

Taboo

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A forbidden love. Teacher and student. Kakashi Hatake, so aloof and coldhearted, falls for the young Sakura Haruno. She has a dangerous choice to make.

My OC is Sakura's childhood friend and sole confidant.

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1 - Accusations

Sasuke and Naruto shared a glance, then nodded at each other. It was time to approach Kakashi-sensei. They both started for the picnic table that Kakashi was parked at, reading his romance novel. Naruto glanced at Sasuke nervously, and cleared his throat.

“Kakashi-sensei, can... Can we talk to you for a minute?” The words hung in the air as Kakashi looked up, returning slowly from the book he was immersed in. He had sensed the boys’ approach subconsciously, not actually expecting them to disturb him. He glanced at the pair, and seeing their tense posture made him sit up a little straighter. Had something happened?

“Hey, kids. Is something the matter?” Kakashi said, his expression serious, for once. Naruto relaxed slightly. At least he was taking them seriously. He screwed up his face in concentration, and took the plunge.

“Well, Sensei, Sasuke and I’ve noticed... something... a little weird between you and Sakura-chan lately. Like, weird vibes.” Naruto’s foot tapped nervously on the grass beneath him, and he tossed a pleading glance to Sasuke. If he was going to be of any help, now would be the time.

Sasuke nodded, and put in, “As in, more than just a relationship between teacher and student.” His gaze was hard and searching, communicating that there would be no understanding or forgiveness.

The teacher’s eyes hardened, and both of the boys could feel the heat of his stare from both eyes, even though his headband completely obscured his left eye. Naruto actually backed up a step, and Sasuke tensed under the stare.

“Now, that is a serious accusation.” Kakashi’s heart was pounding, but his eye showed no such disturbance. “Why would I risk my position by breaking such a serious rule? You both know the legal ramifications of what you’re suggesting is taking place between Sakura-san and I, don’t you?”

A tight nod from Naruto and Sasuke. They both glanced at each other, something akin to panic in Naruto’s eyes and a dull echo of the same in Sasuke’s.

Kakashi flashed them a smile beneath his mask and clapped his hands together, closing his book with a loud thump. “Well, then, now that we’ve discussed this, I need to go report to the Hokage. Have a good afternoon, boys.” He raised two fingers in farewell without turning around as he sauntered off, his silver hair tousled by the wind.

Sasuke and Naruto stood there, frozen in place, watching as their teacher stalked off. As soon as Kakashi was out of sight, Naruto let out a huge breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. Sasuke took one look at him and rolled his eyes. The kid was covered in sweat. If there was one thing Naruto did not hold up well with, it was confrontation with authority figures.

“Well, that went well,” Sasuke snorted sarcastically.

“Shut up, Sasuke. It’s not like you did much better,” Naruto snapped, still shaken up from Kakashi-sensei’s death stare.

“That’s not what I meant, you idiot. He didn’t give us a straight answer.”

Naruto scrunched up his face, replaying the conversation in his head. His eyes widened as he realized Sasuke was right. But...

“But what he said was true! Why would he risk his position in the leaf village by dating a student?” Naruto was so sure that Kakashi wouldn’t break the law. It was almost sweet, the admiration he had for the man.

“Maybe you’re right,” Sasuke sighed, hoping that Kakashi was as admirable as Naruto thought him to be.

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Chapter 2: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100471.html>

2 - Stirring Feelings

A few weeks earlier...

“Again! Come at me!” Sakura’s concentration was once again shattered as Kakashi-sensei’s velvety voice caressed her ears. Naruto almost landed a hit, but he pulled at the last second, aware that Sakura was not paying attention. Again. Sakura glanced over at Kakashi and Sasuke sparring. Kakashi had been sparring with Sasuke non-stop since early that morning, before the sun had even risen.

“Sakura...” Naruto sighed, thinking her feelings for Sasuke had broken her concentration. “Sakura, we need to train. We’ve got a big mission coming up, and you keep getting distracted.” He ran his hands through his hair, his mouth pulled down in a large frown.

“S-shut up, Naruto. I’m ready,” Sakura grumbled, her cheeks turning a bright pink, shooting icy daggers at Naruto with her bright green eyes. Damn, he had caught her daydreaming again. Only this time, it wasn’t Sasuke she was thinking about.

“Then why did I have to pull that last kick?” He shot back, flooding with chagrin. Why couldn’t she blush like that while thinking about him? He’d give anything for that to happen.

She replied with a sweeping kick, knocking Naruto flat on his back.

“Shut up, Naruto! Worry less about me and more about yourself. Get up. Like you said, we need to train.” Sakura sighed. She knew it wasn’t his fault, and she actually felt bad for taking it out on him for once. No, this one was all on her. She held out her hand to him, offering help up. “Sorry. I’ve just got a lot on my mind. I’ll do better this time.”

Naruto took her hand, surprised. She usually didn’t make excuses for her abuse of him, much less apologize! Once he was on his feet, he dusted himself off and looked over at Sasuke and Kakashi. They were still going at it, and neither of them looked like they’d even broken a sweat.

Sakura turned and stood beside him, watching the intense pseudo-battle. Every now and then, Sasuke would land a hit, which Kakashi would block. He would allow the recoil to propel him from Sasuke, then leap forward and attack Sasuke from another direction. The way he ran reminded Sakura of a lion, powerful and strong, yet graceful. She felt her breath catch, and her eyes began to moisten.

“Sakura?” Naruto stood there, gaping at her. She broke out of her trance and touched her fingertips to her cheeks; they were wet.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, wiping the tears away with the sleeve of her training outfit. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” And it was true- she had no idea why she was reacting this way. Frankly, the fact that watching her sensei sparring, albeit beautifully, could make her cry scared her.

“Do you want to call it quits for the day?” His gaze was full of concern. If something was going on with

Sakura, he wanted to help in any way he could. Her silent nod told him all he needed to know—something was not right with Sakura.

Kakashi and Sasuke rushed at each other again. Sasuke had definitely been training on his own. Kakashi had noticed a significant increase in the boy's strength since the last time they'd sparred like this. He was actually being challenged by Sasuke, which was unusual for a genin of his caliber. This kid's going places, Kakashi admitted with grudging respect. *Okay, it's time to end this.* Kakashi tensed his stance, and built up chakra in his whole body, using it to push himself behind Sasuke. Sasuke turned around in alarm as his defenses were compromised. Kakashi pulled out a kunai and wrapped his arm around Sasuke's neck, pointing the weapon at his exposed throat. *Game over.*

"Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto called, waving to get his teacher's attention. He stood beside Sakura who was looking at him with tear-filled eyes. He felt his pulse quicken. Something in him wanted to run to her, take her face in his hands, and kiss those tears away—

Kakashi found himself face-first on the ground, Sasuke's heel at the back of his neck. Seeing Naruto's and Sakura's eyes widen in something close to horror, he grabbed Sasuke's ankle and tossed him into a nearby tree and used his momentum to right himself. He dusted off his uniform and glanced surreptitiously at Sakura. Her jade green eyes still had a hint of tears in them, but mostly they were just filled with alarm. Well, he did toss the kid pretty hard.

"What is it, Naruto?" Kakashi replied, still troubled by his sudden impulse toward Sakura. He shook his head, trying to clear those thoughts away.

"Sakura's not feeling well, so I was wondering if we could call it quits for today..." Naruto trailed off, glancing at Sakura like a dog who knew another beating was on its way. Kakashi looked at Sakura, his gaze full of concern. Her cheeks turned bright pink and she suddenly found a blade of grass that was very interesting. Naruto looked from her to Kakashi, and his eyes hardened. Something was fishy here.

Kakashi felt Naruto shooting daggers at him, and he quickly cooled off his gaze into cool disinterest. No need giving Naruto the wrong idea.

"Sure thing. Sasuke and I had just finished up." Kakashi glanced at Sasuke, who was dusting himself off angrily. He chuckled. Hell, he'd probably be angry, too, if his teacher tossed him around like so much dirty laundry. Not to mention how close he got to owning Kakashi. No one at his level had come that close in years. Not since... At any rate, the kid was a marvel.

Without further prodding, Naruto was off. He didn't need to be told twice; the kid was probably already darkening the doorstep of the nearest restaurant. Sasuke, too, quickly made himself scarce. Sakura finally turned to leave, and her posture emanated distress. Kakashi wanted to comfort her, to take her in his arms and make everything okay.

"Sakura..." He called, unable to stop some of his emotions to seep into the single word. She turned around, an unspoken hope creeping into her eyes. He internally kicked himself, and finished, "I hope

you're feeling better tomorrow," with an innocent smile and wave. Her face fell, and she bowed a "thank you," before turning and running off.

The moment she was gone, he knotted both his hands in his hair and said to himself, "Kakashi Hatake, what have you gotten yourself into now?"

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Chapter 3: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100502.html>

3 - Flustered Sakura, Flustered Kakashi

Sakura sat in the bath, mulling over what had happened not even an hour ago. Kakashi-sensei had seemed seriously concerned when Naruto said she wasn't feeling well. *Well, of course he's concerned, he's my teacher.* But it had seemed more than that. His eyes – well, eye – had told her a different story. Her head jerked up, her eyes full of shock. But then she laughed bitterly and sighed. She had been attention-starved by Sasuke for so long that she had begun imagining things that couldn't possibly be. *I mean, he's my SENSEI. Not only am I underage, relationships between teachers and students are forbidden. Kakashi-sensei is pretty straight-laced, and a well-respected member of the Leaf Village. There's no way he'd risk his reputation for me. LOOK at me. Look at this forehead! Nobody could like this forehead.*

"I'm pathetic," she muttered as she pulled herself out of the bath. She grabbed her towel and began to dry her hair, not bothering to cover her naked body. She turned around, headed for her closet when she stopped dead, frozen in her tracks, staring in horror at the figure that darkened her window. Kakashi-sensei was looking back at her, utter shock totally evident in his expression. Fast as lightning, she moved her towel to cover her body as she let loose an ear-piercing scream that seemed to shake the whole room. Her face buried in the towel that covered her frame, she shook her head in a continual motion. *Maybe I was hallucinating. Kakashi-sensei never stops by my house for random visits, and certainly not through the WINDOW!* She slowly slid one eye open and dared to peek back at the window. Sure enough, there was nothing there.

Sakura quickly wrapped the towel more securely around herself and ran to the window, looking frantically outside for any trace at all of the man she just hallucinated. Nothing, not even a slight breeze. She shook her head sadly as she reached out and closed the window. *I need to be more careful about how far I let my mind wander. I shouldn't be imagining my sensei in my room, while I'm wearing nothing but a towel...!* At this thought, Sakura's cheeks flushed a bright pink, to match her hair. She collapsed on her bed with a weary sigh, throwing her arm over her face. "Kakashi-sensei..."

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Kakashi flattened himself against the roof of Sakura's house, willing his heart to slow down. He was frozen, shocked by what just took place. Sakura had left the training field in such a rush earlier, she left all her ninja gear behind. His heart leapt when he realized that he would be the one to return it to her. He would get to see her again. He lost no time in making his way back to the village, running in a full-out sprint until he reached the edge of the village, where someone might see. He had settled into his usual leisurely walk, making his way through the town, heading directly for Sakura's house. He didn't want to bother with talking to the parents, so Kakashi decided to just hop up through the window and return her belongings directly.

Only, when he reached the window-sill, he saw the last thing he ever expected to see. Sakura... naked. There were still droplets of water clinging to her bare skin, and he had a sudden impulse to jump through the window, throw her down on the bed, lick every drop of water off- and then she saw him. Their mutual shocked expressions would have been comical... if it had been anyone else. **Anyone** else. As soon as Sakura registered who it was, she let out the most horrendous scream he had heard in his life. As soon

as her face was covered, he quickly made his escape to her roof, where he was now frozen in fear. Part of his fear was from his reaction to seeing her. The other part was her reaction to seeing him. It was an extreme ego-smasher. Many a woman would have sold her soul to trade places with Sakura. *Well, I am her teacher. It would be traumatic for your teacher to see you...* He closed his eyes and swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. *What do I do now? I still have her ninja gear.* “Sakura...”

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About an hour later

After several walks around the block, Kakashi had finally recovered enough to accomplish what he came for. He strode purposefully straight up to the front door of Sakura’s house. He hesitated only for a moment before knocking distinctly.

“Hello? Who is it? Oh, Kakashi-sama! Come in, come in! This is rare. Not very many can say their doorstep was darkened by the great Kakashi Hatake. Is Sakura-chan in trouble?” Sakura’s mother bustled about, gushing endlessly, seemingly unable to stop. He smiled charmingly, and waved his hand in a “calm down” gesture.

“No, no, nothing like that. Sakura-san forgot something.” Kakashi raised Sakura’s pack in illustration. *That explains a lot.*

“Oh, I see, I see. Well, I’ll call her down. Sakura? You have a visitor! Come down here!” The woman called up the stairs, then quickly set about preparing tea, chattering away.

A few moments later, Kakashi heard footsteps on the staircase. His heartbeat accelerated slightly.

“Who is it, mom? I’ve got to go out later, so –“ Sakura came to a standstill at the foot of the stairs the moment her eyes set on Kakashi. His heart just about leapt through his chest, but he smiled that same smile, and gestured to her bag. *Let’s see if I can play that off as just a... hallucination? Yeah, maybe she’ll buy it. Who knows what goes through teenagers’ minds these days.*

“You forgot this when you left the field earlier this afternoon. I just thought I’d return it,” Kakashi said, his silky voice disarming her. Her face steadily grew pinker until it blended in with her hair. She coughed.

“Earlier, at my window... Were you...?” In her embarrassment, Sakura couldn’t even form a coherent sentence. He shook his head silently, his unshielded eye crinkling up, and she knew he was smiling. Again. “Ah... Well, thank you for returning it,” she managed to say, surprisingly formal. Kakashi blinked at her, surprised. He felt his cheeks begin to warm and he was glad, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, that he wore a mask. She was just so darn cute!

“I hope to see you tomorrow at training, Sakura. Bright and early! If... you’re feeling up to it, that is. Don’t push yourself.” Kakashi said gently as he strode out the door, leaving behind a flustered Sakura in his wake.

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The moment he was out the door, Kakashi took to the rooftops. He needed to get as far away from

Sakura – no, as far away from people as he could. He was extremely frustrated with himself. The more he tried to reign in his emotions, the more they seemed to fester. What exactly was going on here? Why were these feelings coming to light now? Why was Kakashi, a straight arrow who stuck to the book, attracted to someone over 10 years his junior? This wasn't like him. This wasn't like him at all. He pulled at the top of his mask, the fabric suddenly constricting. A flustered Kakashi? That's something he hadn't seen in a very, very long time.

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Chapter 4: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100506.html>

4 - Meltdown

The gentle wind blew Kakashi's silver hair around his face as he jumped from rooftop to rooftop, pushing harder each time his feet made contact with the red tiles. He was running so fast that even if someone managed to hear his footsteps, by the time they'd look up, he'd be long gone.

Maybe if I take a few days to clear my head. Perhaps staying away from her will put these feelings to rest. His heart hurt at the very thought of trying to avoid her. Not to mention that it would be next to impossible to avoid her, seeing as he was her teacher. He couldn't exactly skip out on their lessons and training without arousing suspicion. Kakashi let slip a frustrated sigh. He was ten years older than Sakura, and she wasn't even eighteen yet. It was so wrong. These feelings were so wrong. And worse – the urges he had. Half the time he wanted to hold her, to kiss her silly. The other half, the testosterone, lust-filled half, wanted to do things far worse to her, with her.

His pace slowed as he reached the outer limits of the village. His footsteps were the only sound, save for the loud thoughts in his mind.

As the trees parted to reveal a clearing, Kakashi came to a standstill. Honestly, he was at a total loss at what to do. The last time he'd felt this much emotion was many years ago, and it was obvious that the lack of exposure was majorly affecting him. The last time he'd felt this way about someone... It hadn't ended well.

He began to pace, thoughts running through his head faster than water. He couldn't avoid her. He had to act normal around Naruto and Sasuke. He could barely control himself around her. Oh, and let's not forget that she was way beyond "off-limits." His reputation in the leaf village would be ruined. Such a scandal would not be tolerated, he was sure of it.

"DAMN IT!" Kakashi roared to the sky, his chakra seething with the turmoil he was experiencing. His frustration was building and building, and his chakra began pulsating, gathering in his hands. With a final cry, he dealt a two-handed punch the nearest tree, sending it flying in a cloud of bark and splinters. It flew horizontally, taking row after row of trees. The tree didn't lose momentum until it was a good half a mile away from Kakashi's panting figure, both arms still raised. He surveyed the swath of damage and grunted. He collapsed, dropping to his knees before he fell face-down into the dirt. Kakashi had almost completely depleted his chakra- if he had put any more into that punch, he'd probably be dead. As his vision dimmed, he saw a pair of legs running towards him. He briefly wondered if it was a friend or foe, but as the darkness closed in around him, he came to the conclusion that he didn't care.

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Chapter 5: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100508.html>

5 - Friendship and Recovery

Kakashi woke to a cool cloth resting on his forehead. He slowly opened one eye, the dark room very slowly coming into focus. The coherent part of his mind wondered who was treating him. The sane part was silently begging, "Please don't let it be Sakura, oh, god, please don't let it be Sakura." The other part, the larger part, was praying to the stars it was. He tried to raise one hand to his face in an attempt to rub the exhaustion from his eyes, but he couldn't even lift a finger. Both of his arms were trembling from the effort as he tried to lift them, but they would not obey. They remained motionless at his side. He sighed audibly and gave up.

"Ah, you're finally awake!" A calm, yet pleased male voice drifted to Kakashi from the corner of the room. "You've been unconscious for three days," the voice continued.

"Who..." Kakashi voiced hoarsely. Then his eyes widened in recognition as the man knelt over him to change the rag on his head. "Ryouko! How did you... How did I...?"

"You destroyed half the forest with your little tantrum, man. I'm surprised everybody in the entire village didn't come to investigate. The impact cloud could be seen from the Hokage's window." Curiosity was plain in Ryouko's voice as he gently chastised Kakashi.

"I..." Kakashi's voice cracked and he began to cough. Ryouko quickly came over with a glass of water and helped Kakashi sit up to drink it. He downed the whole thing. The cup was set aside and Ryouko gently laid Kakashi back down onto the bed. He tried again. "Did you... tell anyone? What did you say to the Hokage?"

"I told the Hokage as little as I could get away with – that you had been injured but that you were in my care. He knows you well enough to know you'd want privacy. Although, I'm sure he'll want an explanation from you once you've recovered. And no, the Hokage was the only person I told." Questions were burning in Ryouko's eyes, but he wouldn't ask until Kakashi was ready to talk.

Ryouko's such a good friend. I've taken him for granted. This kid is one of the most loyal people in Konoha. I think he understands more than he's letting on, though.

"Thank you, Ryouko. You're a true friend. I know you want to know, but I haven't entirely worked it out for myself." Kakashi spoke to the ceiling, then sighed. "Once I sort through it all, you would be my first choice to come talk to."

"Well, Kakashi-sama, when you're ready... I'm here for you. I'm always here." Ryouko was surprised at Kakashi's naked honesty. He had no idea Kakashi felt that way. It was then that he realized something major had happened inside Kakashi- he had been stripped of his defense. Ryouko's hand went to his chin; he was deep in thought. "Kakashi-sama... Do you need... some time off? You know, to get away from everything? Just until you're..." He trailed off, unsure how to say "mentally stable" without being offensive.

Kakashi was shocked to say the least. He had just been handed a Ryouko version of “crash here, bro.” He needed to recuperate, but Sasuke’s, Naruto’s, and... Sakura’s... training was more important than anything, especially himself. He couldn’t afford to be selfish. He steeled himself, then slowly began to try to lift himself from the bed. Agony. **Agony.** Agony ripped through every muscle in his body, and he cried out in pain, collapsing back on the bed.

“Kakashi-sama! Please, be more careful. You nearly died! It will take more than just three days to heal the damage that’s been done, and to restore all your chakra. I’m no Sakura, but I’ll do my best,” Ryouko promised. He frowned as Kakashi’s pulse skyrocketed at the mention of Sakura’s name. He wondered... His heart gave a painful squeeze as a thousand different scenarios popped into his head. The girl he loved in the arms of another man. And not just any man. In the arms of Kakashi-sama, the well-respected high-ranked member of the Leaf Village. Ryouko smiled sadly. Well, of course. Who’d take a second look at him, when in the shadow of someone like Kakashi? *Well, my time was long past. I never had the courage to say anything to her. I can’t blame him, it’s my own fault. Besides, Kakashi will keep her safe. He’ll protect her. If anyone deserves someone like him, it’s Sakura. Same for Kakashi. He deserves to be happy.* Well, the least he could do was try to ease Kakashi’s suffering as much as possible while he recovers.

Ryouko walked over to Kakashi and laid his hands on the man’s bare chest. He built up chakra in his hands and sent a generous amount through him to Kakashi’s ailing body, kick-starting his recovery and practically halving the time. He collapsed into the chair, panting. Kakashi gasped, shocked at what Ryouko just did. He knew the kid was selfless, but this was ridiculous. He just gave Kakashi a third of his chakra.

“Ryouko...” Kakashi sighed and looked over at him. He was fast asleep. Kakashi allowed himself to drift into oblivion, knowing that his recovery was being overseen by a truly one-of-a-kind friend.

