

## Chapter 9

*“Those who break the rules are trash. But those who abandon their friends are lower than trash.”*

Those were the words Kakashi had left them with after their genin test. Sakura couldn't help but keep coming back to chew on those words. And she knew Tanya was doing the same.

As Tanya pointed out, those words both did and didn't make sense.

Cherishing your teammates was an obviously positive attitude to foster in one's genin. Tanya had gone on at length about something called 'esprit de corps', but what it boiled down to was that soldiers fought hardest when they had people nearby that they had a positive emotional connection to. If you like your teammates, you'll fight that much harder to look out for them. So far, so good.

Both Tanya and Sakura, though, felt that Kakashi's wording was a bit problematic. First of all, he hadn't said teammates, but 'friends'. And yes, in an ideal world, you want your teammates to be your friends, particularly in Konoha where genin teams stayed together until one of them got promoted. But Tanya was adamant that it was perfectly possible to build a solid relationship with your fellow soldiers without actually being friends -- and once you started getting put into leadership positions, being friends with your subordinates might actually be detrimental to military discipline.

But that was a minor problem, and could be explained by Kakashi simply talking about their time as genin, which would likely last for at least a year. The *bigger* issue was the tacit permission given by Kakashi to *break the rules*.

Over years of war, Tanya had learned that sometimes, rules had to be broken. Particularly when survival was on the line. And sometimes, the rules were flat-out stupid to begin with. The Empire had been better than most in that aspect, but even they had their share of idiocies. Such as actually trying to implement battle strategies dictated by the Kaiser, a man who'd never led troops in his life. And that's not even getting into the mess that was the second great war.

But - and this was the important point - knowing when and how to bend or break the rules was a function of experience, and an action to be undertaken only with great caution or under great necessity. Giving prepubescent *children* carte blanche to break the rules for the sake of something as vague as camaraderie seemed to be the very opposite of conducive to good discipline.

And yet, Kakashi Hatake was arguably one of the most recognized names in the Konoha shinobi corps. His service record might be classified, but it was open knowledge that he'd been in front-line duty of some kind or another since the age of five. Leaving aside Tanya's lingering suspicion that his 'genius' might be the same kind as hers (a suspicion that Sakura knew

nothing of), he was without doubt a vastly experienced operative. A man like that wouldn't make such unorthodox statements without reason.

Tanya and Sakura had argued on and off about the meaning behind his words. It was Sakura who remembered something else that Kakashi had mentioned during the test. It had been said seemingly in passing, the kind of trite saying older people trot out to annoy youngsters, but the words seemed extremely suspicious when paired with his other statement - 'always look underneath the underneath'.

Once that little datapoint was added to the discussion, both Tanya and Sakura immediately felt they were on the trail of the lesson their teacher had been trying to convey.

If his statement about rules and friends was to be treated as having three layers... then him telling the genin it was all right to disobey orders for the sake of defending those close to you was clearly the first layer and was to be discarded immediately. The second layer, then, was that it was an exaggerated statement designed to drum in the importance of teamwork, but not to be taken literally. *But what lay beneath that?*

*"Context, Sakura. When did he tell us this? Shortly after he got done showing us that monument to the heroic dead, and telling us that his best friends were on the monument. And right before that he gave us a test that was seemingly guaranteed to eliminate one of us, yet required all of us to work together to pass."*

Tanya and Sakura let their mental connection lapse as they both mulled over it. Sakura was quiet as she worked through it. Tanya was quiet because she was having a suspicion as to what Kakashi meant, and she wasn't liking it.

"He told us all his friends were dead. But then he implied it was all right to break the rules to protect your friends," mused the pink-haired genin aloud. "But if it really was all right to disobey orders to protect your friends, why were his friends dead?"

