

Naruto Fanservice

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Just some fanservice! There WILL be lemons included, and I will always warn you in the chapter title, so no excuses.

Provided by Fanart Central.

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1 - Green Tea Shiro-tama

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura called, running frantically to catch up. He turned around, surprised.

“Sakura, eh?” His voice was casual, but not disinterested.

“Thank goodness, it was you after all!” *Kyaa, I’m so lucky to meet Sasuke outside of a mission!*
“Sasuke-kun.. Are you shopping...?”

“... No. I don’t have any particular plan. It’s just that sitting around doesn’t do my body any good,” Sasuke replied.

Chance! This is like a fairy tale! “So... S-Sasuke-kun... why don’t we go there?” Sakura pointed to the shop directly across from them.

“.... Sorry, Sakura...” Sasuke sighed. “I don’t like sweets.”

Why of all things, a sweet shop?! She felt the weight of a boulder being dropped on her head.

“Hey, you two! What are you up to here?” Kakashi’s silky voice startled them both, and they looked up, surprised.

“Kakashi-sensei!” Sasuke exclaimed, then thought to himself, *You’re up to no good again, I bet.*

“Well, what a coincidence!” Kakashi turned to Sakura and said, “It’s been a while, so how about some sweets?” *This jerk... He’s tagging along.* Sasuke made an extremely annoyed face behind Kakashi’s back. “Ah, but Sasuke hates sweets, doesn’t he?” Sasuke twitched. *He’s really irritating. With him being so suspicious, if I leave, someone will report him and have him arrested.*

“Come, Sakura, I’ll treat you to anything!” Kakashi put his arm around Sakura and ushered her into the store.

“Eh, wait.. Sensei... Sasuke is... Ehh-“ All Sakura could do was follow, bewildered.

As if I’d let you make a pass at Sakura just like that...! Sasuke followed them into the shop, apparently unnoticed by the oblivious Sakura and Kakashi.

“Kyaa! It looks so good!” Sakura exclaimed, her eyes round with wonder as she looked at the delicious dessert that was placed before her. She saw stars.

“Sakura, eat as much as you want!” Kakashi said, his cheeks warming. She was just so cute. “Hmm?” His eyes hardened as he noticed Sasuke sitting across from them, nonchalantly drinking his tea. Sasuke was making an obvious effort to not make eye contact with either of them as he drank.

“The sweets-hating Sasuke... You don’t really have to force yourself to join us...” Kakashi said, his dry tone not getting by Sasuke.

“It’d be rude to refuse an invitation, right? It’s such a rare occasion, after all!” Sasuke retorted, seriously irked by Kakashi.

“Oh, Sasuke-kun. I didn’t know you were so considerate!” Kakashi replied, just as irked by Sasuke. “with just me and Sakura eating I feel sorta bad,” Kakashi said, his spoon scooping out a small bit of the ice cream he was eating.

You should. “I don’t want any, don’t worry about it...” Sasuke replied, taking a sneaky glance at Kakashi. Is this guy going to eat...?

Kakashi slowly drew the spoon up to his face, and put his hand over his mask, beginning to pull it down. Sasuke quickly activated his Sharingan, not wanting to miss a single second.

“Here, Sasuke-kun. ‘Aaaah!’ “ Kakashi quickly whipped the spoon so it was inches from Sasuke’s face, flashing him a carefree smile under the mask. ... *The hell?!*

“What’s the big idea??!” Sasuke said, barely controlling his anger.

“Well, it’s just that you gave me quite the piercing look in your eyes, so by mistake...” Kakashi replied, his dry tone revealing his anger.

“Whatever, just eat right now!” Sasuke cried.

“No fair, Kakashi-sensei!! I want to do that!” Sakura practically shouted, grabbing Kakashi’s sleeve and tugging. He looked down at her, surprised. Hmm... *Sakura, I understand your feelings, but in public... My coolness is my best feature.* Kakashi’s face warmed again as she looked at him so crossly. His gaze softened as he looked down at her.

“... Can’t be helped, I guess...” He raised the spoon to her lips and said, “Here, Sakura... ‘Aaah!’ “ His voice was filled with affection. She blinked at him, surprised.

“You need to go straight to the medical squad to get your head examined!” Sasuke yelled, slamming his fists on the table.

“No, Kakashi-sensei!” She shook her head quickly. “I want to do it to Sasuke!”

“But Sakura, this is a green tea shiro-tama,” Kakashi said, putting on the charm. “It’s more delicious than normal shiro-tama. She looked at him, her cheeks flushing a bright pink.

Sasuke yelled, “Green tea shiro-tama with anmitsu, on the double!!” Kakashi looked up, shocked. “Sakura, mine’s coming soon... So be patient...”

“Sasuke-kun!...” Sakura sighed, her eyes filled with love. Kakashi, sighed, outwitted again. *Sasuke... I shouldn’t underestimate him just because he’s a kid. That’s an Uchiha for ya...* Sasuke smirked at

Kakashi's wary look. But...! Boys WILL be boys!

"Help yourself, it's on Kakashi-sensei, anyways," Sasuke said as the shirotama arrived, pushing the bowl towards Sakura.

"Right! Though, hold on a sec." Kakashi smirked under his mask, and held his hand up. "No matter how much Sakura likes anmitsu, it's going to be hard for her when there are two people, no? If only she could handle two mouthfuls..." He glanced at Sakura, who was deep in thought. "Sasuke! How about YOU feed Sakura?"

"WHAT?!" *How'd it turn into this? I don't get it.* A single drop of sweat rolled down the side of Sasuke's forehead as he saw the deep blush forming on Sakura's cheeks.

"I'm sure Sakura would like that. Right?" Kakashi grinned at Sakura as she nodded furiously. Sasuke's heartbeat sped up. *This jerk! Is he trying to humiliate me? He's hoping I would be able to handle the pressure and that I just get up and leave!* He squeezed his hands into fists. *In his dreams!*

"Sakura!" She looked up, her face flushing as she registered the spoon he was holding up to her. "...E-Eat up..." He managed to say, his face flushing a furious red.

"Sasuke-kun..." Sakura was astonished, and not quite sure she was awake. *Ah, it's good to be alive...* Sakura sighed, seeing stars.

Don't tell me he really went for it... Kakashi rested his chin on one hand, filling with chagrin. *Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. And Sakura's so happy now.*

"A-are you sure, Sasuke-kun?" Sakura said, noticing his tremendous embarrassment. Sasuke turned his head away trying to hide his red face. *Please just hurry up...* "Then... then... Don't mind if I do!" Sakura opened her mouth, leaning forward. The sound of pleasure that came from her when her mouth closed around the spoon was enough to send chills down Kakashi's spine, and for the third time that day, he blushed.

Sasuke looked up at her and blushed, his eyes wide. Kakashi's expression was much the same. Sakura wondered what was wrong; they were both acting strangely. Kakashi averted his face and thought, *Sakura is just too cute! I wonder if I should just kidnap her.*

Sasuke sent a dirty look to Kakashi while his back was turned. *Wait a minute, what is Kakashi blushing about? He's kinda freaking me out.*

Kakashi turned around and glared at Sasuke. *Damn bastard Sasuke! Keeping all the good parts to himself!*

Sasuke glared back. *Didn't this happen because of you? And for some reason it looks like you enjoyed the good parts too!*

NOTE: This was an excerpt from a Doujinshi that I found and I loved it so much I put it into written form. The link to the doujin I found is below.

I guess this is a KakaSakuSasu fic, then? xD
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dpc8DetJLcl>

2 - Belated Birthday Wishes

Sakura had just finished cataloging some documents for Tsunade-shishou, and it was way before dinnertime, so she decided she'd go have a walk down to Training Ground 3. No one ever really used it on days like this, anyway. As she walked through the village, she couldn't help but smile as she saw all the little shops and vendors that lined the streets. It was right in the middle of spring, the best time to be selling your wares- everyone was out and about in such fine weather. The cool breeze that gently blew through was refreshing, and it tousled her hair playfully in the way Kakashi-sensei sometimes did to make her feel like one of the boys.

Her step was lithe and full of bounce- today was a good day. The sun warmed her back gently as she walked, and all the little tykes running about brought back some nostalgia for the old days. Sakura's mouth turned up in an amused smile as she had to sidestep to avoid getting bowled over by some enthusiastic kids, the one in front screaming delightedly as the other two chased her. She passed a vendor who offered her a sweet, and she declined politely, continuing on her way.

Soon she saw Naruto running full tilt at her, and she had to hide another amused grin. He was as energetic as ever.

"Sakura-chaaaan!" He cried gleefully, skidding to a halt a few feet in front of her.

"Yo," she replied, smiling as he fell into step next to her.

"You'll never believe this!" He exclaimed in a cheery voice, squirming with delight.

"Oh?" She couldn't really be bothered with more than one-word answers.

"Pervy Sage just promised me another year of training, so I can become the next Hokage!"

She rolled her eyes, but said, "Good for you, Naruto. But you do know he'll spend half of that time trying to peek in a woman's bath house, or practically live in the red light district, right?"

"Well..." He looked slightly crestfallen; this hadn't occurred to him.

Sakura couldn't help but laugh at the expression on his face. "I'm sure it'll be fine, Naruto. Really."

Naruto grinned and laced his fingers together behind his head. "Yeah, with Pervy Sage's help, I'll be the next Hokage in no time! Oh, have you seen Sasuke today? I wanted to show him something..."

" 'Fraid not. Have you tried his house?" She replied helpfully, trying not to roll her eyes again.

"Oh." He looked like this, too, hadn't come to his mind. Then his mouth spread into a wide grin. "Great idea, Sakura-chan! See ya later!" He ran off with a wave.

She shook her head, sighing, and continued her walk to the outskirts of the village. *Is he really that dense? Well, of course he is, he's Naruto.*

When Sakura laid eyes on Genma coming her way, she stifled an inward groan and thought, *Great, here comes trouble.* Outwardly, she smiled in what she hoped seemed an amiable way. Genma grinned at her in a way she could hardly describe as amiable; she felt like he was melting the clothes off her body with his eyes.

"Hey, Sakura-chan. How's it going?" His greeting seemed platonic enough, but he waggled his eyebrows suggestively and he shamelessly gave her a once- twice- no, three-times over. She tried not to giggle at his obvious dirtiness. It would do no good for her to encourage him.

"I'm great, Genma, how are you?" She replied in an innocent voice, as if she had no idea he'd been ogling her. Like she couldn't notice.

