

Naruto Couples (re-posted)

By nextguardian

Submitted: November 2, 2008

Updated: July 14, 2010

I take couples requests. CanonxCanon, OCxCanon only, though. For now, no yaoi/yuri. Please read and comment on at least 1 completed ch before making an rq.

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/nextguardian/54729/Naruto-Couples-re-posted>

Chapter 1 - Info/Contents	3
Chapter 2 - Ekyt CAN say it!	4
Chapter 3 - Sakura's 'Game'	7
Chapter 4 - Giving Up	11
Chapter 5 - Ninjas into Dreams	13
Chapter 6 - Ninjas Into Dreams (Full)	19
Chapter 7 - Benefits of Servitude	31
Chapter 8 - Weird Pairings	42
Chapter 9 - Makeout Unlikely	49
Chapter 10 - Makeout Unlikely (Finished)	51
Chapter 11 - The Fever	63
Chapter 12 - Sakura's Winter	70
Chapter 13 - The Bounty Hunter	77
Chapter 14 - Tsunade the Matchmaker	87
Chapter 15 - Valentine's Day	96
Chapter 16 - Sakura's a Tease!	103
Chapter 17 - Desires	107
Chapter 18 - Double Your Fun	119
Chapter 19 - Affair of the Heart	130
Chapter 20 - The Shore (WIP)	144
Chapter 21 - Untainted Love	146
Chapter 22 - The Shore (Finished)	154

Chapter 23 - Jirayai's Manuscript(WIP)	162
Chapter 24 - Anxiety	166
Chapter 25 - Jiraiya's Manuscript II	172
Chapter 26 - Sis Mea Pars	175
Chapter 27 - Jiraiya's Manuscript 3	183
Chapter 28 - Jiraiya's Manuscript 4	190

1 - Info/Contents

A collection of romance fics I've written. They just don't seem to fit in my normal stories, so I put 'em here.

NOTE: If you comment (a GOOD comment, prove you read it too) I'll be more than happy to do an RQ for you- a couples RQ. I will do CanonXOC or canonXcanon. No yaoi/yuri, hentai, rape, etc.

Also, if those who already commented wouldn't mind repeating their comments...heh, sorry for the accidental deletion thing. If you DO mind, no pressure :)

Contents:

1. Info/Contents
2. Ekyt CAN say it!
3. Sakura's 'Game'
4. Giving Up (TBC)
5. Ninjas into Dreams
6. Ninjas into Dreams (Finished)
7. The Benefits of Servitude
8. Weird Pairings
9. Makeout Unlikely
10. Makeout Unlikely (Finished)
11. The Fever
12. Sakura's Winter
13. The Bounty Hunter
14. Tsunade the Matchmaker
15. Valentine's Day
16. Sakura's a Tease!

RQ's in progress:

NaruXIno or KanTen- YOURIMAGINARY FRIEND- FINISHED!

EkytXHinata- hflp (well, it's more of a suggestion, and it makes sense)

2 - Ekyt CAN say it!

“Sakura...I...” Ekyt felt his courage failing him again. **No! You’ve come so close! You’ve got to tell her!**

“Ekyt-kun? What’s wrong?” Sakura put a hand to Ekyt’s forehead. **No fever...then why is he so red?**

“Sakura...I-...(damnit!)C-can I...? I really like you!” The words burst from Ekyt’s mouth like a gunshot. He had said it quietly, but with such passion behind the words that he might as well have yelled.

“Huh? R-really?” Sakura stammered. **W-what does he mean?**

“I’ve...I’ve been in love with you for nearly three years now. I couldn’t say it. But I HAD to. Please, don’t feel guilty when you say no...” Ekyt cringed.

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t! I love you, too!” Sakura zipped forward and hugged Ekyt. “You couldn’t tell me? That’s so...cute!”

“You were always out of my league, and I didn’t want to make you unhappy, sensei.”

Sakura led Ekyt to the cherry blossom path. This early in the morning, no one would be here, as the park was closed. But Sakura had always dreamed of bringing her boyfriend here.

“Please...let me just...” Sakura slid Ekyt’s mask down, so it was around his neck.

I’d forgotten how handsome he looked without his mask...and I’ve always seen his eyes, but somehow, now, I see them differently. There’s so much love there.

“You really love me? How could you? I’ve got a big forehead, and...well, that’s the only thing that’s big...” Sakura muttered awkwardly.

“I’m not that shallow. You were the first to befriend me when I came to the Leaf Village. And you’ve patched me up more times than I can count after fights. All those times I meant to tell you...but I couldn’t. I felt like I would be a disappointment to you...that you could do better than me. And I didn’t want you to feel guilty when you told me I wasn’t good enough...”

Ekyt looked away shyly. “I think you’re the most beautiful kunoichi in the village, and easily the most intelligent. You just seemed so...wholesome and beautiful, like no girl I’d ever seen before. You didn’t complain about clothes, and you aren’t a ‘material girl’. You’re strong, beautiful, smart, and everything I’ve ever wanted in a girl.”

No one had ever told Sakura that before. Not even remotely CLOSE to that.

“A-all those times you fought in my place, and all those cuts that I healed...they were for me, weren’t

they? To protect me?” Sakura asked.

Ekyt nodded, blushing even deeper. It had been such a hot day, Ekyt had pocketed his gloves. That was when he felt Sakura’s hand snake it’s way into his own, then close tightly.

“I...I never knew. I always thought you were cute, and brilliant. I didn’t think you’d have time for a girlfriend, with your studying. Otherwise I would have asked you...a long time ago...if you’d go out with me...” Sakura’s voice trailed off, but her green eyes looked hopefully up at Ekyt.

“I-I would love to! But, um, thing is, I’m completely clueless. That’s another reason I didn’t ask you out. I have no idea how to...court a kunoichi. Kunoichi scare the hell out of me. You’re part girl, part warrior. Warriors are deadly, and girls are the unknown...”

Sakura had to laugh despite the seriousness of his voice. “Well, I’ve, um, only seen a couple dating sims that Ino owns...never the...you know...but the dating. I’d say going to the park qualifies as a date.”

“Are you supposed to kiss on the first date?” Ekyt asked, suddenly aware he didn’t know if he possessed any kissing skills, and didn’t know any of the fine points.

“In the sims, they did...” Sakura said with a giggle, “But most girls don’t.”

Ekyt sighed with a combination of disappointment and relief.

“But I’m not most girls...” Sakura had suddenly pulled herself in closer to Ekyt. Ekyt was only a couple inches taller, so Sakura didn’t have to get up on her toes to reach him. She reached up, put one hand around his neck, and brought their heads together. Then their mouths met in a warm embrace. It lasted longer than most first kisses, and was a little more provocative, being that both giver and receiver were older, but it was still a first. Ekyt ran his hand through Sakura’s silky hair, then down her back lightly. He was actually copying her movements; he was as clueless as they came. After what felt like hours, but was only seconds, the two broke apart.

Sakura kept a grip on Ekyt’s hand. “(giggle) I heard Asuma-sensei’s advice to you...”

Ekyt went pale. “Oh...the cigarette thing? I don’t do that...”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “No, that’s a perv guy thing! I meant the “Once they kiss you, they own you” advice about girls. I want to assure you...that it’s completely true. I guess you’re mine, now.”

Ekyt nodded stupidly. “I g-guess so. I don’t object!” Ekyt bowed suddenly, as if apologizing.

Sakura giggled again, then patted Ekyt on the head. “It’s okay, I was kidding. But if you’re that willing, it’s kind of a Haruno clan tradition...if you’re okay with it...”

Ekyt nodded. He would have done anything at this point, and he was apparently living on something other than oxygen, because he hadn’t breathed in about two minutes. It’s funny how you work so hard to make your dreams come true. But, at the same time, a nagging voice tells you that ‘it’s only a dream’, never an encouraging ‘it can be a reality’ accompanied with it. For Ekyt, a dream coming true

might as well have been the world ending.

“Here, take this...I’ve got one just like it...it’s kind of proof that you’re ‘taken’...” Sakura held out a kunai. It looked ordinary, except for the red grip tape. That, and the loop at the end of the kunai was white.

“The white part is a circle, the symbol of the Haruno clan. And the red part is the Haruno’s clan’s color. And it’s the tradition that the Haruno clan member gives his or her boyfriend or girlfriend the knife. It’s supposed to symbolize the union of two clans under the branch of the Hidden Leaf.”

3 - Sakura's 'Game'

Nudity: Mild

Sex: Mild

Swearing: Moderate

“I’m just so ashamed, I couldn’t tell anyone!”

I comforted Sakura as she cried, gently laying her on her bed, which was actually my bed. It was a temporary stay, and we didn’t share a room, so no big deal, right? All of Team Kakashi needed a place to stay for a short while, and my place was the most secure. Nothing out of the ordinary, I would put up the entire Leaf Village if I could.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” I assured Sakura. But she looked up at me with those beautiful green eyes, full of tears, and I distinctly felt my heart melt. I would have done anything for her at this point.

