

## Chapter 4

Sakura was on edge. Far more than usual.

First there was the low-key resentment at the antics of her team that had been slowly building up for months. Then there was the nervousness that came with her first time leaving the village on an official shinobi mission. And lest she forget, there was the utterly rude and dismissive client who in one moment would openly question her team's ability, while demanding they do their utmost to protect him in the other.

All of these things had already stressed her temper and brought the fire in her blood close to ignition. And as the heat built, the effects of her bloodline had started to manifest. Increasingly violent thoughts, improved strength, hardening skin... and most relevant of all, heightened senses.

Her eyes were sharper - sharp enough to see the trembling in the client's hands that couldn't be explained by his alcoholism.

Her ears could discern the subtlest sounds - subtle enough to pick up on the genuine worry underlying his irascible words.

Finally, there was her sense of smell. This was the sense whose increased sensitivity confused her the most, usually because she simply didn't understand what she was smelling. Kakashi, though, had looked up from his book long enough to give her some tips. Which is why, underneath the stink of sweat, dirt, and sake coating Tazuna the bridge builder, she could make out the distinct odor of fear.

She'd had to spend the last three days with that scent in her nose, and everything that it implied. It amazed her that none of her team seemed to notice. It occurred to Sakura that before she had become aware of the advantages of her bloodline, she might have been just as blind to the obvious as everyone else.

Well, everyone except Kakashi. The man was a jounin, and from what Ino had found out, a fairly good one. It seemed beyond belief that he wouldn't have spotted the same signs. But if he had, he gave no sign of it. When, on the second night, Sakura had tried to quietly bring up the topic, he'd metaphorically patted her head and told her not to worry about it.

Well, Kakashi's advice had worked, to some extent. Sakura was now less worried and more furious. To be dismissed by her sensei, by the one man in the world who should know exactly what she was capable of!

Sakura had fallen deep into meditation that night, seeking to restore her balance and temper her rage. She didn't want to be an angry berserker, she really didn't, but at times like this she had a hard time remembering why.

Her attempts to check her anger had not been entirely successful. Even though nothing showed on her face, both the boys and even the civilian had unconsciously maintained their distance. Perhaps they could feel the heat radiating from her, or they could hear her bones creaking due to the tension in her muscles. Honestly, it wasn't so bad. Yes, Kakashi would often give her the occasional side-eyed look, but at least the other irritating elements had curbed their obnoxious behavior. More and more, Sakura was beginning to suspect that being quiet and respectful all the time was just an invitation for people to disrespect you. As if being nice and civilized was some kind of weakness.

Suddenly, Sakura's senses picked up a foreign stimulus that broke through her ruminations. Next to the path was a large puddle. Except to her eagle-sharp eyes the color looked just a little bit off. And her nose didn't find the expected scent of moist earth, but instead the faintest whiff of sweat and weapon oil. Also, now that she thought about it, it hadn't rained in days. The rest of the area was dry as the dust of the road.

The implications were obvious. The puddle was not a puddle, but an illusion meant to hide someone. Most likely enemy shinobi. Shinobi which should not have been there on what was supposed to be a C-rank mission.

Their client, in spite of his wariness, paid not the puddle even a passing glance. Sasuke, in the lead of the formation, was staring straight ahead, as if marching to meet his destiny. Naruto was on the side of the path nearest the puddle, but he might as well have been on the moon for all the attention he was paying. And as for Kakashi... Sakura slowed down and casually turned her head to glance at him. Kakashi looked up from his smutty novel, gave her a cheerful smile, and went back to his reading. *Damn that infuriating man!*

The tension was unbearable. Sakura's body was as taut as a shamisen wire, as she expected an attack to emerge aimed at their client. Amazingly, Tazuna and the genin all passed by the puddle with nary a ripple. This didn't soothe her nerves one bit, since now it implied the attack would come from behind. When the two masked nin exploded out of the puddle, it was almost a relief.

The two shinobi had scratched forehead protectors with a single horn coming out of each, and they each had an armored gauntlet with a serrated chain connecting the two of them. In one smooth motion, they had the chain wrapped around Kakashi. Then they pulled, and the razor-sharp device reduced the jounin to bloody chunks.

Sakura didn't care. First, her senses had already detected the flicker of a high-speed jutsu from Kakashi. Second, in spite of the gory scene she smelt no blood in the air. Third, and most important of all, she had already closed the distance to the enemy closest to her.

Sparring with Kakashi had taught her that going for the face of a taller enemy was futile and just pulled her off-balance. Instead she ducked under a hasty punch at her face, put out an arm to block a rising knee, and punched.

