

Chapter 7

“Well, what are you waiting for? The exam has already begun.”

Kakashi’s words knocked Sakura out of her stupor. Without even thinking about it, she was leaping for the cover of the woodline. *When faced with a superior opponent, retreat to cover.* That was basic shinobi tactics, taught by the academy and emphasized by Tanya.

However, Sakura knew she couldn’t go too far into the forest. Kakashi was a superior shinobi, which likely meant he could conceal himself far better than her if he should choose to hide. Determined not to let their sensei break line of sight, Sakura peered back after ducking behind a tree.

“I’M READY! LET’S FIGHT!!”

“Is he crazy?” *“Is he crazy?”*

At any other time, the sudden synchronicity with Tanya might have been amusing, but right now they were both wondering why on earth Naruto thought he could take on Kakashi all by himself.

Without even thinking about it, Sakura started up the mental acceleration technique Tanya had taught her so as to give herself more time to confer with her spiritual advisor.

“While going all out right from the start has tactical merit given the superiority of our opponent, he has no chance on his own,” opined Tanya.

“Exactly! Besides, why the hell did we go to the trouble of setting up all those traps if he’s just going to fight in the open?!” Sakura shouted into her mind.

“It doesn’t matter. The question is how are you going to take advantage of this?”

“Well, Naruto seems to be getting ready to fight hand to hand... but his taijutsu sucks!”

“True. Which probably means he’ll soon get frustrated and try something else. And his two best tricks would be the mass clone thing... and his Centrefold technique.”

“Stop calling it that, it’s just a naked transformation,” grumbled Sakura. *“And it’s not like he can use those to beat a jounin.”*

“To beat him? No. To distract him, however...”

Sakura caught on immediately. *“That could be our chance!”*

“By ourselves?” asked Tanya.

“No... but with Sasuke’s help we might be able to get the bells. Shit, we need to coordinate with him! Where is he?”

Looking around frantically, Sakura eventually managed to spot Sasuke a short distance away, perched in a tree. Glancing back at the clearing, she saw Naruto frantically flailing away at Kakashi while the jounin taunted him by reading a book and dodging all his attacks at the same time.

Realizing it was only a matter of time before Naruto grew desperate enough to try some of his techniques, Sakura forwent stealth for speed, finding herself sharing Sasuke’s perch in a matter of seconds.

“What are you doing?” hissed Sasuke furiously.

“Telling you to get ready. Naruto’s going to make a big distraction soon, and when he does we’ll both attack.”

“What - how do you know?”

“I know, just trust me a little! I’m getting into position.” Sakura felt guilty about being so short with Sasuke, but there simply wasn’t time to explain. She needed to get to a different position so she and Sasuke could attack from different angles.

Another twenty seconds of tree-hopping, and she’d reached a position from which she and Sasuke could pincer Kakashi. And not a moment too soon. Naruto had just been hurled face down in a squealing heap after... *“Did sensei just kancho Naruto?!”*

“So that idiotic game still exists... I guess Kakashi really is just playing around,” mused Tanya.

“Look! Naruto’s going for a ninjutsu! This is it!”

Sure enough, Naruto was back up and shouting at Kakashi. “You think that’s funny?! Well, take this! Clone technique!”

There was a veritable explosion of chakra smoke, and then the entire clearing was covered in a sea of orange. Large sections of the clone population were obviously deformed and dispersed instantly into puffs of smoke, adding to the haze, even as the healthy ones (still numbering in the dozens) all leaped at Kakashi at the same time.

Sakura joined the rush, a rapid transformation turning her into yet another Naruto clone, hoping to use the cover to launch her own assault. There was however one problem with this plan. “EHH? Where’d he go?!” shouted Naruto. When the smoke from the first wave of clones dispersed, Kakashi was gone. There still were at least thirty Naruto clones of varying levels of quality scattered around the clearing. The real Naruto was obvious, since it was the only one talking and looking around. The others were all milling around silently as uncontrolled clones were wont to do.

“He’s here somewhere! Hide!” came the urgent message from Tanya.

Sakura immediately dropped into the lackadaisical attitude of a mindless clone, even as Naruto searched frantically for their sensei.

“We need to spot him before he spots us,” thought Sakura, rapidly glancing at the clones’ feet looking for telltale movements in the grass while also straining her still rudimentary chakra sense. As she looked around, a glint of metal caught her eye - a brace of shuriken, screaming in from the side.

Sakura’s heart rate spiked and almost leaped to the side, before realizing the shuriken were aimed at a spot just behind her.

There was no conscious decision. As soon as her brain processed that last detail, her body was moving. Her leg swung around in a low roundhouse kick, every single gram of physical reinforcement hastening the strike.

THUD!

Through the haze from dispersing transformations, Sakura stood revealed with her leg stopped by Kakashi’s own. At the same time, the man’s left hand was in the air, the two thrown shuriken now spinning around his fingers.

For a moment, the tableau stood. Then things got very busy.

Sasuke charged in, kunai drawn, Naruto and his remaining clones screamed in, and Sakura focused on dodging the shuriken that Kakashi lazily flicked at her.