*"Isn't that the million-ryo question?"*

"You don't think...!" Sakura cut off her vocal surprise and dropped into mental conversation, *"You don't think they were killed because they broke the rules, do you?"*

*"It couldn't have been a formal execution," mused Tanya. "Then they would have been branded traitors, not placed on a memorial. But... Kakashi only spoke about not abandoning your friends. Nothing about saving yourself."*

*"So... what he was saying... underneath the underneath... that teamwork is vital, but breaking the rules will end up with you dead?"*

*"The way he spoke about being worse than trash,"* said Tanya seriously. *"I got the feeling he was talking about himself. Meaning he stuck to the rules, but his friends broke them to protect someone, presumably him. With the final result - he's alive and mourning, but they're dead."*

Tanya didn't like it. She didn't like it at all. Because when she had first founded the 203rd Imperial Mage Battalion a lifetime ago, she'd been a stickler for the rules, and she'd looked upon her fellow mages as meatshields between her and an untimely death. But as time had passed, she'd taken greater and greater risks to protect those who served under her. She tried to tell herself she was merely husbanding her resources, but with the clarity of hindsight, she'd gotten attached. Attached to the point where, ultimately, she had switched position from being Kakashi to being his friend.

Thankfully, she didn't have time to lament the idiocy of her past self. Sakura needed careful guidance, lest she end up making the same stupid mistake and getting herself killed before she could find some way to get Tanya a new body. *"Sakura,"* she spoke sternly. *"You are not permitted to get yourself killed in some idiotic heroic sacrifice."*

*"So you want me to be worse than trash?"* came the snarky response.

*"But you'll be alive. I need you to stay alive at least until you can get me a new body. Then you can break as many rules as you like."*

*"Is that the only reason you care about me?"* replied Sakura, nettled.

*"No. You're also smart, disciplined, and talented. I think you can rise high in this society, and you dying a premature death will be a true waste,"* answered Tanya in her blandest mental tone. *"But I am a rational person, so I naturally will look to my own needs first."*

Sakura huffed and went back to the original topic. *"So, what Kakashi was really saying is that following the rules will keep us alive, and breaking them is likely to get us killed - especially if we break them to protect others instead of looking after ourselves."*

*"Probably,"* agreed Tanya. *"Given his talent, Kakashi would most likely have been in the thick of any fighting. If his friends had stuck to the rules and seen to their own parts of the mission, Kakashi would most likely have died in their place. Instead the opposite is true... and who knows what happened to the mission."*

*"So... what do we do?"*

*"Didn't I just tell you not to make any stupid sacrifices?"*

*"Even if it gets Naruto or Sasuke killed?"*

*"Well, that depends. Do you feel like you will never ever get over it if either of them die?"*

*"Of course! I love Sasuke!"*

Tanya made an exasperated sound. *"And does he love you back? Would he make the same sacrifice for you? Or Naruto?"*

Sakura wanted to say yes, that Sasuke would undoubtedly save her... but she knew that was just a childish fantasy. The conversation descended into a sullen silence.

*"Sakura, teamwork is certainly important. Kakashi has a point, only the lowest of the low ignore a teammate in danger. But breaking protocol is a fast way to get killed in a combat situation. That's what he is really trying to warn us about. No matter how attached we get to our teammates, only the most experienced can get away with breaking the rules. You're just not at that level yet. Maybe, in time, but not yet."*

"Well then, I guess I have to get strong enough that I can get away with breaking the rules," muttered Sakura out loud.

*"Not just you. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. I wouldn't have lasted as long as I did if I hadn't had some truly talented battle maniacs watching my back."*

Sakura nodded with determination. "I guess we all have to get strong enough, and until then, I'll make sure to follow the rules."

The warm glow of satisfaction from having understood their sensei's cryptic instructions lasted all of ten minutes. Then a thought occurred to Sakura. *"Tanya... I was thinking... what are the chances either Sasuke or Naruto will be able to read this deeply into Kakashi's words?"*

*"Sasuke might have a tiny chance. Naruto? None whatsoever,"* was the smug response.

*"Right. That's what I thought. So... here's the thing... wouldn't Kakashi know that? In fact, would I be able to look this deeply if you weren't with me?"*

*"I guess... what's your point?"*

*"My point is, Kakashi knows at least Naruto won't be able to see past even the first layer of his words, let alone the second. If it wasn't for you, none of us could. Most genin would just take his words at face value."*

There was a moment of silence from the voice in her head, then a quiet, *"Dammit, you're right. But that makes no sense. If he expects us to take his words literally, then it means he just told us it was acceptable to disobey orders if we felt it would endanger our team. No military can possibly function like that! There has to be something else behind it!"*

Sakura rubbed her head as Tanya's voice devolved into furious muttering. They'd only known their sensei for less than 48 hours, and already the man was giving them a headache. Was this what it would be like training under a genius?

