

Shoulder Devil Ch. 2

Sakura had to admit, there were times she found herself in agreement with Tanya's more caustic observations regarding Konoha's administration. In this particular case, it was the observation Tanya had made, months ago, that the chief purpose of Konoha's library (at least the civilian-accessible sections) was to spread propaganda and disinformation rather than educate the public.

Her initial foray into the library had been to find information on the Uchiha clan in order to try and determine what sort of women ended up marrying into their leadership. That had been months ago. She was now well past her eleventh birthday and in her last year in the academy, and she had finally found something pertaining to her original quest.

It was a record of births and marriages in the higher ranked houses of the Uchiha clan, stretching back to shortly after the Village's founding. You'd think such a record would be in the section of the library dedicated to the Uchiha clan. Or maybe the section on village history and politics, or even a genealogical record. But no, she had found it of all places in a medical text discussing the inheritance of bloodline traits. She hadn't even been looking for it, instead having borrowed the book merely out of curiosity in between studying up on battlefield medicine.

During her research on the Uchiha, the few genealogies in the library dealt almost exclusively with clans that were already extinct. The section on village history seemed to pretend that the Uchiha did nothing of real significance other than steal other village's techniques with their special chakra-detecting eyes, run the village Police Force, and produce the arch-traitors Madara Uchiha and Itachi Uchiha. The section specifically dedicated to the Uchiha seemed to alternately brag about and condemn the clan for their seemingly overwhelming obsession with combat prowess and their Sharingan eyes. There were practically no works authored by Uchiha other than a few texts on fire jutsu theory, and some commentaries on Konoha politics that were blatant even in Sakura's inexperienced eyes for their pro-Uchiha bias. It was telling that the most cited work on the Uchiha Clan was written by Tobirama Senju the Second Hokage, a man who was openly accepted as one of their harshest detractors.

Sakura had at first been intimidated and confused by the seemingly contradictory nature of much of the material available on the Uchiha. Then Tanya had suggested she line up the references based on publication date, and a pattern emerged. Books at or around the First Hokage's time were harshly critical of Madara Uchiha, but positive towards the rest of his clan, almost as if all evil in the world (or at least, Konoha) was carried by Madara and died with him. Once the Second Hokage came to power, that tune changed. The Second's own polemic on the Uchiha quickly became the go-to reference, and the oft-quoted phrase 'The Curse of Hatred' came into being with regards to the Uchiha clan.

With the death of the Second, there was once more a more positive outlook on the Uchiha, at least during the first half of the Third Hokage's reign. Then came the Second Shinobi World War, and commentary on the Uchiha went from praising them to damning them with faint praise. The books noted the superior performance of Uchiha soldiers, but also noted how few of them there were, since large parts of the clan never left the village as they were part of the Police Force. This was a pattern than continued right up until the Uchiha massacre. After that, all mention of them stopped with a startling suddenness. A few records referenced the massacre as

the cause of the massive shrinkage in Uchiha numbers, but reading the latest work (her own academy history textbook) you'd get the impression the Uchiha numbers had simply faded due to natural causes.

Tanya had then made Sakura find the casualty lists for the Second Shinobi War, before pinpointing what Tanya claimed was the reason opinion seemed to have turned against the Uchiha halfway through the Third's reign. The Second Shinobi War had inflicted enormous damage on the Senju and their allies. Both Senju and Sarutobi clans had taken serious casualties, and the Uzumaki had been wiped out entirely. In contrast, the Uchiha had come through mostly intact. Starting a propaganda campaign suggesting they had done less than their share was an obvious ploy to damage their political standing.

A lengthy trawl through the books mentioning other clans showed that the Uchiha were perhaps unique in how the history books had treated them. While not all clans were acclaimed, no other shinobi clan had been so publicly accused of holding back on their commitment to Konoha. Even the disgrace and suicide of someone called Sakumo of the Hatake clan had been treated as an aberration. Tanya had a ready explanation - no other clan in Konoha had posed a threat to the Senju and their allies' preeminence in the village, so naturally there was no point vilifying them.

At that point, Sakura had given up getting anything actually useful out of the library on the Uchiha. However, she had picked up one clue. The Uchiha prized power, that was something almost every source agreed on. Which meant the best thing she could do was make herself the strongest shinobi she could be. Which was what Tanya had wanted, and what she could have been doing if she hadn't spent weeks studying the Uchiha.

Tanya had been unbearably smug for days.