"Well," he started, his mouth turning up in a slow, seductive smile, "I could be a *lot* better, if you know what I mean..." He finished with a wink.

She had to laugh at that one. Sakura grinned back and said, "Is that so?" in her innocent voice.

"You know, Sakura, I think you should let me take you out to dinner tonight. What do you say?" She wasn't really surprised, but he was totally shameless! Just shameless.

"Hmm," she pretended to think about it. "Maybe when you're older."

"Hey, wait!" Genma protested. "I'm older than you!" His arms folded over his chest in a pout.

"I meant... up THERE." She enunciated this by poking his forehead playfully. He winced and rubbed it, pouting at her with puppy-dog eyes.

"You're a cruel woman, Sakura Haruno," he replied teasingly as she moved to pass him. On her way by she patted his shoulder reassuringly.

"Maybe that's why you keep coming back for more," she laughed, and continued on her way.

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When Sakura finally reached the training ground, she sighed. So many of her best memories were made here. Like the time when they almost failed Kakashi's bell test. Or when she and Naruto took him on again. The expression on his face when she found his hiding place underground with just one punch... That was a memory she'd always treasure. Finding out Kakashi's weakness, then exploiting it to get the bells. His expression then was also near to her heart. She realized that most of her favorite memories involved Kakashi in some way. But that was normal, right? All of her friends were close to their instructors, to varying degrees. Then again, if that was all, then why did she find Kakashi so appallingly sexy? It just wasn't fair.

She fell back against the soft grass with a gentle thump, sighing. It wasn't like the thought had never

crossed her mind. Kakashi-sensei was a mysterious man. Mystery was actually what had attracted her to Sasuke in the first place, really. Kakashi was a private man who kept to himself whenever possible. He always covered most of his body, which left so much to the imagination. Her eyes drifted closed, and Sakura found herself blushing as she tried to imagine what her sensei looked like without all those clothes on.

“Kakashi-sensei...” the name slipped out of her lips like a caress, barely above a whisper.

“Sakura?” A familiar silky voice called out to her, and her eyes snapped open. Was she imagining things? “Are you talking in your sleep?” She sat completely upright instantly, looking frantically around for the owner of that beautiful voice. She found him quickly as he emerged from the trees, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Kakashi-sensei!” She nearly shouted, then covered her mouth with her hand in embarrassment. He wasn’t deaf, she needed to chill out. So why was her heart pounding so fast?

“Yo,” he said as he approached her in his usual unhurried gait. “And you don’t have to call me ‘sensei’ anymore. You’re a jonin now, remember?”

“Ah...” Sakura’s face flushed. “Right. So, what brings you here, Kakashi-sen-” A sharp look from her former instructor caused her to backpedal quickly. “Kakashi...sama?”

Kakashi rolled his eyes and let out a breathy sigh as he crouched down beside her. “Sakura, there’s no need for THAT. We’ve known each other for a long time. Just ‘Kakashi’ is fine.”

She looked up at him, hardly daring to breathe. “Right... Kakashi...” She tasted the word, feeling like it was naked without the regular suffix. That thought led to certain other thoughts about her former sensei. Kakashi... naked. A hot blush spread across her cheeks, and he looked down at her, bemused. He ruffled her hair with a smile, much like he did in the old days, but his fingers lingered on her scalp for just a fraction too long, and the way he gently moved his hand down toward her neck as it slid off was hardly platonic. Tingles began at the trail his fingers left, raising the hair on the back of her neck. Was she just imagining it? She hardly dared breathe.

“So,” he said, breaking her out of her thoughts, “what brings you here? Need a break from Tsunade-sama?” His smile touched his exposed eye, much like it always did. What would he do, she wondered, if she reached up and drug off that mask? Would he stop her? Would he be too surprised to do anything? She wondered... would he kiss her? Her eyes snapped shut and she shook her head slowly, continuously, trying to shake these inappropriate thoughts out of her brain.

“Sakura...?” She opened her eyes and met his gaze, which was full of amused confusion. She had sat there shaking her head for a good 20 seconds.

“I... um... sorry,” she managed, blushing again.

“Oh!” He snapped his fingers together, drawing her attention. “It was your birthday a few weeks ago, right? And you were promoted to jonin status a few weeks before that, right?” Humor danced in his dark grey eye as he sat back on the grass, propping himself up on his elbows.

“Well, yes... You missed it, you know.” She gave his thigh a hard smack, and he winced, rubbing the spot indignantly.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” he replied sheepishly. “Anyway, do you remember the time you, Naruto, and Sasuke tried to figure out what was behind my mask?”

“Yes...” She smiled at the memory. “Naruto thought you had blimp lips, but Sasuke was convinced you had buck-teeth.” Sakura giggled, then put on a serious face. “You were so cruel! Making us think you were going to show us your face like that, then pulling such a stunt.” She aimed her hand to slap his thigh again, but he caught her hand before it hit him. Instead of letting go like she thought he would, he turned her hand over and traced the lines in her palm absentmindedly with his fingertips. She looked up at him uncertainly, drawing in a shaky breath. *What’s he playing at?*

“Well, I had been trying to think of what to get you for your birthday, and I couldn’t think of anything to get you for your ‘promotion.’ “ He paused, fixing her with an unreadable stare. “I thought, well... Maybe I could grant you your childhood wish.” *Childhood wish? What’s he talking about?* The confusion on her face was evident, so he sighed and added, “I was thinking maybe you’d like to see what lay beneath my mask.”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth fell open slightly. She was too distracted by her thoughts to notice the way his eye traced the line of her curved, pouty lips.

“I... Well, I’d be honored, Kakashi-sen- I mean, Kakashi.” She couldn’t help herself from grinning at the thought of finally being able to see her old sensei’s face. She held her breath, and leaned forward slightly as his hand crept toward his face. She leaned forward a little more as his index finger hooked under the fabric right by his nose and slowly began to drag it downward. She didn’t realize how close she was to him until his hand actually brushed her nose as he dragged the mask down. By then, she didn’t even care.

She stared wide-eyed at the beautiful man before her, a slow blush creeping across her face. He had flawless, ivory skin and a beautiful straight nose, not too wide but not too small. A set of exquisitely chiseled lips lay beneath the nose. The bottom one was slightly fuller than the top one, and they were colorless, but that didn’t make them any less beautiful. He had a firm jawline that led down to a strong, but pointed chin. Sakura slowly raised her hand to his face and brushed her fingertips across his cheek, as if she wasn’t quite sure he was real.

Kakashi took in her expression, and pride swelled within him at how enamored she seemed to be. He’d never really thought of himself as good-looking or bad-looking. He was just himself. That was the way he looked. But by the gentle, disbelieving way Sakura’s fingertips and eyes roamed his face, he couldn’t really come to the conclusion that he was ugly. Her fingers grazed his jawline, and he had to suppress a shiver. He gently put his hand over hers and put it on the ground between them, but he didn’t move his hand away. She didn’t really seem to notice, as a question was already forming on her lips.

“Why would you ever want to hide your face? You’re *beautiful!*” Sakura’s green eyes held wonder and amazement, still not realizing how close her face was to his.

Kakashi shrugged nonchalantly, avoiding the question expertly as he asked her a question of his own. "You really think I'm that attractive?" A smile touched his lips, the same mischievous smile he'd smiled a thousand times before, and Sakura was entranced at the way they moved, forming words more sensually than anyone had a right to. This man, she quickly decided, was a hazard to women everywhere.

She blushed and met his gaze, saying, "Well, yes. I don't think I've ever seen a more gorgeous person in my life." Sakura clapped her hand over her mouth with shock and embarrassment. She can't *believe* she just said that to her TEACHER. Well, former teacher, but whatever.

He broke out into a wide grin, and whether it was from her comment or her reaction, she wasn't sure. She was sure that her heart definitely skipped a beat when she saw that smile. Those abominably gorgeous lips framed perfect white teeth, and she vaguely wondered what they would feel like under her tongue. She blushed again, harder, and even her ears began to turn red.

"Sakura, I think if you blush any more, you'll turn into a tomato," Kakashi teased, leaning forward as she leaned back out of embarrassment. He moved one hand from hers and put it on the side of her neck, leaning in.

"S-sensei, what are you doing?" She stammered, too surprised to back away.

"I told you not to call me that, Sakura," he sighed. "But *that* was just your inauguration present. *This* is your birthday present." And with that he slowly leaned in, keeping eye contact with her, giving her ample time to move away or tell him "no." She didn't.

When his lips met hers, Sakura sighed. It was warm and gentle, and the fingers tracing patterns on the back of her neck made her shiver, though it was hardly cold. His kiss seemed to be asking her a question, but she couldn't decide what it was. Her eyelids drifted closed as Kakashi slowly dragged his fingertips up and down the length of her arm. A slow buildup of pool beneath her stomach. He gently pulled away, and for a few moments, Sakura just kept her eyes closed, savoring the lingering taste of Kakashi's warm lips on hers.

Sakura's eyelids slowly fluttered open as he tucked a stray lock of her pink hair behind her ear.

"Sensei, I—" She was silenced by a single long, tapered finger pressed over her mouth.

"I told you not to call me that, remember?" He smiled at her, leaving her more dazed than she was a moment ago.

"That..." She touched two fingers to her lips as his fell away, a small, gentle smile forming. "That was my first kiss."

"Really?" Kakashi's expression was inscrutable as he tilted his head to the side.

She nodded in silence, butterflies rising in her stomach again, and he leaned forward again until his lips grazed her ear.

“Then how about another?” She shivered as his voice hit a deep, seductive note, filling her mind with all sorts of images that she definitely shouldn’t be picture about her teacher. Sakura gasped aloud as he found the sensitive skin under her ear where her jawline started, alternatively biting and kissing gently, making a trail down her neck to her exposed collarbone. When his tongue darted out to trace the indent there, she inhaled sharply and her hand went to his untamed hair, knotting her fingers at the base of his skull.

Kakashi gently took her hand and pried it from his hair, putting it together with her other hand as he grabs both wrists in a one-handed grip. Her breathing quickened when he leaned in again and pressed his lips to hers for the second time. It started out as gentle as the first but quickly became more passionate as his tongue granted itself entry into her mouth. She wasn’t sure what to do at this point, so she just went on instinct, following his lead. When he put one hand on the ground beside her hip and gently lowered her to the ground, pinning her arms above her head, she broke the kiss and looked up at him, confused.

