

Shoulder Devil Ch. 4

Sakura sighed and cracked her knuckles after putting down her pen. *"That was surprisingly easy,"* she mentally addressed her spiritual passenger.

"Indeed. Even Naruto might have a chance of passing this portion of the test. Assuming he bothered to study," came Tanya's voice in her mind.

Sakura glanced at the blonde two rows away. Naruto was focusing furiously as he scribbled away, tongue sticking out one corner of his mouth. *"He's certainly been more focused recently. Who knows, maybe a miracle will happen."*

"Don't wish for that. If he passes he might end up on our team."

"I see what you mean. Naruto is best taken in small doses," observed Sakura, trying to project her amusement to her companion.

"Never mind his personality. Would you like having to place your life in his hands?" came the dark response.

Sakura thought about having to rely on Naruto to watch her back on a mission, and grimaced. *"Point."*

Letting the conversation lapse, Sakura took a minute to look over her paper. Even though written tests came the easiest to her, that was no reason to be careless. This was the final test for becoming a shinobi of Konoha, after all.

After the written test came the weapon and taijutsu exam. In the weapon test she came just shy of a perfect score - there were only so many things Sakura had time to train, and throwing weapons just did not come naturally to her. She was still 4th in class after Sasuke, Shino, and Hinata. Taijutsu was a simple test, requiring everyone to last a minute in the ring with an examiner who was deliberately going easy on them, with full marks going to those who lasted a full three minutes. Tanya liked it because they could get full marks with only moderate effort, and she scoffed at Sasuke who spent the entire three minutes going all out. Sakura simply ignored Tanya's snide remarks and enjoyed the show of martial skill.

However, it was the ninjutsu test they were both looking forward to. It was the one opportunity they had to show off a bit, since passing might require only the bare minimum, but your final score depended on how much you could impress the examiners. Sakura didn't plan to reveal everything, but she and Tanya both agreed that a top score was worth revealing a few cards.

First came the Transformation test, where the goal was to emulate one of the teachers. No room for improv there, so Sakura focused on making it as flawless as possible. Then she was asked to demonstrate the Clone technique. Now, each technique was only supposed to be done one at a time, but this was Sakura's chance. She performed the Clone technique while keeping the Transformation up, leaving three Iruka Umino's looking back at the teachers.

Both teachers blinked but took it in stride. Then came the request for the Substitution, and all three Iruka's raised their hands and ran through the hand signs. There were three puffs of smoke and a clatter, and when the smoke cleared three chairs had replaced the three figures. Looking around, the teachers Iruka and Mizuki saw the three transformed Sakura's further back in the room.

"That's amazing!" exclaimed Iruka effusively. "How did you get your clones to perform the Substitution?!"

"I didn't," came an excellent facsimile of Iruka's voice from one of the figures. Then there was a relaxing of tension, and the other two Iruka's disappeared in a burst of chakra smoke... as did two of the chairs. "I just created two more clones that looked like chairs." Even as she spoke, Sakura relaxed the transformation, letting her teacher's seeming fade. At the same time, her voice smoothly transitioned from Iruka's adult tones to her own childish one.

Figuring out how to modify her voice on the fly had taken Sakura almost as much training time as the rest of the tricks put together, but it was worth it to see her teachers' faces. Really though, what's the point of the transformation if you can't sound like the person you're pretending to be? Even Naruto had figured that one out, in spite of the perverted uses he put it to with his so-called Centerfold technique.

Now, though, was the time to bask in some well-earned praise, as Iruka and Mizuki both complimented her on managing to perform all three techniques at the same time.

Once she got outside, her parents were waiting to congratulate her. Even her mother was effusive in her praise, doing her best to hide her reservations about a shinobi career, at least for this one day. Ino's father Inoichi Yamanaka also came by to congratulate her. One part of Sakura was happy at having received acknowledgement from the head of one of Konoha's most respected shinobi clans, but the other part was disgruntled because she could almost feel the calculations running through Tanya's head. No matter how much the soul in the jewel might have helped her, there were times when Tanya's habit of reducing interpersonal relationships to a cost-benefit analysis left Sakura feeling dirty inside. After the congratulations subsided, Inoichi invited the Haruno's to wait for Ino alongside him, and Sakura didn't need Tanya's urging to agree.

However, one thing Sakura had forgotten was that, alphabetically speaking, Naruto was going to finish his testing before Ino. When the blonde boy bounced out of the building, shiny new forehead protector on his head, he immediately made a beeline for Sakura. "Sakura! Look! I passed! I told you I could do it!"