Academy instructors often spoke of aiming to punch through an opponent to do real damage. Let none say Sakura didn't pay attention in class. Aiming for a point a foot behind her target, she poured every bit of the anger and humiliation built up over the last three days into her arm. The initial strike of her fist lifted her opponent off his feet in spite of his armored jacket. And then her bloodline manifested as a fireball exploding out of the end of her fist.

Scorched leather and fabric and metal links went flying as the man was blasted back. The chain on his arm sharply arrested his journey, but the sudden force also yanked his companion off balance. This was an invitation Sakura was happy to take. Turning sharply, she charged at the other enemy. The second man quickly disconnected the chain, and brought his gauntlet around in a vicious hook as Sakura closed the distance.

Too slow. Sakura almost laughed at how slow he seemed to be moving. A quick twitch of her head, and the armored fist only brushed her face instead of caving in her skull. Yes, the razor-sharp edges tore open a long cut through her cheek and right ear, but what did that matter? Sakura wrapped two inhumanly strong hands around the man's extended arm, and twisted her body into a shoulder throw.

There was a moment of resistance, then with a tearing sound the man's feet lifted off the ground, clods of dirt sticking to his sandals from where he had tried to cling to the soil with chakra. Sakura didn't have the best technique for the throw, but she made up for it with brute strength, slamming the man down on his back.

Before he could recover, Sakura had wrapped her entire torso around the gauntleted arm. Ignoring the cuts and tears being caused by the sharp claws on the device, she braced her feet against the man's shoulder, and arched her back. The overextended arm snapped like dry kindling.

"AARRGGH!! YOU BITCH!"

Howling with pain, the man pulled out a kunai with his free hand and tried to stab her with it. Sakura lifted up one hand and caught his wrist.

Even with her bloodline raging through her veins, Sakura wasn't strong enough to overpower an adult shinobi. She could, however, direct some of the burning fire chakra inundating her system to the hand that was holding his wrist.

One thing Sakura had discovered during her tests with her ability - the sudden surge of power tended to play merry hell with her control. Jutsu that she'd long since learned in the academy suddenly became near impossible, collapsing from the sudden excess of fire-nature chakra in

her coils. Retraining her control while in the throes of her power was a work in progress. But she had learned how to focus the expression of her bloodline limit. She'd done it at the start when she poured all her power into her first strike. Now she did again. In a matter of seconds, the scent of burning cloth and flesh filled the air.

The man was screaming again, desperately struggling to pull free. But he stubbornly clung to the kunai, so Sakura stubbornly clung to him. As they struggled, Sakura was aware of Sasuke unleashing a storm of shuriken to fend off the first ninja, who seemed to have got back to his feet after Sakura's fiery punch. Sakura wasn't worried. Even if the man evaded the barrage, Kakashi was waiting in the wings.

Sure enough, a dark blur knocked out Sasuke's target from behind, before resolving into her jounin-sensei's form as he moved to her own enemy and put the enemy nin into a chokehold that had him out in seconds.

"Sakura." Her sensei's voice was concerned. "Their weapons were poisoned. How are you feeling?"

Poison? Normally that might have worried her, but now all she felt was a furious contempt. *These fools think poison can slay a dragon?*

Looking down at the scratches littering her body, she could smell something sour, and there was something greasy spread around the wounds and seeping into her shirt. Presumably, different poisons would smell different, but Sakura took care to memorize the scent of this one. Then she focused her power into her injuries. For a few seconds, something in the wounds seemed to resist her healing. But as her entire body grew hot enough to start smoking, a threshold was breached, and her cuts closed rapidly. Itching on her face told her that the facial wound had closed as well. "It's not a problem," she informed her sensei.

Kakashi nodded his head in satisfaction, even as his quick hands finished securing the prisoners. Turning to look at the rest of the team, he gave a warm smile. "Sasuke, good job backing up Sakura. Naruto, good job protecting the client. Sakura, nice rush, but you should have coordinated with your team better."

Sakura tilted her head slightly, acknowledging the statement. Not that she would have waited even if she'd thought of it. She was sick and tired of being looked down upon by her team members. The new wariness in Sasuke's eyes as he looked at her was more than worth the slight risk she'd run.

Now that she was feeling a lot calmer, she was surprised that Naruto had had the presence of mind to stick with the client while she and Sasuke engaged the enemy. She supposed all those team drills Kakashi had insisted on had proven good for something. Glancing at the blond, she saw him blushing and looking at the ground. Apparently even the class clown could feel embarrassed.

