she once swooned over straighten and stalk back into his office. It was only when she heard the door slam in the distance that she let her breath out, completely numb to the dozens of eyes from the rest of the sales floor trained on her.

When she first started as Sasuke's secretary, she was absolutely certain she had found herself next to the most handsome creature on God's green Earth. The aristocratic angles of his face, the thick,

glossy locks perfectly framing his obsidian eyes, and those shoulders that could carry the world if he so allowed it. He was a man of few words, but when he did speak, her knees would buckle without fail. Overtime, however, his charming good looks gave way to his unpredictably moody episodes.

He was particular about how he liked things done - and rightfully so! He was a key asset to the company and the executives made sure everyone knew that. But certain things, she felt, were too extreme to be real. He liked his coffee black and only drank robusta blends and they needed to be prepared with a french press, not the drip coffee pot in the kitchen. A mistake involving any of those details would result in at least two hours of grueling and unnecessary Excel exercises on top of whatever other tasks he needed done. If it was a particularly frustrating day, he'd have her leave room in his mug for what she eventually learned was the imported whiskey she kept stocked on his bar cart. If she wasn't keeping an eye on that bottle's contents and he ran short, could forget her lunch break and any others she hoped to take since she would be sent with too-little time to hunt down a locally stocked bottle somewhere in the city. On days that were slammed with back-to-back meetings, he expected a teaspoon of cinnamon to be added to his brew to relieve stress and boost memory function. If she dared to forget or incorrectly measure it, she would easily be given enough follow-up work from the meetings to keep her there until it only made sense to sleep on the break room couch.

And that was just in respect to his coffee preferences.

So when Sasuke's brother - who didn't show up in a single Google search - began calling once, twice, sometimes three times a day, she dreaded answering the phone in fear of hearing his sultry voice on the other side. With the fear of God stricken into her years ago by her boss, she quickly knew nothing good would come of passing along Itachi's messages to him. Yet for some inexplicable reason, she kept relaying them despite her better judgement. It was something about the way he spoke to her, but was beyond her

understanding and impossible for her to attempt to explain to Sasuke.

Little did she know, but fortunately for her, Sasuke had a hunch as to why his otherwise competent secretary was so mindlessly defying his orders. He too, had the Devil's serpent tongue, and could quite easily persuade mere mortals to do his bidding as well. It was a cheap trick, one he considered skill-less and beneath him, so he rarely ever used it. Still, even with his understanding of Tayuya's helplessness, Itachi's weeks of relentless outreach was getting under his skin.

After he had learned of his deal with Kiba, Sasuke immediately swore he'd never speak to Itachi again for all eternity. It wasn't as though they were particularly close in Hell, anyway. Itachi was always the older, far superior of the two brothers and never once offered Sasuke any praise or acknowledgement before or after he took the title of Satan. Sasuke had no choice but to ruthlessly work his way deeper into his Circle, glaring up at his kin on the throne, until Itachi retired.

So when centuries came and went, and Sasuke had his well-earned term as the reigning - and most revered - Satan, he still had not heard one word from his brother....until he too retired and took interest in a mortal woman. And then.....only then..! Did he hear from Itachi, through the human tool he had cursed and manipulated to get between Sasuke and his chance at happiness.

Like Hell was he going to take his call. The message had already been delivered loud and clear.

9 DAYS UNTIL BELTANE

There was just a twitch of time between the bell sounding and the flood of students rushing through the double doors and onto the street. Naruto stood his ground on the sidewalk and kept his eyes trained on the entrance for his lovely lady's exit. When the teenagers

subsided and she finally appeared, a childish grin took over his entire face.

"Hinataaaa!" He cheered, his excitement radiating off of him.

She smiled softly at Naruto as she approached him and gave him a soft kiss on his warm lips. "Thank you for picking me up today," she said, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Of course, you know I always will when I get off work early."

The pair strolled past the middle school Hinata counseled for and in the direction of her favorite bakery along the way home. It was a tradition of theirs when Naruto came by that they would always stop and get a treat to munch on. Today's special was a lavender sugar cookie and Hinata made sure Naruto got his own so she could enjoy every bite of hers.

"You excited to go camping, Hinata?" Naruto asked, his mind filled with savory meats and canoodling in the woods.

Despite the sweet delight in hand, the blonde noticed something was slightly off with his girlfriend. "Something on your mind?"

She looked over at him, slightly startled from her thoughts. "Oh, um. Well, yes."

They continued walking past the row of brownstones in the neighborhood and were shaded by the well-kept trees lining the block. When Hinata didn't immediately continue, Naruto bit back his impatience despite the rising concern.

"What do you think about Kiba?" She eventually asked.

He blinked a few times, finding the question unexpected. "Sakura's wolf boy? Hmm..." He scratched his chin, looking ahead in thought. "He's alright, I guess. Why? Did he do something?"

"No, I just..." She looked down at her flowing skirt as it outlined her thighs with every step. "I had a weird dream about him and Sakura, and the feeling has stuck to me all day."

Naruto hummed in acknowledgement. "I guess we'll just need to keep an eye out for Sakura then, won't we?"

5 DAYS UNTIL BELTANE

"So we'll start marinating the beef once we get there, and while that's going the boys can put up tents and I'll teach you how to make some flower crowns!" Ino let out a tiny squeal, small enough to not alarm anyone else in the clinic, but loud enough to make her enthusiasm contagious.

Sakura smiled, her orderly mind committing her friend's meticulous packing list to memory. It had been ages since she had last gone packing, but she knew this was beyond excessive. The amount of food and drink ingredients alone were already taking up a full page, but this was Ino she was talking about, and no ordinary camping trip. It was a celebration that called for an abundance of food, a frivolous itinerary, and whatever else Ino was in the mood for. To her relief, they would be taking a couple cars up to the campgrounds.

"So," Sakura began, her gem-like eyes scanning the list again. "Is there anything I can bring? It looks like you have everything covered."

Ino cradled her chin in her hands as she looked at Sakura. "Just something sexy to wear for Kiba Friday night. You know, in case you two wander off at some point." She held the cheekiest expression on her face while Sakura turned beet red.

Ino squinted as she leaned in, too close for comfort. "You *do* have lingerie somewhere in your drawers, don't you?"

Sakura pushed her friend back by the shoulders. "I have push-up bras and thongs," she muttered.

"Get up," Ino demanded, pulling the now grumbling woman to her feet. "When is Kiba going to be back?"

"Three days, he left last night." She allowed herself to dip into her memory of the previous evening and the sweet kiss Kiba left on her lips as he promised to be back in time for the trip. Sakura looked at the time and realized it was past five, so they were off the clock already.

Ino began dragging her to the door with a yank. "Let's go find you a few cute things, then. I'm seeing some satin and lace in your future!"

2 DAYS UNTIL BELTANE

As she cradled her now lukewarm tea in front of her chest, she stared at the window across her apartment. Up until about twenty minutes prior, the last remaining lit window across the street had gone dark. Now the only light coming in was from the moon and street lights, filtered through the light trickle of rain.

Kiba said he'd be home that night. He was always on time, always came back when he said he would. Why was tonight any different? Sakura rubbed at her warm eyes that desperately wanted to stay shut, but she forced them to remain open to see his return. She wondered if the rain had affected his train back, but quickly remembered she had checked the status online and found nothing out of sorts. Could he have been hurt? Somewhere stuck alone and needing help? She shook her head. He was a supernatural creature, he was more than capable of taking care of himself. Could he be avoiding her..?

She stood up quickly and flexed her legs and toes, having not moved much in the last couple of hours. She knew better than to let those dark thoughts fester and decided to distract herself with dishes she

had been avoiding in the sink. But even as she lathered the ceramic plates and scrubbed at the caked on debris, her thoughts wandered to her boyfriend's behavior as of late. His full moon trips varied in length, and not for any explicable reason. On the days he was around, he was constantly busy with plans, truly on setting aside a day or two out of the week for them to spend time together. Her heart ached, but she knew it was time she admit it wasn't just because he wasn't there that night.

Once she hit the bottom of the sink, she refilled her mug with another cup of tea. This time instead of the caffeinated blend, she opted for the chamomile. Her feet padded against the hardwood floors to the windows. She brought her tea up to her sternum and let it warm her skin. The floral notes wafted up her nose and she looked up at the rooftops in the direction of the Williamsburg Bridge that was out of sight. Her mind invited images of ink black eyes, raven hair and a devilish smile across from her over a decadent steak dinner. She fondly thought back to the lovely dinner date and wondered if Sasuke was sleeping right now. It was half past two, but she honestly wasn't sure how much he really did sleep.

She turned to her bed where the two lingerie sets Ino helped her pick out were laid out. She had intended to show them to Kiba when he had gotten back to tease him ahead of their trip. After she placed her mug on the nightstand, she scooped the delicates into her hands and dumped them on an open chair.

It could wait until tomorrow, she told herself. He'd be back for her tomorrow and she'd make it all better then.

1 DAY UNTIL BELTANE

Her cell phone rang at an obscenely high volume from the kitchen, startling all four of those present in the apartment. Some of them were only half awake, at least until that call came through. Ino burst out of the bathroom with only half her makeup on and scrambled to stop the blaring jingle from her phone.

"Sakura?" Ino answered, confused as to why her friend would be calling before work. "Hey, hey, hey! Calm down, okay?"

Shikamaru shuffled out of the bedroom and next to Ino to pour himself a cup of coffee. His ears perked as he heard his girlfriend continue to try to understand what Sakura was freaking out about.

"Take a deep breath for me. When did you say last heard from him?" Ino asked into the phone before mouthing that Kiba was missing to Shikamaru. "Is it possible his phone died?"

Both Hinata and Naruto had emerged from the other bedroom at this point, having overheard Ino's side of the conversation up until that point. Ino sighed and put her phone on speaker mode. "Sakura, I just put you on speaker. Naruto, Hinata and Shika are here. We can see how many of us can call out sick and go looking for Kiba if you think that would help. Does he share his location with you?"

They heard the distraught woman let out a shaky breath on the other side of the line. "No, and if his phone was dead it wouldn't matter anyway. I had a bad feeling last night when he didn't come home when he said he would, but now I just *know* something is wrong."

Hinata and Naruto shared a quick glance. "Sakura, I promise we'll find him! He's probably just out chasing cars or something!" Naruto laughed at his own joke, but was met with dead silence on the phone.

Ino took the phone off speaker and held it to her cheek. "Do you want me to come over? I can-"

"Oh, I hear the lock! I think that's him!" Sakura whispered with a mixture of excitement and relief. "It's him, oh thank goodness. Thank you so much, Ino. I'm so sorry. I'll apologize again at work."

Ino's shoulders fell with her own relief and pre-coffee adrenaline. "Don't apologize. Let me know how it goes!"

"What the hell was that about?" Naruto asked, squeezing past the two already in the kitchen to pour himself and Hinata coffee.

Ino pulled herself out of the cramped space, smacking Naruto on the back on her out, and sat at the dining table. "Kiba wasn't answering his phone and didn't come home last night when he told her he would."

"What a drag, I'm going to go get ready for work." Shikamaru walked back towards the bedroom while the remaining three sat in silence at the table.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," Ino said quietly, mostly to herself.

Hinata reached across the table and put her hand on top of Ino's. "She'll be okay. She has some really good friends regardless of what happens."

Naruto perked up. "You better believe it!"

She threw her phone onto her bed and marched over to Kiba with tears still beading in her eyes. He looked worn out, but otherwise completely okay. "What happened to you? I was worried, Kiba."

He put his travel pack down by the door and looked into the apartment, but not directly at her. "Can we sit down for a minute? I didn't sleep much last night."

Sakura was stunned by his reaction and blinked a few times before stepping back so he could pass her into the apartment. She expected him to sit on the bed but instead he went to the couch.

"Is everything okay?" She asked softly, his body language unreadable.

He pulled his hood back and ran his hand through his messy hair a few times. She noticed it looked light and clean, not gritty or sweaty like it usually did when he came back from his trips. Her eyes traveled down to his face, his eyes hooded and brows knit close together. A pit returned to her stomach (did it ever truly leave?) and she chose to keep her distance.

"Sit down with me," he beckoned to her and smacked the cushion next to him.

She folded her arms in front of herself, her guard now up and eyes hardened. "I'm fine right here. Tell me what's going on."

He sighed and anchored his elbows into his knees, his face completely pressed into his hands. Sakura felt her patience evaporate at the sight of this pity party he was delaying this conversation with. "Kiba," she bit out.

When he brought himself to look up at her, he almost didn't recognize the woman. She was as still as a steel fortress and as intimidating as an army staged for war. He had been running through what he was going to say the entire way back into the city. This unexpected side of Sakura that he was getting a first glimpse at was almost enough to erase every word he had practiced whispering to himself just hours earlier.

"I've been carrying this curse for some time now," he started saying. "Over the years I've grown to understand this new side of myself, but lately it's been getting a little out of control."

The pensive woman narrowed her eyes. "Did you kill anyone?"

"No," he quickly responded, reflexively jumping to his feet. "I didn't kill anyone, or hurt anyone." He paced to the window, his hand back in his clean hair. When he turned around to face her again, she noted it wasn't fear in his eyes... it was guilt.

"Kiba, goddamnit, just fucking tell me what's going on... !" She shouted, her nerves shot.

"I slept with someone..!"

The silence that followed swallowed them like a black hole, taking all the oxygen with it. She waited for the pain to hit, but instead felt numbness.

"What did you just say..?" She finally whispered after a minute had passed them.

"I-"

"You *bastard*," she cut him off. Her fists were clenched at her sides and her jaw was locked so tight hardly any words could pass through. "What is wrong with you?"

He started walking towards her, hands in front of him. "That's just it, Sak, it's what's wrong with me. I just can't help myself. I need too much," he pleaded, his eyes round and begging. "I never wanted to hurt you, I just didn't know how to tell you."

"I can't believe this," she breathed, clamping a hand to her forehead. Realization cemented as she processed what he had just implied. Her eyes locked onto his. "Didn't know how to tell me... that this had happened before?"

He only nodded.

Her eyes fell to the chair with the tangle of lingerie on it. She stepped to the couch and finally sat down. He sat next to her.

"It's this animal demon in me," he kept explaining. "It makes me so hungry for release all the time, it's just driving me mad." She only nodded, so he didn't stop. "I so badly want it to go away but it won't no matter how much I want it to."

"Why did you come back?" She asked as she suddenly turned to face him.

He was caught off guard again by this new side to Sakura. "I.." He hesitated. She didn't know about his end of the deal with Itachi. Should he tell her? As he looked into those cold green eyes he saw a glimpse of the Sakura he knew in college. He couldn't break that Sakura like he already had when he disappeared.

"Kiba." There was a demand to her tone, but he didn't miss the edge of vulnerability in it.

"I felt guilty about leaving you the way I did," he answered. And that was true, he did.

He saw the tears film her eyes before she averted them. "Well I hope you feel better now, because it's time to go." She stood then, wiping her nose on her arm. "I'm going to work now, so have your shit out by six before I get back tonight."

His eyes widened and his mouth fell open. "Can't we talk about this?"

She spun on her heel at the door. "We could have, but you chose to go fuck everyone else, so no. Goodbye, Kiba."

She held her breath as she marched down the hall. Her heart was hammering in her chest and her mind was not keeping up in the slightest. She flew down the stairs at a break-neck speed, her oxfords clattering down with her. When she gripped the handle to the front door, she found she couldn't open it. Her arm just wouldn't move.

And then it all happened, all at once.

A violent sob ripped through her and shook her to her core. She clutched her arms, squeezing herself tighter and smaller, hoping the pain would shrink within her. But it didn't. After a few minutes of

crying and releasing, she quieted to a mere snuffle. With a deep breath, she fished a compact mirror and powder from her purse. She wiped away the smears of mascara from her eyes and concealed as much of the blotchy redness from her face as she could. Accepting the state she was in, she took another needed breath, pushed on her darkest sunglasses and went to work.

"We'll give you a call by next Friday, regardless of what the results say, so keep an eye out for us. Enjoy your weekend!" Ino waved as she exited the exam room, a model smile plastered on her face. When Sakura was late to her first appointment of the day, she knew Sakura must have really gotten into it with Kiba after they spoke earlier. When their supervisor came by, she quickly wrote her name over Sakura's so that she was assigned to her 9am appointment, which was just now ending.

"Where is this girl?" She muttered to herself as she closed the patient file.

But ask and you shall receive, because just then Sakura came rushing into the clinic, frazzled and out of breath behind a pair of sunglasses Ino rarely saw her wear. Without saying anything to her, Ino marched up beside her and ushered her into the back of the clinic with an arm around her shoulders protectively. Despite her weak protests, Ino brought her to the backup exam room where she had locked Sasuke in with her not that long ago.

Sakura opened her mouth, but Ino beat her to the first word. "I took care of your first appointment and reassigned the next one, so don't even go there. Tell me what happened."

She didn't say anything at first, but her bottom lip was sucked into her mouth to pacify herself. Ino reached between them and pulled Sakura's sunglasses away. As soon as she got a look at her blotchy red face, her eyes softened with sympathy. "Oh, Sakura..."

When she saw Ino's expression change, she felt that pit in her gut open once more with little mercy. She was a strong woman, or at least she wanted to be. Ino was a fearless and powerful Witch. She didn't want someone like that seeing her fall to pieces over a guy. There were way more important things in the world they needed to focus on, like their careers, and their dreams, and next month's rent... !

But when Ino outstretched her arms in front of her, she couldn't help falling into her embrace and quietly sobbing into Ino's shoulder. They stayed like that for some time until she had run out of tears. "You don't deserve to feel this way, we're going to get you through this."

She was granting her a moment of surrender, a moment to acknowledge her sadness. Ino felt her heart clench as she leaned back to look at Sakura's face again. She couldn't help the chuckle that escaped. "You look awful." Sakura began to laugh, too.

And so she told Ino everything that had happened, everything he had said. She told him about his suspiciously clean hair and belittling reason for coming back in the first place after all those years. She felt tears returning to her eyes as she relived her morning, but this time she let them fall without shame. She was allowed to feel this way after what he put her through.

"Fuck," was all Ino could say afterwards. "Why don't you go wash your face with cold water and we can go get some breakfast. Maybe a morning cocktail?" Ino wiggled her eyebrows like she liked to do.

Sakura rolled her eyes and nodded before going to the bathroom. As soon as she left the room, Ino whipped out her phone and her group text with Shika, Hinata and Naruto in it.

'Kiba's been cheating on Sakura, they broke up.'

'WUT THE FUCK' Naruto responded in half a second.

'Is she still coming tomorrow?' Hinata wrote back.

'Geez get her a drink or somethin' Shikamaru suggested.

'I'll make sure she does both of those things!' Ino replied, pocketing her phone before heading to the back of the clinic office.

She briefly explained to their supervisor that Sakura was going through a hardship and needed to take a sudden personal day and wanted to join her. The supervisor was a compassionate woman and respectfully obliged.

"Are you sure it's okay?" Sakura asked once the two of them were outside, her sunglasses back in place.

"Yep, I told you, I took care of it." Ino grinned as she looped her arm through her friend's. "Now let's get *drunk* !"

"Sasuke, you have a call from-" Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose. He was sick of this shit. "Naruto Uzumaki on line 1. Do you want me to take a message?"

He dropped his hand to his desk. What could Naruto possibly want from him? "Just connect me, thank you."

He picked up his phone and pressed the blinking button to connect to the call. "What is it, idiot?"

"I'm doing great, thanks for asking, bastard!" Naruto shouted back.

Sasuke closed his eyes for a moment, mentally preparing for whatever nonsense he was about to let Naruto unleash on him. "Tell me why you called, Naruto. I'm at work."

"You're no fun," he grumbled. "Say, listen! We're going camping tomorrow for Beltane, you should come with us!"

"And why would I want to do that?" Sasuke dared to ask. He wasn't sure why, but he was in the mood to entertain this thought.

"Tons of food, fire, naked time, your favorite things!" The devilman leaned back in his chair with a smirk. He made a good case for it. However, the smirk only lasted so long. His mind quickly reminded him of how his last orgy ended at his apartment weeks earlier.

"Who is going?" He asked.

"Me, Hina, Shika and Ino. It'll be like old times, come on! When's the last time you've gone out?" The blonde was met with silence, so he continued with an audible grin. "Where's the almighty Devil I used to know? Has he gotten old and soft, giving in to his mundane human life?"

"Don't forget who you're speaking to just because we're of flesh and blood now, runt." Sasuke warned.

Naruto was unsurprisingly unphased. "Come on, Sasuke! Say you'll go!"

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose once again. "Hn. Send me the location. I'll drive up after work."

THE DAY OF BELTANE

Her head somehow wasn't pounding when she woke up, but she was definitely not feeling her best. She sat up slowly, using every bit of willpower in her to sit up against her headboard. The pile of lingerie was still on the chair, but Kiba's suitcase, clothes, and few belongings were gone. While he was away, the apartment was always quiet, but today felt particularly dead.

She let out a soft sigh.

She and her crew for the weekend had all taken off work that day and were meeting at Ino's in a few hours to start driving upstate. She looked at the clock on the wall. Hinata and Naruto were probably leaving soon to go pick up the car rentals. Knowing Ino, she was

most likely still packing and adding a few extra garments to dress Sakura in for fun later.

A smile tugged at her lips as she swung her legs off the side of the bed. Ino not only had her entire day covered yesterday at the last minute, but also treated her to the ultimate sad girl day out. They ate, they drank, their nails were painted and their stomachs hurt from laughter. They drank even more later when Hinata was free, so there were of course a few bouts of tears, but a miraculous facial at the end of the day before dinner took care of all the redness and swelling.

She was feeling - dare she say it - lucky..! To have such great friends, despite all the hell she had been through.

In her drunken state she had somehow finished packing, so all that was left was a quick shower before it was time to go. She splurged on a rideshare app to get her and her small duffel bag up to Ino's and was bathed in the heavenly fragrance of freshly baked breads. Her shoulders softened just before pushing open the apartment door.

"Good morning, coffee is in the kitchen if you want to make a to-go cup!" Ino called from the bathroom, toothbrush in hand.

Stepping over a cooler and giant tote bag of wrapped baked goods, Sakura took her up on the offer and grabbed one of the cups set out for her. "Where is everyone?"

"Naruto and Hinata are getting the cars, Shikamaru is on his way." The sink ran for a minute and then Ino came out into the living room. "How are you feeling today?"

Sakura shrugged with a half-smile. "Better than I would have without you yesterday."

"Aw," Ino feigned bashfulness. "Don't mention it."

The door suddenly opened, Shikamaru having just arrived as predicted. "Hey Sakura," He nodded, only stopping to pick up a large bag on the ground. "Sorry to hear about the boyfriend."

"Oh, um, thanks." She shifted awkwardly and Ino rolled her eyes at her less than tactful partner.

"Cars are downstairs, we should get moving." Shikamaru added, already heading out the door.

The next fifteen minutes comprised of Naruto squeezing Sakura half to death in a hug and the camping supplies being loaded into the two SUVs. At the last minute, they decided to split the cars by sex: Naruto and Shikamaru in one car, the three women in the other. "Girl talk" was the excuse Ino gave, but it didn't matter. The men knew better than to argue.

"Fresh air, flower crowns, and good company. It'll do you some real good." Ino chirped from the front passenger seat.

Hinata looked at Sakura through the rear-view mirror. "I'm really glad you decided to still come up with us."

She smiled back. "Like Ino said, it'll do me some good." She looked out the window at the trees passing by. "Better than Chinese food and Bravo would."

"Debatable," Ino noted.

"I wonder how those two behind us are doing," Hinata commented with a glance in the mirror again.

"Can you stop bouncing around? You're driving." Shikamaru gripped the side of his seat, his back completely stiff.

"Agh, I can't take it! I have to say something!" Naruto shouted, slapping the steering wheel.

"What? Say whatever you want, just stop the bouncing."

"Okay, okay, but don't say anything!"

"Naruto-"

"I convinced Sasuke to come!"

Shikamaru dared to take his eyes off the road to look at his demon friend. "How'd you do that? Isn't he avoiding Sakura right now?" He paled when he saw Naruto's smile widen. "You told him Sakura was going with us, right?"

Naruto began laughing maniacally and Shikamaru pressed the back of his head into the headrest. "I can't believe you, Naruto..." He pulled out his phone and started typing.

"Hey, hey, hey! Who are you texting?" He made a swipe with one hand to grab the ponytailed man's phone, but failed.

"Ino, you idiot." He held the phone out of reach.

"Just tell her not to tell Sakura, okay?" Naruto whined.

Ino felt her phone vibrate and raised an eyebrow when she saw it was Shikamaru. Upon reading the text, the blood drained from her face. Sasuke was going to be there. She quickly composed herself, feeling Hinata's side glance on her. She was someone she could never hide her feelings from, no matter how hard she tried.

She would have told her immediately, but there was no way to do so without Sakura knowing. Instead, she gave her a knowing look to acknowledge something was up but that she couldn't say anything. At least not in the car.

She thought about texting Sasuke, but stopped just short of doing so. Was it a bad thing, or an opportunity? It was as clear as the sky

was that day that Sasuke still had feelings for Sakura, and she was almost certain that underneath her current upset, Sakura had feelings for Sasuke. If anything, she grinned to herself, the two at least lusted for each other. Like the saying goes, the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else... even if they did sometimes have two horns and throne in Hell.

Details.

The next thirty minutes could not have gone by any slower. Ino and Shikamaru both played out every possible scenario in their separate cars, texting each other an endless list of 'what if's to sweat over. Their conclusion was that they would play none the wiser and just hope for the best. Naruto would have no one to blame but himself if Sasuke came after him.

When they pulled up to their assigned campground, Naruto was the first to run out and dramatically inhale the biggest gulp of air possible. "Aahhh... Nature!" He exclaimed.

"Hey nature boy, come help us unload the cars." Ino barked.

Once the heavy lifting was over and Ino was showing Sakura how she likes to marinate the beef, the sun was high above and splintering through the thick treetops above them. She already felt a ton better, just having some distance between her and the city.

"Try this," Hinata said as she passed Sakura a cup of something. "It's an herbal-infused gin I made last night mixed with some tonic." Much better than being in the city.

The afternoon was a lot more laid-back than she had anticipated. They pitched a giant tent near the trees as part of a group effort and then the guys worked on setting up a fire pit while Ino and Hinata showed Sakura how to braid flower crowns using some florals they brought and foliage from the surrounding greenery. By the time they were done, Hinata served up a gorgeous charcuterie board complete with almond crusted goat cheese, strawberries, various meats and

other snacks. Sakura hesitated for a moment before picking some pieces off the serving platter.

"Is that...?" Sakura started to say, gesturing to the oddly shaped platter.

"A vagina? Yes," Ino chuckled. "A lot of things are shaped after bodily parts and sex organs for Beltane to celebrate fertility."

"Ah." Sakura began munching in their circle around the unlit campfire and noticed Ino and Shikamaru kept glancing back towards the cars. "What are you guys looking at?" She asked bluntly.

"Just looking to see if anyone else is driving by," Ino responded with the best poker face she could manage.

"We usually book the campground farthest in to minimize the number of other campers passing through," Shikamaru added.

"Oh, okay." Sakura believed them, but only because she didn't notice the grin Naruto was hiding behind his plate.

So when the Sun was beginning its descent in the West, and the group started assembling the fixings for their supper feast, she was completely unprepared for the third car that pulled up alongside where they had parked. Even more surprised than Sakura was Sasuke, when he got out of that very car and saw her standing there in her flowing white cotton dress, sun-kissed cheeks glowing and hair adorned with a flower crown fit for a queen. She was beyond breathtaking, and he was beyond livid.

"Sasuke," she breathed, just when he thought he no longer could.

Naruto was going to die.

Here we are! The end of Ch 15! And what a turning point, I must say. Fun fact, I wrote this in one day and did NOT proofread, so be

gentle. I was just too excited to get it out for you. Please review with all your thoughts and feelings and thanks for reading :)

Chapter 16

Happy weekend, everyone! So where we left off last, Sakura and Sasuke were both surprised by each other's presence at the Beltane campout. Naruto decided to go rogue and invite Sasuke after hearing Sakura had broken up with Kiba and now here we are. I'll let you get to it and see you at the end of the chapter!

CH 16

"Sasuke," she breathed, her mind going blank for a moment.

What was he doing there? Her heart began racing like a rabbit before a predator. But instead of running as her brain told her to, she remained standing where she was. She watched as he stood as stoic as ever, his white linen button-down and inky locks the only thing moving in the sudden breeze. Her own voice echoed in her head as she recalled the last time she saw him, completely unaware Sasuke's mind was doing the same thing.

"I want to make a deal with you." She had brought herself to say that night many moons ago when they spoke last.

She remembered him trying to call her bluff when he asked if she was seriously trying to make a deal with the Devil. With the sincerity of her determination burning through her, she told him she wanted to get Kiba's soul back, no matter the cost.

"Anything." Sakura had whispered.

She watched him shove his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans and a scowl take his lips. Dark eyes hardened and a knot formed in her stomach as she was washed over by shame. He was sickened by her foolish wish, she thought to herself. Who was she to him to ask such a favor as retrieving a traded soul from Hell?

Sasuke's eyes found Naruto as the idiot demon tried unsuccessfully to creep backwards towards the closest trees for cover. "Get over here, Naruto." The former Lord of Darkness ordered. Knowing better than to run, the man obliged and walked over as casually as he could around his friends. From a mile away, anyone could see the sweat beading on his temple.

While the two of them disappeared behind the car 'to chat', Ino swooped in next to Sakura and put a light hand to her back. "Did you know he was coming?" Sakura asked, her eyes full of confusion on top of her still-fresh pain from her break up the day before.

"I found out when it was too late," Ino half-lied. "Naruto secretly invited him and didn't tell us." Sakura was going to ask more questions, but she didn't even have it in her to be frustrated or dive deeper at that point. It wouldn't change anything.

The rosette dropped her head backward and closed her eyes as the sun filtered through the trees onto her cheeks. Was a break too much to ask for? Even for a day?

"Let's go for a walk," Ino suggested, tugging on Sakura's hand. She made a gesture at Shikamaru and Hinata to keep an eye on the two men currently out of sight and continued on her way in the opposite direction with Sakura in tow. "We'll be back in a little bit, just going to clear our heads."

As their white sundresses fell out of sight down the neighboring nature trail, the remaining two hesitated. Should they check on Naruto and Sasuke, or stay out of it? When they heard the loud crash they knew to be a body slamming against a car, they knew the decision was made for them.

"They're just working out their feelings," Shikamaru explained, shrugging. They both knew it was Naruto who was being thrown against the back of the car and Hinata couldn't help but worry for him. That said, she also couldn't deny it was a bit deserved for pulling this sort of stunt on Sasuke of all people.

"How dare you try to make a fool of me," Sasuke hissed, his hand tightening on Naruto's throat. Fangs grew from both of their mouths.

"I'm... not!" Naruto's voice rasped, his own hands gripping Sasuke's forearm.

The dark-haired man leaned in without loosening his hold so his red eyes were aligned exactly with Naruto's. "Then explain to me why you conveniently left out Sakura's name when I had asked who was going on the trip."

When he couldn't make out the blonde's words, he decided to release him. The breathless man fell to his knees on the ground, gasping. "You like her still, don't you?" Naruto asked, looking up as he rubbed his burning throat.

Sasuke glowered at him. His mind went to the first night he laid eyes on Sakura in Ino's apartment. He could feel the ghost of her warmth on his stomach from when he cocooned her in his coat against him while they waited in line for Fat Cat's. The tips of his fingers itched to touch her like he did when they were sleeping so close together in the Witches' living room during the snowstorm. But were these *feelings* for her? Or was this just lust for the unattainable? He suddenly wasn't sure, having never experienced truly romantic feelings for anyone before. Hell was certainly not the most opportune place for such a thing and it never crossed his mind to be something he had the capacity for... or at least not often.

"Well?" Naruto pushed, standing once again. Sasuke remained silent and looked away. As one of his oldest friends, the demon knew Sasuke was struggling with something inside himself. He knew this because he also went through those same feelings when he met Hinata.

"It's irrelevant. She is committed to that fool," Sasuke muttered.

This was when Naruto's grin returned. "About that..."

The lush collage of foliage and too many plants to name ushered the women to a small relief in the greenery after they had made it just out of earshot from the others. An opening in the overarching trees lit a soft patch of dirt and grass, threaded with tiny flowers blooming in the sunlight. This is where the pair took a moment to sit and collect themselves. A breeze passed through, as though Mother Nature herself was reminding them to slow down and breathe.

Ino exhaled. She had hoped the walk this far would brew up the right words to say to her friend, but as she sat there staring at the broken girl, she could only feel guilt and grief. Sasuke was going to be just fine, she at least knew that, but Sakura was another story. Like herself, she was only human. It was easy to forget such a simple thing as that when your world is so deeply entwined in the supernatural.

"Did you see his face?" Sakura asked, her voice just a notch above a whisper. Her fingers skimmed the delicate weeds rooted next to her while her hair veiled her face.

"Yeah," Ino answered with caution in her tone. "He'll get over it, he's just going to rough Naruto up a bit for punking him and shit."

Sakura shook her head. "He's not mad just because he didn't know I was invited. He's disgusted by me."

Ino's eyes widened. "Where did that come from?"

The flower crown and waves of pink hair tilted back to reveal glassy emerald eyes. "Could it be more obvious? I'm a pathetic fool, offering anything he could want to help this..." She struggled to find the right words for a moment. "This... *boy* who I used to date, who voluntarily gave up his soul," she let out a shaky breath as tears balanced on eyelashes struggling to hold them up. "And what kind of idiot does that?"

Ino opened her mouth to interject, but Sakura continued. " *Me!* Sasuke absolutely could have asked for mine in exchange and I was

ready to hand it over! For Kiba who couldn't even bother to be faithful..!"

"Sakura..." Ino didn't realize this was what her friend had been harboring all this time. It was also at that moment it dawned on her that Kiba had completely fogged her understanding of Sasuke. "... You really might be a fool after all."

The green-eyed woman looked up in shock at the unexpected comment from her friend but didn't say anything. "You really think that's what got him so upset?" Ino laughed then. For such a smart medic, Sakura had the most serious blind spot.

"What are you talking about?" Sakura growled, not finding this as funny as Ino did.

Ino smirked. "You think Sasuke stopped pursuing you because your self-sacrifice disgusted him?" When Sakura nodded, Ino had to force herself to not roll her eyes. "Do you even understand why he was always looking to be around you, to begin with?"

Sakura's eyebrows drew together. She wasn't *that* oblivious. Sasuke was interested in bedding her, she knew that. Sex was a recreational activity for the deviant, there was nothing special about it for him. When she opened her mouth to explain this obvious fact to Ino, the blonde was already standing up and pulling her up as well.

"You're just going to have to talk to him yourself," she instructed her, brushing the dirt off both their white dresses. "I'm not saying anything more than that."

Pretty certain she was more confused than before, Sakura followed Ino back to their campground. Just before they made it to the main clearing, she noticed that while she didn't quite understand what Ino was getting at, she felt a little better hearing that Sasuke didn't find her to be this weak fool she was projecting outward.

So as the music grew louder and the sight of her friends - and Sasuke - setting up a beautiful picnic feast became clear, she felt a little more certain of herself and better.

"Hey, Ino?" She called, reaching for her hand. The blonde turned her attention to her with blue eyes wide and expecting. Sakura smiled. "Thanks."

In their small but private clearing, Hinata looked up from the covered platters she was arranging on the layers of blankets stretched across the grass. She saw the two of them walking hand in hand, softening her features as she straightened up.

"How are you feeling?" She asked Sakura with sincerity.

"Better, I'm sorry for we took so long." Sakura looked around at the gorgeous array of quilted blankets patched together in front of them with equally photo-ready trays of dishes begging to be ravished. "Is there anything else I can help with?"

"Hm," Hinata looked around as she took inventory of the trays. The sun was leaning to the West more now and casting a golden veil over the woods they were in. "Can you tell Naruto he can bring out the oyster cooler?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Oysters?"

Ino slapped a hand on her back. "Hinata's a bit of a Kitchen Witch and oysters are very much a Beltane favorite for us. You know, being aphrodisiacs and all."

Sakura shook her head, already overly impressed by the variety and quality of food at hand. This truly was some next-level camping she wasn't ready for. Walking up towards the simple A-frame tent, she saw Naruto and Shikamaru were rolling out even more blankets and quilts. It looked just big enough for three people to sleep under, but she figured it would be best to ask about sleeping logistics later.

"Hinata asked if you could get the oyster cooler ready," she said as the two finished with the blankets.

"That means it's time to eat!" Naruto cheered. "Do you want to go tell that bastard over there while I get the oysters?"

Her eyes moved past the small fire Hinata had used to cook the meats and platters of food and followed where Naruto was pointing. A few yards away, Sasuke was crouching in front of a much larger fire pit, strategically stacking cut logs. Her eyes snapped back at Naruto like a deer in headlights. She waited for him to rescind the request, but he never did. "Sure thing..."

She'd have to talk to him sooner or later, she told herself, so it was better she broke the awkwardness then. He didn't notice her approaching, or at least gave no indication that he had until she was standing just a few feet from the pit. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and that familiar serpent tattoo was exposed. Technically, all of his other tattoos were visible as well through the white linen of his shirt. As the material became taut against his bicep she could see the pitchfork on the back of his arm and when he leaned over more to grab another log, the marks on his back could be seen as well.

"Food is ready," she said softly, feeling her stomach flip when he stopped and straightened to face her.

"Hello, Sakura." His voice was like cold velvet, his face unreadable.

She forced herself to look him in the eye, fighting the urge to look anywhere else. "Hey, Sasuke."

He took a few steps towards her so there was only a breath of air between them. Feeling his presence inches away sent chills through her. The smell of his sandalwood cologne was intoxicating and she had to force herself to concentrate. 'Focus,' she repeated in her head. She held her ground and eye contact, only adjusting her neck to look up at him. Was he trying to intimidate her?

"I apologize for earlier, I was annoyed with Naruto, not you."

"Oh," she blinked and broke her stare. "Don't worry about it."

She shifted her weight and was overcome by the sudden urge to embrace him and punch him at the same time. There was no clear sense of where her emotions were at that moment, so she elected to remain frozen in place. They stood there a beat longer before he walked around her to make his way to the picnic feast setup. After the fleeting interaction had passed and Sakura had collected herself, she followed his steps to the others. Naruto and Shikamaru had carried down the cooler and brought out all the lemons and knives that went with it. Ino and Hinata were uncovering the endless dishes and trays. Sasuke, meanwhile, simply toed off his shoes and kneeled to take a seat between the blondes in the circle they had all formed. Sakura chose to sit next to Shikamaru and Hinata, directly opposite Sasuke.

In the spirit of the holiday, Ino took the group through a few prayers and songs for Beltane with Hinata's help and put aside a plate of food as a ritual offering. Once they were done, they all grabbed their plates and began their feast.

"Let's celebrate and eat!" The blonde Witch cheered.

"This looks and smells unbelievable," Sakura gushed, scooping a combination of asparagus tips and grains onto her plate.

There was silence across the group, but not necessarily an uncomfortable one. Naruto had his music playing in the background and the occasional breeze rustled the trees around them in soothing waves. It was quite a beautiful day paired with an unspoken agreement to make the best of it, or at least try to.

The pink-haired woman released a slow breath harboring her heartache and anxieties built up over the last 24 hours. She wondered if Kiba was out in the forest somewhere now, also looking to nature for healing. The thought of him caused her heart to clench.

As she tried to place the feeling, she realized it wasn't exactly a grievance for their expired relationship but his tragic fate.

The sun continued to work its way down to the horizon and showed off a miraculous display of reds and pinks in the sky above. The small group had long finished their meal, although there was quite a bit of leftover. They reclined on the blankets with full stomachs and a light buzz from the magical drinks Hinata had passed around.

"Can you believe this is all for free?" Ino asked no one in particular, staring up at the breathtaking views of the heavens.

Sakura closed her eyes for a moment to soak in the freshness of the trees and fragrance from their flower crowns. The sound of the leaves and soft music lulled her into forgetting everything else, if only for a few breaths. When she opened her eyes, she turned her head to the side on the blanket and saw coal-black ones staring directly at her.

He didn't smile at her, raise an eyebrow or even smirk. Her face also remained unfazed, but she could feel something raw and wanting between them. For once, it was he who broke the gaze. "I'm going to get my tent up before it gets dark," he announced, pushing to his feet.

After he slipped his shoes back on and headed to the cars, Sakura took the opportunity to tilt her head back and get Ino's attention next to her. "Where am I sleeping tonight?"

There wasn't an answer at first, but instead an audible sigh from Shikamaru. "Troublesome..." He muttered. "Naruto, since you were responsible for the tents, did you conveniently forget to bring an extra one for Sakura as we had asked?"

The blonde demon shot up. "Hey! I didn't-"

"Naruto... ," Ino growled in warning.

He scratched the back of his head with a laugh. "I'm sure we can all squeeze in,"

Sakura slung her arm over her eyes and resigned herself to whatever the night would bring. She'd survive one way or another.

"Anyone want some wine?" Sasuke shouted from the car. "I got a mixed case of reds and whites on my way up."

"Bring the red!" Sakura shouted, surprising everyone. Sasuke smirked.

"I want to play a game!" Naruto shouted, his voice louder than necessary as usual.

"We brought a Frisbee, didn't we?" Hinata asked.

"Oh, we can play Drunken Horseshoes!" Ino exclaimed, excitedly jumping up before sprinting to the car. She was a competitive soul and knew this was a game she could crush anyone at.

Still reclining on the blankets with her cup of wine, Sakura turned to Shikamaru to ask how to play while Sasuke leaned in to refill everyone's cups with the second bottle of wine.

"There are two teams, each tries to knock the bottle off the opposing team's pole with a Frisbee. You get one point for hitting the pole, two for the bottle." The lazy man explained with reluctance. He just wanted to lay around and stare at the clouds.

Naruto had gone off to grab a few extra rods from the tent and snatched up the two empty wine bottles from Sasuke. "I can fit the rods inside the bottles and stake them in the ground!" He yelled, out in the small clearing already setting up with Ino."

"Come on, Shika! You have to be on my team!" Ino shouted. "Naruto and I need you to help us win!"

The boyfriend sighed, slowly getting rising and dragging himself to her.

"It looks like we're together, then," Hinata observed, turning to the two remaining beside her.

"I don't like to lose," Sasuke warned the two women, offering his hands to pull them both to stand with him.

"I could have guessed as much," Sakura muttered under her breath.

He smirked, letting Hinata walk in front of them as he walked next to Sakura. His hand grazed her lower back and the unexpected contact caused her to stumble for a second. "I must confess I'm also a bit of a sore loser," he said low enough so only she could hear him.

A subtle layer of goosebumps raised on her arms. It had been some time since she had heard him speak in that gravelly voice. She admittedly missed it, she realized. "Again, not much of a surprise," she deadpanned.

The split teams took their sides as Ino smiled. "What's the wager here?"

"For every point against your team, you have to take a shot!" Naruto quickly shouted.

"Are you trying to get us trashed already?" Sakura blanched.

"Did you forget who is on your team?" Sasuke chided from beside her with a smirk.

"He's right, Sakura. Naruto may be a little too excited for his own good right now." Hinata whispered, not wanting her boyfriend to overhear her.

That wasn't all that much reassurance, but Sakura decided she'd suck it up and play anyway. One by one they stepped up and aimed the Frisbee at the opposite poles, missing by impressively small

margins in most cases. After a few exchanges, Naruto declared the warmup period was over and he was ready to kick some ass.

"That's one!" He shouted, bouncing the disk off of a glancing edge of the pole.

Sasuke grinned and cracked his knuckles. His toss landed dead center with the pole, inches below the bottle. Everyone else made it relatively close to the target, Hinata landing a turn on the rod as well. Naruto grew impatient, as did Sasuke, and they decided to turn the heat up. Shot for shot, they both hit the bottles. Ino counted four shots for each person up until that point and decided to interrupt.

"I'm going to call it a tie, just to spare us all." She said.

"I'm not done crushing him yet!" Naruto whined.

"Then you two can keep playing, but I know when to call it in." Ino beckoned for Sakura and Hinata to leave Sasuke and Naruto to their self-imposed demise as the rest of them moved back to the tents and blankets.

"Good luck," Sakura said as she left Sasuke's side. He smirked before turning back to his opponent.

As the sun neared its final descent, the group spectated as the two Hellborns continued. After a good twenty minutes, they lost count of how many points they had racked up. For every expert shot Sasuke took, Naruto followed them with his own and a yell. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth... When it was as close to sundown as she was willing to wait, Ino shouted across the field. "Final round, we need a fire!"

They squared off once more. As a shock to no one, both connected with their target bottles. The two returned to the others and were greeted by a round of applause, mostly because they didn't want to keep watching them any longer as it grew darker.

"Great job, Naruto," Hinata complimented as she passed him a cup of water.

"And here's your prize," Shikamaru said with a smug tone. He handed them each a full cup of straight tequila from a bottle he had produced from his bag.

Without blinking, the two raised their respective cups and one another and poured their contents down their throats. The golden light of the sun made it seem as though the liquor itself was on fire. Supernatural tolerances or not, they would without a doubt be feeling that soon enough.

"Sasuke, do you want to get the fire going for us?" Ino asked as she collected their empty cups.

He cleared his throat, trying to downplay the residual burning in his chest. "Hn. Sakura, do you know how to start a fire?"

"Oh, I bet she does-ow!" Naruto cried, Hinata quick to pinch his arm when he started his suggested remark.

"Um," Sakura paused for a moment. She never had but wasn't sure if she wanted to learn right then... from Sasuke. At least, not with that devastatingly handsome look he was aiming her way.

"We're gonna consolidate and cover the food here, you should go help him." Ino winked at Sakura and nudged her hard.

With a sigh, she nodded at Sasuke and followed him to the bonfire he had been building earlier. Before she did, Ino didn't forget to pass her a cup to match her own. They all still had to down their losing shots, after all. At that moment, however, she was a bit grateful for the liquid courage to calm her nerves. A couple of ounces would do her some good.

"This is the kindling we're going to use," Sasuke explained, picking at a pile of twigs and thin branches he had made earlier. "Help me

place them inside the center of the fire so we can light them up."

They crouched down together in the sand and began placing the sticks inside. Through the opening, he grabbed her hand to guide particularly long twig over. "You'll want that one nice and deep," he said as a blush spread across her cheeks. He grinned to himself but she didn't notice since she was refusing to take her eyes off the wood. They didn't say anything after that for a bit and she was perfectly content with focusing on the task at hand instead of him.

"Now is the fun part," Sasuke announced, producing a lighter from his pocket.

She watched as he slowly lit another long stick from both ends and lightly blew on it to grow the flames. He carefully inserted it in the small stack of kindling at the heart of the pit and then sat back on his heels next to her. In a matter of minutes, the flame spread to the rest of the sticks and twigs and then licked at the chopped logs around it.

"You're good at this," she commented, already mesmerized by the fire.

"Next time you can start the fire." She met his eyes and saw a spark of playfulness in them. She returned the smile.

By the time the sun had finally retired and the stars woke up, the bonfire was roaring at its best. Someone had turned the music up and a few more bottles of wine were retrieved from the trunk. After another bottle had been cleared, Ino began dancing around the fire and coaxed first Hinata, and later Sakura to join her. They were singing along to whatever pop song had queued up and laughing their way through the lyrics as they skipped around the fire.

"Careful," Shikamaru lazily called out to the women. They kept a good amount of distance from the flames, but he felt obligated to warn them at least.

The three men took a break from their drinks as well and enjoyed the antics of the women they were with as they kept circling in their flower crowns and delicate white dresses. The heat of the flames paired with the wine brought bright colors to everyone's cheeks. With each pass the women made around, the smell of flowers and light perspiration grazed the male onlookers. Naruto and Shikamaru were following their girlfriends, while Sasuke's gaze remained on Sakura, who was simply enjoying herself. He couldn't help the stupid smile that found its way across his lips then. She was so damn beautiful when she was happy.

"I need to sit for a minute," Ino panted, waving her hands in front of herself for Shikamaru to make room.

As she sat down, Hinata also agreed she could use a break and was welcomed into Naruto's arms. The lone stander, Sakura lingered on her feet for a moment, unsure exactly where she wanted to sit. When she looked at Sasuke, he patted the space next to him on the blanket he dragged over from the picnic. She accepted the offer and folded her legs underneath her dress next to him.

"You looked quite beautiful dancing up there," he said in that low tone that gave her shivers.

"Thank you," she replied. Her cheeks were already flushed from all the dancing, but she felt them grow even warmer at the compliment.

They fell into another lull of quiet as they enjoyed the crackling and dancing fire they built just over an hour earlier. Sakura took advantage of the peaceful moment to check in with herself after such an involved afternoon and unexpected turn of events in her weekend. Just 48 hours earlier, she was at home expecting Kiba to come back to her.

At the thought of him, her heart ached again as it had earlier in the day. The many drinks she had been working through all day were not enough to numb her that deep inside. She knew she was more distraught over Kiba's resignation to his monstrous life and the

weight of guilt became apparent in her. She had so desperately wanted to go back to simpler times, back to when she was in college and had only her remaining exams and beer budget to worry about... not the lineage of demons popping up or the resurrected evil ones that might ambush her in the bathtub. She chose to bathe herself in denial, evading her own questions about what possible future she could have with Kiba and what she would define as true happiness. Instead, she downplayed his curse and focused on who he was-or thought he was-in college.

She had to face the facts, though. She wasn't in college anymore, protected by the easy to follow guidelines of school or her care-free romance with a boy she enjoyed going out with. This was adulthood, her present-day reality. Now, granted, her last six months presented her with an exceptional plot twist that had irreversibly altered her life, but she couldn't say she regretted it. Despite how Kiba found his way back in her life, Sakura was in some ways relieved she had been reunited with him so she could get some closure. And in the aftermath, she was grateful for the company she was in that weekend after her breakup. At first, she was hesitant, but soon realized it would be wrong to categorize the weekend adventure as a mere distraction. These people were helping her heal... just in some less than orthodox ways.

She dared to take a glance at the man so close beside her. By comparison to the others at the camp, he was a harder pill to swallow. It was unclear if Sasuke was going to act like the others as her medicine or prove to ultimately be her poison. There was so much she didn't understand about his life, so much that she couldn't relate to. Yet time after time, she was undeniably drawn to him like a moth to a flame. The irony of the analogy wasn't lost on her as she felt the heat from the fire warming the entire front of her body.

Off to her right, she heard an odd sound and turned to see what it was just as Sasuke did the same. Embarrassment washed over her all at once when she saw the couples a few feet away from her

making out. They had no regard for the mixed company they were in which left her paralyzed at the moment.

"Are you kidding me," she said under her breath. Despite the less than subtle sexual undertones of Beltane, Sakura doubted her four shameless friends would act any different on any other night.

"Let's go for a walk," Sasuke suggested. She nodded immediately and took his hand to help stand up.

Walking away from the fire, they scooped up the keys from the main tent to fetch warmer clothes back in the cars. It was summertime, but the air was chillier up where they were. Sasuke produced a black hoodie he slipped his arms through but raised an eyebrow at Sakura when she didn't go to the other car. "Didn't you bring a sweater or something?" He asked.

She cringed, mostly at herself. "I wasn't really thinking about it when I was packing."

He turned back to his car and leaned in again. This time, he pulled out a dark blue sweater. "You're lucky I forgot I already had this in my bag," he said, tossing it to her.

She thanked him and pulled it over her head. He smirked at how ill-fitting it was on her, billowing around her torso. It was going to keep her warm and that was all that mattered. They locked up the cars and then dropped the keys in the tent. Before leaving, Sakura looked around for a flashlight.

"It'll be more fun without one," Sasuke suggested. "The moon is almost full and will give off enough light." When she still looked unconvinced, he recalled the time they were descending the unlit stairwell where she confessed her fear of the dark. "Do you think you can trust me to keep you safe?"

She looked him right in the eyes and searched them for her answer. She wasn't exactly sure what it was, but something told her she

should trust him then, that he would keep his word as he had done before.

"There's a trail I no took me down earlier," she finally said, implying he had convinced her. With a simple grin, he gestured for her to lead the way.

They reached the edge of the campground and the warmth of the fire was no longer present on their skin. Sakura stopped in her tracks. The path ahead was almost completely pitch black, hardly resembling what she remembered walking before. She tried squinting to see if she could make out the bushes from the trees but couldn't.

"Trust me," the man beside her softly encouraged. He offered her his arm and she wrapped her own around it to keep close.

"Once we're a little ways in, your eyes will adjust." He explained, his tone still even and gentle. She could only nod.

Within the first few minutes, every unexpected twig snapping or rustle in the leaves caused her to go rigid like a board. After they were about where I no had taken her to sit and regroup, Sakura could finally see her surroundings with more clarity. The moonlight glowed on the smooth surfaces of the leaves and raw ridges of the tree bark. Fireflies twinkled every few feet around them. She maintained her tight hold on Sasuke's arm, but he didn't mind. He found himself more at peace than he could recall experiencing in... well, ever.

"What's that?" She asked, squinting again through the darkness. She could see something shimmering but was unsure what it was exactly. As they drew closer, she gasped when she realized it was a small lake.

To his secret dismay, she released her grip on him and got as close to the water as she could without getting her shoes wet. He watched her gather the hem of her dress and squat down to put a hand in.

"Sasuke!" She shouted back at him. "It's not even that cold, can you believe that?"