“But you’re special, Ryo-kun. Why would anyone want me? I’m a freak!” Sakura exclaimed, twisting my shirt into a ball in her fist. She wordlessly asked me to sit next to her. I did so, letting her do what she needed, which was lean onto my shoulder and sob for the time being.

“I don’t care what you are. I think you’re a beautiful girl, and I KNOW you aren’t a freak!” I exclaimed. Sakura buried her head in my shoulder further, sniffing in a slightly-more controlled way.

“You’re really sweet...but this is a horrible thing, I can’t even help myself! I NEED to, not WANT to.”

I knew what she meant. Sakura had been attacked, and she needed help, in the form of chakra. And blood. In essence, Sakura had become a vampire. That’s why she was staying with me. I protected her. Why? Because I love her. But she doesn’t know that. Because I’m so damn shy, she’ll probably never know, unless I do something drastic to prove my love. But what?

Of course, I spoke without thinking. No, I HAD thought about it, I take that back. And I had concluded I was crazy to even consider this. But seeing Sakura’s eyes, and hearing the desperation in her voice...

“Sakura...I’ll be your game...”

Sakura’s head jerked towards me. “What?!”

Sakura didn’t say that out of ignorance; she knew what I meant. She just couldn’t believe I was serious. To be fair, it sounded pretty insane to me, too. But at the same time...

“I’ll be your game...” I repeated. ‘Game’ meant that I was letting Sakura take my blood and chakra by biting me in the neck. I’m a freakin’ genius, aren’t I?!

“I can’t ask you to do that!” Sakura was shocked. I hope it was the THOUGHT that mortified her, and

not me.

Damn that poison...she thinks she's ruined...if I ever find out who did this to her... I thought viciously, thinking that, while I'd never killed anyone before, this clown might be the deserving first.

"You didn't ask; I offered," I said slyly. Right about there, Sakura would have giggled normally. But not tonight.

"I can't do that to you..." Sakura said shyly, looking away.

I grabbed her hand and held it. "If not me, then who? You've already told me, and you want to keep this a secret, right? Besides, I WANT to do this for you." I had NEVER held a girl's hand before; it was so soft and warm! I couldn't believe this hand could destroy boulders!

"B-but..." Sakura sputtered, but didn't have an argument. Instead, she looked away as she explained how it would work.

"Well, I would have to bite into your neck. That actually doesn't hurt, it's just a little scary. And I don't need much blood and chakra. You'll only feel a little sting. But, the blood flows a little...and you're wearing a white shirt..."

So I was. A white dress shirt. If I ruined this my Mom would kill me. And how would I explain the blood? On ANY of my shirts. So after loosening my tie, I unbuttoned the shirt and slipped it off. (I was wearing a shirt and tie, and Sakura a black school uniform. Why were we dressed up? Y'know, I'm really not 100% sure. I think there was a party thrown by Lady Tsunade or something. But trust me, Sakura looked really cute in that black uniform! My white shirt, tie, and dress pants made me...over dressed. Of course.)

"Is that all?" I asked. Sakura nodded. She was looking at me...at my chest! I never took my shirt off in mixed company, even in the hot springs! But for her, I would have done anything, I guess. So when she started to back out, I made a desperate move, for her sake. It took every last drop of courage I had, but I did it.

I kissed her. I pulled her in tight to me, and I kissed her. I watched her as she closed her eyes and slid her bottom half closer to me. She had one arm around my waist now, steadying herself, still shocked that I, the shy boy, would kiss her. I relinquished my lip lock and offered what I hoped was a comforting smile.

"Please, go ahead. Take what you need."

Sakura had me lay down on my bed, propped up by some pillows. After a moment's hesitation, Sakura climbed onto my chest, pinning me down by kneeling on me.

"I, um, don't want you to move. I'm worried my fangs might damage you. And I know you, Ryouko. You're brave, but kunoichi worry you a little. Don't worry, this won't take long. Are you sure you're okay with this?"

I nodded, my arms trapped at my sides by Sakura's legs. Her hands gripped my head and held it still.

Then I felt her fangs pierce my neck.

It felt like a kiss. Although it DID hurt, it seemed almost...sexual? Where the hell did I get 'sexual' out of 'taking my chakra and blood'?! Oh yeah, maybe the half-naked thing, with the girl on top of me...yeah, that might have been where I got the sexual part from. Anyway, I felt the blood hitting my shoulder, but it was immediately sucked up. I could feel Sakura's fangs, but more prominently, I felt her lips. Girl's lips are pleasing, I'd discovered this night. Losing a little blood was a fair price to feel them again, I thought.

Sakura soon let go, wiping her mouth clean. I noticed she was in no great hurry to get off of me, and wondered if the message "I love you" had been received by her.

"Thank you, Ryou-kun. Can I ask you one more favor?"

"Sure," I replied.

"Keep me company? For a little while?"

My heart damn near stopped. Was she saying what I THINK she was saying? Hey, I'm no perv, but I'm also a twenty year old boy and a member of the, ahem, V-club. Any breathing male in my position would have probably said 'hell yeah!' But me, I just said:

"Okay."

Of course, Sakura didn't mean anything except that she was still scared. And even if she HAD, ahem, pursued me further, I would have felt like I was taking advantage of her rush of affection toward me. All I wanted right now was her safety. Even a vampire needed someone, right?

But Sakura didn't seem like a vampire. She seemed like a lost girl who wanted company. That was proven when I sat down next to her. She buried her head in my chest again, looking up at me. I felt her body shaking, and noticed a cold sweat on her brow.

"You know, you're really cute, Ryouko. Is it okay if I ask you something?"

This was it, right? This HAD to be it! This DID count as 'pillow talk', right?

"Do you think I'M cute?"

Oh, that wasn't what I was expecting.

"I do," I replied quietly, meaning it.

"Does that mean that you love me?"

"Yes," I said again. Oh s---. Say what?! I just said that?! Oh man, not good, not good, delete, delete! Erase, rewind, undo!

"I thought so..." Sakura said with a giggle. I could see my chance at getting her to be my girlfriend

joining my dignity in a spiral down to hell. Giggling with such a serious confession wasn't good...

"...I love you, too, you know..." Sakura pulled down on my head and pulled me into a kiss. Nothing super-provocative, unless you count the fact that I'm shirtless. I didn't notice it (like hell I didn't!), but Sakura was wearing this black school uniform...wow, how the hell didn't I notice that?! But, back to the kiss. Eventually, she put a hand on my chest. She pulled herself in tight, and kept kissing. There were the pleasant lips again!

My heart was now going to beat out of my chest, I was sure of it. The girl I loved, kissing me, while snuggling up to me on a cold night? Geez, you could SWEAR this was becoming a dating sim! But, (as incredibly sexy an idea living out dating sim was) I took this for what it was: A girl in her hour of need clutching the boy she needed.

That worked for me.

--

The next day, Sakura and I spent time together. It was strange, at first. Watching some show about Ninjas. Sakura settled next to me. I noticed that she slid closer and closer after each scene, until our hips were touching. Then, without warning, she laid her head on my shoulder. Huh? What am I supposed to do?

"You're my boyfriend now, you know? We're supposed to cuddle and stuff," Sakura informed me, eyes twinkling mischievously, as I'm sure she sensed my complete clueless innocence.

"Oh, right!" I replied. I guess Sakura thought that was cute or something, because she kissed the small bite mark on my neck.

"It was really sweet of you to do all that...especially getting your courage up and kissing me...I know how nervous you are around kunoichi...it really meant a lot."

Sakura sighed heavily, then climbed onto my lap. Okay...so what am I supposed to do NOW? And what if Mom sees this?! Then again, she'll just be happy I've got a girlfriend, provided the girl isn't pregnant or just out of jail! She's seen Sakura before, so it's not like it's a stranger...

"It's not a problem, I'm glad I could help you Sakura," I said, smiling at her, kissing the place on her neck where she would have gotten bitten, had our roles been reversed. Then I wondered how I knew to do that? Her happy sigh told me I had done something good, so I was thrilled with that!

"What if your team walks in?" I asked, not actually caring.

"Oh, just start making out with me, they'll leave," Sakura joked. "Don't worry, even if they DO, well, you're a boy and I'm a girl. They'll figure it out."

Sounded good to me.

4 - Giving Up

“Ryouko, do you remember the day we met?”

Ryouko nodded in response to Lee’s question. “I do.”

“Then you will recall that we did not always see things eye to eye!” Lee said with a laugh. Lee and Ryouko turned out to be great friends, but their first meeting wasn’t the best indicator.

“Not true, Lee. We both saw one thing eye to eye- Sakura.”

“That is right, we did agree on Sakura! That is what has been troubling me, Ryouko...it has been a year now...that is why I need to ask you...” Lee’s voice was strained with emotion. “Why did you give up and let me have Sakura? You could have won her heart, but instead you bowed your head in defeat, something that you have never done! It has been on my mind for a year, and I need to know!”

Ryouko smiled at the memory. The chakra-enhancing cigarette in his mouth seemed to smile with him.