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Chapter 6: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100521.html>

6 - Visitors

"Sakura-san, you must promise not to tell anyone. Not even Naruto-kun or Sasuke-kun. I didn't want to get you involved; Kakashi-sama would kill me if he knew I'd called you." Ryouko bit his lip nervously as he looked at Sakura. "I trust you, I just wanted to make absolutely clear, so there's no misunderstanding." His hands were shaking as he ran his fingers through his hair. He was taking his life into his own hands by getting Sakura involved.

"Of course, Ryouko-kun. And what's with the formality? We're friends, aren't we?" Sakura put a reassuring hand on Ryouko's arm. Well, she had meant for it to be reassuring, but it was all Ryouko could do to not jump back from under her touch. He didn't want to hurt her feelings. As it was, he had to close his eyes and count to ten to steady his pulse. When he opened them, he saw question in her eyes, and he smiled gently.

"Of course we are, Sakura...san?" He tried, and at seeing her brow furrow in disapproval, he hastily tried again. "I-I mean, Sakura... chan?" She smiled this time, and Ryouko sighed with relief, blushing. *A pet name? I never even imagined I'd be close enough to her to call her that. Sakura-chan. Hah.* Sakura clapped her hands together, snapping him out of his thoughts. She had her business face on, and walked over to Kakashi.

"So, what's the injury?" Sakura asked, looking down at her sensei. She'd never seen him like this. He looked so... vulnerable. His layer of defense- his aloof and distant manner - was stripped away in his sleep. Even through the mask that covered his face, it was obvious he was emotionally distraught. His brow was wrinkled and the skin around his eyes was drawn tight. He had even broken out into a slight sweat, plastering the hair closest to his face to his forehead. *Poor Kakashi-sensei... I had no idea something could affect him this way. I guess I always imagined him to be invincible.* Her eyes fell to his arms which were bandaged from the tips of his fingers to his elbows.

"Extensive chakra burns on his palms, shrapnel damage on his arms. I took out the debris, but the injury itself remains. I'm not qualified to heal him, and it's imperative that he recover as quickly and completely as possible. So... I called an expert." Ryouko blushed and snuck a sideways glance at Sakura. She looked surprised, but pleased, at his praise.

"All right, let's have a look." She took one of Kakashi's hands in hers and began to gently unwrap the bandage. Kakashi groaned in his sleep and she slowed, trying not to cause him any more pain than necessary. Once the bandage was off, she surveyed the damage carefully. This was terrible. He looked like he'd gotten into a fight with a tree, and lost. *That doesn't account for the burns, though.* She built up the healing chakra in her hand as she asked Ryouko, "What happened to him?"

"He got into a fight with a tree and lost," Ryouko replied, shaking his head in disapproval. *Well, more like the whole forest, but no need to worry her.* He watched as she placed her glowing hands over Kakashi's injury. She looked at him, her eyes wide in disbelief, then looked back to Kakashi, her gaze softening and a soft smile creeping onto her face. He turned away, his heart hurting. *So there is something between them.*

Sakura held up Kakashi's hand again, replacing the bandage and winding it tightly around his injuries. Gently laying his arm down, she moved to the other side of the bed and began the same procedure.

"I knew he hadn't shown up to our training, but I figured he just got held up with another mission, or something to do with the Hokage. Nothing like this." Sakura looked at Ryouko as she worked, asking without words why Kakashi was in this state. Now how, but why.

"I don't know, Sakura-chan. I was walking through the forest when I heard an incredibly loud crash. I went running and found Kakashi-sama unconscious and injured."

"So, he hasn't regained consciousness since he's been here?" She asked, surprised. She held Kakashi's arm again as she rebandaged it. "But that was **four days ago!**" Kakashi stirred in his sleep as Sakura's voice rose, and she flinched. She tenderly adjusted some of Kakashi's hair, pushing it away from his clammy forehead. "If it's as you say, he should have been very nearly depleted of chakra. But it would take more than four days to accumulate the amount of chakra he has now. Even Kakashi-sensei isn't that powerful. Did you...?" She trailed off, looking at Ryouko with a tender expression. He blushed profusely and looked away.

"I gave him some of my chakra to help speed up his recovery. It was the least I could do for the guy," Ryouko mumbled, shifting from foot to foot uncomfortably. He really didn't like to take credit for things like this. It felt like boasting. He also lied to her - by omission, but still. Her sensei **had** regained consciousness, but Ryouko knew that what Kakashi said had been in confidence. He couldn't break that trust.

Sakura stared open-mouthed at the man before her. He didn't just give Kakashi "some" of his chakra. He gave him a seriously large amount. She looked back at Kakashi's sleeping face, and gave a small smile. Ryouko really was selfless. Not many would go that far. She walked over to him, reached up, and ruffled his hair. She giggled as he turned beet red.

"You're a really great guy, you know?" She smiled up at him. His heart was pounding so hard, he was afraid it would burst. He took a step closer, closing the distance between them. His body was acting on his own. It wasn't him that put his hand on the side of Sakura's face, and it certainly wasn't him that leaned down until his lips were just centimeters from hers. He felt her sharp intake of breath, and felt his face begin to inch forward of its own accord.

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KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

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The loud noise broke Ryouko from his trance and he jumped back, more flustered than he'd been in a long time. He'd never come that close to kissing anyone before! As he headed for the door he glanced at Sakura. She was frozen, her eyes wide and glazed over with shock. *I can't believe I almost **kissed** her! Where did that courage come from? ANd I know something is going on between her and Kakashi, and yet I... This is not good.*

He opened the door with a yank and felt his mouth flop open. He quickly recovered himself enough to stutter, "H..Hokage-sama?!" Sakura snapped out of her trance and gathered her stuff, making a hasty retreat. On her way out the door, she bowed a greeting to the Hokage. He moved aside to let her pass, and she walked quickly in the direction of her house. The Hokage chuckled, seeing her scurrying away and taking in Ryouko's lost and forlorn expression.

"Are you going to invite me in, or shall I stand outside and grow old?" He chuckled at his own lame joke about being old.

"Y-yes, forgive me! Please, come in, Hokage-sama," Ryouko stammered, and he stepped aside to let the man in. "This was an unexpected honor. To what do I owe the pleasure?" He was glad he sounded more calm than he felt- having the Hokage in his own house was seriously throwing him for a loop.

"I came to check on Kakashi. How is our patient?" The Hokage walked over to the bed and looked down at the man resting there. He looked so vulnerable. Something happened to him, he was sure of it.

"He had almost completely depleted his chakra, and he sustained serious chakra burns on his palms, and shrapnel damage to his arms. I gave him some of my chakra, then called Sakura-kun over to heal his wounds. She treated him successfully. Now he just needs rest," Ryouko explained.

"Hmm..." The old man grunted, then asked, "How long until he's fully recovered?"

"Physically, he should be fine in a day or two. Mentally... Sir, something caused him to have... well... a meltdown. I don't know what it was, but it's obvious that whatever it was is still affecting him." *Even in his sleep.* "If it's not too forward, sir, I'd suggest not putting him on any high-ranking missions until he's dealt with his problem. For right now, he's emotionally compromised."

"Yes, I'm afraid I'd have to agree with you. Kakashi needs to sort this out before returning to active duty. Please let me know if his condition worsens." The Hokage headed for the door. He paused at the doorway, one hand on the knob. "Ryouko... Kakashi doesn't have very many friends, and even less that he can actually confide in. Please, be there for him." And with that, he was gone.

Ryouko sank into the chair at Kakashi's bedside. He had undoubtedly made things awkward between himself and Sakura. Plus, he was treading into another man's territory. Tomorrow morning, he decided, he'd go apologize to Sakura. Kakashi should be awake by the time he got back. He sank into a dreamless sleep, still nervous about what happened with Sakura, and shaken up by the Hokage's surprise visit. His final conscious thoughts drifted to Kakashi, wondering how to help him if the man wasn't ready to confide in him.

Kakashi-sama... What happened to you?

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Chapter 7: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100542.html>

7 - Kakashi, You Dog

Kakashi woke with a start, his head resting on a picnic table. He jerked up, looking around. He had a copy of Icha Icha Paradise in his hand, as per usual. "A dream...?" Kakashi could hardly believe it. All of that was a dream? He'd clearly been reading too much Icha Icha. To let his imagination go this far...? *That's one heck of a dream. I can't believe I imagined a relationship with my student. I might... have to...cut back on my reading.* It caused something close to physical pain for him to admit it, but he couldn't be fantasizing about having a relationship with his student. That was definitely not okay.

Just then, Sakura came running up to the table Kakashi was at, waving and grinning. "I finally found you!" She said, smiling coyly. His heart stuttered as she looked at him like that. She'd never looked at him like that before. His heart definitely stopped when she threw her arms around him, instead of stopping at the edge of the picnic table as he thought she would. "I've been looking for you everywhere..." She said in a hushed voice, her breath tickling his neck through his mask. His hands had automatically gone around her, his first thought catching her. Now that she was this close though, he definitely needed some distance or he'd lose control. It would not be good to grab her by the waist, set her down on the picnic table, and have his way with her right then and there. Yeah, that would definitely not be good.

"Sakura..." He meant it to come out as a warning, but it came out more like a groan. She just bit his ear. His hands tightened on her waist, and she took that as invitation to continue. She drug her lips across the fabric of his mask, tracing his firm jawline slowly until she found his mouth. There she bit his lip through the mask, and smiled when she felt his sharp exhale, his hot breath seeping through the thin fabric. His hands wandered up to her shoulders where his fingers dug in. His eyes widened in shock, and he quickly grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her up and away from him, setting her down gently several feet away. Kakashi took a few moments to calm himself down, cooling off his gaze from one of passion to one of calm disinterest. "What was that just now, eh?"

"Sensei, don't be so mean! You promised, remember?" Sakura pouted, her jade green eyes filling with dissatisfaction. She tried to sidle up next to him, but Kakashi sidestepped and crossed his arms, giving her a slightly scary look. "But, but, sensei... You said..." Her eyes began to fill with tears, and Kakashi raised a hand to comfort her, but let it drop to his side harmlessly. He couldn't afford to give her another opportunity to get through his defenses.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Sakura? I'm your teacher, you shouldn't be trying to make these advances," Kakashi said, all the while wishing he could let her. It really sucked to be in this position. So close to Sakura, who's clearly interested, but having to restrain them both. He ran a hand through his hair in frustration, two different kinds of frustration. "Sakura, what exactly did I say to you?" He said, slightly exasperated, and more than a little confused. He thought he'd woken up, but this was definitely worse than the situation he had been in. At least his 'old' situation had been rectifiable. This... he had no idea what to do.

"Kakashi-sensei! You forgot? You promised that if I could manage to get through your defenses, ... If I could get your mask off, ... you'd... well..." She looked away and blushed heavily. His eye widened in

shock, and he took a step toward her involuntarily. He was now positive he was dreaming. Even if he wasn't... *Would it be okay to do this?* Kakashi grabbed her hand and turned it over, so her palm was facing up. He slowly traced the outline of each finger without breaking eye contact with her. Then he closed her hand, save her index finger, which he slowly hooked under his mask right by his nose. He gently pulled her wrist downward, slowly exposing his face to another living person for the first time in many, many years.

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Kakashi woke with a start, immediately sitting upright in his bed. The rag on his forehead fell in a damp heap into his relaxed palms. He wiped his forehead with his arm, then glanced up as he realized they were bandaged. And... they smelled like Sakura. He laughed and gave a chuckle. Damn that Ryouko... he couldn't keep a secret. Well, that wasn't fair. Ryouko was only thinking of Kakashi's health. To be honest, he felt a thousand times better than he did the last time he was conscious. The fact that he could even sit up was quite an improvement. Although, that dream... *I can't believe I let myself go like that. I totally gave in to her. I... I showed her my face!* He actually facepalmed at that thought. *I've never let my emotions rule me like that. To think Sakura could have that effect on me... I may have to ask the Hokage to reassign them another teacher. I can't allow my feelings to rule the way I act. Their training is too important for my personal feelings to get in the way.* He slowly turned in the bed until his feet touched the ground. *Looks like Ryouko's not around. I think I'll skip town now, before he comes back from wherever he went.* He strode toward the door, freezing in place as it burst open.

"Where do you think you're going?!" Ryouko cried indignantly. "Bed, now! You need rest." He spun Kakashi around, laid his hands on his back, and pushed. Kakashi stumbled and fell back onto the bed. "Stay."

"Would you mind not talking to me like a dog?" The words sounded harsh, but Kakashi's crinkled-eye grin and soft chuckle told the real story. *Besides, that dream only goes to show that I AM a dog. Jeesh.*

"Well, if the collar fits," Ryouko replied with a grin. "Kakashi-sama the dog. Hah, it suits you!" He laughed heartily, and smiled as Kakashi joined in. It looks as though his recovery was well on its way. He seemed in a better mood, as well. Maybe he would feel up to talking about the incident soon. He needed to know what was bothering Kakashi before he could help him.

As Ryouko set about preparing breakfast while simultaneously making sure Kakashi stayed in bed, Kakashi thought about the dream he'd had. It felt so real, and he hadn't resisted for long. To think just a few words made him lose his resolve, throw his care for his reputation, and hers, out the window like that. He snorted derisively at himself. *Kakashi, you really are a dog.*

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Chapter 8: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100543.html>

8 - Apologies

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NOTE: This takes place BEFORE chapter 7

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Ryouko gently closed the door behind him and set off for Sakura's house at a leisurely pace. There was no rush – dawn hadn't even cracked yet. Kakashi was still sound asleep, and he needed time to figure out what exactly he was going to say to Sakura. What if she punched him? He wouldn't be surprised if she did. He deserved to be punched. He took advantage of her and tried to kiss her. His face flushed at the memory. *If only that door had knocked a few seconds later... I would have...* No, no, that wasn't the way to think. He doubted Sakura was even remotely interested. Besides, he had no claim to her. As far as he was concerned, she was someone else's woman. There was obviously something going on with her and Kakashi, and he had no right to get in their way. Yep, he'd apologize profusely to her for his rude behavior, and promise it would never happen again. Yeah, that's what he'd do. She didn't need to worry about his advancing on her when it wasn't needed or wanted. He'd be her friend, as he always was. He could make that sacrifice for her sake. So he'd give up his childhood love in exchange for a wonderful friend.

Ryouko looked up, surprised. He was already at her house? He sighed nervously and hopped up to her window. *Sound asleep.* He felt bad for waking her up, but he needed to get back to Kakashi as soon as possible. He knocked on her window, turning his face aside in case he saw something he wasn't supposed to. She came to the window and pulled it open, gesturing for him to come inside.

"Ryouko...? What are you... " She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and stared at him, blushing furiously as yesterday's incident replayed in her head. "Did you need something? It's early..."

"Yes, I'm very sorry to disturb you, Sakura-sama. I just wanted to..." Ryouko dropped to the floor and bowed in front of Sakura. "Please forgive me for my actions yesterday. I was way out of line. I don't want to lose your friendship over something like that."

"Ryouko...!" Sakura exclaimed, completely taken aback. To think he came all this way, at this early in the morning, just to apologize to her. And what an apology! Sakura dropped to her knees beside him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Ryouko... " She sighed, and Ryouko looked up, surprised. "Ryouko, it's okay. I've known for a while how you feel, and while I can't accept your feelings, I really don't think you did anything that needs an apology of this level."

"But, Sakura-sama-" Ryouko started, but was cut off by Sakura's frown of disapproval.

"I told you, call me "chan," okay? We're friends. I accept your apology, so please get up!"

Ryouko stood to his feet and offered a hand to Sakura. Once she was on her feet, he stepped to the window. He gave her a quick smile, and said, "Sorry again to wake you up so early."

“It’s okay, Ryouko-kun. And... we’re good, right? I don’t want to lose you as a friend,” Sakura replied.

He turned around and walked over to her. “No, you haven’t lost me. I’ll always be there for you, Sakura-chan, in whatever way you need me.” He leaned down and kissed her bare forehead before disappearing out of the open window.

Sakura watched him go, her fingers tracing the spot where Ryouko’s lips touched her brow. His words echoed in her head: “I’ll always be there for you... in whatever way you need me.” She smiled softly. That’s a true friend for you. Ryouko... he’s one of a kind.

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Chapter 9: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100573.html>

9 - Distance, Self-Pity

“Kakashi!” The Hokage slammed his hand down on the table, snapping Kakashi back into reality. Damn. He had been so lost in his thoughts that he stopped talking in midsentence. “How you can get lost in thought in the middle of talking, I’ll never stop wondering. Please, focus! “

“Forgive me, Hokage-sama,” Kakashi apologized in a cool but contrite voice. To think he'd actually daydream in midsentence... “As I was saying ... Er, what was I saying?” He smiled sheepishly and scratched the side of his face with one finger.

“Kakashi...” The Hokage grunted, then sighed. “You were about to tell me why you were picking fights with trees! Honestly, I don’t know where your head is, but if you can’t maintain your focus... Do I need to take you off of active duty?” Kakashi’s head snapped up, and his gaze sharpened.

“No, Hokage-sama, that won’t be necessary,” Kakashi said quickly, waving his hand in front of him in a “no” gesture. *I’ll make sure it isn’t necessary. I’ll take my feelings out of the equation. It doesn’t matter what I feel, I can’t act on those feelings. So, I’ll tuck them away. Maybe, when she’s older...* As for his explanation... “Right, the trees. Well, you see, what happened was...”

Hokage yawned, surprised that such an explanation would take so long. Kakashi invented some lame, roundabout story that the tree holding a grudge against him, and when he went walking through the forest, he happened to trip over a black cat, and the tree finally managed to catch up with him, so he had to teach it a lesson. The story was total crap, and the Lord Hokage knew it, and Kakashi knew that he knew. After he finished his crap story, he heard the Hokage sigh.

I see... So that’s what happened, eh?” Kakashi grinned sheepishly at the Hokage’s dry tone. “Very well, Kakashi. I’ll accept your explanation... for now. You are dismissed.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” Kakashi replied, and disappeared. “Kakashi... At least you know that you can’t fool me. But to so blatantly lie to me, knowing I wasn’t fooled... Just what is it that is troubling you, Kakashi?”

Kakashi sighed as he walked around the village aimlessly. He knew he was pushing it, lying like that to Hokage-sama’s face. But he couldn’t exactly tell him the truth. Especially the Hokage. He wouldn’t be arrested, because he hadn’t acted on his feelings... yet. But he’d definitely be dealt with. The only solution he could come up with was to totally ignore his feelings. He would smother them until they died out, and things will go back to normal. He’d go back to being the lonely man he was, the man who was too good at pretending. The man who was untouched by trifles like affection. The man with so few friends.

He shook his head urgently, clearing away those thoughts. He couldn’t fall victim to self-pity. *I have Jiraiya and Guy, although I definitely couldn’t talk to them about things like this. Jiraiya would make fun*

of me for falling for a minor, and then he'd tell me to go get me some kunoichi tail. Guy would be flabberghasted, but would give me some motivational speech about following my heart, and if I failed, to set some ridiculous goal for myself to overcome my obstacles. He couldn't hold a **serious** conversation with them about it, that's for sure. He just didn't know what to do. Even if he did approach her, which he couldn't, she probably wouldn't believe him.

Aside from that, he wouldn't- no, he couldn't- smear Sakura's honor by having her get involved with her teacher. The old ladies in the village would have a field day with that. Her future in Konoha would be in shambles. And then there was **his** reputation to think about. If he got involved with his student, there'd be hell to pay. Not only would he be arrested, but his honor would go out the window. He wouldn't be respected as a Shinobi anymore. He would forfeit his position as sensei by default. There really was only one thing he **could** do. He'd distance himself from her emotionally, so she wouldn't ever even think about it, and he wouldn't be tempted any more. Self pity wasn't an option.

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Chapter 10: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100593.html>

10 - Way Too Good at Pretending

Kakashi's one-eyed gaze swept over the training field. Naruto and Sasuke were sparring and he devoted part of his attention to making sure they didn't go overboard. The majority of his attention was focused on the fact that Sakura was late. Not five or ten minutes late, which was the maximum for her. Half an hour late. *Should I try to go find her? Is she sick? Did something happen? Is she hurt? I'll wait another fifteen minutes. If I don't get word by then, I'll go check her house.*

Naruto chucked some Kunai at Sasuke, who deflected them with his own. He charged Naruto, forcing him on the defensive. Naruto made the handsign and yelled, "Multi-Shadow Clone Jutsu!" About thirty Narutos appeared in a complete circle around Sasuke, and he cursed under his breath. Sasuke jumped high into the air and rapidly made the handsigns for his fire jutsu, sucked in a huge gulp of air, and released it, an enormous cloud of fire engulfing the shadow clones. They all disappeared with a "poof," and the real Naruto was standing in a tree, swearing.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" He called out again, distracting Sasuke. Caught off guard, Sasuke was punched and kicked in the gut, each blow followed by a syllable of Naruto's name. He knew what was coming next. "U-zu-ma-ki... NARUTO BARRAGE!" The real Naruto landed a direct hit on Sasuke's back, sending him shooting towards the ground headfirst.

At the last second, Sasuke righted himself and landed on his feet at a dead run towards the real Naruto. Naruto swore internally, seeing that Sasuke had activated his Sharingan at some point during his barrage. Summoning was out of the question, but he did have one last trick up his sleeve...

"Multi-Shadow Clone Jutsu!" he cried out once more, and seventy Narutos appeared in a circle around Sasuke again.