He came up beside her on the rocky edge, hands hidden in his pockets. They stood next to each other and stared out over the silver lake they had stumbled upon. Her features had softened, he noticed, since he had first spotted her earlier that day. At least at that moment, her sadness had been pushed away. He thought back to what Naruto had told him about Kiba and wasn't sure if he should tell Sakura he knew about the breakup. At the same time, he realized it probably didn't matter since she most likely assumed someone had told him already.

"I'm sorry for being so weird with you," she said suddenly, pulling him from his inner debate.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye, her gaze still fixated across the water. "Hm," he hummed in acknowledgment. From her tone, he knew she had more she wanted to say.

"No helped me realize today that I was probably projecting my feelings onto you."

His ears perked in interest. "And what feelings were those?"

She chewed her bottom lip and gave a light kick to some pebbles in front of her. They broke the surface of the lake, creating a small rippling that melted outwards. "Embarrassment. And shame, mostly."

He chuckled at that and then brought himself down to rest on the rocks with his elbows propped on his knees. "Sit down with me."

Sakura looked around first. Whether it was for animals or witnesses, she wasn't sure. Regardless, once she had settled down comfortably, Sasuke began talking again. "In my former life, I met thousands upon thousands of humans with more sins to be embarrassed and ashamed of than there are leaves in this forest. Murder, incest, scamming, sabotaging.... I've seen it all." He turned

to her with conviction glinting in his eyes. "Believe me when I say you have nothing to be ashamed of. You may have made mistakes and have regrets, but you have not done anything wrong. You're a truly good person, Sakura."

Her own eyes filled with the glow of the moon and a layer of tears. "Sasuke," was all she managed to say. She hadn't expected such kind words from him. She didn't deserve them.

"I will confess," he started to say with a small grin directed at the water, "I wasn't thrilled when you were so quick to jump back into Kiba's arms the minute he came back."

Sakura's heart clenched. "I missed him for so long-"

"And look where that got you," he retorted suddenly. Regret hit him like a wall when he saw her flinch at that. He pinched the bridge of his nose and screwed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

She wiped her cheek and nodded. "No, you're right."

Neither of them said anything, but they didn't move either. The lapping of the water on the rocks filled the silence.

"You've been so open and kind to me, but I chose to go back to him."

Even the chorus of crickets and cicadas seemed to quiet down a bit after that as though they too were invested in the conversation.

"Explain to me why." His body had turned to face her and his voice had hardened, although it was no louder than before.

She shifted her body to face him and squared her shoulders before taking a deep breath. Looking at him then, she knew he knew what she was thinking, but wanted to hear her say it. He said she had nothing to be ashamed of, but this was the just punishment for the shame she did feel.

"I'm afraid of you."

She cringed immediately, the words not matching what she meant to express. His jaw locked and his eyes grew cold. As she watched his expression morph, panic took over.

"You don't understand," she started explaining, her hands flying to his. He tried pulling away, but her fingers curled into a vice grip. "Please let me explain, Sasuke."

He sneered. "Explain that you're afraid of me because I'm the Devil? That damned boyfriend of yours willingly became a monster all on his own, so don't waste your breath." He tried pulling his hands back again, but she refused to let go. "Give me my hands back."

She ignored his request, her heart hammering in her chest as her eyes grew wild. "I can't read you, Sasuke! That's what terrifies me." Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes as she kept talking, her voice rising in volume in sync with her emotions.

"I like structure, I like knowing what's going on. I hate surprises and being caught off guard almost as much as I hate feeling stupid. When I'm with you," she paused to pull in a shaky breath and hold off on crying. "When I'm with you, I don't know what you're going to say or how you're feeling. Kiba, on the other hand, is someone I could always understand to the point of being predictable... until he wasn't..." She blinked through her tears as she shook her ex from her mind.

"You and I," she pointed between them. "We *literally* come from separate worlds and our values are completely unaligned. You're out there looking for a good time, sleeping your way through New York, but that's not how I operate in the slightest. Despite me knowing this, you somehow have gotten so far in my head that I don't even recognize myself when I'm around you. You make me so nervous and flustered when I see you, but the minute you're gone I'm wishing you were still with me." She stopped for a moment when her voice started to shake at the end. "I don't know what to do and it's terrifying!"

He gave himself a moment to process her burst of a confession. Small tears dripped onto the backs of his hands, her knuckles white in her grip on him still. Another moment passed before he said anything. She wanted nothing more than to jump in the water and sink to the bottom.

"You think I just want to sleep with you?"

She wiped her nose and stared at him with a look on her face that clearly showed she wasn't sure she had heard him correctly.

"I don't want to *just* sleep with you, Sakura." He repeated. She looked at him with all the vulnerability she had exposed. "I've never felt the desire to do more than that with anyone, but you also bring out this unexpected side of me." He returned the squeeze on her fingers and watched the shock spread across her face.

"*That* is something to be terrified of," he said with his infamous smirk. "Not whether or not I'll completely ruin every sexual encounter you've ever had before me."

Sakura laughed at that, too overwhelmed to even be bothered with embarrassment. She had just confessed herself to him and him to her! Nothing could throw her off now. Or at least, so she thought.

Lost in her head, she didn't notice his hand reaching out towards her cheek and cupping the side of her face. The dark pools in his eyes shimmered with the reflecting light and revealed his vulnerability she didn't know existed in him until then. At the same time, it also illuminated his raw passion she recognized and wanted to explore even more. Her heart was hammering from the adrenaline that had been coursing since her confession a moment earlier and only sped up when she realized what he was doing.

Sasuke leaned in at the point, his face hardly an inch from hers. Sakura could feel the warmth radiating from his lips on hers as well as her raging pulse. She couldn't breathe. "Do you trust me?" He whispered.

"Yes," she immediately responded, almost begging.

And with that, he finally pressed his lips to hers.

He held them still in that first moment, just savoring the contact he had desired and yearned for after so many months. She was so soft and trembling against him. In no time at all, he grew hungry for her anxious excitement and wanted to coax out the true carnal desire hiding inside her. His mouth slanted over hers then and he released her cheek to skim both his hands down her sides to her ass, lifting her into his lap. She squeaked out of surprise, but soon melted against him and his warmth. He was so, so warm...

Large hands stroked at her waist and over her ribs as he gently suckled on her bottom lip and licked at it like candy. At first, her touches were light and gingerly, but soon grew more confident as she appreciated his hard chest and gripped the front of his hoodie. He growled as he felt his desire grow and brought one hand up to cradle her head as he pressed his tongue to her teeth for permission to enter. Sakura hesitantly opened her mouth just a bit for him. Sasuke smiled, slowly stroking her tongue with his as he acclimated her to his presence. A small moan escaped her throat. He knew she was loving the attention, but didn't want to press too much too quick on her. He let out another satisfied growl that sent a sharp shiver down her spine before pulling back. Right as she was about to say something, he wrapped one arm behind her back and the other below her ass again. The devilman carefully picked her up and stood, catching her off-guard once more before he started walking away from the rocky shore's edge.

A moment later, he was lowering her back down again, but this time they were a few feet farther from the water and on a soft bed of grass. Still without a single word exchanged between them, he laid Sakura on her back and hovered above her on his forearms as he reunited their lips. Her hands reached into his dark, silky locks and ran through them, letting her nails graze his scalp. He showed his appreciation for the sensation by smirking against her. Her mind became mush under his hypnotic ministrations, but her eyes

snapped open when he pulled her around and on top of him. Before she knew it, her legs were straddling this divine creature with looks that could kill as efficiently as his devil form could. His arms snaked around her back then and pulled her flat against him to place a gentle kiss on her lips.

"You're in charge, Sakura." His deep voice vibrated his chest beneath her. "You set the limits."

Sasuke's eyes were now a rich oxblood, but still soft and recognizable. She took a moment to catch her breath and slow her heart that was running faster than a hummingbird's. Looking down at him as a curtain of her hair fell around them, he kissed her once more.

Holy fuck, she was not expecting *this* .

He grinned at her and raised an amused eyebrow. "You had so much to say earlier."

She let out a laugh. "I wasn't expecting that at all, you really threw me off."

"Let's be clear," he said in a dangerously low tone. His hands gripped onto her hips. "I'll never throw you off, not when you feel this good." He slowly ground his pelvis up towards her and she stiffened. The delicious friction he created between them brought the soaked state of her underwear to her immediate attention.

"We should," she paused as her desires wrestled her self-restraint, but reigned it in. "We should head back to camp."

Reluctantly, he helped her climb off of him before he got up as well. Once he did, she wrapped her arms around his back and pressed her cheek hard into his chest. He hesitated at first, but then followed this newly discovered side of himself and circled his arms back around her.

After a moment, she pulled back just enough to look up at him. When he looked down, he was slightly confused by the apprehension in her face. "I'm not sure what this is," she said as she looked down between their sealed bodies, "but I know I need some time to work through my feelings for Kiba still."

He nodded with some understanding. "Will I need to wait until that's done before I can kiss you again?"

She stared at him while she thought that through. He took advantage and craned his neck down to ghost the flat of his warm tongue just under her earlobe and slowly lay a few wet kisses down her neck. "N-no, I don't think that's possible," she stammered as her mind blanked under the contact.

Sasuke's face became smug. "Hn, that's fine with me."

The woods seemed less intimidating as they walked back down the trail. At first she thought it was simply because her eyes had fully adjusted, but in reality, she knew it was her trust in the man beside her. As he held her hand tightly in his own, she could feel his protective energy vibrating off of him. He had *feelings* for her and was willing to wait until she was ready before going any further. At least for that night, she let was going to let herself feel on top of the world.

Meanwhile, Sasuke was disentangling his own feelings. It was such a foreign sensation, an amplified and more explosive cousin to the fluttering he would feel around her before. Try as he might, he couldn't get that damned smile off his fucking face. But it didn't matter. This feeling was better than any drug he had tried before, and Hell knew he had tried them all.

He glanced down at the woman beside him and paid attention to the swell in his heart as he did so. Was this feeling, he wondered, the indicator that he had finally found his humanity? Was he anchored to the human world for good now? He'd have to talk with Naruto later.

The pair emerged from the trail and back in the campground. There was still music playing, but...

"Oh my god," Sakura gasped as she turned away.

Sasuke blinked and then saw what startled Sakura so badly. On the far side of the bonfire, Ino was stark naked and straddling an equally undressed Shikamaru. Her hair and breasts were bouncing wildly without abandon as he guided her hips down onto him over and over again. Back towards the open tent Naruto had brought, there was another display of affection in full motion. Sasuke wasn't sure if Sakura had even seen them or just the two by the fire, but he could see Naruto as clear as day burying his face in between Hinata's legs as she covered her blissed face with her arm.

"Hn," the devilman grunted. This was not helping his resolve to give Sakura his patience. It also was making her uncomfortable, so he knew he needed to do something about that as well. "Ritual sex is a huge part of Beltane," he offered, trying to mask his amusement.

"I don't think they mean for us to see this, nor do I want to," Sakura said behind him.

He was going to say he had received more than an invitation to watch-if not participate-from Ino and Shikamaru many times before but had a strong feeling that wasn't going to help. Instead, he turned around to face Sakura while blocking the camp view behind him. "Shall we head back to the lake?" He asked with a mischievous smile.

She blushed as he ran his fingers over the sweater shielding her arms from his touch. "... Are they at least almost done..?"

He twisted his neck to look over his shoulder for a check. "Probably a little while longer, Ino is greedy like that."

Sakura felt a drop in her stomach as she recalled Ino telling her that she and Sasuke used to hook up. She quickly wiped the despair

from her face but not before he could see it. "What?" He asked.

"We can talk about it somewhere else," she shook her head. "Why don't we walk over to the bathhouse?"

He nodded and then turned in the direction they needed to go. Fortunately, they didn't need to walk through their campground, just by it. Ten minutes down the path they had reached the building. There were a few picnic tables around the small structure and separate entrances on opposite sides. A floodlight on either side lit the entrances from within.

"I'll meet you out here when you're done?" He asked.

They both went into their respective sides, taking a much needed minute to quite literally look at themselves in the mirror. Sasuke stepped into the grey tiled bathroom and was greeted by the echo of his own steps inside. Empty.

The first thing he did without question was find his way to the sinks to splash cold water onto his face. The combination of his thrilling makeout session with Sakura and accidental voyeuristic viewing at the camp had set his body on fire. He desired to do so much with her, *to her*, but he knew he needed to keep his word and be patient. When he let out a deep sigh, the audible exhaustion made it sound like someone else's he didn't recognize.

There were a lot of new things happening. He was experiencing feelings that went beyond his usual lust and may have put a stop to the ticking time bomb that was his indefinite humanity. If finding love was his key to remaining human-like it was for Naruto, then he was on his way to fulfilling his life's goal. After he relieved himself at the urinals and returned to the sinks, he couldn't help but wonder if he was right or not. Would They, the Fate Deciders in his realm below, let him know he had succeeded in finding his true happiness? Was he going to be secure in his human form after finding love or would he be dragged back to Hell as a failure?

It seemed Sakura was not the only one who had some things to work out...

On the other side of the bathhouse, her mind was spinning just as fast as his, but exactly for the same reasons. After a much-needed squat on the toilet, she washed her hands and assessed the woman standing in front of her in the mirror. Her cheeks were still flushed from the most recent events and she could feel her heart fluttering inside her ribs. She carefully scraped at the creases of mascara that had collected under her bottom lashes and tried fruitlessly to smooth her frizzy and tangled hair. After a minute or two of that, it dawned on her that her flower crown was missing. She had worked so hard on it when they first arrived, but she wasn't about to ask Sasuke to bring her back to the lake where she knew it must have fallen off.

She took a deep breath and a step back as she looked at herself once more. The hoodie she had borrowed was like a tent on her, and not in a cute way. She turned to the side and frowned, not expecting to see herself as a supermodel, but something more than just the familiar face she was used to seeing all her life. She realized what she was searching for was something extraordinary that would match up with the surreal situation she had found herself in. How was it that she, Sakura Haruno, was rebounding from her werewolf-esque boyfriend with the former Satan of Hell? And was it even a rebound? Or something more, or less..?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of hushed whispers entering the bathroom. As two young women turned the corner and came into view, they burst into giggles.

"You have to invite him back to camp if he's still out there," the first one gushed. She had on biker shorts and a cropped pullover on, her taut stomach on display.

"Alright, but you need to promise you won't bitch at me if I take him into the tent!" The other woman had on similar shorts paired with a sports bra and unzipped hoodie. Sakura was certain this girl was a model or something.

"Let's see if he has any friends to keep me company!"

They didn't even waste a glance at Sakura and she was grateful for it. Her eyes fell to her grass-stained dress. There was no way what was going on between her and Sasuke was destined to be anything more than a fling, regardless of her growing feelings for him. He was irresistibly gorgeous and had a sexual appetite that could make Hugh Hefner blush. How could she honestly expect a man like him, with all the options in the world, to remain faithful to her while she worked through her feelings for her ex-boyfriend? And speaking of Kiba, she had only broken up with him the day before, did she even take a *breath* between last kissing Kiba and then Sasuke...?

As she walked back outside into the darkness, she soaked in the sight of her personal Adonis waiting for her by one of the picnic tables. He had taken off his hoodie and was sitting on the bench with his elbows propped on the tabletop behind him, his chest exposed by the unbuttoned opening of his shirt. When she looked up at his eyes, she saw the playful twinkle that let her know he caught her gawking. Unreal.

"Hey," she said, stopping to stand a few steps in front of him. Her shadow draped over him as the lights from the building behind her lit the small clearing they were in.

"Hey yourself," he responded with one hand outstretched. Looking at her then, he decided to put his worries aside and instead focus on the lovely angel in front of him. He wasn't sure if he was uncovering his 'true happiness', but he knew she was without a doubt making him happier than he had been in a long time.

She gave him her hand and let him pull her to his lap so she was seated on his thigh. He wrapped one arm behind her back and rested his opposite hand just above her knee. "Why were you upset earlier at the campground?" He watched her brain replay whatever had bothered her and avert her eyes.

"It's really dumb," she said in an attempt to brush it off. He only raised an eyebrow in response, refusing to let go of her until he got an answer. Eventually, she sighed in defeat. "You commented on how Ino is in bed," she muttered.

He cocked his head to the side. "That she's greedy?"

Sakura nodded, not offering any further clarity. "Was that rude or something? She'd tell you the same thing herself."

"It's not that, it's that you know because you've had sex with her." She felt like a child and wanted to be done with this discussion. She had no right to be upset about this.

Sasuke didn't respond right away, so they stayed as they were with her sitting on him. The two women came out of the bathrooms and visibly stiffened. With their male target occupied, they resigned to sulking back to their campsite. Sakura realized he didn't even seem to notice them and wondered if she had always been so insecure like this.

"Does it bother you that Ino and I have fooled around before?" He asked, determined to get to the bottom of what was upsetting Sakura.

She shook her head. "It's not that... It just felt like a reminder of how... casual... you are about sex, and that's something I don't think I'll ever not consider being a big deal."

He nodded in thought. She was right, he had a very different take on sex than she did. He had more partners than... he actually didn't know what to compare the number to since it never occurred to him to even keep count of how many people he had been with. Sakura, on the other hand, put more weight on the activity. He knew it required a level of trust and intimacy they had not yet reached. To be honest with himself, he wasn't certain they ever would.

"I understand," he said, gesturing for them to stand up. "And I respect that. I think we'll have to cross that bridge when we get there, but for now, let's just enjoy what we're doing here and now."

He tilted her chin up, causing her breath to hitch before he connected them in another breathtaking kiss. Her eyes fluttered open as they separated to the sight of his crooked, cocky grin. She rolled her eyes but nodded. He was right. She was jumping the gun even though she was the one requesting that they hold off on any next steps between them until she was ready.

"Should we head back?" He asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

"Do you think they're done and decent?"

He grabbed her hand and started them off in the direction of their friends. "They should be done, but I don't think I've ever seen Naruto or Ino be decent."

When the bonfire came into sight, Sasuke looked around first. The two couples were done messing around and put clothes on at some point. They were all sitting around the fire with a basket of graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows.

Naruto turned when he heard the grass crunching behind him. "There you are, and HEY..!" He yelled, pointing an accusatory finger at Sasuke and Sakura. "You're holding HANDS!"

The others all looked up to see that they were holding hands. Sakura reflexively tried to pull away out of embarrassment, but Sasuke responded by intertwining their fingers. Ino and Hinata exchanged a knowing look while Shikamaru let out a slight scoff.

"We were wondering where you two had wandered off for so long," Ino remarked, passing a skewer to Sasuke for roasting marshmallows.

Sasuke sat down with Sakura beside him on one of the blankets as he examined the stick. "We would have considered showing you, but you were all a little too busy fucking around out here by the time we got back."

Hinata choked on the s'more sandwich she just bit into while Naruto started laughing. "So did you two fuck?" He asked with no shame in his crude question or the fact that they were all spotted having sex out in the open.

Sasuke saw Sakura stiffen out of the corner of his eye. "We did not!" She snapped at Naruto, her temper flaring and amusing Sasuke.

"Not yet," the devilman instigated with a grin.

"Well, whatever happened, I approve," Ino said with a smug look sent in Sakura's direction. "And on Beltane, of all days!"

While Sakura simmered down, Sasuke passed her the stick with a marshmallow stabbed onto it. "Thanks," she said so quietly only he could hear her.

They all seemed to fall back into their comfort zone like they had when they were sitting around the fire earlier in the day. Sakura found herself pleasantly surprised by how normal it felt to be cozied up to Sasuke's side, roasting marshmallows and resting her cheek on his shoulder. When she finished constructing her first s'more and took a messy bite from it, he turned her face to him so he could lick the chocolate off of her lip. A shudder ran down her spine and she couldn't help but wonder if there was a way to stop time and live the rest of her life in that night.

After her third sandwich, she and the others started to fade out and yawn. Even the fire was looked about ready to call it quits for the night. Shikamaru put his arm around Ino and began rubbing her shoulder to rouse her from her dozed state.

"C'mon babe," he said. "Let's get going to bed."

As the two stood to make their way to the tent, Sakura looked over at Hinata with uncertainty. She then looked at Naruto, who shrugged. "You can try and squeeze in with all of us if you want," he offered reluctantly. In any other situation, he'd be all for adding another woman to their sleeping arrangement, but he was exhausted and they were going to be crammed as it was with only one tent between the two couples.

"Is my tent not up to your standards?" Sasuke asked with a taunting tone.

Sakura turned to him with apprehension written across her face. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

He remained unphased. "I'm not sleeping outside, and I'm guessing you'd also rather not, so I would say it's a good idea." He had a point there.

The remaining four campers slowly brought themselves to gather the remnants of their snacks and head towards the tents. Naruto and Hinata joined Shikamaru and Ino in the bigger tent, while Sakura lingered by the fire as Sasuke put it out. The last of the white plumes of steam and smoke dissipated and Sasuke turned his gaze on the quiet woman beside him. She had her arms folded across her chest and a solemn look creasing her beautiful face. He said nothing as she stared up at the moon. He knew she was thinking about *him* again.

At first, he felt anger, thinking he had fallen prey to jealousy. But after that fear subsided, he realized it wasn't jealousy, but frustration. She was hurting because of the stupid deal Kiba made with Itachi and he wasn't able to take that pain away. Sasuke knew he could use his Devil's tongue to talk his way into or out of most anything, but he couldn't use it to help Sakura escape this haunting pain. It was annoying, to say the least.

"Ready?" He asked.

She broke her trance and looked back at Sasuke and the bonfire. The wood was completely black and ashen, the flames long gone. How long had she been staring at the sky for?

"Yeah," she managed to say with a weak smile.

He didn't say anything to acknowledge the change in her demeanor, but he did place a large hand on her back to escort her to his tent. The others were already dead asleep a few yards away under the A-frame, and Naruto's snores could be picked up when everything else was quiet.

"Is there uh, a sleeping bag?" Sakura asked, arms still crossed. Sasuke couldn't help but feel slightly amused by her discomfort.

"No, it'd get too hot. I figured we could bundle in these blankets," he explained as he held up the three or four quilts and sheets folded in his arms.

She nodded.

"Hey," he said to call her attention to him fully. "Are you okay?"

"Sorry, I don't want to dampen the mood. I'm just feeling a little emotionally worn out." She busied her hands with her hair and began pulling it into a bun behind her head.

"Hn," he grunted. "I'm going to set up the blankets. Do you need to change?"

Even in the moonlight and nothing else, he could see her pale. "Shit," she cursed under her breath.

"Did you forget pajamas, too?" Sasuke asked, clearly incredulous. She could only nod. "I'm sure I have an extra shirt."

Sasuke spread out the quilts along the floor of the tent before trekking up to the car to get her a shirt. Meanwhile, Sakura poked her head in the tent to properly size it up. It was spacious for a single

person but would be tight quarters for two to share. She imagined herself pinned below his heavy body in there, his addictive lips feasting on hers. A pinch on her buttcheek made her jump and yank her head out of the tent.

"What was that for?" She demanded, her face flushed.

Sasuke didn't respond. He simply offered up a white tee folded in his hand. Sakura calmed herself down and took the shirt from him before heading into the tent to change.

"Let me know when you're done," he told her as he turned on the mini lantern inside and closed the tent fold behind her.

Once inside, she unfolded the shirt and tentatively held it against herself. It reached her upper thigh, so she knew it wasn't likely that her butt was going to get much coverage with it on. At least it was something. She bit her lip at the thought of her only alternative, which was sleeping in her bra and underwear beside Sasuke. It was then that she remembered that he slept shirtless when they were sleeping in the living room during the winter storm.

She knew she was taking too long lost in her thoughts, so she quickly pulled her dress over her head and unhooked her bra. As she tugged the shirt on, she struggled to hold back a moan of contentment. Sasuke's smell enveloped her and caressed her skin. As the cotton skimmed her nipples she felt them harden at the contact as though it as Sasuke himself touching her. She gave herself a moment to cover her legs with the sheet before letting him know she was done.

When the flap peeled back, Sakura's line of sight was first matched by the crotch of Sasuke's black boxer briefs. He bent at his waist to make his way inside and Sakura immediately realized she underestimated just how little space there really would be in the tent. And then the wild card - Sasuke wasn't wearing pajama pants. Just underwear.

He crawled in beside her and stretched out on top of the sheet she was hiding underneath. She couldn't help but watch with entranced eyes as his muscles flexed down his arms and torso as he made himself comfortable.

"Did you forget your pajamas, too?" She asked, mustering a teasing tone.

He looked up at her with a smirk. "No, I just figured I'd even the playing field since you forgot yours."

Without her permission, her eyes did a lap down his body once more and lingered a split second longer than they should have on his lower half. He had very defined thighs to no one's surprise and his underwear left next to nothing for the imagination to fill the gaps on. When she realized her shameless gawking hadn't gone without notice, she tore her gaze off of his unbelievable body and to her lap.

"Ready for bed?" He asked, his smirk evident in his voice.

"Yeah," she managed as she scooted her way down onto her back. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him shift around so he was able to pull the sheet over himself and bring his body next to hers with so little in between.

He flicked the lantern off and turned onto his side to face her. "I know we agreed to wait, but I must say," he whispered in that raspy voice that brought goosebumps down her arms. "I want nothing more than to ravish you right now in that t-shirt."

"Sasuke," she groaned, pulling the sheet over her face. "Why do you always say such embarrassing things?"

Under the sheet, the devilman slid a hand across her stomach and curled around her waist. She lowered the sheet just below her eyes and watched him intently.

"I mean what I say. Why do you find that embarrassing?" He snuck his hand back out from under the sheet and pulled the material down from her face.

She avoided meeting his eyes and shrugged. "It's just very direct, I guess."

Sasuke turned her chin towards him and surprised her with how close his face suddenly was. "Does my direct approach bother you?"

She couldn't stop looking at his lips and felt all other thoughts melt away. "Not exactly," she admitted.

"Good," he said before sealing their lips together.

The kiss was simply a soft connection at first, but a primal growl reverberated in his throat as his body longed for more. One hand cradled her cheek in it while the other planted itself on her hip, guiding her to roll onto her side to face him. She didn't fight him at all on this and seemed eager herself.

"I love how you taste, Sakura." His husky words fanned across her face just before he dipped his tongue through her parted lips.

She moaned in response and welcomed his hold on her as he pulled her closer, flush against him. Her hands seemed to find their inclinations and groped at his chest. She admired his well-developed pectoral muscles under her small palms before trailing one hand up to his neck and into his hair. A small tug on his locks earned her a deep growl before he suddenly had her pinned underneath him.

"Sakura..." he growled out with lust thick in his voice.

His eyes were hooded and glowing a deep ruby red above her. She was panting and saw he was as well, but probably for slightly different reasons. She knew she was getting worked up and could feel herself already soaking through her underwear for the second time that night. Sasuke, on the other hand, was most likely struggling

with something a little more powerful. He didn't have to explain it to her to notice. His muscles were rigid and tense, his breath shaky with rusty self-control being put to the test. She wondered if he had ever hooked up with someone without having sex.

"I need to feel you," he said more evenly. "I just want to feel your body with my hands."

Sakura watched him as she thought it over. Her mind was fogged by lust, making her more willing to compromise and explore.

"You can touch me, but that's it!" She wagged a finger in his face and got a smirk back as confirmation. Before she knew it, her eyes were fluttering shut as a wave of pleasure coursed through her.

"You feel so nice, baby," he whispered in her ear as his hand massaged her breast between them. He had also shifted himself to be straddling one of her legs, bringing his crotch flush against her. Through that contact alone, she knew she had a good idea as to how big Sasuke was and almost second-guessed her decision to take it slow.

Their kisses grew even more heated as he continued his ministrations on her breasts. Sakura found herself clawing at his back, desperately attempting to bring him closer to her. He wrapped an arm around her entire body and made sure they were flush together, except for the other hand still toying with her breasts.

"I have to feel you," he whispered, his hand pulling back.

In her haze, she didn't understand right away, but when she felt pressure against the front of her underwear, her eyes rolled back into her head. He was just rubbing a finger against her covered opening, but he might as well have rammed her right then and there with the amount of pleasure coursing through her at the contact.

"Fuck," he hissed. "You're so wet, Sakura." He kept rubbing the length of his middle finger along her shielded slit, his finger

becoming coated in her essence.

"S-Stop," she forced herself to say. His hand immediately retracted and he created an inch of space between their bodies.

Sasuke brought the wet appendage to his mouth and sucked the residue that had gathered across it as she watched in shock.

"I'm sorry," she whispered eventually. "I don't think I can handle much more than that," she confessed.

He sighed beside her and rolled to his back. "I understand."

The silence that followed was heavy and did nothing to mute their raging hormones and visible desires. Sasuke cursed himself for pushing his boundaries just hours after Sakura set them. He didn't mean to formulate an excuse for himself, but this sexual desire she was evoking from him was so much more potent than anything else he had felt before.

"May I kiss you goodnight?" He asked, sounding much more in control than he had minutes ago.

She nodded, so he leaned over her to plant one last kiss on her for the night. Looking down at her then, her cheeks flushed, lips were swollen, eyes glazed over and hair wild, he knew his control would only be challenged further as time moved on.

"Thank you, Sasuke," she whispered. Her eyes were slowly closing as the exhaustion from the day kicked in.

"What for?" He asked, bringing his hand up to caress her cheek one more time.

"For allowing me to trust you,"

"Hn, you'll never have to worry about that." His face softened as she fell asleep next to him. "I promise."

How are we feeling? I'm sure a bunch of you are screaming, 'FINALLY!' and to those, I want to say thank you for your patience up until now. Sasuke is now tasked with building up his self-control until Sakura feels ready to completely move on from mourning her relationship with Kiba. What will that take for each of them to get there? We'll have to see it! As usual, I'm anxiously waiting to hear from you all and what you made of this much-anticipated turning point in the story. Thank you all again! xoxo

Chapter 17

Hello again! I come to you under this fine new moon with yet another chapter! I had to mess around with a few continuity errors I gave myself, which slowed me down a lot. But, nonetheless, they've been resolved/plugged/dealt with accordingly, so we are good to go. So without further ado, I present to you... Chapter 17!

CH 17

The first thing Sakura felt when she awoke was absolute peace. Her cheek was resting on something warm and smooth while her fingers tested a similar surface nearby. Before the pentagram tattoo even came into sight, she knew exactly where she was and *who* she was waking up on top of. She couldn't hear any movement from the other tent and the body underneath her was undisturbed, so she figured it would be best she kept herself as still as possible to avoid stirring anyone else awake.

Her eyelids dared to crack open and prove her assumptions to be correct as Sasuke's chest came into sight in the early morning light. That familiar tattoo over his heart was just inches from where her cheek rested on his firm pectoral. He was probably the sexiest man she had ever seen, she thought to herself. Her heart picked up when she brought her attention to her hand splayed across his abdomen. Even relaxed and asleep, his muscles were taut and pronounced to the touch. She was overcome with temptation and wanted to run her hand across the planes of his stomach and chest, but buried the urge as best she could. If he woke up, she wouldn't be able to so freely take in this eye candy without the pressure of his amused gaze.

Gently, she angled her head back to look at his sleeping face. Flawless, aristocratic features paired perfectly with his thick lashes that cloaked the most piercing set of eyes that always saw right

through her. She could feel his chest gently rise and fall with each breath underneath her and she tried to imagine what it would be like to wake up next to him before going to work. Did he like to snuggle in the morning? Or did he prefer to start his day as soon as he opened his eyes? By the time it was already too late, she realized she had subconsciously started stroking his abdomen with her hand. His face didn't stir, but she felt his hand envelope hers.

"Taking advantage of an old, sleeping devil, are we?" He teased, his eyes still closed and his voice dewy with sleep.

She tried to pull her hand away as though stricken with a burn, but he held a firm grip to keep her against him. The hand that was cradling the back of his head released itself and flexed. He brought it down to anchor Sakura to his side and smirked at how lovely her soft body felt against him.

"Don't resist your punishment, darling," he advised as she started to stiffen.

"Sasuke," she groaned, starting to squirm in his hold.

Before she could even blink, he had her pinned beneath him just as he did the night before. She tried to wiggle and twist out of his trap fruitlessly. His eyes were still hooded with sleep while her hands were both trapped in one of his above her head. She felt a mixture of instinctive fear and arousal as she laid hostage beneath his godly body. His actions seemed reflexive and all too effortless. He wasn't even fully awake, yet he had her expertly pinned and heating at her core. What would it feel like, she wondered, to have him fully ravish her?

"Sakura," he purred. "I don't think you realize you're playing with fire." His hips dipped to meet hers and she felt an unmistakable bulge press against her thigh. Whether it was simply a case of morning wood or something more, she couldn't help but be distracted by it.

A shudder ran down her spine. She hadn't even had a cup of coffee yet and this man was already drawing out oceans of feelings and inner aches from within her that could only be resolved one of two ways... one solo and one with a helping hand... Once she had stilled her body, he rolled off of her and onto his back at her side again.

"Are you two done messing around in there? I need help with breakfast," Ino called from outside their tent.

"Be out in a minute," Sakura shouted, watching as Sasuke's face darkened with annoyance. She only offered a sheepish smile in return.

"A minute, huh?" The devilman smirked, propping himself up on one arm next to her.

Sakura sat up to grab her dress folded by her feet. She was planning on putting on the stale garment to get herself to the car where her clean clothes were stowed away. It was then that she became acutely aware of the sour taste in her mouth from not brushing her teeth the night before and craved a swig of mouthwash ASAP.

"Did I say I was done with you?" Sasuke's deep voice made her hesitate for a moment, but she gathered the willpower to pull her dress over her head and t-shirt.

While the fabric was bunched over her face and constricting her forearms, Sasuke snaked his arms around her middle and pulled her back flush to his chest and between his legs. One arm kept her bound and blinded in the white dress while the other explored the soft flesh of her stomach in lazy circles.

"I don't tolerate defiance, Sakura," he growled as he brushed his thumb against the underside of her breast. She audibly gasped at the contact and felt her nipples harden beneath his shirt she was still wearing to sleep in.

"I'm not your underling in Hell, Sasuke," she retorted. She couldn't see his face, so she missed his smirk.

"You're correct," he said with his lips still curled with mischief. His hand ghosted over one of her erect nipples on its way to her neck so he could push the bunched fabric out of his way. She felt his warm tongue stroke the sensitive skin on her pulse before he placed a chaste kiss on the spot. "They know just how sick my torture can be."

With that, he released her. She felt herself out of breath as she resumed getting dressed. Sasuke busied himself with pulling on his pants but chose to leave his shirt in the tent. "I'm going to help Ino," he informed her as he opened the tent up to leave.

She blinked, her mind catching up with what had just happened. Time and time again, Sasuke was catching her off-guard and taking advantage of her reaction time to trap, tease and use her for his amusement. At first, it made her heart pound and sent her into a flustered state of desire, but she was done letting this one-sided gameplay out any longer. What she did next happened more on auto-pilot, or at least that's what she told herself.

"Wait," she called to him, bringing his movement to a halt.

Her hands hooked into the waist of his jeans before she used all her strength to yank him back into the tent next to her. She would have winced at the impact he wasn't expecting, but she was too focused on straddling him as soon as he landed. Delicate fingers dove into his wild hair and nails scraped too hard into his scalp. He allowed an appreciative groan to escape his chest in a rumbling sound. Before he knew what to make of this sudden change in Sakura, she pressed her hot core onto him so he could feel her need against his stomach and then plunged her tongue into his waiting mouth.

Neither had the best breath by any means, but this carnal need surpassed their concerns around such trivial matters. She was making a point to express her true desires to him, to make sure there

was no doubt in his mind that she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. And on top of that, she didn't want to just play his game but win at it as well. Not one to waste an opportunity, Sasuke brought both hands to her behind and splayed his fingers to grab as much of her flesh as possible. She moaned into his mouth in response and he grinned against her. Eventually, she pushed her palms into his chest for leverage to sit up.

"I needed to do that," she breathed when they parted for air.

He gave her a light spank with one of his hands, surprising her. "I'm glad you did."

The morning floated by with the grace and leisure only otherwise observed in the clouds. At first, Ino and Naruto took turns making cheeky comments at Sasuke and Sakura but that soon mellowed out.

Everyone had their own shortlist of chores before they departed. Sakura was tasked with walking the perimeter of the campground to look for rogue trash or cups that may have blown out of their sight. As she shuffled around with her eyes focused on the grass and leaves, her mind wandered. The pit in her heart from days before was back and just as strong as it was when she and Kiba were officially no more. She felt herself growing frustrated and her footsteps started to hit the ground harder. Why was she feeling this way? Yes, it had only been two days ago, but this wasn't sadness... This was guilt. What the hell did she have to feel guilty for? Kiba made a deal with the devil all on his own. She angrily snatched up a paper plate stuck in a bush. He also cheated on her on his own accord as well. So why was she the one burdened with these feelings!?

Back with the others, the group broke down their tents, folded up all the blankets, bagged up the collected trash and loaded the three rental cars to head home. Ino could tell something was a bit off with Sakura, but Sasuke was first to offer her a ride back to her apartment in Brooklyn.

"You four are all heading to the same place. I can drop Sakura at home on my way to dropping my rental off," he explained with a cool tone that left little room for a rebuttal. Sakura just shrugged.

"Well," Ino started as she approached her pink-haired friend, "I'll see you tomorrow at work, then." The two embraced.

"Thank you for inviting me out here," Sakura murmured into the shoulder of Ino's cropped sweater.

"That's what friends are for. Plus," Ino pulled back with one of her mischievous grins. "The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else, so I think you're doing just fine."

" *Ino!* "

The rest of them exchanged goodbyes and a promise for another get-together soon. Sakura followed Sasuke to his car and let him take her bag to place it in the back seat. The pair watched as the other two cars pulled out of the camp before getting in the front seats.

"Did you have a good weekend?" Sasuke asked, revving the engine.

"I did," was her short answer. He glanced at her from the corner of his sunglasses and kept a neutral expression while they followed the road out onto the highway.

The sudden mood change wasn't something of a surprise. He certainly hadn't forgotten the circumstances under which he had hooked up with Sakura. She was upset about Kiba (as expected) and there was no doubt in his mind that she was thinking about him as she stared blankly ahead. Sasuke reminded himself that her grieving had nothing to do with him and exclusively to do with her selfless nature. Still, it was a test of his patience he rarely implemented with others, and as a result, the car ride was quiet for the first half of it as he left her to her thoughts.

When they eventually hit traffic, however, his patience wavered.

"How do you think he's doing right now?" He asked with his eyes focused on the car in front of them.

"What?" Sakura asked although she had no trouble hearing him. When he didn't respond right away, she sighed. It would be pointless to play dumb with Sasuke and she knew it would only insult him. "I'm not sure."

"Hn," he grunted in response.

More silence.

He wanted to offer some words of comfort but struggled to find any. Kiba was out in his wolf form roaming around somewhere, his heart probably aching and head a complete mess. He did, after all, fall into a lopsided deal from the start and had nothing good to show of it now that he had done the devil's mysterious bidding. Sasuke held back a snort at that, unable to exactly sympathize with the dog boy. Sakura, on the other hand, was burdened with concern and sadness for him.

The iconic architecture of New York City's skyline came into view eventually, signaling the final leg of their drive. Sasuke pulled in front of Sakura's building just as the sun was starting to tilt to the West. They hadn't said anything since the comment about Kiba, but Sasuke did get out of the car to help Sakura with her bags.

"Thanks," she said as he placed her bags on the curb next to her.

"No problem," he responded, his voice more distant than usual.

She shifted her weight between her feet and he placed his hands in his pockets as he waited for her to find the words she was clearly shuffling through in her mind.

"I'm sorry for acting weird this morning," she started out saying. "I'm just feeling a little overwhelmed, I think."

He nodded. He didn't regret kissing her when he did but knew he had to accept the consequences of the overall timing.

"Well, I'm going to head up, then. Definitely need a shower," Sakura laughed awkwardly.

Sasuke gave her a small smirk and leaned over to kiss her forehead. "I'll see you around," he said before walking back to the car. She felt her heart sink a bit after she half-expected one last kiss, but resigned to grabbing her bags and heading inside.

Once back in her apartment, she carelessly tossed her things just inside the doorway. A deep sigh fell from her lips and her shoulders deflated almost instantly. Part of her was happy to be home with some much needed time to herself, and the other part of her wished to see Kiba's goofy smile on the couch waiting for her.

As she shuffled over to the vacant couch, she granted herself a moment to reflect on the whiplash-inducing change that had gotten her to that very moment of emotional exhaustion. Over the course of the last year, she moved across the country to New York, got a great job at a women's clinic downtown, made a bunch of weird occultist friends, reconnected with her missing boyfriend, met the Devil, was attacked by the Devil before *him*, found out her boyfriend was a damned werewolf-shifting creature, broke up with *his* unfaithful ass, and then started hooking up with Sasuke.....

She dropped onto the cushions with the weight of just her sudden year-in-review. The heels of her palms pressed against her eyes as she recalled the days of thinking back-to-back exams or jealous girls in college pining for Kiba would be the death of her...

Her eyes snapped open.

Karin.

What would she do if she found out Sakura and Sasuke had been hooking up over the weekend? The malicious woman had sent out those demonic sex tapes months ago, but the images were still fresh in Sakura's mind. Karin typically worked weekends while Sakura and Ino worked weekdays, so there were far and few days in between when Karin would pick up a shift in the middle of the week when Sakura was there.

She groaned and forced herself to check the clinic's calendar and felt a slight wave of relief when she didn't see Karin's name anywhere over the next few days. It wasn't like she or Ino would share the details of their weekend with her anyway, but it still made her feel somewhat better to know they didn't have to cross paths. Her mind drifted to her midnight kisses by the lake for a soothing distraction.

But as it did before, the churning mixture of sadness and desire soon rose up inside of her. Her fleeting daydream of Sasuke's hypnotic lips and caresses blended with Kiba's lonesome gaze in the woods.

The sun began leaning in through her window as if to check on her, its long rays streaking across her wood floors. When she looked at the time, she was surprised to see how long she had been vegetating on her couch. Time seemed to be slipping by so quickly that day, it was as though she only blinked once between it being afternoon and dusk. What felt like just a few minutes was actually well over an hour. As the fingers of sunlight extending closer and closer to the wall, she wished she could have witnessed time pass just as fast between her breakup with Kiba and hookup with Sasuke as it had that weekend. Would she feel so burdened and upset if she had a few weeks to digest her loss of Kiba first? Even just a few days? She threw an arm over her eyes and wished she could ask Hinata and Ino to magically turn back time or at least make her think they did.

She knew she couldn't, so instead, she opted to pray for patience - both for herself and for Sasuke. She knew this wasn't much easier on him than it was on her, as was evident in the car ride back. While

she was still a bit wary of the man, she couldn't deny how drawn to him she had been all this time. Their moments together out camping only solidified her passion and hunger for more. And seeing that vulnerable side of him when they first kissed... she blushed.

She owed it to him to get her shit together. Actually, fuck that..! She owed it to *herself* to take control of her feelings and act on the things she had power over. The young and flushed woman stood up, motivation suddenly surging through her. She had been sad and conflicted long enough, so she decided to take her first steps to pull it together.

Her hands dug into her pocket and whipped out her phone, swiftly pulling up her music to connect to her speakers. With her upbeat playlist blasting, Sakura purposefully strut over to her cabinets and pulled out an array of cleaning supplies. If she was going to clean her act up, she figured she might as well start from the ground up, which in this case was her apartment.

Scrubbing and wiping and dancing and shining, she spent her evening expelling every hint of dust and trace of subconscious settling leftover from her relationship. Once her apartment was renewed and sparkling, she turned to her mirror to reflect on what was next.

The sweat and dirt that had collected from the weekend excursion had blended with the dust and Clorox from her impromptu cleaning marathon. Underneath all of that, she started to see a familiar spark she hadn't caught a glimpse of in years.

"Welcome back," she said to her reflection. "It's been way too long."

The echo of measured footsteps clapped against the black marble stairs. As the lone figure descended past each mounted torch, the flames quivered as though out of fear of his wicked wrath. With each spiral of steps he completed, the temperature dropped significantly. He slowed once he reached the towering throne room doors, each

side flanked by three demons in their black and deep violet uniforms. Even a demon such as himself had to lock his jaw to suppress his teeth from chattering. The guards sneered at him, barely masking their bloodthirst. He could smell their rabid nature seeping from their hideous grey flesh.

"I'm here to see our Lord Satan," he stated.

"But of course, Sir Kabuto," the creatures harmonized.

Hearing his name slide from their mouths felt like sludge filling his ears. Despite his discomfort, he remained cemented in place as the monstrous doors dragged open for him to pass through. The six sets of red eyes stalked him as he walked inside up until the last sliver of visibility was sealed away by the doors moving back into place. The cavernous space was filled whistling wind and agonizing screams that were as loud as it was dark in there. As Kabuto continued deeper in, he slowed when his boots met the unmistakable ice that made up Hell's core. He couldn't help but wince at the sound of flesh and bones crunching.

"Kabuto," a familiar voice called. "You've kept me waiting."

The ponytailed man dropped to one knee where he stood in the pitch-black abyss. "Forgive me, I was finishing my charm work with that pawn of ours."

"Mmmm," Orochimaru hummed black flames lit the divide between himself and Kabuto. The frozen lake was illuminated just enough to reveal the damned souls trapped in the ice and eternally tortured by demons around them. Lord Orochimaru was in his complete Satanic form, filling the cave more than a storm cloud could. Looking up at his leader, Kabuto could only see his monstrous face twisted with sick satisfaction and framed by long pools of hair that resembled crude oil pouring from the depths of the Earth. Behind Orochimaru, he could see a movement that he knew was coming from his bat-like wings that kept the lake as frozen as it was.

"And how is that mortal girl doing today? Still mourning her shameful revenge plot against our dear Sasuke?" Blackened blood seeped from his mouth as he gnawed on the mangled corpse of Kisame, Sasuke's successor.

Kabuto grinned as he looked up at his lord. Watching the nearly unrecognizable body of the Satan they took down sent a jolt of adrenaline through him. "Not as much today after she found her new direction."

Orochimaru let a sickening smile of his own pull at his thin lips as his elongated tongue wet them. "As long as that direction leads them all straight to Hell, I don't care how you get them here."

It was Monday morning, usually what is everyone's least favorite time of the week. But this time, Sakura made sure she wasn't part of that 'everyone.' She surfaced out of the subway with her coffee in hand and rekindled sparkle back in her eye. Her glossy hair was pulled back into a ponytail, allowing her to revel in the crisp air that met the nape of her neck on her stroll to the clinic.

"Good morning," she sang as she practically skipped inside.

In the back office space, Ino raised an eyebrow, not expecting or enjoying the pep in Sakura's step. It was too early and the coffee hadn't kicked in yet. "You know it's Monday, right?"

"Yep," Sakura responded without any shame. "I had a really great day after I got home yesterday, so I'm just riding that out."

Her blonde friend furrowed her brow and put down her own coffee mug she was nursing. She stepped over to Sakura's side and put a hand on her elbow. Sakura stopped what she was doing in the filing cabinet and turned to Ino as the Witch leaned into her.

"Did you and Sasuke..?" Ino started to ask.

Sakura blinked twice and then paled. "N-no, definitely not!"

Ino leaned into the wall. "Then what happened?"

"I decided I wasn't going to waste my time feeling sorry for myself anymore," Sakura stated simply. "I don't want to be upset, so I'm channeling that energy into more productive things like self-care and work."

The blonde watched her energized friend turn back to the file at hand. "Self-care and work," she mumbled to herself.

"Are you going to sign up for a yoga retreat next?" The two of them turned to the doorway to see who had made the taunting remark. To both of their surprise, it was Karin.

"What the hell are you doing here today, Karin?" Ino spat back, eyes hardened like stones.

The redhead shot her a smug grin and propped a hand on her hip. "Moegi needed her week covered last minute, so I took on the extra days for the overtime." She sauntered past them and filled up her mug with coffee, taking her time to walk back out. "See you around, sluts."

Sakura remained silent, her fingers tight on the folder she was holding. Upon seeing this, Ino softened and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't let her bother you, she's not worth it." Sakura nodded. It was easy to agree, but harder to push the feelings back.

The day went on as scheduled, the appointments set for the day coming and going in an uneventful fashion. With her newly restored drive to take ownership of her feelings and future, Sakura took advantage of the time she had free for lunch to study up on some of the new clinical research they received earlier in the month while she ate. As she buried herself in the printed copy in the break room, she realized her hair tie was pulling a little too hard and opted to take it out.

"Ever the nerd, I see," Karin remarked, pulling Sakura's attention from the publication.

"One-dimensional as always, I see," Sakura retorted. She held back a grin when she saw the woman redden with anger.

"Too much of a loser to get lunch with anyone?" She asked, perusing the communal fridge.

"Nope, just decided I'm all the company I need right this moment." Sakura tried to focus back in on her reading but was once again interrupted by Karin's presence. She stood right beside the table Sakura was seated at and waited until she looked up at her to say something. "What, Karin?"

"You may think you're better than me because Sasuke's fucking you right now, but that won't matter much longer."

Sakura narrowed her eyes. "Was that a threat?"

Karin snatched up Sakura's hair tie off the table and snapped it onto her own wrist. "I'm always a threat."

The confused clinician watched her colleague take her time leaving as she sat there in complete confusion. "What the fuck was that about?" Sakura asked herself.

Meanwhile, Karin's malicious smile morphed into a deep-set frown as she turned the corner to go to the restrooms down the hall. She wasted no time in locking the door before examining her wrist. Her eyes widened with excitement as she yanked off the elastic hair, a few pink strands tangled around it.

"Soon enough," she whispered as she delicately collected the hairs, "you won't matter much at all."

"Any plans this week?" Ino asked as she and Sakura prepared to leave for the day.

"Tenten and I are gonna go for a run tonight. I was thinking about texting Sasuke-"

"Oh were you, now?" Ino teased.

"-to see if he wants to get dinner later in the week," Sakura finished.

"Hinata and I are planning a pasta night Friday if you want to come over for a ladies' night," Ino offered as they grabbed their bags and closed up the back office.

The pair made their way outside as the golden hour washed over the city in a heavenly light. It was still warm from the late afternoon sun that had soaked the miles of concrete.

"I have some errands I need to run, so I'll catch you later?" Ino asked as they approached the subway station.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow!" Sakura waved as Ino kept walking before she went down to her train.

Her wide grin eased into a softer expression as she navigated the stream of foot traffic below ground. In the moments where you're surrounded by the most people, you very well might be most alone. Sakura squeezed onto the train a few hundred of her closest Brooklyn-bound strangers and let her gaze fall to the dark window as they zoomed through the tunnels. She was embracing her new self-issued lease on life but felt the toll of the day wearing on her.

And she still had her run to do.

About an hour and a gallon of sweat later, that new lease was looking a little less shiny.

"Let's," Sakura wheezed, "call it a day."

Tenten threw her hands on her hips and stared at Sakura hunched over. "Fine, but you need to do some running in between us going together."

"Fine," Sakura responded with not the most solid commitment.

"So tell me more about this weekend, the food sounded insane." Tenten prodded as they walked over to a park bench to drink from their water bottles.

"Well," Sakura started saying. "Sasuke was there."

" *What?* " Tenten gasped. "He surprised you after your breakup?"

"No," Sakura sighed. "Naruto surprised us *both* by not telling either of us the other would be there..."

Tenten leaned well into Sakura's personal space. "And?" Her hesitation was all the bunhead needed. "YOU HOOKED UP WITH SASUKE!"

Sakura smacked her hand over her own eyes. "Yes..."

"Look at you, player, onto the next one!" Tenten cheered, shimmying her shoulders for emphasis.

Sakura rolled her eyes. "It wasn't like that, and we only kissed. Besides," she fixated her hands on her ponytail as she collected her thoughts. "I'm still working through my feelings about Kiba so he knows I need time before anything else happens."

Tenten nodded in understanding. "From what you've told me, he has some issues to work through that are out of your control."

"Yeah, you're right."

The second the words left her mouth and she processed what Tenten had just said, it was like a switch had been flipped.

"Um," Sakura suddenly stood up. "Thanks for the run, but I need to get going."

Tenten furrowed her brow as Sakura seemed to morph into a ball of urgency. "Sure, I'll catch up with you soon?"

Sakura was already running off, twisting to wave back at her friend. "Of course, see you!"

"Weirdo," Tenten scoffed as she stretched her arms. "At least now I can go for a serious run."

The last rays of light dissipated outside and passed the baton to the usual array of candles Hinata had lined up near the windows. She paced back and forth a few times with her pale gaze switching between the candles and the street outside.

"What's with all the candles, Hina?" Ino asked, munching on a bowl of cereal.

"I've had an uneasy feeling all day and wanted to ward off any bad energy the night might bring in," she explained as her pacing ended.

"Now that you've mentioned it, I also have been feeling a little off today. Hm," Ino picked up a deck of tarot cards she kept on their coffee table and sat cross-legged in front of it, her cereal put off to the side.

After taking a moment to meditate on her intentions, she pulled three cards as Hinata sat beside her. "Let's see what our situation reveals," she mumbled, flipping the first one over. "Ace of Pentacles."

"The beginning of something?" Hinata wondered. "Could this be the beginning of Sakura and Sasuke's relationship?"

Ino nodded, her eyes focused on the middle card next. "As we both know, it has some weighted potential, for better or worse." She flipped the card. "Our actions in response to this beginning..."

Hinata swallowed hard. "The Hanged Man. Sacrifice."