"W-what? How?! That idiot was hopeless!"

Hearing the normally calm Tanya splutter in shock pretty much made Sakura's day. *"Not so useless now, huh?"* she thought smugly, before replying out loud to Naruto, "Congratulations, Naruto! Did you get the Clone technique working after all?"

"Heh heh, yeah, I did! And it was thanks to you! You told me to start trying new stuff! So I did and I came up with a way to do it!"

"Oh," murmured Inoichi. "I didn't know you were friends with Naruto as well, Sakura."

"*Wait, WHAT? How does Inoichi Yamanaka of all people know Naruto?*" came Tanya's surprised shout. Sakura was surprised as well, but she didn't reply, focused on the conversation.

"Eh? Who are you?" came Naruto's response as he scrunched up his face in puzzlement.

"Naruto! Be polite!" barked Sakura. Then turning to Inoichi she said, "Please forgive Naruto, his manners are a bit rough. Naruto, this is Inoichi Yamanaka, he's Ino's father and head of the Yamanaka Clan. Inoichi sir, this is Naruto Uzumaki. He's a classmate of mine, and one of the more... unique... characters in my class."

"Whoa! You're the head of ninja clan! Then you must be a pretty awesome ninja!" exclaimed Naruto, eyes wide.

"I do all right," Inoichi chuckled in reply to Naruto's declaration. "And it sounds like you're getting there too."

"Thanks, mister! You know, you're a lot nicer than Ino. She's kinda stuck-up and keeps acting like she's the best girl in class or something." Sakura could only join Tanya in mentally despairing at Naruto's utter lack of tact. Even her parents' faces grew stiff in secondhand embarrassment.

Inoichi only smiled wryly at this. "Well, I'm her dad, so she'll always be best girl to me," he replied. "But enough about that. You were telling us how Sakura helped you?"

"Yeah! Well, she told me if doing stuff one way don't work, I ought to try it differently! So instead of trying to make one clone at a time, I tried making *lots* of clones instead! I must've made a thousand of them the first time I tried!"

"And... that worked?" Given how much chakra Sakura had sensed in him she could believe Naruto could make a thousand clones. But how that would help him make a clone good enough to pass the test escaped her.

"Well... most of them sucked just as much as before. But some of them actually looked halfway right! I'd never done that before! So I spent like a couple of weeks trying and making as many as I could each time! And now, when I make like a few hundred, maybe seven or ten of them actually look all right! And since we only had to make two good clones for the finals, Iruka sensei agreed that was good enough to pass!"

"*Good grief, he literally passed by relying on the law of averages. Otherwise known as dumb luck,*" groaned Tanya.

Sakura could admit to feeling a bit of disbelief herself. She knew Naruto had a lot of chakra, but enough to keep spamming a technique like that? She was also jealous. In spite of years of effort, she knew her chakra stores were still short of someone like Sasuke, let alone Naruto. Her stamina had always been the factor limiting her ability to practice and develop her own techniques, and here was Naruto tossing techniques out in the hundreds. He didn't even look winded! "*Life just isn't fair,*" she mentally lamented.

"Oh my, that's quite clever Naruto. Well done," complimented Inoichi.

"Eheheh, thanks! But I couldn'ta done it without Sakura's help! Sakura, wanna go get some ramen? It's not a date!" Naruto quickly held up his hands to prevent Sakura's reflexive comeback. "I just really wanna say thank you for your help! My treat!"

Sakura sighed. At least he was learning. "I appreciate the offer Naruto, but I'm waiting for Ino. I can't go now."

"Oh, well, then I'll wait with you!"

"I thought Ino was too stuck-up for you?"

"Eh, she's your friend, she can't be that bad!"

Before Sakura could figure out another excuse to get rid of Naruto, Ino came walking out, new forehead protector in place.

"Hey Sakura, you waited for me! Wait, what's the idiot doing here?"

"OI! Who you calling idiot?!"

"It should be obvious - "

"Ino dear," Inoichi broke in. "You really shouldn't be so rude to Sakura's other friends. Especially since she helped him pass the test."

Sakura could feel her face redden as Ino turned to her, eyes gleaming at the prospect of fresh gossip. Did Inoichi really have to word it like that? He made her sound like Naruto's bosom friend instead of a long-suffering acquaintance!

"Oh? You and Naruto are friends? Since when did this happen?" asked Ino sweetly.

"Umm.... well, it's a long story... and our parents all have places to be, so some other time?"