"I didn't really do anything," the boy mumbled, "Sakura was the one fighting them." Then his head snapped up. "That's right, Sakura, how'd you do all that? You were all like - HAAH! - and then it was all like - BOOM! - and that guy got blown up and then you broke that guy's arm and where'd you learn to do that it was so cool -"

"Calm down, Naruto." Sakura rolled her eyes. Then she asked Sasuke, "I guess you want to know as well?"

The Uchiha gave a cautious nod.

Nodding in return, Sakura said, "It's a secret of mine. I'll tell you about it, but not now." She waved her hand around. "Not in front of the civilian and the enemy nin. Speaking of which," she turned to Kakashi. "What do we do with these two, sensei?"

Kakashi hummed. "Well, these two are called the Demon Brothers. Chunin-level missing-nin from Mist, and professional killers. I'd like to interrogate them to determine their target." He gave Sakura a smile. "I pretended to be dead to see who else they'd go after, but you moved a bit too fast for that."

"Who else?" Sakura furrowed her brow. "They're obviously here to target our client."

"Is it that obvious?" her sensei smirked at her.

"Yes!"

"Oi, what are you talking about?" broke in Tazuna. "Why'd they be after me? I've never seen them in my whole life."

"Oh, I don't know," Sakura smiled at the man with all her teeth. "Maybe because you've been stinking of fear ever since we left the village? How your nervousness only got worse the closer we got to Wave?"

She was striding towards the old drunk now. Tazuna swallowed and took an unconscious step back.

"You knew." Sakura hissed. "You knew someone was after you. Which begs the question - why didn't you warn us? Surely warning your bodyguard could only be a good thing? Unless you did something that you knew would upset us. Something like, I don't know, asking for a C-rank mission when you knew there were *missing-nin* after you?"

"What - hey, little girl, you better not go throwing around accusations like that! I'm your client! You have to treat me with respect!"

Sakura relaxed and gave him a sunny smile. "Actually, I don't have to treat you at all." Turning to her sensei, she stood to attention and adopted a formal tone. "Jounin Hatake, I have reason to believe that the client has deliberately misled us regarding mission parameters. Pursuant to Konoha mission regulations regarding client rights and privileges, I move that we suspend this mission and return to Konoha until an investigation can be made regarding the client's claims."

Kakashi had an amused twinkle in his eye. "Well, if one of my cute little subordinates feels that way, I can't really say no can I?" He turned to Tazuna, "Unless the client would like to say something in his defense?"

It didn't take long for their client to crack. Sakura listened to Tazuna's tale of how an oppressive businessman named Gato was wringing his country dry and was using missing-nin to enforce his monopoly. Normally Sakura would have been sympathetic to his plight, except then the man tried to tug on their heartstrings by wailing about his daughter and grandson and the dire fate that would befall them if he didn't return and finish his bridge connecting Wave to the mainland.

*Only an idiot would fall for such blatant emotional manipulation,* Sakura sneered mentally. Which is of course when Naruto leaped up saying they had to see the mission through, and Sasuke silently backed him up.

Kakashi gave a great show of thinking about it, as if he wasn't the jounin and couldn't turn them around any time he chose. Then he looked at Sakura, "How about you, Sakura? What do you think? Go ahead or turn back?"

Part of Sakura wanted to insist on turning back out of spite. But Tazuna did raise a good point - this Gato sounded like the sort of scum that needed taking down. Plus, she really needed more combat experience to figure out the limits of her ability. But neither could she simply let Tazuna off the hook. It was a matter of respect. He'd lied to them, and he had to be punished for it.

"I'm agreeable to going on," she said. "But," Then she drew every ounce of hauteur she could muster and stared the bridge-builder down, "Let's get one thing absolutely clear. Fighting enemy shinobi is an enormously different mission from fighting the bandits that you've paid for. So. We'll do this mission. And at the end of it, *you will pay us every ryo it's worth!* I don't care if you have to sell your damned bridge to do it! Are. We. Clear?!"

Tazuna was pale as a ghost. He stuttered and mumbled something that sounded like assent. Sakura was about to insist on him making himself clear when she felt Kakashi's hand on her shoulder. "He agrees. Now let's ease off the killing intent before he has a heart attack, yes?"

Sakura blinked and then smiled sheepishly. She hadn't meant to press that hard. Still, the important point was that Tazuna had agreed and mutual respect was restored. It was a much more cheerful pink-haired genin that headed into the misty strait separating the Land of Fire from the island of Wave.