-----

It was four weeks after the bell test, and Sakura was lying on the grass of their regular training ground, her chakra coils aching from stress. Body Flicker training was *hard*.

Sakura had been struggling on her own to create a chakra adaptation of Tanya's flight spell, but after being stuck for a while on barely-controlled mono-directional thrust, she'd approached Kakashi for help.

He seemed to think she was trying to independently develop the Body Flicker. Sakura had heard of the Body Flicker from her father, but the man had never learned it since it was considered a chunin level skill. Since Kakashi actually seemed willing to give her tips on the technique, she'd decided not to correct his misapprehension.

Sakura did, however, take note that jounin had enormous leeway to break lesser rules like teaching restrictions without sanction, if they felt it justified. Which made sense, after all, jounin are not just the strongest, but the most trusted shinobi in Konoha. The only people with higher security clearance were ANBU, the Hokage's private army of assassins - and there were persistent rumors that Kakashi had been one of them. Rank had its privileges, and in a heavily militarized society like Konoha that only held even more true.

Body Flicker, it turned out, was simply the ultimate form of the Substitution technique. Instead of linking your chakra to a nearby solid object and switching places with it, you link your chakra to a spot on any surface nearby and pull yourself over to it. And while it might look like teleportation to the civilian eye, Kakashi warned her that, just like the Substitution, she was still crossing the intervening space. Just very very fast, while (as Tanya put it) giving a middle finger to inertia and conservation of momentum.

Figuring out just how fast a Body Flicker or Substitution actually moved a human body was going on Sakura's future experiment list. Kakashi had actually looked a bit embarrassed when he admitted he didn't know. Apparently, scientific analysis of chakra got a bad reputation in Konoha after the horrific experiments of the missing-nin Orochimaru.

*"Orochimaru sounds like an unholy cross between Schugel and Mengele,"* muttered Tanya, and refused to elaborate on what she meant.

Useful as the Body Flicker was, though, there were no shortcuts to learning it. It turned out Sakura had been on the right track when she'd been training herself to reduce the number of handsigns for the Substitution technique. The final goal was to reduce the number of signs to one, and reduce the size of the target to nothing.

When Sakura had admitted she'd not been using any signs at all when flinging herself around, Kakashi had simply eye-smiled and told her that a sign-less Flicker was considered an elite jounin-level skill, and she should learn to walk before she ran.

Of course, learning the Body Flicker didn't mean Sakura had given up on learning how to fly. If the Tsuchikage could do it, then she was going to figure it out too! But Body Flicker was a skill she had a teacher for, and a bird in hand was better than a theoretical bird sometime in the far future.

But even with Kakashi's tips, the Body Flicker was the most chakra-intensive technique she knew. Transformation and Optical Illusions might cost more energy in the long run, but with Body Flicker she had to release a significant amount of chakra in one instantaneous burst. Thus the ache of stressed coils rendering her immobile.

As the worst of the pain receded, she groaned and sat up. Looking over to the little creek that ran past the training ground, she smiled as she watched Naruto fall into the water for the millionth time. She might be having trouble with the Body Flicker, but at least Kakashi had declared her control good enough to start learning it. The boys were still stuck on water-walking.

The idea of exercises designed to improve both chakra control and capacity, while at the same time giving them more tactical options, had Tanya frothing at the mouth. Tanya had been shrieking in Sakura's head about why they weren't taught tree and water walking in the academy if they were so useful, instead of the comparatively pathetic leaf-sticking exercise.

When Sakura put that question to Kakashi, the man had said that many civilian students didn't have the capacity for sustained tree-walking until puberty, so the exercise was removed from the academy curriculum. Sakura didn't buy it. Even if most civilian-born couldn't do them, the clan children and the more talented civilian-born should have managed tree-walking at least. Maybe as an extra-credit assignment.

Perhaps Tanya had made her cynical, but Sakura was privately convinced this was one more way clan children were allowed to one-up those from without. After all, they had a clan full of people to teach them these exercises whenever they were ready, letting them get a head start on... well, almost everything related to ninjutsu.

The sight of Sasuke's control slipping and sending him into the water alongside Naruto was enough to bring Sakura out of her wool-gathering. Glancing at the sun, she decided Kakashi would be along in a few minutes, so there was no point doing any more training at the moment.