“Oh, you remember that? I haven’t thought of it much lately, to be honest. I guess the best way to say it...is that you were more deserving of her. Once I realized that, I figured out that I was ruining the lives of two of my best friends with my own desires. That didn’t sit well with me...So I...” Ryouko paused, looking down at the village.

“...So I quit. And I haven’t regretted it, Lee.”

“You do not regret giving up Sakura? Why? It does not make sense to me...” Lee shook his head in confusion. Ryouko exhaled, smoke curling up into the air, twisting happily until it dissipated in the sky.

“It’s not an easy thing to understand, or even explain, but I’ll try. Lee, you’re good friend. Same with Sakura. I’ve put myself in harm’s way for her more times than I can remember. That’s why I stepped aside- the happiness of two good friends means more to me than my own happiness. If I HADN’T stepped aside, even if I had managed to win Sakura, I would have felt guilty. Even if I got over the guilt I felt by taking her from you, I’d STILL feel guilty for making her a part of my life. That last part- don’t bother trying to figure that one out, even I don’t get it entirely. But, that’s why I made the decision I did.”

Ryouko’s internal clock told him it was time for a mission. “Lee, I’ve got to get going, I’ve got a mission. Try not to think of what I said too much, it’s not healthy- take that advice from experience. I’ll catch you around, give my best to Sakura.” With that, Ryouko disappeared, leaving a confused, yet relieved, Rock Lee to think.

--

As often was the case, two strong-willed individuals butted heads.

“...SAYS THE 20 YEAR OLD GENIN!” came the voice of Tsunade, the Fifth Hokage.

“SAYS THE COMPULSIVE DRINKER AND GAMBLER!” Ryouko shot back.

“STOP IT, BOTH OF YOU!” Shizune finally shouted, pushing the two warring ninjas apart. “GROW UP!”

Ryouko and Tsunade both quieted.

“LISTEN TO YOURSELVES! FOR GOODNESS SAKE, LADY TSUNADE, DROP THIS DAMN GRUDGE AND GIVE RYOUKO SOME TRUST!”

Tsunade and Ryouko exchanged glances. Neither one was going to back down. But Ryouko couldn't let the standstill go on like this.

“Shizune's right. Let's just stop this. We've been fighting for a year now, over something so stupid I can't even remember what it is.”

Tsunade flicker her hand at Ryouko. “Could that be because YOU'RE stupid?”

“YOUR BIG MOUTH IS WHAT STARTED THIS, LADY LOSER!” Ryouko snarled. Tsunade stood up, her foot on her desk.

“You wanna take this outside, you little punk? Tell you what, if you can handle me in combat for three minutes, I'll give your promotion! If you lose, you're my servant for a month! We have a deal, you brat?”

“Absolutely. Your luck is as good as mine- so it's just a matter of whose luck is worse, I guess. Since you're still the Hokage, I guess I lose that bet. But I'm willing to make another- If you lose, I become Hokage for three hours, and I use the time as I see fit. Fair enough?”

“Agreed!”

(THIS WILL BE MADE LONGER, THANKS FOR THE COMMENTS!)

5 - Ninjas into Dreams

Ninjas into Dreams
(Or Fights into Dreams)

Violence: Moderate

Sakura changed into her pajamas. The fall nights were still warm, so she chose a two-piece pair of red shorts and a red top that left her stomach mostly exposed. The red material was so soft and soothing to her sore body. She gave a content sigh, then curled up in bed, thoughts of a certain Uchiha boy dancing in her head.

Naruto readied himself for bed too. He pulled on a ridiculous looking night cap, shaped like a frog (he referred to it as "Gama-chan" just like his wallet), yawned loudly, then dove into bed, dreams of Hokage glory offering him solace after the day's hard training.

Sasuke simply pulled on a black set of pajamas and laid down. His dreams, it seemed, were filled with thoughts of murder and revenge. Itachi was his mantra, his focus, and his reason for living.

Kakashi wore the black jumpsuit that jonin and chunin typically wore to bed. However, Kakashi wasn't ready to sleep just yet. After a short, but fond, glance at a photo of his team, then a sad glance at a picture of his fallen comrades, Kakashi settled in with Make-Out Paradise. It was a questionable bedtime story, to be sure, but Kakashi either wasn't aware of this fact, or just didn't care.

The oddball of the group was easily Ekyt. He was already in bed, propped up by his pillow. His pajamas could serve as combat clothes, as he wore the all-black jumpsuit, like the chunin and jonin, except with short sleeves/pants. He rolled a scroll open and studied it's contents, making the handsigns, then taking notes in his own scroll. An insatiable desire to be the best (Even though he has no ambitions of being Hokage) drove Ekyt. It kept him awake, this night and every night.

Sakura's sleep became troubled. She squirmed under the covers as disturbing images and visions took over her sleep.

(DREAM)

Another mission. Nothing new. Team 7 got those all the time. At the head of the group, Sasuke suddenly turned around, the Sharingan's tomoe visible in his eyes. With a flick of his wrist, he killed a shocked Kakashi.

Sakura watched as Sasuke's curse mark spread, taking over his body. He let loose a primal scream, followed by an evil laugh.

Sasuke spun toward Naruto, instantly killing him with his Chidori. Then, Sasuke turned menacingly to Sakura. Ekyt leapt in the way, putting himself between the two.

“So...the little genin...defending the girl...pathetic.”

Ekyt, however, didn't have his usual fight.

“What will it take Sasuke...What do I need to do to make you spare Sakura?”

Sakura's eyes widened. **He cares about me...oh, why couldn't it be Sasuke caring about me?!**Sakura realized what a selfish thought that was, so she bit her lip.

“What will it take...I want you to die. By your own hand. Right in front of me. If you kill yourself, I won't touch Sakura.”

“What method?” Ekyt asked.

“Seppukku.” Sasuke answered.

Ekyt looked at Sakura, then nodded firmly.

“I'll do it...BUT... I want to see her leave first,” Ekyt said, in what was to be his last display of bravado.

“Fine...but I will take your sword as a price.”

Ekyt pulled off his vest and T-shirt, kneeling on the ground. In horror, Sakura watched him plunge a dagger into his stomach, making a plus-sign pattern, cutting up his internal organs. His head fell forward, a nearly placid look on his face, marred only by the slightest twinges of pain.

Sasuke, who had been admiring the sword, raised it high. “Die, Samurai!” he swung the blade downward. In an almost artistic display, Ekyt's head arched away from his body.

Before the life left his eyes, Ekyt told Sakura to run.

--

With a stifled shout, Sakura threw herself up in her bed. She had to tell someone about this dream. There was only one person she knew would be awake at this hour.

Knock Knock. Ekyt pushed himself out of bed, stifling a curse as his scrolls went scattering. He opened his door to find a panicked Sakura on his doorstep.

“Sakura? Everything alright?” **It's not like her to be up like this...something's wrong.**

Sakura seemed to be near tears. Ekyt picked up on this and gently asked, “Would you like to come in?”

Sakura nodded shyly, and walked unsteadily into the room. Ekyt began making tea, picking out a

calming variety that he knew Sakura favored. He filled two mugs of it, and handed one to Sakura, which she took with a shaking hand. He sat down on the opposite side of his rough wooden table, legitimate concern for his friend in his normally burdened dark hazel eyes.

“Ekyl...I know you’ll think I’m weak for this...but I had a nightmare, and it really scared the life out of me. I don’t know why, it just seemed so real...like it had a meaning behind it, something sinister...”

Ekyl removed his mask (Sakura is just about the only one who knows what he looks like without the mask, as she was the first to befriend him) and took a thoughtful gulp of his own tea.

“Well...I’m going to assume you trust me,” he began with a grin, “so why don’t you tell me about it?”

Sakura looked torn. **Should I tell him? I mean...he’s involved, and it’s horrible...but I’ve got to tell someone, and Ekyl can handle it...**

“Okay...but it kind of involves you...” she warned.

Ekyl gave an encouraging nod, and even a smile.

Whoa...I’ve never seen him smile before...it’s...calming... Sakura thought, blushing slightly. **I wish Sasuke would smile at me...**

Sakura told Ekyl about the dream. By the end, she was shaking again, near tears. Ekyl had his hands cupped under his chin thoughtfully. He didn’t tell her what he was thinking, it would have destroyed her in her emotional state.

“Sakura...I think you should get some sleep,” Ekyl said quietly.

“Huh? But I’ll never be able to sleep!”

“I’ll stand guard outside your door. If it will help, I mean,” Ekyl offered.

Sakura shyly nodded, really feeling as though she would feel safer with him around.

Once in her room, Sakura locked the door and secured the windows. Then she changed back into her pajamas, curling up into bed. She was exhausted. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was asleep. Just as quickly, the dreams began...

(DREAMS)

“Sasuke!”

Sakura heard herself cry out the boy’s name.

Sasuke turned around, the Sharingan visible in his eye. In his hand, he held three kunai knives. Without hesitation, he threw them at Sakura. With a single look from his Sharingan, he had Sakura trapped in a

genjutsu. She couldn't move to avoid the knives.