The pursuit of power had seen her returning to the library, though nowhere near as often. The most useful part of the library had been the chronicles on foreign shinobi (information on whom Konoha was relatively free with). Not because these chronicles contained any actual skills, but because it gave Sakura an idea of what was possible for a high level shinobi to achieve. The answer, it seemed, was almost anything...

"Please remember, Sakura, even though your chakra seems to be at least rooted in magecraft as I knew it, there are distinct differences. Magecraft was ultimately about manipulating direct physical forces and raw energy. Chakra is far more conceptual in nature. Chakra seems to work in certain ways because you *think* it ought to work that way. The entire elemental cycle, for example, is clearly a human construct having no basis in nature, but is accepted as universal truth because all current ninjutsu seems to have descended from a single source. Magic's advantage is that because it consists of simple, direct manipulations, it did not have to struggle against the natural laws. For example, a flight spell was nothing more than sustained thrust directed at your own body. Like throwing a kunai, only you were throwing yourself. Otherwise, everything was happening within the bounds of nature. With chakra on the other hand, every technique is a

concept that you are trying to enforce on the world, often running directly in the face of natural law. This lowers the strength of your effects, but it does drastically increase the versatility, so there's no reason you shouldn't be able to do this."

Sakura rolled her eyes at the pompous lecturing tone of the voice inside her head. "Because throwing yourself through the air is so natural! I tried that with chakra and I nearly broke my neck!"

"I warned you that sustained flight required constant minute thrust adjustments that no human mind can easily keep up with, which is why we used computation orbs. Besides, what are you complaining about? You got a new movement technique out of it didn't you? You might not be able to fly, but how many shinobi can bounce off nothing and change direction in midair?"

"I still end up falling flat half the time," Sakura grumbled.

"You're getting better. By the time graduation comes, it will be second nature."

"Are you sure I can't show off to Ino?"

"Not until you have it down flawlessly. You don't want to embarrass yourself."

"Mm-hm," hummed Sakura happily. "She will be so surprised when I show her!" Her face grew a bit sadder. "Do you think Sasuke would be impressed as well?"

"He's ignored you even though you've made enormous strides in your physical and combat scores. I think at this point the only thing he'll notice past his self-centered brooding is you kicking his ass."

"Are... are you sure that's the way to go about it?"

"Positive! That genealogy said every wife to a senior Uchiha has been at least a chunin by age fifteen! Of course, their family tree is more like a ladder, but at least that's one challenge you don't have to overcome."

Sakura directed a frown at her inner voice. "Are you sure it's not because you're upset he refuses to acknowledge our improvement?"

"Of course not! Would I be that petty?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I am being petty, it is on your behalf, my apprentice. Now, enough goofing off. With the increased flexibility of chakra over magic, it should be perfectly possible to convert the Clone technique into a more generalized optical illusion."

"It's not that easy! The clone technique echoes the user's own body to create the illusion! Now I'm replacing that ready-made model with a construct I have to create in my head! Just getting the technique to use a mental image as a source rather than my physical body was a nightmare! You should know, you helped me put the theory together!"

"Yes, well, unless you can get yourself apprenticed to a genjutsu specialist anytime soon, this is the only way we're going to get some decent illusions under our belt."

"I could just wait until I graduate and get a jounin-sensei and learn genjutsu properly from him, instead of trying to reinvent the wheel."

"Now you're arguing just for the sake of it. You read the duties of jounin-sensei in the manuals. They are there to provide leadership and guidance - but absolutely no mention that they are obligated to teach genin new techniques. If we're particularly unlucky, we'll end up with a jackass who does the bare minimum and otherwise leaves us to our own devices."

Grumbling to herself, Sakura returned to her training. Perhaps sensing her lowering mood, Tanya spoke a few minutes later. "Look on the bright side. The teachers are already permitting you to spar with the boys. Give it a couple more weeks, and you might get put up against Sasuke. That's your chance to make sure he can no longer ignore you."

Sakura immediately brightened up at the reminder of her recent success. Normally, the boys and girls were segregated for taijutsu spars. But after Sakura had spent months thrashing every girl in class including the Hyuga heiress, the teachers had finally acquiesced to her demand to spar with the boys.

Of course, her success had come with downsides. Both Ino and Hinata seemed to have been inspired (or shamed) by her success, because they were throwing themselves into their training much harder than before. Ino had already declared her intention to join Sakura on the boys' side, and though Hinata was as quiet as ever, there was a determined air about her that suggested similar thoughts.