"C'mon, don't you have any *new* tricks? This is getting old, Naruto!" Sasuke scoffed, clearly unimpressed.

Ignoring him, Naruto continued. All seventy of him raised their hands, put their fingers together, and shouted, "Sexy Jutsu- Ninja Harem! Sakura style!" Each and every one of him poofed, and in his place was seventy Sakuras, with short towels barely covering them. They all crowded around Sasuke, grabbing at his shirtsleeves, his arms, his torso, and his legs, crying out, "Sasuke-kun," in an annoyingly sensual voice. Sasuke saw red. They didn't have the desired effect on him- no, they just made him angrier. He yelled out, "NARUTOOOOOO!" And jumped into the air, tossing kunai into the crowd of underdressed Sakuras.

Unbeknownst to the sparring pair, Kakashi had just collapsed, a massive nosebleed staining his entire mask a dark red.

"Damn... that... Naruto..." Kakashi managed to choke out, crawling away to the bushes to plug his nose and replace his mask. He reached inside one of the pockets of his vest and pulled out a rag, reached in another and pulled out a spare mask. After wiping his face thoroughly, he replaced the now soggy mask

and put it in an empty pocket. Following that, he created a shadow clone. "Stay here and watch those two. Make sure they don't kill each other. I'm going to try to find Sakura." His clone nodded and stepped out from behind the bushes. The real Kakashi, however, had to go find his student.

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He flew into town, his feet hardly even touching the rooftops beneath him. Rather than go tearing through the town raising a fuss, he decided to take the faster, less-noticed route. When he finally got to Sakura's window, he was actually winded. It had felt like an eternity, but it was really only a few short minutes. He peeked inside carefully, ready to shut close his eye at a moment's notice. She was in her bed. Sound asleep. What...? Averting his face so he didn't have a repeat of last time, Kakashi knocked on Sakura's window.

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Sakura's eyes slowly drifted open, fighting to push back the comfortable darkness that blanketed her. Her face was turned toward the window, and as the room slowly came into focus, she saw her sensei wrapping on her window pane with the back of his index finger, his face turned to the side. "Ka...Kakashi-sensei... What are you...?" She rubbed her eyes blearily, trying to eradicate the foggy haze that still clouded her mind. She looked out the window and saw how sunny it was, and her head popped off the pillow. "OH MY GODDDDD! How could I oversleep?!" Sakura scrambled out of bed, wrapping the sheet around herself. She slid the window open and looked up at her teacher's face, horrified. "I am so, so, so, so, SO sorry, sensei!" She apologized loudly. He turned to look at her, and when their eyes met, Sakura was caught in the torrent of conflicted emotions and overruling passion that swirled in his grey eye. Her head started spinning, but she was quickly grounded when his gaze turned flat and dark, like a switch had been turned off inside him. "Sensei?" She held his gaze, her big green eyes full of concern.

"You were late for training today, which wasn't like you, so I thought I'd come check on you. But it looks like you just overslept. Stayed out late last night, eh?" Kakashi smiled his usual crinkled-eye smile, and Sakura wondered for a moment if she just imagined the whole thing.

"Ah- Not *out*, sensei. I was just, um, reading. Couldn't put it down. I ended up falling asleep while reading." As she spoke, Sakura tried to shift stuff around her nightstand so the book was covered up. Naturally, this piqued Kakashi's interest, and he jumped through the window, materializing behind her. "S-sensei, don't-" *Too late*. Kakashi had the book in his hands, and his eye widened for a moment when he read the cover. He quickly recovered himself and dangled the book over Sakura's head teasingly.

"I didn't know you read Icha Icha, Sakura! How interesting... I wonder if your parents know you read such things..." A mischevious tone crept into his voice, and Sakura flushed, embarrassed. She hastily snatched the book back from him and turned up her nose at him, looking the other way.

"I can read whatever I please, sensei," was her automatic response to his teasing. He ruffled her hair and tossed the book back to her on his way back to the window.

"Of course you can, Sakura. Shall I expect you at the training field soon? I've got to get back to Sasuke and Naruto," Kakashi raised two fingers in farewell, and he flickered out of sight. Sakura's knees finally

gave out, and she plopped onto the bed.

“Kakashi-sensei, no fair...” Her heart was racing. What were these feelings that were stirring around inside her? Her breath was short, her pulse racing, and she couldn’t get Kakashi’s face out of her head. Sakura replayed the first few moments of his visit in her head. She didn’t just imagine that emotion coming from him, or its absence. “Could it be...?” *No, no, don’t be stupid. He’s your teacher, remember? Your teacher.* But if there was one thing she had learned from her all-nighter with Icha Icha, Kakashi wasn’t as aloof and cold-hearted as he seemed.

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Kakashi could have killed himself for what he just did. Damn it, he hadn’t been prepared for that. She saw the emotional hurricane within him, even if it was only for a fraction of a second. She’d also seen him shut down. He saw the response in her eyes to his passion, and the concern that filled its place when he shut himself down. Now that he was away from her, he could admit to himself that when he saw the book she had stayed up all night reading... He had wanted to say so many things, do so many things. The book-lover part of him wanted to sit down and talk about his favorite parts, ask her what parts she liked. The teacher part wanted to scold her for reading such mature material. The dominant part, the part he was desperately trying to suppress... That part of him wanted to kiss her and hold her, among other things. *Damn, another reason to like her. Another thing in common. Damn it!* She was **not** making this easy. But if there was one thing Kakashi was good at, it was pretending. Too good. He’d kept everyone at arm’s length by pretending. He couldn’t allow her to keep catching him off guard like that. No, that wouldn’t do at all.

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Chapter 11: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100598.html>

11 - Forced to Play Hookie

Sakura scrambled to get dressed, throwing her clothes on and running a brush through her hair hastily. She stormed down the stairs and shouted at her mom, "Why didn't you wake me up?! I'm so late for training!" Sakura's mother just stood speechless, watching her flustered daughter in shock. Sakura was never late for anything. As she ran from room to room in search of her bag, her mother wondered if maybe Sakura was ill.

"Sakura-chan...!" The woman called, and Sakura popped her head out of the door of the room she was in.

"What is it, mom? I can't find my ninja gear," she replied, shifting from foot to foot impatiently.

"Sakura, you aren't... sick, are you? You're feeling okay?" Her mother's gaze was full of concern.

"Mom... No, I'm fine. Really!" Sakura walked over and hugged her mother, leaning into the woman's small frame. *If only I could tell you... But, no, you wouldn't understand.* Her mind returned to Kakashi's visit, and her face flushed as she realized he'd caught her looking indecent... again. *Again? No, the first time was just my overactive imagination.*

"My, but your face is hot! You seem to have a fever! Back to bed with you! There's no need to push yourself when your body is weakened. Nothing good will come of it."

"Moooooom, I'm not sick! Really, I'm not!" Sakura protested anxiously.

"Don't argue with me! You have a fever. Now, off to bed. And no sneaking out!" Her mom went into full commander mode, all but pushing her back into bed.

Crap. Mom has eyes and ears all over the village. If someone sees me with Team Kakashi when I'm supposed to be sick, I'm done for! Nothing left to do, I guess. It does give me more time to read Icha Icha... Her face flushed again and she sighed, still caught up in the tide of emotions Kakashi had sent to her. What was going on with that man? She needed somebody to talk to... Someone who wasn't a blab like Ino-pig. She knew just the girl. Last Sakura had heard, 'their' team's training had been canceled - their sensei had come down with a cold or something. Perfect timing. She produced a clone of herself and told it, "Go find her and tell her to meet me here asap, okay?" The clone nodded and turned to go. "oh, and... Don't be seen." With that, the clone was off. Sakura sat on her bed, swinging her feet excitedly. It's been so long since they'd seen each other! This was perfect. It'd been too long since she'd confided in her best friend. And this was a whopper of a secret. "Hurry up, Hisako-chan! I can't wait to see you!"

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Chapter 12: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100607.html>

12 - Enter - Mutakami Hisako!

Hisako knelt over the stream and scooped some water into her hands, drinking deeply. Her dark reddish brown hair had been pulled back into a carefree ponytail, but after the rigorous training she'd been doing that morning, some had fallen out and stuck to her damp forehead. As she quenched her thirst, Sakura's clone appeared beside her. Hisako looked up for a moment, then turned back to the stream and splashed some water on her face.

"Yo," Hisako initiated, drying her face on her shirt. "It's been a while. The usual?" She got to her feet and gave a sidelong glance to the clone.

"Yup!" Sakura's clone smiled in greeting, then frowned. "But hurry. My original's mom thinks she's sick, and put her on house arrest for the day. She's been pacing the floor since I left. She's going nuts."

"Hmm... Wonder what it is this time," Hisako thought aloud. *Probably more about that Uchiha kid. Honestly, I don't know what she sees in him. He's arrogant, selfish, and rude. Sure, he's strong and handsome, but everyone knows he's the self-proclaimed 'avenger' of his clan. That kid's headed down a dark path, that's for sure.*

"Hehe, you will never guess." The clone laughed, then disappeared.

"Never guess... So it's not Sasuke? Don't tell me - Naruto? No, Sakura can't stand him." She sighed, resigned. *Now I guess I've got to go. This is too interesting to pass up. Hah, like I was gonna ditch her anyway? Right.*

Hisako dusted off her shorts, then set off at a run for Sakura's.

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Meanwhile...

Sakura was locked in her room, pacing the floor relentlessly. *Hurry up, Hisako-chan! I'm about to explode!* She stopped pacing, frozen in place as she remembered Kakashi-sensei still thought she was coming! *Crap. Crap, crap, crap. It'd be too risky to send out another clone. Oh, aha!* Sakura planted one fist into her other palm. *I've got it! I'll get Hisako-chan to send one out when she gets here. She's better at those things. And sensei knows her, so it'll be okay.*

Sakura finally gave up pacing and sat on the edge of her bed. Her eyes reluctantly fell on *Makeout Paradise*. Well, while she was waiting, she might as well distract herself. She lay down on her stomach on the bed and kicked her feet from back and forth as she sunk into the chapter.

Forlorn, Junko fell on him. "I'm losing you, and in doing so, I am lost." Just as her concentration shifted, there was a sharp rap on her window. Sakura nearly jumped out of her skin, the book flying out of her hands and into the closet. She turned warily to the window, but broke out in a huge grin as she saw Hisako's face.

"Kyaaaa! It's so good to see you! It's been way too long since we've done this," she chattered as she opened the window to let her friend in. Hisako grinned back and pulled Sakura into a warm hug.

"Seriously! How long has it been? Nearly half a year! What's up with that?" Sakura stuck her tongue out at Hisako in response and tugged on her ponytail.

"Someone looks messy! You get a day off, and you go train? That's so you. Oh, that reminds me! Can you send a clone to Kakashi-sensei and tell him my mom has me on house arrest for the day? I don't want him to think I skipped out, but I can't risk another clone. You know my mom." Sakura just couldn't shut up- she was so happy right now. She and Hisako had basically grown up together, and they counted each other as sisters, though neither bore any resemblance of the other.

"Sure thing! I've got to tell my mom I'll be home for dinner, anyway." Hisako put her hands together and said calmly, "Clone Jutsu!" A clone poofed into existence next to her, and she relayed the instructions. As soon as the clone was gone, she shut the window and said, "Okay, Sakura. What was it that you wanted to talk about? That I'd 'never guess.' I'm sure this'll be good, especially if it doesn't have to do with Uchiha, for once," she grinned and took Sakura by the hand, dragging her over to the bed and forcing her to sit down. "Spill it, girl."

Sakura sighed, Hisako's straightforward manner causing her to shake her head.

"Okay, okay. You see, it all started when..."

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Chapter 13: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100614.html>

13 - Sakura Tells All

“Well, I’m not exactly sure when it *really* started, but if I had to set a date, I would probably say it was that day at the training field with Team 7,” Sakura said, a thoughtful expression coming across her face.

“Whaaaaaat? So it *is* Naruto?!” Hisako gasped, giving Sakura a frightened look. Sakura couldn’t stand Naruto! When had this happened?!

“No, no, it’s not... Naruto...” Sakura replied slowly, dropping her eyes and turning beet red. “Not Naruto.”

“Wait, so if it’s not Naruto, and it’s not Sasuke...” Hisako was totally at a loss. There weren’t any other members of her team. “Was someone else training with you guys?” *Lee, maybe? Or Shikamaru? Even... Neji? Maybe she finally caught on to the fact that Ryouko-sempai practically worships the ground she walks on.*

Sakura shook her head. “No, there was nobody else with us. It’s... Kakashi-sensei.”

Hisako stared at Sakura, her mouth falling open. *Her... teacher?* “Sorry, can you repeat that? I was sure I heard you say your teacher’s name, but that couldn’t be right.”

“I... um...” Sakura pointedly refused to make eye contact with Hisako, and her face got redder. Hisako closed her mouth and just looked at her for several minutes as they both settled into an uncomfortable silence. “Hisako-chan, say something! I can’t stand all this quiet.” She fidgeted nervously.

“Pahahahaha! You...with your teacher! God, that’s... so awkward!” Hisako burst into uncontrollable laughter, clutching at her sides. Sakura turned an even brighter red than before, and punched Hisako on the arm.

“Shut up! Don’t laugh, I haven’t even told you anything yet!” Sakura fidgeted with her skirt, her eyebrow twitching in annoyance.

Hisako continued to laugh, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. As she wiped them away with the back of her hand, Sakura pushed her off the end of the bed. She looked up at Sakura with a bewildered expression on her face, and then burst into laughter again. This time, Sakura joined in. As the laughter died out, Hisako sighed, wiping the last of the tears from her eyes.

“Sorry, Sakura-chan, that just took me by surprise. Actually, imagining you two going on a date and then an ANBU agent coming to take Kakashi-sensei away was what set it off,” Hisako explained breathlessly as she climbed back on the bed, still clutching her side. “Anyway, you were saying...?”

“Right. I was saying that I guess it all really started that day on the training field. It was about a week ago. I had gotten distracted by the sound of his voice...” Sakura blushed, looking at the floor. “Naruto and I stopped to watch Sasuke-kun and Kakashi-sensei sparring. I... As I was watching him, I was just

moved. I hadn't even realized I'd started crying until Naruto said something. It was just so beautiful. That sounds so stupid, doesn't it?" She laughed weakly at herself.

"No, that doesn't sound stupid. It makes perfect sense that something beautiful could move you to tears." Hisako smiled a reassuring smile at her friend. "Anyway, what happened then?"

"Well, Naruto told Sensei I wasn't feeling well, and when sensei looked over at me, I'm not sure what exactly happened... He looked concerned, and not just a casual concern for his student. And when he said my name after Naruto and Sasuke had left... For a minute I thought I heard something in his voice." Sakura looked up at Hisako, biting her lip. "And then, later that day, he came by to return my ninja gear. I had left it on the training field. Kakashi-sensei never does those sorts of things himself. He'll get Sasuke-kun or Naruto to do it. But before that... I had just gotten out of the shower and was drying my hair when..." Sakura turned crimson. "Well, I saw him at my window. Or, at least I thought I did. Who knows, maybe I'm just going crazy." Sakura sighed and put her head in her hands.

Hisako had stayed silent during all of this, watching Sakura with a serious expression. "Sakura, don't underestimate the power of a woman's intuition. Was this all of what happened between you two to make you think...?"

"Well, there was one other thing..." Sakura raised her head and put her palm on the side of her face thoughtfully. "This morning, actually. I woke up late! Imagine that! I was late to training. Kakashi-sensei actually came to my window and woke me up. When I opened the window, he was looking at me, and I could feel all these emotions coming from him. It was so conflicted. And then, he must have saw my reaction in my face, and he kind of... shut down? His expression went blank and his eyes went dark. That's the only way I can think of to explain it." She conveniently left out the bit about her reading Makeout Paradise. That was too embarrassing.

"Well, well..." Hisako murmured, also deep in thought. "What are you gonna do?"

"What do you mean?" Sakura looked totally confused.

"Sakura... If he likes you, what are you going to do? He's your teacher. Not only that, but you're still a minor, and he's over 10 years older than you. That's a big difference, and he'd be in so much trouble. Besides, you could kiss your future here goodbye. Nobody wants to hire someone with that kind of track record." Hisako actually felt uncomfortable for Sakura, saying all that. If she actually cared for Kakashi-sensei, this wouldn't really dissuade her, but still...

"You think I don't know that? I don't know what I'd do. There's just something about him that puts me at ease. He's so comfortable to be around."

Hisako ruffled Sakura's hair affectionately. "I'm not judging you, girl. The heart wants what it wants. Actually, I'm kind of jealous. To be sought after by THE Kakashi Hatake... You are so lucky," She sighed. "He's like, the single most mysterious person in Konoha. Not to mention he's probably gorgeous. I heard from Ayame-chan, whose father owns Ichiraku? She wouldn't stop gushing about how gorgeous he was for weeks after you guys treated him to lunch." She grinned and added, "It's really too bad that Ino-Shika-Cho got in your way, isn't it?"

“Ino-Piiiiig! It’s all her fault!” Sakura ranted, suddenly fired up. “Oh, by the way... You remember Ryouko-kun?”

Hisako nodded, rolling her eyes. Of course she knew of Ryouko. He’d been drooling after Sakura for years. She’d never actually seen him in person, but she’d heard stories. Mostly from Sakura.

“Well, he... he tried to kiss me the other day! I mean, I knew he liked me, but he was always so shy! I was so surprised, I didn’t know what to do.”

“He tried what?!” Hisako jumped up, totally blown away. *I’ll kill him! Trying to lay a hand on my little Sakura-chan.... He’d better watch out.*

“Calm down, calm down!” Sakura tugged on her arm, alarmed. “Don’t hurt the kid. He came and apologized to me the next morning. Actually, he overdid it a little... Well, a lot. He bowed down on the floor and begged me to forgive him, saying that he didn’t want to lose me as a friend over something like that. It was really rather touching.” Sakura smiled at the memory.

“I still can’t believe that girl-shy... I can’t believe he tried to kiss you!” Hisako plopped back down on the bed, amazed. If he’s that comfortable around her, he’s come a long way. “Man, two guys in one week! And Kakashi Hatake of all people! Lucky.” She looked at Sakura, and seeing the expression on her face- a mixture of confusion, guilt, and affection made her think, *My little Sakura-chan... She’s grown up!*

“Hey, why don’t you spend the night? We haven’t done that in a while!” Sakura suggested out of the blue. “You like my mom’s cooking, right?”

“Yeah, your mom’s cooking is amazing! And that sounds like a plan. I’ll be right back, I lemme go tell my mom. Be back in a flash!” Hisako jumped out the window and took the rooftop route to her house.

Sakura sighed and fell backwards onto the bed. She felt so much better after finally telling someone all that. “Kakashi-sensei...” *What are you doing now?*

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Chapter 14: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100638.html>

14 - Girls' Night In

Kakashi let out a noisy sigh, watching Sasuke and Naruto, who had just returned to sparring after a very late lunch break. When Hisako-san's clone came to tell him that Sakura was staying home, part of him was relieved. A very small part. The sane part. The other part of him just wanted to go back to her house and spend the whole day with her, locked up in that room. He had gone several days recuperating from his 'meltdown', seeing no one but Ryouko. It wasn't that Ryouko was poor company... He was just naturally one who kept to himself, as Kakashi tended to do. He supposed he was just used to the outgoing nature of Naruto and Sakura. Those days crawled by more slowly than anything Kakashi had felt before. Even after his little blunder that morning, he had been looking forward to seeing her again.

Idiot. You're so distracted by your thoughts about her that you didn't even remember to grab your Makeout Paradise book. Now, what am I supposed to do to entertain myself? I suppose I could do two-to-one sparring with the boys, but they still hadn't progressed enough to put up a real fight. Well, I suppose that's not true. But I know their fighting style too well to be threatened by them. This is so BORING!

Kakashi decided that he'd make the two practice their chakra control, since it was something they both struggled with, but Sakura was great at, and she wasn't here. Perfect. And it would give him time to go back home and grab his book.

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Hisako ran home, jumping from rooftop to rooftop with ease. She had taken this path so many times, she could probably do it in her sleep. She mulled over what Sakura had told her. *Kakashi-sensei is in a tough position. Even if he truly cares for her, he can't pursue her. He'd put both of their reputations at risk. He'd be incarcerated, for sure... It's a good thing he has such self control. He can't act on his feelings until she's 18. Three years is a long time to wait. A very long time. I'm not sure either of them can last that long. Sakura's never been known to be patient, and although Kakashi doesn't seem to care for punctuality, those three years will be an eternity. But Kakashi wouldn't break the law like that... Well, who knows. I barely know the man. I don't know what he's capable of.*

Hisako was so lost in thought that she almost ran right by her house. She skidded to a halt and hopped through the open window.

"Mother," she called. "Are you home?" Hisako slid her shoes off and put them on the windowsill as she headed for her closet- she needed some sleepwear, along with something to change into in the morning. She grabbed her knapsack and stuffed a pair of plain black ankle-length pants that bunched up around the ankle, and a grey sleeveless shirt. *Oops, almost forgot socks.* She grabbed a pair of low-cut black socks. *Pajamas- done.* For tomorrow, she grabbed a dark blue short sleeved shirt and grey shorts. Simple, comfortable, and modest. It worked.