“K-Kakashi, what are you...” She lost all ability to think coherently as he slipped his headband off in a well-practiced move and leaned over her, their legs overlapping. She was acutely aware of how close his knee was to the open part of her skirt. She squeezed her thighs together in an attempt to keep him from sliding closer, but it was counterproductive. She squeaked as his hand found the zipper of her shirt. “Sensei... I...”

He paused, giving her a bemused look. Looking at his Sharingan made her dizzy, so she settled on his grey eye. What she saw there made her head spin and she felt another flutter of arousal, more intense this time. He was looking at her with a combination of intense desire, frustrated restraint, and a mix of other emotions Sakura couldn’t identify. He was clearly waiting for permission to continue. Contrarily, she sat up, forcing him to sit up as well. A flicker of... rejection?... crossed through his eye for a moment, before she saw his usual distant, aloof manner slide up like a windowpane. Regret washed through her—she hadn’t meant to hurt him. Sakura put her hand on his face, letting one thumb trace his lower lip.

“Kakashi... why?” She had to ask. Regardless of what some people thought (or wished for), she didn’t just go around giving herself to anyone who asked. She had to know his motives before she let anything more take place.

“Because I love you,” he replied with a shrug, his tone indicating that it should have been obvious.

She looked at him, quite shocked. Her thumb froze its movement. “I’m sorry,” she said evenly, “I thought I just heard you say you love me.”

“That’s right,” he replied, solemn.

“Don’t mess with me, sensei. This isn’t funny.” Sakura felt a slight hint of panic knotting in her stomach. Whose idea of a cruel joke is this? She would have made a glance at the treeline, but Kakashi’s gaze demanded her full attention.

“No, you’re right. It’s not funny.” His voice had even lost the usual deadpan. He was totally serious. Apparently.

“Since when?” Her voice was an octave higher than usual; nerves tended to do that to you. She hadn’t picked up anything strange from him to suspect this.

“Well...” He sighed, looking away from her. “I’m not even sure. If I had to put down a specific date, though, I’d have to say that it was the day you and Naruto were assigned to retake my bell test. That was the first time I really noticed you.” He sighed again, running a hand through his unkempt hair. “I’m sorry... This was a bad idea.” Kakashi got up and began to walk away.

Sakura didn’t even hesitate; she just ran. She flung her arms around her sensei, and a muffled, “I love you, too, sensei,” into his back along with warm tears staining his jacket was all it took. He gently grabbed her wrists and disentangled himself from her. For a moment, she thought he was going to keep walking away, but Kakashi was Kakashi. He couldn’t be predictable. He turned around, gracefully switching his grip on her wrists from one hand to the other as he came to face her. Pure happiness danced in that gorgeous grey eye of his as he looked down at her. He let go of her hands and pulled her into an intimate hug, burying his face in her neck. Sakura could feel the radiant smile on her neck. He planted kisses on her collarbone, on her jaw, on her nose, and on her forehead. She felt an embarrassed blush rise to her cheeks, and he kissed those, too.

“Say it again,” he said in a voice trembling with happiness. “I’ve waited so long to hear you say that.” His eyes fixed on her lips, now kiss-swollen.

“I love you, Kakashi,” she said in a stronger voice, amazed by the amount of emotion he showed. She can’t recall ever seeing him this happy. She was actually quite confused; why would anyone love her? She was short-tempered, had a wide forehead, and average looks. Her bust size had improved since back in the day, but not enough to *really* matter. She was freakishly strong, which most anyone would find off-putting. Nobody wanted to have to worry about being put through a wall by their angry girlfriend.

Kakashi interrupted her train of thought by leaning down and giving her another soft, lingering kiss. This one seemed to have a resolution, instead of a question. Sakura’s lips turned up in a smile underneath his as she realized he’d read her thoughts and was putting them to rest. His kiss had translated as, “I love you for being you.” Her arms went around his neck, and she kissed him back happily. They’d finally found someone who understood the other. Sure, they’d get into their fair share of arguments. Sakura imagined most of them would have to do with his reading habits and his tardiness. She broke the kiss, needing to get something off her chest, figuratively.

“First things first, I will *not* be having sex with you on the first, second, or third date.” His face fell, but at her serious expression, he just had to laugh. She was so cute when she was trying to boss him around. “Second, my favorite flowers are white tulips, so you know what to bring me if I get pissed off at you. Third, you have to take me out at least once every two weeks, or you can cook for me yourself. You *can* cook, right?” She gave him a skeptical glance, to which he pouted indignantly. “And whatever you do, don’t be more than half an hour late to anything I invite you to. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Kakashi saluted, grinning down at her. She gave him a cross look, and he responded with a quick, but sweet kiss. He laced his fingers in hers and began to steer her back toward the village. Sakura blushed, still not used to this kind of affection from her former sensei. Her petite hand, though, felt like it was made to hold his large, calloused one. The spaces between their fingers held each

others' perfectly. "Now, I want to set out some rules, too, if you get to." She stuck her tongue out at him. "Don't use my toothbrush- ever." Kakashi glanced down in exasperation as she giggled. "I mean it!"

"Yes, yes," she replied, rolling her eyes. Only *Kakashi* would think up something that weird right off the bat.

"Next, I want to put off meeting your mom as long as possible. She is –" An elbow to the ribs shut him up right quick. They continued like that all the way back to the village, not noticing the stares and whispers that followed them down the streets.

Isn't that Hatake Kakashi?

Yes, and isn't that his former student, Haruno Sakura?

Are they seeing each other?

When did this happen?

What a scandal!

They should be ashamed!

Of course, there was that old stigma to overcome, but not as many people thought that way any more. After all, they ranked the same, and she was of legal age, so there really was nothing to frown upon.

They walked all the way back to Sakura's apartment, hand in hand, oblivious to the commotion.

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"I guess this is goodnight, then," Sakura said softly as they both looked at her apartment door.

"I guess so." His voice was unreadable, and she wondered for the thousandth time what he was thinking. "I guess... I'd better give you a goodnight kiss."

Sakura barely had time to murmur her assent before he swiftly, but gently, pushed her up against her door. A slow, sexy smile spread across his lips as he tugged down his mask. She had barely time to register the intense butterflies that rose in her stomach before Kakashi's lips began their wonderful assault. Her eyes fluttered closed as she fumbled for the doorknob.

She finally managed to open it, and they both stumbled inside. Kakashi looked down into those jade green eyes, his confusion evident.

"But you said..." His lips were puckered in contemplation.

Sakura giggled- that was a face she'd never seen him make before, mask or no.

"I said after the first, second, or third date."

"Right....?"

Really? He could be so dense sometimes.

"This wasn't a date."

A slow smile spread across Kakashi's face as he renewed his assault on her lips, picking her up and carrying her toward the bedroom. As he gently laid her down on the soft bed, Kakashi's silky voice caressed her ears-

"Happy belated birthday, Sakura."

3 - A Valentine's Date

"Jesus, Sakura, are you just gonna stand there staring at him all day, or are you going to go out there and be a *woman*?" Sakura's best friend Hisako remarked quietly, examining her fingernails in a bored manner.

"Shut up, Hisako. I'm gathering my courage. These things take time," Sakura shot back, embarrassed. She'd been taking refuge behind this shelf of books, peeking between books every so often to cast furtive glances at the tall brown-haired, hazel-eyed man poring studiously over what looked like very dull, complicated material. Gentle, kind, quiet, girl-shy Yuji. Falling for him had been quite an accident, really. She hadn't even noticed until recently that her feelings of admiration and trust had shifted in a more... romantic direction. Sakura knew that Yuji had crushed on her while they were growing up, but now that they were both jonin, she didn't know where his feelings stood.

"What... what if he doesn't like me that way anymore?" Sakura whispered, her eyes closing in a brief moment of pain at that thought. She didn't think she could stand the humiliation.

"Well, Sa-chan, there's only one way to find out. But trust me, he's still into you," her friend assured her and gave her a none-too-gentle shove out of the rows of books. Sakura made a rather undignified squeaking noise, and froze in horror as Yuji looked up from his work. He appeared to be just as surprised as she, but he recovered better, and offered her a friendly smile.

"Well, hello, Sakura-san. I haven't seen you in a while," Yuji offered amiably, his cheeks just barely dabbing with a hint of pink- he'd gotten better at controlling his blushing habits. It was something that came with age, and lots of practice. Sakura huffed indignantly, and she put her hands on her hips with an air of grace, but huffiness, that only a woman could manage.

"I *told* you not to call me that anymore! We're friends, not strangers. If you won't just call me 'Sakura,' then at *least* call me 'Sakura-chan.' You're giving me a headache, Yuji."

"Oh... right. Sorry, Sakura... chan." Another small blush formed on his cheeks, slightly more pronounced than the first. "So, was there any particular reason you came to the library today?"

"Uh..." *Busted. I can't do it!* "Yes, but I couldn't seem to find what I was looking for, so I'll just be going now..." She trailed off lamely, taking a few sidling steps towards the entrance of the library before quickening her pace, having to control every fiber in her being that told her to run out of there as fast as she could.

Hisako hung her head in shame at her friend's cowardice. The girl faced down the Akatsuki, no problem. But confessing to a guy and she runs away? *What the hell.* She sighed as she watched Sakura make a hasty retreat. *I guess I'll have to take matters into my own hands. It wouldn't be the first time.* The brunette quietly, but purposefully strode up to Yuji, who had been looking at Sakura's retreating figure with an expression that one can only describe as confusion.

"Yuji, hey!" She called out quietly, snapping the man back to the present.

"Hisako-san, hello. Is there something wrong with Sakura... chan?" Saying 'chan' still felt weird to him.

"Well... That all depends on how you look at it, I suppose... Anyway, she's too much of a chicken to do this herself, so here I am. It's your lucky day, Yuji! You get to go on a date with the girl of your dreams," Hisako said brightly, internally facepalming at the clicheness of it all.

"Uh..." Yuji's blush control was out the window at this point- his face was beet red. "Sorry, Hisako-san... You're not really..." *Not my type? Hardly. Not in my league by a long shot? That's closer to the truth.*

Hisako just shook her head impatiently. "Not *me*, you dunce," she said affectionately, giving Yuji's hair a ruffle. "Sakura."

"I... Uh... What?" *They're playing some sort of trick on me. There's no way this is for real.*

"Jeez, Yuji. You're cute, but are you really that *thick*?" She shook her head in wonder. "You. Are. Going. To. Go. On. A. Date. With. Sakura. Tonight." She spelled it out, extra slowly, so he wouldn't miss a single word.