She walked over to the shore where Sasuke was pulling himself out of the water. Naruto, that unending font of energy, had already jumped back out. Sakura gave him forty seconds before he got dunked again. A full minute if he was lucky.

Kicking off her sandals, Sakura walked out onto the water while barely breaking her stride.

“Hey Sakur-woah!” Naruto tried to wave at her and nearly went under again.

“Concentrate, Naruto.” Sakura smiled as she felt the cool water below her toes. Strictly speaking she should be doing this exercise with her sandals on, but the feel of water through a layer of chakra was just too pleasant to pass up, and she’d already figured out water-walking anyway.

No, she was here for a different reason. Yanking her long pink hair free from its tight bun, she let it flow down to mid-back. And then she went into her stretches.

These were Yamanaka-approved meditative exercises designed to limber up both body and mind. She’d learned them from Ino, and while Sakura wasn’t sure what wrapping yourself into a cinnamon roll had to do with meditation, they were certainly very useful for relaxing after a heavy workout, and great for flexibility. That was her story and she was sticking to it.

*“When I mentioned the contortions of exotic dancers from my time, that was a joke, not a suggestion,”* grumbled Tanya.

*“First, I have all my clothes on,”* sniffed Sakura as she leaned backwards and grabbed her own ankles. *“Second, you’re just annoyed because Sasuke actually stops to look.”*

*“I think he’s questioning your sanity, not his hormones. But hey, judging by his face, Naruto at least appreciates the show,”* Tanya replied, voice dripping with sarcasm.

*“Collateral damage,”* Sakura thought cheekily. They’d had a variation of this argument ever since Sakura had started doing her stretching routine in front of the boys.

The first time, she’d done it in reaction to a slight pain in her back, momentarily forgetting the boys were there. When she realized she was doing Ino’s stretching routine in public, she’d been thoroughly embarrassed. But then all embarrassment had been trumped by an amazing fact - Sasuke had stopped his own exercises to pay attention to her.

And yes, it might be because he found the exercises strange and not because he found her attractive. It didn’t matter. For once, Sasuke was paying attention to her, and not in a negative way or because he had to. Subsequent days had shown this wasn’t a fluke. Even if it was just for a minute, Sasuke would pause his training to study hers. Alas, both boys had turned her down when she offered to teach them. That would have been a great way to get close to him.

Finishing her stretches, Sakura stood, flicking her head to send water scattering from her hair. That move was pure Ino. Sakura wasn’t sure where her best friend had learned all these ‘techniques to attract boys’, but Sakura was going to use all of them she could as long as there was even a chance Sasuke was paying attention.

Sakura wouldn't check to see Sasuke's reaction, of course. Ino, over numerous sleepovers and gossip sessions, had repeatedly emphasized the importance of not looking too eager, even though she rarely took her own advice. Instead Sakura nonchalantly wrung out and wrapped up her hair in its usual tight bun before walking off the water just as casually as she'd entered.

Putting on her sandals, she ambled over to the little red bridge that was Team 7's meeting point. They were supposed to meet each day at seven-thirty. The faint sound of a clock tower's bells told her it had just gone eleven, so Kakashi should be along any minute.

It had taken Sakura a couple of days to figure out why Kakashi would tell them to show up so much earlier, but using those early hours for training really was obvious. She had even come to appreciate Kakashi's choice in missions. Sure, the D-ranks Kakashi picked for them were usually mind-numbingly tedious. But they also required little strenuous effort on their part, meaning their team could train hard all morning, relax while doing their chores, then be ready to go for Kakashi's afternoon team training and sparring sessions.

Admittedly, her philosophical attitude to the annoyance of D-ranks had been a result of the lessons Tanya had drummed into her head.

*"Shinobi work on a commission system. They have to work if they want to eat. But while the village is at peace, there's only so many important missions to go around,"* Tanya had pointed out. *"Besides, be glad for the boredom. Cherish it. Ask yourself this - would you rather be running messages for a grocery store where the biggest danger is the traffic? Or would you prefer running messages between front lines, with enemy shinobi waiting to murder you at the first opportunity?"*

When put that way, suddenly Sakura found she had no problem with running D-ranks. The pay wasn't much, but it would've been enough to survive on even if she'd been living on her own. And it meant plenty of time for her and her team to train and grow stronger.