Within a matter of seconds, Sakura realized just how badly outclassed they were. Even Sasuke blowing out a fireball barely slowed the man down. Sakura herself tried her best, but even redirecting her momentum in midair using the bastardized flight technique only got her fingertips to one of the bells the first time. Subsequent attempts were immediately spotted and countered. As for Naruto, the hyperactive blonde made for a very loud distraction, but unfortunately that quality cut both ways.

As Sakura was forced to break off when Kakashi redirected Naruto into her path for the third time, their sensei spoke up in a conversational tone, “So, I take it the three of you have already decided which one of you gets sent back to the academy?”

“Duh! It’s obviously the bastard!” shouted Naruto.

Their offensive screeched to a halt as Sasuke turned towards the blonde. “If anyone’s going back it’s you, dead-last!”

“Yeah?! Who’s gonna make me, duck-butt?”

“You’re obviously the most useless one here! You almost got yourself killed jumping in front of my technique!”

“Oi, you’re the one trying to set fire to people! And Sakura’s the only one who’s even touched the bells! You’ve been just as useless as me, so there!”

As their impromptu alliance fell apart, Sakura caught the amused glint in the jounin’s eye. “*That jerk’s trying to pull us apart!*” she mentally seethed.

“*Actually, I think he’s succeeding,*” came the unwelcome observation. “*Better discipline your troops quickly, Sakura.*”

It should be said that even with all her Tanya-instilled self-confidence, Sakura didn’t really like putting herself forward. She wouldn’t let anyone push her around, but given a choice was perfectly happy to keep her head down. But the situation was dire, so girding herself, she stepped forward right in between the two boys.

“This isn’t working. Fall back to the forest. Now!” she barked.

Seeing incipient protests from both, she cut them off, “We couldn’t take him together. Think any of you can take him without my help? Fall back.”

Not waiting to hear their response, Sakura fled for the trees. For a long moment, she thought she’d made a mistake. Then came the sound of following footsteps and she breathed a sigh of relief.

She led them close to one of their booby-trapped zones, a trail that cut through the forested section. Soon the boys joined her in concealment under a shrub.

Naruto, naturally, was the first to give voice. “Why’d we leave?! We need to kick that guy’s butt!”

“Agreed, but why do it out there, when we took so much trouble setting up traps *in here?*” replied Sakura softly. Then she raised an eyebrow. “Did you forget?”

Judging by the sudden sheepishness on Naruto’s face, yes, he *had* forgotten. Sasuke scoffed. “Why are we even bothering with the idiot? He’s just going to give us away, and there’s only two bells.”

Seeing a fight about to start, Sakura cut in, “Actually, there are no bells.”

“Huh?!” Sasuke was silent but his expression clearly echoed Naruto’s exclamation.

Sakura took a deep breath as she mentally rearranged some of the lessons Tanya gave her on what she called ‘logical fallacies’. Particularly the pitfalls of making false assumptions.

“Right now, both the bells are with Kakashi. The three of us have zero bells, so zero of us are passing.” Naruto’s face seemed to enter a permanent state of befuddlement, but Sasuke had a gleam of understanding in his eye.

Sakura continued, “Until we get the bells away from him, there’s no point arguing about who’s getting what.”

Seeing the mulish looks on the boys’ faces, she pressed her case. “Think about it, which is easier, getting a bell away from each other, or from an elite jounin?”

“Each other,” muttered Sasuke.

“Exactly. So let’s promise to work together until we’ve got the bells. Afterwards... it’ll be between us.”

“Well done, Sakura. With how much they hate each other, just drop a bell between them and they won’t even think about coming after yours,” gloated Tanya. Her voice turned sly, *“That can even work with just one bell. Let them fight it out and backstab the winner.”*

Sakura felt a little ashamed, but consoled herself that as long as they got both bells, she and Sasuke were guaranteed to pass. *Sorry, Naruto. But I don't see you beating Sasuke, and I'm not giving you mine.*

The boys had been glaring at each other for some seconds. Finally, Sasuke grudgingly nodded. “Agreed. Just don’t get in my way, idiot.”

“Same to you, bastard.”

“Great, so we’re working together to get the bells? Alright, then the first thing, we need to lure sensei into our trap zones. And then...”

"Then, splat!" whispered Naruto enthusiastically.

"No," Sakura shook her head. "We've already seen how good sensei is. I really doubt he's going to be nice enough just to stand still and get hit."

"Use the traps as a distraction to get the bells?" muttered Sasuke.

"Call that Plan A," agreed Sakura. "But if that doesn't work, then we'll lure him into a trap he can't simply shrug off." Her voice grew serious. "We need to be *very* careful though. A trap good enough to take down a jounin... might, no, it *will* kill us if we get careless. As soon as the signal is given, anyone near him has to run away. At once!"

Naruto's eyes had gone round in his head. "Sakura... w-what trap would that be...?" he asked in an awed whisper.

"One involving shuriken, camouflage, and quite a few of those explosive notes."