The blonde Witch let out a deep breath. "That could be a lot of things," she explained. "Martyrdom doesn't need to result in literal death. The last card will hopefully frame this a little better..."

The aggressive yell of the front door buzzer caused them both to jump. Ino got up and answered it, surprised to hear Sakura's voice through the intercom.

"Were you expecting her?" Hinata asked, pushing herself to her feet.

"No, not at all." Ino unlocked the front door to peer outside just as Sakura climbed up the last flight of stairs.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this," Sakura bowed apologetically and out of breath. "But I had a crazy idea and needed to talk to you both right away." Ino stood there no less confused but gestured for her sweaty friend to step inside. "Do you mind opening a window? I kind of ran a good part of the way here and am burning up."

Hinata nodded and started to unlatch one of the windows closest to her. As she lifted the glass pane, a burst of wind rushed into the room and scattered a few papers that were on the coffee table, including the three tarot cards Ino had pulled.

"Oh!" Hinata squeaked.

Sakura bent down to help collect the mess and saw the cards. "Were you reading a tarot spread?"

"Yeah," Ino reached out to take the papers from Sakura's hands that included the cards. When she saw the third card, she paled. It was Death.

Hinata saw her roommate's expression and quickly stepped in to take the pile from Ino. "So tell us what's going on," she said, stacking everything on the dining table while stowing the card in her skirt pocket.

Sakura took a seat on the couch and waited until the two Witches sat across from her in the armchairs. "I want your help to get Kiba's soul back." The two Witches looked at each other and then back at Sakura. Her heart was pounding from not just her run but her conviction. "I need to do this."

Ino didn't say anything, which Sakura knew was out of character for her. She turned to Hinata. "I can't just turn a blind eye to him simply because he wronged me. Yes, he made a few stupid decisions, but that doesn't mean he deserves to spend his life wandering without the option of finding himself and maybe one day settling down."

Hinata nodded. "It's a beautiful idea to want to save his soul, but it's not an easy task to accomplish."

"I didn't think it would be," Sakura countered. "But I want to do this."

"Why?" Ino spat. Both of the other women turned to her, not expecting the venomous tone. "You must have already assumed it will take a great deal of sacrifice to not only retrieve a soul but to go against the Devil's will."

The other Witch put a hand on Ino's arm. "What she means by that is we know firsthand what the Devil is capable of-"

"As do I!" Sakura shouted. "He attacked me in your old apartment! Don't tell me you forgot why you moved already?"

"Watch it, Sakura!" Ino clapped back. "It seems you've forgotten who has come to who for help!"

Silence filled the space between them.

"It's not that we don't want to help you, we just don't want you to put yourself in danger," Hinata explained, her voice soft and almost inaudible. When Sakura didn't respond, Hinata looked over at her. The woman's chin was tucked into her chest, hiding her face from view, but tears were splattering on her lap. "Sakura..."

"It's not that I want to do this, it's that it's the right thing to do. I need to do this." She looked up and wiped the tears from her face to reveal a stern expression full of determination. It was clear they were not going to convince her otherwise.

Seeing this, Ino sighed. "We'll need to do some research on this."

Sakura was suddenly beaming. "You won't regret this, I promise!"

He crossed the street with hardly a glance in either direction at the traffic. It was a little after seven, the time he had agreed to meet Sakura for dinner. He was hungry, tired and cranky from working through a pile of paperwork his assistant decided he couldn't put off any longer. If it were anyone else, he would have canceled the plans altogether and opted for takeout and his bar cart at home.

But it wasn't anyone else. It was Sakura. The mortal woman who unwittingly had his heart in her hands.

What a joke Fate was playing on him. He was undeniably in a foul mood, so any happy thoughts were long forgotten somewhere back at his apartment. He glared at the asphalt, as though to glare into the faces of those who tethered his interest in Sakura.

She was a beautiful woman, had a good sense of humor, and was entertaining to tease. But when it came to her other inclinations, he couldn't help but wonder if they would be compatible. Yes, he enjoyed the tenderness he discovered in himself when they first kissed that weekend, but would she satiate his true appetite? Was she enough?

He ran a hand through his hair as though to unknot those thoughts from his brain before heading inside. Sakura had insisted she be the one to take *him* out this time, which is how he found himself in front of Loreley's. It was a German Biergarten overflowing with twenty-somethings on a Thursday night. Once he had his ID checked by the bouncer, he weaved his way through the boisterous crowd to find the host stand. Before he got that far, he saw the bar directly inside and halfway down, Sakura.

He decided to hang back for a moment and observe her for the first time since he had seen her two weeks prior. She was in her pair of dark jeans he enjoyed and a cropped blouse that exposed her creamy lower back while she sat on the barstool. Her hair brushed just below her shoulders and was adorned by a clip that held the tresses at her temples at the back of her head. She was laughing at something the guy next to her had said and had her radiant smile on full display. She was glowing.

She had a small beer stein in front of her and he deduced she had been waiting a little while for him, seeing as it was about half empty. Despite the wait he unintentionally burdened her with, she didn't seem bothered. In fact, she appeared quite comfortable.

Sure, Sasuke knew he had chemistry with her, but almost everyone found themselves drawn into Sasuke thanks to his dark allure. And on his end... He wasn't necessarily known for his self-control or conservative tendencies. With that in mind, he tried to make sense of what it was about Sakura that had him so enchanted.

The man placed his fingertips on her knee and Sasuke felt his jaw tighten. The strange thing that followed was how she responded. He watched her take his hand and place it on the bar. He could tell from reading her lips she wasn't apologizing, but instead simply telling him she wasn't interested. She bid him a good night and stood from her seat with her eyes scanning the crowd with a sigh. When her eyes finally found him, the jump in his heart was enough to remind him exactly why he was pursuing her. It was that very feeling only she could bring out of him.

"Finally," she exclaimed, lightly slapping him on the arm. "I can't believe you had me waiting so long!"

"It's only fifteen after seven," he started to say but stopped when he saw her cross her arms. "But that is no excuse. Forgive me," he grinned as he gently caressed her cheek.

She smiled at him before taking his hand in hers to guide him to the host stand. "Two, under Sakura," she informed the hostess. With a curt nod, they were escorted to the end of a long farm table in the back of the restaurant. There was a small patio outside, but they were seated just inside so they could enjoy the breeze without being swallowed by the happy hour crowd out there.

"So do you actually enjoy beer gardens or are you trying to relive Tenten's birthday?" Sasuke teased, sitting across from Sakura.

She smiled, managing to focus on the menu instead of memories of the devilman pulling her into a dance at the bar not that long ago. "Want to split some things?"

He quirked an eyebrow. There was something different about her. "Hn, what do you want?"

Sakura reached across and pointed just between his hands at the center of the menu. "I came here a few weeks ago with some coworkers and we saw a table get this, I've been thinking about it ever since!"

Sasuke looked down to see what she was getting all hyped about. "Is this..a party platter?"

Sakura stiffened in her seat against the accusation. "So what if it is? I'm really hungry, and someone kept me waiting for hours!"

"It was no more than a few minutes, Sakura."

"What can I get you two tonight?" A waiter asked, suddenly appearing next to their table.

"I'll take the Altbier," Sasuke started.

"And I'll have the Pilsner, please," Sakura added. "And the 'Feast' for us!"

"Sounds like a good time. Be back soon," the waiter nodded.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes across the table. The last time he saw her, she was overcome by a tangle of grief and guilt for Kiba. Staring at her then, she seemed perfectly fine and chipper. He was clearly missing something and wasn't feeling patient about figuring out what that was.

"Why are you so happy?" He asked, his tone catching her by surprise.

She furrowed her brow and straightened her back. "We're on a date..?"

He leaned back in his chair as he pinched the bridge of his nose. It was at that moment he knew he should have used a little more tact. "I've had a long day, and, wasn't expecting you to be so... *upbeat* since I last saw you."

Sakura chewed at the inside of her cheek. When he had dropped her off after camping, she was working through her feelings about Kiba. The clattering and chattering from the tables around them filled the space in the conversation she should have known was going to have come up. If anything, she had hoped they would have had their beers in front of them first.

"I'm working on a way to get Kiba his soul back," she said with an air of confidence he had grown to admire.

He raised an amused eyebrow. "Is that so?"

He had no doubt she had done some studying on her own, but as the former Keeper of the Damned, he knew such a feat would not be possible for a mortal. Their beers showed up then and Sasuke took a sip through his smirk. He knew Sakura was quietly steaming in response to his arrogant demeanor, but he couldn't help it! How was he supposed to take her seriously?

"Ino and Hinata are helping me." Sakura took a sip of her own beer and watched his expression darken a touch.

"Hn," he grunted. His arms folded across his chest, the fine fabric of his suit jacket creasing. "And what is it exactly that the three of you are planning?"

"A summoning," she responded, folding her own arms.

Sasuke felt the corner of his mouth twitch with annoyance. Ino knew better than any Witch out there that such an act of magic was outside their realm of skill and ability.

"We're looking for a Summoner to help," Sakura added, as though reading his thoughts. She did her best to hold her composure as Sasuke's expression darkened further, bordering on anger.

"You don't know what kind of evil you risk bringing to this world by toying with such magic," he bit out in a low tone only she could hear. She dared to meet his hardened gaze and refused to back down.

"He doesn't deserve to remain like this-"

"He brought this upon himself, Sakura!"

His outburst startled her and the tables closest to them. Sakura swallowed hard as she saw the fork and slosh of beer that had fallen from the force of his fist on the table. Things had escalated so quickly she knew she had to give herself a moment to regroup. Slowly, she brought her eyes back to his. "He's important to me. I have to help him."

Sasuke wanted to give some sort of retort but couldn't find any words for that. The waitress, who had overheard enough of their argument to stall a few tables back, decided to take advantage of the pause to quickly drop off their food.

"We're going to do this whether you support it or not, Sasuke."

"You know," he started. "Ino made a deal with me long ago that puts me in control of her abilities." Sasuke watched her eyes widen at that. "I'll forbid her from helping you with this."

Sakura gawked at him. "Are you being serious right now?"

He said nothing.

Sakura felt her eyes grow warm as tears started to build up. Ino had warned her against telling him, but she didn't think he'd react to such an extreme as this. In fact, she was hoping she could convince him to help her. Hurt and disappointment washed over as she looked away to blink back the liquid that had threatened to weaken her demeanor.

After their weekend upstate, she thought she knew understood him and vice versa, but that was clearly not the case. He was still selfish, stubborn, and by her standards nothing more than a brute. Yes, it was different in the sense that he used to be the Devil, but beyond that, he was just like every other guy she dated before him: a jerk.

"You know what, Sasuke," she said, pushing herself away from the table to stand. "This has been really enlightening, but I think I need to go."

He opened his mouth to say something but didn't know what to say. In the back of his mind, he knew he should apologize, but he didn't see why he should. He knew he was right for not ever wanting her to mess with the chaos that is Hell, much less to help her ex-boyfriend.

He rose from his seat as well, but before he could decide what his next move would be, she held up her hand. "Don't follow me." She slapped a couple of twenties on the table and turned to leave.

Sasuke eventually sat back down, alone and angry, just as he was before he came in. He stared down at the platter of meats, cheeses, and pretzels all beautifully arranged for them. He felt sick to his stomach suddenly in a way that he hadn't felt before. Even though it was new to him as an experience, he knew the feeling plenty well. That feeling was none other than guilt.

Across the city, a muddled pile of dried herbs, ground-up teeth, bones, and beetles began to cloud the room with smoke as an ill-intentioned hand set fire to the mixture. Karin, with eyes glazed over by hate, began chanting as the fire grew in front of her. Her lungs soon felt as though the fire had spread inside of them as did her eyes, but she continued to push through. Even as she wheezed with her weakened breath, she added the next round of powder and plants to the concoction.

"Just one more thing and you're done," the insidious voice behind her coaxed. His glasses gleamed in this light of the fire as his wicked grin remained plastered in place.

She nodded, fishing in her pocket for the napkin inside. Opening the crumpled paper, she revealed just a few strands of hair. Pink hair.

"Burn them," the voice instructed. And she did, a crooked smile growing on her face as they shriveled into nothing but smoke and ash.

So there we have it! Didn't take long for them to get into their first fight post-hookup, now did it? But hey, Sakura's not the pushover some too quickly take her to be. And KARIN! What exactly is this woman up to with Kabuto the Creep beside her?

As always, please review and thanks for reading! xoxo

Chapter 18

Hello again, friends! We're coming in hot this Friday afternoon with a jam-packed chapter of SSD. For those that have been sticking it out since the beginning, I appreciate you. And for those that have binge-read up until this chapter, I am so jealous of your attention spans! 3 Please enjoy this chapter and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

CH 18

Sasuke paced his office yet again, his eyes darting to the phone full of disdain. Once he started to get dizzy from the rapid spinning back and forth, he threw himself into his chair to stare directly at the damned device that had been challenging him all morning.

The reason he was all out of sorts wasn't that he had been on the receiving end of a barrage of calls. In fact, he had his secretary route all inbound calls to voicemail with the promise of a callback the next day. He needed to be distraction-free so he could make one call. Just one simple call. This had been his plan since 8 am that morning. He looked at his watch and saw it was already after 11:30 am. He growled. How the fuck could a simple fucking phone call derail him so hard?

He snatched up the phone from his desk and punched in the number his secretary had given him countless times before that he never called back. Until today.

Sasuke could hear ringing as the call connected and straightened his tie in a failed attempt to calm himself. "So you finally decided to return my calls," the rich and familiar voice greeted him.

"Hn," he grunted. "Meet me at Dock's in thirty minutes."

"It would be my pleasure," the voice responded with an audible smile.

It was an unusually slow day for the clinic. A few scheduled appointments had been sprinkled through the morning, but not enough to keep the entire team busy. Sakura didn't mind, though. She was nestled in the back of the breakroom with her nose buried deep in one of her many books with her attention completely committed to the text before her.

Ino entered the room seeking out some caffeine to keep her alert but wasn't surprised at all to see her friend. "Hey Sak," she called out as she watched her copy something into her notebook.

"Hey Ino," she responded, her mind clearly too preoccupied to talk beyond that.

The blonde sighed and leaned on the communal fridge. She wanted so badly to help, but after the surprise visit from the darling Devil, she knew her hands were tied.

"Who the hell is holding down our buzzer out there?" Ino yelled to herself, marching to the intercom. "Who is this!?" She demanded.

"Open the door, Witch."

Cold sweat instantly rushed over her. It had been some time, possibly years since Ino had heard Sasuke use that tone with her. Without much choice, she pushed the button to buzz him in. As she waited for him to make his way up the stairs, she cursed to herself as it dawned on her this man was going to have her head on a stick if he saw all the research on soul retrieval scattered all over. She quickly gathered all the books from the dining table and threw them haphazardly into her room as his footsteps echoed outside. Running across the apartment, she scooped up the print outs and notebooks Hinata and Sakura had been using from the coffee table and barely got them under the couch as Sasuke's fist hammered on the door.

"Coming!" She yelled, her heart racing. She opened the door after taking a deep breath and steadied herself as she looked up at her visitor. "What are you doing here, Sasuke?"

"We need to talk." He took a step forward and Ino was forced to move out of the way as he entered the apartment. She noted the icy look in his eye and knew it would be wise to avoid any games with him tonight.

"Do you want anything to drink?" She asked, cautiously following him to the living room. "Should I get myself a drink?"

He spun around suddenly with no warning and towered over her. At that moment he looked twice as large as he usually did and she wasn't sure if it was her imagination or if he actually grew with his anger.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Ino?" He barked.

"What, um-"

"Cut the bullshit, woman, and answer me." His voice had morphed into something darker, sinister and inhuman. Her body automatically dropped to her knees before him.

"She's my friend and I want to help her," Ino explained, her brain stunned by the sudden control he had on her. She focused her eyes on his black leather shoes in front of her, unable to lift them any higher.

"I will only say this once, so listen carefully," he instructed. "I forbid you from helping Sakura retrieve Kiba's soul from Hell."

"Why-"

Before she could even process the fact that he had suspended her by the front of her shirt, he trapped her in his blood-red glare.

"Do not challenge me after I have been so lenient with you all these years, Miss Yamanaka."

She swallowed as she took in his horrid demon face that she loathed seeing. It shook her to her core and silenced every ounce of a fight she had in her, exactly as he intended.

He lowered her to her feet and then made his way back toward the door. "Sasuke," she called to him desperately.

He stopped but didn't turn around. He didn't need to look to know the pain that was etched across her face. "I don't know what I would do if anything were to happen to her, Ino."

And then he was gone.

He ran a hand through his hair one last time as the bar came into sight. How many years had it been since they had seen one another? A hundred years? Maybe two? He couldn't be exactly sure, but that didn't matter. What mattered was what his brother had done within the past few years and how the chain of events had impacted his life, coincidences be damned.

The lively oyster bar was humming with the early lunch crowd, mostly suits and ties. After a quick scan, Sasuke spotted his brother's signature ponytail at the bar with a coffee in front of him. He sighed before walking over.

"Wouldn't Mother be so delighted to see her two sons together again," Itachi wondered out loud as he stirred a little milk into his cup.

Sasuke unbuttoned his jacket and sat in the seat next to him. "Whisky on the rocks," he said as the bartender approached him. He fought the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose as he watched the man then take a few other drink orders. Of course, it was his luck that he'd have to start this conversation completely sober.

"Tell me, brother, what made you suddenly so interested in seeing me?" Ruby irises turned to Sasuke without an ounce of emotion hinted. He always hated it when he looked at him like that.

"Why did you make a deal with that idiot boy?"

Itachi blinked in a lazy fashion one could only liken to that of a cat's. "Centuries without a word from you and already onto business." He shook his head. "I suppose you were never the sentimental type. Sakura's boyfriend, is that who you're referring to?"

Sasuke frowned. "Ex-boyfriend. Yes."

Itachi nodded and looked up at the ceiling as though he didn't have an immortal memory or ulterior motives. Sasuke barely kept his temper in check and knocked back half his drink as soon as the bartender handed it to him.

"What do you think of that Sakura girl?"

Sasuke stiffened. "Don't change the subject. Why did you make a deal with Kiba? What's your game?"

The older of the two brothers let out a soft sigh and leaned on his elbow. When Sasuke met Itachi's eyes this time, he saw an emotion he didn't immediately recognize... It was regret. He felt a pit in his stomach form in anticipation for whatever it was Itachi was going to tell him. He had always been his too-wise older brother, the poster child that overshadowed anything and everything he ever did. So what could he be holding off from confessing that could call for so much stalling?

"For what feels like an eternity, I've always known you would eventually be one of my successors in Hell. It was a long-standing comfort for me even as I retired to this world. But," he hesitated, his face growing solemn. "The Fates showed me your struggles in this life that would lead to your descent back to Hell and I couldn't just stand by and allow that to happen."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "So am I to not only believe you felt the need to interject yourself in my life, but also that Kiba has something to do with it?"

"Precisely," Itachi responded without hesitation. "As a catalyst of sorts."

"What do you mean?"

Itachi smirked softly. "Dense as ever, I see." Before Sasuke could lash out, he continued. "We needed Kiba to help you learn there is more to pursue in others than just lust."

Sasuke glared into his drink, the ice mostly melted thanks to his grip on the glass. "So let me get this straight," he started at an almost inaudible volume. "You thought I was going to fail at finding my true path to my humanity, so you tried to throw me a bone? How pathetic do you think I am?" He hissed, barely keeping himself from yelling.

"Your human form was expiring-"

"And I am working on it..!"

"You were trying to seduce the one woman who wasn't immediately falling for your charms, Sasuke. You needed something to help you realize you wanted more from her than just sex."

The younger devil sneered. "So you decided bringing her deadbeat boyfriend back would do the trick? I'd thank you for that, but I had already figured it out, you meddling asshole. And guess what? Still not human."

"I apologize, Sasuke." Itachi folded his hands in his lap and straightened his already perfect posture. Sasuke could only feel his temper rising.

"Then fix it, brother. Bring Kiba's soul back and save me from this headache that is Sakura's stubbornness to get it back herself!"

Itachi's smile was coy. "A stubbornness to challenge yours?" He chuckled. "You know very well, dear brother, I cannot undo my own deal. No devil can."

Sasuke ran a hand through his hair again, the locks becoming impossibly more disheveled. He took a moment to compose himself before asking the question he already knew the answer to. "How can I get his soul back?"

His brother slowly sipped at his coffee, his lids lowered. "You would have to go back to Hell yourself and retrieve it."

Going back to Hell in his volatile state would be a complete gamble. Without the guarantee of his human life, there was a very likely chance he could be trapped down there without the ability to pull himself back out. And for what? This human girl? He felt his heart clench. Her warm smile and tender touch enveloped his mind's eye. She was gentle and conservative in her interactions with others, something he admittedly could stand to learn from. And her patience.... Oh, the fucking patience. If one could die from blue balls, she would have been offered a top-rate position in Hell. This wasn't just some girl. She was the one to show him there was more to intimacy than sex and what it was like to long for love. This was someone who cared for him, demon roots and all.

But was she someone he could fall in love with?

Sakura was important to him, there was no denying that. But was she worth going back to Hell for? Everything suddenly felt more real than ever before. His future was on the line and he couldn't say for certain he was ready to risk it all for someone who only demonstrated a commitment to another man that abandoned her in the first place.

Sasuke stood up and ripped out a few bills from his breast pocket.

"Little brother-"

"Thanks so much, now because of you, I'm not only no closer to earning my humanity, but now have to worry about the trouble Sakura is going to get herself into trying to save Kiba's soul that you damned to Hell in the first place!"

It wasn't even the second half of the day, yet Ino found herself already running on autopilot. As she closed the door to the exam room, her hand lingered on the cold metal handle. A small frown formed. The sensation brought back memories of the ritual knife she used that fated night years ago when she formed her pact with Sasuke. Sure, she enjoyed the insights and luxuries her craft afforded her, but at what cost? She wouldn't admit it to anyone but her most recent dreams were just recollections of her deal with the Devil and the endless opportunities she thought she could then manifest. Looking back, she could only grimace at her greed.

She let go with a sigh and made her way to the break room for another cup of coffee. As she rounded the corner, she was only half surprised to see her pink-headed friend still in there, asleep on her notebooks. She sighed yet again and started walking towards her to wake her up. Sakura may not have had any appointments on the calendar, but it wouldn't be a good look for her if their supervisor came into such a sight.

As Ino got closer to the source of the snoring, she thought back to that fated night the previous Fall when she had invited Sakura over. Ino found her to be a curious combo of hidden spunk and air of innocence that she couldn't help but find entertaining. She was trying to broaden her friend circle outside of her occult interests anyway, so she didn't see any harm. Another sigh passed her lips.

She looked down at Sakura's face and noted the shadows under her lashes and the small furrow in her brow. The woman had been obsessively reading in an effort to help Kiba to the point of neglecting her own health. Ino would call it quits after a few hours, but Sakura would pack up her books and continue into the early hours of dawn back at her own apartment.

The Witch looked down at the books stacked under Sakura's elbow to see what she had been reading through that morning. With just a glance, she felt her eyes widen after reading the spines. Her knees bent immediately to crouch down for a closer look. 'Could this be..?'

The books she had in her possession were unusual in that they weren't on the subject of recalling a soul from Hell. They were about the plight of Satan and saving demon souls. Ino's eyes began to water and she couldn't help herself from stroking Sakura's hair.

"You're such a hopeless case, you know that?" Ino teased, lightly flicking the sleeping woman's forehead.

Sakura jerked awake and sat up immediately. Her eyes fell on Ino full of confusion. "How... how long have I been sleeping?"

"Probably an hour, couldn't have been much more than that." Ino poured herself a cup of coffee before sitting down across from Sakura. She watched her run a hand through her bedhead and blink the sleep from her eyes. "What are you reading there?"

"Oh," Sakura looked down and chewed her lip. "Just some more research."

"Looks like you went off the beaten path a bit with your selection there, no?" Ino reached across and plucked one book from the pile to hold up in front of her. "Is this book about demon lifecycles supposed to help Kiba?"

Sakura turned bright red. Caught. "I don't know what to say."

"Is this what you've been reading when you've been telling me you're going home to continue researching Kiba's case?" Sakura nodded under a veil of guilt.

"You want to help the Devil?" Ino challenged.

"You more than most know he's more than that title. He has a harder exterior, but those moments when he's been so kind and vulnerable with me..." She paused in thought. "He deserves to have this chance. I want him to be able to have this."

Ino brought her hands to her face. It had been almost a year since Sakura learned about Sasuke's true identity while he pursued her with evolving intentions. It hadn't occurred to Ino that Sakura's feelings towards him had been deepening as well, even with Kiba in the mix. She slowly peered through her fingers at her friend who could not look any more guilty if she tried. "I wish you had told me," she said softly.

"I was worried you would try to stop me," Sakura confessed.

"I probably would have," Ino laughed. "But regardless, I'm just shocked you've been hiding this from me all this time."

Sakura shrugged. "I just wish I could say I had something to show for it."

Ino reached across the table. "You do, silly."

The clinician quirked an eyebrow, not following what she meant.

"Your heart." Sakura blinked a few times out of shock but then slowly smiled back. She hoped Ino was right.

Looking up at the clock a moment later, she saw it was almost noon. "I have to go meet up with Tenten, but maybe we can talk more about this after work? I can at least share with you the little bit I did find."

Ino nodded and handed Sakura back the book she had snatched. "See you later, then."

After she stowed her books and notes in the back office under her desk, Sakura made a mad dash out of the clinic. Tenten was always

one to be punctual and didn't tolerate much less from others. But had it not been for her frenzy, Sakura may have put more notice on the odd feeling tugging at the back of her mind. She also may have noticed Karin who was lounging in the reception area as she ran by... And the evil grin plastered on her face.

But she didn't.

In record time, she made it to the cafe a block away where she and Tenten agreed to meet. Inside, she spotted her beaming friend and rolled her eyes when she saw the woman had already ordered for the two of them.

"Couldn't wait even five minutes for me?"

"We both said we were craving some hot deli sandwiches, so I ordered them!" Tenten retorted, arms folded across her chest. Sakura looked down at the pastrami on rye on her side of the table and fell silent. She had been craving one of those for some time now...

"Anyway, how are you doing? Is your cold gone yet?" Sakura asked, picking up half of the giant pastrami.

Tenten nodded, her mouth full. "I think so, just a little congested," she shrugged.

As the two friends caught up on each other's lives, Sakura couldn't help but feel a pit in her stomach forming. She looked around the cafe as the feeling only strengthened but didn't see anything or anyone out of the ordinary. Was it just the guilt she felt from not telling Ino about her secret research? No, she thought to herself, it wasn't that. The haunting image of Orochimaru's glowing yellow eyes suddenly seeped into her mind. A cold rush of goosebumps skimmed her body from her scalp to her toes.

"You okay, Sak?" Tenten asked, confused by Sakura's furrowed expression.

"Yeah, I just have a weird feeling. It may just be that I haven't been getting a lot of sleep lately."

Tenten took on a mischievous expression. "Could that have anything to do with Sasuke?"

Sakura blushed and then swatted at her across the table. "Oh shut it, you."

They wrapped up their meal once they couldn't handle a bite more and sat back in their seats. Sakura was still overcome by the ominous wave of anxiety but did her best to mask it for the moment. Yellow eyes, yellow eyes.

"Ugh," Tenten groaned. "This congestion is seriously the worst."

"Why don't you come by the clinic? We can get you some medicine for that at least."

By the time the pair made it back, Sakura noticed Tenten was notably paler than she was at lunch. She didn't say anything, but she still took her back into one of the exam rooms to check her out.

"It's really cold in here," Tenten complained, wrapping her arms around herself.

Yellow eyes.

Sakura put a hand to her friend's forehead and winced when she felt how burning hot she was. She was perfectly fine just minutes earlier, what could have happened to cause such a change? "Why don't you lay down, I'll recline the chair for you."

She wasted little time in taking her vitals as the dark pit in her stomach continued to grow. Tenten's heart rate was racing and her temperature was still rising. Sakura struggled to stay calm as she watched her friend's health mysteriously deteriorate before her eyes.

Yellow eyes, yellow eyes.

"What's going on?" Tenten moaned, her head pounding. Just as Sakura was about to ask her a question, Tenten turned her head to the side and immediately threw up. Her vomit was black like tar and smelled of death and decay.

Sakura gasped and opened the door to the hallway. "Ino..!"

The blonde poked her head out from the break room and saw the panic on Sakura's face. A wave of evil energy seemed to flood the hall and her face darkened. "What's going on?" She demanded.

"It's Tenten," Sakura explained. "Something is wrong with her."

Ino came storming in and almost choked on the stench of vomit and the palpable dark forces in the room.

Yellow eyes, yellow eyes, yellow eyes.

"Hello? I need to request an ambulance," Sakura started saying into the exam room's phone.

Ino approached the ailing woman with caution, the energy rolling off her like blood out of a gushing wound. She held her hands inches over her shaking body and mouthed a healing spell over and over, concentrating on the unimaginable forces inside.

Yellow eyes, yellow eyes, yellow eyes.

Nothing.

"I have no idea what's wrong with her, she's burning up getting worse by the second." Sakura yanked open the cabinets and pulled out ice packs to activate. She held one to Tenten's scolding forehead and checked her watch. "The hospital isn't too far, so the ambulance shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

"This is definitely out of our control, Sakura." Ino stated.

"I know, that's why I called-"

"You don't understand," Ino shouted. "This isn't just a sickness. This is black magic."

Yellow eyes. Smiling.

As he stormed out of the oyster bar, Sasuke could practically hear his own pulse quickened by his rage. He stopped marching ahead once he was a few blocks away, forcing himself to slow his breathing and regain control of himself. He wanted nothing more than to rip Itachi to shreds, but he had more pressing matters to worry about. He looked down at his hands and saw his nails growing into black claws. Yes, much more pressing matters had to be dealt with first.

Just as he was about to continue on his path back to the office, his attention was captured by the sudden barrage of car horns blaring beside him. He turned to the street and saw the avenue was at a complete standstill, which was unusual for this time of day. Something unknown irked him, leading him to step into the motionless street to see farther ahead. Complete gridlock.

The frown on his face deepened as did the churning inside of him. He pulled out his phone and checked a live traffic app for more information. What he was expecting to see was a localized streak of red in the area where he was standing, but instead he saw the entire bottom half of Manhattan lit up. What the hell was going on?

"Black magic?" Sakura gawked. "Tenten?"

Ino began pacing. "Yes, Sakura. I can sense it pouring it out of her like a river. She's not sick, she was cursed."

"What do we do?" Sakura changed out the ice packs on Tenten's head and put a second bucket next to her to vomit the black sludge into. "The paramedics have medicine, not magic, so what are they supposed to do?"

Blue eyes fell onto Tenten's writhing body. The evil inside her was far more powerful than any she had ever encountered before. Its strength may even have been stronger than Sasuke's. "I'm not sure."

It was then that the ground began to shake with a violence common in California and unheard of in New York. Sakura and Ino locked eyes, both realizing this wasn't Mother Nature's work, but instead that of someone more sinister. The clinic filled with screams as everyone else rushed out of the building to escape in fear of a collapse. In a matter of seconds, everything around them stilled.

Alone, the pair did what they could to stabilize Tenten. Sakura prepared an IV of fluids to keep her hydrated while Ino worked through a number of spells to dampen the evil growing inside Tenten's body.

"I'm calling the hospital," Sakura yelled lunging for the phone after some time. When she finally got an answer, the voice on the other side of the line seemed completely panicked. "I'm trying to see what the ETA is on the ambulance I requested about twenty minutes ago."

Ino watched Sakura's face pale. "What?" She eventually hung up the phone before turning to her Witch companion.

"What did they say?" Ino asked.

"The ambulances can't get through... dispatch put a hold on all of them until the island is deemed safe."

"Well if that's the case, then I need to go get more materials." Ino rushed out of the room to raid her secret cabinets in the last exam room at the end of the hall.

Sakura sighed. She was pouring out sweat and running on pure adrenaline at this point. But that didn't matter. Tenten's life was on the line and she needed to do something about it, evil be damned.

"Oh Sakura," a sing-song voice called behind her. She spun around, shocked to hear Tenten speaking. What shocked her more, however, was the fact that she was standing just a foot away from her with a scalpel in hand. Her posture was unnatural and her eyes were fogged over. This wasn't her friend. This wasn't good. "We've got you now."

His pulse began to pick up again. Despite the deafening sound of cars honking to no end, Sasuke began dialing Ino's number. After a few rings, she picked up.

"Sasuke," she breathed, her voice anything but calm.

"What's going on downtown?" Just as he finished asking his question, the ground beneath him began to shake again. "The fuck," he cursed, bracing himself.

"Is this another earthquake!?" Someone screamed around him.

"Sasuke, something is going on here. There is an overwhelming source of evil coming from inside Tenten and we can't get it out," Ino explained, her voice becoming panicked. He could hear the clinking of glass containers on her end.

Sasuke's eyes widened. "Is Sakura there with you?"

"Yeah, she's with Tenten-"

"Get her away from there now..!" He yelled. "Keep Tenten isolated until I get there!"

The dark pit inside of him had expanded to the size of the entire city. He braced himself as a stampede of people came rushing out of the neighboring buildings, toppling over each other out of fear of an earthquake. The ground continued to shake and in the distance, explosions could be heard.

In the midst of the chaos, Sasuke knew he had little choice but to act a little recklessly and allowed his demon claws to grow all the way. As the crowds pushed around him, he marched to the closest building and sank his claws in to start climbing the brick exterior. Whether anyone noticed him or not, he did not know, but he also didn't care. His eyes were burning red once he was on the roof and he looked in the direction of downtown from his vantage point. What he saw at that moment caused even his breath to catch.

Traffic lights as far as the eye could see were flashing in a chaotic pattern, endless walls of traffic beneath them. But closer to the Lower East Side, he saw smoke and could smell the fire. The fires of Hell. Without wasting any more time, he leapt from the rooftop to the next and raced his way in the direction of the horrific smoke. The closer he got, the better he could see exactly what was going on. The streets were cracked with thick ridges making them impassable and holes the size of cars were forming in a pattern the average person would think was at random... But Sasuke knew that was anything but the truth.

"Orochimaru," Sasuke hissed.

Tenten lunged at Sakura with the blade tightly gripped in her fist. Her movements were fast, but clumsy enough for Sakura to evade. "Stop moving!" The possessed Tenten screamed.

Sakura toppled over rolling trays and the IV stand to slow her down, but when she went to reach for the doorknob, it was scolding hot to the touch. Tenten began laughing behind her.

"You think you can escape me? So arrogant. Just like Sasuke." Tenten continued to laugh, clutching her black-stained sweater. "I cannot wait to break you in Hell."

Sakura side-stepped towards the cabinets and threw a glass container of cotton swabs at Tenten when she made a second attempt to lunge for her. Sakura took advantage of the seconds she

gained by fishing through a drawer for anything useful. She found another scalpel and quickly wielded it in front of her.

"And what are you going to do with that? Kill Tenten?" The voice chuckled.

"Who are you?" Sakura shouted, her heart pounding.

Tenten's body straightened and wiped the vomit from the corner of her mouth. "I'm Kabuto, servant to Lord Orochimaru, now prepare to die."

Sakura only had time to duck as the blade came thrusting at her. With only a split second to react, she stabbed her scalpel into Tenten's thigh. Her resulting scream rattled her, but she shoved Kabuto away while he was caught off guard and watched him fall back onto the ground.

"You fucking bitch, " he hissed as he clutched Tenten's thigh.

"What do you want?" Sakura yelled, holding the bloody scalpel in front of herself again.

Kabuto grinned through Tenten. "Just to take over this world with Lord Orochimaru, " he said as his smile widened. "And to make little Sasuke pay for his arrogance!"

Sakura pushed herself up just as Kabuto suddenly lept up again. She managed to maneuver herself around Tenten's zombie-like form and pin it to the wall closest to them.

"S-Sakura, " Tenten struggled to plead.

"Tenten? Tenten..!" Sakura cried, holding her wrists to the wall.

"Tenten, you have to fight him!"

"It-it hurts, " Tenten started to cry. "Please kill me, I'm begging you!"

Sakura felt paralyzed. Her friend was suffering under the demonic possession of her mind and body. She wanted to save Tenten, but she had no idea how to.

From the hallway, Ino could hear Tenten's plea for death as she came running closer. But just as she was about to reach the door, Karin appeared and stepped into to block her.

"Think I'm going to let you in and ruin things just when they start getting good?" Karin sneered.

Ino put her hands on her hips. "You've got to be kidding me, Karin."

"The only joke here is the three of you, now get lost!" The red-head reached out to grab Ino's arm, but the Witch was far from willing to entertain this.

"You do not know who you're messing with," Ino growled. She muttered a spell under her breath and watched her hand erupt into a dark violet flame. It was a gift from Sasuke, one she had only wielded under his supervision years ago. Her fiery fist should have connected with Karin's stomach, but a knot of snakes emerged from Karin's sleeves and absorbed the attack.

"What the fuck," Ino whispered in disbelief. Karin laughed maniacally.

"You're not the only one to have been granted powers by the devil, I just happened to work with a different one." The snakes, scorched and disintegrating, disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

Ino's eyes widened. It all made sense. Karin was behind the curse. She was working with Orochimaru. "You have no idea what you're doing, Karin. This is bigger than your spat with Sasuke."

"Shut up, you have no idea what you're talking about... !" Karin screamed. "Sasuke humiliated me, but this is bigger than that. I have the opportunity to be a part of something so much more. I will have

my own seat next to the throne once Lord Orochimaru begins his takeover!"

"Sakura!" Ino's muffled voice could be heard screaming on the other side of the door. "Sakura, open the door!"

"We're a little busy, " Kabuto teased, back in control of Tenten.

They could hear Ino cursing outside, but Kabuto quickly stole Sakura's attention again. "So you won't kill your friend to save the world?"

Sakura glared in response and then let out a shaky breath. "No, because I can make a deal with you."

Kabuto blinked a few times before curling his mouth into a smile of sorts. "Go on."

"Tenten has done nothing wrong, she has nothing to do with this. If you let her go, free from harm, you can have me instead."

Kabuto observed Sakura through unblinking eyes and fought back a hearty laugh. "You care so much for this girl," Kabuto giggled as he gestured to himself in Tenten's body. "Enough to set yourself up to die? How precious!"

"Do we have a deal?" Sakura grit out.

Kabuto only grinned. Before Sakura could even make sense of the pit back in her stomach, he was pressing his lips harshly against hers. Tenten's bile-coated tongue shoved its way into Sakura's mouth and before she could scream, something slithered down her throat. She ripped herself away desperately, choking on whatever it was that entered her. Clutching her throat, she watched Tenten's body collapse to the ground before feeling her own follow.

Darkness swallowed her.

And then she could only see those yellow eyes.

"Where are they? Sasuke's voice boomed, ricocheting off of the clinic walls.

"In here, " Ino pointed at the door as he turned the corner.

"Sasuke..!" Karin spun around to face the man. He appeared completely unphased by her presence and walked towards the door as though she wasn't even standing there. "You can't go in there!" She shouted, hands flying to his lapels.

Demon claws reached up and yanked her hands off of him and a rumbling growl boiled up from within his chest. "Move before I destroy you."

"Don't do this!" Sakura's voice shouted from the unseen exam room.

"Sasuke, you still have a chance to join us!" Karin forced herself to keep her hands to herself as she hoped her former lover would change his mind and join her.

"Join you? In your sloppy attempts to attain power?" He merely shoved her out of the way, his attention focused on Sakura trapped inside.

He drew back his arm as he prepared to slash the door open, but right before he could, Karin unleashed a mass of snakes to restrain him. "Why won't you join me? Look at my power, how I am not enough for you!?" She cried.

Sasuke closed his eyes to reign in his temper. "Because that's all you're actually worried about," he answered as the serpents suddenly combusted into dark flames and fell from his arms. "And now, you're nothing more than a pawn."

She cried out with frustration and blindly charged towards him. His burning red eyes barely flickered in her direction and in a blink he threw Karin down the hall and crashing into the reception chairs. His

expression darkened and Ino staggered back. She pressed her back to the wall when he summoned a giant snake of his own and held her breath as it leisurely made its way to where Karin landed. Ino wanted to ask what he had ordered the snake to do but knew he wasn't in the frame of mind to answer... and she may not have actually wanted to know.

Sasuke brushed past Ino as he raised a clawed hand overhead before smashing it through the door. She remained speechless, suddenly unsure if the sinister energy was stronger in the room or coming off of Sasuke. The former Satan stormed into the room and immediately froze when he saw what was happening inside.

"Sakura..!" Ino gasped behind him. The energy she felt pouring out of Tenten earlier was now coming from inside Sakura.

The woman in question stood with her knees buckled in and her own hand holding a scalpel firm against her throat. Her eyes were screwed shut and her face was dripping with sweat and torment. At her feet, Tenten's body was crumpled and motionless.

"Sweet Sasuke, so glad you could join us," Kabuto greeted through Sakura.

"What do you want, rodent?" The demon spat, his body itching to shred the nuisance.

"Nothing too crazy, just for you to break under your newfound human weaknesses," Kabuto laughed. "As you can see, I have your darling little plaything in my hold and unless you kill her, I will act as a gateway for some of our damndest friends to join us here from Hell!"

Sasuke cursed to himself. Orochimaru was without a doubt cackling in his chambers below. He needed to do something, or it would soon be too late. Kabuto began laughing again. "What's so funny?" Sasuke demanded.

"I can feel the hesitation coming off of you in waves. Just a few minutes ago, I was inside this other girl, but Sakura begged me to take her in her place. She didn't want this other weakling to get hurt! And look where we are now, your feeble human heart is going to let me summon all the demons to kill them both and the rest of this world instead!" He kept laughing maniacally and Ino shot Sasuke a look of fear from his side. But then abruptly, Kabuto stopped laughing. In fact, he was struggling to talk at all.

"S-Stop.." Sakura strained to say, fighting the demon inside her. "Stop this... I won't let you use me like this!"

Kabuto resurfaced. "You pathetic little girl! You say stop, but you're the one who gave me this grand opportunity!" He slipped deeper inside Sakura's psyche and sank his fangs into the low-hanging fruit that was her insecurities. "You're so dependent on your weakling friends and follow this bitch-" he said gesturing at Ino, "like a dumb lamb! No wonder you so foolishly made such a naive decision. You have no true life of your own, no PURPOSE..!"

He winced, a sound of pain escaping Sakura's lips as she fought him back. Her body crashed back against the wall as a scream echoed out.

"You're... wrong..." Sakura panted, even as the scalpel blade bit into her neck. "I care for my friends... I will do anything for them..because... they're what is important to me." She used her opposite hand to force the blade a hair away from her skin as a small trickle of blood rolled down to her collar bone.

"What a fool!" Kabuto hissed, wrestling back control. He bound his serpent form around her inner self and tightened in a deathly grip.

Sasuke was about to lunge at Sakura to grab the knife, but Ino quickly put a hand on his arm. "It's too risky! If you jump in now, there's a good chance you'll hurt her... or worse." Sasuke growled in frustration. "While he's fighting her, he can't concentrate on acting as

a gateway anchor. We have to wait," she explained, not at all liking her own answer.

"Is this the type of idiocy you want to be with, Sasuke? Is this your true equal?" Kabuto taunted.

"I'm my own person, you asshole!" Sakura yelled as she continued to battle from within. "And I do have a purpose. I validate my own worth, not you!" Her head was thrown back in agony as the war inside her heightened. Nevertheless, she was far from giving up. "Now," she panted. "Get the fuck OUT OF MY BODY... !" She screamed so loud that the others in the room had to cover their ears.

Using her quick thinking, she recalled Kabuto's falter when she stabbed Tenten in the thigh. Holding her breath, Sakura stabbed herself in the shoulder and then fell to her knees, the scalpel buried in her flesh. She began wrenching violently and Ino ran to her side to aid her.

"Sasuke, this is our chance! I can't purge him out on my own, I need your help!" Ino cried out.

The devil was soon right behind her and placed a scaly palm to the Witch's back. She felt the cold burn of his power pooling inside her and silently thanked him. He didn't have to say it, but she knew such a strain was only worsening his condition and weakening his hold on his human form even more. Ino performed a crude but promising spell on Sakura which made convulse and vomit black bile just as Tenten had. Sasuke winced, feeling his arms grow hard and dry with demon skin.

"There!" Ino shouted as a snake was finally forced from Sakura's throat.

Sasuke pulled away from Ino and snatched the slimy serpent in his gruesome claws. "Pathetic trash," he spat. With just a single squeeze, he crushed Kabuto's snake form and let his limp, disintegrating body fall back into the black bile.

"You did it," Ino whispered, her hand steady on Sakura's back as she pulled the scalpel from Sakura's shoulder. She was still on her hands and knees panting with exhaustion.

Sasuke crouched down and felt his heart clench at not just the sight of the blood she was spilling, but the look of concern she had for him under her hooded eyes. Even after a life-threatening demon possession, she was worried about someone else.

"Your hands," Sakura lamented, reaching for the violent claws. "Are you turning back into a demon again?"

He let her wrap her fingers around one of his claws, careful not to cut her. "I'm not sure."

Ino shifted Sakura into Sasuke's hold as she moved to check on Tenten. "She's okay, just unconscious."

Sakura visibly relaxed upon hearing that and Sasuke only pulled her further up into his arms. He was so warm and his cologne was a comfort after all that she had been through. He held her close. Looking down at her then, he realized there was no way he was going to have killed her as a means of ending Kabuto. In theory, it was the most sensible choice, but at that moment, staring at her pained but determined face, he knew it was never going to be an option. "I didn't mean for you to get caught up in this."

Sakura smiled. "You underestimate me, Sasuke," she countered with exhaustion heavy in her voice. "I promise I'm going to help you." Her eyes closed as she fell unconscious from the strain. Sasuke couldn't get himself to look away. She was so fragile, just a human full of bones and wrapped in tissue-like skin. How could she help him? His eyes trailed to the ink-like stains tarnishing her clothes and skin, evidence of the battle she championed against Kabuto. He knew there were feelings between them, but that was not what it was going to take to save him. The grey skin peering out from his sleeves more than enough evidence of this truth.

The bang of the clinic doors swinging into the wall reached them without warning. Sasuke unconsciously curled his torso around Sakura in a protective hold and Ino narrowed her eyes at the oddly familiar energy coming towards them.

"What a mess, my brother," Itachi chided as he stepped into the doorway.

Ino blushed. If this man was a bouquet of flowers, he would be a dozen red roses - thorns and all. She looked to Sasuke for a hint as to whether this stranger was a friend or foe. Judging by his unmoving crouch and venomous glare, she was inclined to think the latter.

"What do you want, Itachi?" Sasuke growled. He saw Itachi peering curiously at the woman in his arms and tucked her head further into his chest to shield her.

"To help, of course." His eyes, a deeper red than Sasuke's, landed on Ino and Tenten. "You not only have that woman out there to deal with, but these three in here."

Ino paled. She forgot about Karin. Mustering up her courage, she turned her body to face Itachi. "My name is Ino," she introduced herself.

He smiled. "A Witch, I take it? I can sense the pact you made with your devil over there." She bowed her head but then felt a finger lift her chin back up. She didn't even hear him approach her! "With such beauty as yours, I would happily make a pact with you myself."

"Get away from her," Sasuke snarled. "This isn't a brothel for you to peruse."

Itachi sighed and pulled away from the stunned Ino. "There are emergency crews scouting the streets looking for trapped survivors from the earthquake Kabuto stirred up. In your current state, I don't imagine it to be possible for you to get everyone out of here without calling attention to yourself."

"What do you suggest we do, then?" Ino asked.

The old devil smirked. "We transport the group to safety."

"How-" Ino started to ask but was interrupted.

"He has the ability to transport through spaces. Can we hurry this up?" Sasuke was growing anxious and wanted to get to safety where Ino could tend to Sakura's wound and clean her up.

"Where is the closest location for us to go to?" Itachi asked him, unbothered by his brother's attitude.

Ino looked over at Sasuke expectantly. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and knew he had no choice. Itachi's ability had limits when it came to extending it to others, so every inch they could avoid traveling would guarantee that much safer of a transport. He sighed. "My apartment is closest."

"Excellent," Itachi responded immediately. "Let's rid ourselves of that mess out there and then be gone."

Sasuke and Ino carefully rose to their feet. Itachi helped Ino by taking Tenten's limp form from her while Sasuke continued to cradle Sakura to him. Surprisingly, the slight jostle stirred her awake and her eyes fluttered open just a crack.

"Careful," Sasuke warned as she tried to squirm upright. "I've got you." His deep voice vibrated against her and she felt herself slacken in his secure hold. "We're about to go."

She nodded. With the adrenaline gone, her throat was aching and she knew better than to try to speak. Looking around, she saw another man holding Tenten and Ino close beside him. He looked so much like Sasuke... Her eyes widened. This must have been his brother, the man who damned Kiba's soul to Hell. She gripped at Sasuke's jacket and he looked down at her startled expression. He sighed again. "That's my brother, Itachi. We can discuss him later."

The group funneled out to the deserted hallway, walking towards the dim sunlight filtering in from the far-off front door. Sakura thought she was going to pass out again when she caught a first glimpse at the giant snake knotted amongst the toppled chairs in the waiting area.

She felt Sasuke shift her weight in his arms. "Do you trust me?" He asked her, red eyes soft and focused. She nodded. "Close your eyes for me." She did as she was asked and pressed her face into his chest.

Sasuke began speaking in something that sounded like Tongues. Sakura could hear the beast's ridged scales sliding against one another as it uncoiled. Chairs screeched as its body pushed them out of the way. "Wait, stop!" Sakura yelled as best she could.

Everyone froze and looked to the woman in Sasuke's arms. "Sakura," Ino whispered, feeling sympathy for her.

"What's going on?" Sakura forced herself to ask.

"Karin was the one who summoned Kabuto to use you and Tenten against Sasuke," Ino explained. "She made some sort of pact with Orochimaru, it seems."

Itachi nodded. "Which begs the question, what exactly is going on down in Hell?"

The younger demon began speaking again to the snake and Sakura could hear it flick its tongue in and out, tasting the air. "Sasuke, what are you doing?"

He looked down and saw jade eyes staring right back at him. "I'm going to kill her so she can't come after anyone again."

Tears began to form. "Isn't there some other way?"

He didn't know what to say. How could she be concerned for someone as terrible as Karin, someone who summoned the likes of

Kabuto to murder her? "What kind of punishment would you find just?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "Just not death."

Sasuke clenched his jaw. How could she possibly want to spare her? He couldn't make sense of it.

While they stood gathered around the serpent, the ground beneath them began to shake again. Could it have been another earthquake?

"Let's go," Sasuke ordered the group as the ceiling started to crumble. The door was just feet away, but they made a run for it.

Sakura dared to look up just as tiles from the ceiling began falling behind them. The five of them made it outside, but just as they did, the three-story building collapsed. A rush of dust and debris came following the destruction of the old building. The serpent and Karin had still been inside and Ino looked incredibly pale and shaken. Itachi huddled them together and closed his eyes in concentration. When he opened them, the irises took on a spinning geometric shape, unlike anything she had seen before. When Sakura blinked, she found herself no longer in the clinic, but some sort of apartment.

And 'apartment' was an understatement at best. She craned her neck as best she could from her cradled position in Sasuke's arms to gawk at the magazine-worthy space. Polished concrete floors spanned the airy room along with lofted ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows. Black curtains were drawn back to frame the most perfect view of the Williamsburg Bridge and a stainless steel kitchen behind her. Over by the windows was a minimalistic glass desk and a sunken-in living room with cordovan-brown leather couches built into the center of the space. And the fireplace. Oh, the grandeur that was the fireplace. Not only was it large enough to throw a body in, but it had a classic shag rug in front of it.

So where were they exactly?

"I don't know if I would have chosen the same curtains myself," Itachi commented as he wandered.

"That's fine since you don't live here," Sasuke grumbled. He peered down at Sakura. "Ino, do you think you can manage both Sakura and Tenten?"

"Hm?" Ino looked back and forth between the two women still being held by the former Satans in the flesh. "Yeah. Sakura, can you stand?"

Sasuke helped her lower her legs and kept a supportive arm wrapped around her waist as she tested her weight on her feet. "I think I'm okay," she croaked. "What... happened to Karin?"

No one said anything at first, but Sasuke finally answered. "She was trapped with the snake when the building came down, so I have to believe she did not survive."

Sakura's chin hit her chest as she stifled back tears of mourning. She hated Karin, but she didn't want her to die. Not like that.

Ino cleared her throat. "I'll help you walk to the bathroom where you can rest while I clean up Tenten. Sasuke, can you make some hot water for tea? That should help her throat recover." Sasuke nodded and gently passed Sakura to Ino while Itachi followed the Witch to the bathroom.

They took slow steps all the way to the back of the penthouse and entered what Sakura could only assume was the master bedroom. Oversized French doors gave way to hardwood floors and a king-size bed fitted with black silk sheets and a simple black duvet. The room was cozy in comparison to the awe-inspiring living room, but still large by New York standards. The ceilings were lofted in there as well, but the walls were entirely flush with bookshelves with the exception of one that was also entirely a window.

"The guest bathroom only has a shower, so we'll use Sasuke's for the bathtub." Ino pulled the distracted Sakura with her into the black marble bathroom. "Um," Ino hummed, looking for a chair for Sakura. The pink-haired woman plopped onto the toilet, her mind distracted by the shock of Karin's fate. "Itachi, can you put Tenten in the tub?"