They never hit her.

Ekyt leapt in between her and the knives. They had struck him in the chest. His makimono pouches had protected his heart.

"Sasuke, you've got to fight that mark off!" Ekyt shouted.

Sasuke's only reply was a smirk. Slowly, the cursed seal took over Sasuke's body. When that happened, Sasuke's chakra and power grew, making the naturally talented boy even harder to stop.

"Did you really believe I ever WANTED to control such power? Suppressing it would be foolish."

"Joining Orochimaru, leaving all the people that care about you...that would be even more foolish," Ekyt replied.

Sasuke disappeared. In a flash, he was next to Ekyt, using a backfist to knock him backward. Ekyt skidded in a crouched position, then scrambled back toward Sasuke, in the opening stages of a flying sidekick. Sasuke grinned and stepped sideways, then slashed with his kunai. It's metallic surface glittered twice in the sun.

The second glitter was marred by blood.

A gash opened across Ekyt's stomach. But he stayed still.

"I swore to protect her...to protect everyone...with everything I had. Every drop of blood. Every breath..." Ekyt's eye cast a dark look at Sasuke.

"You just took your last breath. CHIDORI!"

Ekyt was hit full in the back with the attack. He had been talking to a Sasuke clone. The young ninja was blown into a tree, hitting it's rough bark face-first with a sickening crack. Sasuke leapt high and threw a kunai down, striking Ekyt in the throat.

With Ekyt out of the way, Sasuke turned back to Sakura.

"Now I'm going to kill you...hope you still love me," Sasuke said mockingly as he stepped toward Sakura.

(END DREAM)

Sakura threw herself upright, kunai drawn. She slashed at the first thing she saw. CRASH! Her lamp shattered, the porcelain flying all over, one piece becoming lodged loosely in her hand.

Outside, Ekyt leapt to his feet. "Sakura?" he called. Praying she was decent, and wasn't going to kill

him, he broke into the room.

When he leapt inside, he saw Sakura in her pajamas, holding a kunai, surrounded by the broken lamp.

“Sakura, are you alright?” he asked gently, making sure she knew who he was.

Sakura looked at him, her emerald green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Her kunai clattered to the ground as she threw herself at Ekyt. Despite his surprise, he managed to catch her. She sobbed hysterically, her head on his shoulder. She had a death grip around his upper body. Ekyt, who had never been put in a position like this before, wasn't sure how to react. Gently, he returned the hug (If you could call the life being squeezed out of him a hug). He wasn't sure how long they stayed like that.

Finally, Sakura started to compose herself. She blushed heavily as she realized that she had just hugged Ekyt. **Knowing him, he had no idea what to do! It must have been awkward...but he genuinely cares...right, the dream!**

Ekyt felt Sakura's hand holding his. He felt a warm sensation in it, one that was all too familiar to him. Blood.

“Sakura, hold still, okay?” he asked her. At her perplexed nod, Ekyt took off his mask and tied it around her bleeding hand. She noticed that his hand was stained with blood as well.

“Here, sit down. Tell me about it.”

Ekyt's words shook Sakura out of her trance. Sitting on her bed, still giving Ekyt's hand a death-grip, she told him the dream.

Ekyt wasn't afraid of the dream. He was afraid of what it did to Sakura. And, almost as importantly, WHY it was happening to Sakura. He had his suspicion, and only knew of one way to prove it. But he had to do it carefully and quickly.

Kakashi heard Ekyt coming. He was used to see the genin walking around town, training more often than not. This time, Ekyt was looking for Kakashi. In hushed tones, they spoke rapidly, occasionally nodding.

“Alright. But if things go wrong, don't stick around,” Kakashi said firmly.

Ekyt nodded once, then walked off.

--

Sakura woke up, drenched in a cold sweat. “Sasuke!” she screamed aloud, then leapt up. She was headed to the same place Ekyt was.

--

Sasuke looked at the Leaf Village's gates, almost contemplating his next move while reminiscing about the people he would be leaving behind.

"Sasuke!"

Sasuke turned around, seeing Sakura sprinting towards him.

"Sasuke, please, I know what's going to happen! Don't go!"

Sasuke made no indication he heard her. Sakura hugged him.

"Please Sasuke...I love you...if you have to go...take me with you! I don't want you to leave me!"

Ekyt saw all this and cursed. **Damnit! Now I can't talk him down alone...and of course the fact she's still in love with him presents a problem. She's going to hate me...but I'm going to fight him, if I have to. I'm going to stop him from leaving, even if it means Sakura will kill me.** In some part of Ekyt's mind, he knew that he had a crush on Sakura. But it wasn't his nature to sabotage someone else's dreams. In fact, he had tried to help Sakura get Sasuke's attention. Besides, there HAD to be a kunoichi for him, right? He just had no idea who it would be.

Sakura held on to Sasuke, pleading with him to stay. Sasuke was too far gone, lost in thoughts of power, to care. He still harbored feelings for his friends, but his thirst for power, and the ability to beat his brother, overcame all of that.

"Get off." Sasuke gave a hard punch, sending her flying backward.

Damn it! Ekyt thought to himself. He used the body flicker jutsu and caught Sakura before she landed. He checked on her, finding nothing but a scrape on her face from the punch. He set her down gently, trying to force the image of her crying from his head. He let anger take over.

Ekyt grabbed Sasuke by his lapels and stared, the hatred so thick you could almost see it, rather than just sense it.

"How about you go ahead and try that on me, you son of a dog," Ekyt snarled.

"Fine. Loser. Without Naruto around (This takes place while Naruto is gone, so in between the regular period and timeskip period.), you pose the best threat to me. In order for me to obtain the Mangekyo Sharingan, I need to kill my best friend. That would be Naruto...but you and Sakura would be close seconds. Maybe killing both of you would do it..."

Ekyt stepped directly in front of Sakura.

"I have no problem stopping you."

6 - Ninjas Into Dreams (Full)

Continues by popular demand! Thanks everyone!

-NG

Ninjas into Dreams
(Or Fights into Dreams)

Violence: Moderate

Sakura changed into her pajamas. The fall nights were still warm, so she chose a two-piece pair of red shorts and a red top that left her stomach mostly exposed. The red material was so soft and soothing to her sore body. She gave a content sigh, then curled up in bed, thoughts of a certain Uchiha boy dancing in her head.

Naruto readied himself for bed too. He pulled on a ridiculous looking night cap, shaped like a frog (he referred to it as "Gama-chan" just like his wallet), yawned loudly, then dove into bed, dreams of Hokage glory offering him solace after the day's hard training.

Sasuke simply pulled on a black set of pajamas and laid down. His dreams, it seemed, were filled with thoughts of murder and revenge. Itachi was his mantra, his focus, and his reason for living.

Kakashi wore the black jumpsuit that jonin and chunin typically wore to bed. However, Kakashi wasn't ready to sleep just yet. After a short, but fond, glance at a photo of his team, then a sad glance at a picture of his fallen comrades, Kakashi settled in with Make-Out Paradise. It was a questionable bedtime story, to be sure, but Kakashi either wasn't aware of this fact, or just didn't care.

The oddball of the group was easily Ekyt. He was already in bed, propped up by his pillow. His pajamas could serve as combat clothes, as he wore the all-black jumpsuit, like the chunin and jonin, except with short sleeves/pants. He rolled a scroll open and studied it's contents, making the handsigns, then taking notes in his own scroll. An insatiable desire to be the best (Even though he has no ambitions of being Hokage) drove Ekyt. It kept him awake, this night and every night.

Sakura's sleep became troubled. She squirmed under the covers as disturbing images and visions took over her sleep.

(DREAM)

Another mission. Nothing new. Team 7 got those all the time. At the head of the group, Sasuke suddenly turned around, the Sharingan's tomoe visible in his eyes. With a flick of his wrist, he killed a shocked Kakashi.

Sakura watched as Sasuke's curse mark spread, taking over his body. He let loose a primal scream, followed by an evil laugh.

Sasuke spun toward Naruto, instantly killing him with his Chidori. Then, Sasuke turned menacingly to Sakura. Ekyt leapt in the way, putting himself between the two.

"So...the little genin...defending the girl...pathetic."

Ekyt, however, didn't have his usual fight.

"What will it take Sasuke...What do I need to do to make you spare Sakura?"

Sakura's eyes widened. He cares about me...oh, why couldn't it be Sasuke caring about me?! Sakura realized what a selfish thought that was, so she bit her lip.

"What will it take...I want you to die. By your own hand. Right in front of me. If you kill yourself, I won't touch Sakura."

"What method?" Ekyt asked.

"Seppukku." Sasuke answered.

Ekyt looked at Sakura, then nodded firmly.

"I'll do it...BUT... I want to see her leave first," Ekyt said, in what was to be his last display of bravado.

"Fine...but I will take your sword as a price."

Ekyt pulled off his vest and T-shirt, kneeling on the ground. In horror, Sakura watched him plunge a dagger into his stomach, making a plus-sign pattern, cutting up his internal organs. His head fell forward, a nearly placid look on his face, marred only by the slightest twinges of pain.