She slipped into the bathroom, grabbing her toothbrush, comb, and some hairties. She never went anywhere without at least two extra hairties. Having your hair blowing around your face was such a pain. On her way back into her bedroom, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Hisako turned to face her

reflection. A perfectly average face peered back at her. She stood about five feet, seven inches tall, and slender for her height. Not as slender as Ino, but then again, she didn't go on diets. She was better developed in the chest area than Sakura, but then again, who wasn't? No offense to the girl, but she was pretty flat. Her reddish-brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail at the base of her neck, the bottom of it just barely grazing her mid-back. Full, but not plump, naturally pink lips were curved downward, hiding a set of perfectly straight white teeth. Finally, she met her reflection's eyes. They were large and round, a bright, icy blue. Dark lashes framed them, and thin eyebrows furrowed in disapproval. A chagrined flush tinted her pale cheeks, and she strode out of the bathroom, closing the door more noisily than she intended to. An average face like that couldn't even begin to compete with Ino, or even Sakura. They're both the admiration of all the boys in the whole village. Ino could have any boy she wanted. But of course, like all the other girls, she only had eyes for Sasuke Uchiha.

Hisako shook her head, angry that she let this get under her skin. Usually she didn't let it bother her, but Sakura's little talk with her stirred up old feelings she'd buried. She'd attracted the attention of a man twice her age. She'd also had poor Ryouko-sempai trotting after her for years. She knew it wasn't Sakura's fault, but she felt more than a little jealous, to say the least. She shook her head again. *Sakura's a good friend. She's always been there for me, no matter what. Tonight's the first time we've been able to hang out like this in a long time, so I need to just shut up and enjoy myself.*

Her packing done, she tied up the top of the bag and slung it over her shoulders. She silently walked to her mother's room, and stopped right in front of the door. She sighed sadly, shaking her head. *She brought another one home? Again? Although I guess I should come to expect this by now. I guess I'll just leave a note.*

*Mother,
I've gone to Sakura's house for the night. I'm heading out early tomorrow morning for training, so you won't see me until dinner tomorrow. I'll bring something from Ichiraku, so don't worry about cooking. Have a good night.
-Hisako*

With that done, Hisako made a dash for her room. She grabbed her shoes, then jumped out the window. After she made sure the window was securely shut, she put on her shoes and ran all the way back to Sakura's house, ready for a good "girl's night in."

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Chapter 15: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100673.html>

15 - Realization, Denial

Sakura lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to Hisako's even breaths next to her. For the first time in about a week, her thoughts turned to Sasuke. Dark, mysterious, enigmatic Sasuke. Those dark, lonely eyes had haunted her many a night. She knew that when she and Ino got into it in front of him, it just annoyed him. Everything annoyed him, it seemed. She wondered why she still trotted after him. It was totally one-sided... An unrequited love. A bit like Naruto's feelings toward her, actually. She felt bad for Naruto. Sakura thought about promising to try to be nicer to him, but she knew that would fail.

She ran her fingers through her short hair thoughtfully. She was still bothered by what happened during the Chuunin exams.

Sasuke-kun will seek me out... in search of power.

Orochimaru made that ominous promise after he had bitten Sasuke on the neck, leaving him with the curse mark. But Sasuke was powerful already, and his strength was growing by the day. What would Sasuke need such power for? So much power that he would abandon his home, his friends, here in the Leaf Village? It didn't make sense.

My ambitions... Well, I plan to restore the Uchiha clan and... to kill a certain man, no matter what.

Could it be that whoever he planned on killing was so powerful that even Sasuke needed to rely on other powers to accomplish his goal? Who could possibly be that powerful? She couldn't let him fall to his inner darkness. Sakura knew that – love or no – Sasuke-kun was important to her and she would do anything to keep him here, where he belonged. Here, with her and Naruto and Kakashi-sensei.

She was snapped out of her thought as Hisako stirred next to her. Her eyes slid shut as the girl gently got out of the bed and smoothed the sheets. Hisako dressed in the darkness as Sakura breathed evenly, facing away.

"Couldn't sleep, eh, Sakura-chan?" Hisako whispered, her quiet voice breaking the pre-morning silence.

Busted.

"Mmhm," Sakura murmured, not bothering to form a complete response.

"I'm going to go spar with Neji-kun today. If there are any more developments, you know where to find me. I..." Sakura sat up as Hisako paused with a thoughtful expression on her face; she seemed to be on the verge of saying something more. "I hope things work out for you," she finished, clearly not saying what she thought about saying.

Sakura nodded, smiling at Hisako. She was glad that her friend cared. As Hisako gathered up her things, she walked by Sakura and ruffled her hair affectionately. She headed for the window and paused, her

fingers on the window frame. Hisako's eyes met Sakura's, her expression serious.

"Be careful, okay? If things between the two of you go much further... Both of you will be in more trouble than you can imagine. Watch your step, Sa-chan."

Sakura sighed, smiling at Hisako's use of her childhood pet name. She didn't let anyone else call her that.

I know that, Hisa-chan. I know. It's not like she'd seriously go after Kakashi-sensei. But... something about him drew her in a way even she didn't understand. She wanted to matter to him. And that scared her. Wasn't that how she felt about Sasuke-kun? Her eyes widened in shock. *No way. Absolutely no way.* Sakura shook her head, her pink hair whipping back and forth across her face. Her fingers knotted in her hair and she rested her elbows on her knees.

There was no way she was in love with Kakashi Hatake. There was no way she was in love with her teacher.

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Hisako stood a yard's length away from Neji Hyuuga, with her knees slightly bend and her feet almost shoulder's length apart. She had one arm behind her back. Her other arm was tucked into her side at the elbow, at about a forty-five degree angle from her shoulder, her palm flat and facing her face. Neji spread his feet apart and put one palm facing outward while holding his other arm close to his side, his fist even with his hip. He regarded Hisako silently with his pale eyes.

"Please be patient with me, Neji-kun," Hisako said with a bow, momentarily relaxing her stance.

"Think nothing of it, Hisako-san. I am anxious to see your progression – after all, before the incident at the Chuunin exams, you were training with Lee on almost a daily basis. His taijutsu is far superior to mine, so I do hope you'll forgive me if I don't live up to your expectations," Neji replied, mirroring her bow.

She smirked in response, and called out, "Shall we begin?"

"Let's go!" Neji called back, and charged at her.

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In the midst of their sparring, Neji was vaguely aware of someone watching them from the landing above. He wondered in the corner of his mind who the person was, and if Hisako had noticed. Their eyes met, and he read the understanding in hers. *So she did notice. Hmm. Is it... ANBU?* His thoughts were snapped out of his head as Hisako sent him flying with a kick to the gut.

"Neji-kun!" She cried out, alarmed. She hadn't noticed his guard drop. She ran over to him, kneeling beside him as he grasped his stomach, wincing. "Neji-kun, I am so sorry! I hadn't realized..." She trailed off as she glanced at the landing overlooking their training floor. A tall man leaned against the ledge, observing them both. He had large eyes that reminded Hiskao of onyx. He had a wide mouth, and a full

lower lip. A straight nose sat squarely between his eyes, and a mask-style headband covered his whole forehead and contoured his jawline. It reminded her of something similar on one of the faces on the Hokage monuments. The neck of his shirt covered his wide chin, conforming to a firm square jaw. She followed the contours of the part of his body she could see. Strong, broad shoulders were hunched forward, and he had sturdy biceps that connected to slender but powerfully built forearms that supported his weight. His hands, large and square, were pressed together, and his long and slender fingers were interlaced. The man's short, disheveled dark brown hair swayed a bit in the slight breeze, playing at the base of his exposed neck.

She regarded him appreciatively while she helped Neji to his feet. Whoever this man was, he was no ordinary shinobi. His well-built frame exuded quiet power. He watched the two of them, not giving any acknowledgement that he knew she'd just thoroughly checked him out. Even though she knew that he knew that she had.

"Neji-kun, who is that?" Hisako murmured, nodding to their observer. She never broke eye contact with the man, even while speaking to Neji.

"Well, if I had to venture a guess..." Neji replied in a low hushed tone. "ANBU. It seems that the elite has taken an interest in one, or the pair of us."

ANBU? But the both of us are only Gennin. Even so, it would probably be Neji they're after. I'm nothing special.

"Sorry to disappoint," the stranger broke in, hopping over the ledge and joining them on the floor with graceful ease. His deep, melodic voice caught Hisako off-guard. "I was just passing through, and I saw the two of you sparring, so I thought I'd stick around to watch. I'm sorry for disturbing you," he finished, his wide mouth pulling up at the corners in an apologetic grin.

"Oh, it's no disturbance," Hisako assured, waving her hand dismissively.

"That's right," Neji agreed. "I just got lost in my own thoughts, and Hisako-san here got the better of me."

Their visitor laughed and said in an amused voice, "All right, then. Allow me to introduce myself properly. You can call me Tenzo."

--

Tenzo, in truth, *had* been passing by when he saw their mock battle. Something about the fierce girl had intrigued him, and he stopped to watch. She was formidable. She put the Hyuuga boy on the defense almost as much as she herself was forced to defense. That's no small feat when you're going up against a Hyuuga.

When she actually managed to land a blow, his eyes widened. Compromised Neji Hyuuga's "ultimate defense?" This was no ordinary kunoichi.

She had raised her head and met his eyes, holding them even as she helped Neji up. He felt those eyes

wander across his upper body as if she had physically touched him. When the girl locked eyes with Tenzo, it was all he could do to not react. Those icy blue eyes seemed to peer straight through him.

He heard them talking about him below, and at the mention of ANBU he jumped down and joined them. True, he was in ANBU, but he wasn't sent there by ANBU. No need in getting their hopes up just yet. After all, they're only gennin.

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NOTE: This encounter happened in the room where Sasuke and Lee had their little pre-exam duel, as shown here:

<http://naruto-world.com/episode22/naruto22-06.jpg>

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Much to Kakashi's delight, and chagrin, Sakura showed up bright and early that day for training. They acted no different than usual toward each other (or tried to, rather), but even Naruto and Sasuke could sense the tension between them.

Kakashi greeted Sakura with an innocent wave, saying, "Good morning, Sakura. You finally manage to put that book down?" His voice hit a deep, seductive note as he teased her, and he internally kicked himself while suppressing a wince. There went his plan for apathy.

Sakura's eyes widened slightly, and her pulse skittered. His voice was making her think very inappropriate thoughts. She blushed as she realized he was talking about Makeout Paradise, and dropped her eyes, replying in a mumble, "No, I haven't had the chance to finish it yet."

"I see, I see. Well, then. I won't spoil the ending for you," he responded with another smile. "Okay, kids, let's get to it."

As the day wore on, Naruto would sometimes catch Sakura looking at Sasuke searchingly, and then Sasuke would catch her watching Kakashi in much the same manner. Sakura herself caught Kakashi watching her from time to time, and he wasn't quick enough half the time to hide it from the boys.

Naruto's and Sasuke's thoughts were in sync, for probably the first time ever; *Something's not right here.*

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Chapter 16: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100682.html>

16 - A Secret, A Hug

After the weird day with Kakashi-sensei, Sakura headed to Hisako's house. She told her mom she might not be home for dinner, so she decided to go see her friend. Besides, Sakura hadn't seen Hisako's mother in a while. It'd be rude to forego it much longer. Hisako didn't know she was coming, so for a moment Sakura wondered if it was okay to drop by unannounced like this. She paused at the door, debating whether or not to knock. Then she remembered all the times Hisako came round without a word of warning. *Ah, what the hell.* Sakura knocked on the door distinctly and waited for someone to answer.

--

Hisako walked home at a leisurely pace, thinking about her sparring with Neji-kun. She actually managed to land a hit on Neji Hyuuga, with the "ultimate defense." Tenzo-sama's presence had seriously distracted him. *Is he expecting a visit from ANBU? He's brilliant, but he's delusional if he thinks ANBU would take a Gennin. Well, it's been known to happen on rare occasion, but the Gennin would need to be extremely exceptional. Not that Neji-kun isn't exceptional; he's just not ANBU material. Yet.*

Tenzo-sama... There was something interesting about him. Those large, dark eyes... They seemed to tell a story that his calm demeanor and gentle smile contradicted. He exuded power, and she felt totally safe in his presence. The only other person who made her feel that was was Kakashi-sensei. She vaguely toyed with the idea that they might know each other.

At any rate, she wondered if she'd ever see Tenzo-sama again. Probably not- like he said, he had just been passing by.

--

Kakashi leaned against a tree, closing his eyes as the gentle breeze played around his face. He couldn't stop himself from flirting with her. He had told himself he was going to distance himself from her emotionally, but everyone saw how well that went. He couldn't even hide it from Naruto and Sasuke. This wasn't good. At all. Maybe... Maybe it was time to visit Ryouko. He hated putting his personal problems out there. It made him feel weak. But he supposed it was preferable to taking out the rest of the forest. Actually, the *preferable* thing to do would be to go find Sakura, locate the nearest bed, and ravish her for hours upon end.

He actually took a step forward toward Sakura's house. Kakashi's eyes snapped open and he dug his fingers into the bark of the tree, forcing himself to slump back into his relaxed position. He wasn't sure how much longer he'd hold out. His nerves were so frayed already.

Yeah, definitely time to visit Ryouko.

--

“Hisako-chan? Hisako’s mom?” Is anyone home?” Sakura slid the door open slightly, calling into the hallway. Silence. She pushed the door all the way open and left her shoes by the entryway, stepping into the empty hall.

“Hisako-chan... are you here?” She called again, in a slightly hushed voice. She felt like she was intruding on something that was thoroughly off-limits.

She heard noises coming from the living room, and she picked up the pace. “Hisako-chan, there you-“ Sakura’s mouth flopped open as her eyes registered what she was seeing.

Hisako’s mother looked up, startled, and peeled herself off the lap of a man Sakura’d never seen before, who was lazily sitting on the couch. “Sakura-chan,” the woman stammered in a false cheery voice, readjusting her clothes hastily. “I didn’t know you were coming to visit! I would have put some tea on.” She walked quickly over to the kitchen and put a kettle on.

“Oh, no, I was just looking for Hisako...” Sakura pointedly looked away from the man who was shamelessly taking his time zipping up his pants, leering at the young girl. A knot formed in her stomach. “Since she’s not here, I’ll just go look somewhere else...”

“Oh, you can’t stay?” Hisako’s mom interjected. “But it’s been so long since your last visit!”

“Yes, I’m sorry about that. I really need to find her and get home.” With a final farewell bow, Sakura hightailed it the hell outta there.

She ran down the block, not stopping as she rounded the corner... and plowed face first into Kakashi. She looked up at him, startled, and he peered down at her with a similar expression. His arms had automatically gone around her when they crashed, and when he saw the emotional distress in her eyes, he tightened his grip around her involuntarily.

“Sakura, what’s the matter?” The deep concern that was clear in his voice made her want to cry.

Sakura had relaxed into his accidental hug automatically, her hands sliding up his torso to stay, wedged between them. She sighed, feeling some of the tension leave her body.

“Sakura?” Kakashi asked again, and she realized she hadn’t answered him, but had just stood there stupidly, blinking at him. Sakura pushed away gently and shook her head slowly, a fragile smile forming on her lips.

“I’m fine, Kakashi-sensei. I just wasn’t watching where I was going.” She backed up and walked around him, continuing at a slower pace.

Without thinking, he grabbed her arm before she could get far and said softly, “Sakura, you know you can come to me for anything. I’m here for you,” while his thumb rubbed reassuringly across the middle of her wrist.

Sakura turned around, her wide eyes filling with tears. Kakashi’s breath caught. For a moment, he

forgot he was in the middle of a busy street and he leaned down and pulled her into a comforting bear-hug. She stiffened at first, surprised, but allowed herself to relax into his hold for a moment. She gently pushed away again, whispering, "People will start to talk, you know."

Let them. Kakashi wanted to say those words so badly, but he knew he couldn't. He tried to convey it with his gaze, though, and she smiled at him, a genuine smile, understanding lighting up her brilliant green eyes. She squeezed his shoulder and said, "I can't, sensei, it's not my secret to tell."

He looked at her, proud that she had such loyalty to whatever friend's secret she was carrying. As he watched her go, much more calmly than she came, he couldn't help but think that Sakura'd make a wonderful wife someday.

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Chapter 17: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100698.html>

17 - Problems

“Mom! I’m home!” Hisako sensed the presence of her mother as she walked in the door, along with someone she didn’t recognize. She sighed. *How many will it take...?* She slipped her shoes off and padded into the house, being sure to make extra noise so she didn’t walk in on a scene that would scar her for life. Again.

Fortunately, her mother was bustling about in the kitchen while a strange man lounged on her couch with a bottle of sake in his hand. Hisako had to suppress an eyeroll and a grimace. *Not exactly a looker, is he?* She pushed that thought aside and put on a cheery face.

“Good evening, mother. How was your day?” She said in a neutral voice, kissing her mother on the cheek as she passed by, heading for an empty chair.

“Oh, Hisako, Sakura came by earlier. She said she was looking for you,” her mother said in response, casting (what she thought was) a stealthy sidelong glance at the bum on the couch.

Hisako’s blood ran cold.

Sakura came here... while *this* loser was around? This was why she didn’t like Sakura coming over. The creeps her mom brought home were... She had to suppress a shudder. Their looks alone could make you feel violated. The fact that Sakura hadn’t found her meant that something happened.

“Izanami,” the man called in a gruff voice. Hisako’s eyes widened at the lack of a suffix. *Totally disrespectful. I bet you haven’t even known her for a week, you creep.* “My bottle is empty. What’s wrong with this picture?” His speech was slightly slurred as he waved around said empty bottle.

“Sorry, dear. Hisako, could you get him another bottle?” Izanami tossed a glance at her daughter.

Can’t he get it himself? He has legs. I could fix that, if you like. She decided not to say that, but instead said, “Sure thing, mom.” She grabbed an unopened bottle and walked over to the man, handing it to him with an extremely fake smile. As she turned around, his “wandering hands” reached inside her shorts. In a movement so fast that the offender didn’t even have time to blink, she had grabbed a pressure point on his hand, her other hand cupping his shoulder blade, and he was face-first on the couch with his arm slowly being pulled out of its socket.

Hisako leaned down and whispered in his ear with a dangerous tone in her voice, “Things like that may work on my mother, and as long as she doesn’t complain, I won’t interfere. But if you *ever* try to touch me again in any way, shape or form... Well, let’s just say that a dislocated shoulder would be the very least of your worries.

The man nodded his understanding as best he could while his face was being pressed into the couch.

She released him and handed him the new bottle of sake and flashed him a cheery smile.

“Mom, I’ve got to go out again. I won’t be home for dinner.” She hastily made her exit, her thoughts turning to Sakura. *What happened?*

The door slammed shut and Hisako’s mother sighed.

“After all the time took to make supper...”

“Look on the bright side...” A creepy grin passed across his face. “More alone time for us.”

She giggled like a schoolgirl, and all thoughts of supper were forgotten.

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Hisako sighed and stepped out into the street. She thought about the creep who was helping himself to her mother. She wondered for a moment why her mother had such poor taste. There was really no point in wondering. If she was happy with her lifestyle, then Hisako had no right to interfere. She turned the corner, lost in thought... and ran straight into Kakashi.

“Kakashi-sensei...?” She blinked, confused.

“Hisako-san! Two in one day, I’m a lucky man.” Kakashi’s surprised expression shifted to recognition, his amicable voice breaking the ice.

“Two...?” She was totally lost.

“I had a similar run-in with Sakura earlier,” he explained, lacing his fingers behind his head as he fell into step beside her.

“Oh? I’m sure that was... interesting.” She giggled, and when Kakashi threw a sharp glance at her, she winked. He looked away pointedly, a blush coloring his cheeks below his mask. *Of course she told her. They’re best friends, after all. More like sisters, really.* “Don’t worry, she continued softly, breaking him from his thoughts. “I’ll take it to my grave.”

“Haha... thanks.” He chuckled, unsure what to say. “Where you headed?” He asked out of casual interest. He enjoyed her company. She was calm and laid-back like him, but had an interesting sense of humor.

“Oh, just wandering around,” she replied quickly, *too* quickly, not looking at him.

Oh? He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, intrigued. Where was she going that she didn’t feel comfortable telling him?

“I see. Well, I’ve got to get going. I’ll see you later, I’m sure,” he said, and disappeared with a poof.

As soon as Kakashi disappeared, Hisako headed for Sakura’s house. Kakashi watched from a rooftop above. He quickly came to the conclusion that it was just a stop along the way, since there was nothing

remotely embarrassing about that. Damn, now she had him curious. As she knocked on the door, he settled against the roof, hidden from sight. Nothing to do now but wait.

--

Hisako knocked on Sakura's door, shifting from foot to foot impatiently. When Sakura's mom opened the door she smiled quickly, but said, "Where's Sakura-chan? Is she okay?"

"What? She's upstairs... She's perfectly fine, why?"

"Just a feeling... Can I see her for a minute?" Hisako's urgent tone caught the woman's attention and she let her in.

Hisako took the stairs two at a time, afraid of what Sakura had seen.

"Sakura-" She ripped the door open and ran into the bedroom, coming to a standstill when she saw Sakura's sleeping figure.

"She's... asleep?" She slowly backed out of the room and gently closed the door behind her.

She made her way back down the stairs and smiled apologetically at the thoroughly confused woman staring at her.

"I'm sorry, I... just had a feeling, I guess," she shrugged noncommittally.

"That's okay, dear. She came home and headed straight for her room, saying she didn't feel well. But would you like to stay for supper?"