Sakura had done her best to pass this wisdom along to the boys, but it had proved a hard sell. Naruto was utterly convinced of his own immortality, and Sasuke seemed to have a need to challenge himself. Thankfully, Kakashi seemed perfectly happy to ignore their grumbling. It only confirmed both her and Tanya's good opinion of him.

Still, she was a bit nervous today, because she had to ask Kakashi a question that might just reduce her status in his eyes. Tanya was against anything that might hurt Sakura's career, but Sakura was undaunted. This question was too important to leave hanging.

When Kakashi showed up a few minutes later and ordered the team to fall in and head to the Hokage's tower to pick up the day's mission, Sakura stepped forward and raised her hand. "Um, Kakashi sensei?"

"Yes, Sakura?"



"I have a question. It's about what you said that first day - 'those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their friends are worse than trash'."

Kakashi's eye grew serious. "So I did. What was the question?"

"Well, when you say 'rules', exactly which rules are you talking about? It can't be the Second Hokage's rules for shinobi conduct...?"

"And why not?"

"Well, those rules... aren't really rules are they? At least not all of them. Sure, some of them, like obeying your commanding officer, are also present in Konoha military law. But there's no law I've heard of that penalizes a shinobi who cries on a mission..." Sakura trailed off.

Kakashi eye-smiled at her. "You're quite correct. Most of the Second's rules for shinobi are more guidelines on recommended conduct rather than actual enforceable laws. However, those guidelines are taught for a reason. Many shinobi, particularly veterans, treat those rules as an ideal to strive for. Was that your question?"

"Ah, no. What I meant was... what rules *can* we break to save a friend on a mission? I mean, are we actually expected to disobey one of your orders if it means putting a teammate in danger?"

Kakashi grew somber. "Sakura, your first thought should always be of your teammates. Always."

"*What?!*" came Tanya's exclamation. Sakura could feel Tanya's shock multiplying her own.

When she'd asked the question, Sakura had expected Kakashi to reassure her that *of course* they're not meant to disobey direct orders. No military could possibly function if soldiers valued the lives of their comrades over their superior's instructions. She brought her stunned mind back into gear as she realized Kakashi was still talking.

"That being said, please understand that I too am your teammate," continued the jounin. "And you are mine. And I will not allow one of my team members to die. So you don't need to worry about orders from me. I will personally ensure you all make it back. You have my word."

Sakura could feel the gravitas etched into each and every word. This was so unlike the jounin's usual lackadaisical attitude that she was briefly rendered speechless. Judging by how stiff the boys had gotten, they too felt the weight of Kakashi's promise. Swallowing to clear her throat, Sakura gave a bow of respect to one's superior. "Thank you for your words, Kakashi sensei."

Kakashi gave a sunny eye-smile, the serious atmosphere dissipating like morning mist. "Think nothing of it, Sakura. And I'm glad you're thinking about these things. It's always good to ask questions, or you'll never learn otherwise."

The jounin turned around to lead them to the Hokage tower. As Sakura studied his back and mulled over what he said, she felt a sense of satisfaction radiating from Tanya. "*Well, that explains it,*" came the voice of the spirit.

*"That explains what?"*

*"I was wondering how on earth Kakashi could possibly maintain discipline while encouraging us to prioritize lives over orders. The answer is trust. By emphasizing the bond between teammates, and then making himself one of the team instead of our superior, he's relying on us absolutely trusting that his orders will keep us safe. Underneath the underneath, indeed. Instead of relying on his rank and fear of punishment, he's relying entirely on mutual trust to keep us obedient. Tricky, but far more effective than the harshest discipline if he can pull it off."*

Sakura almost tripped. "So, you're saying he's basically manipulating us?"

"Of course," Tanya replied casually. "All leadership is an exercise in manipulation. Every leader, to be effective, must either use the threat of punishment, or convince his followers that their goals align with his own. Kakashi's approach is rather unusual, but I'd say it worked, don't you?"