Sasuke, who had been admiring the sword, raised it high. "Die, Samurai!" he swung the blade downward. In an almost artistic display, Ekyt's head arched away from his body.

Before the life left his eyes, Ekyt told Sakura to run.

--

With a stifled shout, Sakura threw herself up in her bed. She had to tell someone about this dream. There was only one person she knew would be awake at this hour.

Knock Knock. Ekyt pushed himself out of bed, stifling a curse as his scrolls went scattering. He opened his door to find a panicked Sakura on his doorstep.

"Sakura? Everything alright?" It's not like her to be up like this...something's wrong.

Sakura seemed to be near tears. Ekyt picked up on this and gently asked, "Would you like to come in?"

Sakura nodded shyly, and walked unsteadily into the room. Ekyt began making tea, picking out a calming variety that he knew Sakura favored. He filled two mugs of it, and handed one to Sakura, which she took with a shaking hand. He sat down on the opposite side of his rough wooden table, legitimate concern for his friend in his normally burdened dark hazel eyes.

"Ekyt...I know you'll think I'm weak for this...but I had a nightmare, and it really scared the life out of me. I don't know why, it just seemed so real...like it had a meaning behind it, something sinister..."

Ekyt removed his mask (Sakura is just about the only one who knows what he looks like without the mask, as she was the first to befriend him) and took a thoughtful gulp of his own tea.

"Well...I'm going to assume you trust me," he began with a grin, "so why don't you tell me about it?"

Sakura looked torn. Should I tell him? I mean...he's involved, and it's horrible...but I've got to tell someone, and Ekyt can handle it...

"Okay...but it kind of involves you..." she warned.

Ekyt gave an encouraging nod, and even a smile.

Whoa...I've never seen him smile before...it's...calming... Sakura thought, blushing slightly. I wish Sasuke would smile at me...

Sakura told Ekyt about the dream. By the end, she was shaking again, near tears. Ekyt had his hands cupped under his chin thoughtfully. He didn't tell her what he was thinking, it would have destroyed her in her emotional state.

"Sakura...I think you should get some sleep," Ekyt said quietly.

"Huh? But I'll never be able to sleep!"

"I'll stand guard outside your door. If it will help, I mean," Ekyt offered.

Sakura shyly nodded, really feeling as though she would feel safer with him around.

Once in her room, Sakura locked the door and secured the windows. Then she changed back into her pajamas, curling up into bed. She was exhausted. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was asleep. Just as quickly, the dreams began...

(DREAMS)

"Sasuke!"

Sakura heard herself cry out the boy's name.

Sasuke turned around, the Sharingan visible in his eye. In his hand, he held three kunai knives. Without hesitation, he threw them at Sakura. With a single look from his Sharingan, he had Sakura trapped in a genjutsu. She couldn't move to avoid the knives.

They never hit her.

Ekyt leapt in between her and the knives. They had struck him in the chest. His makimono pouches had protected his heart.

"Sasuke, you've got to fight that mark off!" Ekyt shouted.

Sasuke's only reply was a smirk. Slowly, the cursed seal took over Sasuke's body. When that happened, Sasuke's chakra and power grew, making the naturally talented boy even harder to stop.

"Did you really believe I ever WANTED to control such power? Suppressing it would be foolish."

"Joining Orochimaru, leaving all the people that care about you...that would be even more foolish," Ekyt replied.

Sasuke disappeared. In a flash, he was next to Ekyt, using a backfist to knock him backward. Ekyt skidded in a crouched position, then scrambled back toward Sasuke, in the opening stages of a flying sidekick. Sasuke grinned and stepped sideways, then slashed with his kunai. It's metallic surface glittered twice in the sun.

The second glitter was marred by blood.

A gash opened across Ekyt's stomach. But he stayed still.

"I swore to protect her...to protect everyone...with everything I had. Every drop of blood. Every breath..." Ekyt's eye cast a dark look at Sasuke.

"You just took your last breath. CHIDORI!"

Ekyt was hit full in the back with the attack. He had been talking to a Sasuke clone. The young ninja was blown into a tree, hitting it's rough bark face-first with a sickening crack. Sasuke leapt high and threw a kunai down, striking Ekyt in the throat.

With Ekyt out of the way, Sasuke turned back to Sakura.

"Now I'm going to kill you...hope you still love me," Sasuke said mockingly as he stepped toward Sakura.

(END DREAM)

Sakura threw herself upright, kunai drawn. She slashed at the first thing she saw. CRASH! Her lamp shattered, the porcelain flying all over, one piece becoming lodged loosely in her hand.

Outside, Ekyt leapt to his feet. "Sakura?" he called. Praying she was decent, and wasn't going to kill him, he broke into the room.

When he leapt inside, he saw Sakura in her pajamas, holding a kunai, surrounded by the broken lamp.

"Sakura, are you alright?" he asked gently, making sure she knew who he was.

Sakura looked at him, her emerald green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. Her kunai clattered to the ground as she threw herself at Ekyt. Despite his surprise, he managed to catch her. She sobbed hysterically, her head on his shoulder. She had a death grip around his upper body. Ekyt, who had never been put in a position like this before, wasn't sure how to react. Gently, he returned the hug (If you could call the life being squeezed out of him a hug). He wasn't sure how long they stayed like that.

Finally, Sakura started to compose herself. She blushed heavily as she realized that she had just hugged Ekyt. Knowing him, he had no idea what to do! It must have been awkward...but he genuinely cares...right, the dream!

Ekyt felt Sakura's hand holding his. He felt a warm sensation in it, one that was all too familiar to him. Blood.

"Sakura, hold still, okay?" he asked her. At her perplexed nod, Ekyt took off his mask and tied it around her bleeding hand. She noticed that his hand was stained with blood as well.

"Here, sit down. Tell me about it."

Ekyt's words shook Sakura out of her trance. Sitting on her bed, still giving Ekyt's hand a death-grip, she told him the dream.

Ekyt wasn't afraid of the dream. He was afraid of what it did to Sakura. And, almost as importantly, WHY it was happening to Sakura. He had his suspicion, and only knew of one way to prove it. But he had to do it carefully and quickly.

Kakashi heard Ekyt coming. He was used to see the genin walking around town, training more often than not. This time, Ekyt was looking for Kakashi. In hushed tones, they spoke rapidly, occasionally nodding.

"Alright. But if things go wrong, don't stick around," Kakashi said firmly.

Ekyt nodded once, then walked off.

--

Sakura woke up, drenched in a cold sweat. "Sasuke!" she screamed aloud, then leapt up. She was headed to the same place Ekyt was.

--

Sasuke looked at the Leaf Village's gates, almost contemplating his next move while reminiscing about the people he would be leaving behind.

"Sasuke!"

Sasuke turned around, seeing Sakura sprinting towards him.

"Sasuke, please, I know what's going to happen! Don't go!"

Sasuke made no indication he heard her. Sakura hugged him.

"Please Sasuke...I love you...if you have to go...take me with you! I don't want you to leave me!"

Ekyt saw all this and cursed. Damn it! Now I can't talk him down alone...and of course the fact she's still in love with him presents a problem. She's going to hate me...but I'm going to fight him, if I have to. I'm going to stop him from leaving, even if it means Sakura will kill me. In some part of Ekyt's mind, he knew that he had a crush on Sakura. But it wasn't his nature to sabotage someone else's dreams. In fact, he had tried to help Sakura get Sasuke's attention. Besides, there HAD to be a kunoichi for him, right? He just had no idea who it would be.

Sakura held on to Sasuke, pleading with him to stay. Sasuke was too far gone, lost in thoughts of power, to care. He still harbored feelings for his friends, but his thirst for power, and the ability to beat his brother, overcame all of that.

"Get off." Sasuke gave a hard punch, sending her flying backward.

Damn it! Ekyt thought to himself. He used the body flicker jutsu and caught Sakura before she landed. He checked on her, finding nothing but a scrape on her face from the punch. He set her down gently, trying to force the image of her crying from his head. He let anger take over.

Ekyt grabbed Sasuke by his lapels and stared, the hatred so thick you could almost see it, rather than just sense it.

"How about you go ahead and try that on me, you son of a dog," Ekyt snarled.

"Fine. Loser. Without Naruto around (This takes place while Naruto is gone, so in between the regular period and timeskip period.), you pose the best threat to me. In order for me to obtain the Mangekyo Sharingan, I need to kill my best friend. That would be Naruto...but you and Sakura would be close seconds. Maybe killing both of you would do it..."

Ekyt stepped directly in front of Sakura.
“I have no problem stopping you.”

An eerie wind howled across the small area the three were in. Sakura looked from one boy to the other, still on her knees in shock.