"Uh... Why?" *Shut up you idiot, and smile at your good fortune!* Yuji was confused, but he internally kicked himself for protesting something he'd always wanted.

"God, you really *are* thick, aren't you? She likes you! Are all men as clueless as you are?" She rolled her eyes heavenward in a short prayer, then pinned him with her gaze. "You're going to be waiting outside Sakura's house at 7 o'clock this evening. You will wear *nice* clothes... Aw hell, you've probably never been on a date. I'll have to send Ten- er, Yamato over to help you. Sakura likes roses, so a single red rose will do just fine. And for *God's sake*, Yuji, if the opportunity presents itself to kiss her... *Kiss the girl!*" Hisako passed a hand over her face in exasperation. Yuji was just sitting there with a glazed expression, staring at her as if she'd sprouted three heads.

"God, you're hopeless. Stay right here, I'll go get Yamato. You need some manly guidance in this area." Hisako left as abruptly as Sakura did, leaving Yuji alone with his thoughts again.

*Sakura... likes me? Since when? I thought she had eyes on Kakashi... Aw, who cares? This is awesome. I'm just going to put my worries aside and enjoy tonight. It **is** Valentine's Day, after all... Anything could happen!*

--

nextguardian's comment: I'm absolutely loving this so far. Sakura confessing to Yuji is a nice switch, and will most certainly make his Valentine's day. All parties should be thankful for Hisako, since it wouldn't have happened without her. lol, I love how she manages to simultaneously insult and compliment her friends!

Awesome work so far! Thanks for doing it!

--

Hisako sent Yamato towards the library with great haste, making her way to Sakura's house, knowing that her friend would have resorted to reading 'Makeout Paradise' and indulging in some comfort food to drown the shame of her recent cowardice. She quickened her pace- she had a date to prepare her friend for.

"SAKURA!" Hisako yelled into her friend's window, making the pink haired kunoichi jump in surprise, looking guiltily up over her book. "Let me in now or I break your window. And no, I won't pay for it." Sakura scrambled up and opened the window with one quick tug.

"Hisako, I... I couldn't do it! I just couldn't. He was looking at me so expectantly, and I just--"

"Oh, shut up, will ya? You need to stop griping and start getting ready!" Hisako cut her off, pushing Sakura toward her closet.

"Get ready...? For what?"

"Your date. Duh!" Hisako rolled her eyes and started going through Sakura's closet, pulling garments out and promptly putting them back as they each failed inspection.

"My date?" Sakura was quite confused. Then it hit her. "You... You didn't!" A shocked whisper was all she could muster as Hisako demolished her closet.

"Yes, I did, because neither of you were getting anywhere, and don't you have anything decent to wear?!" Hisako threw up her arms in frustration, sending several hangers flying into the air.

"There is nothing wrong with my wardrobe," Sakura huffed indignantly. "If you want something better, go buy it yourself."

A lightbulb flashed over Hisako's head, and her eyes took on a mischievous glint. Sakura was instantly afraid. "You know... That's a great idea! Let's go!" Hisako grabbed her friend's hand and dragged her to the nearest clothing shop. Sakura sighed and let her friend pull her away.

--

Yamato gave Yuji a quick once-over as they walked to his house; the guy was a nervous wreck. Sweating, wringing his hands; the works. He sighed in exasperation- this was going to be tough.

"Yuji, are you alright?" Yamato hedged, trying to be courteous of Yuji's emotions while still expressing his concern. There was no point in asking, "Are you sure you don't want to back out of this now?" Not with Hisako at the reins. There was no backing out of anything for this kid. All the same... He looked like he was preparing himself to go before a firing squad.

"What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine, Yamato-senpai. Just a little nervous is all," Yuji replied distractedly. In his head every single 'worst-case scenario' was playing itself out simultaneously. What if she changes her mind? What if I'm no good at this? What if I make a fool of myself? What if...

“Yuji, you can quit running through the mental ‘what-if’ checklist,” Yamato said kindly, looking straight ahead as Yuji tossed him a baffled glance.

“How did you...?”

“Everyone’s been in your shoes at some point or another. Even me,” he replied with a wide smile that touched his eyes. “There’s no point in contemplating everything that could go wrong. Just be yourself, have a good time, and let things progress from there. And... don’t forget to breathe. It’s kind of fundamental to your continued existence, you know.”

Yuji resumed breathing with a spluttery laugh, and looked up- they had reached his house.

--

“I’ve got to warn you, senpai, I don’t have a lot of ‘fancy’ clothes...” Yuji trailed off as they both stared into his closet.

“Well, that’s probably a good thing. It’s just a date; you’re not going to a dance or anything. Here- put this on.” Yamato threw several garments at Yuji, who caught them with a surprised look. At a ‘shoo’ motion from Yamato, he quickly retreated to the bathroom to change.

Yamato sighed, leaning against the wall. A soft smile tugged his lips as he remembered his first date with Hisako. Despite the advice he’d given Yuji, his first date with Hisako had been purely accidental. They had bumped into each other in town, and ended up spending most of the day together. He’d treated her to dinner, and they’d had a great time chatting the night away. He eventually walked her ‘home,’ which consisted of them stopping in front of her house and him awkwardly kissing her on the cheek. He knew she wouldn’t stay there- she’d go to the meadow where her tent was. But he let her pretend- she had her reasons. He realized later that their day together was essentially a ‘date,’ and told her as much some time after. His reminiscence was interrupted as Yuji came out of the bathroom.

He was wearing his usual navy pants- without the kunai holster, but instead of the under armor and vest, he had on a simple coal grey long-sleeve button-up shirt, collar slightly askew. His hair was now a mess from his hasty clothes-change.

Yamato reached into one of his vest pockets and withdrew a small bottle of hair gel (did you think his hair naturally looked like he’d just walked through a wind tunnel?) and poured a small amount into his hands. He gestured for Yuji to lean down, and he promptly ran his hands through the man’s hair, styling it to perfection in short order. There. He stepped back to admire his handiwork, and nodded approvingly. There was just one thing missing...

Yamato quickly made the hand sign, then held one hand out, his index finger pointing skyward. A thin, spindly twig sprouted from his finger, and a soft, dark green color crept up from the base to cover the twig until red petals blossomed out spectacularly, forming the most beautiful rose Yuji had ever set eyes on. He had to close his mouth, but his eyes were round with admiration. Yamato handed him the rose coolly, and gave him a friendly push out the door. You’d better hurry- it’s almost 7, and if you’re late, Hisako will have you for dinner.”

--

nextguardian's comment: Now THOSE are two true friends. Yuji and Sakura are so clueless, which is darned cute in it's own right. I loved the 'you need to breathe' thing, and the 'Hisako will have you for dinner'. Apparently, Yamato isn't the only one who inspires fear in other people, eh Hisako? Good chapter! Can't wait for more!

--

Yuji sighed in relief- he'd gotten to Sakura's front porch with just thirty seconds to spare. He, fortunately, hadn't seen Hisako's wrath for himself, but if it made the man who was infamous for his "draconian methods" worried, he really didn't want to.

What do I do? Do I knock? Do I let myself in? Do I call out?

He looked around helplessly, totally clueless. Luckily, he was saved by the front door being wrenched open and a certain pink-haired kunoichi shoved outside, straight into his arms, amidst a bunch of sniggering that sent chills up his spine. He looked down at the girl he'd caught, and blushed a deep crimson. Hisako had really outdone herself this time.

Sakura's hair was pulled up in a tight bun, and even her bangs were pinned back. Wispy pink baby hairs framed her face, and delicate ringlets fell around her ears. She had minimal (but expertly applied) makeup, but to Yuji that just seemed to enhance her beauty. The silk dress she had on was the exact same shade of green as her eyes, with black lace embroidery on the thigh. The slight slit in the side drew attention to the hem of the dress, which fell just above her knee. This showed off her pale skin and legs that (to Yuji) seemed to go on for miles. Yuji finally met her eyes and blushed when he realized she'd seen him giving her the thorough once-over.

"So... Do I pass?" Sakura asked shyly, a slightly teasing smile playing around her lips. He wasn't fooled- he saw the nervousness in her eyes.

"I, uh... Yeah! You look absolutely gorgeous!" He blurted out, and stuffed his fist into his mouth out of embarrassment. She giggled and softly elbowed him in the ribs.

"You look pretty good, yourself, you know," she said seriously. When he blushed again (where had that control from earlier gone?), she grabbed his hand and gently led him toward the teahouse.

As they were walking, Yuji tried to put his free hand in his pocket, but was stopped by the flower he'd totally forgotten about.

"Oh, I forgot I had this!" He handed her the beautiful rose Yamato had given him. When she gasped in pleasure and smelled the exquisite thing wonderingly, he made a mental note to repay Yamato later, somehow.

They got to the teahouse and were quickly ushered to the roof, where the just-setting sun filled their whole view. It would appear that "someone" called ahead and rented the whole roof for the night, just

for them. The two took their seats and admired the view while they dined.

The rest of their evening went really well, if truth be told. They both talked and laughed and enjoyed each other's company. There was none of the usual anxiety around her, and Yuji chalked it up to the fact that it wasn't one-sided anymore. She was feeling the same things he was.

Their dinner was over too soon, and neither wanted their date to end, so they decided to talk a walk through the park. Yuji was getting more comfortable around her, he realized as he took her hand and threaded their fingers together so casually that it felt like he'd done that all his life. Sakura pulled to a stop and looked up at the starry sky, sighing happily.

"It's so beautiful," she said softly, and felt him squeeze her hand in response.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Beautiful." But she didn't notice that his eyes were focused solely on her.

"I had a really good time tonight, Yuji," Sakura started, finally meeting his gaze.

"Me too, Sakura-chan. I wasn't expecting it to be this easy. I'm not very good at this, you know," he replied, taking a step closer to her. He remembered Hisako's advice, and he wasn't gonna let this opportunity pass him by.

"I know... That's one of the things I like about you. It's really cute how clueless you are sometimes," she giggled. "I... I really like you, Yuji!" Sakura was so embarrassed, she was nearly shouting. Her cheeks were burning from the inside out, and the sensation was almost uncomfortable. They stood there in silence for a short time, but it felt like years to her.

Yuji stood there for a moment, stunned. Hisako had told him, but it was quite different hearing it from the horse's mouth. His heart swelled, and his happiness overflowed onto his face in the form of a really big smile. He gently tugged on their intertwined hands, closing the distance between them. His usual nervousness vanished as he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers.