Sakura scowled furiously and focused even harder on her training. She was not going to lose this contest! Her true love was at stake!

It was taking everything she had not to gloat. There was only four months left until graduation, but Sakura had done it! Iruka-sensei had just signaled her to step into the ring with her true love!

"Thank god we didn't get that suck-up Mizuki today," grumbled Tanya.

Sakura agreed, Mizuki was annoying. He always seemed to enjoy putting Sasuke up against Naruto and then fawning over the inevitable victory. Even more annoyingly, no one could really complain, since Naruto was always eager to fight, and technically he was in the top quarter of the taijutsu class. Naruto had no skill and would use his incredible toughness to win battles of

attrition against any opponent lacking finishing power, which made him absolutely hopeless against an opponent with actual talent.

As they entered the sparring circle, Tanya spoke crisply, "All right, break it down. What are his advantages over us?"

"Superior strength, speed, talent, training, experience, and stamina. And he probably eats better," Sakura snarked back mentally.

"And his weakness?"

"Overconfidence?"

"His or ours?"

"I'll take what I can get." Sakura considered it a small victory to get a genuine chuckle from Tanya.

"So. Plan A?"

"Plan A," Sakura agreed. Truth be told, plans B through D amounted to, 'Plan A, but sneakier'. Not that sneakiness was likely to work if Sasuke figured them out. "And don't forget your promise!"

There was a long moment of silence, and then Tanya replied, "I won't."

The fight, when it happened, was over quickly. Sasuke started the fight the same way he did with any opponent he didn't respect - a lightning fast blitz.

Sakura immediately fell into a heightened mental state - the very first of Tanya's spells she had learned - and picked her moment to countercharge, letting Sasuke's fist brush by her face.

Sasuke immediately switched to defense, not that it mattered. Sakura wasn't looking to hit him, only to establish a firm grip. Before Sasuke realized what was happening, Sakura had stuck her feet to the ground with chakra, and *heaved*.

Even a girl as small as Sakura could lift an impressive amount of weight if she had picked up the trick of strengthening herself with chakra. Combined with a weak Reinforcement spell running through the Type 95, she could deadlift way more than Sasuke's body weight. Credit to him, Sasuke flipped through the air and stuck a perfect landing. He also did it over a foot outside the arena.

Iruka-sensei seemed almost disbelieving as he declared Sakura the winner. Sakura though was far more interested in Sasuke's reaction. Her heart fell as she read frustration, anger, and resentment, but not an ounce of admiration.

Sitting alone in her room, Sakura listened as Tanya tried to comfort her. Sakura could always tell when Tanya was trying to be sympathetic, because she was so bad at it. "... and really, what does it matter what a little boy thinks of you anyway? It should be mature, intelligent *men* you should be looking for...."

"Enough, Tanya." Sakura cut her off. "I'm not that upset. If Sasuke can't appreciate my strength, I'll find something else. In the meantime, you have a promise to keep. You said you'd tell me a bit about how you got stuck in the Type 95."

"Ah. That. Well, the simple answer is I failed to heed the lesson of Arachne."

"Arachne?"

"An ancient tale. It goes something like this. There was once Arachne, a weaver of such great talent that she thought herself equal to Athena, a kami of weaving. Athena didn't like that, and challenged her to a weaving contest. During the contest, Arachne wove a tapestry depicting the many true tales of how the local kami had tricked and hurt humans - and she did it with skill surpassing Athena's. Athena, however, was a very sore loser. She destroyed Arachne's work and hurt her and shamed her. When Arachne tried to kill herself to escape her torment, Athena cursed her into the form of a spider to live out her life a mindless insect."

"So... the lesson is, don't piss off kami?"

"That. And also, it doesn't matter if you're in the right. The powerful can only be held accountable if you have power of your own. I used to live in a world of rules and laws, so I'd forgotten that lesson. But you, Sakura, live in a village which peddles violence for cash. So either become powerful, or accept being the plaything of the powerful. Otherwise you'll end up like Arachne. Or me."

There both sat in silence for a long time. Then Sakura said, "You know Tanya, I like to think I've come to know you quite a bit."

"So?"

"So, I don't think you've learned your lesson at all. You're still fighting, aren't you?"

Tanya did not reply. She did not speak for the rest of the night. It would be a long time before either of them brought up the topic again.