I never knew Ekyt could be like that... Sakura gaped at him, seeing him looking completely unlike himself. His back was straight, his shoulders were back, his mask was around his neck, and his body language was saying ‘aggression’. **I just turned sixteen...that makes Ekyt eighteen or nineteen...I don’t even know! I don’t know his birthday, how old he is, or even his favorite color! But why is he...why does he care? This doesn’t even concern him. He doesn’t have to get involved! Wait, I don’t even know if he’s a match for Sasuke!**

Sasuke charged, and Ekyt dodged.

“My Sharingan has never faced an easier opponent- ?!”

Ekyt had his hands under his vest. “Don’t wait on my account, Sasuke. It’s not what I would expect of you. Unless you’re going to give up after all?”

Sasuke snarled and charged. Ekyt stomped his foot.

“Flama Succendo!” Flames shot up from the ground, forcing Sasuke to leap in the air. **How did he do that?! Of course, he hid his handsigns under his vest! Damn it, he blocked my Sharingan! It doesn’t matter, I’m stronger than him! I don’t even need that mark Orochimaru gave me!**

Ekyt was in the air next to Sasuke. He managed to seize Sasuke by the vest and throw him to the ground. If Sasuke had been paying attention, he would have had an easy time of Ekyt. Ekyt’s specialty was genjutsu- a definite no-no when facing a Sharingan user. So that took away any advantage Ekyt might have. Sasuke skidded on the ground, knowing this. He wondered how much Ekyt knew about the Sharingan.

“Maybe I should seal those annoying eyes of yours...” Ekyt murmured. “Five Pronged Seal! Sakura, go get help! He’ll beat me eventually!”

Ekyt began to throw open-hand strikes at Sasuke’s face. Sasuke had to dodge or risk his Sharingan being sealed- he needed those eyes, so he kept moving. As he did, he made handsigns.

“Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!” Sasuke took a big intake of air, getting his chakra ready. He blew out, creating a huge blast of fire. Ekyt was wide-eyed, and looked like he got nailed. Sasuke knew better than that. Ekyt wasn’t as untalented as his rank led him to seem. He was dangerous.

“I know that didn’t finish you! Where are you...Ah!” Sasuke aimed a blast of fire at a nearby tree. Again, he seemed to hit Ekyt. But then Sasuke’s Sharingan picked up another Ekyt. He took a shot at that one, too.

I get it...he’s making me waste my chakra. At that range, he has plenty of time to move, or use a

Replacement Jutsu...I wasted a lot of chakra doing that. I've got to stop treating him like he's Naruto. He's obviously not going to kill me, or he would have tried by now. So he must be planning to delay me somehow.

Ekyt landed in front of Sasuke, his leg flashing out in a sweep kick. Sasuke jumped over the kick, but Ekyt stuffed him in the stomach with a fist. Sasuke coughed up blood as Ekyt clenched him close to him.

"Don't think I'm going to be a pushover. I don't hate you. So I can't let you go make a huge mistake without me opposing you." Ekyt threw Sasuke hard into a tree, then immediately followed him in. His fist cocked back, Ekyt punched.

CRACK!

He only hit the tree as Sasuke used the speed he copied from Lee. As Ekyt turned, Sasuke kicked him hard in the chest, knocking him high in the air.

"Lion's Barrage!" Sasuke yelled, aiming kick after kick at Ekyt. Ekyt could only cover up and wait for the impact. Or so Sasuke was led to believe. Instead, on his last kick, Sasuke splintered a log. The log had an exploding tag attached to it. Sasuke barely had time to kick off and away from the tag as it exploded. The shockwave was just enough to throw him off balance, and Ekyt was right there to capitalize. In the air, Ekyt clotheslined Sasuke, his leg behind Sasuke's tripping him up. Sasuke crashed and burned. Ekyt adjusted his landing so that he could block the gate with his body.

"I'm not letting you leave, Sasuke. I don't really believe you're capable of killing. You're talented enough, but I don't think you can. You don't want to. You'd be just like your brother."

That was a bad word for Sasuke. He pulled himself up, shaking from pain and anger.

"Don't talk about him! You don't know my brother! You don't understand! You can't even begin to understand! Damn it! I'll kill you!" Sasuke rushed at Ekyt in a blind range.

"You've completely lost your focus, Sasuke. And I've met your brother...he's scary as hell, and just as talented. But you're not your brother. And you're aiming for the same path he is. Come to your senses already!" Ekyt thwarted Sasuke again, then landed an elbow to his chest. Sasuke skidded backwards.

He struck me on a wound I already have...when he was bouncing around, he must have looked for a weakness...he's smart, but he's scared. But I don't understand this change in him. Was it for...ah. NOW I know his weakness.

"How long have you liked her?" Sasuke asked, getting up slowly, a smirk growing on his face.

"Who?"

"Sakura," Sasuke said, sneering. "You're in love with her. It's all over your face. I should have guessed. You lit up like a Christmas tree around her. And then you decide to fight me...a suicide battle...while she runs for help..."

Sasuke activated his cursed seal. He felt his chakra and speed multiply, and his strength came soon after. He saw through Ekyt's mask of stoicism. The black marks of the curse covered Sasuke's body now, and his grin grew more and more scary.

"So you're her martyr. Hate to say it, but you've shown me two things tonight: you CAN fight...but the second- you love that girl, and you can't tell her! Well, it won't matter anyway. You won't LIVE long enough to tell her!"

In Ekyt's state of shock, Sasuke easily rushed in and grabbed him around the neck. Ekyt's fingers pried at Sasuke's hand, but he couldn't make the raven-haired Uchiha let go.

"I'm going to snap your skinny little neck." Sasuke closed his hand, but only got splinters for his troubles. "Replacement again? Use that tired old trick all you want; you can't dodge me forever!"

-

He's got THAT right...how do I counter this; I don't even know what it is I'm facing! Ekyt was camouflaged by the leaves for the moment. **A normal seal won't work on him...If I seal his curse mark, I might stand a chance. And if he gets me, but I seal his mark, then whoever Sakura gets will have a better chance. That's the best course of action. Right now, Sasuke has me beat. But that doesn't mean I can't dictate how the fight ends. That's the mistake most people make about losing...** Ekyt forced himself to focus his chakra into his hand, forming his special Five Elements Seal. **...they think it's over the second you concede defeat. But it's not- even if you die in the attempt, the lasting impression you leave is what REALLY matters. It's your last swipe, your last gasp, your last desperate attempt that outlines who you are and what you mean to those who care about you.**

...

That's pretty deep for a guy like me. I guess it's the fact that I'm protecting someone...no, two people. Sakura from Sasuke, and Sasuke from himself. I guess I'm one of those people that needs a purpose. Heh, well, no point in delaying the inevitable- if I don't move, he'll come for me eventually. Worse yet, he could escape altogether.

-

Ekyt leapt down from the tree, closing his eyes for a split second to open the first gate of chakra. To his shock, the second and third gates opened as well. **I guess things change during an emergency. I could never open the second and third gates. Just that one time, helping my Father...well, I'll take the power at this point, because I've really got my work cut out for me!**

Ekyt ran next to Sasuke, on the side of a wall. Sasuke was in the trees. The two traded kunai shots as they zipped around the sleeping village, both at the peak of their abilities. There was room to grow for both of them, but for two young boys, this was an amazing spectacle.

"You don't know when to quit, do you?!" Sasuke shouted throwing an explosive tag into the mix. That was really just a diversion for his second, and more deadly, attack. **Chidori!**

As the two ran past a cherry tree, Ekyt silently called a jutsu he hoped would save him. **Ninja Art: Chakra Shield!**

Ekyt dodged the tag, which exploded harmlessly several feet behind him. Sasuke's Chidori was going to be harder. The sound of birds chirping gave it away, but Ekyt couldn't pinpoint its location. Then it hit him- **The smoke! I've gotta do a quick about-face- he hits me in the spine with that thing, it's instant game-over!**

Sasuke barreled through the smoke. Ekyt crossed his arms in front of his chest, guarding his heart.

"CHIDORI!"

The Chidori landed right where Sasuke aimed it. Grinning manically from the curse mark's power, he cackled with victory. But then he noticed Ekyt was still alive. Not only that, conscious. He was on one knee, breathing heavily, but alive.

"I don't know how you did that..." Sasuke growled, a second Chidori growing in his hands, "But you won't do it again!"

Ekyt knew he was right. He couldn't dodge and his chakra shield was all but gone. In his left hand there was his ace- but he had to get to Sasuke first. **The key to the Chidori...speed. It takes time for Sasuke to build it up, leaving me a short time to plan. I've got to ruin his speed advantage. I'm at a three-gate state- just about even with his speed. I'm getting hit with this attack, but maybe I can make it less devastating. If not...no, don't think! Just act! Don't talk yourself out of it!**

Ekyt used a body flicker jutsu to land right near Sasuke. The Chidori was only half-ready, but Sasuke instinctively punched. He hit Ekyt in the stomach, but felt something strange- his curse mark was receding.

"What did you do?!" Sasuke demanded. Ekyt held on to his hand, preventing Sasuke from pushing the Chidori into his body.

"Five Elements Seal. Well, you won't get your Mangekyo Sharingan by killing only me, and there goes your curse mark. So the fight is yours- but the war is mine."