"Actually, I was thinking," broke in Inoichi. "Sakura, you are Ino's best friend. Perhaps you and your family could join us for this little get-together I had planned? Oh, and Naruto is invited as well."

"What? I am?" Naruto's flabbergasted expression certainly matched Sakura's mental shock. *What was the man playing at?*

Sakura's father blinked in surprise. "Well, we wouldn't want to intrude on a private clan affair..."

"Oh, hardly. It's just an informal get-together between friends to celebrate our children passing the academy. There's certainly no reason you can't join us. That is, assuming you didn't already have plans for the day?"

Her parents looked at each other, then her father bowed. "We would be honored, Yamanaka-san."

As the group toddled after Inoichi, Sakura ignored Ino's increasingly curious glances to focus on her mental conversation. *"All right, Tanya, what just happened? I don't think he'd decided to invite us until he heard what Naruto said."*

"I'm puzzled too," admitted Tanya. *"Maybe he's just curious about Naruto's method?"*

There wasn't much conversation, even Naruto seemed subdued by the unexpected situation. Eventually they ended up at a fancy Akimichi-run restaurant, Sakura vaguely remembering having gone there once when her father wanted to celebrate a successful business deal.

It was here Sakura learned that 'informal get-together' was apparently code for a dinner meeting between three clan heads and their heirs. Sakura had met Shikamaru Nara and Choji Akimichi before. One couldn't be close friends with Ino without getting to know the two boys, because no matter how much Ino complained about their laziness she was still mindful of the fact that their clans were closely allied to the Yamanaka. But Sakura had only ever met the Nara and Akimichi clan heads in passing. Never had she dreamed that she would be attending dinner with them and Inoichi. And certainly not while still wearing her rather plain and sweat-stained workout clothes.

Thankfully Inoichi seemed to have been honest about the informal part, since no one was dressed in anything better than working clothes. Even better, Naruto actually seemed to know and like Shikamaru and Choji. He greeted them in his usual boisterous manner, and the friendly barbs traded between him and Shikamaru served to break the ice.

The whole outing turned out surprisingly well. The food was excellent, and all three clan heads were engaging conversationalists in their own way, and none of them seemed inclined to talk down to her. She could almost feel Tanya radiating approval as Sakura got the Akimichi clan head, Chouza, to give a brief but enlightening lecture on optimizing shinobi nutrition plans. *"Allowing your superiors to talk about things that interest them is an easy way to gain their approval,"* came the sage voice inside her head.

"Hey, this is actually pretty interesting and useful!" shot back Sakura.

"Even better. Two birds with one stone."

There was one thing that Sakura noticed though. All three of the clan heads were definitely paying attention to Naruto. It was a subtle thing, but Inoichi soon had Naruto chattering away happily about the various 'experiments' with chakra he had been doing in the last several weeks. Along the way, Naruto ended up spilling almost everything he'd been recently doing, including his interactions with Sakura.

Apart from that oddity, the whole evening passed very enjoyably. It was after she was back home and in her bedroom that Sakura decided to address the strange attention Naruto seemed to have garnered.

"Ah, so you noticed it too?" asked Tanya.

"Yes. It's almost like they knew Naruto, or at least about him."

"Most likely they've heard about his pranks, or from their children."

"Are you sure that's what it is? They seemed almost... cautious."

"You're overthinking it. They probably spotted something about Naruto's experiments that piqued their interest. You know what that means, right?"

Sakura sighed. "You want us to spend more time with him?"

"Of course. If something about his crazy experiments caught the eye of ninja clan heads, we need to get in on it."

"Wouldn't they have mentioned something?"

"Of course not. They won't help him unless they can see a way to benefit their clans from it."

"Isn't that what we're doing?"

"Well, you've already helped him once. I'd say we're owed. Besides, think of how much Naruto could achieve if we were there to guide his experiments. I know you're curious yourself," wheedled Tanya.

"I thought you hated him."

"That was when he was a lazy idiot who refused to better himself. Now that he's gotten a bit more serious, he's worth a bit of our time."

"You know, sometimes I get the feeling you might have deserved to get locked up."

"Now that's just rude. I'll have you know I've never willingly broken any rules of the society I lived in!"

"Yes, yes. *Once team assignments are done I'll see if I have time to keep Naruto from blowing himself up.*" Sakura rolled her eyes at Tanya's self-righteousness before getting ready for bed. Team assignments would be in just a couple of days, and she couldn't wait!