"Do you need assistance undressing her?" Itachi's coy tone did not go unnoticed.

"I'll manage," she deadpanned. "Can you ask Sasuke to get a couple of bathrobes? I'm going to want one, too." Ino busied herself with collecting towels and soaps as Itachi watched from the door.

"You're very bossy for someone who should be serving a Satan."

Sakura's breath hitched when Ino marched to just inches from Itachi's face. "You're pretty fallible for someone who once was Satan."

His stoic face gave way to a boyish grin. "Touché."

And with that, the man took his leave and marching orders with him.

Finally alone without any demons in the room, Ino let out the world's heaviest sigh. "Honestly, who knew they'd be so similar."

Sakura remained quiet. Yet again, her supernatural friends had delivered a whirlwind day of events. Ino watched the emotions flash across her friend's face and walked to kneel in front of her. "You were so impressive back there, Sakura. It takes an incredibly strong person to basically exorcize a demon such as Kabuto from themselves. To be honest, I'm still in shock over it."

She smiled back. "Thanks," she managed to whisper.

"I'm going to get Tenten cleaned up and then I can help you if you want. Keep an eye out for any peeping devils, okay?" Ino winked before going back to Tenten's side and maneuvering her out of her

clothes. Sakura watched as she then drew a warm bath and got to work on the black sludge staining her arms, neck, and face.

"I'm going to use an amnesia spell on her once we get her all cleaned up," Ino said after a few minutes of silence. "We'll tell her she fainted from her fever and we took her back here after the earthquake."

"That seems best," Sakura answered. She thought back on the traumatic invasion of Kabuto inside both of them and debated asking Ino to wipe her memory of the event as well. It fell quiet for a while outside of the scrubbing and water sloshing in the tub.

"You know," Ino spoke again. "Sasuke should have killed you back there."

Sakura stiffened before the Witch continued. "I mean, it would have been the simplest solution." She methodically scrubbed at the crusty sludge. Sakura felt her eyes prickle with tears, berating herself for being a burden. "The old Sasuke wouldn't have even hesitated. But he didn't." Ino shrugged. "You've really changed him, Sakura."

Jade eyes shot up at that. Did she change him? Or was this something else, like pity?

The bathwater became a murky grey and Ino opened the drain. She stepped out for just a moment to grab one of the bathrobes Itachi left for them outside. As she dried and dressed Tenten, she turned back to Sakura and cringed. "I realize my blabbing wasn't that tactful."

"It could have used some tweaking," Sakura admitted.

"Listen, you were amazing today. Ignore the rest. I'm going to get one of those ogres to come in and move her to the couch."

Sakura leaned her head against the wall with a small thud and focused on just relaxing. She thought back on the last time she saw Sasuke before that day and winced.

"He doesn't deserve to remain like this-"

"He brought this upon himself, Sakura!"

His outburst startled her and the tables closest to them. Sakura swallowed hard as she saw the fork and slosh of beer that had fallen from the force of his fist on the table. Things had escalated so quickly she knew she had to give herself a moment to regroup. Slowly, she brought her eyes back to his. "He's important to me. I have to help him."

Sasuke wanted to give some sort of retort but couldn't find any words for that. The waitress, who had overheard enough of their argument to stall a few tables back, decided to take advantage of the pause to quickly drop off their food.

"We're going to do this whether you support it or not, Sasuke."

"You know," he started. "Ino made a deal with me long ago that puts me in control of her abilities." Sasuke watched her eyes widen at that. "I'll forbid her from helping you with this."

Sakura gawked at him. "Are you being serious right now?"

He said nothing.

Sakura felt her eyes grow warm as tears started to build up. Ino had warned her against telling him, but she didn't think he'd react to such an extreme as this. In fact, she was hoping she could convince him to help her. Hurt and disappointment washed over as she looked away to blink back the liquid that had threatened to weaken her demeanor.

After their weekend upstate, she thought she knew understood him and vice versa, but that was clearly not the case. He was still selfish, stubborn, and by her standards nothing more than a brute. Yes, it was different in the sense that he used to be the Devil, but beyond that, he was just like every other guy she dated before him: a jerk.

"You know what, Sasuke," she said, pushing herself away from the table to stand. "This has been real enlightening, but I think I need to go."

"Knock, knock." Sakura jumped at the sound of someone at the door, but relaxed when she saw it was Ino. "I got Itachi, he's going to bring Tenten out to the living room. Do you want help with the bath?"

"I'll be okay," Sakura assured her.

Itachi quietly scooped up the bundled Tenten and was followed out by Ino, who gave one last look at Sakura before closing the door behind her.

As she readied the bath for herself, Sakura undressed in front of the vanity. Her eyes counted half a dozen bruises already ranging in colors down her body. The deepest of the bunch ran down her neck. She could have died. Should have, as Ino put it. But they waited. Sasuke waited for her and gave her the chance to prove her strength. But did he really see it that way? With a shaky breath, she pulled away and backed up to the tub. The water was just hot enough to send a shiver down her back as she slowly lowered herself in. She could get used to this, she thought to herself.

And then she wondered if she really could. This was Sasuke's penthouse, after all.

She sank down in the tub until just her eyes peered above the water's surface. She had no business thinking like that. If anything, that was a far-off fantasy. Still, her mind wandered as she soaked. She recalled the feeling of Sasuke's protective hold on her and the warmth he gave off that radiated all the way to her soul. She longed to feel his hand gently cradle her cheek.

But then her mind took a turn in a different direction. The sound of bones crunching invaded her calm and sent her eyes flying open. He had killed Karin. Yes, she understood Karin had been quite literally been doing the Devil's bidding, but she still was someone she knew.

And now she was dead. Could she make peace with this? She had put the thought off until then but knew she needed answers. She needed to talk to Sasuke.

"Hot water is ready," Sasuke muttered, stalking to the couches and plopping down.

Ino glared at him from her seat a few cushions down. "Would it have killed you to pour some into a mug with a tea bag for me?"

Sasuke glared right back at her, his patience as worn down as he could ever remember it being. "Now is not the time for your bullshit, Ino."

With a huff, the scorned woman stomped over to the kitchen to make her own tea. She came back a little less angry and clearly something on her mind. "You know, Sasuke," she started out saying. "I found out today that Sakura has been reading up on a little more than just soul collecting."

Itachi perked at this from his stance by the fire he lit but said nothing. Sasuke kept a wary eye on him as he took the bait. "What has she been reading?" It was a question, but the way he asked sounded more like a statement.

"Books about demons. Specifically life after Hell," she explained with feigned nonchalance.

Sasuke said nothing in response, but Itachi could tell his brother was somewhat stunned by the news. After a minute of digesting this, Sasuke got up and busied himself in the kitchen with a cup of tea.

"Where are you going?" Ino demanded, watching him pass by on his way to the back of the apartment. "She's still in the bath, pervert!"

He paid no mind to her and continued on. The demon entered his bedroom where Tenten was resting under a blanket and knocked on

the closed bathroom door. With his mind going a thousand miles an hour, he didn't wait for a response before entering.

In the tub, Sakura gasped and plunged back under the foamy water to hide her naked body. Sasuke didn't seem to notice, but his face was strained. He wasn't wearing his suit jacket anymore and the sleeves of his now wrinkled button-down were pushed up to his elbows. The devilman approached the side of the tub and stood there for a moment before extending the mug to her.

Still a bit startled, Sakura reached out to take the tea from him. "Thanks," she managed to say. She watched him stand there and wondered if he was just going to hang around until she decided to get out. The minty aroma wafted towards her. After just the first sip, her throat already felt a little better. "Is everything okay?"

He exhaled through his nostrils and brought himself to sit on the marble tile. She watched the hesitation churn in his burgundy eyes. Sakura fidgeted in the silence. What was going on in his head? "Back in the clinic," he eventually started by saying, "you said you're going to help me."

She nodded, sipping the mug while keeping herself submerged. The flush on her cheeks could have been from the hot water, but she knew that wasn't exactly true.

A hand stroked at her damp cheek, causing her to jump. The skin of his hand was rough and grey with scales. With those long claws so close to her face, they appeared even more lethal than before. When she looked up, she saw Sasuke's chin was resting on the edge of the tub and his red eyes were staring directly into hers. Her shoulders softened and she felt a smile form at her lips. It didn't matter whether he was human or demon to her, she knew in her heart she was falling for Sasuke.

As he pulled his hand back, he grabbed the mug from her as well. Her eyebrows knit together as he did since she had most of the tea still to drink. But when he rose to his knees and leaned over the

edge to hold her face in both hands, she understood. His lips were just as warm as she remembered them being back in the tent those many nights ago. He pressed them to hers with a gentleness that felt different than before. He was more tender. This was his way of expressing gratitude.

Her fingers emerged from the water to reach for his wrists as she melted more into his kiss. He felt her sigh against him and he had to stop himself from climbing in to hold her body to his. She just made him feel so good, he couldn't help but want all of her.

"Sakura," his deep voice rumbled against her lips. She relished in how he said her name.

"Yes?" She meekly responded. He pulled back just enough to take in her entire flushed face and the glistening tops of her shoulders surrounded by the shroud of bath foam. His pants were straining with the desire to take her right there in that tub.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you the other night," he managed to say.

Sakura cast her gaze down into the bubbles as she recalled their fight at the restaurant. "I'm sorry I reacted the way I did."

"What you're trying to do is very dangerous," he emphasized, his voice carefully measured.

She looked up at him with hardened eyes. "That's not going to stop me, Sasuke."

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. She was testing his patience again. A smirk tugged at his lips. "You're so annoying, you know that?"

SPLASH!

The warm water took him by surprise as Sakura laughed at his expense. He looked down at his soaked white button-down and then

back up at the perpetrator. "That was quite a bold move for someone naked and defenseless," he said in a dangerously low voice.

She sank down as he loomed over her with his hands on either side of the tub. His eyes were glowing and his face was shadowed by a predatory expression. Before she could protest, he was climbing into the tub on top of her. The water sloshed out and all over the floor as he crashed his lips onto hers again, his body pressed flush against her. One clawed hand expertly tangled into her hair while the other wrapped around her waist. Sakura's heart was racing, still in shock over the fact that Sasuke actually pounced on her in there fully clothed. His tongue entered her mouth to stroke hers with a hypnotizing effect. Her body slackened under his ministrations and she unconsciously let out a small moan, to which he responded with a satisfied growl of his own. She looked down when they broke for air and ogled his torso and arms, the white fabric transparent revealing his tattoos and glued to every bulge and ripple of muscle.

"Sasuke," she gasped as he flipped them over so she was stretched out on top him. The cold air nipped her exposed backside while he rested beneath her with the smuggest expression.

"Still warm," he noted contently. He continued smirking as he relished the sensation of Sakura's soft form pressed against his body under the water. She was still bright red in the face and he admired the continuation of the blush down her neck and to her breasts, which were flush against his chest. She looked absolutely delicious.

"This is really embarrassing, please let me cover myself." She bit her lip nervously and covered her eyes.

He grinned and sighed, realizing he should oblige as much as he had been enjoying himself. Slowly, he shifted so she was back under the water and he was able to climb out. The bubbles had almost entirely dissipated and she quietly began to panic without any cover.

"Please don't look," she pleaded as he took off his water-filled shoes. The floor was already entirely flooded with water from the tub, so he

paid no mind to the water that poured out of them.

"I won't," he assured her. His hands began fiddling with his shirt buttons, undoing them one by one. "You can if you want to," he grinned, tossing the shirt onto the floor. She fell silent as he moved down to his belt and then the button of his slacks. Her breath caught in her throat as he undid his zipper. Finally, his pants pooled at his ankles with a soft thud. He stood there in his black boxer briefs and sent a sinful glance over his broad shoulder at her. He knew what he was doing to her and it just wasn't fair.

She wouldn't dare complain, though. As he sauntered out of the room, her eyes remained glued to his broad and taut back. Just as he crossed into the bedroom, he tossed a towel back at her that she somehow caught before it hit the water.

"Thank you," she whispered, her smile unseen by her sweet, sweet devil.

"What the...." Ino trailed off as Sasuke re-emerged from his room in a loosely tied bathrobe. "The poor girl was just attacked by a demon, witnessed a death, and you now to be the appropriate time to have sex with her?"

Sasuke glared at her as he walked down to the couch to have a seat. He didn't waste his breath on a response to her question. "Itachi, what did the serpent do with Karin's remains?"

His brother kept his eyes closed in concentration. A frown deepened and his brow knit tighter. "It seems... she disappeared."

Boom, 18 chapters done. I had been starving us all of some cuteness, so I made sure this chapter gave our couple some time together. But around that, a lot happened! What did you think? Can't wait to hear from you and hope yall have a good weekend. :)

Chapter 19

Hello, hello! Happy Winter and all the holidays that come with it! I'm back from a much-needed break after a writer's block took hold... But I'm back now! It should go without saying, if you need a quick refresher of where we are picking up after the last chapter that you should go skim it a bit because we are jumping right into where we left off, and we will not be slowing down. Enjoy!

CH 19

The water wasn't going to get any warmer, Sakura finally admitted to herself. Resigning to the goosebumps that had taken a stubborn hold of her, she pushed herself out of the tub and into the towel Sasuke had tossed at her earlier. She shook her head. No one else she knew could flip between being so tender and unequivocally... well, sexual.

She had grown fond of it.

Back in the bedroom, Tenten was still passed out on the bed with a much more peaceful expression than she had just hours before in Kabuto's possession. A grimace turned the corners of Sakura's lips at the memory.

"What do you want?" Sakura yelled, holding the bloody scalpel in front of herself again.

Kabuto grinned through Tenten. "Just to take over this world with Lord Orochimaru," he said as his smile widened. "And to make little Sasuke pay for his arrogance!"

Sakura pushed herself up just as Kabuto suddenly lept up again. She managed to maneuver herself around Tenten's zombie-like form and pin it to the wall closest to them.

"S-Sakura, " Tenten struggled to plead.

"Tenten? Tenten..!" Sakura cried, holding her wrists to the wall.

"Tenten, you have to fight him!"

"It-it hurts, " Tenten started to cry. "Please kill me, I'm begging you!"

At the end of the bed, there was a bathrobe splayed across the corner. Sakura wasted little time when swapping her towel for the robe before making an appearance out in the living room.

"How lovely," Itachi said with a hum. She looked over and saw he looked completely at home with his legs gracefully crossed and a tumbler of some sort of dark liquor in hand. Not only did he bear a resemblance to Sasuke, the melting stare he gave her brought a similar flurry of butterflies over her. She could see the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth indicating he was fully aware of what he was doing and suddenly grew frightened of the control he had with just a glance.

An arm wrapping around her shoulders pulled her from the unwanted heat swarming her body. "Enough with your party tricks, brother."

Itachi clicked his tongue and shifted his gaze elsewhere. He was just trying to spark a little mischief as he did in his good old days, but Sasuke didn't have the same sense of humor anymore it seemed. Across from him, he saw the blonde Witch fixated on his brother and looked out of the corner of his eye to see what she was so focused on and smirked. Sasuke still had his arm around the young woman and was carefully running his clawed hand up and down her arm as she gazed up at him with smiling eyes and a glowing flush. The devilman looked down at her with what could only be described as pure adoration.

'It seems there is hope for you yet, little Brother,' Itachi thought to himself, quite amused.

"How are you feeling?" Ino asked, bringing her friend's attention from the tall glass of handsome holding her by his side.

"Exhausted but better," Sakura shrugged. Her bare feet brought her into the sunken space where Itachi and Ino were lounging. She took a seat in the open armchair facing the insane view out the glass panes that were more than twice her height.

While she was absorbed by the sunset wash over the sky and Williamsburg Bridge, Ino patted the open space next to her for Sasuke to sit in. "I see you're having trouble maintaining your human skin," she said so only he could hear her. Itachi could as well but didn't let on.

Sasuke sighed and let Ino run a finger over a patch of scales on the back of his hand. "I need you to fix it."

She shook her head. "You know just as well as I do that it would only be a temporary fix." Her sapphires locked onto ruby in a cold stare. "We don't have long... if any time at all."

He knew she was right. After years of his devilish debauchery in the human realm, the once seemingly endless time he had to solidify his human heart and soul was on its last leg. Ino's hardened expression caused the guilt in his chest to throb painfully. Sasuke had tangled her in his fate with his damning deal and now had her future resting in his hands as well. They both were desperate to help him find the missing piece to his humanity, but it seemed hopeless at this point. Ino would lose all of her divine abilities, a core pillar to her identity... and Sasuke would have to return to Hell, never to surface in the human realm ever again.

A giggle pulled his attention back to his apartment. It was Sakura who had laughed. Itachi had a coy air about him and Sasuke knew his brother had mocked him in some way to get that reaction from the woman near him. Instead of feeling annoyed, he only felt the pain in his chest sink deeper inside of him. If he were to fall back into Hell, he would never hear that giggle or see those eyes, full of life

and hope, ever again. Of all the experiences and memories he had collected as a human, those that he shared with Sakura were the most cherished of them all.

His eyes widened. While he knew his fate was inevitably drawn out before him, he knew he could at least help Sakura with hers. Beside him, he could feel Ino cocking her head to the side. She could sense his energy change and wanted to know what the devil was plotting.

"H-hello? Sakura..?"

Sakura shot up to her feet and went running to Sasuke's bedroom as soon as she heard Tenten's voice croak out her name. "Tenten..!"

Ino took the opportunity to demand information from the brooding man beside her. "What's going on in that thick skull of yours?"

Sasuke shot her a glare from the corner of his eye but knew it wasn't worth arguing over at that point. "We don't know how much time I have left, so I want to be strategic about it."

"Is that so?" Ino deadpanned. She could only imagine what the man beside her wanted to do with his final days. The first and only thing that came to mind was a giant orgy. Still, she put on her best mask of patience and waited for him to elaborate.

"I want to go to Hell and retrieve Kiba's soul."

His companions sat frozen in place as they both replayed what he had just said in their shocked minds.

"What?" Ino finally managed, more confused than ever.

"Wha.....Why..?"

Sasuke ran his claws through his hair and moved his gaze to his bedroom doors where he could faintly hear Sakura talking to her friend. "She deserves to be free from all her guilt and worrying about him."

Itachi didn't even blink. "That's Orochimaru's domain now, Sasuke. You would be walking into enemy territory."

Ino bit into her bottom lip and focused on her lap as her eyes began to water. Everything felt undeniably different, including Sasuke's tone. He was resigning himself to his fate and laying out his final will - to do right by Sakura.

"Are you doubting my strength?" Sasuke growled.

The elder of the two sighed. Once Sasuke had his mindset on something, he knew there was no turning back. "No, little brother."

"Then shut up."

Itachi pursed his lips and tried to focus on soothing thoughts of rippling flames licking at his brother's carcass. "Very well, then."

Sasuke pulled out his phone and started tapping vigorously on the small screen. "What are you doing?" Ino demanded.

He kept his eyes glued to his screen as the device pinged a few times. "Texting Gaara. The two of you will send me back down and bring me back with Kiba's soul."

"Are you crazy?" Ino blanched.

Sasuke looked up then, his eyes stone cold. Ino felt the tension... no, Sasuke's dark forces, choke her. "I'm your master and you will do this for me."

She nodded.

A moment later, she gasped as he released his invisible hold on her throat. He knew how against this idea she was since it was a risky accelerator into a damned fate she still had hopes of avoiding altogether. Still, Sasuke was set on completing this final act. He couldn't figure out how to help himself, but he at least knew how he could help Sakura.

Ino put a light hand to her throat to soothe it as her heart ached. The room was quiet and all she wanted to do was scream. She loved Sakura and had grown to consider her one of her closest friends. Still, that didn't mean she was ready to sacrifice her world for the girl. Hardened eyes slowly found Sasuke standing by the windows with his shoulders squared. He was standing straighter than usual, and when he finally turned to look at her again, she saw the determination... and sympathy... written across his face. She softened.

"I'll tell Sakura to sleep in your room with Tenten and make sure they stay asleep while we're sending you down." Ino had made her way across the room to stand beside him, looking out over the city. "If... this is what you really want."

Sasuke looked down at her with a rare, small smile. "It's the best I can do."

"Knock, knock!" Ino sang as she nudged open the doors to the bedroom. She was holding a breakfast tray in her hands and used her hips to gain entry.

Both Tenten and Sakura were situated amongst the charcoal sheets, curled up close together as they chatted. Tenten, normally full of life and fight was barely sitting upright with a stack of pillows supporting her back. Her eyes were slightly hooded with exhaustion and darkened by the physical toll the day had taken on her.

"I brought some more tea for you both," Ino explained as she held out two steaming mugs. "And some snacks."

Sakura passed a mug to Tenten as the two thanked Ino for taking care of them. "It smells great, what kind of tea is it?"

The Witch sat on the edge of the bed. "It's a mixture of florals and herbs I put together. Since it's getting pretty late, I figured it would be good to help you sleep."

Tenten cocked her head to the side. "Sleep? Aren't we going home?" She had enough for one day and wanted to hide away in her apartment.

"It's already pretty late out and we figured it may be best you both stay here tonight where you can be safe." Ino watched as Tenten shrugged, not having much in her to argue while Sakura furrowed her brow.

"Will you be staying here too?" Sakura asked.

"Of course," the blonde smiled. Sakura could see her eyes didn't match her lips in their expression but chose not to press on anything. "You two will be sleeping in here and I'll be in the second bedroom across the apartment. The guys will be on the couches, so just a heads up."

"Are you sure Sasuke's okay with us taking his bed?" Sakura asked, shifting on the nicest mattress she had ever laid on in her life.

Ino grinned as she pushed herself off the bed. "He insisted. Get some rest and I'll see you both in the morning."

When the doors clicked shut, Sakura immediately crawled off the bed to put an ear to the door. There was something going on that Ino wasn't telling her and she didn't like it. Despite her gut feeling, she couldn't bring herself to open the doors and confront them. Instead, she turned around to meet Tenten's confused face.

"What's going on?" She whispered from her nest of blankets.

Sakura sighed and then climbed back onto the bed beside her. She could tell Tenten the truth, but that would truly be a can of worms she didn't have the energy to manage. Lucky for her, when she woke up, Tenten couldn't recall much at all from the day's attack. Sakura told her there was a collapse within the clinic and she had been caught in the rubble. Even though she only had a few cuts, bruises and an odd stab wound on her leg blamed on some glass, she believed Sakura.

It was easier to do that than to push on the dark nightmares in the back of her mind.

Sakura shrugged as she pulled a blanket around herself. "I think she's just worried about us getting some proper rest, is all." She picked up her tea. "Let's take advantage of this impromptu hotel while we can!"

Back in the living room, the three others waited with various levels of patience for the time to pass so they could begin their night's work. Sasuke looked at Ino expectantly as she sat down on the couch. "They should be out plenty before twelve," she assured him.

A few more hours passed and the chatter in the bedroom had long been dead. Gaara was on his way up in the elevator, so Ino checked on the two slumbering women to make sure they were truly fast asleep. Cracking the door enough to slip in, she picked up the tray from beside the bed and saw both mugs were empty and the snacks were mostly eaten. She had laced the tea with few drops of her own homemade sleeping tincture that she loved to use herself on nights when it was hard to sleep. With a small smile of victory, she retreated from the room and nodded in confirmation at the men across the living room.

When the moon seemed to be at its brightest around midnight, there was a buzz from downstairs.

"Hello all," Gaara greeted as he glided into the apartment. He was wrapped in a black coat and yellow ochre scarf that sat just below his lips. Sasuke walked to stand in front of him and locked eyes with the Summoner.

They stood like that for a moment, neither saying a word or making any gestures. Ino wondered if they were somehow reading each other's minds but Itachi knew Sasuke was just taking another step toward fully accepting his own decision to return to Hell, even if presumably just temporarily.

Once Sasuke had broken his deadlock stare, he turned to the others. "Let's begin."

The plush rug was rolled in the corner of the room, blocked in by the bedside table and armchair also moved out of the way. Ino was setting up a collection of candles along the perimeter of the small room while Gaara drew a series of shapes and sigils in the center with chalk.

"This will be my first attempt at sending someone back into Hell, so I won't aim deeper than Limbo," the stoic man explained.

"Hn. That's fine," Sasuke muttered.

"But," Ino interjected, "How far down do you need to go to find Kiba's soul?"

Itachi was the one to answer. "The Sixth Circle of Heresy."

"I'm ready," Gaara announced, sending a wave of silence through the room. Ino had her mouth open to object but quickly locked it shut as she felt obligated to hold back her concerns.

Sasuke made his way to the center of the diagram while unbuttoning his shirt. He tossed it to the pile of furniture and quietly let out a breath as he brought himself to the ground. The others slowly circled around him as they prepared themselves for all of the spiritual labor they would be required to complete. Though he once the King of Hell, Sasuke seemed more like a mere mortal man than ever before as he barely masked his nerves. Ino felt the pit growing in her stomach, witnessing the trepidation on Sasuke's face.

The group began to chant then, eyes slowly falling closed as concentration rose. The room began to grow warm and the air thickened. Once it was time, Gaara released Ino and Itachi's hands to approach Sasuke's still form. Feeling his presence beside him, Sasuke opened his eyes and watched as the man slit his own hand

to draw blood. The red oozed from his palm and was used as paint to draw more symbols onto Sasuke's forehead and chest. Gaara stepped back to the others and continued their chants.

And then there was the pain.

Excruciating, unspeakable, Hell-summoned pain.

At first, his jaw locked to hold it down, but in a matter of seconds, it became too much. A crackling yell of agony broke out and then a wave of even more powerful screams echoed through the apartment. Everyone around him fought back on their instinct to put an end to it, to shake Sasuke from his torment, but it was too late. Every muscle in his body was clenching and burning and his back arched painfully as it smudged the chalk lines beneath him.

And as quickly as the screams and tidal waves of pain took over, they then suddenly dissipated. No one dared to move. As they continued to watch, they saw the final phase begin. The blood, now smeared and mixed with sweat on Sasuke's body began to glow. A deeply pitched hum filled the room and a vibration shook in everyone's core. The human body of the former Satan was still again.

They did it, they all realized. Sasuke was on his way back into Hell. What they didn't realize was that they weren't the only ones waiting and watching. Deep down below, at the most purely rotten point in Hell, the reigning Satan stirred.

Yellow eyes snapped open and dilated in the dark tundra he resided in. Orochimaru's gruesome lips curled back to reveal a collection of jagged and flesh-hungry fangs. He could feel Sasuke's presence in the outermost parts of Hell, which was no longer that brat's to control. When Orochimaru was a demon working his way up, he had waited century after century for Sasuke to complete his term as Satan, impatiently waiting for his chance to dominate the realm he always knew was destined to be HIS. Oh, how he savored every aspect of his domination of the realm... It made him hungry for more.

No matter how many damned souls he tortured and mangled, it wasn't enough. He wanted something bigger, something more heinous... He wanted that mortal world.

The truth of the matter is that he would have long ago clawed his way out and sent his armies of demons on a rampage, but Sasuke, being the pest he always had been, was in the way. When Orochimaru openly fantasized about the conquering, Sasuke berated him. He believed the balance was dependent on the separation of their worlds. Orochimaru believed the so-called balance was Sasuke's contentment. But now... he began salivating all over the damned souls he was chewing on... he would have his chance to permanently rid himself of that pathetically soft nuisance so he could then take over the mortal world. With Sasuke in his clutches in Hell, there was nothing that could stop him..!

"Kariinnnn," he hissed, his voice traveling to the hell-bent woman's inner mind. "It is time!"

The redhead gasped and shot upright. Her head was pounding and she felt the clammy sweat across her body on every inch of her skin. She was on the floor of her living room, bruised and aching still from her fight back in the clinic. She looked around to see if there was anyone else in the apartment with her, but only found the familiar stillness of isolation she knew too well.

"Karin..!" The voice shouted again, causing her to jump.

"Y-yes, sorry! Sorry!" She clambered to her feet and scampered to her room to find the scribbled spell Kabuto sent her from Below. There was no going back now, she reminded herself, not all that certain if she even cared.

Back outside the locked guest bedroom door in Sasuke's apartment, Sakura stood pressed against the wall as her chest heaved with adrenaline. While Tenten sipped every drop of Ino's tea, Sakura sneakily poured it into a planter beside the bed. She knew the group was up to something and didn't think Ino would trust her to idly sit

around... awake. Just as she suspected, Tenten was soon out like a light, leaving Sakura to quietly eavesdrop from the bed. When Sasuke's screams subsided and the ominous hum filled the air, she decided it was time to creep to the other side of the apartment to see what was going on.

From the bits and pieces of what she could hear, she understood Sasuke was now in the bowels of Hell. The vibration in the air made her stomach churn and her lungs struggle. A sinister red glow bled from under the door. She wanted so badly to go inside, but what was the point? He was already gone and she knew better than to think she had the ability to undo that.

Just a few breaths later, a terrible rupturing sounded from inside. The light grew brighter and the humming louder, like an airplane engine in an echo chamber.

"What's happening?" She heard Ino yell.

"The gateway-" Itachi had started to say. She would have heard the rest, but Ino's horrifying scream washed it out. An eruption of force was heard and Sakura couldn't breathe as she heard the distinct sound of a body slamming into the wall right behind her.

"Gaara..!" Itachi shouted

Before she could even think to run, the door ripped open and the face of a familiar blood-smothered demon emerged. Her eyes widened in shock which only caused the summoned monster to smile in such a way that she could see every single one of its wet razor-like fangs.

"Oh, how unfortunate for you!" The creature cackled. It lunged forward and pinned Sakura to the wall. "You've ruined everything for me!"

Sakura was paralyzed by the force of the impact but gasped when she met the yellow eyes of her attacker. "It's you," she choked out.

"The flesh toy Sasuke is so enthralled by," Orochimaru purred. "How delightful that our stars aligned once again, dear..."

An injured Itachi dragged himself from the room, gritting his teeth. Sakura panicked further when she was able to see he was covered in blood... blood that was absolutely too much to be his own. "Why are you here?" He managed to ask, the demand venomous with hate.

"I am here to celebrate my own first steps of claiming this world as *my* dominion and rid it of any potential *pests* in my way," Orochimaru explained, his voice smug and grip on Sakura still strong. "Not that she carries any consequence, but I am just too tempted to destroy this whorish scrap first."

Sakura gasped as the claws on her throat tightened. "I could kill you right now and be done with you, but I feel that would be too merciful," Orochimaru hissed. His jaw tightened and then released as a sickening smile formed on his crusty black lips. "I know what I'll do with you."

Itachi winced under the pain of his shattered leg he was forced to drag behind him. Quietly he summoned his limited but still present powers to rebuild what was broken. He could feel the fragments unifying underneath his skin and muscles. Meanwhile, Orochimaru managed to lose himself to his own monologue of reasons for hating Sasuke addressed to Sakura. The snake demon was going to destroy Sasuke in Hell later but wanted to also make those important to the twerp suffer as well. Even with the time gained from all the talking, Itachi feared there wasn't going to be enough for him to be able to save Sakura.

And his fears quickly proved to come true.

"Instead of slaughtering you into a simple demise, I'm going to submit you to the worst torture of all..." Orochimaru cocked his head to the side in thought. "Death would probably just send your goody-

two-shoes ass to a simple afterlife and I just can't have that. So instead, I'm going to send you straight to *Hell* ..!" Orochimaru hissed.

Itachi cursed and knew he couldn't wait any longer, no matter how poor his chances were of saving Sakura. He summoned his force into his uninjured leg and shifted to lunge at the demon. But as he did, Orochimaru had already reeled back his unengaged arm, then glowing with pitch-black energy and slammed it into Sakura's chest.

Her resulting scream filled every vein in Itachi's body until she slackened like a rag doll against the wall. Orochimaru dropped the woman's body to the hardwood floor and then turned back to Itachi, still on the ground and seething with a myriad of emotions.

"Don't be sad, my darling senior Satan. You'll get the simpler solution," Orochimaru smiled.

"If you kill me, I'll go back to Hell where I can summon my own demons to destroy you," he warned the reigning Satan.

Orochimaru responded with a boisterous laugh as though he had told the joke of a lifetime. "You think I'm going to let you roam free down there? What a fool." He stalked closer to him and without a second more of a delay, used his blood-caked claws to pierce him through the heart.

He smiled, satisfied with his quick work of the two pests. This was such good fun.

As Itachi fell with little grace, he summoned every drop of what was left of his mortal life force and lit the forbidden black flame in his hand to strike Orochimaru. He managed to scrape his arm just before he hit the ground and that proved to be just enough to spread the eternally burning flame onto his wretched opponent.

"Aaagghhhh!" Orochimaru screamed, his arm burning and sizzling relentlessly. He knew that black flame all too well and didn't risk hesitating for even a moment as he used his own claws to slash off

his cursed arm. More screams ensued as thick, inky blood spewed from his shoulder.

Panting, he looked down at Itachi. At least he was finally dead.

But there was one more!

Orochimaru whipped inside the bedroom and scanned the room for Ino, leaking his own blood everywhere. He shoved Gaara's mangled corpse aside and growled when he didn't see the Witch behind him or anywhere else in the room. Sasuke's glowing body remained untouchable, seeing as he needed to keep him alive for use as a portal back to his throne in Hell. But where did Ino go? Just as he turned to the window facing the city, he heard footsteps behind him and the sound of the door hitting the wall.

"I'm going to get you... !" Orochimaru screamed, racing from the room and after his blonde prey. He could hear his own pulse in his ears, his adrenaline taking over.

As he suspected, the front door was wide open and from across the apartment he heard the door to the stairwell slam open as well. Charging at breakneck speed, he followed Ino's trail and -

He stopped.

Not by choice, but by force.

Orochimaru's eyes widened as Ino seemed to vaporize into view in front of him, the invisibility spell she had managed to cast on herself wearing off. Her face was tear-streaked and splattered with the blood of the deceased Gaara and her hands were out in front of her clutching the knife the wretched demon had just run straight into.

No words were exchanged, but their eyes stayed locked onto each other as Orochimaru slowly slumped to his knees. He couldn't believe it. He had only arrived moments ago, how could he already be going back to Hell? His breath became heavy like lead, stirring

confusion in him. It didn't feel right. He felt his mind slowing as well, but at such a rapid pace. What was happening to him?

Suddenly, his eyes widened and his breath hitched. Orochimaru managed to look down at his shoulder and saw not just the cut where he severed his arm, but *rot*. Itachi didn't just curse his limb with an eternally burning flame... he also cursed him with complete mortality. Orochimaru wasn't just going to fade out and find his way back in his throne in Hell, he was going to truly die... Where he would end up after, he did not know.

"Curse you, Itachi..." Faster than he had expected, the darkness and silence enveloped him as the new sensation of death finally took him.

Cold, damp grass chilled the side of her face and sent a shiver down her spine. Her fingers tentatively curled into the dirt as her eyes cracked open. There was a misty fog in the air that made it hard to see very far, but from what she could make of her surroundings, it seemed like she was in a forest.

Sakura slowly sat up and looked around with more focus. There were clusters of sullen trees, some big rocks scattered about, and that persistent fog that kept her just cold enough to be uncomfortable. Then she gasped. Was she dead?

She looked down at her hands and body. She could feel her own pulse but wasn't sure what to make of that. From what she could tell, aside from being damp and cold, she felt alive. She was dressed in a less-than-flattering grey tunic and didn't have any shoes.

The wind howled, startling her. Not wanting to stay where she was but also not sure what was around, she got up to wander ahead. What started out as a few minutes most surely evolved into hours. The faded grass and moss beneath her remained chilled and slick and the fog kept her consistently disoriented and on edge. Just when

she was about to stop and kneel for a break, there was a twig snap behind her.

Her head quickly turned to face the direction of the sound and her pulse picked up. She wanted to speak out and ask who was there, but she wasn't sure she actually wanted to know.

The rustling of a bush sounded even closer. She started to run.

Without even noticing, tears began pouring from her eyes as the fear took over. She felt her lungs start to burn and the heavy material of her tunic preventing her from running with more agility. Where was she? What was chasing her? Her eyes widened. She remembered Karin.

" *I'm going to send you straight to Hell ..!*"

She was in Hell. She was being chased down *in Hell*. Sakura began to sob, causing her to become more out of breath and made it harder to weave through the trees. She could hear her heart pounding in her ears and felt her legs start to burn. Ahead, when it was already too late, she saw someone. The predator that had been chasing her all this time. Her legs slowed as the form grew nearer. There was no more running... this was it.

When her chaser was just a few yards away, she fell to her knees with relief. It was Sasuke.

"Oh, God, thank you," she panted as he reached her.

"There's no god to thank down here," he informed her, his hands digging into his pockets.

She looked up at him through wet eyelashes and saw he was dressed in a similar material, only it was black and fashioned into a long-sleeved shirt and pants. His eyes were glowing brighter and redder than she had ever seen them before and the whites were

black like his clothing. Upon further inspection, she noticed his body seemed paler, harder and more angular.

"This is my 'human' form here," he explained, noticing her observant eyes.

"Why aren't you in your full demon form?" She asked as she took his hand to stand again.

"I didn't want to startle you more than I already did." He smirked at her, bringing a small smile to her face.

Sakura then crushed herself against Sasuke's chest, gripping him hard in her hold. He quietly enclosed her in his arms and pressed his lips to the top of her head. He could feel her trembling as she fought to hold back tears.

"Are... we in Hell?" She forced herself to ask.

"We're in Limbo, the outermost part of Hell." He met her concerned jade eyes and held them. "How did you get here?"

"Great question," a voice chimed in. Both Sasuke and Sakura turned to see a demon standing a few trees away from them. "But I can't say it will change what will happen to you now that you're here."

Sasuke pulled Sakura around and behind him, his arm acting as a barrier. "Kabuto."

Sakura's eyes widened as she then recognized Kabuto's facial features in the monstrous demon in front of them. She also noticed the collection of equally heinous demons lined up behind him.

"My, my, what a treat to see you down here in your old stomping grounds," Kabuto mused. "Are you looking to take back your throne?" He slowly sauntered closer and Sasuke only kept Sakura a step behind himself.

"What are you talking about?" He spat, not in the mood for Kabuto's antics.

"Don't you feel it?" Kabuto asked, cocking his head. "You can't be that thick-headed from your time with the mortals."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes but quietly focused his energy and centered himself. A moment later his eyes snapped open. "There is a void in the Center," he muttered in disbelief.

"There we go!" Kabuto clapped.

"What void?" Sakura asked in a whisper. The demons still caught her question.

"Great question, stupid human. You see, for the first time in the history of existence, there is no Satan." Kabuto's words echoed in the forest.

Sakura could feel Sasuke tense further in front of her. The demons had slowly circled around them and she desperately curled her hand in the fabric on his back to stay close.

"With such an opportunity as this for myself, I can't have the likes of you wandering around," Kabuto shrugged. He snapped his clawed fingers and the small army behind him began to stalk forward with their hungry grins baring fangs and zero empathy.

"Out of my way," Sasuke ordered the dozen or so demons as they closed in.

"My, my. You talk as though you're the Satan running the show here." The demons parted to let Kabuto in. "But let's be clear," he continued with his smug grin, "you're not."

Sasuke knew and understood that to be true, but being back in Hell did have its advantages. He could feel the dark energy all around

him and his proximity to the Center gave him some of the strength he admittedly missed from his days as Satan.

"This is true," Sasuke started to say with a smug grin of his own. "But I was."

And in just a matter of seconds, his skin morphed and hardened into a black and scaly finish with thick onyx claws to match. Two sharp horns protruded from his temples, curling slightly. His body grew to almost twice its human size and became more beast-like, with a feral growl rumbling from within. Sakura gasped and took a step back as bones pierced through the skin on his back to form hand-shaped wings. Even with her medical background, she found herself on the edge of vomiting as she watched bat-like skin grow on and between the finger webbing of the demonic wings.

"Submit to me or I will destroy you," Sasuke's voice boomed.

Kabuto began shaking with excitement after witnessing such a powerful transformation. He began laughing maniacally. "What are you all waiting for? Rip them to pieces!"

"Sasuke," Sakura's voice called desperately. She was helpless and terrified, even though she was already presumably dead down there. But if there was even an ounce of truth in what Kabuto said, she did not want to find out what he had in mind for her.

She saw Sasuke look over his shoulder at her and grin. "Relax, baby."

And while she couldn't relax, she watched in awe as he moved with lightning speed to shred and slaughter the attacking demons in seconds. Kabuto was the only one remaining and was left seething in front of the mangled bodies and pools of black blood.

Kabuto slowly smirked and Sasuke narrowed his eyes. The grey-haired demon began to unravel, morphing into tangles of snakes. Before he could spin around upon realizing he had been tricked, he

heard Sakura's yelp. Behind him, the real Kabuto had her in his arms as newly spawned demons lurked in from the surrounding woods.

"Tsk, tsk. I expected so much more from a former Satan such as yourself." He laughed, gripping Sakura tighter when she squirmed.

"Release her," Sasuke growled.

Kabuto only batted his eyes. "Or what?" He laughed. "You lost, Sasuke."

Sakura counted at least forty demons around them and could only assume there were more behind her. She tried her best to keep calm, but the anger rippling off of Sasuke's livid form was making it difficult.

"Once I kill her soul, which Circle should I imprison it within? I hear the pits of the Eighth Circle are particularly gruesome these days, perfect for a whore like her to suffer in." Kabuto took a long claw to her throat, ready to plunge it into her.

"Last chance," Sasuke warned, his fangs growing and his body shaking with anger.

"Or what? We're dying to know!" Kabuto started laughing and scraped a thin cut straight down Sakura's neck for Sasuke to see. He laughed louder and the circle of demons began laughing, too.

The cacophony of bellowing laughs and cackles filled the otherwise silent forest of Limbo. The once terrifying and ruthless Satan Sasuke was now just a lovesick worm, paralyzed by a mortal's life.

But while the crowd was getting their fill of comedy, Sakura watched in wide-eyed terror as Sasuke continued to morph into something even darker, more heinous than his demon form. His shoulders just about doubled in size as did the rest of his muscles and claws. What sections of skin he had left were then covered in thick scales harder than steel. His face became unrecognizable and beastly, his eyes

still bright red but now blinded by hate and bloodthirst. This, Sakura knew, was *the* Satan.

A high-pitched scream assaulted her left ear as Kabuto released her suddenly. She stumbled forward and looked back to see her captor's lower half was engulfed in black flames. The flames didn't inch any higher up his body and his screams didn't die down either. He was trapped in his agony. Sasuke roared, stunning the collected demons as he summoned a circle of more black flames to trap them all in with him.

"You think I'm weak?" He shouted, his overwhelming power thundering through all of Limbo. Sakura covered her head as his monstrous form stepped over her.

The demons tried to run away but were trapped by the undying wall of flames. When Sasuke suddenly began snatching them up and eating them, some desperately tried breaking through the flames, only to meet their demise by hellfire instead.

"Sasuke!" Sakura screamed, watching in horror as he terrorized and made quick work of the remaining demons. While he ignored her and carried on with his sick pleasure, someone else did hear her cry.

It was Itachi.

Just outside the ring of black fire, he observed his foolish brother overcome by fury and ego. He shook his head. While he wasn't all that surprised, this was going to be more exhausting of a task than he wanted to deal with. As he readied himself to enter the flamed arena, he noticed Sakura getting up and... running *toward* Sasuke.

Itachi charged ahead, leaping into the circle but quickly realizing he wasn't fast enough. He watched in silent horror as she fearlessly ran as fast as her legs could take her. In his state of mind, Sasuke was regressing into a raw and violent demon. Sakura didn't know it, but if Sasuke didn't pull himself back into control, the other Circles would

sense his chaotic energy and be drawn out of their holes. Limbo was no place for a demon like him.

Sakura reached the former Satan as he reeled back to rip apart a cornered demon. She knew what she was doing was crazy and reckless, but she also knew this wasn't Sasuke. This was the Devil. Yes, Satan was a part of Sasuke, but it wasn't all that he was. Sasuke was kind, flirtatious, slow to show his feelings but passionate when he did. This creature, full of nothing but bloodlust and pain, was not who he was and not who she knew he wanted to be.

Her arms wrapped around his leg. Itachi froze in his place, shocked when Sasuke did as well. "Please stop," she pleaded with a shaking voice. "Please!"

Time seemed to stop for a moment as they all absorbed the shock of her actions.

"Sakura," Sasuke managed to say, slowly lowering his arm.

The demon cowering before him dropped to its knees, pushing its head flat against the dirt. Sasuke blinked slowly as his body shifted back to his neutral form like when he first found her.. Sakura never let go, leaving Sasuke to find her on her knees still clutching the back of his leg.

"Sakura," he said again, this time in the familiar deep voice she was relieved to recognize. She looked up, eyes glossed over with unshed tears. The first thing she noticed was the exhaustion and shame filling his stare down at her. She knew without a word being exchanged between them that he didn't mean to lose himself so deep to his abilities like that, and he knew that she was still for him through such an event. "Thank you."

The second thing that she noticed was that he was completely naked. She kept her eyes locked on his and held her breath as he turned around before kneeling in front of her. "Are you okay?" She asked, not knowing what else to say.

"I should be asking you that," he admitted. His clawed hand reached out with exercised caution and stroked her red cheek.

Itachi remained utterly paralyzed where he stood as he watched the pair after such a miraculous event. He watched his brother lean down to tenderly kiss the mortal woman who was never in a million lifetimes meant to be in Hell. There would never be a purpose -

He gasped.

Her purpose... or rather, her destiny.

As he watched Sasuke relax his shoulders in her embrace, he scolded himself for not seeing it sooner. Sakura was Sasuke's destined partner. She was his Lilith. Itachi felt a faint smile find his lips.

"Brother?" Sasuke asked, perplexed by his presence. "What are you doing here?"

Itachi shook his head. He was standing with his foot firmly planted on the back of Kabuto's head, preventing him from moving around much while his legs remained indefinitely aflame. "Do you even know why she's here?"

Sasuke flushed, possibly a first for Sakura to see. Itachi remained unphased. "Orochimaru ambushed us through the portal you created. As an act of spite, he chose to cast Sakura to Hell before killing me."

"What about the others?" Sasuke asked.

Itachi looked away for a moment. Sasuke grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "Tell me, Itachi." Sakura covered her mouth with her hand, already fearing the worst.

"I saw Ino casting an invisibility spell on herself before I died, but Gaara... He didn't survive the initial attack, I'm afraid."

Sasuke's grip slackened as his gaze fell to the ground. "Ah."

"Is... is he here somewhere?" Sakura bit her lip, looking between the two of them.

Itachi smiled at her. "No, he is rightfully elsewhere, as are most other destined Summoners."

She nodded, deciding that would be enough information to carry on for now. Sasuke nodded as well and straightened his spine.

"I can sense the unchecked chaos festering here," Itachi observed, the air full of erratic vibrations. "Without any authority, the Circles will run themselves to ruin... Or worse."

In the distance, they could hear the roars and shrieks of the beasts that formerly bowed down to Orochimaru. In his absence, they were roaming free without anyone to stop them. And they were getting closer.

"We have to step in," Sasuke looked down at Sakura and frowned. This was a disaster of ungodly proportions like nothing the universe had ever seen before, bubbling before an eruption. He had worked so hard to escape this world, was he really willing to risk everything and end up back where he started? Those emerald eyes searched him desperately. He wanted nothing more than to be with Sakura and live his life through as a human, but he knew that wasn't even an option with the turn of events they were currently plagued by. He had no choice but to return to his role as-

In the distance, there was a blur of movement as a barrage of lower demons closed in on them. Both Sasuke and Itachi braced themselves, ready to fight. The elder of the two picked up Kabuto by his hair and held him out for the approaching mob to see. Free from the dirt that silenced him before, he began screaming again from the pain of the black flames.

"Sasuke," Sakura called out with a somewhat steady voice. "What should I do?"

He took a second to devise a plan and once he did, he turned to her with a softened gaze. "Do you trust me?" Sakura felt her breath hitch at the sound of his deep voice speaking so intimately to her. She nodded, forcing herself to focus on him and not the horrific wave of demons approaching. "Demon," Sasuke barked. The sole remaining creature from Kabuto's attack looked up submissively at Sasuke. "Come here."

She felt her stomach flip and panic start to build inside her suddenly as it got closer. What was he going to do with it?

"I am your master, correct?" His voice carried farther than when he was speaking to her a moment before. The demon, back on its knees, nodded vigorously. Sasuke bared his fangs. "Say it!"

It brought its face back down to the dirt. "You are my master, I'll do anything you wish, Satan Sasuke!"

Sasuke calmed himself and straightened up once more. "You will protect this human with your life, understood?" Sakura shot him a look of fear, but he ignored her. "I will not tolerate a single hair out of place." Before she could argue, the little demon had scooped her up and created some distance between them and the others.

Itachi winked at her over his shoulder. "This shouldn't take long, dear."

It was then that the two brothers exchanged a knowing look and began morphing into their larger, menacing and demonic forms. Itachi grew clawed wings like Sasuke's but also had spikes sprouting down his spine and a waterfall of black hair grow out and to the ground. Together, they summoned a towering wall of onyx flames to erupt from the split ground in front of them.

At the sight of the two returning Satans, the crowd halted abruptly. "Is that..?" "He's back..!" "Two Satans?!" "Lord Kabuto..!"

Silence washed over them all with the exception of the screaming Kabuto, still dangling in agony. "Let there be an understanding here," Sasuke projected his voice to the point of it echoing off the trees. "This is not your leader!" In a blink, he swiped his claws across Kabuto's neck and effectively decapitated him.

"I am," Itachi declared. Sasuke almost snapped his own neck as he turned to look at his brother. "I am your current reigning Satan. Bow beneath me!"

The hundreds of bodies below suddenly dropped to their knees. The two of them were prepared for a bloody fight, but the terrifying combination of the two of them rendered such a concern beyond unnecessary.

"What are you doing?" Sasuke hissed.

Itachi only spared him a glance. "I am the reason you came down here to begin with."

"I don't understand-"

The older brother shook his head dismissively before turning his full attention to the army of hell creatures. "Back to your Circles, be gone..!" At the command, they all ran away faster than they had appeared.

The two of them stood there unmoving, Sakura quietly watching from a distance with her demon caretaker.

Itachi finally looked up at his brother. A rare tint of regret colored his eyes. "I foresaw your future interest in Sakura in a vision years ago, soon after you retired from here. You were so young and reckless, I was worried you wouldn't figure out how to earn your keep on Earth on your own..."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "So you screwed with Kiba, knowing you could call him back at any time to show me what I had to lose?"

Itachi bowed his head. "I should have had more faith in you to find the joy of love."

Sasuke was seeing red. "Like fucking Hell you should have, and now look where we are!"

"Which is why I will pay for my mistakes and return to the Center to reign as Satan until the next one is ready."

Silence again.

"You can let her go," Sasuke muttered to their slave demon. Sakura quickly separated herself from it, but hesitated to approach the Satanic brothers.

"What happens now?" She mustered enough courage to ask.

"I will expedite my journey to the Center of Hell to reclaim it as my own, and you two," Itachi gestured with a single claw between her and his brother, "will find Kiba's soul."

Sasuke boiled. He didn't want Itachi to have to return to this life, but he knew the only other option was that he himself would return and Itachi would in no way let that happen. This was how it was going to be, until a new Satan was ready.

A hand weighed on his shoulder. "I'll have my chance to return," Itachi smirked. Sasuke grinned right back.

"How does this work?" Sakura asked dubiously. She felt so lost and had no hope of understanding the politics of the Underworld.

"I will make my way down the end and fix what unneeded chaos Orochimaru left behind. In a hundred years or so we should have a new Satan ready to take my place."

"You make it sound so simple," she muttered. Sasuke, despite still being mostly still in his Satanic form, pulled her small mortal form closer to him. He needed to feel flesh to calm himself. "S-Sasuke!" She squeaked as he nuzzled down into her neck, his horns curled right into her line of sight. She gulped upon close inspection of the pointed ends so close to her.

Itachi clucked his tongue at his brother's easily riled emotions and cleared his throat. "I can't say I have much time to waste here, so I am going to get going."

Sasuke centered himself and held Sakura at his side as he shook Itachi's outstretched hand. "I hope you will eventually forgive me," the elder confessed.

It was Sasuke's turn to smirk first this time. "I already have."

Itachi gave Sakura a surprisingly soft hug before holding her at arm's length. "You're a strong woman, Sakura Haruno. Don't let this fool scare you." Sakura smiled somberly, knowing this would probably be the last she would see of Sasuke's brother.

"Come, underling," Itachi called to the demon a short distance away. "We must go."

And with a burst of flames left in their wake, it was suddenly just Sasuke and Sakura.

"They're... gone," Sakura blinked, still not used to any of the supernatural tricks and all that was this unholy realm.

"No need to worry about him," Sasuke sighed. "Are you tired?"

It was then that she realized she was in fact exhausted. Having her mortal soul sent on such a journey had taken a toll on her. "I guess so," she admitted.

"Your soul may not have to eat down here, but you do need rest." Sasuke ran the back of his claw down her cheek, his mind wandering to how fragile she was here and how easy it would be to rip her like tissue. He was pulled from such thoughts by the touch of her hand on his.

"I don't suppose there are any hotels around here?" She joked, earning a raised eyebrow from her devilish companion.

"No, but I do have something in mind."

"Oh yeah? Is it a burning bed of coals? Sakura teased, hand on her hip.

Sasuke pulled her flush against his hard, scaly torso. "Close. It's my old sex dungeon."