Disgusted, Sasuke threw Ekyt into the wall he had been running on. Ekyt slid down the wall, blood dripping from his mouth and chest. He was burned from the Chidori, too- but not dead. Although the next move would see to that. Sasuke couldn't use the Chidori again, but Ekyt was tapped of chakra and couldn't fight back. A kunai would do him in.

Sasuke let loose a cry of rage and charged. Ekyt accepted his fate, secure in the knowledge that he had made a lasting impression. As Sasuke ran closer, Ekyt started letting his body relax- everything ached, but his job was done.

Whoosh, tok, CRACK!

Those three sounds were Kakashi and Sakura returning, landing, and then Kakashi grabbing Sasuke by the arm and hurling him into the wall.

“Sakura, time to put your training to use. We might not be too late,” Kakashi gestured with his head toward Ekyt. Sakura gulped and nodded. She was a medic now, she couldn’t shy away from this one. No matter how she was involved, she couldn’t let this go quietly. She had practiced healing arts, but never in a near-emergency situation like this.

“You’ll be fine,” Sakura told Ekyt. He didn’t seem panicked.

“I’m in good hands,” he managed to say, wiping the blood off his mouth and chin. **I think I grew tonight...that thought I had about lasting impressions...I never would have thought that before. It was always ‘a loss is a loss’...maybe I shouldn’t stop there. I should strive for victory...complete victory. Strength is a lot, but it isn’t everything if you don’t know how to use it. Even worse, if it’s use is evil...if Sasuke taught me anything, it’s that.**

“Your injuries aren’t too bad...” Sakura murmured. She plucked at the hole that was burned through Ekyt’s shirt, down to the chain mail he wore underneath. “These burns worry me, though. Hold still, okay?”

Kakashi had eased Sasuke into unconsciousness, and was reading, unconcerned. He met Ekyt’s gaze and gave a smile.

“Top of page 128,” Kakashi told Ekyt, holding the book open. Ekyt really wasn’t into *Makeout Paradise*, but he did as sensei said.

Just tell her, idiot! – That was the writing on top of the page. Kakashi’s lousy handwriting, anyway.

Suddenly, the book was gone, and so were Sasuke and Kakashi. But Ekyt had gotten the message. **No time like the present, I guess...**

Sakura’s conversation wasn’t making it any easier, though. As she was treating his burns, she couldn’t help but ask Ekyt the question that had been burning on her mind since he stepped in against Sasuke. No- since she had been hit by those dreams and he had stayed with her.

“Ekyt...I don’t know anything about you. So...I mean, I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but...why would you risk your life to help me? I mean, you don’t know me either...”

Ekyt closed his eyes, trying to figure out a way to word this. “Maybe...well, I would save anyone. But...I don’t want to get to know *everyone* I help better. To be honest, you’ve always been nice to me, and I didn’t always get that. Maybe I wanted to return the favor, since you were the first to make me feel welcome here. Or maybe it was something more profound...”

Sakura kind of understood, but didn’t quite get where he was going. **I see so little of his face with that mask on...without it, he’s always seemed pale. But right now, he’s so red...**

“...I’m muttering like an idiot. (amused laugh) I’m just going to say this. Sakura, I really like you. I have for quite some time. But I could never get the guts up to just say that to you.”

Sakura suddenly understood. **He likes me! That’s why his face was so red! But why...**

On cue, Ekyt answered her unspoken question. "I could never tell you because you were so far out of my league. Besides, you always liked Sasuke, and I would never dream of getting in the way. But after all that's happened today, I had to say something."

Sakura froze. Ekyt took that as a sign that he should leave. He got to his feet unsteadily, but relatively pain-free. Ekyt had long accepted pain as part of the job, so this was nothing new. But someone getting under his arm and helping him stand up- that was new. It was also nice. Sakura could have carried him, but she knew how boys were about their pride.

"Well, how about you make yourself less of a mystery to me sometime, then?" Sakura said brightly, recovered from the shock. It was Ekyt's turn to be shocked anyway.

"R-really?!" he sputtered, sounding like an ordinary teenage boy instead of a hardened warrior.

"Really," Sakura said with finality. "BUT- you go right home and rest. This time, I'LL watch YOU. When you're better, we'll go out. Deal?"

Ekyt offered a weak but genuine smile.

"Deal."

7 - Benefits of Servitude

Note: This is my first time writing a fic like this. At parts, it may seem almost like Akamatsu-sensei's work (I wish- in terms of style, perhaps similar, but he's in a whole different league skill wise). My regular readers will know that Ryouko and Sakura isn't such an odd pairing in my stories. This fic was designed to enhance that. What better way than to have Ryouko serve Sakura? I've kicked the idea around for a long time, and finally found a way to make it work.

Also new is that I wrote more from Sakura's point of view than Ryouko's. Between that and a mix of first and third person POV's, this was somewhat difficult to write. But very rewarding, as I'm rather fond of this fic now. I hope you enjoy. Please comment (I return the favor on non-hentai, yaoi/yuri work). Thank you to my regular readers for sticking with my fics, and thank you to my new readers for giving my work a chance!

-NG

--

I have served Sakura for a scant couple of months now. I've been in love with her for a longer time. I can't help it- her graceful movements, beautiful body, and her generally sweet disposition are just so incredible.

Too bad I have a snowball's chance in hell with her.

That in mind, I drew a bath for her, then set off to cook for her. I never found this troublesome- she was so sweet natured I never minded. But lately, I've been noticing a sadness about her. It pains me to know that something's wrong, but that I can do nothing about it. It would take more courage than I have to ask her what's wrong- it seems to be a private matter, and I don't want her to dislike me for prying...

I refer to her as 'Sakura' in my thoughts, but in my duties, she's 'Ojo-sama'. But it seems a shame to hide such a beautiful name behind such a strict title.

--

It's been quite some time now since I've been considered a top medic-nin. But having my own attendant is awkward. Not least of all because it's a male attendant. Not that I mind having a cute guy serve me, but I've know Ryou-kun for so long it seems we should be equals. He may be stronger than me in terms of combat. It just shows what a gentle soul he is- willing to humble himself for the sake of my comfort.

But why did Tsunade-sama order this? No one before me received such treatment. And the title of 'Ojo-sama'? I'm not entirely sure where that came from either.

I hope Tsunade-sama isn't trying for an O-miai (Prearranged dates to help someone find a life partner)- just because I haven't dated doesn't mean I'm incapable. I just need to meet the right guy. But the only guys I feel really comfortable with are Kakashi-sensei, Naruto-kun, and Ryou-kun.

Well, maybe a soak in the tub will help me think.

--

It seems Ojo-sama enjoys watching my evening practice. She has a rare appreciation for samurai arts. 'So graceful, Ryou-kun!' she always says. I treasure those comments.

I have gotten better lately- stronger, faster. My sword becomes a blur as I cut through tatami mats or straw dummies. In full formal attire, this is an awkward feat. My damn gi feels like it's made of carpet. My Hakama would be fine, if it didn't look like a dress.

One day Sakura asked to try it on. Seeing her wear it so comfortably almost made me ask her if she would like to learn more. I started to speak, but stumbled over my sentence. Maybe I'll get the courage up later.

--

Ryou-kun let me try his samurai clothes a couple days ago. I never knew samurai's dressed so comfortably! There's something about Ryou-kun when he's practicing like that. He seems so at ease. He's such a nervous guy, it makes me feel bad. But all the same, seeing him move like that- I know I'm in good hands.

I thought he was going to ask if I wanted to learn his sword art. It sure seemed like that's what he started to say. I'll have to ask him. I hope he wouldn't think it a burden, teaching me. Maybe I could show him healing jutsus. I know he's interested in those.

It's strange that I don't see Ryou-kun train very often. Yet I know he does, because he keeps getting better and better. He seems so secretive. It's as though he can't bring himself to trust anyone. I guess I feel...honored that he's more open with me than the others. He's even confided to me his frustration at being denied an advancement in rank. It's one he deserves. I'll have to speak for him sometime.

But all the same, I have been on a team with Naruto for years. I know the look of a lonely person.

--

The place I'm to serve Sakura at didn't feel like a home when I first came. I took a room so that I could be a live-in servant, if need be. That room has since become a sanctuary. My many swords line the walls, ready to be drawn. It's in this room that I sleep, eat, bathe, meditate, and study. I train outside so I don't damage what has become my sanctuary.

Lately, I've been spending a lot of time here, sorting out my thoughts. No promotion, no sensei, no team, and until recently, no purpose. But my purpose- to protect and serve Ojo-sama- has only made more clear to me my biggest weakness.

I'm alone.

Sometimes the most crowded city may be a lonely place. I admit, I long for female companionship. Unfortunately, my eyes strayed to Ojo-sama, and I've been unable to look away. Someone so above is simply not an option, no matter how much I wish it so.

It's time for me to prepare Sakura's bedding. As I recall, she'll be having a guest tonight. A sleepover, perhaps? Likely it's Ino-chan or Ten-chan. I shudder to think of what they talk about. I've assumed it's boys, and I've also assumed my name will come up.