*"But... he really seemed sincere!"*

*"Of course he was sincere. That's what makes it effective. I have no doubt he will do his utmost to protect the three of you. But make no mistake, Sakura. Kakashi is a jounin and possibly an ANBU. You don't get to be either without repeatedly proving your loyalty to Konoha. He will protect you three... right up until your lives are balanced against the needs of the village."*

*"Oh... well, that's good."*

*"What? What's good about it?"*

*"It means, he'll only risk our lives when it's vital to Konoha. That's good, isn't it?"*

*"Yes, normally that's a good thing. The problem is, Konoha isn't a normal military, it is a mercenary organization. All the shinobi it sends out on missions - they're not for defending the lives of its citizens. Its shinobi are a source of income, a profit center. So the question becomes - what does Kakashi consider important? Just how big a paycheck will be worth the life of a genin?"*

Sakura felt her spine freeze. So disturbed was she that she barely managed to pay attention as Kakashi outlined their day's mission (walking the Inuzuka dogs). Finally she spoke. *"I don't believe it. I don't think he'd let us die over something like money."*

*"The manipulation is already working,"* came Tanya's amused response. *"You've only known him for a month, and he's carefully avoided revealing any personal information in that time, and yet you're ready to defend him."*

*"It's not that. Does he really strike you as the kind of guy who cares about money?"* Sakura snapped back.

*"Personally, no. But that's the thing about money. Even if Kakashi is immune to its lure, money, in enough quantity, becomes a strategic asset."*

*"What does that mean?"*

*"It means Kakashi himself might not care about ten million ryo. But the village Kakashi serves would care very much about ten billion ryo."*

Sakura wanted to argue, but found she couldn't. Would the life of any single shinobi be worth ten billion ryo?

The Academy went on and on about the Will of Fire and how all of Konoha was a single family united by the love of each other. How no price was too great to pay to protect your family. Tanya had scoffed at what she called blatant propaganda, and combined with her father's own observations on shinobi life, Sakura couldn't bring herself to disagree with Tanya's position. Konoha was a business, and shinobi were its assets. Sometimes, assets had to be traded away.

The warm feelings of hope and trust in her sensei congealed to a cloying mass of worry. Tanya must have sensed her distress, because the spirit's next words were more conciliatory. *"Don't worry too much about it Sakura. This is the truth of any military organization. The leaders have goals they must pursue, and those goals are to be bought with the lives of their soldiers. Didn't we both agree, if you're going to become a shinobi, you'll do it with both eyes wide open?"*

Sakura sighed. *"You're right. I already knew all this, didn't I? How did you put it? Konoha peddles violence for cash. It's just for a second there... I'd hoped..."*

Tanya's voice was grave. *"And that's why hope is dangerous. Never let hope substitute for reality, Sakura. The politicians in my life did that, and the result was two wars more devastating than anything the Elemental nations can imagine."*

*"Right, right. But then... how much can we trust Kakashi?"* puzzled Sakura.

*“Quite a bit, at least for the near future. One good thing about being genin, none of our missions are likely to involve sums large enough to matter to someone like Kakashi. In fact, I’d say you don’t really need to worry until you become chunin. And by that time you’re likely to have a new leader anyway.”*

Sakura felt her eyebrow twitch. *“Wait, so after all that, you’re saying we can safely trust Kakashi anyway? Then what was the point of this entire debate?!”*

*“The point is that you now know you can trust Kakashi for sound, logical reasons. Not due to nonsense like hope and emotional manipulation. Now pay attention, those dogs look feisty.”*

-----

The next couple of weeks were quite interesting to Sakura. Now that she had decided Kakashi could be trusted to protect them on any mission a genin team was likely to take, she could relax and focus on her training. But while she did that, she also got to observe the effect Kakashi’s words had on Naruto and Sasuke.

On one hand, those words didn’t really seem to have any impact on their relationship, or lack thereof. The two boys were still viciously acerbic to each other. You honestly couldn’t leave them alone for fifteen minutes without an argument flaring up, often about the silliest things. Like whether tomato soup was better than ramen. And they competed on *everything*. Even on things you really shouldn’t compete on, like how many weeds you can pull out of a garden. Sakura had to move fast to prevent Naruto from denuding the flowerbed to pad his score.

On the other hand, the boys were now far more respectful of the jounin, and on the rare occasions the man gave them orders, they would jump to obey with alacrity. Their team training sessions, in particular, were suddenly far more productive. Sakura wouldn’t go so far as to call the team a well-oiled machine, but at least none of them would get in each other’s way in a fight.