So there we have it. Itachi's taking the old throne as Satan once more and Sasuke and Sakura are going to be catching up on some Z's in the old sex dungeon. Consider the gears shifted, friends. ;) I'll try to get the next chapter out soon enough as a gift of sorts to us all. As always, reviews are forever appreciated 3 Miss you all! xoxo

Chapter 20

Hello, hello! Welcome to Chapter 20. This is a special chapter for a few reasons, but most importantly to me because this story is now over a year old! I'm pretty much in shock because it really doesn't feel like I've been working on this that long, but that just goes to show you the power of a hobby I suppose. Anyway, enough of my drabbling. This chapter picks up right where we left off: Sasuke and Sakura are in Hell and about to head off to Sasuke's sex dungeon (he called it that himself, we won't judge) while the mortal world has just become a little quieter after Ino killed Orochimaru in Sasuke's apartment after he used Sasuke's body as a portal OUT of Hell. So go forth, young reader! Read on and please review! Would love to hear from you. :)

CH 20

The only sound Ino could hear was her own panting. Her hands were trembling and sweat now coated her forehead as the stress of the moment found new ways to express itself. She did it. She killed Satan Orochimaru. Still in shock by her own actions, Ino slowly rose to her feet as the long-haired corpse disintegrated into a pile of ash before her eyes.

"What the fuck," she said to herself. "Did I just..."

Unfortunately, Orochimaru wasn't the only one to die that day. The weary blonde quietly made her way through Sasuke's wrecked apartment to where it all started. Sakura's body, breathing but currently just a shell, was sprawled out near the wall and another heap of ash. This mass she knew was what was left of poor Itachi's body. If it weren't for him, she realized, Orochimaru wouldn't have been possible to kill. She mouthed a 'thank you' to his remains.

Taking a shaky breath, she braced herself for the next room... The room where Sasuke's body lay, glowing bright red in the darkness. It was also where she witnessed Gaara's murder and where his remains would be found. She meant to walk into the room, but her feet were cemented to the floor. Her heart became immensely heavy, to the point of being painful, but it made no difference. She couldn't bear the pain of seeing her dear friend's corpse. It was too much.

Ino retreated to the living room to find her phone in her bag and called Hinata as tears rolled down her cheeks. When she heard her pick up, she took a deep breath. "Something happened," she sobbed. "I need you and Naruto at Sasuke's apartment." Her eyes shot to the doors of the master bedroom when she heard a stirring behind them. "Fast."

"Are you fucking kidding me, Sasuke?" The pitch in her voice rose with every word thanks to her temper. Sasuke could only stare back in surprise. "You used to own this whole world and the best place you have for me to rest is your demonic sex dungeon?"

She shielded her eyes with her hands, pushing the heels of her palms into her sockets. Could it all just be a dream? After everything she had gone through that day - the demon attack at the clinic, the murderous ambush from Satan, being hurled to Hell, *another* demon attack, and then *another* bloodbath at the hands of the *good* Satans... and after all of that, Sasuke was offering to take her *where* ..?

Sakura's face was burning bright with rage and Sasuke had to admit he knew she was going to snap at him any day at that point, it was just a matter of when and where. The fact that it happened while they were down in Hell on his self-imposed mission to save her ex-boyfriend's soul was just luck.

"Is this really your best idea!?" She was still yelling, but this time came armed with a pointed finger she was then jabbing at his scaly chest.

Bad luck, he clarified to himself.

Sasuke remained motionless and if anything, slightly amused by her blow up. "I understand you're not a human like I am but I can't understand why you have to be so fixated on sex all the time. Isn't there anything else you want more than that?" Her eyes became glossy but he knew those were tears of frustration, not sadness, brimming at the edge. "From me..?" She added with a whisper.

She tried to read his expression, but behind the onyx scales and sharp edges of his face, she only saw what he wanted her to see: nothing. Her heart was pounding and her stomach constricted on itself, the anxiety building ever stronger. "Please say something," she finally begged as her body was still trembling with adrenaline. It wasn't an everyday thing, to find yourself screaming (especially in a berating fashion) at Satan.

With his expression still neutral and leaning towards apathetic, he stepped closer to her. There were only a few breaths between them, enabling her to see the way his ruby eyes shined a little brighter than before. Sticking to her resolve, she chose to stand her ground and ironed her posture as he brought himself even closer, so as to tower over her in his demon form. Neither said a word for what felt like an eternity.

"Do you still really think all I want from you is sex, Sakura?" The way he enunciated every syllable in her name sent a violent chill through her. He rested the tip of a claw at the base of her throat, causing her to involuntarily hold her breath. "What is it that you expect from the Devil exactly?" He lowered his claw to the rough collar of her grey tunic, pulling downward just enough to remind her of how easy it would be for him to rip it, and her, to bits. "What do you want from me?"

"I... I don't know," she whispered, forcing herself to meet his eyes. He held her gaze just a moment longer before releasing her altogether. She felt colder.

"We'll start our journey down," he said as he turned and started walking away. "The dungeon is hidden away in the Second Circle. Once your energy is back we can keep descending to where Kiba's soul is."

Sakura reluctantly followed him through the fog and mist. He didn't give her much at all to go off of in regards to the dungeon, so she still was stressing about that. She also had so many questions, like where they were going in that moment, how they would get to the next Circle, who or what else lived in Limbo... but she was still so shaken by his questions that she couldn't speak. It was a fair of him to ask her all that, but she hadn't yet truly asked herself those things before. As her eyes followed his broad back through the forest, she tried to figure it out. What *did* she want exactly?

Her mind wandered back to memories of Sasuke's devious flirtations and warm embraces. She longed to feel how she did every time he held her, to feel desired and cared for. It was back in Ino's old apartment building that she first saw Sasuke's demon form when he chased down after her during the snowstorm. It was then that she first saw his true heart.

" I thought once I had figured out what my true source of fulfillment was, the thing that would serve my soul, I'd be set to live the human chapter of my life..." His expression darkened. "But then I met you."

' What?' She felt her stomach drop and didn't know what to say.

" Sakura," The way her name rolled off his tongue sent a shiver down her spine. She dared herself to meet his gaze. "You've made me feel some things I haven't felt before."

" I don't think I understand.." She tensed as he slowly rose from sitting.

" I don't either," He stepped down the last of the stairs and squat on his knees right in front of her. His thumb extended to her cheek and

wiped away tears still silently rolling down her face. "It's absolutely terrifying."

She felt her lip quivering again. "Sasuke-"

"I'm sorry, Sakura." He was looking directly into her eyes. "I'm sorry for being so selfish and careless about your feelings."

She broke her gaze and lowered it to her knees. "I just thought you wanted something more than sex from me."

"That's just it, though." He chuckled again. "For the first time in my life I think I do. Listen," He took both her hands into his palms, careful not to nick her with his claws. "I want to show you the real me, all of it. I don't want to promise you anything because I just don't know what is going to happen, but at the very least I want you to be able to trust me to be honest. Do you think you can do that?"

She felt his palms underneath her and studied his large hands holding hers. Could this truly be Satan himself in such a vulnerable state? No, she realized, because he wasn't Satan. At least not the one she had in her imagination. This was Sasuke, and although she didn't know him all that well-certainly less than she would have guessed that morning-she believed he had a good heart.

"We can make a deal," She offered with a small smile. "I'll help you figure this human thing out however I can, but I get the couch."

He grinned and held his hand up to shake hers. "Deal."

A smile ghosted at her lips. So naive, she thought to herself, but she wouldn't have had that moment any other way. Sasuke was still walking a few paces ahead of her without any indication of slowing down. Sakura sighed. "Sasuke," she called to him. "Why did you ask Ino and Gaara to send you back to Hell in the first place?"

While he didn't change pace or turn to look at her, she could see his hands clench at his sides. "There wouldn't have been any point in

you coming down here by yourself," he grumbled.

She felt one eyebrow twitching in annoyance and quickened her pace to stop in front of him. He was still completely naked, but at least his scaly outer form shielded his crotch from sight. "Tell me the real reason, Sasuke. Why are you doing this?"

He looked down his nose at her, not one to take kindly to demands from others. His hand-wings flexed on his back as he concentrated on keeping his cool. She locked him in a staredown with no sign of backing down until she got her answer... a real one.

"Why?" She asked again. He growled and stepped to walk around her, but she sidestepped back in front of him. "Talk to me!"

"Because!" Sasuke roared suddenly, his fangs and wings fully extended and his eyes flaming red. "I want you to be *happy* !"

He expected her to run off or fall under the weight of her fear. Part of him wanted her to. All of these emotions were so complicated and painful, how could anything pleasurable come from them? He wanted it all to stop. Despite his desperate inner wishes, Sakura took a few steps forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. His shoulders slackened under the contact, as did the rest of his features. He looked down at the mess of pink hair against his chest and returned the embrace. "Thank you, Sasuke," he heard her say.

The scales on his face receded as he created a few inches of distance between them to look at her. "I care very deeply for you, Sakura."

She put a careful hand on his solid chest and nodded. His words warmed her heart, but she knew he was still waiting for an answer to his initial question. *What did she expect from him?* "I know, and I feel the same about you."

Her hands extended to find his cheeks and caressed them with her thumbs. How she was able to find a tender moment in a place like

Hell was beyond her own comprehension. She should be terrified, traumatized, concerned about getting back to the mortal world..! (Actually, she was very concerned about that last part.) "Sasuke," she said his name with a nervous edge he knew wasn't at all related to their intimate hug. "How are we getting home after all this?"

' *Home*,' he smiled to himself. "Without Gaara, Ino won't be able to summon us back on her own. We'll have to trust she is calling on some extra help. With her tie to me through our pact, she'll be able to find me at least."

"And what about me?" Sakura quickly followed. "How will Kiba and I get out?" She felt a small bout of panic stir in her as he looked away. Her hands fell to his chest. "Sasuke-"

"I never intended to have you down here-"

"Sasuke..."

"Let's get moving and then-"

"Sasuke!" She slapped his chest in aggravation.

He growled, but she stayed strong once more. She needed answers, at least this one. The devil looked out over her head. She knew it was just to avoid eye contact and grew all the more unsettled. "You'll have to be connected to me similarly to Ino," he sighed. "We'll need a pact. That will act as the glue so you can latch on."

Sakura forced space between them once more. "I have to make a pact with you? And Kiba does, too?"

Sasuke nodded. He already told her it wasn't how he intended this mission to go. "You can overthink it all you want. Let's just get moving, we have a bit of a walk until we get to the passage to the Second Circle."

Her feet followed on autopilot through the eerily silent forest, but her mind was racing with visions of her kneeling before Sasuke as his devotee and personal slave. Would he have complete control of her body and will? Would she be tied to his side for life? Eternity? And Kiba, what would happen to him?

"This is where we head down," his low voice announced, breaking her from her spiraling thoughts.

Sakura blinked as she looked out from behind him, suddenly facing a giant hole the size of a city block. She could probably see about forty or fifty feet down, but the rest of the way was a level of darkness unlike any other. "We're... going down there?"

Sasuke nodded before pointing to the narrowest steps she had ever seen in her life carved into the wall of the cavernous abyss. They spiraled down and around without anything but the rocky wall to count on for support. One wrong step and she would be done for. The demon took note of her visible apprehension. "Even if Itachi has already managed to reclaim the Ninth Circle, I can't count on his authority to have traveled this fast upwards. I'd rather not alert the demons in the Second Circle of our presence and deal with them trying to trap you... So we'll take the stairs."

She looked up at him and then back down into the pit. It was disorienting to look into if she stared for more than a few seconds. Still, she forced herself to swallow any protests and stepped closer to the rigid lip of rock. "What happens if I lose my footing?"

The demon raised an eyebrow. "You'll fall." She threw him an exasperated look and he sighed. "I can snatch you up, but that kind of movement could be enough for the Second Circle demons to notice."

The pink-haired woman took a deep breath before taking her first tentative step into the darkness. Her hand pressed into the gritty rock next to her face for balance and her eyes trained onto the steps just in front of her. She wanted to ask how many steps it would be until

they got to where they were headed, but if she had to guess, there wouldn't be a satisfactory answer in store for her.

They moved along in silence and at a painfully slow pace. Despite this, Sasuke remained quiet. If there was a time to practice patience, it was most certainly at that moment. He watched his human companion move along with stiff, mechanical steps and white fingertips glued to the uneven rocks. With every step they took, he could feel the hazy darkness of his former life scratching at the back of his mind.

Memories squeezed in through the cracks in the walls and gaps in the floorboards of his mind. There was the incomparable sensation of flesh on flesh. Insatiable mouths and wet tongues. Shameless moans. Heat. Friction. Pain.

Sasuke realized he had stopped walking at some point and was a few yards behind Sakura. He refocused himself and then noticed there was a shift in the air. His superior eyes zeroed in on the shifting force from down below. Something was coming up and fast. Looking in front of him he didn't want to alarm Sakura and cause more trouble for himself to manage, so he just quietly readied himself for whatever was approaching. Seconds later, he could hear the faint flapping. He knew that sound right away. It was a Second Circle demon. He only had a moment to react.

Before she even knew what was happening, Sakura found her back pressed hard into the rocks with Sasuke's equally hard body flush against her. "S-Sasuke-" she started to protest, but his hand covered her mouth before she could finish. Her eyes widened when she saw his wings expand and completely seal her off from the pit. The thick talons pierced the rock like a slab of meat.

"Lord Sasuke, is that you?" She heard a raspy voice ask. Her heart began pounding and she forced herself to stay still despite the sharp edges of the stone stabbing her flesh.

Sasuke turned his head to the side to look at the demon flying a few yards away from them. "What do you want?" His tone was cold and foreign to her. She could only imagine what kind of hell-born creature was just on the other side of him.

"What an unexpected surprise, forgive me. I smelled a lost soul and came up to find it." Sakura could hear its lips smacking with hunger. Sasuke remained completely unmoved.

"I have nothing for you here, so keep it moving." Sakura expected to hear wings flapping away, but could tell the demon was still in close range. She became more nervous and clutched at Sasuke's forearms. "Did you not hear me?" He spat over his shoulder.

There was only the faint howls of winds from down below. "Lord, I smell the soul on you..." The evil creature said, growing closer, the flapping becoming louder. "What are you-"

"Any closer and I will destroy you," Sasuke growled, venom thick in his voice. She could feel his body tensing and inhuman muscles rippling around her.

"I smell the..!" Before the demon could finish its sentence, Sasuke slashed a hand-wing out behind him and knocked the demon out of the air.

"Annoying pest," Sasuke growled. She could feel him peel his body off of her and then found herself being held against his chest right before Sasuke jumped into the air. "Hang onto my neck, we're going to have to fly down fast to avoid a swarm of them."

"What just happened?" She yelled, clinging to Sasuke as he carried her into the center of the column of darkness.

"They know you're here. We have to dive down to the dungeon before they all find us." Sakura screwed her eyes shut, completely aware of the fact that there was no arguing with him. "I got you, don't worry."

Before she could even nod in understanding, they were falling. Fast. Her mouth opened to scream, but it was like the force of the descent was barricading all sound in the back of her throat. Just as she was on the brink of blacking out, Sasuke quickly evened their trajectory out and started gliding back to the wall. If she had her human gut with her, she most definitely would have thrown up. Sakura dared to let go with one arm and scraped the hair from her face tilt her head back and see where they were going. Only when she squinted her eyes she could see a cave-like opening ahead. The wind was louder now, more chaotic and violent.

As they swooped down into the lip of the cavern, Sasuke kept her on him as he opened an enormous iron door just out of sight from the pit. Once inside, she couldn't help but gasp in astonishment. "Welcome to my dungeon," he said, placing her down on her feet.

Sakura took a moment to regain control of her feet as she allowed her balance to return before taking stock of the dreaded sex dungeon Sasuke had dragged her to. From behind, the trembling echo of the door shutting reverberated. There was silence.

It was a lofty cave, reminding her of the neck-straining ceiling in his apartment back in New York. While the space was rough and jagged all around, there was an array of shackles lining the walls like BDSM-themed garlands. Higher up the walls, pillars of dripping wax candles lit in almost every available crevice.

Sasuke stood by idly as he watched Sakura wander the dungeon. Her bare feet crossed the cool cave floor to the center where a nest of silky black sheets and giant velvet pillows were piled about.

The scraping inside had escalated into gouging cuts all throughout. His mind was hazy and he felt overly tense and on edge. His senses were heightened and his throat grew tight. He knew the deeper into Hell they went, the stronger it would pull on his old vices he was working so hard to keep under control in the mortal world. What he didn't know, however, was how quickly he would be affected by the

Circles and the compounding influence of his own demonic nature. Having Sakura there was just the rotten cherry on top.

Looking like the ultimate prey in his clutches, she slowly turned around to face him. Sakura's soft locks were tangled and frizzing around her like an aura. Her Hell-issued tunic, as unflattering as it was, taunted him by hiding that supple flesh he yearned to taste. That summer weekend when she first let him fondle and feast on her breasts. He could feel himself salivating. "Is this where I'm supposed to sleep?" She asked pointedly.

He grinned. "Unless you want me to chain you up on the wall?" He could see her eyes widen in horror and clenched a fist. His chest grew warm as though he had just swallowed a shot of whiskey. Her reactions were always so intoxicating.

Sakura remained frozen in her place as he stalked forward until he was towering just in front of her. Whenever he would tease her back up in the mortal world, there was always a glimmer of levity in his eye, maybe even a boyish tilt to his smile. But in that moment, there was no light or charming expression. On his face, she could only read hunger. "You've always been a bit curious about this side of me, Sakura, am I right?" He put his hands on her arms and slid them to her wrists. Her heart was pounding as she tried to search his eyes and almost felt like she was looking at a complete stranger. Or an animal. "Let's indulge some of that curiosity, shall we?"

Before she could ask him what he was doing, she was being lifted and suddenly pressed into the cave wall with Sasuke pinning her wrists beside her face. His hips leaned on hers to press her into the rock and she gasped. "Sasuke, this isn't funny," she forced out in a firm voice. He craned his neck down to run his long tongue across the vein in her throat. She shivered and tried to shield herself with her shoulder but it was pointless. He wanted her like this and was not going to be stopped by a puny human shoulder like hers.

Tears pooled at the root of her bottom lashes. He had a ghost of a smirk at his lips that remained in place after that. She tensed when

she heard a contented rumbling stir from his chest. "Don't you want to know what kind of pleasure I can give you once you submit to me?"

Sakura felt the panic building as he collected both her hands in just one of his so he could reach for the shackles on the wall. "Sasuke," she called out again, tears spilling down her cheeks. "This isn't you. Please don't do this, I'm scared."

It was like a bucket of water had been thrown in his face. He stopped what he was doing and brought his eyes back to hers to study them. It was an abrupt but welcome pivot she didn't expect. She held her breath as he searched her face, completely uncertain as to what he would do next. Once he blinked a few times, she started to recognize him again. He was Sasuke again. "You don't want this," he finally said, mostly to himself.

Without another word, he pulled his body off of hers and carefully lowered her to the ground.

"The blankets are quite comfortable," he noted absently as he turned to the corner a ways away from her. Sakura wrung her wrists to ease the ache that lingered while she took a moment to compose herself. Every survival instinct in her told her to run, to go hide and pray, but instead she followed after him.

Sasuke pressed his forehead into the rock, willing the oily sludge that was those dangerously tempting but toxic inclinations to dissipate. How could Sakura trust him if he -

A small hand pressed lightly on the space between his wings, shocking his eyes wide open. "Are you okay?" He heard her ask from behind him.

Was he okay..? Was *he* okay? What kind of person would ask such a thing after being attacked like that? What mouse ran back to the cat to see how it was faring? He couldn't help but grin. She wasn't a

mouse and she didn't recognize him as her predator. ' *This isn't you.*' She just saw him as Sasuke.

"Being down here has a regressive effect on me, I apologize," he explained as he slowly turned to face her. "I won't let it happen again." She nodded, although not fully understanding. What mattered was that he pulled himself back for her. "You should really get some rest, though."

She nodded again and slowly turned to walk back to the giant nest of luxe fabrics in the center of the cave. Sakura hesitated for a moment before cautiously kneeling down onto the plush pool of silks. Curious red eyes followed her as she crawled across the sheets until she settled next to a few pillows about the same size as her.

"This feels weird," she eventually confessed. "I don't know if I can sleep with you watching me like that."

The demon crossed the cave to the edge of the nest with a playful expression. Looking up at him, he reminded her of their date night in Brooklyn when he coaxed her into a nightcap paired with a few goosebump-raising touches.

"Would you prefer I join you while you nap?" He offered, enjoying her squirm under his intimidating gaze.

She squeezed the pillow closest to her in her hand and hesitated to respond. How was he so quick to move past what had just happened? She would rest easier if he wasn't looming over her like a stalker in the corner, but he *did* just try to chain her to the wall moments ago...

"I promise to let you sleep," he assured her, crouching down. "I'll control myself."

After another moment of mulling it over and accepting the 'fuck it' that ran through her mind, Sakura nodded. The powerful demon locked eyes with his guest and slowly crawled towards her like an

encroaching black panther. Her stomach flipped and her heart fluttered recklessly. As he grew closer, he let more of his scales recede and gave way to a more familiar face, the one that she longed to touch. Sakura smiled and instantly felt more at ease when he smiled back.

"I know this goes without saying, but you've proven to be very trusting of me by letting me bring you in here," he mused as he stretched out beside her. She couldn't help but let her eyes scan the layers of muscles running down his torso, the ridges of his abs and long, strong arms.

"It wasn't as though I had much of a say in the matter," she countered.

"Hn," he snorted as his masterful hand glided across her cheek. Without even realizing it, she had leaned into him as he leaned towards her. She admired his thick lashes and the flecks of deep orange and amber making up his irises. They played in the chorus of flickering candle lights all around them and she found it hard to pull herself away, not that she wanted to. Considerate claws brushed a few strands of blush pink hair from her face to admire her soft features. Something felt different between them, he noticed. The hold she had on him felt stronger than any physical hold he could ever have on her. "Do you regret being here?"

Emerald eyes locked with ruby ones. "I don't regret anything with you."

Sasuke felt his own breath hitch upon hearing that. They were such foreign words, like spells in another language she was casting on him. Drawn in, he didn't wait a moment longer before he dipped down to finally close the gap between them and pressing his lips firm on hers. Sakura found herself struggling to imagine what Heaven could offer her with someone like Sasuke holding her like this in Hell.

She found his lips to be surprisingly soft and warm. She had assumed he would feel rough and dry, like rigid sandpaper. He kept

the contact gentle, probably out of fear of scaring her away, and Sakura could feel her whole body melt against the blankets underneath her. The devilman let a hand run across her stomach to pull her side out from under her so she was laying on her back next to him. She found herself smiling into his kiss and enjoying the sensation of the tip of his tongue gliding across her bottom lip.

"Sakura," he purred her name, angling his chest above her. She only smiled more, daring to lace a hand into his thick hair. This only encouraged him to prod at the seal between her lips to ask for entrance. His presence was overwhelming.

"Come here," he growled after tasting her tongue and the rest of her mouth. His true hunger began to stir and was calling to hers. He leaned back and pulled the woman into his lap to straddle him. Sakura draped her arms over his shoulders and wasted little time in bringing her mouth back to his. He felt so good, so right, she couldn't bring herself to stop. And why should she?

The fact that they were in the bowels of Hell did not escape her. Maybe the energy of the Circles was influencing her as well, but she also didn't see a real reason to deny herself this simple pleasure of intimacy with Sasuke anymore. Why did she in the first place..? She couldn't deny that she was constantly battling her attraction to him, and while his dungeon down in Hell was not the wisest place to give into some of those desires, she frankly did not care. She was tired, they were alone and she wanted him. Bad.

Her stiff tunic hitched up her thighs and his hands only took that as an invitation to slide under and further up to access more of her sweet, soft flesh. "I want to feel every inch of you in my hands," he breathed against her. She could only nod with hooded eyes full of lust. He took a brief second to admire how beautiful she was in the warm flickering light and wondered if they could just spend eternity in there together. With all the secrecy of the dungeon, the ever-present fuel of sin in the air, and without the burden of mortality, there was nothing to stop them.

But as he daydreamed about this never-ending romp, he remembered all the others above and those who sacrificed themselves to help him get back down there to retrieve Kiba's soul in the first place. He owed it not just to Sakura, but to everyone else involved, to finish what he started.

"What's wrong?" Sakura asked, pulling his wandering mind back to her.

He sighed and shook his head. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I don't think it's a good idea for us to keep going here."

Her brow furrowed with both confusion and frustration. "Why not? Isn't this what you've always wanted?"

He let his eyes trail her crumpled tunic and glowing skin in his lap. "Most certainly. My fear is if we keep going here, I'm not going to be able to pull us back to our mission to save Kiba."

Her face fell in sober shame. Kiba's smile, which she hadn't seen in what felt like ages, filled her mind while guilty sorrow filled her heart. "I wouldn't want that to happen," she agreed sullenly. She realized it really must have been the effects of the Underworld egging her on, but the guilt was as heavy as an iron blanket.

"But," Sasuke said with a hint of mischief in his voice, "I can think of an alternative that will make both of us quite happy."

Sakura blinked a few times, not sure what Sasuke had in mind. It didn't matter, though, since he wasn't planning on keeping it a mystery for long. Sakura only protested mildly as he removed her from his lap and planted her back on the cushions around them. Her keen eyes watched as he licked his lips and looked down at her lap before meeting her gaze again. She gasped.

"You want to..?" She couldn't even bring herself to finish her own question. "I don't know-"

"I would kill to taste you, Sakura." Her mouth ran dry after hearing that and her cheeks burned as red as ever. "Let me eat you, baby. I'm hungry..."

His eyes swirled into the blackest wine as a shadow fell across his face. She knew he was going to get her drunk. He crawled closer until he was all but on top of her, his hands supporting him on either side of her hips and his nose brushing the side of her cheek. She didn't dare move, especially when a set of sharp teeth captured her ear lobe. "Are you really going to deny the Devil his simple pleasures?"

She pulled back just enough to look him in the eye. "First of all, there's nothing simple about what's down there. Second of all, you're not the Devil anymore!" Sakura was half-playing with him, but that didn't stop him from defending his ego. His smirk had morphed into a deep scowl as he got up.

"Let's make this very clear then, *Sakura*..." She felt goosebumps rise at the roll of her name off his tongue. He made his way back to the cave walls, his back muscles flexing deliciously as he reached for some of the chains and devices she didn't even recognize. "Just having dominion over this realm doesn't make you the Devil," he explained as he pulled down a matte black cat of nine tails. Sakura swallowed as he pulled the leather bits through his hand before cracking them against his unflinching palm. "Neither does an unbreakable pain tolerance or thirst for blood."

She shifted nervously, feeling afraid but somehow still a little turned on by him. Part of her knew he was acting with a clear mind, but the other remaining bit couldn't help but wonder if he was going to try to scare her... or was he serious? Sasuke took his time sauntering across the rugged space and gave the air a taste of the leather bits as he snapped them in front of himself. Sakura couldn't help but jump. On the other wall, he took down what Sakura recognized to be a leather harness and connected mask with a ball gag built into it. "Do you know what makes one the Devil, *Sakura*?" He fingered the ball before hanging the piece on his arm. His eyes were still perusing

his vast collection, but she shook her head as though he was looking. She watched him with her lip clenched in her teeth as he plucked a smooth but very girthy carved stone off the wall. He played with the weight of it in his grasp before looking over at her again. When she blinked, he was suddenly right in front of her.

"When you become the master of all things pain and pleasure, able to harness them to break souls..." He drawled on as he ran the smooth obsidian crystal down between her breasts to the bone of her pelvis. "Then... you may be worthy of such a title as the Devil." A finger tilted her chin up to force eye contact between them. "Which I claimed. Would you like me to prove my mastery in pleasure or pain for you?"

Sakura felt her skin burning and her head was dizzy from his heightened intensity. She had to wonder if this was some dark magic he was exercising. "I-I, um," she stammered as he ran his tongue down the stone with his eyes still locked onto hers.

The dark-haired creature dragged the long leather bits down her thigh to her bare toes. "I'd love to hear what kinds of noises you'd make on the brink of your climax, personally..."

"Okay, stop..!" She grabbed the flogger with frantic desperation more expected from a skittish nun. "You're the Devil, I give up!"

A smug expression formed on the devilman's face. He tossed the tools aside and brought her face to his once more. "I bet in the heat of things you'd say some naughty things, too."

Sakura slapped his shoulder at that. "You've made your point."

He raised an eyebrow. "I don't think I have exactly." His eyes fell to her lap again and she knotted her hands over it defensively. Sasuke noted this gesture and leaned in closer. "Let me eat you out, Sakura." He slid behind her and began lining wet kisses down her neck while his hands snaked around to cup her breasts. She shuddered with pleasure as he flicked her nipples over the rough

fabric covering them. As she pressed her legs together, she could feel her wetness smearing between her thighs.

"Sasuke," she managed to whisper.

"Hn?" He grinned into her skin, his tormenting still ongoing.

"H-how is this any better than us..."

"Fucking?" He finished for her, grinning as she squirmed more. It just wouldn't get old.

She used the remnants of her sense of responsibility to pull away and create at least an inch of distance. "This feels wrong. How would it be mutually enjoyable? I feel like this is going to end in us going too far and you're right, we can't do that..." She cursed her own wavering voice. "Not until we do right by Kiba."

He sat a little straighter, his face a solid neutral. "If that is where you draw the line, I won't cross it. You have my word, Sakura."

Her brow knit tightly on her forehead. "I don't understand."

The sharp arch in one of his eyebrows lifted. "If you morally can't bring yourself to have sex with me right now, then we won't. I would still like to eat you out."

Sakura fell slackjawed and became bright red at that. He may have been a supernatural being, but she felt she had a good grasp of where his pleasures aligned with mortals. Not bringing oneself to a climax would be an exceptional preference. Was he trying to pull a fast one on her and still trying to coax her into sex?

Reading the skepticism on her face, he further explained himself. "I've had my fair share of partners in my existence," he started by saying as he shifted closer. "In that time, I've learned my gluttonous inclinations can be satisfied in a multitude of ways..."

She gasped, momentarily brought back again to that staircase where he explained it all.

"I'm a demon, Sakura." He finally confessed.

As he said this, her eyes widened again and he heard her breath suck in. "I served in Hell until a few years ago when I was given a chance to find my ultimate fulfillment in my own humanity."

Her head grew foggy for a moment and she had to ground her nails into her arms to bring herself back. "What?" She was beyond incredulous. "Hell..? Like... Satan? That Hell?"

Sasuke chuckled, which did not comfort her. "Yes," He smirked at her and Sakura leaned in. "I technically am Satan."

He watched her pale and held up a hand as if to pause her racing mind. "There isn't a single 'Satan'. We demons work in a hierarchical system, using rank and Sin to determine which Circle we work in."

At this point, she knew she had to suspend her disbelief and focus on not fainting from the sheer shock of it all. "Sin?"

"The 'Sin' that lives in you, not too far off from how you relate to your astrological sign or natural element. People like to use these primal inclinations to control others, but it's what drives you towards your deepest desires." He watched her swallow and so terribly wanted to run his fingers down her throat. "I encourage you to explore them more."

"Sasuke," she called to him with eyes full of curiosity. He remained silent as he waited for her to say more. "Do you remember when you were first explaining to me what you were in Ino's building?"

He grunted, which she took as a 'yes' of sorts.

"You had mentioned you have a 'Sin' that dictates what Circle you work in," she followed his sneaky hands as they found her thighs.

"You never told me what your Sin is."

Sasuke smirked and sighed. Of all the times for her to start asking questions... "Gluttony."

She blinked a few times. Gluttony? "Wouldn't have been my first guess..."

Suddenly she felt his hot tongue on her cheek as he cupped the other. "I would advise you to not take it so literally... and to not think too highly of my patience."

Again, she felt herself fall like putty in his hold and couldn't bring herself to be upset about it. The nagging skeptic in her stayed strong, however. "I still don't understand what you want right now," she managed to say as he migrated down to her sensitive pulse.

"Let me indulge a bit on you, it will be more than enough to satisfy me... I promise." As he gave her his word, his hand snuck between her thighs and found the soaking source of her own temptations. She was struck with shock as he brought his coated fingers to his mouth and wrapped his lips around them.

"G-go ahead," she squeaked, surprising the both of them.

His tongue traced the shell of her ear. "You'll need to be specific, darling."

Sakura squeezed her eyes shut. "Eat me out!"

Sasuke wasted no time in weaving his hands under her clothing to test the waters. He shook his head upon feeling the utterly drenched crotch of her underwear again. Sakura gasped at the contact. "It seems someone's been ready for me for quite some time," he teased, planting one last kiss on her shoulder.

While her vagina was no stranger to some good old fashioned lip service, Sasuke had a way of making the build-up to it feel

exponentially more erotic. He propped a few pillows behind her and was gentle as he guided her onto them. She was shaking with nerves and excitement, unsure which was more to blame. Her wide eyes followed him with utterly undivided attention as he stretched out on his stomach between her parted thighs and caressed them tenderly. Before she could say anything at all, he looked up at her and said, "I must warn you, this will ruin oral sex with anyone else for you."

And that made her laugh. Not because she doubted what he had said, but because his cocky attitude had at that point become familiar, if not endearing. She let out a breath she had a habit of holding and nodded to the smirking devil between her legs, signaling her final approval for him to continue.

The first thing he did was tear the soaked underwear from her body and coax legs to spread a little wider for him to admire her. He could feel her whole body tense as he looked at her most private of parts from just inches away. A groan of desire escaped his throat as he gazed at the delicate pink lips framed by fair curls that had caught some of her essence. Her eyes widened in horror as he inhaled deeply.

"Don't do that!" She blurted out, her legs failing to close when his hands kept them spread.

"Sakura," the man so close to her growled. The deep tone of his voice stunned her. "I want you. Let me have you."

She couldn't find any words to respond with and could see the hunger in his eyes. Taking another deep breath of her own she forced herself to lean back onto the pillows and submit to what was to come.

"It's just us here, so you're going to relax and let yourself enjoy this, as am I. Now," he brought a finger to her wetness and traced a light circle around the outer folds as it collected her clear desire along its length. She shuddered at the faint contact as he studied her calmly.

"I could make you come right away and let you skip a lot of this self-inflicted embarrassment, but that won't do it for me. We're going to take our time so I can enjoy every fold and noise you have to offer me. Understood?"

She threw an arm over her eyes and nodded again, finding herself growing even wetter as he spoke. She'd be a fool to think he didn't notice as he mindlessly drew circles on her, but she chose not to dwell on it.

"You're also going to watch," he instructed, pulling her arm away from her face. "So I can watch you as well."

"Can I just-"

"Sakura."

The finger was still going and she was already fighting to keep her thoughts straight. It was time to really give up. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry, I give up."

The finger stopped. She looked down in confusion as Sasuke crawled up in front of her so they were face to face. "This isn't about you giving up, this is an opportunity to give in and fully embrace the true indulgence of pleasure."

Sasuke grew confused as he saw the tears building up in her eyes. "It's just a lot to take in right now, Sasuke."

He sat back on his heels and ran his clean fingers through his hair. "I was being too selfish, I'll tone it back a bit." When she smiled in what he knew to be some relief, he smiled back. "I'm still going to ruin oral for you."

"I never doubted that," she laughed.

Sensing she was in a calmer headspace, Sasuke gave her a gentle kiss before returning to his previous position between her legs. "I

won't force you to, but I would enjoy having you watch."

Without any further of a delay, Sasuke reintroduced his fingers to her slick flesh and savored the subtle twitches he could evoke from Sakura with every stroke. Once he was familiar, he slowly sank a digit inside. Her body had been aching for contact for so long that it practically sucked him in. He growled with hunger, forcing back his imagination that could only focus on what it would feel like to truly penetrate her, pelvis to pelvis.

"I love how wet you are for me, Sakura." He whispered, craning his neck to get closer. When she didn't respond, he looked up and saw her eyes were screwed shut. "Sakura?"

She looked down to meet his concerned gaze and was about to apologize when he spoke first. "Let's try another time."

"Wait," she quickly spoke, grabbing his hand on her thigh before he could pull away. He waited for her to say more again. "I want to do this, really."

He returned the hold and caressed her knuckles with his thumb. "Then what is holding you back?"

"What happens if it's not as good as you want it to be?" She asked, her eyes determined to stay on his.

He cocked his head and rested it on her thigh by his hand. "I thought we were past any doubts."

"No," she sighed, shaking her head. "I mean, what if you don't enjoy it as much as you say you will. What if you realize you've had better?"

His face grew dark and she quickly regretted saying anything. "I guess we aren't on the same page after all." He put a strong hand on her hip and held her gaze. "I want *you*. Everything that comes with that is secondary."

She gasped softly at hearing him say such a tender thing as that, but before she could respond, she saw he was leaning into her again. A cracked yelp broke from her lips as the full flat of his tongue ran up the entire face of her pussy. "Sasuke..!"

"Do you trust me?"

She looked down at the devilman between her legs once more and took a moment to reflect on this question he had asked her many times before. Did she trust him to be honest and caring, not just physically or with her soul, but her heart as well? Emerald eyes search ruby ones once again.

"I trust you, Sasuke."

He smirked. "No more interruptions, then."

Sakura clutched the hiked hem of her tunic as Sasuke brought his tongue back to her flesh. He kissed the insides of both thighs before laying his lips on her hidden pairs in between. She focused on steadying her breath as she felt his tongue slowly lap at her, slowing down immensely more once he was focused on her clitoris. His arms snuck under her thighs to prop himself more on his elbows as his hands anchored on her hips. She gave up on her hem and tightly squeezed his hands instead. Feeling her anxious grip, he rubbed her knuckles again in a soothing motion until she slackened her hold.

"Does that feel good?" He asked, pulling back from his lazy licks. He went back down as soon as she nodded.

Moving away from her burning nub for a moment, he migrated down to her weeping slit and let his tongue lap up the seemingly never-ending flow she was producing. He moaned into her, sending chilling vibrations up her spine. That expert tongue proceeded inside as he angled his head back and forth to reach as deep inside her as he could. Her eyes fluttered shut under the coiling pleasure he was winding up inside her. She thought back on the handful of other guys

who had offered to go down on her and their techniques. Rushed licking, strange patterns, complete neglect of the clitor-

"Oh my god..!" Sakura gasped. He had moved back to the tiny bundle of nerves and was spiraling his tongue closer and closer to it until he was wrapping his inhumanly long tongue around it.

"Just the Devil's work," Sasuke coyly responded when he pulled away for just a moment. After returning to his work for a few more minutes, Sakura's leg began shaking involuntarily which brought a deep smirk to the devilman's face. Her grip tightened on his hands to the point that would make any man cringe but for Sasuke it only brought on more excitement. Once he could feel her edging close to her release, he slowed his pacing and pulled his tongue away.

"W-what..." She panted, eyes hazy with lust. Why did he stop?

He looked up at her and used his tongue to clean his face of all her juices that had coated his chin and cheeks. "I needed to tell you how delicious you are before I get to making you come for me."

Sakura's cheeks were already flushed from his ministrations, but he managed to coax her to a level higher of redness. "You're unbelievable," she muttered, fidgeting her hips as she desperately craved more of his touch.

Lowering himself back down with that devious grin still in place, she watched him slide his snake-like tongue out to graze her opening again. "Sasuke," she groaned in frustration, starving for more. "Please."

"Please what?" Sasuke instigated, replacing his tongue with the bare tip of his finger. The ghosting motion was driving her insane and he knew it.

Her nails dug into his hands and his grin only continued to grow. "Please keep going..." Her voice was a strained whisper, but he was in no rush, and that was exactly what she was afraid of.

"That's what I'm doing, is it not?" He feigned innocence to a sickening degree. She tried pushing her hips down onto his finger for relief, but he used the one hand on her hip to steady her. "Tell me what you want, Sakura."

Her eyes screwed shut and all she could focus on was the incessant teasing of his finger just inside her opening, gliding up and down, up and down, up and down, holding her hostage and on the edge of the world. "I-I want to come," she ground out.

"I see," Sasuke responded, as though he was mulling over the situation in deep thought. "I suppose I can help you. Do you want me to help you?" She gasped when his thumb grazed her throbbing clit.

"Yes, do it!" She squirmed more, failing to maintain contact with his thumb. He went back to running his index inside her opening, driving her further up the wall by the second.

"I want you to be very clear in your request to me, Sakura. You get one chance here or I'll make you sit with no touching at all for fifteen minutes until you can ask again." Her eyes snapped forward and caught his grin. Sasuke chuckled and used his thumb to rub a few circles around her clit this time. "I'm kidding about the second part. I would love for you to ask me properly though."

He pulled his hand away once more and Sakura felt as though the air was being sucked out of her lungs. She couldn't wait any longer. "Sasuke, please make me come," she begged.

Sasuke hummed appreciatively and smirked while he positioned himself in front of her dripping slit again. "Hn. I'm going to make sure you come real hard for me. Prepare yourself."

His tongue lapped at her juices a few times before slipping inside while his thumb went back to trailing around her clit and activating all the nerves around it. As she laid there at his mercy, she noticed a new sensation. His tongue wasn't just shallowly lapping at the front

walls of her vagina, but had made it deep enough to press on *something* that heightened her stimulation exponentially.

"A-ah, there!" She cried, desperately clinging to the coiling of her orgasm.

Sasuke moaned into her as her body began to shake again. She was so close and soon became rigid in anticipation. The massaging of her G-spot at the same time as her clitoris was proving to be all too much for her fragile form to take. Like a rupturing volcano, her orgasm exploded from within her and washed over her entire body. Sasuke slowed his rhythm and carefully retreated his hand and tongue once the waves of her orgasm had subsided.

"Wow," she commented breathlessly.

Sasuke sat up and pulled himself beside her to gently remove the supporting pillows and lie her down fully. He pushed some loose strands of hair from her face as he softened his smirk. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" She stared up at him incredulously, still not fully understanding how that was simply satisfying for him and not at all sexually frustrating.

"That was amazing," she whispered, still not fully off her orgasmic high. He pulled one of silk sheets over her and laid beside her as he continued to stroke her hair. He wondered if he ever wouldn't find her flushed cheeks endearing. "I've never had someone do that before."

"Use their demon snake tongue to penetrate you?" He clarified, sending her through the usual motions of embarrassment.

"Well, yes. That." She timidly leaned forward to bring her lips to his. She could taste herself on him and took a second to wear that little tidbit with pride. She just had her world rocked by one of the best orgasms of her life, courtesy of Satan. Was that something she was proud of? Maybe not exactly, but she knew it felt damn good.

Sasuke shifted onto his back and rested his head on his hands.
"Sleep, we have quite a journey ahead of us."

And there ya have it! Twenty chapters in and some spice to send you home! I'd love to hear any thoughts, feelings, suggestions for how this continues on since I always have been working on a pretty loose outline. I'd also appreciate hearing from you all about when you started reading SSD and your thoughts on its progression since coming aboard. Thank you all for supporting and reading! xoxo

Chapter 21

Hello, and a much-owed apology for my hiatus! I'm not using this quarantine time to force myself to do much, but I certainly recognize a bit of an escape writing this fic can grant me, so I figure reading it probably will do the same for you. This is a very short chapter, but hopefully will get a pulse on those still checking in on the fic 3 I'm working on the next chapter already, I just couldn't handle knowing I've gone this long without any update at all. So please, read on! When you're done, a review is always kindly appreciated. I'd love to connect and also know how you're holding up during these exceptional times. Much love to you all!

CH 21

Her legs slid between the silken sheets, the chill of the untouched fabric refreshing as she stretched from her cocoon with Sasuke. She tried to clear her throat but found it was too dry to do so with any success. Slightly annoyed, her eyes cracked open and took in the gratuitous collection of candles still somehow burning on the cave walls around her. They weren't normal candles, she remembered, because they weren't back in her world. They were in his. Part of her was surprised to still be in the literal hellhole and expected to wake up alone in her apartment with the realization this whole journey was just a sick dream. She pushed an exhausted breath through her nostrils once she accepted that wasn't the case.

"Sleep well?" A deep voice behind her asked as a warm hand smoothed over the curve of her hip.

Sakura rolled back just enough to lean into Sasuke's chest and feel more of him around her. She took her time responding, allowing herself to recollect what had transpired between the two of them before she laid down to rest. She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes tight shut with the mortification she only expected to feel after a

drunken one-night stand, which that certainly was not... at least she didn't want it to be.

"My throat is so dry," her voice cracked.

Sasuke moved his hand to her throat, his fingers gently pressing onto her skin. "Hell is funny like that. You're without a mortal body here, but can still experience a certain collection of sensations."

When he pulled back his touch, she suddenly felt the relief of hydration. She turned over more to face her host and found herself slightly annoyed by how handsome he looked and wondered if he even slept. "Thank you," she whispered. He looked down at her through his thick lashes with deep red eyes that seemed unusually serene. There was even a gentle smile to match.

Sakura let her cheek sink deeper into the pillow as she continued to stare at the devil's face, wondering if the warmth emanating off of him could be something she'd get to bask in every day. Flashes of the turn of events from earlier crossed her mind once again and she felt her skin heating with a blush. The way his smile grew more cheeky and smug let her know his thoughts were in the same place.

"Something on your mind?" He teased.

She narrowed her eyes at him in response but realized the path of least resistance was all she had energy for at that point. "That was a lot, what we did," she admitted, knowing he knew exactly what she was referring to.

He softened his smirk and brushed a few strands from her face. "Do you regret any of it?"

Sakura searched his eyes for doubts as she reflected within herself to do the same. She couldn't help but smile when she witnessed what appeared to have been a glimpse of uncertainty. He was worried, she realized. Pushing herself up onto her elbow, she

cupped his cheek and planted a kiss firmly on his lips. Whatever worry he had lurking inside of him, she hoped that would rid him of it.

"Hn, I'll take that as a no," he whispered, lacing his fingers in the tangles behind her head to pull her face back to his.

She melted into him, the attraction pulling her flush to him like an overwhelming gravity. His arms snaked around her in an embrace that finally convinced her to drop her guard and give in to the affection she craved and was struggling to accept that she deserved.

Sasuke slowly moved his lips against hers, making sure to fully enjoy the plush friction. He wanted so badly for her to be his. At that moment he wasn't exactly sure what that truly meant to him, but at the very least knew he wasn't willing to let go.

"Sakura," he purred as his thigh found its way between hers. He wanted to take her right then and there, feel himself sink deep into her and never leave... but he couldn't. He needed to restrain himself. They still had their journey to complete.

"Sakura," he said again, this time with a sober edge that made her pull back.

"What?" She asked, expression hazy with a cloud of affection and desire.

"As much as I want to continue from where we left off, this isn't the reason we're down here."

He pulled back with rarely exercised restraint and watched her eyes clear of their fog and fill with a self-aimed rage.

"Don't blame yourself, Sakura," he berated her. "I told you already, this place, me, the effects are impossible to resist. You're human."

Her eyes flashed at him.

"I can't accept that just *being here* has the ability to completely muddle my morals just like that," she lamented. "I hold myself to a higher standard than that."

The devilman raised an eyebrow as she stood to straighten her rough tunic out, her anger rising. "A higher standard than the limits of humanity?"

She jerked around to face him with tears brimming in the corner of her eyes. "I expect myself to at least be able to practice some self-restraint until Kiba's soul isn't writhing in agony!"

Sasuke didn't respond, nor was he all that surprised by her outburst. She was being tormented by what she thought was the battle between right and wrong, and he decided if he were to dive into that more, it should at least be back on the mortal surface and not in his sex dungeon.

"Then let's get moving. There is a secret passage that veins down deeper past those demons trying to find us out there," he explained gesturing back to the enormous door they had entered through.

The mortal woman sighed and held her forehead as though it would cool her temper. She knew she nor Sasuke were to blame, or at least there was no outcome worth pursuing by doing so. "I'm sorry, this is still just a lot to take in."

He smirked. "There's a lot more coming."

She watched as he then held a hand up and circled the space, the candles all dying down in a wave behind him. No sooner the flames were out, a passageway appeared across from them with mounted torches inside.

"This will lead us directly to the Third Circle," Sasuke explained from just beside the opening as the shadows still stained his face.

His mortal companion nodded with a brave step forward. "The Circle of Gluttony?"

"Correct," he answered as the scales slowly covered his face once again and his body took on more of his demon features and size. "Not all demons had secret alcoves like this and it grants us the luxury of not having to face the horde of them in the Second Circle looking for us."

Sakura shifted her weight and looked down to examine her feeble form by comparison to his. "What's the plan forward?"

He stepped towards her, now a few feet taller than before. He raised a claw and she tentatively wrapped her fingers most of the way around it. "The Third Circle won't be an issue, I had some close acquaintances there. But from there, we'll need to be fast and get to the River of Styx. Once we make it that far, I'll make sure we can negotiate space on the boat and get into the City of Dis -"

"Sasuke?" Sakura's voice interrupted.

"Hn?" He blinked down at her, only slightly annoyed.

"I need to thank you again for this. You don't owe Kiba or I anything for this favor, so... again, thank you."

His eyes softened. It wasn't the first time she had thanked him, but the sincerity was just as present as before. "This is the first time in a long time I've found a meaningful purpose in something," he said with a wistful tone. "I promise we'll save him and get you both home safe."

Sakura didn't know how to respond to that. She couldn't figure how she ever deserved to be on the receiving end of such a kindness, but knew the least she could do was make herself as little of a burden as possible. "I'm ready."

Over the months he had gotten to know Sakura, he learned she was someone who in no way, shape or form could hold a poker face. Her emotions were written across her face like a billboard and he could see her entire body straighten and harden for the ungodly journey ahead. They were, after all, not even in the Second Circle.

"It will only get harder from here, but just do as I say and everything will be fine."

She nodded.

The devilman walked ahead of her this time, his clawed wings tensed and ready to snatch her up if needed. The narrow and winding stairs of the tunnel took them hundreds of steps deeper into Hell. The walls were jagged and unforgiving to the touch with rows of sharp rocks lined like shark teeth. If she zoned out for even a blink and stepped just off center, those razor edges surely brought her back in no time. After a punishing amount of time had passed, Sakura was about ready to ask how much farther they had to go when the sudden wall of stench hit them.

"Ugh..!" She exclaimed, grasping at her nose and mouth immediately. "What is that!?"

"Just as I remembered it..." He muttered over the sound of Sakura gagging behind him.

The crumbly dirt stairs eased into an even narrower passageway where Sakura could feel her nostrils and throat burning with every breath. She clutched at her throat with one hand, silently begging whatever god or demon in existence to save her from the torture, and clawed at Sasuke's wing fingers with the other.

He turned and sighed, having not been looking forward to this moment the entire walk down. Something innate in him was tickled by the sounds of her suffering, but seeing her there in pure agony was unraveling him in the worst way. He had two choices: he could

calm her down until her senses were fried and numbed out, or he could knock her out and carry her through.

Seeing him weighing some unspoken options, she waved him off as though telling him to pay no mind to her. She was being stubborn, what a surprise. "It's only going to get worse," he warned.

"I," she started with a shuddered breath. "I can manage." Her hands were on her knees for support as she tried to compose herself and not gag on the acidic air.

Sasuke was completely unconvinced, but his sick sense of humor justified the low risk in allowing her to exercise this stubborn streak. They were in a territory that was familiar to him at least, so he let her have her way. In fact, there was a hint of admiration for her determination.

He outwardly shrugged. He could always knock her out later. "Stay close," he directed as they continued forward as a faint light came into sight.

Sakura muffled her breathing and gags in the bend of her elbow and forcefully blinked the stinging tears from her eyes as the pair trudged ahead. She was going to persevere and prove she could handle Hell. She wasn't going to be a complete burden. The least she could do was hold back some vomit.

"Here," Sasuke's voice announced, pulling her from her thoughts. They reached the end of the tunnel and were standing a few yards back from what would have appeared to have been the outside world she was used to, but the sloshing black muck at the opening was like nothing from her world.

She cringed as a new wave of bile crept up her throat. "What is that?" As the question left her mouth she immediately regretted it. Did she really want to know?

As if reading her mind, Sasuke shook his head. "It's best I not tell you." He turned to face her then and his demon eyes hardened as they locked on hers. "Once we enter the Third Circle there is a good chance my name will still hold some weight as a former Satan, but it's equally likely the remnants of Orochimaru's ranks may be lurking around and not so welcoming."

His shoulders, although no longer human, appeared more tense in that moment. She nodded but didn't quite understand what to expect ahead. Was he saying there was a chance they wouldn't be able to pass through? Would they be taken as prisoners until Itachi could release them? Would he even know?

"Sakura." The sound of her own name pulled her back. Sasuke still had a stern expression with the addition of raised brow.

"Sorry," she responded as she moved to stand close behind him. "Is... Is that stuff safe for me to walk through?"

They both looked down at the dark sludge inches from his clawed feet. "Hn," he ran a hand through his thick hair and glanced back at her. "I'll need to carry you, its purpose is to suck souls in."

With nothing else needed to be said, Sasuke gestured for her to lift her arms so he could pick her up. She held onto his shoulders as his arm effortlessly kept her pressed into his scaly chest. He was cold to the touch and without a pulse. "Ready," she whispered, though they both knew that would never be the case. No one was ever ready for Hell.

"Keep your eyes closed," he commanded. "No matter what, understood?"

Sakura just nodded and proceeded to close her eyes. She didn't need to ask why.