Her small sigh of surprise against his lips had Yuji sliding an arm around her, his hand settling on the small of her back. He pressed his other hand against her neck gently and she leaned into him, her eyes drifting closed.

He gently pulled away, his heart skipping a beat when her eyelids fluttered open slowly and she gave him a shy, breathless smile.

"I wasn't sure if... you still felt that way. I mean, it's been a long time since then, you know?"

"I understand. But..." Yuji blushed, his words embarrassing him before they were even spoken. "I've loved you from our first mission together... And every day since, I've just fallen harder and harder for you. I don't see that changing any time soon. I don't see that changing, ever."

Sakura looked slightly taken aback- Ryouko wasn't prone to sudden outpourings of emotion. She suddenly had to fight back the tears that threatened to overtake her. Ryouko looked alarmed- he'd just confessed his undying love for her, and she starts crying?

God, I really suck at this.

He pulled her to his chest and held her silently while she cried into his shoulder.

“All this time... I’ve been so lonely, Yuji! Sasuke... and then Naruto up and left... I couldn’t even get another boy to look at me!” She hiccupped, and he rubbed her back soothingly. “And here you were the whole time, watching from the shadows. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’d rather have you in my life as a friend than not at all,” he said simply. “I don’t think I could bear it.” He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, and she pulled back far enough to pierce him with those glittering green orbs. The way her pouty lips curved as she spoke was nothing less than distracting.

“Yuji... Kiss me again.” She whispered, and Yuji’s heart stopped for several long seconds. When he realized that she was still looking at him expectantly, he gathered his courage and leaned down again, pressing their lips together in another gentle kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back happily. They both felt the holes in their heart beginning to close, their loneliness finally coming to an end. When they separated, he took her hand and they walked slowly through the park, just enjoying each other’s company, continuing on their small piece of heaven.

--

An eager Hisako and a reluctant Yamato sat behind a bush, watching the new couple from a distance. They were too far away to hear what was being said, so Yamato had an ear to the ground, using his Earth Style to pick up on the sound waves and relaying them to Hisako. When the two ambled off, blissed out in their own little world, Yamato sat up and Hisako leaned back and snuggled up to him, sighing contentedly.

“I’m glad that worked out,” he offered as he wound a hand around her waist.

“Me too. They’re perfect for each other.” She sighed again and exclaimed, “Things like this make you want to fall in love all over again!”

“Hopefully not with anybody I don’t know!” He reached up and began to tickle the enthusiastic girl. He earned a muffled shriek mixed with uncontrollable giggles and a swift, yet restrained, punch on the arm for his trouble.

“You know I’m really ticklish!” Hisako pouted, giving an even better wide-eyed, pouty-lip routine than he’d been subjected to from time to time as Kakashi’s fill-in.

“That’s why it’s so fun to do,” he replied easily, but his noticeable gulp didn’t get past the indignant girl. She gently pushed him until he was flat on his back, clambered on top of him, and pinned his wrists to the ground. He suppressed a grin as her long braids tickled his neck.

“That’s not fair, you know. You shouldn’t get all the fun,” she whispered in a mischievous voice, leaning forward until their noses almost touched.

“No, you’re right,” he said seriously, then leaned up and kissed her sweetly. He leaned back and flashed her a cocky grin in response to her dazed expression. She quickly recovered and leaned forward again to press her lips to his.

“I didn’t say you could stop that,” she replied with a grin, and his lips met hers in a sweet embrace.

--

The two couples continued on with their night, finding their own bit of happiness that’s oh, so hard to come by in a war-stricken land.

--

Happy Valentine's Day, guys!

--

NG's Comment: That was downright sweet :) I absolutely love the intense emotion here. It was good to hear Sakura's side a bit, too. Everyone seems more human and less shinobi, and when it comes to romance, that's a good thing :)

Great job! Major thanks to you for doing this!

I loved the HisaYama at the end, too ;)

6 - Following the Master's Shadow

Naruto wanders the streets of the Leaf Village, grief stricken over the death of Jiraiya. Unable to overcome his feeling of loss, Naruto traces back through his memories of Jiraiya. What can help the heartbroken Naruto get back on his feet?

One step at a time. One foot in front of the other. It took all of Naruto's concentration to not give in to the overwhelming grief lapping at him and collapse right there in the street. Children passed by him, laughing and screaming, but he didn't see them. The noise of the bustling town was deafening, but he didn't hear it. Blindly, he passed shop after shop, not caring where his feet were taking him. One poster caught his eye... The new *Make-out Tactics* novel, a bright blue poster. "Long-awaited new novel! Best work ever!"

Flashback

Jiraiya peeked over the wall of the bath separating the two genders, a naughty blush spreading across his face. A leer played across his lips and he exclaimed happily, "Oh, there they are! So many well-developed gals!"

An aghast Naruto chastised him, but it fell on deaf ears.

"What a sight! What a sight! I'm getting inspiration for my next novel!"

End Flashback

The small, unbidden memory brought a ghost of a smile to the boy's lips as he gazed at the poster blankly before his feet carried him away again.

--

"Dead?" The single word didn't want to come out of her mouth- it couldn't be true. Hisako stood in her doorway, staring blankly at the morose silver-haired ninja. Dead... She shook her head in disbelief.

"He fought against the leader of the Akatsuki... 'Pain.' He gave us a wellspring of clues as to who this 'Pain' really is, which in the long run will prove useful in the defeat of the organization. He wanted to protect Konoha, and the people in it, as best he could. He died an honorable death." Kakashi regarded her silently.

"And Naruto? Has he been informed?"

"....."

That silence was all the answer she needed. She turned on her heels and grabbed her jacket, hastily

stuffing her arms into the sleeves before heading back for the door. When Kakashi wouldn't move, she huffed at him impatiently.

"Stay here. He'll find you," the older man murmured, laying a gloved hand on the girl's face. A moment later, and he was gone.

--

The very same pole that Naruto first clambered up and announced his return to the village not so long ago now held a mere shadow of that same boy, staring unseeingly at the Hokage monuments, again lost in his memories.

Flashback

"Now listen, Naruto," the Pervy Sage said as the two of them walked down a dirt road, "I have only three years to make you strong. I will spend that time training you vigorously. Be prepared for that."

"You bet! This time, I'm going to bring him back for sure!" The always optimistic Naruto shot back without a moment's hesitation. His face settled into an expression of intensity. "There's no time for me to waste."

--

"Cripes.. I can't take this... What's with this lame training, anyway?!" A frustrated Naruto yelled over the roar of the waterfall behind them.

His equally ticked master replied, "Fool! Nothing in training is lame! You foolish student!"

--

An adrenaline-pumped Naruto ran full-tilt at his master, aiming a right hook that was deflected, and then a left hook- also deflected. He brought his knee up to land a hit to the man's gut, but was deflected again by two hands. With a triumphant grin, the boy grabbed those two hands and the old man barely had time to widen his eyes before he was attacked from behind by a kunai-wielding shadow clone... and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"What?!" The two blonde boys searched frantically for their disappeared master, and they found him at the same time he let out a hearty laugh, then spoke.

"You're not the only one who uses Shadow Clones. You're still so naïve..."

End Flashback

The blonde-haired boy grasped unconsciously at the zipper of his jacket as he walked, the memory of when he first put it on coming to mind, unbidden.

"Yo, Naruto!"

Naruto was so lost in his thoughts that he almost didn't stop to see who called out his name. He looked up, and before him was none other than Iruka-sensei, the first adult in the village to acknowledge him. He tried to pull it together enough to listen to his former teacher.

"I hear you've been real active on missions and such. Everyone in the village is talking about you."

Really? A few days ago, Naruto would have been thrilled to hear things like this, but now... He couldn't find it in him to care. He forced himself back to attention when he realized Iruka was still speaking.

"Hey, let's go somewhere and catch up!" His sensei jabbed a thumb behind him, and with a wink suggested, "How about Ichiraku for some ramen?"

Naruto looked down, and without meeting the man's eyes, muttered a quiet, "No thanks..." and walked right by his speechless teacher, letting his feet carry him away, not caring where they lead him.

--

Hisako sat in impatient silence, heeding Kakashi's words. She knew deep down he was right- Naruto would find her, just as he had always done, ever since they were little. The corners of her mouth turned up in an unconscious smile as she remembered the first time they met.

Flashback

"Sakura-chan, who's that boy over there?" the brunette asked her friend, swinging her feet absentmindedly as they sat on the picnic bench together. "He's always alone."

"Oh, him? That's Naruto Uzumaki. He's nobody, really. A total dork," Sakura shrugged indifferently.

"Isn't that kinda harsh, Sa-chan?"

"Have you ever met him? He's so annoying! That's probably why he doesn't have any friends."

"Well, I'm gonna go over and talk to him," Hisako replied, sliding off the bench and marching over to where the blonde sat on a swing, all alone.

"Hisa-chan, don't! You'll get made fun of!" Sakura called nervously, glancing around to see if anyone was watching.

"Like I care! Nobody pays attention to me, anyways," she retorted, sticking her tongue out at her best friend.

Naruto looked up from his swing, looking surprised at first at the girl headed his way. Then a shadow crossed his face, and he looked away sadly. This made the already determined girl even more determined.

"Hiya, I'm Hisako! Nice to meet you," she said with a cheery wave, a sincere smile spreading across

her face. At the look of total and utter shock on the boy's face, she rolled her eyes and elbowed him. "This is where you tell me your name, and we go play together," she explained with a grin and an outstretched hand.

"Uh..." Naruto was totally stupefied. Someone was actually choosing to play with him? "I'm Naruto Uzumaki, but... Do you really want to play with me?"

The girl rolled her bright blue eyes at him, and grabbed his hand. "I wouldn't be over here if I didn't, Naruto-chan."

"Oh, uh... thanks. Hisako...chan."

And from that day on, they were the best of friends.

End Flashback

From then on, Hisako and Naruto were thick as thieves. If one had a problem, the other would know about it within the hour. She even told him some things that she never told Sakura. The bond between the boy and girl was stronger than the friendship that she shared with Sakura... It was something Sakura could never hope to understand. Loneliness was something Sakura was entirely unfamiliar with. The girl thought she was lonely because she wasn't well-liked among their classmates, but in reality she had no idea what it was like to be totally shunned. Naruto and Hisako shared a common suffering, and through the years they had become the closest friends either could ever hope to ask for. Every time he got lonely or afraid, he came to Hisako. That was why she was sure that he would do so again, in what probably would be his darkest hour.