Even as she spoke, Sakura was also reaching out to Tanya. *"Tanya...tell me more about these... claymores."*

In the end, getting Kakashi to follow them into the woods proved surprisingly easy. So easy, Tanya was convinced the man was playing along. *"This is good news,"* the spirit said. *"It means he's giving us a chance to pass."*

Sakura was struck by worry. "If he's going easy... do you think we should..."

"He did tell us to try to kill him. Besides, he's wearing a flak jacket. He'll be fine... well, he'll live unless he gets really unlucky."

Even with Kakashi going easy on them, the fighting was far from easy. He kept throwing out taunts trying to disrupt their teamwork, he was using substitution to get out of the few traps they managed to get him in, and he seemed to take unholy glee in grabbing and throwing them into Naruto's pranks. It took *forever* to get glitter out of hair! That little incident alone went a long way in bolstering Sakura's desire to bring that smug jerk down a peg or ten.

Much as Sakura had expected, none of the traps ever came close to inconveniencing the jounin. They might have if they had included explosive notes, but Sakura had ordered all the explosives removed from every trap except the big one. No need to tip Kakashi off beforehand that his students had access to gear a bit beyond recommended for fresh academy graduates.

All this sound and fury had but one purpose... get Kakashi close to the east side of one particular tree. The tree's surface, from a height of one foot up to about five feet, was covered with Sasuke's explosive notes, pinned in place by shuriken. As soon as one note was set off, the rest would go up in sympathetic detonation. The entire trap was concealed under one of Naruto's camouflage cloaks. Not that Sakura was relying just on the cloak. She'd used one of the fruits of her many years under Tanya, the ability to cast optical illusions, to perfect the disguise. Since optical illusions were a real chakra construct, much like the transformation technique, it was to be hoped that Kakashi wouldn't notice until it was much too late.

Keeping up the illusion had definitely reduced her combat ability, but hopefully Kakashi would just think she was getting tired. Finally, when she got knocked back one more time, she used the force to roll next to the tree. Kakashi was in place. Placing her hands on the tags, she focused her chakra sense on the seal's inner workings. A moment of concentration, and the tags were on a three-second countdown.

"NOW!" she screamed.

Two seconds.

The boys broke off in desperate runs. Sakura threw herself flat and covered her ears.

One second.

The tags let out a loud hiss. Kakashi's eye went wide.

Detonation.

Explosive tags were, sadly, omnidirectional. Even though they had chosen the sturdiest tree they could act as a backstop, most of the blast was still directed off to the sides, much to Sakura's discomfort. Thankfully, internal chakra reinforcement meant ninja simply weren't as badly affected as civilians by blunt force. This was also why explosive tags were mostly useless against them in open terrain. Piercing damage, on the other hand, usually worked quite well.

Fighting through the ringing in her ears, Sakura made a mental note to develop *directional* explosive tags. As soon as she learned how to make regular ones. Because that was honestly kind of cool. Then she looked up, and the bottom fell out of her stomach.

Her sensei was swaying, body and throat pierced by metal shrapnel. His flak jacket was shredded, clearly unable to handle the force behind the fragments. Before her horrified eyes, the man collapsed into a pool of blood. Naruto and Sasuke came in sight. Naruto was shouting something, Sasuke was pale and trembling. From Tanya came a whispered "*Shit*".

Sakura was paralyzed. The world slowed. Slower and slower, as Sakura frantically tried to give herself time to think. And as the world slowed, her sensei's body... *glitched*.

Sakura's breath stopped. She looked closer, the Type 95 vibrating as she pushed her mental enhancement to the limit. And as her senses sharpened to painful levels, the body started looking duller. Washed out. *Woody*.

"GENJUTSU!" Sakura screamed.

In her head, Tanya was talking fast. "*Sakura, your magic sense!*"

The ability to sense chakra (or magic as Tanya still called it) was one of the first things Tanya had tried to teach her, but also one of the hardest. She could sense it fine, but understanding what she sensed, separating the signals...that was a work in progress. Out here, though, there were just the four of them.

Sasuke's small steady flame. Naruto's blinding sun-like prominence. And finally, the steady, controlled, surprisingly *small* feel that she didn't recognize...

"Underground!"

Sakura leaped into the air, but Kakashi's leap out of the ground much faster. A hand closed around her ankle, and then she was flying to slam into Sasuke, both of them going down in a tangle of limbs.

Then they were slammed again, this time by Naruto's body.

Before any of them could get their bearings, loops of shinobi wire had wrapped tight, trapping all three of the genin against each other. *"So...so fast,"* Sakura could only think in wonder. It was a testament to just how much Kakashi Hatake had been holding back.

"I'm glad to see you all had the right attitude," came their sensei's cheerful voice. "But you took way too long. If you listen carefully..." From far away came the faint sound of an alarm clock. Sakura felt like crying. *After all that...* She could feel the rage emanating from Sasuke, and poor Naruto curling up in a ball of failure.

Their sensei was still talking. "It's probably for the best. You lot were getting pretty dangerous back there. And none of you got the bells. So under the circumstances, I have no choice but to let you all... Pass!"

...."WHAT?!"