"No, thank you, but I have somewhere I need to be," Hisako declined politely, glancing at the window. Night was falling quickly.

"Well, in that case, take some rice balls with you. I made them for Sakura for lunch, but she forgot to take them. Please, go on," she prompted, handing the carefully wrapped package to a surprised Hisako. Her own mother never did anything like that for her. She bent her head, looking at the sack in her hands.

"Hisako-chan...?" Sakura's mother trailed off, confused. When the girl looked up at her with tear-filled eyes and flashed her a brilliant, sincere smile, her breath caught. The poor child had never known the simple luxuries of having a caring mother.

"You'd better get going, hadn't you?" Sakura's mom said gently. Hisako nodded, and the woman reached up and kissed the girl on the forehead. "You're always welcome here." Hisako left Sakura's house, having experienced for the first time in her life the warmth of a mother's love.

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Kakashi got to his feet as he heard Hisako's footsteps outside the house. She was carrying what looked like a pack lunch. She was about ten yards away from the house entrance when she disappeared.

...the hell? Where did she go? He leaned forward on the roof, searching frantically. *I lost her?*

“Kakashi-sensei, are you following me?”

Kakashi jumped and whirled around, his jaw dropping when he saw the very girl he'd just been tailing leaning nonchalantly with her back against the rail on the roof, examining her fingernails. *How did... When did... What?*

“No, no, of course not. I was just... looking... for something I thought I'd lost,” he replied, trying not to wince. As excuses go, that was probably one of the shakiest that he'd delivered.

“Right, sure,” she replied with sarcasm. “Just don't ‘lose’ things while ‘not’ following me too much,” she laughed. “Your ‘girlfriend’ might get jealous.”

“H-Hisako!” Kakashi was speechless, and a little flustered. She reassured him with a conspiratorial wink, and disappeared again with a poof.

Kakashi let out a long, slow breath. That girl... She sure was a mess. And to think, she was faster than he could track – even though he hadn't used his sharingan. Well, he supposed it made sense. After all, before the Chuunin exams, she trained every day with Lee for hours.

He was still a little shocked by what she'd said. *My... girlfriend, huh?* His heart leapt at the thought. Sakura wasn't yet, but if he had his way, she would be. His run-in with her earlier had just reinforced that.

But... Three years was a long time to wait.

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Chapter 18: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100711.html>

18 - Tenzo

When Sakura finally got home, she told her mother she wasn't feeling well and made a beeline for her room. Although Kakashi's comforting hug had calmed her down somewhat, she was still emotionally distraught. She couldn't believe Hisako had hid something like this from her. She felt guilt for not noticing anything suspicious sooner, but she also felt something close to betrayal. She had always confided everything in Hisako. Why didn't Hisako do the same, especially about something like this? It explained why she always came over unannounced, and why she never let Sakura stay the night, as well as she avoided having Sakura come over as much as she could.

And she wasn't even sure what to think about her little moment with Kakashi. She knew their relationship wouldn't be the same after that. But she didn't know what to do about it. Sakura's eyelids began to droop, the stress from both situations taking over her. She staggered to her bed and collapsed in it, sleep quickly overtaking her.

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Hisako headed toward the forest, constantly checking to make sure she wasn't followed. She did this on occasion when being around her mother got to be too much- she set up camp outside the village, among the trees. It sounded dangerous, but Hisako was one girl who was totally at peace with her surroundings, wherever that may be. She instinctively knew which parts of the forest were safe, and which were not. If there was no other choice, she'd light a small campfire, which would discourage any possible predators while she was sleeping.

She came to a clearing, and the sound of a gentle stream nearby made her sigh, already feeling some of the tension leave her body. She sank slowly into the soft grass, sitting in a cross-legged position, finally pulling out the package of rice balls Sakura's mother gave her. She laid it out before her and carefully unwrapped it.

Her eyes laid on the rice balls, and Hisako quickly came to the conclusion that she had never seen anything so beautiful. She picked one up, and took a gentle bite, cupping her hand and putting it right under her chin when some crumbled away instead of going into her mouth. She giggled at her own clumsiness and made short work of the first, quickly moving on to the second, and the third. By the time she finished with the fourth, she was so full she didn't think she could eat another bite. Sighing contentedly, Hisako closed her eyes and laid back against the gentle slope of the hill that curved slowly into the stream six or seven feet away from her. She extended her arms and ran her fingers through the soft grass as a gentle breeze toyed with her already messy hair. She wasn't sure if there was anything more peaceful than this. Her eyelids lazily fluttered open, and she smiled in awe at the brilliant sunset. Dazzling pinks and oranges, mixed with brilliant reds and purples painted the sky without a cloud in sight. She could hardly wait for the stars to come out. She sighed again gently as her eyelids slowly drifted closed and she was taken into a calm, dreamless sleep.

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Tenzo had been running back to the leaf village through the trees with the other ANBU agents sent on

their mission when he realized they'd be passing right by his favorite spot to be at this time of night. He slowed to a walk and dropped to the floor of the forest, telling the others to go on ahead. He'd catch up with them before they met up with the Hokage. Fidgeting with his mask out of habit, he calmly strolled toward the meadow he had been to so many times. *His* meadow. He hadn't seen it in a while- hadn't had the chance, really. His blank face cracked into a small smile as the trees parted to reveal his meadow- and the expression froze when he saw a girl lying on the hill, asleep. He slowly and silently walked over to her, looking at the sleeping girl. His eyes widened when he realized it was the same girl who he had seen sparring with Neji Hyuuga. Tenzo's hand slid up to his mask slowly, removing it so he could get a better look at the girl. He remembered the determined cast about her when she had been training with Neji. Her features seemed softer somehow in her sleep, more vulnerable. The gentlest smile he had ever seen in his life began to play around her lips as she curled and uncurled the hand that was closest to his foot, which was also close to her face. Her fingers reached out and wrapped around his ankle gently, her thumb playing with the tendon in his heel. He knelt down without shifting his footing and examined her more closely to be sure she actually was still asleep.

No doubt- she was definitely asleep. Her deep, even breaths made Tenzo want to stretch out on the grass next to her. He backed up slowly, his pupils dilating slightly when the smile disappeared as her fingertips lost their grip on his ankle. She had sensed his presence? No, that was silly; she'd only met him once. He knelt down again, putting his face close to hers. She really was beautiful, in the purest kind of way. He had seen her interact with Neji, and she didn't hold herself in the manner of someone who knew they were beautiful. Rather, she walked like she was average, and she knew it. Her lips parted slightly as she drew in a deep breath, unwittingly driving poor Tenzo to distraction. He wanted to kiss those lips. *Wait, what?* He shouldn't be thinking about kissing anyone. He was in ANBU. She was merely a Gennin. Although, one of the most fascinating Gennin he'd ever had the privilege to meet. There was no doubt in his mind- he needed to know more about her. As he walked back towards the woods, a smile played across his lips. He replaced his ANBU mask and as soon as the trees covered him, he ran at a full-out sprint to catch up with his teammates. Things were about to get a whole lot more interesting in his life.

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Chapter 19: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100793.html>

19 - Surprise Visit

Against his better judgment, or perhaps because of it, Kakashi decided to stay home that day. He woke up at some ungodly hour during the night, and it took forever to fall back asleep. When he finally woke up again, the sun was already high in the sky. The boys were probably furious. He wondered if he had come by to wake him up at some point. He always locked his doors and windows, but he knew a little broken glass never deterred Naruto. Kakashi slowly forced himself to sit up, and he rubbed his eyes blearily. *Yep, definitely not a morning person.* Not to mention his terrible night of sleep left him feeling like the living dead. He'd had awful nightmares- he couldn't remember them now, but they were there, niggling at his subconscious.

Groaning, Kakashi pried himself out of bed and staggered to the bathroom, turning on the shower with a lazy smack of his hand. As he waited for the water to heat up, he stared bleakly at his reflection in the mirror. He looked like hell. He didn't *feel* much better, either. When Kakashi heard a gentle tap on his bedroom window, he shrugged it off as a bout of wind. When it happened again, he decided it was too much effort to go investigate. When the knocking began a third time, his eyebrow twitched in annoyance. When it didn't stop, but was followed by a continuous steady tapping, he sighed in annoyance and grabbed his headband, tying it awkwardly around his face- he wouldn't realize til later that he had put it on upside down. That done, he padded over to the window.

Kakashi's hand froze on the frame when he saw a very wet Sakura perched on the sill, looking at him expectantly. She motioned expressively for him to push up the window. When he just stared at her blankly, frozen in place, she pushed down the light yellow scarf that covered her mouth and pointedly frowned at him.

"Are you going to let me in, or should I just drown?" She mouthed through the glass, gesturing to the downpour.

"What are you doing here?" He mouthed back, forgetting that it was pretty impossible to read lips that were covered up by a mask.

She shook with silent laughter, and for a moment Kakashi thought she was crying. Then she looked up at him and motioned to her face, staring pointedly at him.

Oh. Well, he felt like an idiot. He gently pushed the window up but put his arm on the frame, blocking her from entering.

"I said," Kakashi repeated in his usual deadpan, " 'what are you doing here?' "

"I came to check on you, sensei," she replied, sticking her tongue out at him. "Now will you let me in, please? It's really cold out here, and I'm soaking wet."

"Hmm," Kakashi said, his gaze drifting upward in mock thought. "I'm not sure."

“What’s there not to be sure of?” She asked incredulously, cupping her hand to catch some water, which she promptly flung at Kakashi’s bare chest. He flinched; that rain was cold as ice.

“That wasn’t what I was referring to.”

“Oh...” She looked confused for a moment, then realization, followed quickly by indignation flashed across her face. “What? Why not?”

Kakashi made a point of leaning out the window slightly and looking pointedly right and left, then drawing his head back in.

“Imagine what the neighbors would say.”

She stared at him, incredulity pooling in those jade green eyes, and dark humor dancing in his grey one. Was he really implying that *she* might compromise *him*? A slow blush crept to her already cold-nipped cheeks.

“I’m not the one who came to the window half-naked,” she snapped, and slipped under his arm with a flexibility that only a kunoichi could manage; a flexibility that made him shudder with the possibilities—there were so many things he could do to her with a flexibility like that. He felt a twitch in response below the waistline of his pants, and looked downward darkly.

Down, boy, Kakashi warned his manhood dryly. It would do no good to lose control and jump her bones right here and now. Well, it would do *some* good, just not the right kind.

Sakura turned around and as she peeled out of her raincoat, she regarded her sensei’s smooth, broad back. He had prominent shoulder blades that she could imagine beautiful angel wings unfolding from. Barely noticeable indents led to a point that met somewhere under the waist of his pants and next to them – dimples.

Oh, god. Dimples... on his back. Back dimples. Kakashi-sensei has back dimples! Her face turned a glorious red and she was glad, not for the first time, that he couldn’t read her mind. She wanted to reach out and traces those dimples with her fingertips so badly it hurt. Sakura cleared her throat awkwardly and he finally pivoted around to face her.

“You stood us up again...” She started, but her tone was a little harsh, so she started again. “You look like hell. What happened to you?” Well, that sounded even harsher.

“No need to hold back, Sakura,” he replied dryly. “Tell me how you really feel.” She shivered, but tossed him an exasperated smile. Kakashi frowned; she was cold. And wet. He leaned into the bathroom and grabbed a dry towel, throwing it over her head. She peered up at him, some of the droplets falling from her eyelashes and running down her cheeks. He leaned in involuntarily, his hands still on the ends of the towel. Sakura cleared her throat and Kakashi’s spell was broken; he quickly put two feet between them.

And was briskly whirled around by the shoulders and bodily thrown into the bathroom. “Sakura, what the-“ but his only response was having the door slammed in his face.

“I’m going downstairs to make coffee, and see if I can scrounge up some breakfast. You’ve got to have *something* cookable in this house,” she called through the door. “Take your time, sensei.”

He sighed as he heard her footsteps on the stairs. She was so *pushy!* Although, he had to admit, that was probably one of the reasons he was attracted to her. He liked a woman who could take charge in the bedroom. He heaved a sigh at that thought. He wasn’t going to let her take charge anywhere near the bedroom, as much as he’d like to. And, he admitted as he stepped into the already steaming shower, he’d like to a hell of a lot more than he should.

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Sakura landed at the bottom of the stairs, and froze in place. Her eyes swept across the living/dining/kitchen area and she gasped. Had a bomb gone off in here? There was trash and mail scattered on every surface. Her OCD kicked in- she had some work to do.

First she cleared off his dining table, bagging up the trash and putting the mail in a pile on the couch. It took longer than she expected, but once the surface was actually visible, Sakura took a sponge to the laminated material and scrubbed. It felt like hours before the grime came off, but soon it was sparkling. She was not going to do this halfway. Sakura set the trashbags outside and quickly set about cleaning off the stove and scrubbing it, as well.

Just look at this place! It looks like he hasn’t cleaned in months. This is going to take a while.

It took almost an hour and a half to make the room look presentable. Sakura knew he was lazy, but how could he stand to live in such a dirty house? She put the coffee on and began to prepare breakfast, waiting for Kakashi to finally come downstairs.

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Kakashi shut off the water, but he really didn’t feel like getting dressed. Instead of putting on the uniform he had thrown on the floor yesterday when he came home, he just put back on his white pajama pants and the smell of a very promising omelet had him heading downstairs.

When he hit the bottom step, he did a double take. It was... clean. He distinctly remembered this room being a mess yesterday. When he spied Sakura sitting on the *clean* island, minding the skillet, his eyes narrowed.

“What did you do?!” He cried, aghast. How had she possibly gotten *all* of this clean in just the time he was in the shower? Had she mastered some sort of time jutsu?

Sakura blinked at him and replied dryly, “I thought that would be obvious, Kaka-sensei.” To make matters worse, she seemed to be helping herself to his blueberry yogurt- that was his favorite flavor. The way her mouth closed over the spoon to make sure she didn’t let a single drop go to waste... His hands tightened into fists, and he felt a very strong twitch below his waistband.

“That’s my yogurt,” he told her, having to clear his throat to rid it of the raspy edge it had just acquired.

She paused, spoon half out of her mouth, to regard her teacher. He was as shirtless as before, not that she was complaining, but his hair hung around his face in damp lines, and a telltale drop of water would trace a path down his chest. Kakashi had a hungry look in his eye, but it didn’t seem to be craving food. Her cheeks warmed drastically, and she scooped out another spoonful and hastily put it in her mouth, drawing out the spoon from her closed lips with a resounding pop.

The skin around his eyes tightened and a pain look crossed his face- that was even evident while he was wearing the mask.

“Stop that,” he said hoarsely, his gaze boring into hers intensely.

“Stop what?” She asked, another spoonful of yogurt paused, perching on her bottom lip.

He cleared his throat again and took a step closer to her. “Eating your yogurt like that.”

“Like what?” She replied, confused. She ate the spoonful of yogurt, and when some got on her lower lip she licked it off with a sweep of her tongue. The pained look intensified and he grabbed her wrist gently when she tried to go for another spoonful.

“Like that,” he croaked, his voice barely above a whisper. Sakura bit her lip as he leaned forward until their cheeks brushed. He put one palm on the counter next to each hip, close enough to graze the fabric of her skirt and tickle the skin underneath. A sharp pang of arousal shot through her veins. She drew a shaky breath, and when his masked lips touched her neck, she stopped breathing altogether. She floundered; she didn’t know what to do. Her hands hovered over the back of his neck for several agonizing moments before she tentatively placed them at his hairline. Kakashi leaned back far enough to fix her with a one-eyed gaze.

“Why do you let me...?” He murmured, his hands meandering up and down her back. When a shudder shook her from head to toe, and her lips parted to sigh breathily in his ear... He nearly lost whatever remained of his self control right then and there. As it was, he leaned back into her neck and dragged his mask down so he could press his lips to her flesh unhindered. A small gasp came from her as Kakashi’s warm lips planted kisses and bites along her jaw. Her pulse skittered as he brushed his lips down across her jugular, and she could feel those lips curve up in a smile. When his tongue darted out to trace the indent in her collarbone, Sakura gasped out loud and knotted her fingers in his hair, pressing herself to him. All of a sudden, the long-forgotten breakfast popped back into her head, and she knew that if she didn’t say something now, it would go to waste.

“Um... the food’s about to burn...”

Sakura’s whispered words felt like a cold slap of water to the face for Kakashi. He pulled his mask up and stepped away from her in one fluid motion, not meeting her eyes. She slid off the counter and tended to breakfast while he padded over and began to play with the edge of the tablecloth fretfully. He couldn’t believe what he’d just done. If things had continued as they were, he would have taken her right there and then, in the middle of his kitchen.

They ate in silence, the air so tense it felt like a weight was pressing down on them. Kakashi's back was turned to her, and he stared at the kitchen sink without really seeing it. Sakura stared at the floor, unsure what to say or do. She wished now she hadn't said anything about the food, but it was probably better that she had, for both their sakes. If things could get any more awkward than *this*, it was definitely something to be avoided.

Sakura glanced out the window, wondering what Hisako would say to this situation while Kakashi glared at the faucet, wondering the same thing about Tenzo.

I could use some advice right about now.

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Chapter 20: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100808.html>

20 - Rainy Day

Sakura washed the dishes while Kakashi went upstairs to get dressed. *What just happened?* She wasn't sure what to make of it. On the plus side, she now knew for a fact that he was interested. There was no way she could miss that sizeable bulge as he pressed himself closer to her. Nobody reacted like that if they weren't interested. On the downside, things just got really, *really* awkward between her and her teacher.

Kakashi walked down the stair slowly, and Sakura couldn't help but smile when she saw he was buried in his usual Makeout Paradise novel.

"Ready to go?" she asked, and laughed when his eye shot up to her face, surprised. He'd been so engrossed in his novel that he forgot she was there.

"Uh... yeah." Kakashi sighed inwardly, and she could feel the tension rolling off him in waves.

She popped open a large black umbrella as she stepped outside and waited for him to lock up. They walked side by side in silence until they reached the street, where he stopped in his tracks. She stopped a few step ahead of him, accidentally leaving him exposed to the rain. A look of question was evident in her expression when she turned around to meet his eyes.

"Sakura?" His voice was his usual deadpan, but his gaze fixated on her, intense.

"Yes, sensei?" Her voice was surprisingly clear- she had to ball her hand into a fist to stop her fingers from shaking.

"Thanks for breakfast."

--

A single frigid raindrop fell on Hisako's face, and she jerked awake. She looked up at the sky with a confused expression as another fell and landed on the tip of her nose. Then the downpour began. Hisako shrieked and scrambled to her feet, making a hasty line for the trees. She stood under the tree's protection and watched wave after wave of raindrops attack the landscape in awe.

Today is a bad day to wear just a t-shirt and shorts, she thought dryly as a shudder wracked her whole body. She needed to get somewhere dry and warm before she caught a cold. With a heavy sigh, she headed back toward the village at a run.

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Tenzo looked out his window at the deluge with a sour expression. He usually loved the rain, but when it was coming down like this and it was this cold outside, he doubted he'd get to see a certain gennin.

I hope she managed to get out of there before it started pouring.

He sighed as he glanced about his room. He'd passed on the mission he would have been assigned today, due to a "cold." Truth was, he just wanted to see that girl again. Now that that was out of the question, Tenzo decided to do something productive- house cleaning.

With another disappointed sigh, he rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

--

A drenched Hisako finally made it home. She slid her window open and practically fell inside, eager to escape the cold rain. She dragged the curtains closed and peeled out of her soggy clothing, hanging them up to dry on the empty towel rack. She grabbed the towel that had been lying on the radiator and used it to dry herself off, reveling in the warmth.

She wrapped the towel around herself and walked over to her closet in search of dry clothes that were preferably more suited to this type of weather. She opted for a maroon flannel long-sleeved shirt and a pair of black pants that bunched around the ankle. Making sure the door was locked, she shed her towel and slipped into the dry clothes.

Hisako pulled the ribbon that was holding her hair up, and it came down in cascading waves to rest on her back. She shivered again and clambered into bed, burrowing under the covers and curling her knees to her chest.

If she was ever going to spend another night in that meadow, she was investing in a tent.

--

"So why did you come to check on me?"

Kakashi's abrupt question snapped Sakura out of her trance.

"Hmm?" She replied, not following.

"I said, why did you come to check on me?" He repeated, then sighed.

"Well, you stood us up for training. Usually you send word if you can't make it. And when you don't, you're either gravely injured or ill. Sasuke-kun and Naruto both volunteered me to check on you, and they went home." She gave a small laugh at the memory.

"Mm," he grunted.

"Say, I need to do some grocery shopping for my mom, and from the look of your fridge, you do, too. Would you mind accompanying me?"

Well, it wouldn't hurt to ask, she thought. I like being around him.

"Hmm," he grunted again, considering. He had no legitimate reason to turn her down, and he really did need groceries. Kakashi snuck a sideways glance at Sakura. She seemed unfazed by what happened earlier, so as long as he didn't let his control slip like that again, it should be fine. Right? "Ah, why not?"

"Oh, really? That's awesome!" She grinned at him, and he wondered why his presence made her so happy. As far as he was concerned, he was a grumpy old man. How could that appeal to a fifteen year old girl?

Sakura stumbled, and Kakashi's hand grabbed her elbow, steadying her. The hand stayed on her arm a fraction too long, and the way it slid off her arm to fall back at his side was more like a caress. Her breathing became subtly heavier.

Kakashi glanced at her worriedly. This is how she reacts just to him touching her arm?