In fact, Kakashi’s little spiel had worked so well, Sakura wondered why he didn’t step in more often during their D-ranks when the boys were about to do something particularly bone-headed. It was during the flowerbed incident, after Sakura had managed to get Naruto straightened out, that she glanced over and spotted a gleam of approval in her sensei’s eye. And that’s when she understood - Kakashi was standing back to see who would emerge as the team leader.

Sasuke’s talent and name should have made him the obvious pick, but then, hadn’t Kakashi himself urged them to look beneath the surface? Sakura hadn’t needed Tanya’s urging to take advantage of the opportunity. Part of the criteria for promotion to chunin was leadership skills, since chunin often led genin teams on low-rank missions. Demonstrating said leadership by corralling her unruly teammates was an obvious path to promotion. More importantly, getting promoted at a young age was sure to impress Sasuke with her suitability as

From that day, Sakura started to assert herself more and more during missions. Controlling Naruto was easy - he liked her anyway, so reinforcing his fondness with a few tips on his ongoing experiments with the Transformation technique, and he'd follow her instructions like an over-eager puppy.

Sasuke was a bit trickier, since the last Uchiha possessed a prickly pride that needed to be worked around. Thankfully, he also really, *really* hated D-ranks. He saw them as an utter waste of time, and so he was grateful for anything that made them go by faster. Once convinced that Sakura's plans could get the job done in the shortest possible time, he fell in line without demur.

Sakura was a bit worried about what would happen once they graduated to more important missions, but Tanya assured her that obedience was a habit. As long as she didn't screw up where Sasuke could see, he'd continue to follow her instructions out of inertia.

The best part about slowly taking command of the team, was that she was also able to minimize their grumbling about the missions. Yes, Sakura was getting a bit tired of the chores as well. But rationally speaking, it was in the village's interest to get them on more high-paying missions as soon as possible. Not getting any either meant there weren't any to be had, or that Kakashi didn't feel them ready yet. Either way, the best response was to wait for a signal from their sensei. It wasn't easy though - Naruto had looked on the verge of exploding after they had to retrieve the daimyo's wife's cat three times in the same day. She had to step in and remind Kakashi he'd promised to show them his underground movement technique to get the blond boy to calm down.

It was three days after the incident of the escaping cat, that their comfortable routine came to a screeching halt. Kakashi showed up right at seven-thirty.

Sakura immediately fell into a guard position while accelerating her mind to detect genjutsu. To her satisfaction, the boys instinctively fell into formation around her, even though it was clear they had no clue what was happening.

Kakashi eye-smiled. "Good reactions, but we need to move. We have a C-rank mission."

"Once we check you for Transformation," Sakura shot back.

Kakashi chuckled. "You're a little young to be that paranoid... but far be it from me to discourage good habits."

Checking only took a few seconds, and then the entire team was sprinting for the gate. Kakashi filled them in on the run.

"Genin team 8 took a C-rank a few days back. Escort mission. I don't have the full details, but apparently the client had missing-nin coming for his head. Team 8's jounin-sensei, Kurenai Yuuhi, managed to take down the two attackers. But in the course of the fighting, one of her

genin got poisoned. She rushed to bring him back to Konoha, but that has left her remaining two genin guarding the client. They are on their way back as well, but the client is slowing them down. We are to rendezvous with the remaining members of team 8, and escort them and the client back to Konoha.”

Sakura’s heart had started to thunder at the phrase ‘missing-nin’. “If there are enemy shinobi involved, shouldn’t this be a B-rank mission minimum?”

“The enemy shinobi have already been neutralized. The plan is to get them all back to Konoha before any more have a chance to show up.”

*“Classic corporate penny-pinching,”* groused Tanya. *“Since this is sounding like a village-issued mission, naturally the village will put as low a rank on it as they can get away with paying.”*

Sakura wasn’t worried about the pay. She was worried about going up against other shinobi with only six weeks of training. Kakashi seemed to pick up on her concern, because he gave her a confident look. “You don’t have to worry. If any enemy shinobi show up, I can take care of them easily. Just focus on protecting the client from stray kunai.”

Sakura did her best to relax at those words. She couldn’t afford to appear anything less than confident. But all she could think of was the first rule of battle - *“No plan survives contact with the enemy. That’s why he’s called the enemy.”*