The first thing she heard was the sound of his feet submerging into the repugnant ooze. Her mouth mashed itself hard against his

collarbone in the hopes it would keep her gagging muffled. Through her eyelids she could see the light growing brighter but at the same time was assaulted by a cacophony of the most tortured and pained moans gurgling beneath her. His steps were even, unaffected by the sounds that were immediately paralyzing her thoughts. It would have been enough to distract her from the stench, had there not suddenly been the addition of the sludge raining on them from above.

A few clumps skid down her arms and she gasped in pain as they left burning trails behind them. Sasuke clucked his tongue in annoyance - possibly at her, or just the circumstances she hoped - and shielded her with his wing. The pain slowly simmered to a mild irritation, but the moaning and sloshing grew louder. They were getting deeper.

Sakura's heart began to race as her mind scrambled together a frightening image of what she imagined her surroundings to be. She thought of the texts in Dante's *Inferno*, the endless abyss of bile and drowning souls, forever doomed to sink under the hail of shit and torment. She just wanted to be home, she wanted to be anywhere but..!

"Could it be?" A voice called from a near distance. "Sasuke?"

"Deidera," Sasuke's even-toned voice acknowledged, the rumble transferring to Sakura through his chest. She listened as this Deidera character approached them, the sludge loudly slapping and breaking as the demon grew closer to match Sasuke's stride.

"What a pleasant surprise to see that wicked mug of yours down here after all this time!" Sasuke kept moving along and Sakura silently wondered if this was a friend or foe. "I knew you would miss this place too much to call it quits. And, oh," there was a pause as both of them stopped walking. "Is that a fresh *soul* ?"

"Nothing for you to concern yourself with." Sasuke started moving again but the sound of rushed splashes followed them.

"Don't walk away from me! What are you doing with that?" The voice was hardly a breath behind them when Sasuke suddenly whipped around and landed a kick onto the nosey demon trailing them.

"Eyes closed," he reminded Sakura as both he and her gripped each other tighter.

"What the fuck!" The demon yelled, smacking the sludge they were submerged in. Sakura could hear it grunting as it composed itself in the sea of the damned. "You don't run this world anymore, Sasuke! You can't just march through here like it's your castle!"

"Watch me," Sasuke growled, his voice suddenly deeper and *darker*.

They were moving faster now, so much so that Sakura could barely make out the sounds of Sasuke's feet breaking the mud. She could hear Deidera yelling for Sasuke to stop, that they wouldn't be able to get past - "I'm going to need to take a chance here, eyes stay shut."

She couldn't hear what Deidera was warning Sasuke about, but she was able to make a pretty solid guess soon after. His gait slowed down and the world darkened as though the night rolled in. Then there was the growl. And then another. And another.

"Cerberus, it is I, Satan from your Ninth Circle of Treachery. Let me through!"

The growling slowly dragged out until it quieted into a low rumble. "Sasukeeee," its ancient voice growled from all three heads at once, "you are no longer our Satan, and that soul... It is from the Living..!"

Before she could even flinch, they were moving at lightning speed again as one of the heads lunged at them. There was a booming bark and exploding impact in the muck where standing just a split second before as one of the Cerberus heads lunged forward. The snap of its teeth and the gnashing that followed sent Sakura's heart

racing to catch up with Sasuke's sudden rush to dodge another attack.

"I told you this wasn't yours anymore, cocky bastard!" Sakura could recognize that as Deidera again back in close proximity.

"You really must have lost your mind out there to think we of all demons would let such a treat like this slip away," a new voice bit out. There was movement from all around and it could only be assumed new demons had emerged and surrounded them. It could have been a dozen or a thousand, she wasn't sure at all but was entirely on edge.

It was a war waged against just the two of them and she knew she was not only to blame but dead weight as well. Sasuke dodged and fought off the screeching demons almost effortlessly while keeping her safe against him. The air around them was shredded by countless claws and she could feel the force of their attacks rush by from every angle. She could also feel him land his punches and kicks again and again. He was crushing them.

Until he wasn't.

"Mine..!" The demon hissed, latching its claws into the back of Sakura's tunic just as a barrage of others occupied Sasuke's defenses. By the time he swung down to grab her, the timely monster was already pulling Sakura into the acid mud below.

"Sakura!" Sasuke yelled. "Hold on!"

Every imaginable inch of her body felt as though it was immediately set aflame and starting to melt off her bones. She opened her mouth to scream from the excruciating pain but couldn't when the heavy sludge poured in and started choking her. She was being pulled deeper and deeper, Sasuke's voice growing faint as she heard him starting to chant in a language she couldn't understand at all. What she could hear, although still foreign, sent a violent, primeval chill down her spine.

"Stop, no!" That was all Deidera could get out before the unmistakable crackle of lightning washed out everything else. Through her eyelids, the blinding white light flashed. Just when she thought she was going to black out from the pain, she felt herself being pulled back up to the surface.

Covered in filth but at least out from the sea of it, Sakura began retching and threw up as much of the dark mud as possible. Sasuke was astonished to see her eyes were still screwed shut. He cradled her and tried wiping off as much of it as he could, knowing it was causing her such incredible pain. Despite his efforts, she was soaked in it.

"Please make it stop," Sakura weezed.

There was nothing he could do for her there and that helplessness was overwhelming. Stepping into action, he sprinted with her across the Circle to where the unconscious Cerberus was laying and leapt into the air to bound over the beast.

"They're all incapacitated," he explained quickly, having cleared the mess behind them. "I'm going to find you water to wash this off, hang in there."

"Where?" She managed to ask, gritting her teeth in pain. It felt like her skin was boiling to her bones and she couldn't bring herself to believe there would be water in Hell. The world grew darker once again.

"The River of Styx, we're almost there." She could hear and feel his wings extending before they lifted from the ground into flight. They were descending. Fast. The darkness was suddenly so thick again, she wasn't sure her eyes were still closed. She squeezed them extra tight just in case. "The only good from this is the cover the mud has given you. It will mask your soul while we pass through the Fourth Circle."

His even tone annoyed her. Did he not feel any sympathy for her? She knew he did, hence the massive attack directed at his own demons. Still, childish or not, it irked her. He wasn't human, he was born into a world of pain and suffering, so she knew this wasn't an extraordinary condition to witness for him. She wanted him to relate, she realized.

When it came to pain, didn't he already? In other ways? She thought back to his Sakura had hoped the pain would eventually numb her, that her soul's body would be so overstimulated that she would feel nothing, but that wasn't in the cards for her. That wasn't how this realm was designed. She was as tense as a body in riggamortus, unable to exist any other way under the straining agony.

As if on cue, the guttural grunts of the greediest beings to have ever existed blanketed over the sound of Sasuke's wings and Sakura's shaky breaths. Thunderous crashes exploded beneath them and Sasuke only glanced down for a moment to witness the souls slamming boulders into one another with no end in sight. It was when he aligned his gaze back at the path ahead that he missed the red eyes below looking up at him.

"We'll take care of it," Hinata assured her as Ino kept her face buried in her hands.

An hour earlier when Ino had called her, she knew right away something had gone horribly wrong, but she didn't expect anything remotely close to the bloodbath she and Naruto walked in on.

"I made some progress on the room," Naruto informed the pair from across the apartment. While his girlfriend calmed down Ino, he took on the task of clearing the pulpy remains of Gaara and ashes of Orochimaru. He lingered from a distance, not wanting to get any closer to Ino while she was in her current state at the time. He couldn't blame her, though. Even for him, a demon born to the Circle of Violence, found the situation to be gruesome. "Hina, can you come over here for a second?"

The raven-haired Witch took care when moving to leave Ino's side on the sofa and make her way to the scene of the demonic attack by Orochimaru. Sakura's body had since been moved to a long couch in the main space where Ino was to rest until her soul was returned from Hell, but Sasuke's remained in its original place in the other room. It was glowing with an aura of his energy combined with Ino's, casting an eerie light on the pool of blood that was left from Gaara's mangled corpse.

"Something isn't right with Sasuke," Naruto whispered. Pale eyes widened immediately and turned to the comatose man naked in the center of the room.

"What do you mean? Shouldn't Ino have felt something?" If Ino wasn't properly synced with Sasuke, she wouldn't know when to begin summoning him back to his human body.

The blonde demon shook his head. "I can sense a disruption. I don't think he's having as easy of a time getting around as he thought his arrogant ass would."

They stood there in a moment of silence, both unsure where that left them. Hinata knew anything beyond what had already been done was outside her skills and abilities. Naruto was anxious and annoyed by not being able to jump in and fight, his face creased with frustration. It was truly a waiting game.

"We'll have to just hope for the best, I'm afraid," Hinata sighed.

"What if," his voice perked cautiously, "I go back down and help him?"

Hinata's eyes could not have snapped wider. "Are you out of your mind?" He opened his mouth to respond but she continued. "You may still have some demon in you, but you don't know how that will play out now if you were to go. You said you can sense Sasuke is having trouble and he's not even fully human yet."

"But-"

"She's right, Naruto." It was Ino standing in the doorway. "We need to trust that Sasuke will make it back, and with Sakura."

"Can you sense him, Ino?" Hinata asked, examining the red aura settled around his body.

"Mhm, he's there. I can tell he's upset, but that's better than not being on my radar at all." She joined her friend's side. "He must have Sakura with him."

Lavender eyes closed. "Let's hope that's the case and it's not something else that has her."

Short, but eventful, no? A struggle for our couple in Hell and a check-in on our friends in the mortal world. I'd be curious to know how you're feeling about our Hell journey so far, as I'm still working on how much more content will take place there. Regardless, would love to hear from you to know how you're doing whether it's your first time reading SSD or if you've been on board since day 1. Take care of yourselves and stay safe! xoxo

Chapter 22

Hello old friends! I'll keep it short, just want to wish you all well and hope you're safe and healthy. Continue on and enjoy :)

CH 22

When you have a headache, sometimes it can get so insufferable that the only escape is to go to sleep. The relief that follows when you wake up hours later, possibly the next day, pain-free, is nothing short of heavenly relief. But for those times when you desperately fall unconscious, only to wake up haunted by that same pain again... utter tragedy. So when Sakura passed out along the way in Sasuke's arms while they flew through the Fourth Circle, she was nothing short of devastated to be woken in the same burning state of torture from before.

Sasuke felt her stir against him and glanced down at her strained features under the smothering pain of the Third Circle's sludge. He sighed. "We're close, I can see the rocks that line the River."

He picked up the pace, red eyes scanning the barren terrain for a water source. If he could just get her under the water that feeds into the River, she'd at least experience some form of relief. At least that's what his plan was. He couldn't recall in any of his years of existence or the passed down stories of his predecessors any detailed accounts of a soul being healed by the hell waters. Still, it was worth a shot.

"There," he murmured to himself, gliding down to a stream a few yards from the river bank.

"I don't think I can move," Sasuke croaked, all her energy having gone to the unrelenting pain.

"I'll wash you, then." The devilman lowered her onto the rocks, her body submitting to the angles beneath it. Her hair was thick with the dark mud and her skin at its clearest was stained by it. "I'm going to need to take your tunic off to rinse it as well."

She gave a meek nod, too exhausted for modesty. With careful hands, as delicate as a devil could be, Sasuke slid the soiled fabric off of her before resting her directly in the shallow water flow.

"Oh my god," she breathed as the cool water started to wash away the oily layers of muck from her skin. Sasuke's shoulders dropped in relief once he knew that this was actually working. His eyes trailed her body, watching the patches of black crumble away. Her delicate skin was left moderately raw and red, but it was better than he expected it to be. He still found her beautiful, even in her mange-like state. "Sasuke," her beckon pulled him from his staring. "Can I open my eyes?"

"Hn," he grunted, amused by how resilient she had been through even the worst of it so far. "Yes, go ahead."

She slowly cracked her eyes open and Sasuke could only smirk at his Ophelia in the stream of water. She was breathtaking. He was going to make sure she survived. Something deep inside him told him she could make certain of it all on her own.

Neither fully smiled but he held her gaze for a drawn-out moment before he sank his hands in the water to rub the stubborn mud from her body. Gradually, her hair returned back to its familiar pastel pink and her skin was clear once more. He asked how she was feeling and she braved her first true smile. "Grateful," she replied.

He snorted. "Grateful? I don't think anyone in Hell's history has ever claimed to be grateful down here."

She slowly sat up, her naked form adorned by a veil of water droplets and hair plastered to the sides of her neck and shoulder tops. He watched her lean forward towards him, willing her body to

rise to her knees to level with his crouched posture beside her. Like a siren emerging from the sea, she placed her hands on his scaly chest and fell into him for a kiss. He groaned appreciatively into her mouth and wrapped his arms around her to bring her close. Soaking wet from the bath, she found herself straddling his lap and driven to express her affection.

As Sakura pressed her chest flush to his, she felt the unmistakable flutter in her chest and wondered if he felt it in his as well. "Sasuke," she whispered breathlessly against his lips. "I-"

"Well, would you look at what we have here," a boisterous voice interrupted. The pair looked up suddenly and Sasuke barely contained a groan. "Was the mortal realm not willing to play out all your little fetishes?"

"Shouldn't you be manning your boat, Jiraiya?" Sasuke retorted.

The rich laugh that bellowed from this demon gave Sakura a full show of his razor-sharp teeth and pointed tongue. As she fell distracted by his wildly long white hair, she quickly panicked and looked to Sasuke for guidance. Should she have not looked at him? Were her eyes supposed to be closed? Seeing her frantic display, the former Satan shook his head.

"You're fine, it's the souls of the damned you need to keep away from." The demon by the name of Jiraiya chuckled. "One glance and your living soul would be latched onto like a parasite on a dog!"

"How did you-" Sakura started to ask.

"I am Jiraiya, boatman to the River of Styx!" He interrupted, beating his chest. Similar to Sasuke, he had some human likeness but was covered in a rough, bumpy skin much like that of a toad.

"But how did you-"

"Sakura, forget it." Sasuke put a hand on top of her head as he stood to his full towering height. "Jiraiya, we need to cross to the City of Dis."

The boatman had a lighthearted air to him, but the glint in his eye kept her from even thinking about putting her guard down around him. He was shamelessly ogling her naked form and she defensively shielded herself with her arms and knees.

Sasuke saw her shift from the corner of his eye and sighed with annoyance. "Stop staring at her, you're making her uncomfortable."

"But doesn't she look all the more delectable that way? Hmm," the demon hummed to himself in thought as a devious grin curled at his lips. "You need a ride, you say? And you wouldn't happen to have the coin payment needed to cross, now would you?"

Sakura looked up at her companion and caught him narrowing his eyes while his taloned hands curled into tight fists. It was an old tradition to bury the dead with a coin under their tongue to serve as payment for safe passage into the Underworld and she was afraid that's what this old demon was referring to. By the looks on his face, it was obvious he knew neither of them had such coins in their possession. Her stomach churned.

"I have business in Dis, there is no need for me to pay you."

"Ah-ah, dear Sasuke! I wasn't asking for you..." He only grew smugger in his expression and tone. Sakura's eyes widened when she realized he was talking about her.

"She's with me and you will take us across. That's final."

Jiraiya shrugged. "If only you had some sort of authority over me to force me to transport this trespasser," he rued theatrically.

"Do I need to remind you of the time I spared your existence after *you* were trespassing amongst the mortals?" Sasuke hissed, his

patience thinning.

The cocky demon grew serious at that. He was quiet for a moment as his eyes glazed over with an old sadness being revisited. Sasuke straightened up as he saw this as well. Sakura couldn't help but feel for the demon, just for a split second. As soon as she did, he looked over and right at her with a penetrating gaze. "She reminds me of her," he said solemnly. "I can see that annoying spark in her eye."

Sasuke didn't say anything in response, he just stood in his strong silence until Jiraiya sighed with defeated shoulders. "I'll take you both across, but the girl sits with me."

It was a victory, but Sakura couldn't help but feel upset at the cost. Sasuke agreed to the arrangement and Jiraiya turned away with a giddy smile as he made his way in the direction of where Sakura assumed the River of Styx ran. While her mind was processing what had just happened, Sasuke wrung out her tunic and handed it to her to pull back over her head.

"It's damp, but the River is hot so this will cool you... and you'll want a barrier between you and Jiraiya."

As she tugged on the rough material she made no effort to hide her scornful glare. She felt like a piece of meat being traded to this slimy demon without any attempt at an argument from Sasuke. How was he okay with this? Morals and sensibility came in a different flavor in Hell, but she expected him to try and treat her better than this.

"Right this way," Jiraiya sang as they crossed the rocky landscape to the water's edge.

The demon was standing in his long but simple boat, a single steering oar in hand. There was a rotting dock between them and his vessel, the inky water below so opaque she was certain it ran all the way to the bottom of Hell itself. In the distance through the fog over the water, the gates of Dis were roughly silhouetted.

"Let's go," Sasuke spoke in a firm and distant tone. Sakura followed his order, but couldn't help but chew on the inside of her cheek.

She took careful steps along the splintered dock, wincing once as a particularly ragged plank bit into her foot. Jiraiya happily offered her a hand as she stepped into the boat while she braced herself, but she shook her head to decline the help. His cheerful demeanor cracked then.

"One splash in the Styx and you'll dissolve into nothing more than a faint memory."

Her eyes shot up to meet Jiraiya's and she saw he still had his hand extended, but his eyes were cold and steely. After a second more of internal debate, she reached out to steady herself with his help as she stepped down into the boat.

"Your Lowness," Jiraiya sardonically bit out bowing before Sasuke as he boarded behind his mortal companion.

The stoic demon sat on the bench along the vessel's port-side with an unreadable expression as Jiraiya stood at the forward with an arm greedily hooked around Sakura's waist. She looked over her shoulder at Sasuke but he did not meet her eyes. Instead, he was glaring straight ahead with a grim line holding his lips.

"What's your name, girl?" Jiraiya barked, jostling her attention back to him.

She winced under the potent stench of his breath. "Sakura."

"Sakura, you say? What a fitting name for such a flower like you!" He laughed then, swinging his opposite arm out with the oar in front of them. Without even touching the water, the boat began moving, steering itself in the direction of the City of Dis.

The boatman didn't say anything after that for some time, just hummed a tune to himself that Sakura found painfully familiar but

couldn't place. She was desperate to ask him what the song was but didn't want to chat with him any more than was necessary. His arm clamped to her hip was more than enough to manage.

"Here we go," he said a moment later, unwinding his arm from around her. "Go sit with your pouting devil back there, we're about to hit the soul stream." Sakura didn't waste a second and padded her way to Sasuke who still had that frigid mask on.

"What's wrong?" She asked in a whisper.

"Hn," he grunted. "Just sit down."

Sakura first felt a jolt of hurt but quickly rebounded with soured anger. If anyone was going to be mad, it was her. While all he did was hold her a little too close for comfort, Jiraiya had taken advantage of her vulnerability and Sakura had no choice but to obey. Sasuke should have been writing her checks of remorse. She was going to give him a piece of her mind and -

The boat clashed with an oncoming wave that sent her gripping the bench beneath her and only made Sasuke scowl. "Here they are!" Jiraiya shouted back at them. "Keep your hands inside the boat, girl!"

Like a rolling storm, the guttural screams of the angry souls that were damned to the River burst from just under its surface by the hundreds. Sakura gasped at the sight of the countless heads and raging limbs tearing at each other around them. As far as the eye could see, souls were clawing their way up out of the water with nowhere to go. That is, except those surrounding their boat.

SMACK!

The impact on the side of the boat could be felt by everyone onboard. From all around, the grey hands reached up to grip onto the vessel. They were inches from Sasuke's back in what she thought was a blindspot until he turned to swipe off half a dozen in one motion. She tightened her jaw and struggled with knowing what

to do. Just sitting while they were being attacked seemed beyond shameful while Sasuke continued to fend off the intruders, but Jiraiya was yelling in almost a jovial fashion that made her all the more confused.

BOOM!

Another blow to the boat sent her toppling to the floor on her hands and knees, hair flying in front of her face. She was confident Sasuke had muttered something under his breath, but couldn't hear it over the shriek that erupted from behind her. Still bracing herself like a wet mutt on the floor, she turned to see what it was that broke the Devil's facade.

"Close your eyes..!" He had commanded her, but only when it was too late.

Sakura looked right into its eyes.

Her eyes.

Sakura's breath hitched. If she were in her proper body she was certain her heart would have stopped right then and there.

Her mouth opened to speak, but she took too long to find that word she hadn't used in years. The sudden paralysis did her no favors, nor anyone else on the boat. Bony, tight fingers gripped the edge of the siding until it splintered. Pupilless eyes sucked Sakura in with no chance of escape. The hands that had held her as a baby and beat her as a child, the unforgettable frown lines that haunted her dreams - here was no mistaking it. It was her. The soul coming at her from the depths of the Styx was her dead mother.

"Mom," Sakura whimpered just as the boat dipped with the water's stormy path.

" *Mom?* " Sasuke echoed in a shout to be heard over the roar of the raging water, completely incredulous.

"Hahaha!" Jiraiya howled, steering the boat with a fierce grip on his oar. "Isn't this great!?"

With a whiplash force, they shot up on the tail of a vicious wave, forcing everyone to brace themselves, including the ghostly soul still clinging on. Sasuke looked down at Sakura before looking back at the soul that stubbornly clawed its way closer.

"You're sure it's her?" He shouted over the roaring storm of the dead.

She could only nod, not a single word able to pass the emotions clogging her throat. The soul resembling her mother managed to crawl completely out of the boiling hot river and into the boat.

"Sakuraa... !" She let out in a guttural cry.

After he threw a skeptical glare back at Jiraiya, Sasuke lunged forward to grab the soul by the throat and hold it at arm's length away from him and Sakura. It didn't need air or anything but clawed at him to get away desperately.

"Y-You're hurting her! Stop!" Sakura screamed in a panic.

He looked down at her with little patience left. "I'm not hurting her-"

"Sasuke, *please* !" She pounded on his side, her eyes wild with fear.

"She looked her in the eyes, boy!" Jiraiya shouted over his shoulder.

Sasuke sneered at both the situation and the condescension. As the boat bucked again, he used his wings to block Sakura from tumbling forward when she was solely focused on beating as his ribs.

"Listen to me, Sakura." His voice bled authority and a limited amount of patience, but it was a fruitless tactic. She was still trying her best to fight him and he knew then that she was completely lost to the effects of seeing her mother's soul.

"Let her go!" She screamed as she pounded on his hand-wings.

"Sasuke, fucking let go!"

"You leave me no choice," he growled before tossing the attacking soul back into the River.

"Mom..!" Sakura screamed after her, making a dash for the side of the boat to go after her.

Jiraiya watched from the corner of his eye as the devilman wasted no time in grabbing the frantic woman and pulling her back into the boat as she continued to scream and kick. The retired Satan could have held her down in his sleep like a lion on a mouse, but the pained look in his eye told the boatman everything he wanted to know and more.

"What the fuck was that, you slimy shit?" Sasuke shouted over the screams.

Jiraiya turned away to look straight ahead as he steered them onward. "I needed to check something," he grumbled with no further explanation offered.

"Needed to *check something* ?" Sasuke seethed. Before he completely lost it, he turned his attention to the hysterical woman in his arms, fighting to free herself. Unlike the mud of the Third Circle, if Sakura found herself in the boiling waters of the River, he wouldn't be able to pull her out. She would be trapped to spend the rest of eternity fighting for an escape she would never reach. "Sakura, you have to stop. You can't save her."

Tears were streaming down her face as she sobbed. "We can't leave her! How could you throw her back in like that? That was my mom..!" She spat up at him, eyes bloodshot and overflowing.

"Sakura..." He took a second to temper himself. "Once a soul is in the River, it can't leave. Jiraiya summoned her to you for his own sick amusement. If she had gotten her hands on you, she would have dragged you into the River with her."

She stopped trying to writhe her way out of his hold then, consumed by confusion and sadness. The boat continued to dip and bob in the soul-filled waters. "Mom," she cried. "Can't you do anything to get her out?"

He looked away as his eyes darkened. "I don't have that kind of power anymore."

The boat was quiet after that with the exception of a few audible sobs from Sakura's crumpled form on the floor. Sasuke sat hunched behind her with his face brooding behind tented hands propped on his knees. Hell wasn't the place to sort out her pain, so he had no choice but to table any productive conversations with her on the trauma she was ambushed by. He shifted his glare to the boatman. Jiraiya steered onward as they approached calmer waters in the direction of Dis, seemingly unperturbed by the chaos he dumped on them moments earlier. If it weren't for Sakura, he would have shredded the old demon to bits and fed him to the damned.

"Old toad," Sasuke called out. A slight tilt of the demon's head let him know he had his attention. "Explain yourself."

Jiraiya hummed to himself in what could have been interpreted as playful thought. This wasn't unfamiliar to Sasuke, so he remained as stoic as ever. "How long has it been since you've been in the River?"

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "Ages. There wasn't any reason for me to come here."

He could see the corner of his old grin and a mischievous fang poking out. "My, my... maybe it was the right time for you to step down when you did, after all." He chuckled to himself and shifted the oar from one side of the vessel to the other. "You don't recall what's supposed to happen when a living soul encounters a damned one?"

"Enough, Jiraiya," Sasuke snapped. "Tell me what's going on before I show you just how fit for retirement you are."

"Forgive me, my Lord," Jiraiya threaded with sarcasm. "When a living soul engages with a soul damned to the River, why do you want them to close their eyes?"

"So they don't get drawn into the Circle," was Sasuke's curt response.

Jiraiya nodded, facing ahead. "But more specifically, what happens if they interact with a soul from the River?"

Sasuke's red eyes widened before he looked down at Sakura. Her head was a rock on her folded arms and knees. She would've appeared asleep had it not been for the jerking movements of her shoulders as she continued to mourn and cry. Sasuke's mind was racing as he continued to stare down at her with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. His lack of a response at that point told the boatman enough. He knew the old Satan had figured it out. An encounter with a damned soul should send a living soul to a similar fate and state of mind. In the River, that state of mind is one of unrepressed violence.

But Sakura's reaction wasn't all that violent - or at least not the kind that puts one in Hell. It was an act of unconditional love and an instinctual reaction. It was unheard of. The old Satan didn't know what to think, but he knew the boatman had some thoughts on the matter.

"Why wasn't she overcome with rage?" Sasuke asked, his shock evident in his tone.

"I suppose spending all your time tending to the scum of existence would have prevented you from encountering something like this before," Jiraiya mused. "She's a pure one, Sasuke."

"Pure?" The devilman repeated, the taste of it not sitting well on his tongue. He wasn't even sure if he had ever used that word before.

The City was within sight now and the impenetrable walls seemed to grow larger by the second. Jiraiya turned to face Sasuke with a lopsided grin. "A soul so resilient, not even the powers of Hell could tarnish it."

"What?" Sakura croaked, her voice hoarse. She lifted her head as she caught the tail-end of the conversation and squinted at Jiraiya. "What did you say I am?"

"You're like a sin virgin. You're able to resist the seduction of sin born from the very bowels of Hell you're stewing in now. Pretty lame, if you ask me," Jiraiya taunted her at the end with a wink.

"Pure..." Sasuke mumbled to himself again.

"Why did you do that to me?" Sakura shook her head, not able to move past the horrors from moments ago and pushed herself to her feet. The water wasn't exactly calm, but it was much more predictable at this point which allowed her to hold herself tall.

"I wanted to find out if my hunch was right or not," Jiraiya shrugged, not at all phased by her sudden movement. "And I was right. Congrats to us all, you didn't get sucked into the River for all eternity."

"That was my mom you toyed with, you asshole." Her voice shook with anger she hadn't felt in years. Not since the burial.

"She was an abuser, was she not? She didn't take care of you, she isn't worth-"

" *That's none of your business..!* " Sakura was suddenly lunging at the demon with the full intent of tackling him and Sasuke almost let her. His Hell-born reflexes allowed him to grab a hold of her just as she reeled back a punch.

"Stop it, Sasuke! Stop!" She screamed, using every mobile part of her body to jab or kick at him.

"I'm not letting you go until you calm down."

He sounded surprisingly calm to the point of irritating Sakura. She was heartbroken and angry... So, so angry. The large arms bracing her against her demonic companion became too much to fight and she eventually lost steam. Her eyes were still burning with a vendetta and Jiraiya found himself simply amused at the sight.

"There's something else," Jiraiya piped up just as the dock was coming into range.

Both Sasuke and Sakura looked up at him as he held back a chuckle. "Pure souls aren't born any different than the others, they're just protected."

"Jiraiya..." Sasuke growled in warning. He was at his wit's end with the games.

"Sasuke here wouldn't be able to detect it, but I would know that old hag's protection spell anywhere."

"What are you talking about?" Sakura asked, masking the churn of her gut with a brave tone. They drifted into the shadow of the City's stone walls. She forced herself to keep her eyes steady on the boatman, not ready to leave until she got an answer.

"If you make it back up to the living world," Jiraiya started as he put a foot out to steady them to the dock, "say hi to your aunt for me."

Sakura's eyes widened as did Sasuke's. "Aunt... Aunt Tsunade?"

Another chapter down for the count! I'm so excited to hear from you all in your reviews to get your thoughts on the journey our favorite pair has taken and the shit Jiraiya has stirred up. Again, I hope you're well and look forward to hearing from you soon! xoxo

Chapter 23

Hey, everyone - I hope you're doing well, especially if you're in a heavily quarantined city like myself. Thank you to everyone doing their part to keep everyone safe and I appreciate those of you who have sent your kind regards to me throughout these crazy times. Below is our twenty-third chapter of SSD, so please go ahead and enjoy!

CH 23

Sasuke glowered. "Explain yourself, Jiraiya."

The old boatman grinned to himself and let his eyes close as he reminisced. The narrow vessel rose and fell lazily as the tide rhythmically echoed the motion farther out from the shore where the damned were crowded. As the water licked the sides of the boat, she became more aware of how erratic her breathing had become.

Sakura could see her companion's posture wilt. It took all her willpower to not bark at Sasuke to do something. Why was he letting this creep toy with her? He was Satan, after all! She was curling her shaking hands into fists when she started to piece the narrative together. Her fingers slackened and fell into her lap. From the run-in on the stairs descending into Hell to the disobedience of Cerberus, she realized Sasuke was not able to control this realm as much as she had originally believed. She looked up at the devilman through a new lens. Was he as surprised as she was?

While Jiraiya continued his own internal musings, Sasuke kept a laser focus on him as he simmered into accepting the fact that the ball was not in his court. Sakura was more correct in her thinking than she could ever know: the former Satan was humiliated. He was no longer an almighty and powerful king. Yes, at that moment he was already twice removed from his throne with his brother now

taking over in Orochimaru's place, but he still expected some sort of respect in the Circles. But this was his reality now, and worse, a glimpse into what his life would be like if he were to find himself unable to anchor his humanity and sent back to Hell to start over...

He buried the thought and returned to the present. This was Jiraiya's house he was in and they were just visitors. "What do you want from Sakura?" He asked with a measured tone.

The boatman perked at what seemed to be a change in attitude from the former Lord. "I already told her. Just a little hello on the other side is all." He shrugged, making neither of his passengers any more at ease.

Sakura swallowed. "How do you know her?"

Jiraiya's eyes twinkled with delight. It should have come as no surprise that the old hag's foolish bravery had trickled down the family line. "Well, since you both seem to be fixed on getting answers more than continuing your quest, I suppose we can break here for a while."

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose as the old demon sat down beside them with his long oar across his lap over the black waters of Styx. Being a boatman was a lonely existence, so it wasn't far-reaching to think he simply was drawing this out for the company. He almost wished to be wrong so as to move along into Dis and wrap this nightmare up already. But looking over at Sakura, her eyes sharp with determination, he knew this was part of their journey now and he'd just have to bear it.

"Long ago, surely before you were even a thought, your Aunt Tsunade was quite the young and happy woman... As are most, when they're in love." He paused to hunch over and narrowed his eyes with a glint of mischief. "In fact, she looked almost as you do now."

Sakura's back straightened like a rod and her face immediately reddened. Jiraiya's bellowing laugh echoed through the fog for a moment before he continued. Sasuke noticed Sakura was turned more severely away from him to face Jiraiya dead on, frustrating him when he was just looking to make eye contact. Was she..?

"She was married to an equally jovial young man to whom she swore her life to, until the day he tragically died." Sakura's eyes began to darken. She knew he was speaking of her late uncle, Dan. She never had the chance to meet him. "It was a sudden death, an unknown illness that haunted Dr. Tsunade. Neither she nor her expert colleagues could save him and she couldn't help but feel at fault for his death. That was when she turned away from medicinal sciences and to her spirituality... thanks to me."

Those jade eyes dilated and pulled her from her trance-like focus. "What did you do?" Her voice trembled, her emotions mixed with the grief she always knew lingered in her aunt's heart.

"I bought her a drink!" Jiraiya chuckled. "A stiff one to dull the pain, if only for a while."

"You surfaced in the mortal world?" Sasuke growled. "Under my authority?"

Jiraiya winked. "Oh, come now, Sasuke. Everyone deserves a break every now and then! And if you didn't notice any mishaps, then all is well!"

Sasuke quietly boiled, struggling to keep his ego under wraps as Jiraiya continued. "So there I was, innocently lending her an ear and some gin... We had a good time, given the circumstances, and every few weeks I came up to pay her a visit. Much to my dismay, nothing romantic came from our relationship, but I did spark her curiosity."

Sakura furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?"

"Patience, dear," Jiraiya softly chuckled as he scratched his chin. "When she asked what I did for a living, I told her I was a boatman but she didn't buy it. She said my eclectic dress said otherwise and that I looked a bit too clean and well off for someone with that line of work. Not one to lie, I told her exactly where I was working and, Sakura... I don't think I'll ever forget that laugh in all eternity..." He sighed. He missed that laugh. "So after a few times of her asking me and getting the same response, her temper came out on full display and she decked me real good!"

"It was the first time in ages someone had landed a hit on me and I was as giddy as a schoolgirl. My lack of bruising or pain shocked her and in her drunk haze gave her enough of a reason to entertain believing me."

Sasuke scanned Jiraiya's face while he spoke and looked for any signs of a tell. He didn't know exactly where this story was going, but he wasn't sure the ending was going to be music to his ears.

"Whether or not she really believed me is irrelevant, but we didn't breach the subject again for some time. Years went by and she started to come out of mourning the loss of Dan and spent more of her energy on her living family, which soon would include you."

The young medic's breath hitched. Had this demon been in her life before?

"One summer, there was a night we were pouring our glasses extra heavy when she decided to humor me and learn more about my story. After she demanded proof, I dared her to let me show her. Thinking I was full of shit, she agreed... And that was when I brought her *here* ."

"Tsunade's been to Hell?" Sakura gasped.

"You brought a mortal down to the River?" Sasuke shouted.

"Settle down, children! Let me finish my story!" Jiraiya straightened on the boat's bench and cleared his throat. "Your aunt is a lot of things, Sakura, but fearless isn't one of them. She is brave, but not fearless... And let me tell you, if she's not a God-fearing woman, she at least is certainly a Hell-fearing one. There was no need to linger, so I brought her back home and let her digest what she had seen. She refused to speak to me for months, understandably, but I don't regret showing her what I did since it made her believe the truth."

"Jiraiya..." Sasuke seethed through his grit teeth and he struggled to stay in place. The defiance of this slimy toad was enough to drive him mad.

"Relax, Sasuke. I'm almost done. After you can decide if you want to kill me." He patted the former leader on the knee and then turned back to Sakura. "This discovery opened the door for all sorts of questions for Tsunade. What were science and religion truly worth? What did fate mean? Was death inevitable or an option? I can't say I helped much to answer those questions, but I did share with her some tools to come up with her own."

Sakura's jaw dropped. The image of a mangy, leatherbound book appeared in her mind. Tsunade always let Sakura peruse her study for books to read whenever she and her parents would visit. She recalled the packed shelves and stacks of hardcovers and paperbacks in every corner. She had an impressive collection of illustrated biology and medical journals, but also some fiction. Her aunt let her flip through almost her entire collection, spurring her interest in the medical field, but kept her from one particular shelf locked behind glass.

She remembered the sensation of the cold barrier against her finger pads as she longingly pressed into the glass. Behind it, she recalled a number of curiosities like small taxidermied creatures and stones she collected on her worldly travels. There were also a few rare books she owned as well as the seemingly out of place book with the torn and stained cover. This book, she was warned, she could never touch.

"That would be an old gift I gave her," Jiraiya beamed. "Her first book of Spells."

Sasuke counted in his mind to keep his cool.

"Book of Spells?" Sakura looked between the two men across from her desperately. "Do you mean-"

"That Tsunade is a Witch? Why I sure do, girl!" He laughed louder than thunder and slapped his own knee. "And don't think for a minute she didn't try to bring poor Dan back. In fact, trying to do so almost drove her irreversibly mad! But what she was able to do was quite magnificent..."

The old Satan clenched his jaw to push down the unsettled weather storming in his gut. He stared so hard at Sakura he was surprised he didn't accidentally set her aflame with the intensity. Despite this story being as fresh to him as it was to her, deep down he was certain where Jiraiya was going with it...

"Jiraiya," Sakura carefully started. "What did she do?"

He smiled. "She protected you, child. The love she has for you, that your own mother couldn't provide, she concentrated it into a spell to keep you out of the unknown's harm as best she could."

"She did *what*?" Sasuke and Sakura were as confused as the other. The devilman finally caught her eye and saw the fear in it that he himself was struggling to suppress.

"Tell us what the spell was," Sasuke demanded. Jiraiya could see the desperation behind the bark and grinned.

"While it's not one you've ever seen, I think you already know what it is."

Paralyzed by his own thoughts, Sasuke sat in silence as Sakura looked back and forth between the two demons. The water began

lapping at the boat's siding more urgently, signaling to Jiraiya that the mob of souls was headed their way.

"This has been a welcome interruption to my day, but you must go now." He gestured for the pair to stand and despite her overwhelming state of confusion, Sakura stood as instructed so she could be helped from the boat. Dazed, Sasuke followed her out.

Jiraiya positioned himself back at the helm of the boat and gave a coy salute with his hand. "Farewell, you young fools!" He kicked off of the dock and swiftly paddled his way back deep into the fog. In just seconds, he was gone. There was just black water and grey mist in front of them.

"Sasuke, what is going on?" When she didn't get a response, Sakura grabbed for his arm. He jerked away instantly, surprising both of them. Neither said anything for a moment.

He turned to face the stony walls that gated the entrance to the City of Dis. "Let's get going. We've wasted enough time as it is."

"But Sasuke-"

"Do you want to find Kiba or have a discussion?" Sakura was taken aback and looked into his glowing red eyes with all her vulnerability on display. He did nothing to acknowledge this and instead glowered harder at her. "Well?"

She couldn't believe how short he was suddenly acting but had little choice in how to respond. She did want to make sure Kiba was rescued, after all. "Let's go, then."

The dock linked with a well-worn path of what seemed to be volcanic rocks that led to the towering gates of Dis. Skulls fixated on iron stakes were burning on either side of the pathway to light the way and discourage any wandering. Way up above, the shadows of winged demons could be seen circling them and perched on the wall's edge. Sakura did her best to stay close to Sasuke's side,

afraid any of those demons could swoop down and grab her like a hawk on fieldmouse.

As they grew closer, a sizzle of some sort could be heard all around them. Sakura immediately thought of water burning up in a hot skillet but realized it would be absurd to think there was something of that nature where they were. Looking around, she realized it wasn't a pan, but the walls before them making that noise. Upon closer inspection, she could even seem the ribbons of steam and smoke coming off the colossal stones. She swallowed hard as the heat grazed her skin even from a distance.

"Who dares to approach the City of Dis unannounced?" A voice called down to them. Sasuke stopped where he was as a brigade of fallen angels dove down in front of them, armed with spears and a clear thirst for blood.

"Eyes shut," Sasuke whispered to her before turning his attention to the demons. "Medusa, it's Sasuke, your former Satan."

"Sasuke?" He could hear the surprise and skepticism in her tone as she was carried down by the beautiful but deadly fallen angels to inspect him herself. Sakura shifted closer to Sasuke and clutched at his wing. A cacophony of rattles assaulted her ears, the snake tails going off like alarms. "What are you doing here and what is *that* doing clinging to you?"

The webbed fingers of Sasuke's wings stiffened and spread almost in reflex at Medusa's tone. Sakura couldn't help but let a small gasp out as the familiar scaly skin brushed against her bare arms and calves. She shook her head to clear her thoughts and remain vigilant. This was *the* Medusa of mythologies. At that point, nothing should have been a surprise, but for some reason, this legend that had come to life was sending her nerves over the edge... Or was it the haunting image of her dead mother? Her eyes screwed shut even tighter than before.

"I'm back on a mission in Dis that involves this soul. I need entrance into the City." He could feel his companion's nails digging into him and stood tall before the outfit of female demons that were unphased by his request. His frown only deepened when he saw the dark angels smirk in a mocking fashion.

"Is that so, Sasuke?" Medusa asked sweetly. Her mane of snakes twisted and unraveled around her face. "Am I supposed to just stand aside, then, and let you through?" She stood close enough to him that the draping fabric across her breasts brushed his torso. Her lethal stare dragged along his body, in no rush to miss a single detail of muscle under his hell-born skin.

"As a gesture of appreciation for your former Satan," he suggested. His bold statement was without a doubt laced with implications and soured Sakura's stomach. It wasn't out of left field to hear Sasuke may have slept with this cursed woman, but it still hurt. Her lip was pinched between her teeth as she was torn between digging her thumb into the wound of emotional anguish and burying it deep inside herself. Before she could make up her mind, Sasuke's wings snapped open to their full span across his back, effectively shielding her from the hellish collective.

"You deserve no such thing!" Medusa exclaimed.

"Step back," Sasuke's commanding voice boomed. Sakura had no idea what had just happened. She was oblivious to Medusa's sly attempt to sneak a dagger around Sasuke to stab her. "Tell me what you want."

The Gorgon spat at his feet. "Certainly not to pay any homage to you. How pathetic can you be to think a creature such as myself would ever dream of stepping aside for a lowly demon as yourself?"

The gaggle of angels behind her cackled at this biting remark. Sakura, still hidden behind Sasuke, was swallowed by her helplessness. She had nothing to offer Sasuke. She couldn't restore his title and respect, she couldn't help him fight his opponents, and

she couldn't imagine offering the creature comforts to any degree of satisfaction within the realm of which a supernatural being could. Once again, she felt resigned to her status as a burden. Something, her lingering memories reminded her, that her mother would have called her.

Sasuke let his eyes close for a moment to collect himself. "I'll ask a different question, then. What do I need to do to be granted safe passage into the City?"

"Simple," Medusa perked up. "Give me the girl."

Tears welled up in Sakura's eyes in a panic as soon as she heard this.

"No."

"Then you cannot pass."

There was a moment's pause before Sasuke spoke again. His voice was softer this time.

"Medusa," he said, "what is it that you truly want? This soul isn't going to do anything for you."

There was another pause as she assumed the snake-haired woman mulled this over.

"I want an audience with Satan."

"Am I not good enough for you?" He was teasing to bring some levity to the conversation, but Sakura would be remiss to not have heard the twinge of sincerity there.

"Make that happen and you can enter Dis."

Sasuke shifted his weight, possibly to alleviate the pressure on his bruised ego. "Let us through and you can have my word that I will get you an audience with Satan Itachi."

The Gorgon stepped back in front of the towering devilman with a smug grin. A long nail was dragged up the column of his throat to the point of his chin. "How will I know you'll follow through?"

His stony facade didn't falter for a second, not even when her snakes flicked their tongues at his arms. "It appears my word is all I have at this point... but has it ever failed you before?"

The smug expression on her face let him know he had a deal. Still, even as the woman with the ability to turn a soul to stone stepped aside for the pair to pass, he couldn't shake the bitter feeling that this was all too simple. Nonetheless, he kept his guard up and Sakura closer as the iron gates screeched open for them to finally reach their destination.

As they passed the burning stone walls, the ear-piercing screech of the gates closing gave them the certainty that they had made it through with Medusa's unholy blessing. Much like the River and Circles previously traversed, this Circle of Hell was also filled to the brim with screaming souls. Sasuke reached around for Sakura who was up until then hanging onto a claw from his wings to get as far as they did.

"You can open your eyes again."

As she did, she gave herself a few seconds to take in what appeared to be an endless expanse of graves before them. Each and every one of them had a slab sealing the deceased below, but also had an outpouring of flames that burst from the edges every so often, along with the wailing of the soul beneath.

"This is horrible," she whispered if only to herself.

"Let's start walking. Kiba is about a mile in this direction," Sasuke said as he pointed off towards the left.

"Wait..!" As the word tumbled from her lips, she found herself as surprised by it as Sasuke was. The devilman stopped where he was

on the narrow paved path that ran through the graves. He didn't turn around, but she knew he was listening at least.

"I know you'd rather we just keep moving, but I want to know what just happened - all of it." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the fallen angels perched on the ledges of the wall behind her.

"You'll need to be more specific."

She sighed out of frustration. "Let's start with my mom."

Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose. This was not the time nor the place to dive into whatever mommy issues Sakura was bubbled to the surface by Jiraiya's meddling hands. Denying her this, however, clearly had the potential to give him more trouble than he already was facing.

"Your mother died with a lot of guilt, as did anyone else who has found themselves down here. What do you want me to tell you?"

Hearing the cold bite in his words hurt her. Even when he was just meeting her for the first time, he was more aloof than anything, but nothing close to this. Her brows furrowed together as she only stood taller.

"Hey," she yelled. "The least you can do is look at me!"

He let his breath exit his nostrils and obliged. Her face was creased into a frown and the anger was bursting from her eyes like the flames from the tombs around them.

"I get that the concept of death doesn't phase you given your history here, but you can't expect me to be even remotely as desensitized to it. You say you want to be human, so start acting like one."

Her fists shook at her sides and eyes remained locked on his. He tilted his chin up as he looked down his nose at her. He didn't take kindly to her snapping at him, but couldn't help but mull over what

she was saying. Seeing her mother after however many years of her being sent to the grave must have been a complete shock to the system. Right after such an event, she was expected to just continue on without much more than an acknowledgment of the sighting? Even he had to admit he knew this wasn't right.

"Sasuke," her voice cracked. "I'm struggling here."

His long fingers raked through his hair as he resigned to the sympathy she was calling for. He made his way closer to her and only then was able to see the tears quietly streaking down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Sakura. You deserve better."

She shook her head vigorously. "No, Sasuke. You can *do* better."

His jaw clenched as the foreign tugging in his chest consumed him. "Thank you. I'll try to be for you."

As he said this, her arms circled around his waist and her tear-stained cheek pressed into his chest with urgency. Instinctively, he returned the gesture and held her closer, suddenly hungering for this type of intimacy he never really felt a need for before. Even though she was without her true physical form, she was soft and forgiving against his sharp and hardened demon self. He longed to be back in the mortal world to feel her warmth through his flesh and caress her delicate features that managed to lend themselves to such strong expressions.

"I don't know anything about your mother personally, but I do know she passed with a guilty conscience for the type of life she lived. That's how most every damned soul ends up in Hell." He put some distance between them to look down at her small face as he tried to answer her question. "Do you know what kind of violence she might have committed to have ended up in the River of Styx?"

Sakura swiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand as she turned her gaze down to the worn path beneath them. "She wasn't the best mom," she admitted.

"You don't need to tell me if you don't want to," he whispered in a gentle tone. He could see the shame radiating off her and didn't want her to shut down on him. She nodded.

"Regardless of the details, I'm sorry you had to experience that. Jiraiya is a selfish creature, not that I'm one to speak." This got a hint of a laugh from Sakura as she lifted her gaze back to meet his ruby stare.

"I don't even know where to begin with him... I can't believe Aunt Tsunade..." She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. Tsunade was always an oddball relative of hers and her favorite, but she never suspected anything out of the ordinary about her. A poorly hidden gambling problem? Sure. Demon-endorsed witchcraft? Not so much.

"Hn.." The truth of the matter was that Sasuke also didn't know where to begin with this.

" While it's not one you've ever seen, I think you already know what it is."

Sakura looked back again at the devilman and found him lost in a vacant stare. Only when she placed a tentative hand on his scaly chest did he shake himself out of whatever was holding his attention before.

"What kind of spell do you think my aunt cast on me?" Sakura withdrew her hand when Sasuke unraveled his arms from around her.

"I'm not certain."

It wasn't a lie. He didn't have any sort of confirmation to check himself against, but Jiraiya was right - Sasuke did think he knew what Tsunade learned from that spellbook from Hell. As he glanced down at Sakura who was still staring up at him with a puzzled look on her face, he grew frustrated with himself for not noticing it sooner.

Sakura could tell he was holding something back from her but decided it might not be best to press on right then. She watched him recede back into his thoughts once again as he wrestled with them. He needed to get himself straightened out before he could say anything more to her about it.

"Well," she started to say. "If you aren't certain about the spell, can you help me understand what is going on with the politics here? I would have figured being Satan you wouldn't have this much trouble getting around.."

His distant stare narrowed into a glare instantly. "As you may have noticed," he said as he turned to walk off towards one of the rumbling tombs, "that's not the case."

She drove her teeth into her lip once more as she wished to have worded that with more tact. "Sasuke, I'm sorry. What I mean is, it seems unusual. Are other past Satans treated this way if they come back down?"

His clawed foot pressed onto the burned stone to steady it against the force of the flames beneath. "That's just it - once you leave, you're not supposed to come back."

She watched him focus on the rock with his solemn red eyes and a bitter smile at his black lips. Even in his true form in Hell, she couldn't help but see the glimpses of vulnerability that she was growing to depend on. Sakura didn't need him to spell it out for her. She was smart enough to piece together what was going on and what was catching Sasuke off-guard. His usual cape of overconfidence had been worn down to a tattered scrap. This wasn't his domain anymore. He was no longer king of the castle that defined him up until this point. This wasn't his home.

Her hand rested on his arm, quietly coaxing him from his sulking state. When he saw those emerald pools of empathy shining at him, he knew it was time to get moving. "Let's go get your mutt of an ex-boyfriend out of here."

They trekked onward in a comfortable silence that was only interrupted by the occasional eruption of a tomb nearby. The sight of what appeared to be endless graves beyond the horizon line didn't cease to hold Sakura in a state of astonishment. If her mother was sentenced to a place like this, she could only wonder hopelessly how many other mothers were also trapped by their own wrongdoing in Hell.

After about a few thousand steps later, Sasuke took them off the main path and through the rows of headstones alongside them. "He should be around here somewhere," he explained. "This is where the devil-dealers are kept."

They split up to cover more ground, scanning neighboring rows for Kiba's name and careful to dodge any sudden bursts of flames from below. Sakura was thoroughly in the zone of quickly reading the stones when a shadow overhead pulled her attention away. When she looked up, she felt her face drain of feeling. It was one of the angels from before, circling like a hawk over its prey.

"Sasuke," she warily called out for help.

He had noticed the angel as well and marched over to where Sakura was to glare upwards. "She's just trying to intimidate us, pay her no mind. I'll stay close to you."

So they kept searching, but this time with Sasuke just a step away from Sakura. Finally, they did find him. "Look! He's here! Sasuke!"

After checking to confirm it truly was Kiba's tomb, Sasuke stepped Sakura aside so he could prepare himself for what came next. "I need you to promise me you'll stand back and preferably look away."

"What's going to happen?" She couldn't help but ask.

He sighed, reminding himself to be patient once again. "When I open this tomb, the flames of Hell are only going to react more violently than they are now... And when I grab Kiba's soul, that will continue

to magnify as they work to keep him in there. You must not let his screams affect you, Sakura."

She straightened her back indignantly. "I won't."

"Hn. Then prepare yourself."

Sakura laced her fingers together and pressed them to her lips what naturally looked like a prayer. She willed herself to remain still, but her knees were already trembling. It was one thing to witness strangers in pain, but an entirely different animal to see someone you know in agony.

The devil she trusted to save the man she used to hold so near in her heart bent down to get a good grip on the lip of the stone slab over the grave. Without knowing it, she held her breath as he slowly forced the supernaturally weighted rock to lift from its place. As promised, angry flames gushed from all sides, pouring like a fresh flood on the ground around the grave. Even worse were the screams. It was Kiba.

"Agh!" Sasuke roared as he threw the slab aside and let out the full force of the fire inside with nothing to hold them back. Although he wasn't the reigning devil anymore, that didn't change the fact that he was born from hellfire and therefore was unaffected by the flames bathing him.

Sakura watched through parted fingers and waves of sparks and smoke as he leaned down into the grave. It seemed in that moment that the eruption from Kiba's tomb not only intensified his suffering, but that of the other souls buried nearby. Every grave around her began to violently shake and jump with equally pained cries for mercy assaulting her eardrums relentlessly.

After some struggle, she saw Sasuke's form pull back from the grave with what appeared to be Kiba's soul. He was engaged in an episode of tug-of-war with the hellfire, fighting to win Kiba from its clutches. Every strip of muscle on his body was flexed and straining,

threatening to burst off his bones under the intensity of the battle. Another wave of flames crashed over them as he summoned another round of strength.

Pink tresses whipped around in the wind storm stirred up by the chaos and licks of fire slashed at her grey tunic and vulnerable skin. She gasped, watching as Sasuke slowly bent back into the grave, losing power. It was then, just as she felt her feet about to take off in their direction, that his wings ripped open and created the most extraordinary burst of wind to cut through the fire.

Sasuke wasted no time in leaping to where the displaced stone covering was thrown and kicked it back on top of the grave to re-seal it. He stood there panting on top cradling Kiba's scorched soul limp in his arms.