--

Naruto could feel the waves of grief lapping at him, threatening to submerge him in their icy depths. His heart felt like it had been torn from his chest. All that remained was a gaping hole that threatened to consume him. His subconscious knew what he needed before he did, and while all of his concentration was focused on not being devoured by his grief, his feet led him to the one place he wanted to be most. Before he knew it, he was on her front step, wrapping on her door with two knuckles. The sound echoed around the silence in his head, and he waited for the door to open.

--

She knew that knock anywhere. Her heart leapt into her chest and she scrambled to the door before collecting herself, calmly opening it. When she saw the blank stare of the blonde-haired boy before her, her heart nearly broke. She wanted so badly to take him in her arms and promise that everything would be all right. But she knew that was not what he needed right then, and she waited.

"Would you like some tea?" She offered in a muted voice, opening the door wider so he could come in.

His silent nod and the way his hand laid on her shoulder as he passed her, sliding down her arm gently before walking inside, made her heart flutter; first out of grief for him, and second, for an entirely different reason.

They sat across from each other, sipping their tea in silence. After the third time Naruto put his cup down and stared unseeingly into it, Hisako noiselessly rose from her chair and walked around the table to stand behind him. When he didn't react to her presence, she gently put her arms around his neck and murmured into his hair, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know how much he meant to you."

He reached a hand up and silently held it, the gentle squeeze he gave her hand the only thanks she needed. She pressed a gentle kiss to the back of his head, and felt his breathing still. She pressed another one on the back of his neck, and nipped gently when he remained motionless. His breathing returned, more shallow and ragged than before.

"Hisako-chan...?" The question in his voice was obvious, even as he rose from his chair and stood to face her. He stood a good five or six inches over her, and she wondered... *When did he get so tall?* She closed the distance between them and met his eyes unwaveringly. His hand touched her cheek and her heart raced and she wondered how he couldn't hear it. Even as she spoke her next words, she wondered how he didn't hear the subtle shake in them, how he didn't see what was right in front of him.

"It's okay, Naruto. I have to help you somehow. Seeing you like this... It breaks my heart." She placed her hand over his tenderly, tears coming unbidden and threatening to spill over. She frustratedly wiped them away with the back of her hand and whispered passionately, "I love you, Naruto, and if this is the only way I can help you, then please, let me." And without further warning, she leaned up and planted a gentle kiss on the surprised boy's lips.

She knew she shouldn't have. She knew that after today, everything would change between them. But as her best friend's arms wrapped around her and he returned her kiss, she decided that she didn't care. Naruto pulled away after a few moments, locking their gazes; a question was forming on his lips.

"You love me, Hisako-chan?" The whisper was almost too much for Hisako to bear, the sliver of hope that crept into his voice. Her response, to wind her fingers in those beautiful blond locks of his and to press another, less gentle kiss to his lips, was more than enough of a "yes" for him, but she didn't leave any room for doubt.

"I always have, Naruto. Always have, always will. Now, please, I want to stop your pain, if it's only for a little while. Let me distract you from the emptiness... here." At the last word, Hisako placed a gentle hand over his heart, and their blue eyes locked. His were asking, hers were answering: "What are you offering?" "Anything. Everything. Whatever you need."

He accepted wordlessly, pushing her gently against the wall and trailing kisses down her neck, leaving her nerves blazing. Knotting her fingers in his hair, she responded with shallow, breathy moans which cut off sharply as he slid a single hand up under her shirt and squeezed gently at the small of her back. There was no awkwardness in the way he caressed her, nor in the way his lips claimed hers. There wasn't room for it. There was only room for the grief that they were both trying to forget, and the unbridled love of a girl who'd do anything for the man in her arms.

Even as she took his hand and led him to her bedroom, even as he lay her down gently and began to make love to her, there was no sense of the awkward hormone-ridden angst that drove most couples to the bedroom. Even after she cried out his name as he took her over the edge, following soon after. The pain he had been trying to escape was successfully forgotten as they lay there in silence, their hearts beating as one. Filling its place was a love he had unconsciously been suppressing, fearing change. As Hisako lay there, her head on Naruto's chest, listening to his slowing heartbeat, her heart swelled with love for him so much that she thought she would burst.

"Things can't go back to the way they were now, you know," she murmured sleepily against his chest.

A smile, a genuine smile, pulled at the corners of Naruto's lips as he realized that he didn't have to go through this alone. Sure, there'd be days where the grief would almost take him, and it would take a long time for the hole in his heart to heal. But with Hisako at his side, it wouldn't be so bad. The worst was over, and it was all thanks to his best friend... no, his lover.

"I don't want them to."

"Mm?" She drifted into unconsciousness as he finished his thought.

"Because... I love you, too."

7 - Two Lonely People - Part 1

This is an IruHisa fic, I hope you like it! I'm not done with it by any means, but I was too impatient to wait til I was finished for you to read it!

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Iruka Umino was a pretty straight-laced, by-the-book sort of man. He rarely broke regulation, and if he did it was for a damned good reason. But this... He wondered what had happened to his common sense, his sense of 'regulations' when he got involved with a girl four years his junior... His subordinate, to boot. He waited for the guilt to come, the overwhelming sense of chagrin he would always get when he broke the rules. The kind of guilt that would claw at your insides, threatening to consume you until you eventually couldn't stand it anymore and confessed. He waited, but to his surprise, he felt none. It just felt so right, being with her. They fit, like pieces of a puzzle. Even now, as he let his gaze wander over the peacefully sleeping girl lying on his chest, the graceful slope of her bare shoulders, the feminine curve of her naked back... He couldn't find it in him to feel guilty. Iruka rubbed his thumb across the girl's shoulder absentmindedly, thinking about the time they first met.

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Another late night... Damn that Kakashi, he always manages to find me right as I'm leaving, shove his paperwork in my hand, and leave before I can say no. Someday I'll make him make it up to me! The brunette exited the academy, his arms laden with unfinished reports and mission files. And it was such a nice day, too. Despite the heavy load, he decided to take the scenic route, through the park, on his way home. He set a leisurely pace, enjoying the bright green of the grass, the vivid pink of the cherry blossoms, the musky earthy smell of the forest. The gentle wind played with his short, spiky ponytail and rustled his papers, and as the quiet tok of his sandals along the paved road filled his ears, he smiled. He always loved being outside.

Iruka had just reached the top of a hill when he first laid eyes on her. His first thought was, *Wow, she's cute*, before he slipped back into platonic teacher-mode. She was sitting next to Sakura Haruno on one of many grey stone benches that decorated the village, watching passively as her pink-haired friend continued chatting animatedly. Her long, reddish brown hair was weaved into two identical braids on either side of her face that hung down to the tip of her waist. One pale, slender arm was casually draped over the back of the bench, and her equally pale, femininely toned legs were crossed gracefully. Iruka hadn't even noticed that his pace had slowed considerably as he took her in- he was too busy watching the gentle curve of her full lower lip as it parted from a slightly thinner upper lip to murmur monosyllabic tones of assent- which was apparently all Sakura needed to continue talking. The pink-haired kunoichi didn't even notice that her friend's eye was focused on the trees to her left, rather than to her right, where Sakura was actually sitting. When Iruka looked up into the girl's bright blue eyes, his heart gave an empathetic twang. He saw loneliness there, a deep loneliness, a feeling he was painfully acquainted with. He was close enough now that he could catch snippets of the conversation, and heard enough to know that Sakura, as usual, was talking about Sasuke Uchiha.

“Hisako-chan, you should have *seen* him in class today! He was so cool, and mysterious, and- Oh, *look!* There he is now! I’ll see you later, Hisa-chan!” Sakura got up, started running, and nearly bowled over a certain paper-laden teacher. Luckily, he side-stepped, and Sakura looked back apologetically without slowing down.

“Sorry, Iruka-sensei!” He grunted his acceptance of her apology, which probably wasn’t even heard, since she was already all the way across the field walking next to a suddenly irritated-looking Sasuke, chattering away.

Somehow, a single paper had managed to slip its way out of his grasp, and Iruka watched in dismay as the wind carried the sheet across the road to land directly in the lap of a now alone brunette. Long, slender fingers wrapped around the sheet and she stood up gracefully, sauntering over to where he stood and slipping it into one of the manila folders in his arms.

“Here you go,” she said in a friendly tone, and the musical quality of her voice temporarily mesmerized Iruka. “I’m Hisako Mutakami, by the way.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mutakami-san,” he replied in an equally amiable tone. “I’m Iruka Umino, and thanks for catching my runaway paper.”

She groaned and rolled her eyes, causing an expression of pure confusion claim Iruka’s face. What had he said?

“Please, *please* don’t call me Mutakami-san. First, that’s my mother, and second, that makes me feel really old. Hisako-san is just fine. In return, is it all right for me to call you Iruka-san?” First chagrin, then humor touched her eyes, and the corners of his mouth quirked in an instinctive smile.

“Very well, then... Hisako-san. And sure, I suppose Iruka-san is fine. Most kids your age call me ‘sensei,’ though, even if I’m not their teacher.” He grimaced internally, hoping his bait about her age wasn’t too obvious. Apparently, it wasn’t. She sniffed, offended.

“ ‘My age?’ I’ll have you know, I’m nineteen! Just because I hang out with Sakura doesn’t mean I’m her age,” she pouted, her lower lip jutting out. Iruka swallowed audibly. A small spark of triumph in her eyes snapped him out of it.

“But aren’t you a gennin? I’m a chunnin, so I’d have seen you around at least once,” he asked, his dark brown eyes conveying his inner ‘?’.

“Pssh,” she scoffed. “By choice.”

He cast her a doubtful look, to which she returned an irritated one.

“*Really,*” she insisted in a softer, more serious voice. “I couldn’t leave Sakura by herself. Ino always cuts her down, her parents don’t take her seriously, Naruto pisses her off, and Sasuke won’t give her the time of day. She needs someone to look up to, someone who believes in her.”

Iruka stood there for a moment, taken aback. What a loyal friend. Not too many people like that these days. When he took in her expectant expression, he remembered he hadn't replied.

"How many times have you taken the Chuunin Exams?"

"Four."

A low whistle of appreciation emanated from Iruka, and Hisako flushed with embarrassment. With a jolt, he realized how late it was getting- he had to get these reports done.

"Well, listen, I've got to get going... Kakashi-san keeps dumping his work on me, and I'm gonna be up all night doing these reports. It was really nice to meet you, Hisako-san!" His heart skipped a beat when she actually looked disappointed for a second, but a second later she fixed him with a cheery smile. It happened so fast, he wasn't sure he'd seen it at all.