She's not going to make this easy. Not at all.

--

Tenzo looked around, satisfied he'd made a sufficient dent in the housework for the day. He grabbed his umbrella and headed out into the storm; he had some shopping to do.

He walked down the street, glad he'd put on his boots- the dirt was now no more than a long stretch of mud. Tenzo walked past shop after shop, restaurant after restaurant. There seemed to be a gloomy cast about them all- not very many people were like him, willing to brave the storm to do errands. He stopped midstride when his eyes landed on Kakashi-senpai and his student Sakura Haruno walking together, sharing the same umbrella. In one of Sakura's arms was a bag filled with what looked suspiciously like groceries. In her other hand was the umbrella handle, and Kakashi had to lean forward slightly to avoid getting bonked in the head. Tenzo's interest was further piqued by the fact that Kakashi's hand appeared to be on the small of her back. He rolled his eyes heavenward in wordless exasperation.

Subtle, senpai, subtle.

They were almost shoulder-to-shoulder now, and kakashi looked up to meet Tenzo's inquisitive gaze. The skin around his eye tightened, but when he registered Tenzo's non-condemning smile, his posture shifted subtly. He seemed less tense, more at peace. Tenzo frowned, thinking.

Looks like he's feeling pretty guilty about the thing with Sakura. I wonder just what's going on between them? He'd better watch his step.

Tenzo carried on with his shopping in a thoughtful mood, wondering whether or not to approach his senpai. After all, Kakashi looked like he needed someone to talk to.

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Chapter 21: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100839.html>

21 - Rain and Tears

"Sensei?" Sakura turned to face Kakashi as they reached her front step. Kakashi had a bag of groceries in one arm and the other was snaked around her, his hand on the small of her back. She had her own bag of groceries in her arm, resting on her hip.

"Hmm?" Over the course of the day, Kakashi had found himself relaxing bit by bit, opening up to her. It was so easy to forget everything with her. Being around Sakura just felt... right. He looked at her now, and his stomach clenched at her serious expression.

"I..." She started, then paused, biting her lip.

"What is it, Sakura?" Kakashi gave her a somber look, not sure if he wanted to hear her next words.

"Um... I had a really good time today... with you." She looked away from him, her cheeks staining a glorious red. He had to suppress a chuckle- she was just so cute.

"I did, too, Sakura," he replied, his eye crinkling up in a smile. She quickly glanced up and down the street to make sure there were no witnesses, then reached up on her tiptoes and pressed a hasty kiss to his cheek, just tagging the corner of his mouth. He wanted so badly to turn his head so their lips touched through the thin fabric. But he didn't, and too soon she had returned to her original position.

"Can we... do this again sometime soon?" Her words were tentative, but hopeful.

"Sakura..." Kakashi sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" She pouted, her bottom lip jutting out.

"Because I'm your teacher," he said flatly.

"So? Ino, Shikamaru and Chouji go out and about with Asuma-sensei all the time," she protested.

"That's different, and you know it." He sighed, regarding her wearily. "I don't see Naruto or Sasuke anywhere, and Asuma doesn't accost Ino in his kitchen, does he?"

Sakura blushed at the reminder of what happened that morning. She jutted her chin out, defiant. "But what does it matter?"

"What does it... What does it matter?" He exploded. "Sakura, it matters a great deal! You have no idea how much trouble we'd be in if people even started *guessing* about a relationship between the two of us, much less if they were right! I'd lose my job, and any credibility I have, and your career would be way past over."

"Sensei, I-" Sakura started, but he cut her off.

"If even *that* doesn't convince you, how about statutory rape? You're *fifteen*, I'm *thirty*! I'd be thrown in prison for God knows how long. You'd be branded as that girl who'd fool around with her teacher to get a better grade. Is that what you want?"

"I wasn't asking for you to take me to bed, sensei," she remarked coldly. "It's just a date, if you could even call it that."

"Same thing, Sakura. One date leads to another date which leads to another which leads to..." He trailed off, the fire in his grey eye giving her a graphic image of exactly what those dates would lead to. He stepped closer to her, invading her space as her heart squeezed painfully. "It would be better if we both just pretended like today didn't happen."

"But I-" She was cut off again by a warm finger pressed to her lips.

Kakashi leaned forward and kissed her forehead so gently that tears began to form in her eyes.

"I can't, Sakura," he whispered against her forehead. "I just can't."

And he was gone, unwittingly taking a part of Sakura's heart with him.

Her umbrella fell to her side and the rain kissed her face, mingling with the bitter tears that flowed freely down her cheeks. She stood like that for a long time, staring blankly at the spot where Kakashi should be.

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Chapter 22: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100868.html>

22 - 3 Days

As expected, Tenzo saw neither hide nor tail of the girl, and he was in a right foul mood. He usually loved the rain, but today it was just a nuisance. His thoughts turned to Kakashi, and the “date” he was with. To the untrained eye it would look like nothing more than a sensei accompanying his student on some errands. But Tenzo knew Kakashi better than most. He saw past the aloof façade and the torrent of emotions underneath. And he definitely saw the way his senpai was looking at Sakura. And the way her body unconsciously reacted to his told Tenzo that Kakashi wasn’t alone in his feelings. Honestly, he didn’t have a problem with them as a couple, but he knew that there were less accepting people. And if he knew Kakashi, which he did, he’d try to push her away.

If I’m right about how their “date” ended, he probably needs some emotional support right about now, even though he’d rather die than admit it.

With that last thought in mind, Tenzo headed home to drop his groceries off, then headed straight to Kakashi’s house.

--

Kakashi walked home slowly, his foul mood giving off a tangible aura that caused any passerby (few and far between in this weather) to give him a wide berth. His posture was even more slouchy than usual, and his heels dug into the ground with each step, kicking up mud. His hands were stuffed in his pockets angrily, and if “looks could kill,” anyone who met his gaze would have died a thousand times over.

Sometimes, doing the right thing sucks balls, Kakashi noted sourly. He knew he made the right decision by putting her in her place and walking away. So why did it hurt so damn much? Being with her felt so right. It was so easy to forget everything when he was around her.

Maybe I should encourage a relationship between her and Sasuke. I’m not sure how that’ll work... He can’t stand her most of the time. Hmm... Maybe, I could... bribe him with special training... He may eventually learn to like her. As long as she’s happy... That’s all I can really ask.

Kakashi rounded the corner and started up the first step to his cold, empty apartment when he spotted Tenzo leaning casually against the fence next to the door. Kakashi reigned in his emotions and put on his usual cheerful face.

“Well, hey there. How’s my favorite little kohai?” His cheery voice gave away nothing of the hurt he was going through inside. Tenzo was impressed, if he admitted it to himself.

“Hey, senpai... I was... just in the neighborhood, and I thought I’d stop by. We haven’t seen each other in a while, so...” He threw his hand behind his head and ran his fingers through his hair sheepishly, knowing that excuse was shaky at best.

“That’s true,” Kakashi agreed, putting a hand to his chin in contemplation. He then put that hand on

Tenzo's shoulder and finished, "But I just feel like being alone tonight, if it's all the same to you, Ten-chan."

"B-but senpai," he stammered, flustered by the absurd pet name. "We haven't seen each other in so long! I've missed your company."

"Tenzo..." Kakashi looked taken aback. Tenzo could have sworn he saw a sly grin creep across the man's masked face then. His eyes widened in surprise when Kakashi put a thumb on Tenzo's chin, angling it upward as he leaned forward until their faces were mere centimeters away. "If you wanted 'company,' you should have said so in the first place."

Tenzo blushed as Kakashi's voice whispered intimately in his ear. He pushed the older man away gently and coughed as he regained his personal space.

"Very funny, Kakashi-senpai," Tenzo said in a shaky voice. Kakashi always messed around with him like that, and he always got the same reaction out of Tenzo- lots of stammering and blushing.

"Oh, well," Kakashi sighed, seemingly disappointed. "It's your loss." He shook his head sadly and walked slowly up the steps, each footfall echoing loudly in the gloomy darkness.

"Oy, senpai-" Tenzo started forward, stretching out his palm in a "wait" gesture, but stopped in his tracks when Kakashi held up a hand.

"Tell you what, Ten-chan," Kakashi said, earning another protesting blush from his kohai. "I should be done with my Icha Icha marathon in about three days. Meet me at the teahouse downtown, you know the one, and we can go for drinks. First one's on me for a change."

"Um, yes..." Tenzo knew it was the best he could do when he was dealing with someone like Kakashi.

--

True to his word, Kakashi went upstairs and put in the first of many Icha Icha movies, grabbed a bag of munchies, and settled in for three days of mind-numbing Makeout Paradise. Truth be told, he probably wouldn't move at all during those three days. Besides, mind-numbing sounded pretty good about now; being alone with one's thoughts didn't appeal to Kakashi right then, or any time soon.

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Chapter 23: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100902.html>

23 - Day 1

The next three days were torture for Sakura. As expected, Kakashi skipped their training, and on the first day, Naruto went to collect him (Sakura refused, giving him a very scary glare). He came back Kakashi-less and flustered. Apparently the man was home, because Naruto could hear him watching a movie... with lots of moaning involved. They didn't need to ask.

Sakura's gaze had lost its depth, and the color had faded from her cheeks. She had to be asked a question several times before she would respond.

Naruto was concerned. Well, in fairness, so was Sasuke- he'd just rather die a thousand painful deaths than admit it. He did, however, show his care while they lounged about in Training Ground 3 in the hopes their absent teacher would show up at some point- Naruto hanging upside down from a tree, Sasuke leaning coolly against the trunk, and Sakura sitting on the ground at the root of the tree, resting her chin on her knees.

"What crawled up your @\$@ and died, Sakura?" Sasuke asked in a disinterested voice.

"Shut up, Sasuke-kun," Sakura replied politely, turning her head away in defiance.

"Seriously, Sakura," Naruto piped in, "you've been moody since you got here. What's your deal?"

Sakura didn't even look up. She straightened one arm out from her body, curled her hand into a fist, and slammed it against the trunk of the tree. The entire tree shook and Naruto was unceremoniously dumped to the ground, landing facefirst. Sasuke had to suppress a snigger as Naruto hastily stood up, brushing himself off. He seemed about to tell Sakura off, but thought better of it. He and Sasuke met eyes, and they both mouthed, "P.M.S. ?"

She stood up in a sudden, jerky motion, and they both flinched.

"Screw this- I'm going home. If sensei wants to skip our training, then I'm going to make the most of my free time." She stormed off, leaving an angry cloud of dust in her wake. Sasuke and Naruto just looked at each other, confused once again by the ever-changing female temperament.

What she failed to mention was that she'd make the most of her free time... sulking. She wasn't one to take rejection well, and when he went as far as skipping training to avoid her... That really set her off. It's pretty hard to "forget" something if you didn't act like you normally would. And Kakashi definitely wasn't acting like he normally would.

When she finally made her way home (after storming through the village in a huff, leaving a trail of dust and overturned market stands in her wake), her mom instantly knew something was wrong. Her first clue when her daughter slammed the door so hard, the whole house shook. Her second clue was when she yelled, "I'm not feeling well," and stormed up to her room, slamming that door with another house-shaking bang.

Well, I think I'll let her cool off before I go up there... It's best to let sleeping dogs lie, as they say.

--

Hisako was glad that the storm finally blew over- she could continue her training. She climbed out of bed and stretched, letting out a massive yawn. Who knew someone could sleep so much? Opening the window with a shove, she noted with pleasure that it was a beautiful day. What luck! With a wide grin, the girl quickly changed into her training gear, tied her headband around her waist firmly, and hopped out the window, heading for the training area at a run.

Today, Tenten had agreed to spar with her. The girl had needed to work on her timing with the weapons, and Hisako needed to work on her speed and defense- something she had been neglecting since Lee's injury at the exams. As she ran through the waking village, her thoughts wondered to Sakura... and Sakura's newfound "problem." Being sought after by an older man was a heady thing. It made a girl feel special, feel wanted. The fact that an older guy would take interest in a younger girl wasn't necessarily a good thing, though. Young girls will do anything for that kind of attention, and older men know how to get what they want. Now that wasn't to say she thought Kakashi would take advantage of her like that, or that Sakura would allow herself to be used. No, if his feelings were genuine, he wouldn't besmirch her honor like that. Although, being a man of his age, they do tend to lean toward more "physical" things in their relationships. Who knows, really? This whole thing was a mystery to her. What she did know was that if Kakashi hurt Sakura in any way, shape or form, she would be happy to cause him slow, agonizing pain... Maybe breaking one finger at a time? Or maybe she'd go a little happy with a kunai on his pretty arms-

Her thoughts were interrupted when she ran headlong into someone's chest. Luckily for her, the man caught her before she fell backwards and unceremoniously landed on her rear. Hisako shook the stars from her eyes, and then looked up to see who exactly it was she plowed into.

"I'm so sorry! Please forgive me," the man exclaimed, blushing as he realized he was still holding the girl who nearly bowled him over. His hazel eyes held embarrassment, then recognition. "Wait... You're... Hisako, right? Sakura-chan's friend?"

"Yes, but who..." Confusion was plain as day on Hisako's face.

"Pleased to finally make your acquaintance, Hisako-san. You can call me Ryouko."

"Oh... OH! Oh, my god, you're Ryouko!" She slapped a palm to her forehead in realization. "Nice to meet you, too. I've heard nice things, but I guess the village is bigger than I thought, if we're just meeting now."

"Haha... Indeed. It's a wonder how we've managed it this long. Where are you headed? May I walk with you?" When Hisako gestured her consent, he fell into step beside her as she continued her path to the training ground.

"Oh, I'm just headed to the training area for some sparring with Tenten-san. I didn't get the chance to yesterday, and it's just gorgeous today, so I thought, 'Why waste an opportunity like this,' you know?"

Hisako snuck a sidelong glance at Ryouko as he listened, facing ahead.

“The weather *is* nice today, isn’t it?” He had to agree, looking up at the cloudless sky.

“You know...” Hisako started, her expression serious. “You’re cuter than I thought you’d be. Not that I’m saying I didn’t think you’d be cute, but Sakura isn’t very good at explaining things.” She held her serious expression as she took in his reaction to her statement.

“H-Hisako-san!” Ryouko protested and turned a very bright shade of pink, refusing to meet her eyes. She giggled and looked back at the path before them, sparing him further embarrassment.

“You’re cute when you blush, too.” Well, maybe not sparing him anything, after all.

“You don’t hold back, do you?” He replied with a flustered cough, blushing again.

“Nah, not really,” she replied with a grin, lacing her fingers behind her head casually as they walked.

Ryouko cast a sidelong glance at his current companion. She was pretty cute, he decided, and she seemed pretty laid back. *Probably taken, though, with my rotten luck. Best not to even start down that path.* Their amiable conversation continued until the pair reached Hisako’s destination, and they both said their goodbyes.

“Here we are, Hisako-san. It’s been a pleasure.”

“It really has. You’re pretty cool, Ryouko-kun. We should do this more often,” she replied with a friendly grin.

Ryouko blushed again at the compliment, and they both waved before parting ways.

He really is pretty cool, Hisako thought as she headed up to where Tenten was probably already waiting for her. *He had a kind of aura of loneliness, though. Maybe I should pay him a visit sometime. The guy looks like he could use the company.*

--

Tenzo was mad at himself. He used his “sick” excuse yesterday, so he couldn’t use the same excuse today. Besides, he wasn’t really one to shirk his responsibilities, anyway. A top-secret ANBU mission that he couldn’t deny diplomatically was sent his way, and he’d had to gear up and head out before dawn had even cracked.

Just when the weather turned nice like this... I might have seen her today.

--

Hisako and Tenten exchanged greetings and went straight to work. Neither knew the other very well, so there wasn’t much to talk about. Hisako noted slightly glumly that Tenzo-sama was nowhere to be found. Well, it makes sense that he wouldn’t, if he had “just been passing through,” as he’d said. Still,

she'd give anything to see him again.

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Chapter 24: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100931.html>

24 - Day 2

NOTE: Yes, I **am** trying to make my chapters longer. It's kind of frustrating, because I just want to be like, "Okay this is enough. *post*" But I'm workin' on it! Anyway, enjoy!

--

Bright and early, Sakura showed up at the usual spot to wait for Team 7. She wasn't even sure why-force of habit, probably. She was willing to put money on the fact that Kakashi wouldn't show... again. The pink-haired kunoichi folded her arms over her chest and stared angrily at the fence across from her. She slipped into her thoughts, mulling over the past few days.

She never did find out what caused Kakashi's injuries- the one's she'd had to treat. It had been such a relief to her then that Hisako was a quick study, and an even better teacher. Her friend had attempted the path of a medic ninja for a little while- her unreal chakra control was well-suited to the task, and she picked up the basics of healing jutsu in no time. When it went on to poisons and more intricate and complex procedures, though, she dropped out, saying that the path of a typical shinobi was more to her liking than being a medic-nin. She did, however, teach Sakura the basics, which she practiced on her until she far surpassed her teacher. Her drive not to be a burden pushed her to excel at this one thing- and excel she did. Far beyond Hisako, and even better than a lot of the medic-nins in the village. That was why Ryouko called on her of all people for help- that and she would understand and respect Kakashi's wish for privacy.

She thought about her visit to Hisako's house. That man was obviously not her friend's father, and Sakura never knew Hisako's mother was... that way. She'd always looked up to Hisako, and she figured that her friend's admirable qualities were inherited from her mother; that was clearly not the case. Sakura had been distressed when she learned this, because it made her realize how little Hisako talked about herself. She always listened to Sakura's problems and Sakura's gossip and Sakura's good news- but the roles never really reversed.

Starting today, Sakura vowed, that will change. I want to be there for Hisako like she always is for me.

A familiar set of footsteps brought her back to reality, and she looked up with only a slightly forced smile.

"Good morning, Sasuke-kun!"

"Yo," Sasuke replied disinterestedly. "Naruto not here yet?"

"No, not yet," she sighed heavily, her mind on another member of their team who hadn't arrived yet, either. Sasuke threw her a shrewd glance. *I highly doubt she's thinking of Naruto with longing like that in her voice. But it doesn't make sense that she'd think of Kakashi-sensei like that, either. What the heck is her problem?*

Not too long after, Sasuke and Sakura heard the cry of their number-one knucklehead teammate.

“Sasuke! Sakura-chaaaaan!” Naruto was running full-tilt at the pair, looking more frazzled than usual. “I’m late, I’m sorry. I kinda... overslept.” A sheepish grin played across his face at the obvious disdain of his teammates.

“Jeez, Naruto, is there anything you *can* do right?” Sakura snipped, glaring at the poor unwitting boy.

“Hey, Sakura-chan, I-“ A look of hurt flashed across his face before he recovered himself, allowing a sheepish, yet defiant look to settle in its place. “Yeah, maybe one day.”

Immediately, regret touched her eyes, and Sakura hoped Naruto saw it there, because she was too proud to admit it aloud. Instead, she stated the obvious, yet annoying fact: “Kakashi-sensei is late. Again.”

“Not yet, Sakura,” Sasuke corrected. “It’ll be another hour before he’s late by *his* standards.”

“That’s true,” she admitted with a defeated sigh. They settled in to wait it out.

--

Hisako’s partner was Neji again today. They stood about twenty feet apart, regarding each other carefully. At each movement of one, the other responded accordingly. There was no way Hisako was going to take any chances with a Gentle Fist user. Neji’s thoughts were along the same line; she managed to land a hit on him the last time they fought- he wasn’t going to allow that to happen again. His pride had been injured, and it demanded retribution.

Hisako picked right up on the extra intensity coming from the Hyuuga boy, and unconsciously tensed up under his stare. Things would not go as last time, of this she was certain.

“Are you ready to begin?” Hisako called to her partner.

“Bring it,” he replied tersely. “I won’t be holding back today.”

“Tch.” *Who asked you to hold back in the first place?* “All right, let’s go!”

--

Tenzo got back late the night before. He almost didn’t bother to change out of his uniform before collapsing on his bed, but he knew he’d get yelled at for it somehow.

He woke up about four hours later, feeling like death warmed over. He staggered to the bathroom, stripped, turned on the warm water and stood there in the shower for several long minutes with his eyes closed, letting the water warm him and flush the tiredness from his body. After about fifteen minutes of this, he felt recovered enough to shut off the water and pad back into his bedroom, donning his navy-longsleeved shirt, navy pants and green vest, saving his hitai ate for last. After popping into the kitchen to grab a banana from the fridge, Tenzo was as ready as he’d ever be. He headed for those training grounds with a slight bounce in his step; he could feel it- today was the day he’d see a certain

gennin.

--

Hisako and Neji were hardly anything but blurs to the unskilled eye. They darted in and out of their opponent's range, testing for an opening, occasionally parrying an attack. The moment they sensed that man's presence, they split apart wordlessly and locked eyes. It was the same man from last time, that same strong, safe presence that put Hisako at ease. But in all fairness, he looked like hell, she thought as she snuck a glance at him. He had deep bags under his eyes that showed tremendous lack of sleep, and even his posture was a little more slouched than last time. He had clearly had a late night.

Neji's tension had increased tenfold with the appearance of the man who claimed not to be from ANBU. He had to prove his worth. At Hisako's distraction, he snorted, and called out clearly, "Your opponent is me! It wouldn't do to get distracted," as he rushed at her.