She only hesitated in disbelief for a second before running over to them, elated at the success of their mission. "You did it!" She cried, grasping at his arms to take a look at Kiba's face.

He looked younger than when she saw him in the mortal world. Sasuke saw the confused look on her face and immediately guessed that was what caused her brow to wrinkle. "When you sell your soul, it remains frozen at the age it was at the time of the deal."

She didn't say anything but couldn't bring herself to look away. He looked just as he did in college when they were first together and everything seemed right in the world. Simpler times.

"So," she finally said, breaking her trance and looking up at Sasuke. "Are you going to get Ino to bring us all back now?"

"Not yet," he replied, leaving her slack-jawed.

"What?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Sasuke-"

He pointed up at the circling angel, an ominous reminder of his promise earlier. Her face fell. "Medusa... right... So what now?"

Sasuke kept his eyes on their spy above. "We must make our way all the way down to the deepest crevice in Hell. The Ninth and Final Circle."

Another one done! Kiba's been extracted from his place in Hell, but our favorite duo has one last leg of their journey to complete before they can get out of there. What do you all think? Always looking for a temperature check to keep me on the right path here, so I look forward to your notes and reviews. As much as it is fun for me to write, I want to make sure we're all having fun through this story together! xoxo til next time.

Chapter 24

Welcome back, one and all. Today's chapter is sponsored by Quarantine - there's nothing else to do! This is our final chapter in Hell, so I hope it rounds out in a way that feels comfortable for you all. I won't bother giving anything else away, so please go ahead and enjoy more of SSD (and thank you in advance for your review)!

CH 24

The first thing he became aware of was an excruciating pain that coursed through his entire body. He was afraid to move, the stiffness of his skin tempting him to believe he was made of brittle paper threatening to crumble if he dared to. What happened to him?

"Are you going to get Ino to bring us all back now?" He recognized that voice. It was Sakura. Relief washed over him, if only for a moment. She sounded okay, so they must be safe, wherever they were.

"Not yet." This deeper voice was one he didn't quite recognize but it immediately sent his stomach into knots. When had he heard it before?

"What? Sasuke-" A shiver took hold of him at the name and he wanted to cry as his body screamed in protest. "Medusa... right... So what now?"

"We must make our way all the way down to the deepest crevice in Hell. The Ninth and Final Circle." Ninth Circle? What? He could feel his mind fogging. It was too much at once. He returned to darkness.

When he next came to, he could feel wind cooling his burns and heard the heavy beating of wings. Large ones. Although he knew the

pain would be like none other, he willed himself to crack open his blistered eyelids to survey where he was. But when he did, what came into view was enough to make him wish he was blind. Giant, grotesque webbed hands flapped on either side of him as he was propelled in the opposite direction from which he was facing. He was being carried over someone's, or *something's* shoulder through a massive cave. Was he in a volcano? Lava hundreds of feet below him glowed and bubbled viciously, sending heat to his raw wounds even from such a distance.

"He's awake," Sasuke announced.

"Kiba!" It was Sakura again. There was some clambering from behind him and eventually, her familiar face popped up beside him over the dark mass of hair of his captor's head. "You're okay, I'm so glad."

He could only manage a slight nod. "What's going on? Where are we?"

She scraped her hair from her face as the wind whipped through it. "Well," she hesitated. "We're in Hell."

"What?" He croaked. He couldn't believe it. Was he actually in Hell? Did that mean he was dead? Flashes of merciless flames and extraordinary pain flooded his memories. When did he die? He remembered desperately beating his burning fists helplessly on the slab of rock above him. Was this it for him? But why was Sakura there? Was Sasuke really carrying them? Where-

"Calm down. You're still alive in the mortal realm," the brooding devilman explained. Wait, Sasuke was this creature? "Your soul is here in Hell, where you sold it off for good when you made a deal with the Devil."

Kiba looked at Sakura in a panic. "Why are you here?"

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "We're rescuing you."

She misinterpreted the following silence as confusion. There was a grunt behind him. "It's Sasuke," she assured him. "Remember?"

"The Devil." Sasuke added bluntly. Kiba jerked his head in his direction.

That fated day after the horrid demon fight he was wrapped in came flying through his mind in flashes. He remembered the flames, the teeth, the snake-eyed demon. That part was hazy, but he clearly could call back to memory the moment he explained to Sakura why he had sold his soul. He could never forget it.

SMACK!

Hot tears rolled down her face as he held his scolding cheek. "Why didn't you talk to me? I could have helped you!"

"I had been turned into a fucking beast, Sakura! I could have killed you!"

"You idiot!" She yelled in his face. "I mean before that, when you were feeling so lost! You were supposed to trust me, and instead you go and tell some stranger everything to make a deal with the Devil?"

His eyes screwed shut in an attempt to push down the remorse stirring in him. His head was spinning with twice as many questions than just seconds before. So could deals with the Devil be broken? How was he being rescued?

"We have to make a quick before we can go back home, but I promise you're safe now." Despite the searing pain, he held Sakura's hand extended across Sasuke's back. He didn't deserve her kindness, not after what he did to her.

"I have so many questions," he confessed.

"I'd prefer you save them for later," Sasuke butted in. "This isn't the best time to catch up."

"Sasuke," his female passenger scolded him. "Please."

He held a glare on his face but didn't say anything back. Sakura gave his shoulder a gentle touch, hoping he understood it as a sign of gratitude.

"Kiba..." She called to her ex. She didn't know what to say, but her glassy eyes were brimming with pain. Pain that he knew he put there.

The damned soul looked back at her and reached out to touch her cheek. She deserved so much better.

Medusa reclined in her carved throne built atop the wall of Dis. With a cheek propped on a fist, she sat there meditating over the easy escape she granted Sasuke and those two souls. It was torture watching them fly off like they had, having never allowed such an episode to occur under her watch before.

But it would be worth it, she reminded herself.

Just as Orochimaru promised.

"Medusa, my dear," that very serpent devil greeted from below. He bowed, his curtain of hair pouring to the ground.

"They're on their way. My angels tell me they're about through the Seventh Circle and should be entering the Eighth soon enough."

A sick grin formed at his thin lips. His plan was finally coming together and the prize was in sight. Ever since his abrupt return to Hell by the hands of Sasuke's tacky blonde Witch, he had been working non-stop on his adapted plan to return to power. It was simple in theory but tricky in execution: alliances had to be formed in each Circle to build a slowly growing army of support to take over the underworld. Eventually, he would have every Circle just short of the Ninth on his side. But with that much firepower, he was confident he

could take down the reigning Satan and reclaim the throne..! That is... until he spotted Sasuke with his beloved mortal trespassing through.

That changed things... or at least had the potential to. He quickly pivoted and devised a new plan of attack. It only took a few demons spying on the pair to figure out what they were up to and it ended up fitting all too perfectly into Orochimaru's conspiratorial puzzle.

With Sasuke forced by Medusa to take a detour through the Eighth Circle, he was set to fly right into Orochimaru's trap. And with enough struggle close enough to the Ninth, Itachi would pick up on his brother's compromised situation and fall into the ambush as well.

It was genius!

"Orochimaru," Medusa hissed with disgust.

The devil previously lost in thought looked away and wiped at the drool that had started dripping down his sharp jaw. Soon, he told himself, but not quite soon enough.

"Where are we?" Kiba asked as they became shrouded in a heavy fog.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes and slowed his pace as it became trickier to navigate. "The Eighth Circle of Fraud."

The two souls clinging to the devilman's shoulders remained tight-lipped. Mountains seemed to appear out of nowhere just feet from them as Sasuke narrowly dodged them with the limited visibility. This Circle was shaped much like a funnel and required them to loosely spiral in flight to the bottom. Below, a flash of lightning illuminated a mass of clouds with a booming thunder trailing after.

Sakura pressed her face into Sasuke's neck to hide from the storm enveloping them. The soft flesh of her lips and warm breath on his

skin distracted him for a split second, making this detour all the more frustrating. It was bad enough that Hell seemed to take advantage of every twist and turn available to shame Sasuke for leaving, but to also pepper in temptation was a kick to the groin. He let himself indulge in a quick fantasy in which he'd toss Kiba to his fate so he could pin Sakura to a rocky formation and fuck her senseless.

A vibrating growl rumbled from below, stealing the trio's attention. "Geryon," Sasuke grumbled. This was the strange beast that guarded the Circle with the face of an honest man, tail of a vengeful scorpion and other odd creature parts in between. It didn't help that he was also a behemoth in size. "I'm going to assume he won't be thrilled to see us roaming through here, so we're going to need to proceed with caution."

They drifted to a wall of rock and Sasuke used his clawed wings to latch on with the two souls protected against his chest. The tension was as thick as the fog as they waited for movement. The growls soon died down until only the storm and wind could be heard. Although one might perceive this to be a good thing, this did nothing to calm Sasuke's nerves. It wasn't like Geryon to be so stealthy in his own domain. He was a cruel but social creature who preferred his presence to be as brash as a neon sign in the night, so why was he hiding? Something wasn't right. He unconsciously gripped Sakura tighter, not feeling so great about the depleting leverage he felt slipping away.

"Lost?" The rock wall inquired, startling them all.

Before Sasuke could release his claws from the ledge and push off of it, a giant lion's paw pinned his legs to it with just less than enough force to crush them. Sakura squirmed to peer over his shoulder and gasped when she saw a stinger the size of a tank pointed directly at them.

It was too late at that moment when Sasuke realized he wasn't hooked onto a rocky ledge, but Geryon's camouflaged chest. The

beast had him trapped and there didn't seem to be anything he could do to escape him.

"Now there's a face I never thought I'd see again," the beast's deep voice chuckled. The deceptively human face with rosy cheeks and full lips glistened in the light of a crashing thunderbolt.

"What do you want, Geryon?" Sasuke yelled up at the giant face, its cheery expression annoying him further.

"An opportunity of sorts presented itself to me recently," he mused as his barbed stinger drew lazy circles around them. "And all I had to do was catch one measly old devil. Can you believe it?" He laughed like a sick Santa Claus fit for a horror film.

Sasuke grit his teeth. Someone else was pulling the strings here. His mind raced through a list of potential masterminds who would have wanted him captured and couldn't help but trust his gut on the hunch that a certain serpent was behind all this.

"Geryon, tell me what's going on." He tried to maintain an even tone despite the increasing pressure on his legs.

An eye as big as his entire body drew closer to get a good look at him. Lashes like whips flicked with every blink. "You should be the one telling *me* that, don't you think?"

Sasuke glared back at the creature. "What are you talking about?"

"You're trying to get to the Ninth Circle to take back the throne! Don't be coy with me, boy!"

Sakura and Kiba shrunk down as much as they could to avoid the spit and stink of the beast's breath. Sasuke only grew angrier. "You think I'd be so cocky as to singlehandedly face the seated Satan?"

The arched brow on Geryon's face told him enough.

Sasuke's temper boiled over. "Release me!"

"Hahahaha!" A slick laugh echoed down on the unfortunate scene below. "Caught in the act, I see." It was Orochimaru.

"You really thought you could just waltz in here and take back what you threw out?" A trail of demons from various Circles above collected behind the long-haired fiend. Sasuke simmered as he sized up the crowd, the grim line on his lips deepening when he saw Medusa there as well.

"Stay down," Sasuke instructed his mortal companions.

"Behold," Orochimaru projected. "The once-mighty Satan, now just a mere scrap of a demon! Is this who you want scrambling to return to the throne?" The demonic mob roared in response. "As our Lord?" The resounding reply doubled.

While Orochimaru basked in the bloodthirsty energy, Medusa remained stoic at his side with her eyes trained on Sasuke. She knew why Sasuke was down there and had knowingly tricked him into stepping into this trap. He had been a good Satan, a fair one, but this was her only chance at rising - or descending, rather - to more power. With Orochimaru's plan, the two of them could take down Itachi... She could have it all...

And speaking of the Devil -

As though an earthquake was passing through Hell itself, the walls of rock and stone began to violently shake from all around. The army of demons braced themselves while Geryon looked down below into the fog. His eyes widened, first with shock, and then fear. Orochimaru's maniacal grin only grew. This was it. This was his chance. The throne would be his.

Black flames emerged from the darkness, dissipating the fog. Sasuke could only clench his jaw as his brother emerged from the Ninth Circle. Satan had arrived.

"What is this?" Satan Itachi's voice demanded. He was almost as big as the Eighth Circle creature but his dark aura gave him a presence exponentially more intimidating. Reflexively, the demons shrank away from him. " *ANSWER ME!* "

"Your Darkness, your brother was plotting to dethrone you, so we were in the midst of eliminating this threat," was Medusa's smooth response.

Itachi glowered at her. He could see right through her and her lies. It was offensive how stupid they must have taken him for.

"Release him now," he instructed the beast. Geryon looked up at Orochimaru with hesitation.

"My Lord, that would be a grave mistake-"

Black flames began seeping through the walls and trapped the demons. Sasuke could feel Kiba and Sakura trembling against him. He watched as his brother crept the flames forward, narrowing his eyes as Orochimaru began to cackle.

"Don't you see? Sasuke has Itachi fooled! Neither are fit for the throne!" He raged, pointing at the trapped devilman. Spit began flying from his mouth as he continued screaming. "He's hiding a mortal soul and plans to make her his queen! His own Persephone!"

The demons were struck by this. A *mortal* as their queen? They would never..!

"We must take them both down!" The demons erupted with a shockwave of battle cries as they banded together. Medusa looked out over the crowd of desperate, foolish demons and then turned to Orochimaru, who was nearly foaming at the mouth with excitement. This was her army fit for battle? And this... this was supposed to be her new leader? Blinded by her own greed, she had trusted him, but now... The wise Gorgon was not going to end well for either of them.

She closed her eyes in concentration, solidifying her resolve at that split moment. If she wanted to survive this, she knew exactly who couldn't. Her eyes opened again, but this time glowing red with her cursed power. Sealing her fate, she flew right between Itachi and the demons. It happened so quickly that none of the Satans could react in time. With just one look, Medusa turned the mismatched collection of demons into a pile of stones.

" *How could you?!* " Orochimaru screamed, his teeth fully bared.

She looked away. She had foolishly agreed to wage a war and knew in that moment she had chosen the wrong side. This was her only way out.

The black flames merged and in one swift motion swallowed the crazed Orochimaru. Sasuke watched as he fell from the ledge he had been clinging to before being taken down by gravity and hellfire to exactly where he wanted to be all along - the Ninth Circle. The only difference would be that instead of ruling the domain, Itachi was going to sentence him as its prisoner.

A small hand pressed into Sasuke's chest, bringing his attention back to Sakura. Medusa sneered when he saw him looking down at her. What was that look in his eyes? Lust? No, she glowered. It was more than that. It was something she would never experience. "All of this, for *that?* "

Before he could give his retort, Itachi spoke. "And what can you say for yourself?" He gestured to the stone demons, effectively killed by her doing. "Go back to your post and we will revisit this another time."

Itachi commanded Geryon to release his brother, also promising a similar conversation later. He had other matters to attend to. "Follow me, we can chat down in the Ninth."

The reprimanded beast placed the three of them on a cliff's edge before sulking off into the fog. And just like that, it was over.

The lonesome whistle of the wind traveled through the tunnel. Sasuke put Kiba and Sakura down and took this opportunity to slump to the floor with exhaustion. His legs did sustain some remarkable damage, although he did a good job until then to mask it. Kiba was visibly unhappy by the useless burden he had been reduced to while Sakura was doing her best to hold up a brave face. She kneeled beside Sasuke, still feeling so small by comparison to his demon form.

"Sasuke," she whispered, reaching up to touch his face that was as hardened as ever.

He grabbed her wrist, catching her by surprise. "Do not pity me."

Her mouth opened to say something, but nothing came out. He let go of her and closed his eyes while running a careful hand over his legs. It began to glow with a deep violet hue she had never seen before. Her eyes followed his clawed hands as they hovered over his legs, the bones cracking back into place underneath.

Back in his glory days, he would have been able to send Geryon flying into the wall with just a flick of his wrist. His glare intensified. It was clear he was now only a shadow of the Devil he once was. What was he left with to be proud of? How could he justify holding his head high if he couldn't even see eye to eye with those who once served him?

"Sas-"

"We're done here. Let's go." Sasuke stood up and ignored Sakura's furrowed face. He threw Kiba back over his shoulder and secured her back against his chest.

As they descended one last time, the air grew frigid and their breath started to cloud in their faces. Sakura's bare feet began to burn from the intensity of the cold, so she quietly pulled her legs up from where they dangled and pressed them into Sasuke's stomach. He didn't even flinch, but Sakura couldn't help but flush with embarrassment.

His hard muscles didn't do much to warm her, but at least shielded them from the wind. Kiba, on the other hand, focused on clenching his teeth. He'd take this chill over the flames of his tomb any day.

The farther they flew down, the colder it was. Ice collected in patches on the rocks around them and formed some of the sharpest icicles Sakura had ever seen. She did her best to still her body but at a certain point couldn't fight back the trembling in just her tunic.

Finally, they reached the floor of the cave. Confused, Sakura scanned the shadows and saw a number of tunnels hidden in the walls. Before she could even ask, they were headed down the smallest of openings on foot. The silent devilman folded his hand-wings in and kept an unwavering gaze focused on the path in front of them. To say it was dark would be an understatement. In almost no time at all the darkness was almost palpable, her sense of sight becoming useless in there.

Then there was a flicker of light. It was a small black flame, much like the fire she had witnessed Sasuke and Itachi produce. She looked up at the devilman's face and witnessed the light hit the severe planes of his cheeks and angles of his sharp nose. The darkness pooled on the opposite sides of those cuts, hiding the inner thoughts storming behind those glowing red eyes.

The shadows pulled back as they reached the opening beyond the flaming torch and they were soon bathed in blue light from within the core of the cavern.

"Welcome," Sasuke finally said. "To the Ninth Circle of Hell."

She looked out into the enormous cave she stood before and couldn't believe how deep it continued down below the ledge they ended on. Jagged ice jutted out in every direction as large as buildings from the cave's ceiling to its icy floor.

Squinting, she could see the floor was solid ice... and were those...?

"Those are souls who are guilty of betrayal," Sasuke explained. "The worst sin of all."

She winced, taking in the ring of struggling bodies half-frozen in the ice. A moment later a gust of freezing air pushed past them, stealing any warmth lingering inside. Sakura's eyes trailed to the source of the wind and widened to the point she thought her lids would never come down again.

What she saw in the center of the frozen pit was none other than Satan Itachi himself in full form. Instead of being trapped waist-deep in the lake like the writings of Dante described, he was settled into a most remarkable throne, poised like a god musing over his underlings below. Seeing him in his fully realized grotesque glory paralyzed her. Had Sasuke not been holding her, she would have fallen to her knees at the sight.

"The cold can't kill either of you, but if you touch the ice you'll be trapped in it."

Her eyes shot up to meet his. "So don't put me down?" She threw back, trying but failing to sound calm.

He cracked the first grin she had seen from him in a while. "Don't tempt me."

"C-can we please hurry up?" Kiba begged through chattering teeth.

And just like that, Sasuke's grin disappeared. Free of the narrow confines of the tunnel, Sasuke spread his wings and took flight.

They flew down into the pit, giving Sakura a better view of the ongoing below. As they passed over the dense barrier of trapped souls in the ice, she noticed their mouths were straining as though screaming even though there was no sound. She unconsciously grabbed at her throat, wondering in horror what it would be like to have her voice taken away.

Once past the outer ring, she could see the rest of the damned were divided into half-circles on either side of the frozen lake, leaving a long path in front of her guarded by armed demons. At the very end was Itachi's silhouette, looming over them all. Sasuke's feet grazed the ice as he slowed to a halt before the demons armed with swords and armor, the sigil of Lucifer carved onto the breastplates.

"Sasuke," Itachi greeted from afar. As soon as he spoke, two rows of black flames burst to life in front of the feet of his demons, lighting the way for his guests. The younger devil watched as the ice melted down and a stoned pathway formed before him. "And our mortal guests."

Kiba squirmed to get a good look, but Sasuke clamped a clawed hand on his back to steady him. "I'm putting you both down, just don't do anything stupid."

Sakura tentatively stepped out to touch the cold stones as she slid out of Sasuke's arms. He helped Kiba to his feet next to Sakura before focusing on the King of Darkness.

"Relax, little brother." Itachi spat out the souls he was chewing on to give his full attention to his visitors. As they walked past the flames and demons, He couldn't help but let an amused smile cross his lips when he saw the protective eye Sasuke had on the woman in front of him.

Sakura found herself in a state of awe staring up at the Devil. She was still trembling from the cold, but knew the incessant pounding in her chest was her instincts telling her to run away... and fast. But she didn't, and not just because she knew she couldn't. She had met Itachi before and was trying to meld the two versions of him together in her mind. Here he was, towering over her as the ruler of Sin and Punishment, armed with twelve sets of barbed wings, razor-sharp angles at every opportunity his body granted, and spiraling eyes that seemed to burn with swirling magma. As she took all this in, she forced herself to remember this was still somehow the coy and kind man she met in the mortal world.

"When we were in Limbo," Itachi spoke, "this world was without order. You and I both had access to our full abilities, as did Orochimaru. Now," the water beneath the ice began to rumble and boil, a circle of steam forming around him before an eruption of black flames appeared. "I hold all of it."

"Kneel!" One of the demons barked from behind. Sasuke bit back a comment and dropped to one knee as both Sakura and Kiba fell to theirs.

Sasuke directed his death glare into the ground, his jaw clenching. This was what he wanted, he reminded himself. He chose to leave his gold-plated throne and loyal army of demons. It was his desire to ascend to the mortal world for fulfillment. It was his decision to explore new territory, knowing his title as a Satan would only go so far, could only carry so much authority and meaning...

"Itachi!" Sakura called out.

Sasuke's eyes widened as he snapped his head up to look at her. What did she think she was doing? Her expression was trained into a measured mask of focus as she locked eyes on the King of the Bottomless Pit.

Itachi raised a brow with curiosity. He decided to indulge in some entertainment and with the flick of his wrist surfaced a jutting rock out in front of her. She fell backwards immediately and he held back a smirk as Sasuke could barely restrain himself from lunging for her.

"Place her on the rock. I want to speak face-to-face."

Narrowing his eyes, Sasuke knew his brother was just doing this in part to tease him. Still, he fulfilled the request and helped Sakura climb onto the flat top of the rock. She sat on her shins and gripped the stone beneath her. Sasuke could see the tremble in her fingers. "You'll be okay," he promised her with locked eyes. "I'll be watching you."

The rock suddenly grew with the force of Itachi's wicked will and Sakura found herself a second later looking into the all-consuming face of the Devil. As his blood-red irises scanned her defenseless form, she found herself finally sinking into the realization that she wasn't just looking into the eyes of a mischievous demon, which was somehow already normalized in her world, but the actual fucking Devil.

Her breathing became ragged and labored as she fought back a panic attack. A spark in his large eyes told her he could see right through her crumbling poker face.

"Now then," he smirked, fangs openly displayed. "What is it you wanted to say to me?"

She stammered for a moment, the weight of his power so palpable it became hard to speak. "I... I wanted to ask you for help returning to the mortal world."

"Oh?" He craned his neck out so his nose was almost pushing into her torso. "You don't want to bind your soul to my little brother in an unbreakable bond?"

She didn't know what to say but couldn't help but feel washed over with shame. "I don't think it's what either of us wants."

Itachi scratched at his chin as he continued to observe her. He could smell the fear. It was clear to him she was afraid of this pact, but enough to plead to him..? "I'm afraid I must tell you that I can't help here. As the reigning Satan, that is the one thing I cannot do. My duty is to keep souls down here, not release them."

Her eyes quivered in disbelief. She was left with no choice but to become indebted to Sasuke with her soul on the line. She choked back tears.

"Stop that at once," his voice boomed and she froze immediately. "You are being granted the impossible opportunity to be freed from

Hell. Have you no gratitude?"

Sakura bowed her head to touch the rock beneath her. "Forgive me," she whispered. "I'm just afraid."

"You mean to tell me you've journeyed through all of Hell and you're afraid of *him*?" Itachi scoffed before bringing his face back in front of her so only she could hear him. "You strike more fear in him than you know. Don't you forget that."

She lifted her head to ask what he meant by that, but the pillar sank back down below the ice faster than she could scream. Sasuke lunged and snatched her in his wing before she hit the water, saving her from being bound to the Ninth Circle forever.

"I don't have all eternity to entertain you three. Leave so I can return to my duties."

Sasuke calmed himself before addressing Itachi again. "Before we go, I need to uphold my deal with Medusa."

"The Gorgon who tricked you?" Itachi taunted.

"Yes," he grit out through clenched teeth. "In return for Kiba's release, she asked for an audience with you."

"For what it's worth, she did turn on Orochimaru." He jerked his head in the direction of a cluster of figures frozen beneath the ice, only their eyes exposed. One feral set of yellow eyes was immediately recognized. "He's rightfully being boiled under my watch now... not to worry."

Sakura and Kiba paled.

"I will meet with her. Now," Itachi waved his clawed hands dismissively. "Leave."

Sasuke took one last look at his brother looming over him from his throne. "Thank you," he bowed, then lept into flight, bringing the two

souls to a faraway ledge far above the frozen lake he used to consider home. As he put them both down on the ground, he suddenly found himself caught in a moment of hesitation. Once he bound the souls to him and called for Ino, this would be it. If all went according to plan, the two mortals would make it back to their bodies and he would continue searching for the key to his own humanity. If it didn't work out as planned... He looked over at Sakura and couldn't stop himself from picturing her sinking back into a demon-riddled pit of sludge and decay.

"We only get one shot at this," he explained. "So we shouldn't cut any corners."

Sakura narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"When Ino summons me back, our bond needs to be stronger than the laws of life and death."

The dreaded knots in her stomach returned. She watched him straighten his back and square his shoulders. "What are you saying, Sasuke?"

"This can't just be a flimsy deal where you simply clean my laundry in return for a chance to live again. You need to be fully sworn to me with more on the table."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing and the lack of emotion he was expressing wasn't helping. She cringed at the idea of a future filled with chains, cages and what she imagined the unbearable prison of servitude to feel like. Was she going to be able to continue living on her own or would he have her live with him? Would she be allowed to work again or would he have her tending to him day and night? And Kiba..!

"I told you," Sasuke scorned her. "You're thinking of the extremes. I am not making you two into slaves." He turned his back to them to look out over the Circle that was once his. "That's not my role anymore."

Kiba opened his mouth to say something but then thought against it. He was just happy he was going to be able to leave this literal Hell hole. He didn't care what it took.

"Sakura," Sasuke called to her, his back still facing them. "You have my word that I will take care of you and do right by you. Please trust me."

She looked at Kiba to see how he was taking the news. To no surprise, he only nodded with a readiness to leave Hell. This was up to her. She reflected on all the other times, both serious and trivial when he asked for her trust. Could she give it to him this time?

She sighed. There wasn't much of a choice.

"Just do it then," were Sakura's next words. She swallowed her pride and pushed down her doubts as best she could. 'Be grateful,' she ordered herself, Itachi's firm words emblazoned in her mind.

When Sasuke turned to face them again, he looked different. He appeared more demon-like, she observed. His muscles appeared tense and riddled with bulging veins while his jaw was clenching to hold back the dark forces he had quietly summoned within himself. "Kiba," his deep voice called. "You're first."

The man nodded, sparing one last glance at Sakura before approaching Sasuke. While he walked towards him, Sasuke looked over at Sakura with his eyes that had become entirely black. "I need you to put more distance between us."

She looked behind her and was able to back up a distance to press into the cave wall. She didn't know what he was going to do that he wanted her so far away from them, but knew there was no point in asking as she did as he asked.

"So..." Kiba started out saying. "How does this work? Do we make a handshake?"

Sasuke was entirely unamused by this attempt at humor and made no effort to throw him a bone in the form of a chuckle. Instead, he snatched one of his wrists in his clawed hands before Kiba could even flinch and drew a single slash on his open palm. A second later, blood began to seep through.

"In return for safe passage back to your mortal body, you must vow to live under the mercy of my will and in my servitude. Understand?"

Kiba nodded, his heart pounding in his ears. The sick churn in his gut he only associated with his fated conversation with Itachi returned. Sasuke released the mortal from the locked stare to turn his attention to his own hands. With the same talon he used to cut Kiba, he made a similar cut in his own hand. He reached out faster than Kiba could pull away and clamped their bleeding hands together in a steely hold.

"When you return to your mortal flesh, your soul's memories will merge with your mortal memories. Once you've straightened that out, your first act under your allegiance to me will be to disappear."

Kiba's brow scrunched, turning his attention from the stinging grip on him. "What do you mean?"

Sasuke kept a disinterested face as Kiba desperately searched it for clarity. "You're going to leave town. I don't care where you go, but you will go far."

"But I-" The grip tightened painfully.

"Let me make this clear to you, Kiba. I risked everything I have worked towards to come back down here just to rescue your disposable soul. I am generously giving you the chance to start a new life. My one condition is that it is away from *her* . Do you understand?"

He needed a minute to process what he just heard, all the while his hand was dripping with their mixed blood onto the rock below. "So

what you're saying is... stay away from Sakura and I'm good to go?"

Sasuke nodded.

Kiba barely stifled a laugh. If he truly was understanding this all correctly... Because this jerk had the hots for his ex, he was going to be a free man again. Lady Luck was back on his side after all. "You've got yourself a deal!"

Sasuke closed his eyes in concentration as his aura glowed around him in a dark cloud before taking a more opaque form and absorbing Kiba into it as well. Sakura watched through shakey eyes as the wind picked up and she lost sight of them in the black mass oozing off of Sasuke. She unconsciously held her breath, waiting for a sign of life, becoming more panicked by the second until the wind finally died down and the darkness receded. But once it did, she knew the pact had worked. Sasuke was still standing and Kiba was on the ground kneeling before him.

Kiba had made his second deal with a devil.

He was going to be... saved.

Dark eyes locked onto hers, causing her breath to hitch in her throat. She couldn't help but feel as though a bloodthirsty predator had spotted her and she was just a helpless rabbit paralyzed in fear.

"Sasuke," she whispered as he stepped around Kiba's bowing form and approached her. Her back was already pressed into the rock behind her with nowhere to go.

His shadow consumed her, then his intimidating height and unbreakable stare next. He didn't say anything, but there wasn't much to be said at that point. They both knew what was coming. She held her chin high with the dignity she refused to abandon and watched as he read her face carefully.

He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you upset?"

A rogue tear spilled from her eye but she ignored it and shook her head.

Sasuke felt his patience wearing thin. He reached for her chin and tilted her head back to look at her dead on. "You wanted this."

She yanked herself from his hold and her lip curled almost in a snarl. "I wanted Kiba to have his soul back, not be indebted to another devil!"

He scoffed and stepped back, turning to face the Circle again. He raked a hand through his thick mane and looked down at the hundreds of demons standing at the ready for Itachi. Never would he have guessed that his previous life as Satan would be less complicated and frustrating than his attempt at one with the mortals.

"I'm at a loss, Sakura." He turned to gesture to Kiba, still on his knees with his forehead to the ground. "I thought this would make you happy."

She did little to hide her exasperation then. "I just told you this is what I wanted, but this twist is just... unexpected."

He closed his eyes for a moment. He understood, but there was nothing else he could do. "Consider it a formality."

"Is that what you told Ino when you bound her to you?"

His eyes snapped open. He could feel his temper boiling. "That's different."

She cocked her hip out and rested her hand on it. "Not really, or at least it shouldn't be." He watched her drop her hands to her sides as she moved to lean against the wall. "I know when we get back up there you're going to continue trying to figure out how to become human, but shouldn't you also want to be a good person?"

He narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

What could he say? That he needed the extra insurance more than a friendship? That he didn't trust Ino to stay by his side without having part of herself on the line? No, that was just the nature of the relationships between Witches and the Devil. But there it was again, the damned title. He wanted to be more than just the Devil, but he couldn't help but feel without the name he would only become less.

When he pulled himself from his thoughts, Sakura wasn't against the rock anymore, but instead standing right in front of him. Looking down, he saw her hand was extended to him with her palm exposed.

She wasn't expecting an answer. It may have been that she thought he didn't have one or that she was afraid of what his answer would be if he did. Regardless, what she did know was that she wanted to be home and this was the only way out. She was going to trust him.

When he cradled her hand in his, she didn't dare to look down, not even when she felt his razor-sharp claw slice into her palm like a knife through paper. She didn't look, but that didn't stop her from crying. She was torn on the inside, grieving over her naivety. He took her bleeding hand in his, moments from locking their souls together. But then...

As she looked up from his chest in front of her to his face above, she was overcome by shock. Without even thinking, her other hand reached to wipe something from his cheek. It was a tear.

"You're crying," she said in astonishment.

He looked equally as surprised and then realized that was why his chest had been aching so much. For the first time in his existence, he was not just hurting, but hurting for someone else. "I guess I am."

There they were, a retired Satan and simple mortal, in the pits of Hell... crying. He took her by surprise once more by pulling her into an embrace while still keeping their hands together. With his free one, he threaded it through her hair and brought his lips to the top of her head. He couldn't logically explain why, but being so close to her

erased all doubts for what he would do to ensure she never cried again. At the very least, not by his doing.

"I'm ready," she eventually murmured into his scaly skin, her unscathed hand resting on his scaly sternum. Even being well aware of Sasuke's state, the lack of a heartbeat gave her pause. She searched his face for a reason to back out, but it was already too late. Sasuke saw the anxiety bubbling and wished he could simply command her to relax. That wasn't within the realm of their reality, so he opted instead to push ahead and finish settling their bond. He folded her closer to him as his aura grew off of him again in a thick inky mass. Her lips pressed against his sharp shoulder as he brought his to her ear.

"It's time for me to tell you what your first act of allegiance will be," he whispered in his deep commanding voice. As the words reached her ears, her mind rushed with images of humiliating sexual acts, exhausting lists of chores, and a permanent seat beneath him, never beside him. She prayed the anticipation would be worse than the reality. One last breath passed her lips as he finally told her what she would need to do. Her eyes widened as she processed what he said, but then immediately fell heavy with the deep sleep he induced upon her. The darkness was thick and cold on her skin like an ice bath. "Rest," he gently whispered as she was lowered to the ground. "We'll be home soon."

His shoulders fell without him realizing they had been tense for who knows how long. At his feet were both Kiba and Sakura, bowing before him in their states of unconsciousness. He cracked his neck, turning his attention to the wolf boy. If he pulled back on his deal with Kiba, he could get rid of him down in the Ninth Circle with no problem. Sakura wouldn't have to know. His clawed toes nudged the unresponsive body. Kiba didn't care for Sakura, at least not the way she did for him. The selfish shit didn't even pretend to hesitate when considering if he was okay with Sakura being left to this devilman's devices. All he was worried about was himself.

The next thing he knew he was holding Kiba up by the hair, glaring at his slackened face. He growled out of frustration. He knew he was jealous. Him! An infamous devilman who once had armies of demons at his disposal... jealous of a mortal chump with no true legacy to his name. But... Sakura loved him. Sasuke could only dream of being loved and *cared for* in such an unconditional way. As his fangs began to creep out from under his taut lip, he reminded himself why he was back in Hell to start with. It was for Sakura. He dropped the boy back by his feet and looked over at the other limp form folded on his other side. This strange and frustrating woman who cared for others with no regard for what she would get in return. He tried to find a proper word to describe her with, but the closest he could get was 'pure' and that certainly wouldn't do. The soft trails of hair he was most familiar with being glossy and neat were faded and matted. Her once glowing skin had a collection of marks and stains from their travels. She wasn't a saint, nor did he want her to be. She was... good.

" Shouldn't you also want to be a good person?"

Yes, good. That seemed to fit more appropriately. In fact, it stirred something in him as well. He brushed the backs of her limp hands with his scaly ones. He wanted to be good... but also good enough for her.

If she were to ever have a heart attack, that was how she imagined it would feel. As she remembered to breathe, a hand was pressing at her back and Shikamaru was asking if she was okay. "It's him," she said between gasps of air. "He's ready to be summoned."

Shikamaru and Hinata exchanged a look before standing with the blonde Witch. Shikamaru watched his girlfriend struggle to regain her breath. He knew this wasn't going to be easy on Ino to complete, but they had no choice. "The sigils are reset, so we are ready for him."

" Them," she corrected him, evening her breathing and retying her hair. "Without the two of them, this will have been for nothing."

The pair crossed the apartment to the room where both Sasuke and Sakura's bodies were positioned in the center of two separate and complex circles cast by the Witches. Naruto stood off to the side with Hinata as the other pair entered. "Let's bring these crazy kids home already!"

Lightning coursed through him, stirring both shock and relief. It was Ino's doing, a sign that she received his signal and had begun the summoning. It was a most delicious pain that locked his jaw and cramped every muscle with the force you'd expect from a Witch endowed with Satanic energy. If anything, he was comforted by it. A strong connection made for better odds for a safe return. This was her first time extending her powers into Hell, so he was glad she seemed to be giving it everything she had - despite the torture it put him through.

The white bolts of energy sparked across his skin as the intensity only heightened. Sasuke felt his neck tense impossibly more, forcing his head to jerk back. A brief shout escaped his lips against his will.

"Sasuke," his brother's voice echoed around him. He managed to crack his eyes open to see the King of Hell hovering out from the cliff he was on. Twelve sets of wings flapped to keep him in place, producing a storm of wind carrying ice and rock everywhere. Itachi remained unphased as Sasuke struggled to place himself as a shield in front of the two souls he bonded to himself. "I want to acknowledge the tough decision you made."

The lightning pulsed inside of him, bringing Sasuke to his knees. "What... are... you talking... about?" He managed to ask. He was growing exhausted and felt himself also becoming impatient.

"You chose to keep the pest."

Sasuke channeled all his energy into shooting a glare at Itachi for blatantly reading his thoughts. He wanted to spit out some sort of

biting response but the power of the summoning had rendered him silent. Itachi smirked and continued to speak to his captive audience.

"Coming all this way, keeping to your word with no direct benefit, nothing to stop you from disposing of him in the end... It's all very selfless of you, little brother."

The paralyzed devil's vision began to blur then. Looking down, he saw his hands beneath him begin to fade in a haze. He was able to jerk his head just enough to see Kiba and Sakura were fading as well. It was happening, they were all being summoned back to their mortal bodies!

"Sasuke," Itachi barked, not liking how he was being ignored. The younger of the two obliged and brought what was left of his focus to Satan. He couldn't see much as the world around him faded away, but he was able to see the turn of Itachi's lips as he smiled.

"Congratulations."

Splat.

Splat. Splat.

There was a sniffle.

"Fucking wake up!"

Sasuke twitched his fingers, the entire length of his body as stiff as a board. He grunted, slowly opening his eyes to the idiot hovering over him. Teary blue eyes and blotchy red cheeks were the first things he recognized.

Splat.

Another tear landed on his cheek.

Crying.

Why was Ino crying?

Sakura.

Where was Sakura?

He lunged forward like a corpse being tossed from its grave, his bare naked form suddenly crouching in a familiar room of familiar faces, his pulse pounding in his ear -

"Where is Sakura?" His throat was as dry as could be, catching his words in it like tissue on a gravel road.

"Right there, bastard." Naruto pointed behind him. Sasuke jerked around at a speed that should have given him whiplash, but he didn't have time for that. Why wasn't she moving?

He stumbled forward, finally landing on his knees beside her. She was unmoving, her lips sealed in a grim line and paler than he remembered. "Sakura, wake up." He started breathing harder and felt his hands start to shake.

"Sasuke!" Ino shouted from where he was seconds ago, having inadvertently shoved her when he rushed for Sakura. "She's alive, please calm down!"

He stared at her with his eyes hazed by fury. Moments passed by as he let her words sink in as well as his own emotions. He didn't want all of that to have been for nothing. He didn't want to be faced with the possibility that he made it back without her. That she was possibly still trapped in Hell alone and afraid. He was angry because she could have been dead. He was angry because he realized how weak she made him.

As did the others.

Studying her closer, he noticed the soft rise and fall of her chest. She was okay.

"Why don't you-"

"Why are you crying?" He snapped at Ino, barely pulling his eyes off Sakura's subtle pulse in her neck.

Her mouth opened for a second before snapping shut. Her once watery eyes hardened to steel. "They were tears of joy," she responded with a bite in her tone. "You're finally human. You did it."

" *Congratulations.* "

And that's a wrap for this chapter! Lots of transitions... Sasuke's officially human, Sakura is in a mysterious deal with him and Orochimaru is once and for all dealt with thanks to both our guest star Medusa and dear Itachi. As our favorite characters are all reunited, they'll have to face a new set of challenges: Sasuke's newly established mortality, potentially a change in his relationship with Ino, this new dynamic between him and Sakura... and maybe some frickin romance ahead!?

Stay tuned to find out! Big shout out to my followers and especially those of you who have reviewed and continued to review this story. I seriously can't do this without you.

Chapter 25

Hello, lovelies! I hope everyone had a restorative weekend. I come bearing a gift for you today and that gift is the 25th (and longest) chapter of SSD. All together we're at about 185K words, can you believe it? That's over 400 pages. I'm still pretty shaken by this. Anyway, please read on and enjoy!

CH 25

The late sun was streaking through the apartment in greedy blocks of light through the window walls. Stark shadows stretched behind the severe angles of the minimal but luxe furniture throughout. There was a sigh from the couch where Ino was slouched forward, her back to the windows and her forehead pressed against her interlaced hands as though in prayer.

Ding .

Shikamaru peeled his back off the wall and shuffled to the open kitchen where the percolator finished boiling the water he was heating for coffee. No one had asked for any, but he knew this troublesome day was far from over. "Ya gonna go in there?" He drew lazy circles in the pour-over filter with the water.

Ino shook her head but then realized her boyfriend wasn't looking at her. "He'll come out when she's awake. Besides," she sighed again as she laid out along the length of the couch. "I'm still working out exactly what I need to say."

Before he could say anything else, the front door swung open. A sweaty Naruto with demon eyes dragged himself in, still panting from his run. "I'm back!"

Shikamaru turned to pour himself a cup of coffee. "We can see that, idiot."

When Sasuke had finally calmed down and acclimated to being back in the mortal world, he transitioned to his unspoken plans. Still shamelessly naked, he marched out to his desk and scribbled a brief note before stuffing it in an envelope already pregnant with whatever was inside. He returned to the room where the others were and handed it to Naruto, asking him to locate Kiba and give him the mysterious envelope. Next, he turned to Hinata, who was beside Sakura's unconscious form. His curt ask of her was more delicate. He wanted her to wake Tenten and escort her back to her apartment and tell her that Sakura had to head home herself. He may have just become human, but he still knew how to command a room.

"You know where that guy lives? Fucking far." Naruto made his way to the kitchen and filled a glass with water from the sink before gulping it down in seconds. "And you know what was in the envelope? Ten fucking thousand dollars and a note that said 'first thing tomorrow.' What's this bastard up to?"

"He obviously paid him off. Are you really that slow?"

Naruto growled at Shikamaru but was interrupted by the guest bedroom-turned-summoning room door opening and an anxious Hinata emerging. She had returned far faster than Naruto thanks to the subway. "She's awake."

Before anyone could move, Sasuke's door slammed open. "Out of my way," he warned them as he stormed by in the black silk robe Ino managed to coax him into before he originally locked himself in his room. They all froze in place except for Hinata who stepped aside to let him in the room. "Close the door behind you," he instructed. She gave one last look inside before letting the lock click behind her.

While Sasuke had disappeared to his room to unpack his new and unexpected humanity, the four of them moved the fold-out couch back into place so Sakura could be taken off the floor. Through the

shuffle of the move, the summoning circles were smudged and broken across the hardwood floors but Sasuke paid no mind to them. His focus was on the woman sitting up under the blanket Hinata had draped over her.

"Welcome back," he said without much enthusiasm at all.

Her head was still in a bit of a fog, but Hinata had assured her she was entirely in good health and just experiencing some 'jet lag.' Had she been less exhausted, she would have laughed at the idea of jet lag from Hell. She mumbled something that sounded like a thank you, her eyes taking in the human version of Sasuke standing before her. After spending what felt like days with him in his demon form, his obscenely good looks were only that much more distracting.

He approached her with his dark eyes anchored to her, fully aware of her preoccupation with his exposed chest. She blushed when she realized she was caught ogling. "We need to talk."

She swallowed hard as he stopped right in front of her. "About?"

Seeing her look up at him then didn't break his focus, but it did make him hesitate for a moment. He missed the softness in her eyes that Hell muted while they were there. He sighed. "How are you feeling?"

She blinked a few times, clearly not expecting that to be his topic of urgency. "A little out of it, but mostly just tired." He chewed the inside of his cheek, nodding absently. "Is Kiba okay?"

In his loose robe, he visibly became brittle. "Kiba's fine. I sent Naruto to check on him."

It was quiet again. She knew he wasn't standing there without anything to say. The obvious truth was he was still sorting through his own thoughts, all of them battling for his attention. Kiba was far from the top of the list. "Was that all you wanted to talk about?"

His long fingers pinched the bridge of his nose, eventually sinking into the inner corners of his eyes. "No."

"Sasuke-"

She stopped talking when his hand was suddenly cupping her chin. She didn't move a muscle as he seemed to examine every corner of her face. He slid his palm to her cheek, his thumb stroking the delicate skin there before coming to rest on her lip. A moment later, he pulled back from the touch but didn't offer any explanation. She also didn't need one.

When he took a step back, a shaky breath left her. "I'm going to send the others home," he said as he turned for the door. Pulling it open, he paused to look over her shoulder back at her with his smoldering pitch-black eyes. "Then I'll be back for you."

As she sat alone this time, she wasn't sure if she was left afraid or excited.

Naruto whined, slamming his fist on his armrest like a child throwing a tantrum. "Can you just hurry up and tell us?" Sasuke remained unbothered in the kitchen as he sipped from his cup of coffee. This only drove the blonde demon crazier, his limited patience worn too thin. "Look bastard, you either give us the story or I'm leaving and you *know* you need my help."

"I don't need anyone's help," Sasuke shot back with a burning glare.

Ino scoffed. "Is that so? I would love to hear how you managed to make your way to Hell and back." His glare faded into something more contemplative. Troubled. The Witch closed her eyes to gather her thoughts. For years Sasuke had been in her life and her in his. They had made a pact, but that pact did eventually evolve into a real friendship. He was a master of mystery, but over time she learned how to read him. Observing him then, she knew he was lost.

They had been struggling for so long to find his humanity, the critical achievement sought by demons to live out their lives as humans after serving centuries in the Underworld. Ino poured over ancient texts while Sasuke selectively listened to Naruto's advice, but if they had gotten remotely close to the answer, they had only stumbled upon it unknowingly. Looking over at the closed door across the room, Ino couldn't believe she had been working beside the key to their success in a tiny forgettable clinic all this time.

"While you're holding us hostage with suspense, can you at least tell me what happens between us now?" The devilman lifted his gaze and through thick lashes took note of Ino's anxious fingers picking at one another in her lap.

"You've completed our deal, there's nothing that says I have to revoke my power from you."

Her brows lifted out of sheer surprise. All she wanted was to at least be able to practice her divination... but to keep her ungodly abilities? "Thank you," she managed to say through the shock.

"Sasuke," Shikamaru interjected while Ino worked through her stunned state. "As much as I love just sitting around in your place, I think it's best we get to talking."

The blankets of sunlight were long gone and in their place was the glow of dimmed lights and lamps across the apartment. Outside, the twinkling of the Williamsburg Bridge and city surrounding it formed the skyline. Sasuke had recounted the events of their journey through the Circles of Hell with the detail and emotional detachment one would expect from a being whose whole existence was about death and suffering. From Kabuto's ambush in Limbo to their struggles with Cerberus, he thoroughly laid it all out there. Even the pair's stay in his dungeon. All was well... That is... until he got to their encounter with Jiraiya.

"He said I wouldn't know the specific protection spell her aunt placed on her but I should know what effect it has."

Ino wore a look of sheer disbelief while Hinata finally felt the nagging notion that something was different about Sakura was validated. All this time, she could sense something peculiar about her aura but never managed to place it. This was exactly what she was looking for.

Naruto couldn't help the wide grin that broke across his smug face. "Is this a relief for your ego?" The devilman narrowed his eyes. "Knowing this spell may be the reason Sakura wasn't automatically swooning over you?"

"If anything," Shikamaru added, "it may be more of a bruise than relief. Without your devil charms, you must be wondering if people would find you as attractive as they do now."

Sasuke looked away, immediately proving the cynical genius to be correct. Naruto found the whole situation to be hilarious. He considered Sasuke to be one of his closest friends, but that didn't change the fact that he was a bit of a narcissist who thought the world of himself. To hear that someone was not by default and without question head-over-heels infatuated with him was the highlight of the day.

From the sidelines, Hinata felt heartache for the devilman. "It also goes to show how genuine of a connection you both have, no?" He sent her the smallest of smiles that had she blinked, she would've missed.

"It would be worth looking into, just to know more about what other spells this Tsunade woman knows," Ino shrugged, downplaying her rattling thirst to know more.

Sasuke continued on with the rest of their story from where he left off. He shamelessly owned up to the terms of his deal with Kiba, but stepped around what the arrangement was with Sakura. And that was just half of his troubles. There was the surprise twist upon his return.

"It was unexpected," Hinata said from the windows as she looked out at the city. "Even if all this time you just wanted to be human, you didn't know how you would feel once it happened."

There was a heavy silence that followed that loaded truth.

"It was everything that I was."

Naruto couldn't stand sitting still any longer and jumped to his feet. "But now you're free to be more than Satan! You can finally just be Sasuke!" He practically flew to the brooding man's side and slapped an arm over his shoulders. "You can take up bird watching or something."

Sasuke sneered at the long-retired demon and shoved his arm clean off of him. "I'm not going to go bird watching."

"Fine! You can do whatever the Hell you want!" Naruto waved his arms with exasperation. "You have your whole second life here to do it all!"

"He's right," Shikamaru yawned. "But can we figure out Sasuke's bucket list another time?"

Ino suddenly stood up and marched in front of her Satanic companion. "Just tell us what your pact was with Sakura."

From inside the room, the voices were frustratingly muffled. She could hear Sasuke's unmistakable deep voice for a moment before everyone else grew quiet. It was a struggle to stand in her weakened state but she allowed herself a bit of patience when the lightheadedness kicked in.

" You sick asshole..!"

Well, at least until she heard that.

She tiptoed to the front of the room and lowered herself to the wood flooring. Her ear pressed hard against the door as she anxiously

hoped to get some context for Ino's outburst.

"She'll be comfortable."

" *Bullshit* she'll be comfortable! You and your shameless ego!"

Her heart sank. It was inevitable that he'd tell them, she had just hoped to have more energy to face what her new reality looked like.

"It's not like-"

"Not like what? Like when you made your deal with me? Essentially enslaving me like your own little witchy minion? You arrogant fuck!"

The screaming went on, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until Ino ran out of steam and insults to hurl at him. The stomping of her feet grew louder as she made her way to the door Sakura was scrambling to scoot away from.

"Sakura?" Ino's shockingly calm voice rang.

"Here," she piped up, drawing the Witch's attention to the floor.

"Oh," she threw on a lopsided smile. "Was I not loud enough for you to hear from the bed?"

Sakura smiled sheepishly while taking the hand she was offered to stand up. "I wouldn't say that."

Ino helped her to the bed and busied her hand with her long ponytail as she paced the room. "So you're working for him now, huh? He didn't even know he was going to be human, yet he already had another companion lined up." She sighed. "Did he say specifically what you'd be doing for him?"

The pink-headed woman shook her head. "We haven't talked about it yet."

Speaking of the Devil, Sasuke appeared in the doorway with only a subtle look of contempt on his face. "It's time to go," he said to Ino.

"What about Sakura?"

"She'll stay here tonight while she regains her strength."

Ino crossed her arms over her chest. She had seen Sasuke do a lot of things in her day. Whether it was convincing a packed Michelin-star restaurant to give him the best table or navigating a dozen bodies in an orgy, he was a very capable man. But taking care of someone who was ill?

"Not a chance."

This time it was Sasuke who folded his arms. "Ino..."

"I'll be fine," Sakura assured her, catching both Sasuke and Ino off guard. "I can handle him."

When Sasuke narrowed his eyes and his lips twisted downward, Ino laughed. "He's more talk than he is bite, isn't he?" She rested her hand on Sakura's shoulder while weighing the situation herself. "Make sure you eat something before you sleep tonight and take a few drops of the tincture I left for you in the kitchen. You can add it to some tea or something."

Looking back at that moment, she would wonder if she should have insisted on taking Sakura with her.

After a few more strings of instructions laid out by Ino, the two Witches and their partners took their leave. Sasuke turned from the front door to face his empty apartment. It was both a relief and source of stress to have the opinionated bunch out of his space. All that was left was Sakura. Just him and her. He swallowed as he remembered her *taste* .

He took his time padding through the open living room, half-wondering what time it was and how many waking hours they would have together before the exhaustion of her mortal soul's travels forced her to sleep. His bar cart looked slightly off, a sign that one of his gracious guests had helped themselves to a few drinks in his absence. His favorite whiskey was running low but there was enough for him to enjoy that evening. After all he had gone through, literally to Hell and back, he figured he was due for a drink. Maybe two.

Sakura spun around with a gasp when there was an unexpected knock on her door. She had been perusing the bookshelves next to the pull-out couch she had grown restless on. "Sorry, I was being nosy."

He leaned in the doorway. "Look at whatever you want."