"It was nice to meet you too, Iruka-san. Who knows, maybe we'll run into each other again," she replied in an almost hopeful voice.

"Maybe so," he echoed, then began walking. "Bye for now!"

8 - Two Lonely People- Part 2

Much to Iruka's dismay, long hours turned into long days, which turned into long weeks, and finally two months had passed and he'd seen neither hide nor hair of Hisako. He had been more distracted at work, and even some of his students had noticed the difference. Asking Sakura about the elusive girl was a big no-no, Iruka was sure. He thought about approaching Kakashi about it, but he knew the white-haired ninja would only mock him about it. Kakashi wasn't good for much meaningful conversation... only once in a blue moon could you get the man to divulge any private thoughts, with more than a little prodding.

The door swung shut behind him, and he swiftly inserted and turned the key in the knob, locking the door before heading out to town. The brunette had found upon checking the fridge that morning for breakfast that it was dreadfully low on just about everything- the only thing to be found in that fridge was a bag of long-expired oranges and a small Tupperware jar encased in saran wrap... The contents were unidentifiable.

He had come prepared with his wallet and a paper sack (he preferred to recycle, whenever possible), but it looked as though he should have brought an umbrella, too. Iruka sighed unhappily as he saw the heavy grey clouds spanning the horizon. *Another storm? That's the third major rainstorm in the past month. I'd better put Mr. Ukki in when I get home. I just watered him this morning, the poor thing doesn't need to drown.* Mr. Ukki was an attention-desperate house-plant that Kakashi had gotten as a present, and was too good to let it die, but not good enough to actually take care of it. So, he passed the little thing off to Iruka. Surprisingly, putting his initial irritation aside, he really enjoyed caring for the plant. It made him feel like he had something to look forward to when he came home. Looking back up at the sky broke Iruka out of his thoughts, and he quickened his pace; sooner there, sooner back.

Iruka opened the door to the grocery shop and stepped inside, raising his hand in a 'hello' gesture to the shopkeeper before walking down each aisle slowly, deliberating. He picked up a carton of fresh milk and placed it into his bag, which was quickly followed by two cups of instant ramen, in honor of Naruto. Several small bottles of orange juice came soon after, and he had just reached for the yogurt when he glanced up, and their eyes met.

He was sure his expression had been a mirror image of hers; eyes wide, mouth open in a surprised "o," everything else forgotten. The carton of yogurt slipped through his fingers and he quickly made several grabs for it before finally lifting up his foot and catching it on the toe of his shoe. He sighed in relief and put the yogurt in his bag, then looked up sheepishly. That move was so Naruto. Hisako was silently snickering at the simple absurdity of the scene that just took place. When she managed to quell her laughter, she approached him.

"Afternoon, Iruka-san. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"It has," he agreed, trying not to let his chagrin seep into his voice. Realizing that she was alone, Iruka stealthily scanned the area. It really appeared as if she was grocery shopping on her own. "What brings you here?" *Stupid, stupid question. Duh, she ran out of groceries.*

"Well," she replied, "when I checked the fridge this morning, I was out of milk. I can't eat my breakfast without milk, it just isn't... complete. Know what I mean? And then I just had this horrible craving for fresh oranges! Out of nowhere. They don't seem to have any here... I guess they're not in season. And I'm babbling," she realized as she took in Iruka's amused expression, flushing in embarrassment.

"No, no," he placated her, "I think it's cute." She looked slightly taken aback, and he had to resist the urge to clap his hand to his mouth in shock. He... just said she was cute. He just said she was *cute*. *What the hell is wrong with me?* He cleared his throat, a slight blush painting his cheeks. "I... You know, you seem pretty independent for your age," he tried for a topic change. Apparently that was the wrong thing to say; he could have sworn he saw a vein twitch in her forehead.

"Look, I *told* you I'm nineteen," she ground out, thoroughly irked. "I live on my own."

"Sorry, sorry," he backpedaled quickly. "You just have this youthful, cute air about you-" he really did clap his hand to his mouth this time. Two in less than two minutes. *There's got to be something wrong with me*, he thought in horror. *She probably thinks I'm some sort of pervert, coming onto her like that...*

"You... really think I'm cute?" She asked almost timidly, surprised.

"I... Well, that is... um..." Iruka frantically searched for the right words to say, but they wouldn't come, and at each utterance he grew steadily more flustered. Seeing him flounder like that, there was nothing Hisako could do, really, but laugh. Her expression of surprise gave way to one of amusement, and she laughed at him. She clutched her burning side with one hand and covered her mouth with the other, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. Her outburst gave Iruka time to think, and he quickly formulated a response.

"Well, don't you?" She stopped short, looking puzzled, so he clarified. "Think you're cute, I mean. You seem surprised that I would think that."

"Well, I..." For once, she seemed unsure of herself. Her gaze slid downward, and she shuffled her feet as her cheeks heated up from embarrassment. They spent a few moments in an uncomfortable silence as she tried to come up with a reply. When she finally found her words again, Hisako looked at Iruka, and his heart gave a painful twang. Her eyes were filled with such a painful loneliness that he felt it. Loneliness by proxy. Who would have thought? "I'd better be going," she said abruptly, heading for the door.

"Wha-"

"It was nice to see you again, Iruka-san!" She called as she made her hasty exit.

"Will I see you again?" He yelled to her retreating figure.

"I'm sure you will," was her almost unintelligible reply as her figure retreated from view.

"I hope so," Iruka murmured to himself. "I really do. Hisako Mutakami, you are quite possibly the most interesting person I have ever met."

9 - Hisako's Exam

The opponents stood facing each other in the arena, about forty feet apart. The proctor raised his arm, and Hisako tensed, spreading her feet to a little past shoulder's width while Neji slid one foot behind him, providing more traction and distributing his weight evenly. Their arms both went up in their signature fighting style, and they regarded each other warily.

The crowd that had only a moment ago been so noisy fell into a silence so heavy it was almost oppressive- although Hisako wasn't sure if that was just the adrenaline roaring through her veins. Time seemed to slow down: the breeze rippling her clothes and whipping the sand around in small spirals were a fraction of their normal speed, and even the deep, even breaths of the boy in front of her seemed to grind to a standstill.

H have to find a way to get him to focus on my attacks so he doesn't notice...

"Ready?" The proctor shouted, his voice deafening in the weighted silence, and Hisako's adrenaline spiked. She was going to put this arrogant punk in his place.

"Please don't hold back, Neji-kun. I'm giving it my all," she called across to her former sparring partner. His mouth turned up in a sneer.

"Let's just hope your all is good enough, hmm?" His words were said so flippantly that Hisako had to curl and uncurl her fist several times to stop herself from jumping over and beating him senseless right then. They had fought together for so long... He knew she was strong, and still he dared to speak to her that way? Is he really *that* arrogant? This kid was just begging for a beating. She'd humiliate him in front of thousands of people. Maybe that would wipe the overconfident smile off his smug little face.

"Don't underestimate me, Neji, she replied in a polite yet clipped tone, intentionally leaving off the suffix. Before he had a chance to respond, she nodded tersely to the proctor and said, "We're ready."

"START!"

Neji made a huge lunge for her, and she propelled backwards, dancing out of his reach. She quickly recovered and made a leap for him, easily overshooting and when he ducked she sailed over him and landed about ten feet away, spinning to face him with one hand in her defensive stance and the other behind her back.

He hasn't even activated his Byakugan yet, she realized with a wave of annoyance. Am I really so little of an opponent to him? She reached behind her and with a practiced effortlessness, she eased the cork out of a pineapple-sized gourd belted at the small of her back. Making sure that none of her movements were visible to Neji, she put the cork in the kunai holster at her back and dipped a finger into the mouth of the gourd. The cool touch of the chakra-laden water instantly relaxed her, and as the thin film of water slowly crept over her skin a calm, confident smile fell into place. This boy was hers. Once the gourd was empty, an invisible armour of water covered her entire body and she straightened and walked right up to

Neji, stopping less than five feet away.

What the hell is she doing? She's walking right into my... She's dumber than I thought.

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"What the hell is she doing?" Naruto shouted, being held back by Kakashi and Sakura from jumping into the arena himself. "She's walking right into his... is she stupid?!"

The only answer he got was a knot on either side of his head.

"You have no faith in her at all, do you, Naruto?" Sakura muttered angrily.

"Just watch her, Naruto. She knows what she's doing," Kakashi added, but he wasn't looking at Naruto. He was looking at a hitae-ate-less Tenzo with a death grip on the rail. "She'll be fine," he said more softly. Tenzo looked up and met Kakashi's gaze. The worry there was obvious, but as Kakashi's gaze didn't waver, Tenzo's became more calm and collected. Kakashi's lips quirked in a small smile, and the brown-haired ninja blushed, turning back to the match.

Kakashi met sakura's eyes, and she gave him a knowing smile. He was so in love with her.

10 - Hisako's Exam - Part 2

Neji, Neji, Hisako thought to herself. *What rotten luck for you... I'm the worst possible opponent for you. This ends here.* The outcome of this match rested on Neji's arrogance, really. If he didn't activate his Byakugan... He was dead meat. She stood not five feet from the boy, well within reach of his 64 palms attack. Adapting a haphazard defensive stance, Hisako slid her foot forward with enough force to kick some dirt in Neji's direction, which didn't go unnoticed. His eyebrow twitched, to which the girl responded with a sneer.

"What, Neji-rin?" She jibed, enjoying the look of outrage that crossed his face at the diminutive suffix. "Afraid of getting dirty?"

Hisako watched Neji's fists clench, saw his knuckles turn white. She even thought she may have seen a telltale vein emerge on his forehead. One more push...

"Look, Neji-pi," she said disdainfully, examining her fingernails in a bored manner. "Are we going to fight, or what? I have other things I need to be doing."

That was it. His calm demeanor was in shambles. Neji was livid; his entire body was shaking with barely controlled rage. The entire stadium was silent. This girl was just asking to die.

"What..." Neji's voice was barely above a whisper, but she could feel the waves of hostility rolling off him. "What did you just call me?"

"What, are you hard of hearing now, too... Neji-tan?"