She dodged just in time and replied in a pleasant tone, "You would know, Neji-kun, right?" Then she remembered Lee's warning- *Don't antagonize Neji! He gets very defensive, and becomes stronger. You'd be in for a tough fight. Oops.*

The Hyuuga boy in question let out a derisive, angry grunt and aimed a solid punch at her stomach, and when she dodged, swept his leg under her feet, causing her to lose her footing. She fell backwards, but a hand shot out and she propelled herself up and away from the angry boy. Hisako circled around him for a moment, and then ran back toward him.

--

What's with these guys? This fight is a lot more intense than the last one.

Tenzo looked on with awe, caught up in the girl's intense expressions, her different stances, the graceful way her body shifted to react to her opponent's attacks and back to offense, launching attacks of her own. He could watch her spar all day, he decided, but that might come off as a bit creepy. As it was, he watched them for a good hour, and when they looked like they were about to stop for a short break, he disappeared with a body flicker jutsu. No need overstaying his welcome.

--

Of course, Kakashi never showed. Sakura was pretty pissed. Of course. Instead of making a scene like yesterday, she quietly slipped away in the middle of one of Sasuke's and Naruto's arguments, wandering the village aimlessly. If this kept up much longer, she'd go insane. Not to mention, Kakashi would get in trouble for shirking his duties. She ground her teeth together. If she didn't see him soon, she'd lose what little was left of her wits at this point.

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Chapter 25: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100941.html>

25 - Day 3

The third day, Sakura didn't even bother showing up for training- there was no point. She knew perfectly well that their teacher wouldn't be there. Luckily, she got herself up every day and got ready on her own; her mother wouldn't come to check on her. She lay there in her warm bed for several hours, just staring angrily at the ceiling. As she lay there, her anger and frustration slowly welled up inside her until she wanted to scream. She jolted upright, the sheets falling in a pile around her lap. Sakura smoothed out the lump of fabric, then wadded it up in her hand, forming a fist so tight that her knuckles drained of color and the bones jutted out harshly against her pale skin.

She wasn't going to take this lying down. Sakura Haruno was going to give Kakashi Hatake a piece of her mind.

--

"Sakura's late," Sasuke commented in a monotone.

"Thank you, Master of Deduction," Naruto replied dryly, earning a solid punch to the arm from his teammate.

"Aren't you worried? Your dear Sakura-chan, so adamant about punctuality, is late."

"Tch." Naruto defiantly looked away from Sasuke, his face burning. "Sakura's a big girl. She can take care of herself. Why? Are *you* worried? The stoic Sasuke who doesn't care about anyone is worried about Sakura?"

Another punch to the arm quickly silenced him.

--

Hisako woke up shortly after sunrise- her light green tent got kind of bright under the sun's rays. She stretched, sore after her intense workout of a sparring session with Neji yesterday. After Tenzo had left, Neji had pushed and pushed until he come close to his limit, and although he hadn't managed to land a single hit against her, Hisako was rapidly approaching hers as well. Eventually she had to 'man up' and call it quits for the day, ceding defeat to Neji- she knew quite well that he wouldn't give up.

"Okay, Neji-kun. I admit defeat."

"What was that?" The smug edge of his tone irked her to no end, but she just smiled blithely at him, albeit tiredly.

"You win, you win."

After that, she made her way through town and picked up a sturdy tent and sleeping bag- she didn't want another repeat of waking up to that storm. Hisako had foregone going back to her house, except to

get some extra clothes- it was just more comfortable at that meadow. She wasn't sure why, apart from the tension that always lurked in the back of her mind when she was at home.

After working out her sore muscles, Hisako decided to go visit Lee in the hospital. She had neglected going to see him for too long. There was a patch of beautiful flowers not twenty feet from her tent, and she'd pick some and arrange a pretty bouquet for him, she decided. The girl clambered out of the tent and set to work before heading to the hospital.

--

Sakura walked slowly through the village, allowing her anger to simmer just below the surface. She projected a rather scary aura- anyone unlucky enough to have to walk by her quickened their pace and cast tense, worried glances back in her direction. She couldn't really blame them; she probably looked like she was going to commit a murder. No, murder was too merciful for Kakashi. If she was going to kill him, she'd make him suffer first. But before that, she needed to make it to his house before she snapped.

--

Today was the day. Tenzo had been promised a round of drinks by Kakashi. Whether or not Kakashi would hold up to his end of the bargain was still undetermined, but it was the best Tenzo was going to get. It was a pretty chill day. His mission two nights ago was a killer, and he had been passed up for today's mission so he could get some R&R, which is exactly what he was doing. The man was sprawled on his worn couch, his eyes glued the nature channel on his ancient tv. He just never got around to replacing it. The thing even had antennas on it. Tenzo wasn't really paying attention to the program- he was sound asleep, even though his eyes were open. It was a handy trick he'd learned in ANBU training- the enemy was less likely to attack if they thought you were awake. His main thing right now was to store up enough energy to stay out for what was likely to be an all-nighter with Kakashi, though he would try to make it shorter than that.

--

Sakura just barely managed to make it to Kakashi's front step before her lid flipped. She knocked very angrily on the door, shouting, "Sensei, I KNOW you're in there, I can hear your stupid movie!"

"..." No response.

"Dammit, sensei, what the hell is wrong with you?! You say, 'Just forget it ever happened.' It's pretty damn hard to forget when you won't even act like normal! Going so far as to avoid me... You're just a jerk. A coward!"

"..." Still nothing.

"shoot... answer me, you bastard, or so help me, I'll kick down this door-"

The door Sakura had just about to put her foot through opened with a harsh yank, and a masked, shirtless Kakashi appeared before her, his hand still on the knob. There were dark circles under his

visible eye, and his face was devoid of color. His gaze was hard and flat as he looked down at her with that expressionless face she hated.

“What do you want, Sakura?” She flinched; his tone was harsh and unforgiving. Her temper wavered a little under his stony glare.

“I... You’re avoiding me, and you’re skipping training. Naruto and Sasuke are getting irritated...” She trailed off, her voice cracking as his expression refused to change.

“Go home, Sakura.” His voice was gentler this time, but his gaze remained as stony as ever. His guard was up, full-force. That hurt her somewhere deep inside. She didn’t want him to have to be guarded around her. As he turned to go back inside, she made a wordless cry of protest, but he just stepped inside, and the door slid gently shut in her face.

“Sakura... Go wash out your mouth. With soap.”

--

Hisako made her way up to Lee’s room, flowers in hand. Just thinking about the poor boy made her heart hurt. His dream of being a brilliant shinobi... In shambles. All because of that man... Gaara. She promised herself she’d get revenge for Lee. The next chuunin exams, she would humiliate Gaara in front of thousands of people- in front of his own people.

“Oh, Hisako-san! Nice to see you again. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” A friendly medic-nin smiled at her.

“Yes, it has, Katsume-san. Too long. How is he?”

“He’s doing quite well, considering... But, we have had to resort to resort to tying him to his bed sometimes... He gets it in his head to overcome this ‘challenge.’ Poor boy.”

“Thank you, Katsume-san. May I see him?” A solemn expression framed Hisako’s features, and the nurse nodded quietly.

“Yes, but... He’s asleep.”

“I see, I’ll be sure not to wake him, then.”

--

Sakura was left drained emotionally from her outburst, and oddly comforted in his reaction. His voice tended to have that effect on her. But his eye... She shuddered delicately. She’d never seen such a cold look aimed toward her. He’d only aimed that look at foes he faced in battle. Never at his teammates, and certainly never at her. She walked slowly back through the village, unaware where she was even going; she let her feet lead.

--

The dried-out flowers Hisako had brought the last time she visited were replaced with the ones she'd picked that day, and stood next to Lee's bed, enclosing one bandaged hand in both of hers. She spoke softly so as not to rouse him, but so that his unconscious may hear.

"Lee-san... You were an amazing teacher. I'm so glad I had the privilege to learn from you. You worked me like a dog," she laughed softly, "but I'm all the better of a warrior for it. You'll never believe... I actually managed to land a hit on Neji the other day!" Hisako imagined that a stunned silence rose from the sleeping boy. "I know, who would have thought! He was pretty mad about it, though, and worked us both to the bone yesterday. He's a fierce opponent. I only hope I can make you proud, Lee-san, and that one day I can have the honor of fighting alongside you again... And who knows, maybe... Maybe one day I'll be good enough to actually hold my ground against you!"

She leaned down and pressed her lips gently to Lee's brow, brushed the hair from his eyes, and gave his hand one last squeeze before quietly leaving the recuperating boy to his slumber.

--

"Ouch!" Sakura rubbed her head gingerly as she stepped back to see who ran into her.

"Hisako-chan! What brings you to... the hospital?" Sakura's confusion was obvious on her face.

"Yes, the hospital, Sakura-chan. Were you so deep in thought that you didn't know where you were going?" Hisako teased her friend.

"Yeah, I guess so..." Sakura's solemn response made Hisako take a closer look at her friend. She was emotionally distressed. Well, drained was the right word, really. She had obviously just let out a lot of emotion in a short period of time.

"I just went to visit Lee-san. And you, what's wrong?"

"Oh, jeez. Where do I start?" Sakura rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips exaggeratedly.

"Well, why don't you meet me at the teahouse in about an hour? I've got to change out of these clothes- I slept in them! Yuck. As for you- wash your face and put on some makeup. No offense, love, but you look like crap."

"Yeah, yeah," Sakura mumbled, though her mood was marginally improved. She'd get to vent to somebody who knew about her situation. Finally!

--

About an hour later, when the girls had both freshened up, they met outside the teahouse, and headed in together, arm in arm. They both decided quickly that a table at the very back of the place would be best- not so many eavesdropping opportunities. In retrospect, this probably wouldn't have been a very good idea, but they were girls. Girls knew how to gossip- and best of all, they knew how to keep eavesdroppers away.

As soon as they ordered their drinks, Hisako said, "Okay, girl, get me caught up."

Sakura didn't need telling twice.

--

"Whoa..." Hisako whispered, an awed expression on her face.

"Yeah..." Sakura echoed, blushing furiously.

"Your sensei... on the kitchen counter?" Hisako murmured.

"Yeah..." Sakura repeated, turning an even brighter shade of pink.

"That's..." Hisako paused, looking up at the ceiling in search of the words she wanted. "That's so hot! I wish T- I mean, someone would do that to me while *I'm* cooking them breakfast..." She trailed off dreamily, her eyes glazing over as she envisioned it.

Sakura glanced behind her friend's shoulder at the opening door. Her mouth fell open, and her face drained of all color. She immediately scooted to the far corner of the table, out of the line of sight of the newcomer.

"Sakura-chan? What's wrong?" Hisako turned to look, and her mouth flopped open as well. She looked back at Sakura, and had to suppress an astonished giggle. Kakashi himself had just seated himself at the bar, ordering himself a healthy glass of... well, Sakura wasn't exactly sure what it was. She wasn't well versed in alcoholic beverages. It looked strong, though.

Hisako noted that he looked pretty tense, and extremely sullen. "Speak of the devil..." She whispered mischevously.

"I'm gonna go on home... I have some errands I need to attend to. I'll leave you to it?" A wordless sound of protest came from her pink-haired friend, but Hisako waved her off. "You'll be fine. Just sit here, enjoy your drink-

"I didn't order a drink."

"Yes you did." Hisako waved her arm, and a waiter appeared with a pitcher of sake and a small cup. "Don't drink it all. You'll get sick."

"Hisako..."

"You'll be fine! Promise. Really, I gotta go."

And Hisako slipped out of her seat, quietly exiting the teahouse that, to her, just gained a very tense atmosphere.

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Chapter 26: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-100942.html>

26 - Later That Night

Hisako walked out of the bar, leaving Kakashi and Sakura to their sulking. She herself had only half a cup of sake, but she was already quite tipsy. She was such a lightweight- her gait was a little stumbly as she headed home.

Jeers and catcalls came from a group of older men who had just staggered out of another bar made Hisako roll her eyes and stick out her tongue at them.

“Oh, come on, baby, don’t do me that way,” one of the men jibed, clutching at his heart in mock injury. She giggled as the men winked at her and turned down a sideroad, stumbling home.

Hisako sighed loudly and heavily, feeling left out again. Sakura had captured the attention of Kakashi Hatake (whether he admitted it or not), one of the most prestigious ninja in the village, and freaking sexy to boot. She giggled again at that thought. She also had Ryouko trotting after her like a lost puppy. Even Naruto! Hisako, however, couldn’t capture the attention of even one guy. Just an average joe to pay some attention to her. She knew she couldn’t possibly appeal to someone like Tenzo, and she gave a derisive snort at the thought. Definitely not. Tenzo was an elite. What was she? She was nobody; a lowly gennin. Hardly worth a first look, much less a second. In fact, -

Her self-inflicted emotional beatdown was violently interrupted by a clammy hand on her arm, yanking her into the unlit alleyway and slamming her hard against the wall.

She blinked, clearing the bright spots from her eyes, and her stomach dropped as her eyes focused. Before her were four men, and the leader... her mom’s... “boyfriend.”

His beady eyes bored into hers, and a slimy tongue wet his thin lips and Hisako had to swallow to stomach her revulsion.

“You think you got rid of me, eh? Think that you’d flex your muscles and send me scampering off? Girls like you are an abomination. Kunoichi shouldn’t exist. Women like you need to learn their place.”

As his gaze raked over her, she struggled against his one-handed grip on her wrists against the wall. She suddenly found extra hands on her shoulders, slamming her against the wall again. She closed her eyes and reached for her chakra, intending to send a pulse through her body- just enough to burn their hands so she could get the hell out of there. But... Her eyes flew open in shock. It wasn’t responding. Something had cut off her chakra flow. Usually, it flowed freely throughout her body, but now it just lay there at her core, stagnant. She reached for it, but a slight ripple was her only response. Adrenaline and undiluted fear shot through her then, icing her veins and turning her heart to lead.

“Oh, you finally noticed? Yeah, one of my buddies slipped a chakra suppressor in your drink. So there’s no point in even bothering to try to escape.” A truly malicious grin crept across his face, sending another wave of fear through her. “I’m going to teach you your place.”

“No, please! Let me go, please!” Hisako’s plea was barely a whisper, her eyes wide with panic. Those thin, wet lips spread wider as he heard her begging.

“Let you go? You should be thanking me! I’m teaching a valuable lesson. Women should know their place.”

A dry sob escaped her throat as his hands were suddenly on her. The man’s sweaty hands forced their way up her shirt and she let out a wordless cry of pain as he squeezed her and his rough nails scratched her.

“Stop, please stop,” she cried in a sob, struggling uselessly against the hands that restrained her. Hisako lifted a foot up and kicked, landing a solid hit to one of her assaulter’s lackeys and hearing a satisfying crunch for her effort.

“shoot!” The man spat out a mouthful of blood, and when a tooth came with it, he repeated the curse. “Stupid dog! Screw this, Kano, she ain’t worth the effort.” The injured man stalked off without a backward glance, touching his injured mouth gingerly.

“Whatever. You two, restrain her. And *you*...” Kano slapped her hard across the face, leaving her cheek red and stinging. “Don’t try that again.”

She skewered him with her eyes as his hands roamed her body. When the other men grabbed her legs and hoisted them up, she screamed and kicked at them, earning another smack across the face for her trouble.

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Kano sighed as he played with the waistband of her shorts. His flat black eyes locked onto her blue ones, and Hisako’s whole body froze, as if she was being held in some sort of paralysis jutsu. It was like staring down some giant disgusting, dangerous insect. His pudgy fingers tugged slowly at her shorts, revealing her plain underwear in the dim streetlight. Hisako found her voice then, and she screamed and yelled and thrashed as he ripped the shorts from her body with a resounding tear. He grabbed at the collar of her shirt and wasted no time in tearing that fabric straight down the middle, allowing a ripping noise to fill the air.

She screamed again, uncontrollable sobs wracking her frame and tears streaming ceaselessly down her face. What god had she offended to deserve this?

The man’s malicious smile grew broader as his eyes raked over her exposed skin, making a path straight down from her collarbone down across her sternum, straight down her abdomen, where his eyes lingered on her panties. Those cold, clammy fingers began to follow that trail and she screamed again, uselessly struggling against her captors.

“Don’t touch me! No, stop, don’t TOUCH me!”

--

Tenzo had decided early on that he wasn’t going to go out for long. Just meet up with Kakashi, offer some male companionship and a shoulder to “cry” on, then leave. He didn’t particularly care for bars.

Well, technically it was a teahouse, but he knew Kakashi better than that. Kakashi would be glued to the bar like nobody's business. Kakashi tended to avoid bars, because once he started drinking it was quite difficult to convince him to put the bottle down. And Tenzo'd probably get stuck with the bill... again. He swore that man had some sort of smooth-talk jutsu. As far as Tenzo knew, Kakashi hadn't paid for a single food bill when he was out with someone else. *Hopefully, he doesn't go overboard. I'm not sure my wallet can take his kind of drinking...* he thought as he slipped on his usual uniform pants and a plain black long-sleeved shirt with the usual long-sleeved navy shirt he always wore- pulled right up over his chin, as usual. He decided to forego the hitai ate tonight; all the better to blend in. He flipped the lights off and shrugged into his brown lightweight jacket before heading out the door.

The trees stirred under the restless wind, creating an unsettling sound as he walked toward downtown. Tenzo looked around uneasily, and quickened his step slightly. The cold wind blew hard for a moment, mussing his hair and sending a chill down his spine.

The wind feels ominous tonight, he noted apprehensively. *I wonder...*

He grunted in alarm as a branch above him snapped and fell against the road with a crash behind him, blocking his way home. *Yeah, definitely a sign. Something bad is going to happen tonight.*

Tenzo walked quickly to the bar, a faint anxiety pressing down on him. The atmosphere around him did nothing to help; the streetlamps flickered and an eerie silence had fallen over the residential area. The only sounds that could be heard were coming from the bars and restaurants ahead. He had just caught sight of his destination when he heard a scream and some choice expletives.

"Don't touch me! No, stop, don't TOUCH me!"

That voice... It's that girl! Tenzo set off at a dead sprint for the source of that voice, his stomach dropping painfully.

--

"Let me go, no, STOP!" Hisako yelled as her assaulter tried to remove her underwear. She thrashed and kicked, not even feeling the slap across her face as she struggled to get free.

A grunt of surprise behind him had Kano turning around to see both his lackeys knocked out stone-cold, and an ominous figure looming over him.

"You heard the lady. Let her go," Tenzo said, his voice hitting a very dangerous note. The other man visibly wilted and released his grip on Hisako, who slowly sank to the ground in a daze. She was too surprised to be ashamed at her exposure in front of Tenzo.

Tenzo quickly activated his wood style jutsu and wrapped up the unconscious men, along with their misogynistic leader in his wood tendrils. With them restrained, he quickly made a wood clone and told it to report this to the Hokage immediately- *the men are apprehended, and the girl is safe with me.* The clone vanished, and Tenzo turned his attention to the dazed girl, slipping out of his jacket and helping her into it. When she didn't respond, he zipped it up for her and pulled her to her feet. He was glad to see that the jacket fell easily to her mid-thigh. *Good, it'll cover her.*

He regarded her carefully. Her cheeks were red, from being struck, he assumed, and tears still flowed freely from her blank eyes. Her hair was unkempt and knotted, and her wrists and ankles were already bruising. Her expression was vacant; she was in shock.

I don't know where she lives, so I'll just have to take her home with me. There's no way I can just leave her like this. Gathering the girl in his arms, he turned around to face the still-conscious man who accosted her. The venom in Tenzo's eyes was enough to make the man flinch.

"If you ever even come *near* her, or her family, *I'll kill you.*"

As a single sob wracked Hisako's whole body, Tenzo's grip on her tightened and he had to force himself to keep walking, to not go back and kill that scumbag. When the girl in his arms knotted a fist in his shirt and buried her tear-stained face against his chest, he decided to get her taken care of.

When he reached his apartment, he flipped on the light with his elbow, trying not to jostle the girl in his arms. Tenzo gently carried her to his room and lay her gently in the bed, covering her up with the plain brown sheets. She curled up, folding her knees to her chest and burrowed into the blankets, inhaling deeply and shakily.

Tenzo gently stroked her forehead with his thumb, moving her hair from her face. She leaned in to the touch, some of the tension draining from her face, and he let his hand fall to his side. He turned off the light and quietly went into the living room where he collapsed onto the well-worn couch with a sigh.

That poor girl... No one should have to deal with what she went through... Now, though, the question is... Who is she?

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Chapter 27: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-101055.html>

27 - Later That Night - Part 2

That night passed by in a drunken blur for Sakura. She vaguely remembered Hisako's warning: Don't drink the whole thing, or you'll get sick. That warning flew out the window as soon as Hisako stepped outside the teahouse. Sakura downed glass after glass of sake, eyeing a certain white-haired ninja seated at the bar. She wondered if he knew she was there. She thought about how he'd been avoiding her the past few days and how he had shot her down earlier that day, and an anger began to build up inside her. Who did he think he was, to dismiss her so easily?

Sakura stood up abruptly, nearly overturning her table, and before she could talk herself out of it, she marched over purposefully and planted herself in the stool next to Kakashi.

"Good evening, Kakashi-sensei," she greeted with only the slightest slur in her speech.

Kakashi, who had just taken a swig of some hard liquor under cover of a large gloved hand, looked over at the pink-haired kunoichi sitting beside him with a shocked expression and immediately started coughing. Tears began to form in his visible eye, and Sakura clapped him soundly on the back until he stopped wheezing.