It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but there was a layer of tension she couldn't quite describe. The weight of what was yet to be discussed was heavy on her and she was already so tired. "Do you think I could shower and then talk with you about... what's next?"

The devilman pulled his shoulder from the door frame and backed out of the room. She followed him out a few steps behind, staring after him in wonder as she adjusted to seeing him like he was and not as the demonic beast he lived as in Hell. As he almost glided to the marble kitchen island, she couldn't help but admire the way the silk robe draped over the tops of his broad shoulders and cinched at his trim waist. When he turned to face her, she had to quickly divert her eyes so as to not be caught staring. Unfortunately for her, she wasn't quick enough.

"Do you miss my demon body?" He smirked when she suddenly became very engrossed in the lamp closest to her. His grin only grew when he noticed the redness across her cheeks. It was always all too tempting to play with her. "Or maybe just my demon tongue?"

Her face shot up with a look of complete offense. "Are you going to hold that over my head?"

His smirk slackened. "I'm only teasing you." She shifted her weight out of discomfort and looked away with a frown. He ran a hand over his face, coming to terms with the fact that things were different now. The moment he made his deal with her, he knew that was going to be the case. But it was his mess to navigate. "You can use my shower. There are fresh towels on the counter."

She thanked him before turning to the french doors separating his bedroom from the rest of the apartment, struggling to keep the memory of that aforementioned demon tongue at bay.

The hot water soothed the aches and stiff muscles that seemed to plague her entire body. It was as though the struggles and pain her soul had to endure in the Underworld had manifested in her physically, which she couldn't rule out entirely. In an effort to clear her head she tilted it back into the water, letting it wash the suds from her hair and down her back. Her eyes fell shut as she began to unwind. The water just felt so calming...

A pounding at the door stirred her. She wanted to roll over and bury herself in her pillows to block out the intrusive sound, but there were no pillows. There wasn't even a bed or blankets.

"Sakura, are you okay?"

Eyes snapped open to reveal not her bedroom, but the shower. Sasuke's shower. She rubbed the back of her head, a dull ache hinting at how she ended up on the tiled floor.

"Sakura?" Sasuke's muffled voice called again.

"I'll be out in a minute," she called back as she reached up for the handle to turn off the water. Sitting in the draining puddle of the shower, she worked on centering herself after the startling realization that she had essentially blacked out in the shower. Clearly she had underestimated the toll her body had taken and tried not to think

about how horribly wrong her shower could have ended had she fallen forward into the glass.

So there she was again. Trapped by her own weakness and left all too dependent on someone else to take care of her. She managed to get herself standing again and gingerly dried off before wrapping herself up in a long, thick robe hanging by the door. When she opened the door, the unmistakable smell of fresh cheese and tomato sauce greeted her.

"Everything okay?" Sasuke asked as she emerged from his room. She noticed he had sweat pants on now and the robe hung open looser than before, his sculpted body adorned with tattoos on display. His hands were busy with plates and glasses as he stepped down to the sunken living room where a pair of pizza boxes were stacked on the coffee table. She could smell the fragrant pies wafting towards her.

"I think I fainted," she admitted, surprising herself with the blunt honesty.

Sasuke paused for a moment before putting the plates and glasses down. "Are you hurt?" He started to walk towards her even when she shook her head. Before she could say anything more, he was holding her chin and searching her eyes. Whenever his face was that close to hers, it became hard to focus. He was *too* gorgeous, she decided. "You need to take Ino's tincture."

He gestured for her to go sit down while he grabbed the Witch's creation and a bottle of sparkling water. The tiny vile was a dark amber, but the tincture itself was a cool violet. Sasuke used the dropper to squeeze some into her glass, the concentrated concoction streaking and dissolving into the bubbly beverage. It tasted somewhat like gin and she wondered if that was something Ino used and if it would be the dumbest idea in the world to ask Sasuke for a gin and tonic.

Like a brick wall, her thirst hit her at full force. She gulped down the entire glass in seconds and the relief that followed was unparalleled. Her head started to clear almost instantly, which was unexpected. She made a note to ask Ino if this was also a good hangover remedy.

"Eat something," Sasuke firmly instructed her. He meant well, but she still threw him a sideward eye for the tone.

As she opened the top box and stared at the pie, a wave of bittersweet nostalgia washed over her. It wasn't all that long ago that she had made the short walk to get pizza for everyone that fated night they first met. The cheese was still hot and formed long strands as she pulled a slice to her plate. He watched her lick the grease from her thumb and settled back in his seat while his own finger twitched.

After a few bites hit her stomach, she could feel herself become more herself again and let out a sigh of relief. Her quiet host simply remained observant, especially when she better angled herself to address him. "Is now a good time to talk about it?"

He rested an arm atop the back of the couch, causing his robe to open even more than it already was. She milked every ounce of her willpower to keep her eyes on his and not the sculpted pectorals and abs he had to be intentionally taunting her with. He saw her swallow hard.

"What do you want to discuss?" She gave him a look that dared him to continue playing dumb. Of course, he ignored it, his mind still preoccupied with a list of what he'd like to do with that mouth of hers.

"The deal we made," she said and then paused with some hesitation. "And Kiba."

"You don't need to concern yourself with him anymore," he said brusquely.

Her eyes narrowed. She set the plate down on the table and turned her body to face him straight on. "What did you do?"

He scoffed. "He didn't even bat an eye when we discussed our terms."

"Sasuke..."

His aloof attitude gave nothing away and that only angered her more. It was amusing, he decided, to see her get so worked up. That said, he knew he was bordering on cruel and needed to change his tune if he didn't want her storming off and locking the door. "He's going to pursue his travels again as he originally desired. I asked him to make good on the promise as soon as he was able to."

She deflated next to him and looked out the windows as if to spot him crossing the bridge right then. Watching her, Sasuke played the role of a voyeur to the beautiful sadness. He absently wondered if she would feel the same longing for him if he were to leave. "No goodbye?" She asked with no expectation of an answer.

He didn't say anything. The truth was that Kiba didn't offer a goodbye. He didn't send a message for Naruto to relay or even remorse. There was no benefit in telling her this, so he opted to not rub salt in the wound and just let her heal on her own. It was for the best, he told himself.

While he let her process her ex's final departure, he pivoted the conversation. "Do you want to still discuss our arrangement now?"

With a quick swipe at what he suspected was a tear from her eye, she turned to face him again and tucked a leg under herself. "Yes. Let's discuss."

Her hair was wet and clinging to the white terry cloth of the robe but still managing to leave blotchy trails of water on the cushions behind her. The evening colored her eyes like sage leaves and the glow of the lamp served to highlight the focus she trained on him then.

Seeing her shift into her 'serious' mode there in his apartment at whatever hour it was with a strand of cheese hooked under her chin made it hard for him not to smile. When he rested his lips behind an index finger to hide an amused grin, her expression soured.

"I'm so glad you find this so entertaining." She moved to stand but he reached out and grabbed her wrist before she could get her footing.

"I didn't mean to come off that way," he said truthfully. "I just can't remember the last time I spoke business with someone while in robes like this."

She looked down as he said this and couldn't help but smile as well. Everything about the situation was ridiculous, so of course, it only made sense for what she was wearing to be too. Her eyes trailed from the fuzzy material to the warm hand and thumb gently caressing the inside of her wrist. "Do you have anything I can change into?"

Sasuke took his time letting go before getting up to find her something suitable in his bedroom. He shuffled through some drawers and came back with a black t-shirt and sweatpants. "You can roll the waistband down to your size," he suggested.

"I'm sure you have plenty of experience to support that," she mumbled before disappearing into the second bedroom. He didn't bother confirming or denying it.

While he waited for her return, he pulled a warm slice from the box for himself and reclined back where he was before. It was nice having her there, he decided. Underneath the tension and bickering, he wondered if she felt the same. It was a complex question to answer. After all, there were so many layers to their relationship, so much that had transpired. Thinking back on their first date felt like a lifetime ago and Karin's sex tape incident even longer. What did he realistically expect of Sakura, this young friend of Ino's with a protection spell he couldn't penetrate? Maybe that wasn't the best word to use...

The squeal of her door opening pulled his wandering thoughts back. "Okay, now where were we?" She didn't bother using the step and instead opted to hop over the back of the recessed couch. Picking up her plate, she filled it with another slice. Sasuke raised an eyebrow at her quick ability to make herself at home.

"Our arrangement."

"Can we not call it that? It sounds..."

"Like I'm your sugar daddy?"

She almost choked while eating, failing to play it off as nothing. Although she had no intention of ever admitting it, hearing him use that phrase sent a shiver through her. It wasn't as though that sort of thing was exactly her kink or anything, but not having much variety in her sex life maintained a strong air of mystery around concepts that were off the vanilla path.

As much as he relished in his ability to make her squirm, Sasuke knew they needed this conversation to be clear and precise. It was the deal that brought her back to life, after all. He reeled back his smirk and cleared his throat. "In the Ninth Circle, you pledged your allegiance to me. Our *agreement* is that you will work for me, for an appropriate amount of time, under my terms."

Her brave facade faltered and gave way to the masked anxiety she had been harboring since she woke up. He could only imagine the array of tasks and torment she furiously worried he was going to put her through. It was frustrating. Was he not respectful of her? Did he not keep her safe and keep to his promises? Why was her default to keep her defenses so high around him?

"Have I done anything to betray you?"

She looked up suddenly like a deer in headlights to see his annoyance as clear as day. He leaned across the space between them and dared her to meet his stare. When she failed to respond,

her heart lurched in her throat as he searched her eyes for an answer.

"Have I not been good to you?"

She pressed her teeth into her lip as she shook her head. "You've been great to me."

"Then explain to me why you keep saying you trust me, but clearly do not." His words stung and filled her with sudden shame. She hid her face behind a curtain of pink hair as she looked down at her lap. "Look at me," he ordered her, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't bring herself to tell him the truth because she wasn't sure she was ready to face it herself.

Before she could even think to scream, he was on top of her, pinning her hands and back to the cushions. His lips had curled back in a snarl and his grip was just shy of leaving a mark. "You will answer me!" She couldn't stop the sob that came up. He remained unphased by it, too fed up with the one-sidedness, and held his position on top of her.

"Please get off of me," she begged.

Sasuke lowered his face to hers. The snarl was gone, she noticed. But in its place was something far more sinister. Calmer. "Are you *afraid* of me?" He narrowed her eyes as she shook her head in denial. He could feel her heart pounding in the pulse of her wrists in his hold and see the frantic throbbing in her neck. "Are you fucking lying to me?"

There was another sob. "Sasuke, please!"

"Not until you tell me the truth!"

"Fine!" She screamed. "I'm afraid of you! I'm afraid of the Devil! I'm afraid!"

His grip instantly loosened and he pulled back from her tear-stained face. This wasn't the first time she had said that. He closed his eyes, falling back into the memory of that night not all that long ago.

"I'm afraid of you."

It was when the group had gone upstate to camp for Beltane. He remembered the smell of dew in the grass and soft roll of the lake on the rocks the pair had stumbled upon.

She cringed immediately, the words not matching what she meant to express. His jaw locked and his eyes grew cold. As she watched his expression morph, panic took over.

"You don't understand," she started explaining, her hands flying to his. He tried pulling away, but her fingers curled into a vice grip. "Please let me explain, Sasuke."

He sneered. "Explain that you're afraid of me because I'm the Devil? That damned boyfriend of yours willingly became a monster all on his own, so don't waste your breath." He tried pulling his hands back again, but she refused to let go. "Give me my hands back."

She ignored his request, her heart hammering in her chest as her eyes grew wild. "I can't read you, Sasuke! That's what terrifies me."

That night was the first time he had kissed her. That painful conversation ultimately ended as one of the most joyous nights he could remember. Maybe he was foolish to think it would last, that they could go back to that moment in time. His eyes opened, any traces of softness no longer there.

"Hn." Her breathing was shaky as he climbed off of her and adjusted his robe. "I'm going to-"

This time, it was Sakura's turn to grab him. "Please wait," she whispered. Her hand was shaking, but he wasn't sure if it was

adrenaline or fear at that point. He pulled himself from her as he seemed to look right through her.

He walked off to his room and closed the doors behind him, unaware that she was thinking about that early summer night as well. Sakura shielded her eyes with her arms crossed over her face.

"You and I," she pointed between them. "We literally come from separate worlds and our values are completely unaligned. You're out there looking for a good time, sleeping your way through New York, but that's not how I operate in the slightest. Despite me knowing this, you somehow have gotten so far in my head that I don't even recognize myself when I'm around you. You make me so nervous and flustered when I see you, but the minute you're gone I'm wishing you were still with me." She stopped for a moment when her voice started to shake at the end. "I don't know what to do and it's terrifying!"

She wanted to badly to barge into his room and wrap him in a hug and demand they start over. They had shared their vulnerabilities and found themselves closer together than ever, she didn't want that to have been a wasted connection. But going back to that time... undoing the damage she had done... that was impossible. She had said what she said and there was no taking those words back. They were to be bound in a different way than she had ever imagined and had to trust him, just as she said she would then. With some effort, she pulled herself up and stared at the pizza stacked in front of her, cold and mostly untouched. That night continued playing in her mind and across the apartment in his as well.

"Do you trust me?" He whispered.

"Yes," she immediately responded, almost begging.

That kiss was unlike any other she had experienced in her life. It was tender, kind, and understanding. Her fingertips found their way to her lips as she relived his touch.

She was undeniably attracted to him and knew in her heart he wasn't going to enslave her in any way... so why did she keep pushing him away?

As the impulsive urge to go after him startled to bubble up again, she tasked herself with putting away the leftovers and moved to bring the boxes to the kitchen counter. It would at least give her time to process. Looking out from the kitchen, she had a perfect view of the spacious apartment she could never afford. It was stunning, really. The only other time she could recall seeing such an apartment was in a dreamy interior design magazine she'd flip through while at the airport waiting on a layover. Truly seeing it then, the lofty ceilings seemed more empty than airy. The meticulously designed furniture was severe, not just modern. The spotless surfaces were barren, not just minimal. This grand apartment was not truly a home. She retrieved herself from her thoughts and poked around the cabinets until she found some proper zip-lock bags to store the leftovers. All the while, she couldn't help but think about the devilish man behind the closed doors who was lonely, not just alone.

And she was, too.

"Sasuke?" She knocked lightly on his door and then took a small step back to wait for an answer. There was the faint sound of sheets rustling and then the click of the doorknob turning. The stoic devilman stood before her and almost looked bored. "Can you come out so we can talk?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned on the open door, the dim lights from the living room bringing to her attention the fact that he no longer was wearing his silk robe. "What do you want?"

She swallowed her pride as she looked down at her feet for a moment. When she brought her gaze up to meet his, she knew it needed to be all or nothing when it came to her honesty. "I'm sorry for the way I acted earlier. I didn't mean it when I said I was afraid of you, that wasn't fair." He remained frozen in place as he observed her, causing her to fidget. The more she spoke and the longer he

went without responding, the more nervous she became. Still, she continued. "While I wouldn't exactly call you an angel, you've been so kind to me since the beginning, even when I didn't entirely deserve it... You're a good person, Sasuke, even if you were the Devil."

There was a flicker of softness before he composed himself. "Thank you."

"I think what's been scaring me all this time is just *how* good you are and how much it'll hurt if you ever..." She paused, looking for the right word. "If you ever leave." He knew as he heard the strain in her voice she wasn't talking about Hell. "So... Do you think you can forgive me one more time?"

He lifted a brow. "Do you deserve forgiveness again?"

She didn't know what to say to that. Did she? He had her under his expert watch while she stood there in self-doubt. After he felt she had suffered enough, he opened his arms in front of her. "You'll always be forgiven as long as you *do* trust that I am not going anywhere."

The force of her against his chest was unexpected but far from unwelcome. He closed his eyes and wrapped her in an embrace, his lips resting on the pastel crown of her head as though he had done this a thousand times before.

She cleared her throat. "Can we just make hugs the deal?"

He grinned and stroked the hair from her face as she looked up at him. "That would be too easy."

She was only kidding but that didn't stop the disappointment that followed. "I guess we should get back to where we left off."

"Hn," he nodded and released her to step back into his room. It was completely dark except for the lone candle on his bedside table.

Looking at the tousled black sheets and the flickering shadows in the room brought back tangible memories from their stay in his secret dungeon. Her breath hitched.

"Can we talk out here instead?" Her voice came out in a higher pitch than she intended. Sasuke shrugged. She also thought about saying something about him just walking around shirtless but knew him well enough to know that would only result in him threatening to take his sweats off instead. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't tempted to test this, but ultimately shook the thought from her head.

Instead of returning to the living room, they met around the kitchen island. "As I was saying earlier," he started out with as he opened his oversized fridge. Her eyes trailed the rippling of muscles down his back. "In exchange for your safe passage back to your body, you agreed to work for me." When he turned around, he had another slice of pizza in hand from one of the bags she had stowed away.

She took a deep breath. "So what kind of work?"

He took his time chewing the slice as he hunched over the marble surface. "I need a primary physician."

Her brow bunched in confusion. "You want me to be your doctor?" He nodded after ripping into the crust with his teeth. "Do you even have to worry about your health?"

"Now that I'm human I do."

"Can't Ino treat you?"

"She has paid her dues and is no longer obligated to me."

She mulled this over. "Does this require me to quit my job?"

"No." He swiped at the crumbs resting in the corner of his lips. "But I expect you to answer when I need you."

"I don't understand," she blurted out. "I'm not going to complain here, but how is this that serious of a commitment? Do you plan on being sick often?"

He shrugged, wiping his hands of the grease. "We'll just have to see how I fare without my full demon healing abilities. As for the severity of this debt," he shrugged. "You may be underestimating the care I need."

Sakura stood there in thought as he retrieved his glass of seltzer from the living room. He had his back to her as he tilted the water back into his mouth, she stared at his twelve dash-like tattoos he memorialized his wings with and wondered how much of his devilish abilities he retained as marveled at his kindness. He could have asked her to do anything in exchange for her life and she probably would have surrendered to whatever fate he prescribed. Despite this unspoken truth, he chose to show her mercy. When he turned to face her, he caught her staring this time. "Eager to conduct your first exam?"

She turned bright red, just as he intended. His feet were light on the floor as he took his time approaching her. With every step, his smirk and her blush deepened. Eventually, he was close enough for her to feel the heat radiating off his skin. She leaned back into the counter's edge for space.

"You know," he mused out loud. "An exam might not be such a bad idea." The backs of his fingers ghosted down her arm and left a trail of goosebumps in their tracks.

"It's late," was her half-hearted rebuttal.

He craned his face down so he could brush the tip of his nose along her neck and let out a hungry groan. "It is." Before she could respond, he lifted her by the waist and seated her on the island with himself nestled between her legs. "Should I examine you instead? See how your recovery is progressing?"

Her heart began pounding as his large hands stroked the tops of her thighs over the sweats he gave her. She didn't know what to do or say, her mind still stuck on their pact and her responsibilities.

"Sasuke, wait," she spoke softly as she used her hands to stop his. "Is... this part of the deal?"

He peered up at her puzzled, his brow knit together. "No."

She cupped her face in her hands as her flustered thoughts became too much. "I feel like we're back where we started," she told him. "I'm confused."

He analyzed her from head to toe, looking for something to give him clarity. "I don't understand."

Her hands fell to her lap and she dropped her gaze to his hands still gently resting on her. Suddenly she was nervous, but she had already decided to be direct and honest. She was going to be vulnerable with him again. "I don't want to just be hooking up with you."

His head dropped in what appeared to be defeat and she immediately regretted saying anything. Why couldn't she just go with it? Her heart sank as she prepared for the inevitable rejection. He was anchored to his human self now, he could go and fuck whoever he wanted 'til the end of time. How could she ever think-

"How can someone so smart be so dumb?"

She gasped. "Is that necessary? I just put myself out there-"

He slammed his hands down on either side of the marble surface, effectively silencing her. "Do you even understand how I was able to become human?"

As she sat there trapped by his arms, she realized she didn't have an answer. He shook his head with an air of frustration. Sakura

wished she could just shrink inside herself, suddenly aware of how single-minded she had been.

His face reached up to close in on hers. Her breath caught in her throat as the familiar pools of merlot swirled in his eyes. "I needed to find my true source of happiness. That's what my brother did before he returned to Hell, as did Naruto and many, many other demons before me." She stiffened as he took a deep breath through his nose as though to inhale her very soul. "Do you know what I thought was the source of my true happiness and fulfillment?"

She very carefully shook her head as he came even closer, his mouth inches from hers as he gazed at her lips with carnal hunger. She found herself completely on edge. "You don't want to guess?" When his fingers just barely grazed her cheek she flinched. He waited patiently for her to look at him again. "I thought it was sex."

When he didn't say anything after that but continued to stroke her cheek and neck, she mustered the courage to speak up. "... What was the answer?"

"Something a little less tangible, I suppose..." His voice drifted as he became distracted by the racing pulse in her throat again. She swallowed, pulling him back. "An act of true selflessness."

He granted her the privacy of her thoughts while she processed this information. Without words, he was still able to follow her racing mind through her rapidly changing expression. Confusion, frustration, realization, shock... disbelief... acceptance. He cupped her cheek again and stroked it with his thumb. The bloody storms in his eyes had calmed as she waited for him to expand on what he meant.

"You test my patience like nothing else, Sakura... But you also showed me what it means to put someone else before yourself. I want to continue to be the one who does that for you."

She clasped her hands on top of his, pressing her cheek deeper into his palm. "Sasuke," she whispered through the quiver in her voice. It was the sweetest thing she had ever heard. "After all you've done for me, that's all I want to do for you as well."

His free hand reached out to cradle the back of her head as his mouth finally found hers. The kiss started out gentle and soft. Their lips echoed their raw affection for one another over and over without a single word needed to be said. With each shared breath, this affection grew hungrier. Less timid. Bolder. Hands began to grope and explore. Friction found new opportunities to exist between them. Carnal needs expressed themselves through soft moans and deep growls. There was only so much kissing and touching could satisfy. They needed more.

Sasuke folded her legs around his waist and cupped the backs of her thighs to lift her off the island, all while sucking at her throat. In her lusty daze, Sakura threw her head back and clutched at his inky locks, further arousing the devilman. Despite facing away from the direction he was taking them, she could tell he was walking towards his bedroom. "Sasuke," she breathlessly called to him. He ignored her and continued suckling at her delicate skin.

They were in his room, the candle now just a few inches tall and calmly swaying its flame. He kicked the doors closed and lowered her to the bed. "I'm going to have you, Sakura."

It was the very voice she knew that once ruled an entire world. It left her speechless for a moment. She watched him drink in the sight of her splayed on his bed, in his clothes, looking back at him through hazy green eyes. She dared a grin. "Come and get me already."

A familiar dark aura arose and she simply laid back and admired his delicious strong body and the devilish ink he had riddled all over it. She wanted to put her mouth on each and every inch of it, including the parts she hadn't yet seen. She stretched out an arm towards him, reaching to feel him, but he remained rooted in place.

"No."

She blinked a few times thinking she misheard him. "No..?"

He slowly shook his head with hooded eyes. "You don't deserve the pleasure I'm going to give you yet."

Her jaw dropped. "Are you kidding me?"

Before she could continue, she found herself flipped onto her stomach and her pants yanked down to just below her ass. "Hey!" She protested. Her toes just managed to graze the rug below as she struggled for her footing. "What are you-"

SMACK!

The young medic yelped at the unexpected contact and looked up over her shoulder in disbelief at the looming man beside her, now resting his hand on her burning skin. The flesh of her ass cheek was left stinging and then just tingling. "Do not even *think* about defying me in my own home. Understand?"

She nodded, her head spinning. Even more surprising than the spank was the wetness she then felt rousing between her legs.

SMACK!

"You will answer me."

Her heart was pounding. "Y-yes," she mumbled into the coal-black sheets.

SMACK!

" Ah! "

"Yes what?"

"Sas-"

SMACK!

When she looked up at him that time, she noticed his eyes looked different. They were colder, much like his brother's in the Ninth Circle. His lip curled as he corrected her. " Yes, *Satan* ."

There was something so darkly delicious churning inside her when he said that. Something she hadn't felt before and something she couldn't ignore. It felt so wrong, but she was curious... She kept her eyes on his as she repeated after him. "Yes, *Satan*."

His wicked grin crept across his face and his hand stroked the length of her back. The tension melted under his touch and she suddenly craved more of it. From behind, the bed dipped at her hips just as she let her face rest back into the mattress. Sasuke had gotten down on his knees, leaning his weight into his forearms on either side of her. She stiffened as a lazy trail of wet kisses made its way across her enflamed behind. "That's a good girl," he whispered in a groveled voice that sent her heart fluttering again.

She fell into a trance-like state as he continued to grace her ass with affectionate attention, groaning appreciatively against her every so often. "You have such a beautiful ass, *Sakura*." She couldn't help but smile to herself.

SMACK!

"Ah!"

"What do you say when you receive a compliment?"

"Th-Thank you, *Satan*." She caught her breath as he caressed her again.

Soon after, he got up from his knees and she could hear him walk away from the bed. "Undress for me, I want to see you out of those baggy clothes."

She heard the bedroom doors open and looked around just in time to see him leaving through them. Was he trying to give her privacy to get naked? To get some sort of whip or chains? It was unclear and she found herself overwhelmed with nerves as she tentatively crawled off the bed with her sweatpants still halfway down her thighs.

When he came back into the room, he found her just like that, awkwardly standing around in his clothes and her face crowded by anxiety. He put down his drink on the bedside table and stroked her arms. "What's wrong, baby?"

No whips, no chains, no torture devices. Just his damn drink. She let out a shaky breath into his bare chest and let her weight lean into him. He smelled faintly of warm sandalwood, now a familiar scent, and stroked her hair with an unexpected amount of care. "Is it lame if I say I'm not used to this kind of foreplay?"

He peeled himself back off of her to take a look at her face. There was apprehension he recognized from when he lost some control in Hell. His chest constricted at the thought of pushing her away. He'd find a way, he decided, to meet her somewhere in the middle... and then bring her to his side. "It would be lame if I judged you for that." He eyed the shirt still hiding her form that he so deeply desired to see. "Can I take this off of you?"

She lifted her arms and let him pull the shirt over her head. He let out a shameless groan and bent down almost instantly to wrap his lips around one of her nipples while he cupped her other breast. The combination of anticipation and the swift flicks of his tongue started to make her lightheaded. Fortunately for her, he let his hunger get the better of him and guided her back to the bed until her calves met the frame and she was lowered down onto it. His fingers curled under the waistband of the sagging sweats and tugged them clean off of her. "There," he said finally. "You're so gorgeous, Sakura. You know that?"

The nude woman blushed, moving to cover herself. Sasuke was straddling her before she could hide from view and pinned her wrists so he could continue admiring her form. His eyes grew dark again but his lips turned with a faint smile. "I just told you how gorgeous you are and you respond by hiding your beautiful body from me?" He cocked his head to the side. "If I didn't know any better I'd say you were looking for another spanking."

She'd be the worst liar to ever have been born if she even attempted to say she wasn't turned on by his dominant inclinations in the bedroom. Kiba had also been an alpha type who liked to take charge more often than not, but this was different. He wasn't just trying to rail her from behind and selfishly steer them to his orgasm under the guise of playing the tough guy - or at least assumed. She could feel something deeper at play with Sasuke. Pondering this over, she realized she would be a fool to expect anything less. He was, after all, literally a crowned sadist and not forgetting that horrid sex tape Karin sent her, a creative one at that. As intrigued as she was by this unexplored side of sex, she couldn't help but harbor some anxieties.

"Sakura," he addressed her softly. "Are you alright?"

She cursed herself for not saying something sooner. "Sorry, I think I'm just a little nervous still."

He rolled over to lay beside her. His own sweats had shimmied down at some point and the very edges of his pubic hair came into view at the center of his V-cut. "What's making you nervous?"

Sakura swallowed hard and sat up with an arm draped over her breasts. Sasuke reached down for a blanket, which she graciously accepted to cover with instead. "You have a lot more experience than I do, and I haven't forgotten that tape Karin sent me." She shrugged in a poor attempt to downplay her words. "I can't say I've done much outside the realm of normal sex, so I guess I'm feeling intimidated. I don't have any party tricks for you here."

He had to take a minute before responding. The truth of the matter was that he *had* tried essentially under the sun when it came to sex and the vast array of kinks and taboos that existed. When he sought out sexual partners, they were rarely through the everyday dating app or bar scene. They usually were sourced from underground sex clubs or lesser-known lounges where individuals interested in more eccentric and erotic experiences congregated. Looking back on his most recent years of partners, he admittedly had been more partial to the stranger opportunities. Most of his engagements were your run-of-the-mill BDSM setups he used as an outlet for release and opportunity to indulge in some sadistic punishing. Ino and Shikamaru would sometimes join him depending on the spot. Every so often he would happily find himself with someone more interested in a specific kink rather than just being dominated and couldn't remember ever saying no. Rain or shine, he loved to indulge the kink-enthusiasts - leather freaks, bondage fiends, latex lovers, cuckold couples, role players... if you could get off on it, he probably tried it.

So, sitting on his bed with this woman who found his spankings to be more surprising than fundamental, brought some unexpected perspective. It could be fun, he mused, to introduce her to a few things.

"I'd be honored," he said, stroking her hair. "To teach you how I like to fuck."

Sakura shuddered, unable to fight back her body's visceral reaction to his seductive voice she damn well knew was intentionally using to drive her mad. He slowly pulled her arm off of her body and then slid the blanket down her legs. "I want to feel you, baby." With his sly hand, he trailed over her breasts to massage the tender mounds. Her nipples puckered, daring him to pinch them. From there, he grazed down her stomach to the soft dip of her pelvic bone. When she couldn't hold down a small protesting moan, he chuckled. "Do you want me to eat your little pussy again?"

When she didn't answer right away, he ran his fingers through her pubic hair and gave it a light tug. "Y-yes," she finally said.

"Good girl," he purred, sliding off the bed to kneel at the edge of it. His hands hooked onto her hips and dragged her closer to him, spreading her thighs in the process. "We'll work on your proper responses later."

A shock of pleasure coursed through her from just the lightest stroke of his finger down her slit. He gave a throaty chuckle. "Do you like it when I talk to you like this?"

She started to nod but paused when she saw the disapproval brewing in his eyes. "I do," she said at a volume only a mouse could hear.

Sasuke leaned into her musky opening and inhaled as deep as he could. His mouth began to salivate as he continued to drag his finger up and down her wetness, the sound of her juices only making him harder. "What do you want, Sakura?"

Her head tilted up from where she was hiding it under her arms. "What?" She didn't understand - or didn't want to believe what he was asking.

The rhythmic stroking stopped. "You have to tell me what you want," he explained.

Sakura propped herself up on her elbows as he stood straight on his knees. His hands absently stroked the insides of her thighs. "You know what I want," she protested. "Why are you making me say it?"

He gazed at her through hooded lashes and leaned forward to make himself clear. "I want to hear you say it... And I can just get right to claiming your sweet little hole next time."

No amount of dirty-talking porn would have ever prepared her for the way he leveraged his words.

The devilman between her legs lifted his hand so she could get a clear look at it. Despite her embarrassment, he splayed out his

fingers to show off the web of her essence clinging between them. Her eyes widened and he put the digits in his mouth to lick them clean. What was surprising to her wasn't the fact that he did that, but with *what* . His tongue was long and slick with saliva, just like it was in his dungeon. "Is your tongue... how is it still like that?"

He smirked, the pink muscle recoiling into his mouth. "This new mortality had subdued some of my demonhood, but not all of it." He took in her vivid flush and the palpable anticipation coming off of her in waves. He suddenly wasn't feeling as patient as he thought he'd be. "I changed my mind," he said, sending her down a pit of confusion.

"About what? This?" She gestured between the two of them in complete disbelief.

He sat up and rested his hands on her thighs again. His fingers drew faint circles on them right where her legs met her hips. "I'm not going to have you tell me every little thing you want. I don't want the distraction of teaching right now." She took a shallow breath as he gripped her. "I'm just going to take you tonight."

Her heart began to pound faster as he stood up in front of her in all his unholy glory and consumed her with his eyes as his thumbs hooked into his waistband. She almost held her breath as he started to pull it down. When he stopped, she looked up to see his smug grin and his eyes twinkling full of mischief. "That's right," he said, feigning surprise. "You haven't seen my cock yet." He brought one hand to the front of his pants and grabbed the visible bulge through them. Sakura swallowed hard.

"Have a feel," he offered as he walked right up to her where she was laying on the bed. She hesitated, but then brought her palm to where he was gripping himself. Her touch was polite, barely making contact. Not satisfied with this, he pressed his palm into the back of her hand, effectively making her grip his length. It pulsed against her.

She felt the wetness between her legs spread as her mind played out how it would feel to have him spreading her out and stuffing her. He looked down at her face just inches from his crotch. He grew harder at the thought of her blowing him and seeing her strain to fit him all the way in her mouth.

"You want to see it?"

Without overthinking it, she nodded.

He was more than happy to oblige. As the band slipped down his hips and slowly threatening to unveil his manhood, Sakura couldn't blink. His pubic hair was thick and shiny, curling around the base of his shaft that slowly came into view. Even after feeling it, she was surprised by how far he was pulling the band down without yet reaching the tip of his penis. Inch by inch, she felt her eyes grow wider. He had more girth than she could wrap a single hand around and a few bulging veins running down his length to the swollen tip that finally popped out inches later. It throbbed in front of her, flaunting its soft curve and hefty size.

Her hand reached out to grab it and his eyes widened. She stared back up at him with a glint in those deep emeralds he hadn't seen before. As her small fist dragged itself up and down his length while she stayed on her back, an appreciative groan reverberated from his chest. "It needs to be a little of this," he grunted, gently stopping her ministrations to spit in his hand and rub it into his erection. "Hn... I bet I'll slip right in with how drenched you are," he commented as he tugged on himself.

He snuck his other hand back to her slit and was pleased to find it sopping wet to the touch. She tried to stifle a moan, but it was pointless. He was the embodiment of sin and knew just how to draw out the worst in her with just his touch. "Oh god," she whispered breathlessly. He navigated her body better than she could herself. She couldn't believe her thighs were already quivering.

"The brain is such an overlooked erogenous zone," he chuckled. She felt her eyes roll back from just his fingertips brushing on her clit at that point. "The anticipation of having me fuck you must have been eating at you day and night, huh?"

She couldn't think straight enough to speak coherently. All her focus was on his minute strokes on her swollen bundle of nerve endings and those glowing eyes watching her unravel without him hardly having to do anything at all.

Did he think she was pathetic for this?

"Look at you squirming for release."

But he was turning her on so much, she couldn't help it.

"You want me to make you cum from just my finger, don't you?"

The coil in her stomach was winding tighter and tighter, restricting all thoughts outside of her immediate pleasure.

"Such a sloppy pussy."

His finger circled her clit again and again to the point where her nerves were on fire and set to explode any second.

"Getting your messy juices all over my bed."

She thrashed her head to the side and was met face to face with his hard cock.

"You're about to come, aren't you?"

Suddenly, his finger was gone.

Her clit pulsed desperately and she looked up at him in alarm. He chuckled.

"Why don't you put that pretty little mouth of yours on this," he suggested, grabbing his cock. He pushed back a few strands of hair from her face as she processed what had just happened. "I'll give you what you want."

She didn't care how handsome he was in that moment or how seductive his voice sounded. That move was completely messed up. She sat up and snapped her thighs closed. "That was so fucked up, Sasuke. You can't just do that."

He bent down to her level, his tone stone cold. "I will do whatever it is I want."

The cruelty he was exhibiting was jarring. This wasn't how she wanted her first time with him to be. "And I won't put up with anything I don't want to." She shifted to the edge of the bed and tugged the discarded pants and shirt back on.

Sasuke didn't move or say anything at all. Pushing against limits was nothing new. They always made the release that much sweeter. It was fun to work against them, but never had he experienced someone outright walking away from him. He couldn't comprehend it. As she started for the door he knew had to say something. "Sakura," he beckoned to her. "Slow down, please."

When she turned around, he expected to see her sexual frustration directed at him. Instead what he saw was a muddy tangle of uncertainty and confusion. "Baby," he lamented.

"Don't 'baby' me right now, Sasuke."

He fought back a scoff and took a deep breath before fetching his own pants. He had enough sense to know standing around with his dick out wasn't going to help him at that moment. "Please come sit down so we can talk about this. I didn't mean to upset you."

Seeing him so patient right then made her question her own outburst. Was she overreacting? On top of her frustration and

embarrassment, regret was following close behind. She made her way back to the bed and sat beside him at the edge.

"Will you tell me what happened?"

She chewed on the inside of her cheek as she tried to find the right words to explain herself. After a long pause, she turned to him. "You and I haven't had sex yet," she started out saying. He raised an eyebrow at the obvious observation as he waited for her to continue. "So to have you humiliate me like that wasn't the most encouraging act."

He stared down at his knees as he mulled this over. Sure, he wasn't showering her with flowery compliments, but he also wasn't attempting to hurt her. He was a dominant sex partner, something he proudly associated with his identity. Asserting himself in the bedroom was a passion of his. Hell, he thought it was the answer to his humanity practically up until that day. Was she not interested in that?

"I want you, Sakura," he proclaimed. "And I want you to derive as much pleasure from this as I do."

His concern was sincere and gave her some reassurance. Listening to him then, she could hear his confusion as well. She had to wonder if he had ever even engaged in just plain old sex. No, she corrected herself, emotional sex. That's where he was probably lacking. In his eyes, his degrading behavior was unquestionably positive. But for her, with less familiarity and nerves to start with, it was exactly upsetting enough to send her running.

"Can we try something my way?"

His ears perked at this. "You should know I'm up for anything."

She rolled her eyes and smiled. "Yeah, I got that from day one with you."

He feigned a hurt expression with a small pout, earning a laugh from his companion. Hearing it he realized how long it had been since there was a sense of levity between them. He made a note to find an opportunity to change that in the future.

"So what did you have in mind?" Backlit by the candle, Sakura's heated cheeks were hidden. She lowered her gaze to his lips and then stared deep into his eyes. Sasuke was so curious as to what she was thinking and was surprised to find himself a bit nervous. He wasn't worried he would be uncomfortable, but that he wouldn't be successful in making her happy. "I don't say this often, so don't get used to it... But I'll follow your lead."

She scoffed at his ego and let her hair fall forward as she laughed again. "I promise I'm grateful, *Lord Satan* ." He wanted to pull her across his lap and spank her for that jab. Luckily for him, she redirected his attention by grabbing his hand next to her and lacing their fingers together. "I want to take it slow."

"I can do that."

Her eyes stayed trained on his as she brought her mouth closer. He waited until she pressed her lips against him to see what pace she would set. She was so soft to the touch and had this uncanny effect on him that was like sinking into a hot bath after being out in the cold for so long. He sighed against her as she ran her hand up his chest to rest on his shoulder.

"Can I touch you?" He asked without taking his lips off of her.

She nodded, rewarding him with a small moan when he slid his hand appreciatively up and down her side. After a few strokes, she began to shift around as the desire pooled inside her. When she stood up suddenly, he forced himself to remain still. He fought back a teasing comment as she moved to straddle his lap.

Her smile was coy but still sweet. Creamy arms circled around his neck as he gave a satisfied hum that she could feel in her chest. She

wanted to feel more of him in her. She wanted *him* . With their bodies pressed together, she started kissing him again and slid her tongue between his lips. He could practically taste her bubbling urgency.

"Mm, Sakura..."

The wet sounds of their kisses and her heat directed at his crotch were maddening. As much as he wanted to wait for her to guide him, he couldn't restrain himself from filling his hands with her ass and pushing her down harder onto his straining bulge. He hungrily sucked on her bottom lip, holding it hostage with his teeth for a moment before letting her have it back.

"The things I cannot wait to do to you," he chuckled through his impatience.

"Lay back on the bed," she whispered, ignoring what he said. He did as she asked and felt her lay right next to him with her head on his shoulder.

They just stared at each other while catching their breaths and Sasuke found himself not entirely hating it. Her eyes were that darker green again that he wanted to see more of. She smiled, stroking his face and letting herself move to his chest to appreciate his manly physique. The tentative touch was gone, he observed. Her contact was confident. She was finally just enjoying him. *Finally* . He relished in this new change of pace.

But he was a creature of desire. As much as he was learning to enjoy her increasing confidence, he needed more. They had started kissing again and she had pressed herself flush from chest to toe with him. Her hands grew bolder as they explored new planes on his muscular form and he reciprocated by running his hands back over her ass and through her hair, fisting it lightly.

"You feel incredible against me like this," he whispered as he pressed his hips into her more.

She buried her face in the space between his neck and shoulder and planted a collection of butterfly kisses on his heated skin. When she sat up he watched her inquisitively. She started to pull the shirt over her head, a pleasant surprise for the hungry devilman. "Take two?" She grinned.

Without skipping a beat, he leaned over and put his mouth on her breast to use the flat of his tongue along its underside. She shivered, looking down to find him looking up at her before he captured her hard nipple in his mouth. She mewled, his tongue sending her to the edge. After he felt he had messed with her breasts enough he tilted his head back and hooked a hand behind her neck.

"Come here," he cooed.

She ended up laying on top of him as they began to kiss again. Large hands roamed up and down her back as their tongues brushed along each other. When she felt him grab her hips to grind up against her, she knew it was time to take it to the next level. A shy hand tugged at his waist and he broke their kiss to throw her an amused grin. He couldn't resist the chance to tease her just for a second. "Is that what you want? To see my thick cock again?"

Earlier she would have been embarrassed by that comment, but she was properly aching then and excited by it. "I do," she said in earnest.

His eyes stayed trained on her face as she rolled off of him to let him pull down his sweats. When his hard length was fully released, it sprang from the restraining cotton. He could see her measuring it in her mind. "You can touch it, baby."

She glanced at him for a split second as if to say 'no shit' before she brought a hand to his hard-on. If it was possible, he was even harder than before. She slid a loose fist up and down the rock hard erection and tried to imagine herself spreading and squeezing onto him. She shuddered with anxious eagerness.

Her fingertip circled his tip with the same light swipes he had applied to her swollen clit. The organ rewarded her with a generous bead of precum that she then rubbed down the shaft.

"Fuck," Sasuke growled, hooking his arms behind his head. If he didn't restrain himself, he was going to throw her down and penetrate her any second. "I cannot wait to show you what I can do with that," he continued to say, as he watched her slide her hand up and down his throbbing cock.

Her hand soon slowed and he was so curious to know what she was going to do next. She let one hand stroke his muscular thigh and the other go through the same motions up his rippling abs. Her fingers took some detours, tracing each of his tattoos. He tried to read her face then, but she was too deep in thought.

He was doing his best to be patient, but she still had those damn pants on. His cock continued to throb and his balls were aching. How much longer was this going to be? Her hands moved to her hair and his eyes widened at the tell-tale gesture that he knew had to be preceding some head. Trained eyes watched her push the pink locks behind her ears and shoulders. "What are you planning there?" He teased.

"Nothing if you don't hold still." Her threat was clear, but he also caught the nerves in the back of her tone.

Just as he predicted, she started to lower her face down to his length. He pressed his head back into his fidgeting hands that were dying to fist her hair so he could thrust up into her mouth. It was the sweetest torture, he admitted, when her pink tongue came out to lick the underside of his dick. "Shit," he cursed as she dared to wrap her lips around his swollen tip. She even looked up at him while she did. Fucking tease.

She worked him in her mouth as best she could while using a hand to cover the portion of his length she couldn't fit. He knew the last thing she wanted was for him to face fuck her then, but he couldn't

help but release a hand to touch her. She tensed when he stroked her hair, so he slid his hand to her cheek. "Can you let me feel myself through you?" He asked as he stroked the soft skin. She carefully turned her head to the side so his cock was pushing into the inside of her cheek. He rubbed the tip through it and groaned. "I love how you look up at me like that. It's making me mad."

He eased her off of him. "Can you please take your pants off for me again?" She nodded to his delight and shimmied out of the sweats one last time that night. Sasuke sat up and placed a hand on her knee. "I promise I'll be good this time," he assured her with a lopsided smile.

"I trust you," she smiled back.

He smiled back. "Let's get you in a better position then, shall we?" He stacked his pillows at the top of the bed and gestured for her to lay back on them. "This way," he explained, "you can watch me work this delicious pussy of yours."

She blushed as she let her back press into the fluffed down pillows. Sasuke took to all fours in front of her as he stared hungrily between her legs. She could feel herself throbbing at the sight. Slowly, he lowered himself down and hooked his hands around the base of her thighs.

"This time," he said peering up from her pubic mound at her, "I'm going to make you come for me. Hard."

His tongue ran up her soaking slit, coating itself in her essence. He groaned, swallowing fast before pressing his entire mouth against her and covering his face with her juices. "You taste," he said between hungry sucks at her swollen lips. "So good, baby." She gripped the sheets hard. "I want you to always get this wet for me."

The suckling was paired with the dips of his firm tongue into her, its supernatural length causing her breath to hitch. "If you think this

feels good," he said once he could hear her panting. "You're going to fall apart when I put this cock in you."

She was struggling to keep her focus, the pleasure becoming so blinding. When she looked back down at Sasuke, she couldn't help but moan again at the sight of him simultaneously eating her out and reaching between his own legs to jack himself. "I think I'm ready," she said, entirely breathless.

"Not yet," he replied. Her jaw dropped open. "I want you to come for me first."

She chewed her lip as he swirled his tongue around. "Sasuke," she breathed. Her fingers laced themselves in his hair which only encouraged him. She was getting close again, he could feel it. Again and again, he flicked at that red and swollen clit with his finger as his tongue rubbed in and out of her sopping wet hole. Soon enough he could feel that familiar tremble in her thighs and pressed on. She was beyond incredulous to his abilities to take her to the edge as he had twice already before. Down in Hell and again here on his bed, he made pleasuring her seem easy. Any guy before him made it into a whole overwhelming ordeal that either ended with her stopping them out of frustration or because they had rubbed her raw. As Sasuke's fingertip gently worked her clit and his tongue massaged her opening, she finally saw stars.

"A-ah!" She screamed, the winding pressure inside her bursting into waves of indescribable pleasure. "Oh..." Her voice cracked, the orgasm eventually subsiding and his ministrations coming to a stop. As her vision returned, she looked down at the man responsible for her undoing and saw him grinning with a face covered in her essence.

"What a beautiful mess," he purred, his tongue licking at the corners of his mouth.

"That was unreal," she panted as her head fell back into the pillows. Sasuke crawled on top of her and cupped her face in his sticky

hands to kiss her. She tasted herself as he dipped his tongue into her mouth.

"You ready for more?" His voice was smooth and sultry, hiding the erratic throbbing he was managing below the surface. She could feel his heated tip graze her stomach, the oozing precum dripping onto her. It had been so long ago since he started pursuing her, she reflected in amazement. From the day they met, he was on her case but she was always hung up on one thing then another. Any other guy would have bored of her and given up ages ago, but Sasuke didn't. Deep down, she knew it was her ungainly attempt at self-preservation and she couldn't be more grateful than she was then that he just happened to be more stubborn than her. Looking up at his devastatingly handsome face, she gave him one last kiss and nodded.

He kissed her back before moving down her body. Without another word, just a shared glance, he pressed the tip against her wet folds. How long had it been since he had felt another's body like this? The soft flesh heated to the touch, the eyes dilated and hooded with desire, chests heaving with hunger. If someone had told him a lifetime, he would have believed them. It was a despicable day when he finally came to accept that sex just wasn't enough anymore to be satisfied. He grew hungrier and hungrier over the years, but his palette had slowly, quietly, changed. It felt impossible to pinpoint what was missing, but when he did, he chose to greet it with denial. Until Sakura.

He covered his tip generously in her messy juices and tapped at her sensitive clit. For so long he had been pursuing this woman and he was finally going to have her, all of her. He spread her creamy legs a bit further apart and pushed his hips forward to let himself sink into her. "Fuck," he hissed as he watched his length squeeze in.

Her whole body went stiff and he worried he had hurt her with his girth. He in no way was under the impression she was a virgin, but he couldn't help worry he was doing something wrong. "Please," she whimpered. "It feels so good, don't stop!"

And just like that, his wicked grin returned. Without knowing it, she had reminded him that although there were many human things he had yet to fully understand, sex was something he had absolutely mastered. "I only just put it in, you better prepare yourself."

He started by pumping into her at a leisurely pace, enjoying the sloshing sound of her drenched pussy taking him in. Her pale breasts bounced on her chest with every thrust, exciting him further. He wanted to tell her how lewd she looked, how long he had been going mad thinking about railing her, *owning her*. He wanted to make her say she was his little slut to fuck and to teach to fuck, that she would love it. Especially when he filled her with his load.

He groaned.

She wasn't ready for that yet, but there would be plenty of time in the future.

"Sasuke," she whined, reaching up for him.

He positioned her legs around his waist as he leaned forward to hover right on top of her as he continued to drill his cock into her. She started to moan louder, the curve of his length targetting her hidden bundle of nerves. "Oh god," she cried.

"We'll need to work on that," he said as he groped her flushed breasts.

"Oh, Satan," she laughed. It made his dick twitch inside her to hear her call him that.

"Give me your hands," he demanded. He gathered her wrists in one hand and pinned them above her head. "You look so gorgeous taking my dick like this," he told her. "I'm going to reward you with my cum."

She looked up at him in surprise and was met with his red eyes. What was more surprising than seeing them that color again was

how much they turned her on while he slammed into her. "I think I'm going to come again," she announced. Watching him pump his thick cock in and out of her looking as devilish as he always did was becoming too much. He could feel her walls starting to contract on him.

"You're going to wait until I'm ready to come as well, understand?"

His commanding order sent shivers down her body.

"I'm getting close," he grunted, fucking her harder. She started moaning louder, her voice pairing pleasingly with the slaps of their bodies meeting. Her nails clawed at his back and her mind was on fire.

"Get ready to come with me, baby," he ordered her, his hips slamming hard into her.

They tangled their limbs as the tempo of his thrusts picked up, his release just seconds away. She couldn't help but cry out at the inhuman pace set as her orgasm neared. "Ah, ah! Give it to me..!"

"Argh, I'm coming!" He grunted, the hot load filling her to the brim. She could feel her insides becoming full. This was the undoing for her as well as her walls began spasming with her second orgasm. A few breaths later, his hips rolled to a stop. He shifted to rest beside her with his cock still inside and legs comfortably tangled.

Her head fell to the side to look at the man panting beside her. His abs, twisting with his hips that were still meeting hers, contracted with every breath. His hard chest glistened when the candlelight managed to catch the beads of sweat collecting in the valley between his pecs. When he caught her staring, she couldn't be bothered to be embarrassed. She was too awestruck to even think to be. For similar reasons, he was feeling the same way.

"Feeling better now?" He asked with a smug grin.

She let out a breath laugh and rolled her hips away so he was no longer inside her. "A little parched, if I'm being honest."

Sasuke pulled himself up and off the bed, examining the mess smeared across his pelvis and thighs with a mischievous look on his face. "I imagine you must be quite dehydrated."

Sakura shot a glare his way but said nothing. She didn't want to inflate his ego then, but she knew without a second thought that was without question some of the best sex she had ever had. What was even more shocking was the fact that made her come not just once, but twice! And it was their first time together..!

"I'll get some water," he said as he turned to leave the room. She smiled up at him, grateful for the offer. Her eyes shamelessly lingered on his sculpted ass as he left the room and sighed. She only wished she had let herself do this sooner.

As she sat back and let her body bask in the lingering glow of her orgasms, the warm light from the living room poured into the room. She looked down at her own exposed body and was brought back to reality by the small pool of milky semen pouring out between her legs and onto the contrasting black sheets.

"I suppose I should help clean that up," Sasuke mused as he handed her a tall glass of water. She snagged a tissue off his bedside to catch the rest of the liquid seeping out of her and without thinking offered an apology for the mess on the bed. He caught her eye as he tugged the sheet off the mattress while still nude. "Sakura..."

She looked at him inquisitively. "What?"

He discarded the crumpled fabric and stood in front of her with his hands on her arms. "You have nothing to be sorry for. The only apologies you'll owe me are in bed if you disobey me then, are we clear?"

She let loose a soft grin and he leaned down to kiss it, his hands sliding down to grab at her sore behind. When he pulled back, he intertwined their fingers to guide her to the bathroom with him. "Now let's get cleaned up, I want you to get a full night's rest so you can give me a *full* physical examination in the morning."

"You're going to just be a pain in my ass about these exams, aren't you?"

His eye twinkled. "Yours and yours alone."

She had to laugh. He was, after all, her sweet, sweet devil.

End.

Aaaaannnddd... CUT! How are we feeling?! Before you read any further, let me cut to the chase and say there WILL be a sequel! We WILL be diving into this newly forming relationship between Sasuke and Sakura now that he is fully removed from his seat in Hell and firmly locked into the mortal world. He's been enjoying himself with little consequences at stake up until this point, so how will his life shape up now that he has found something worth fighting for? And Sakura... If you've read this story through, you know there's a lot of... hobbies and preferences... she hasn't been properly introduced to yet that Sasuke will be anxious to introduce her to.

I am marking this story as complete (finally!) but will update it with the info for the sequel once I have that first chapter ready for publish.

Thank you everyone who has read my story, given me the gift of your feedback and especially those who have been with me since the beginning. You all have made me a very happy hobby writer and I look forward to sharing more cheeky happiness with you on this upcoming story to follow.

drawingdownthemoon