With a growl, Neji leapt from his spot and aimed a punch straight for her gut. Hisako easily sidestepped and caught his ankle with her foot, causing him to lose his footing. Neji stumbled for a moment before regaining his balance, jumping back a few feet only to come at her again. He was so angry he was seeing red. She danced away from each of his attacks, never attacking, only backing up again and again, leading them both toward the middle of the arena, away from the walls. When Neji finally tired of his opponent leading him in circles, he came to a stop about six feet from her, deciding it was finally time to use his 'gentle fist.' To further enrage him, Hisako decided on a whim that she'd drop her guard. She didn't need it, anyway. The flash of pure undiluted rage in his eyes at her casual stance quite easily made her day.

He decided quickly that this girl needed to be put in her place. She'd done nothing but speak down to him since they came into the arena. To defeat her without even using his Byakugan... That would be the ultimate slap in the face. He'd had the chakra network and its sensitive points drilled into him night and day since he was a small child, so he had each critical point's position memorized. The girl would collapse, immobile, and he'd have won without even breaking a sweat. How dare she act so calm and confident, *facing him* as an opponent? He'd teach her how to treat a Hyuuga.

Hisako tensed minutely when she saw him gathering chakra for his attack. *So you took the bait?*

Arrogant little... I wish I could wring your neck, but I'll do for publicly humiliating you. Her feet shifted apart slightly, supplying her with steadier footing in preparation for the onslaught she was about to take. She heard him cry out the name of his attack, and her adrenaline spiked.

"Eight Trigrams!"

Here it comes.

"Two palms!"

Hisako took two hits straight to the gut, knocking the wind out of her and causing her to bend almost double. But Neji was just getting started.

"Four palms!"

Four more hits, and Hisako was losing ground with every strike.

"Eight palms!"

She relaxed her breathing and went limp- locking muscles under this onslaught would only cause for more pain later.

"Sixteen palms!"

Strike after strike of that 'gentle fist,' causing her world to narrow to just her skin and his hands. Everything else was black. Her ears roared deafeningly, and her instincts screamed to not take this beating, to tense up and defend herself. But she couldn't do that, or everything would be ruined.

"Thirty-two palms!"

Blow after blow landed on her body, and she wondered if it would ever stop. She almost succumbed to the desire to increase the density of the water encasing her body so those strikes would stop hurting... but she didn't. She grit her teeth and let herself be tossed around like a rag doll. Hisako vaguely wondered how Neji hadn't figured it out yet. Only halfway through the beating, and she was already close to passing out.

"Sixty-four palms!"

Finally, the brunt of the attack. She took it all, unguarded. Refraining from tampering with her shield, she sufficed with placing a chakra seal at the end of the nerves of her torso- she couldn't feel the damage she was taking. The relief of the alleviated pain was enough to make her sigh, and her eyes wandered across the stadium. She saw Tenzo there, standing next to Kakashi and Sakura and her heart leapt. Then she realized he was making one of the most anguished expressions she'd ever seen. This brought her back to her senses. That's right, she was here to humiliate this arrogant child. She'd punish him for causing Tenzo to make such an expression.

Finally, the last strike of Neji's attack sent Hisako spiraling across the stadium, crashing into the far wall

to slowly sink to the ground. She sat there for a moment, releasing the seals on her nerves and quickly administering first aid, to assuage the pain. When it was bearable, she very slowly got to her feet, using the wall as a brace to pull herself up. When her legs were steady beneath her, she let go of the wall and looked up, meeting a dumbfounded Neji's gaze. The entire stadium was deathly silent. This girl had taken the mighty Hyuuga's 'Gentle Fist' attack... and *stood up*? Seeing the disbelief in her opponent's eye, she flashed him a cheeky smile.

"Oh, Neji, I didn't realize you were *that* arrogant," she sighed, her voice easily carrying across the arena.

"How....?" Neji voiced the sentiment of every single spectator.

"Well, if you hadn't been a total @\$\$, and had come at me like a proper opponent, activating your Byakugan, you would have known the answer to that," Hisako snapped, her temper finally getting the best of her.

"Byakugan!" The boy finally activated his eyesight... and gasped. "You..."

"That's right, Neji," Hisako spat, then took a deep breath to calm herself before continuing in a more polite tone. "My entire body is encased in a film of water soaked with my chakra, practically undetectable to the naked eye. But as you can see..." She removed the film from one of her hands, controlling the chakra-water, floating it into the air and allowing it to form abstract, whimsical shapes. "Your attack had no effect on me whatsoever. I won't even get a bruise later. In fact, the water not only absorbed the chakra you put into each attack, but also gave me the ability to do this."

Grinning almost evilly at Neji, Hisako slowly made the handsigns for the rat and the ram, as well as the ox.

"Ninja Art: Water Entrapment!"

Neji froze in place, his body not responding to the signals he was giving it. He looked down and realized that his entire body was encased in the same watery film that Hisako's was. Through his surprise, he managed to sputter out the question- "How?"

"Well, while you were busy beating the crap out of me - thanks for that, by the way- I was busy transferring some of my shield to your body. It was hard work, really. I had to decrease the density of the part on *my* body, and focus on letting it cover *your* body without you noticing. But face it, Neji. This battle is over. You know as well as I that I have well over twice the chakra you do. I could do this until you pass out, but that would take so long. Just concede defeat. Or are you too proud to back out of a hopeless battle?" She couldn't resist letting a little bit of the anger inside turn her last question into a sneer.

Neji looked torn for a moment, and it was clear he was trying to break free from her hold on him. But he finally realized how utterly pointless it was; the defeat was etched in his face.

"I concede," he spat quietly, his voice almost indistinguishable in the suddenly noisy arena.

"What was that, Neji?" Hisako called loudly, cupping her hand to her ear. A second later, Neji found his body mimicking hers, cupping his ear in the same gesture.

"I *said*," he repeated in an irritated fashion, mirroring her tone, "that I concede defeat."

Hisako let a triumphant grin claim her face, and she looked over at the proctor, unwilling to free Neji until the match was officially declared.

"Due to concession of the opposition, the winner of this round is Mutakami Hisako!"

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After the match...

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The brown-haired kunoichi walked tall and proud out of the arena, her chin held high. She drank in the applause, letting the approval from the crowd wash over her. As soon as she was out of sight, though, she sank to her knees, leaning heavily on the wall, and clutched at her stomach- the 'injury site', as it were. She lifted up her battered shirt and winced at the sight - black and blue everywhere. She may have even recieved a couple of cracked ribs.

"Good Lord, Hisako," exclaimed a familiar silky tenor voice, and Hisako quickly yanked her shirt down in surprise and lurched to her feet- a bad idea. The blood rushed to her head and the world began to tilt on its axis. She tilted sideways and began to fall, to which Tenzo responded by stepping forward and gingerly putting his arms around her. She sighed and gratefully rested her head on his shoulder.

"I didn't mean for you to see that," she murmured quietly, just basking in that woody smell that was so familiar, so *Tenzo*.

"You shouldn't try to hide things from me," he replied in the same hushed tone.

"I don't want you to worry about me," was her only response before her knees gave out and she leaned heavily on him, slumping forward. Tenzo gently, but swiftly, wrapped one arm around her torso and one arm around her thighs and picked her up. As he recognized the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching, Hisako's head slumped into his chest, and he realized she passed out. He turned around to face a concerned Sakura, Kakashi, and Naruto.

"She fainted?" Naruto's overly-loud, obnoxious voice.

"It would appear that way," Kakashi responded dryly.

"She needs medical attention. I think she's got some cracked ribs," Tenzo explained to Sakura (the medic).

"But she said he wouldn't even have given her a bruise," Kakashi pointed out, bemused.

"She was bluffing," Sakura realized, her gaze softening as she looked at her battered friend. "She didn't want to give Neji-kun the satisfaction of knowing he'd affected her at all."

"Hisako..." Tenzo looked down at the unconscious girl in his arms, yet again amazed. "You really gave it your all, didn't you?"

11 - Two Lonely People - Part 3

A full month had passed since the grocery store incident, and Iruka was growing steadily more flustered by the day. Everywhere he went he kept seeing flashes of reddish-brown hair, or the sparkle of those vivid blue eyes. Then he'd blink, and he'd realize he had imagined it. He slumped over his desk in frustration.

I can't stop thinking about her. That's it, he decided with sudden forcefulness, pounding his fist on the table, I'm going to ask Genma about her. He's bound to know something, and if not, he'll know someone who does. I've got to find her.

He was about to stand up when the door to his classroom slid open, and a girl walked in. A very familiar girl. Iruka's jaw dropped. *Speak of the devil...*

"Oh, Iruka-san!" Hisako exclaimed in surprise, the expression claiming her face nothing but adorable, Iruka had to admit.

"H-Hisako-san!" He stammered, his mouth suddenly going dry. *Damn it, now that she's here, I can't think of anything to say!* "W-what brings you here?" *A relatively safe question. I hope.*

"Well, I work here from time to time, filing reports, delivering papers, that sort of thing. It's tedious, but I get to see people, and it doesn't pay too terribly," she said with a delicate shrug of her shoulders.

"Would you like to go to dinner with me sometime?" Iruka blurted, his face falling in shock as he registered what he just did. *I just asked her on a date! Ah, hell.* She blinked, surprised at the outburst.

"You... want to go to dinner. With me?" She asked in a disbelieving tone.

"Well, yes," he admitted with a blush, scratching the back of his head in dismay at her lack of enthusiasm. "We keep meeting by accident, and I'm tired of waiting, well, hoping, to run into you. And while I'm being so painfully honest, I figured I'd just go ahead and ask." He internally slapped himself. He felt like he was just digging himself a deeper hole. His fears were confirmed when the light left her eyes, and a dark expression took hold of her.

"I don't need your pity," she replied, the chill in her voice sending shivers down his spine. "I saw the look in your eye when I told you about why I'm still a gennin. Figures. I tell you my sob story, so you take pity on me and decide to rescue me from loneliness by becoming my only 'understanding' friend." I don't need it. I don't want it." With that she turned and stalked out of his classroom.

"Hisako-san, wait!" Iruka yelled after her, overturning his chair in his hurry to catch up with her. By the time he rounded the corner, she was already gone. "God damn it!" He shouted, and was rewarded with several stern looks from passersby in the hall. He flushed with chagrin, but most of all, sorrow. Did she think so little of herself that a guy could only take interest in her out of pity? What *happened* to her to make her see herself so poorly?

Iruka balled his hands into fists as he thought this through. He knew just who to go to. If Hisako was friends with Sakura, then there's no way she's not friends with him too.

Time to visit Yuji.

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I know this is short, but I intend to upload another one in the next day or so! So don't fret!