"Are you all right, sensei?" Sakura gave him a dubious look as she let her hand linger on his back for several moments, only dropping it when he met her gaze. As she dropped her hand, she let it pass down the rest of his back gently, stopping the contact just above his waistband. Kakashi's slouched position snapped into one of perfect posture and he regarded her with a wary one-eyed gaze.

What's she playing at?

A small smile played around her lips at his reaction of her touch.

You may be able to avoid me, sensei, but you can't ignore me.

"Y-yeah... it just went down the wrong pipe," Kakashi answered, reminding her of the question she'd asked. "What brings you out here, Sakura-chan?" The added suffix took her by surprise; he usually reserved it for when he was trying to put her down (though not in so many words). Regardless, she wasn't going to back down like he was prompting her to. She'd play that little game, but she'd play it her way.

Resting her chin on her hand, she looked up at him innocently and gave a soft laugh. "Oh, Hisako-chan took me out for a night on the town, but she ditched me almost as soon as the drinks were ordered."

"Mm, I see." Sakura could feel the tension radiating from him, and that, mixed with the sake, gave her courage (or stupidity) to do something she'd never have done sober.

"What about you, sensei?" Sakura put her hand on his thigh under the counter. "What brings you to these parts?" A gentle squeeze, slightly higher up, had his knuckles turning white around his glass. He

met her eyes, but Sakura just looked at him innocently.

“Oh, I was just meeting a friend here,” he replied evenly, giving no sign that he noticed her caress. Her eyebrow twitched in annoyance, and he smiled blithely in response.

“I think you got stood up, sensei. You’ve been here for a while,” Sakura said in that same innocent tone, sliding her hand further upwards and squeezing his inner thigh a little more firmly. She had to suppress a satisfied grin as his grip further tightened on his drink.

“It would appear so,” Kakashi agreed, giving a longing glance at the door. “You know, I should probably be going,” he added, starting to rise from his barstool. He froze when his actions caused Sakura’s hand to slide up his thigh until it was dangerously close to a rapidly swelling part of his body. He quickly sat back down and her hand retreated, but only slightly.

“Sakura…” he called out her name in a warning.

“Sensei, don’t you think it would be rude to just up and leave when in the company of a lady?” Sakura hiccupped, then giggled as she massaged her sensei’s inner thigh, occasionally tracing patterns with her fingertips. His entire body went rigid.

“You’re drunk,” he said hoarsely, eye widening in realization.

“Am I?” Sakura murmured, leaning forward, invading Kakashi’s personal space even further. “I couldn’t tell. Say, sensei,” she breathed in what could only be described as sensually, “why don’t you take me back to your place? I bet you could show me a *real* good time… I know you want to…” She trailed off suggestively, running her hand up and down his inner thigh.

Kakashi’s eyes tightened, and a pained expression crossed his face. The passion burning in that dark grey eye of his took Sakura aback, even drunk as she was. He fingers tightened on his thigh almost painfully, and his hand was suddenly over hers, pulling her grip away.

“I’ll do nothing of the sort, Sakura. What I *am* going to do, however, is take you home and get you in bed before you further embarrass yourself.”

“I haven’t embarrassed myself,” Sakura slurred crossly, leaning forward again. He gently pushed her arm into her chest, putting some space between them.

“You may be singing a different tune in the morning, Sakura-chan,” Kakashi said gently as he paid the bartender and escorted Sakura out of the teahouse. That was probably the only time she’d ever see Kakashi pay his own tab, but she was too drunk to notice- or care.

Kakashi maintained a grip on her wrist as he gently pulled her through the dark streets of Konoha. Sakura swayed and giggled as he pulled her along- at least he wasn’t ignoring her, for now.

“Sensei, where are we going?” She whispered, a giggle slipping from her lips.

“Kakashi rolled his eyes, but she was too far behind him to see. “I’m taking you to your house, Sakura.

The place where you live, remember?"

"But..." Sakura's brow furrowed, confusion evident. "But my mom lives there." Her protest was slurred, and her gaze searched out his.

"Yes, she does. What of it?" Kakashi had no idea where this was leading.

"We'd wake her up, you know. I'm not exactly quiet."

"Um...?" Kakashi was confused. They had reached her house and she backed up against the wall, taking him with her. He realized too little too late that he'd fallen into a dangerous trap.

She pressed herself against him suggestively, taking advantage of his shock to break free of his grip and wind her arms around his neck. She tucked her face under his jawline, and her hot breath on his neck sent a tremble of desire running through his veins. He stood stock still, however, too stunned, and too afraid, to move.

"I want you," she whispered almost desperately, pressing open-mouthed kisses along his neck, smiling when she heard his sharp intake of breath. His hands reached up to her shoulders and pressed against her back, pulling her body closer to his. Her proximity was intoxicating; he was now as drunk as she was, but it wasn't the alcohol that caused his head to spin.

"Sakura," he whispered, his warning turning into a groan of desire. Her fingers danced along his hairline, giving him goosebumps and causing another shiver to work its way up his spine. He knotted a hand in her hair and pressed masked kisses on her neck, earning a soft moan into his ear in response. He grabbed one of her hands and pressed it against the wall by her head, threading their fingers together as he bit and kissed her neck through his mask. She let out another breathy moan, and any self-control he'd clung to flew far, far away.

"Sakura..." He whispered again, suppressing a smile as he felt her pulse skitter under his lips. His free hand dragged down from her shoulders to her lower back, where he pulled her into him. He was just contemplating taking off his mask to properly kiss her when a group of drunk men stumbled by across the street, laughing loudly and yelling at each other.

Kakashi stepped away quickly, his self-control back for the moment. They were both breathing hard, but he recovered himself first.

"Go to bed, Sakura," he told her wearily, putting his hand over his face in shame.

shoot. I just can't resist her... There's no way things can continue like this. I don't know what to do.

"But sensei," Sakura pouted, grabbing his shirt to pull him to her, sliding a hand into his vest and slowly pushing downward, unzipping the vest with the base of her palm. She smiled as his abdomen muscles clenched under her touch. When her fingertips brushed the waistband of his pants, his hand snapped up to close over her wrist tightly. They stood there in silence, just looking at each other. The burning heat in his gaze was enough to make her knees go weak. Kakashi was leaned down far enough over her so that if she raised her knee slightly, it would brush against the very noticeable bulge there. She did so,

earning a low groan in her ear that made white hot desire shoot through her whole body.

“shoot, Sakura... We can't do this...” His voice cracked as her knee brushed against him again. “We shouldn't be doing this...” He flipped his mask down in the darkness and pressed hot kisses along her jawline. Her eyes slid shut and her breathing deepened as her knee continued its rubbing.

He groaned again against the skin of her neck, sending another of many shivers down her spine. When his broad, warm hands slid under her shirt and roamed her back, her breath caught, and she sought his gaze.

Is he really giving in?

Her moment of hesitation was enough for Kakashi to remember himself. He dropped his hands and took two large steps backwards, putting at least four feet between them.

“Sakura... I really can't do this...” He cleared his throat when his voice cracked again. “I really can't. There's too much at stake. What happened to you liking Sasuke?”

“He's obviously not interested. There's no point in dreaming about someone who doesn't want you back.”

“it's better than wanting someone you can't have,” he replied softly, tracing her jawline with a single finger.

“No one has to know,” she protested in a passionate whisper, leaning into his touch.

“Nothing good would come of it. I'm not going to take this time away from you that should be about going to parties and chasing down boys when you're not on missions. That's a time of your life you won't get back. I don't want you to end up hating me.

“I'll end up hating you if you keep avoiding me. You're driving me crazy.”

“If things like this keep happening every time we're alone, I don't see any other alternative... I'll have to report this to the Hokage... Is that what you want?”

“No, you can't separate us! Naruto and Sasuke... They really look up to you. And... I need them. I promise to behave from now on, so please don't!”

“It's not really you I'm worried about, Sakura,” he replied, dropping his hand. “I can't seem to control myself. None of this would have happened if I had been strong enough in the first place.”

“Then I won't do stuff like this anymore. You won't have to be strong enough. Please, sensei.” Sakura may have been drunk, but she was still a woman. She set her best teary-eyed, pouty lip expression on him, and gave an internal air-punch when she saw him crumble.

“Alright, I won't go to the Hokage about this. But this can't keep happening, Sakura. You have no idea about the trouble I'd... the trouble we'd be in.” Kakashi ruffled her hair affectionately, then prodded her

toward the door. "Now, get to bed. You need to sleep off that alcohol."

Sakura grudgingly did as she was told, and they both went their separate ways, none the wiser about anything else that happened that night.

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Chapter 28: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-101110.html>

28 - Drugs and Affection

Tenzo popped his head in his room, and once he was assured that the girl was still sound asleep, he set off for the Hokage's office to give an official report of last night's incident.

It was early enough that the streets were deserted- the shops hadn't even opened up yet. He walked in silence, lost in thought.

I don't know what to do about her. I don't know where she lives, so I can't even inform her parents... I don't know any of her friends, so I can't- Wait, the Hyuuga boy! I can ask him her name, and go from there. In fact, I need to do that first. I can't file a complete report without even knowing her name.

With that thought in his head, Tenzo headed for the Hyuuga residence.

--

Sakura woke up that morning, and immediately wished she hadn't. She finally understood why Hisako warned her not to drink much. She felt every single one of her heart beats in her head- with the pressure of several large sledgehammers. She moaned out loud, but the sound just made it worse. She just wanted to curl up in a ball and die; anything to escape the agony roaring through her forehead. She curled up and lay there in her pink and black plaid pajama bottoms and plain pink t-shirt, holding her head gingerly. Amidst the agony splitting her skull open, she felt a slow wave of nausea build up, and her stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch. Fearing the worst, she scrambled up and made a step to the bathroom, but the world suddenly started spinning, and she quickly found herself facefirst on the floor. Another sledgehammer attack to her head had her in a fetal position on the floor cradling her poor abused cranium.

"I'm never, ever drinking that much ever, ever again," Sakura moaned, wincing when the sound sent another pulse ripping through her head.

"That's probably a good idea," said a familiar silky voice in hushed tones. This time it was her heart that gave a lurch- only one person could have a voice like that.

"Kakashi-sensei, it hurts..."

"I know, love, I know. I brought some stuff..." Kakashi gestured at the paper sack in his arms, forgetting that she was too busy trying to block out the pain to look at him. "Can you sit up?" He set the bag on the floor beside them and knelt beside Sakura, slowly helping her into a sitting position, propping her against his side.

"This feels awful, sensei... How can people stand this?" Sakura asked hoarsely, suddenly realizing she was thirsty. Kakashi seemed to sense her need before she did, as he was uncapping a power drink and handing it to her gently. She was about to take a drink, but he grabbed hold of her wrist and held her still while he found two liquid gel capsules and held them in his fingertips.

“Open,” he commanded, and she did so, earning a mouthful of aspirin for her trouble. “Now you can drink. Trust me; it’ll get rid of the headache after a while. Or lessen it.” Sakura greedily drank from the bottle, not realizing how thirsty she was until the bottle was in her hands. When her sensei shoved a piece of dry (and somewhat stale) toast into her hand, she looked at him, baffled. “It’ll help with the nausea. Don’t question me, just do it, okay?” He sighed exasperatedly.

“Thank you, sensei,” she managed to croak in between bites. Kakashi gently shifted her so she was leaning on her bed, and he got up and strode to the bathroom. Quietly opening the door, he found the hot water knob for the bathtub, and began to set a bath for her. While the tub was filling, he walked back to her and dug around in the bag, earning a dirty look from Sakura- that crinkling paper was wreaking havoc on her head. He grabbed the item he was searching for and shoved it in her hand the moment the last bit of toast was gone. She looked at him, in his grey and blue pajama pants, and navy blue undershirt that covered his face, then back to the... banana? Her face was an obvious question mark.

“Just eat the damn thing, already,” he muttered, looking away from her embarrassedly. When she peeled it and took the first bite, he made to pat her head, then thought better of it. “It helps. It’s too much effort to explain right now, but it helps.” He sat behind her as she slowly ate the banana bite by bite, and began to tenderly massage her scalp. A slow groan escaped her throat, and his fingers paused against bright pink locks. “Does it hurt?”

She shook her head slowly and responded, “No... It helps.” And with that, his fingers wordlessly continued their gentle massage. The banana forgotten, Sakura leaned into his hands, letting out a small sigh. “You’re... really good at this, sensei,” she whispered, her eyes drifting closed in a blissful daze as her hand reached out and grabbed his knee for support. The wonderful massage stopped suddenly, and Sakura barely had time to whimper in protest before she was bodily picked up and moved into the bathroom. With a foot, he deftly turned off the water, then gently set the girl down.

“Change into a towel, then call me back in. I don’t want you cracking your head open trying to get in yourself, okay?” His harsh tone was at odds with his actions, and Sakura had to suppress a smile.

“ ‘Kay.”

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Neji was already up and training when Tenzo came to call. He was escorted into the courtyard where the Hyuuga boy was hard at work under careful eye from his father.

This early in the morning? Either the dad’s a slave driver, or the kid’s pretty damn dedicated.

He gave a greeting smile and slight bow, and called out, “Sorry to interrupt, but could I have a moment to speak to Neji-san? It won’t take long, I promise.”

After a nod from his father, Neji walked – no, strutted – over to where Tenzo was standing patiently. Skipping past all the pleasantries, Neji dove right in. “You’re the one from the other day...”

“Yes, that’s me,” Tenzo replied with an embarrassed laugh. “Listen, I was hoping I could ask you something.”

Neji's ears perked up.

"Could you tell me the name of that girl you were with? I didn't manage to catch her name when I met the two of you, and I was hoping you could help me out, man to man."

The boy visibly depuffed, and his eyes hardened. "Hisako Mutakami... what of her?"

A wide smile crossed Tenzo's face, and he mentally airpunched while thinking up some way to assuage Neji's frustration. He quickly came upon an idea, and just rolled with it.

"Well, I know she's just a genin, but she's older than most genin, isn't she? And I saw the way she fought..." Neji bristled, and Tenzo finished, "I had been hoping to ask her out on a date, but I didn't even know her name! I can't go up to a girl and say, 'Hey, I don't know your name, but let's go out sometime.' Things like that don't work in the real world."

"Is that all?" Neji rolled his eyes in disdain at the older man. "You interrupted my training... for frivolities?"

"Yes, I'm sorry about that. I was very impressed with your sparring session with her the other day. Nice technique. But, thanks for your help, Neji-kun. Sorry to interrupt." With another polite bow, Tenzo made a hasty retreat and headed straight for the Hokage's Tower, a slight bounce in his step despite the circumstances.

Hisako Mutakami, huh? I finally know your name!

--

Hisako slept dreamlessly, safely enveloped in the husky, earthy smell of the forest. That protective aroma kept the nightmares at bay that would surely have come if she were in her own bed. The only memory that was allowed through the defensive barrier that was Tenzo's essence... That was the memory she clung to for dear life. She remembered the wind whipping against her tearstained face (why was she crying? She couldn't remember), and the warmth enveloping her as a pair of strong arms carried her gently.

The birds chirped and the sun peeked out from behind the clouds into the window, touching Hisako's face ever so gently. When the light reached her eyes, she slowly blinked awake, drifting back into consciousness from what felt like a drug-induced coma. Not awake enough to feel anything, she slowly got out of bed and padded to the door of an unfamiliar house. Even this didn't faze her. She was fine until she opened the door and saw the building across from her. It was made out of the same brick that she had been so roughly thrown against last night as –

BAM!

She dropped to her knees as the memory hit her like a tidal wave. Every little detail flashed into her head at once in the sharpest clarity, and her breathing became ragged and shallow. She wasn't even aware of the footsteps rapidly approaching her and the strong arms that hoisted her up, nor was she aware of

the fact that she put her arms around the owner of those arms, and wrapped her legs around him as he carried her inside, rubbing her back comfortingly as her whole body shook with dry sobs.

“It’s okay, it’s all over now. They can’t hurt you anymore,” that gentle voice murmured in her ear, and her hysterical sobs faded into small hiccups, accompanied by little shivers. That voice continued to whisper in her ear and rub her back consolingly, even as he sat on the couch and just held her. Neither of them noticed the fact that she still had nothing on except for his jacket. They just lay there in a silence only broken by her quiet sobs, his hand rubbing soft circles into her back even as she fell asleep in his arms.

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Chapter 29: <http://www.fanart-central.net/chapter-101204.html>

29 - Gratitude

Once Sakura had her towel situated well enough, she opened the door and stuck her head out, nearly headbutting Kakashi in the back.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” she stammered, his sudden proximity catching her off-guard. He didn’t respond, but followed her into the bathroom and offered her his hands. She took them gratefully, stepping into the bath. She got about halfway down when the room started spinning around her, and she began to fall. Kakashi’s arm snaked around her waist, steadying her as she lowered into the water.

“You’re going to feel really dizzy for a few minutes, so just lay your head back and close your eyes,” Kakashi suggested as he wiped his arm on a spare towel. She complied, sliding down into the water until her head rested on the lip of the tub. He made to leave, but her soft, pleading voice stopped him.

“You’ll stay, right?” Her voice shook, though whether it was from the dizziness or something else, he couldn’t say.

“If... that’s what you want,” he replied in an expressionless voice.

“It is,” was her response. Without another word, he sat down and rested his back against the tub, silver hair mingling with pink.

After a few minutes of silence, Sakura murmured sleepily, “Kaka-sensei?”

“Mm?” A one-word response was all he had energy to muster; his eyes were also closed, and he hovered on the border of unconsciousness.

“You smell nice,” she finished as she tapered into a surprisingly peaceful slumber.

Kakashi was glad, again, that he wore a mask. This girl seemed to be able to make his pale cheeks warm in a way that no one ever could. Something about her made his heart flutter, made him feel like a school-boy again.

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The deep, even breathing of someone in her ear brought Hisako gently to consciousness. She sat up slowly, stretching in a way that could only be described as feline. She froze, arms high over her head, when she saw exactly where she was sitting. With an indignant squeak, she slid off Tenzo’s lap and fell to the floor with a thud. She winced, rubbing her injured backside and trying to comfort her injured pride when Tenzo groaned and stirred, blinking blearily. She froze again, looking sheepishly up at her guardian.

“What happened?” He asked, rubbing his eyes as a huge yawn overtook him. Hisako blushed and looked away, an embarrassed pout claiming her mouth.

"I... uh... I was surprised, is all," she mumbled, resisting the urge to stick out her tongue at him when he gave a soft chuckle.

"Well, let's get you some clothes, shall we?" He slapped his hands on his knees and stood up, offering her a hand. She took it, her heart fluttering when his warm fingers closed over her wrist. He pulled her up, and she had to stifle a startled gasp when her nose actually touched his upper chest. That deep, earthy smell mixed with the darker, masculine scent filled Hisako's nostrils, leaving her dazed. She looked up at him uncertainly, the shallowest, shakiest of breaths expanding her lungs.

Their eyes locked, and Tenzo's expression was inscrutable, his dark eyes offering no insight to Hisako as to what he was feeling. Now that she was so close, she noticed that Tenzo's eyes were actually a deep, rich, warm brown, and the intensity of his gaze unleashed hordes of butterflies in her stomach. He leaned down slightly, putting their faces just inches apart, and Hisako's head spun at the taste of his breath on her tongue. She had no idea what to do.

I know that look... But I can't, not after what just happened to her. It would be like taking advantage of her. She's emotionally compromised right now. I have to be strong for her, support her. I can't be thinking of kissing her silly.

Tenzo cleared his throat and took a step back, putting just enough distance between them for Hisako to think, but not enough that her feelings were hurt. Her head began to clear, and an embarrassed flush crept across her cheeks, the accompanying shy smile almost breaking Tenzo's resolve.

So damn cute.

"All I have are t-shirts and an old pair of pajama pants... But they'd be huge on you. I could run to the store... Unless you want me to take you home?"

She only hesitated a moment before answering, "No, but I don't want you to pay for something for me... I have some extra clothes... I was camping out in this meadow..." She flushed, embarrassed, expecting questions to be asked. When none came, she continued. "I brought some spare clothes with me, so they'd be in the tent. I could go with you to get them... Are you really sure I can stay here? I don't want to put you out."

"No, no, it's no trouble at all," he dismissed with a wave of his hand. "And no need, you can wait here and make yourself comfortable. There's food in the fridge, and munchies in the cabinet above the sink. I think there's some beer in the fridge, too, if you're into that. Honestly, just help yourself. What's that saying? 'Mi casa es su casa?' 'My house is your house.' I'll be back before you have time to miss me," he finished with a wink as he headed out the door.

As soon as the door shut, Hisako sank back onto the couch, dazed. She was sure, just for a moment, he was going to kiss her. Then she gave a derisive snort, and shook her head sadly. What a silly notion. Who would want to kiss *her*? Who would find her desirable enough to kiss? *Her*, a nobody gennin. Someone like her couldn't possibly appeal to someone like Tenzo. It was silly, and pointless to even consider the notion.

"I forgot to say thank you... Again."

The man had rescued her from... she shuddered, quickly ending that train of thought. Still, he rescued her, he offered her his house, his food, his... beer. Hisako gave a soft giggle at that. She never really pegged Tenzo for the drinking type. She stood up, suddenly, determined. The kitchen was soon a flurry of fridge-doors, knives, and cooking food as Hisako set to work, resolute on giving her savior some form of her gratitude. No one had ever been this kind to her, and she wanted to show him somehow just how much it meant to her.