--

"Ino-chan, Ten-chan!" Sakura said happily. It was always good to see her friends.

"Sakura-chan!" the two kunoichi exclaimed in unison. Sakura smiled and began to help them with their baggage for the night.

"Please, Ojo-sama, allow me."

Sakura didn't have to turn around to know it was Ryouko, performing his job.

"Oh, thank you, Ryou-kun. We'll be upstairs, then. If it's not too much trouble, will you bring up the food?"

"Certainly, Ojo-sama." Ryouko now had a second to greet Sakura's guests. "Ino-san, Ten-chan. Welcome. (bows) It's good to see you both again."

--

In Sakura's room, the girls immediately broke into giggles.

"Ojo-sama?! How'd your train him to call you that?!" Tenten immediately asked.

"Well, he's kind of supposed to. Tsunade-sama says..." Sakura replied, blushing slightly.

"So he has to do what you say?" Ino fired out.

"Well, yeah..."

Together, the girls said "Have you made him do anything naughty?!"

"NO!" Sakura shouted. "I would never misuse him like that! Get your minds out of the gutter!"

"I dunno, it's pre-ttty suspicious. A boy and girl living together, alone..."

"Stop it Ino..." Sakura warned.

“Not to mention the fact that the boy follows her every command...” Tenten chimed in teasingly.

“I’m warning you both...” Sakura growled in reply.

“I’ll tell ya this much- if I had a guy here and I could make him do whatever I wanted, he’d be doing A-LOT more than just cleaning up after me...(hehehe)”

Sakura couldn’t help but laugh herself now. “I’m not like that. Ryou-kun is just a good guy doing a good job. Besides, he could have his pick of the kunoichi. I’m sure I wouldn’t be his cup of tea.”

“I dunno...you’ve gotten cuter, Sakura. Still no breasts, but the rest of you matured nicely!” Ino declared happily.

“Yeah, you’ve got a good figure. I don’t know how you’re still single! I mean, even Lee finding someone.”

“Ohhhh, make Ryouko-san wear spandex! Bet that’d be hot!”

--

Ryouko heard the jabber of a typical girl slumber party. He thought nothing of it. He wasn’t involved, even if the discussion did somehow pertain to him. His only job was to put down the tea and cookies, then leave. Simple enough.

--

I knocked on the door, not entering until I heard Sakura’s voice tell me it was okay to do so. I slid the door open, balancing the tray of snacks with a practiced ease.

“Please let me know if you need anything else, Ojo-sama. Or your guests as well.” I always thought it best to include the guests when I said such a thing.

“Ryou-kun, is it?” Ino began mischievously. “How come I don’t get to call you that? Sakura’s allowed to. And you call Tenten ‘Ten-chan’...”

“Ino, don’t tease him!” Sakura protested, looking flustered.

“So, what do you do for Sakura around here? Anything newsworthy? Scandalous, even? Of course it’s to be expected- a cute girl and guy shackled up together. The forbidden love of a master and her servant. I bet it’s gets steamy here. Have you ever-” Ino persisted, until a smack from Sakura’s harisen (fan) shut her up.

“Thank you, Ryou-kun. Pay no attention to her. She’s a dumb bleach-blonde. Please don’t let us keep you from your evening.”

I was already blushing, but I kept my face impassive as I bowed to the group of kunoichi.

“Goodnight. Please don’t hesitate to call me if you need som-”

“You can start by rubbing my feet, and then you can-” Ino began. “Hey, I’m talking to you!”

I looked at Sakura, trying to make sure my eyes smiled. “Pardon me, Yamanaka-san, but the mistress has asked me to pay no attention to you. I do not wish to disobey Ojo-sama’s orders.”

I saw Sakura burst into laughter. I felt my heart melt once more. I should have told her. Instead, I shut the door and walked to my room, keeping on my mask of stoicism. It wasn’t my place to have feelings such as this. To fall in love with one’s mistress like this...

Even though I had loved her before, it seemed wrong to feel that same normal emotion now. Working for her only intensified my feelings for Sakura. But I had to pay them no mind. I might not have been content to simply serve her, but I WAS happy.

--

I enjoy Ino-chan and Ten-chan’s company. Even though Ino IS overbearing about my ‘relationship’ with Ryou-kun. There is none! He does what he’s ordered to do. Though he treats me kindly and not at all like he’s dissatisfied, it’s strange being his boss. I think very highly of him.

But- I haven’t told him that. It may make all the difference in the world to tell him how grateful I am for him to do so much for me, and never once complain. Getting gratification is always nice. Even someone so stoic must feel that sort of pull. It’s a human need- to be acknowledged. Even Ryou-kun must feel that.

It’s as though he’s a robot with limited emotions. But I know better. He has a beating heart in his chest. All the times he saved me, or Naruto, or anyone else who needed help proved that.

--

I sat down in my room, knees folded under me on a beat-up cushion. I sat at a low table, unfurling a scroll to study from; then I unrolled a second one to write on. I had a cup of tea at my side. A childish part of me wanted to pretend I was a samurai, readying myself for battle by studying the enemy. Perhaps not far from the truth, but that didn’t make it THE truth.

Putting that thought away, I looked back to the scrolls. It was easy going- I didn’t choose anything advanced for tonight. My mind was too preoccupied to think at a really high level. Besides that, when Ojo-sama held a sleep-over, silence was usually in short supply, and concentration even more so.

Tonight was easy- translate my jutsus into another language. I knew phrases in several languages, but in combat, my favorite was Latin. It threw my enemy a curveball, as most of the time they couldn’t understand what I said. It was a handy tactic.

--

“C’mon Sakura-chan, mixed bath!” Ino wheedled. “C’mon, it’ll be fun! Even for him! In a bath with three gorgeous females- he’s a guy, right? He’ll be all over the idea!”

“I don’t know, Ino-chan...it might be degrading for him...” Sakura squirmed, though she wasn’t sure if it was with pleasure or embarrassment- maybe both?

“It couldn’t hurt to ask, right? Besides, he has to be there to tend to us anyway, doesn’t he?” Tenten said carefully, not wanting to earn Sakura’s ire.

“Besides, it’s not like we’ll be naked. Him, on the other hand...hehehe!”

Sakura scowled at Ino. “Are you trying to say you want Ryou-kun, Ino-chan? Ordering someone around is the only way you’ll ever have se-”

“HEY!” Ino howled in protest. “No, I don’t want him. But he IS fun to tease. Besides, what harm could flirting do? But if you ask me, Sakura-chan seemed *awfully* defensive of him earlier...”

“That’s not it!” Sakura replied furiously, blushing a crimson hue.

“Then prove me wrong and have him relax with us!” Ino challenged. Sakura gulped- Ino had her over a barrel now.

--

“Flama...Flans Ventelius...no, no...Flans Invocatem, Flama Invocatem.”

I scribbled down more notes. Three more jutsus. My appetite for learning was known throughout the village. At no point did I dispel those rumors. In the first place, they were true. In the second place, it couldn’t hurt my chances for a promotion to jonin to have a reputation as a scholar.

A knock at my door shook me out of my learning trance. With a sound of question, I opened it.

“Hi, Ryou-kun, uh-?!”

THUD!

I had fallen back into my room, tripping over my cushion as I backed up (Smashing my head painfully in the process, I might add). No wonder there. As well known as my reputation for learning was, I had one other reputation- kunoichi made me light up like fireworks on Chinese New Year. So three of them in bathing suits, showing up at my door was immediate cause for my face to turn red. Quickly, I composed myself.

“Forgive me, Ojo-sama. How may I be of service?” I spoke all this while bowing. The bow was half apology, half hiding my beet-red face.

“Well, Ryou-kun...how about coming to bathe with us tonight? Just a soak in the hot spring, you know? You’re, uh, always working so hard, and you should, uh, relax more. Since I’m also your primary

medic, call it a prescription.”

I could understand- Sakura had been put up to this, and she was also making this an order of sorts. I am male, therefore I want to go in a hot spring with girls, make no mistake. But I also have more respect for females than to just obey my hormones. At the same time, this was an order from Ojo-sama. My hands were tied.

“Yes, Ojo-sama.”

Sakura wasn't done with her surprises yet.

“I know it's a little strange, Ryou-kun, but how about calling me by my name tonight? We're relaxing, so it seems right to act more relaxed with titles and such.”

This was a big honor for one in my position. Though I had called her by her name for years, being asked to now, as I'm serving her...that was a big deal.

“Yes...Sakura.” I managed to smile, though I sounded like I was 'tasting' the name, as if seeing if it was really appropriate for me to say. Sakura gave me a warm smile, then moved on. I could have sworn my heart stopped beating for a few seconds.

--

Ryouko joined the kunoichi in the hot spring. They all looked beautiful. Ryouko was never a girl watcher, but such beautiful skin, smooth curves, and...so much of it visible. Some invisible barrier in Ryouko's mind was being hammered on- he kind of wanted to stare shamelessly. Of the three, Ryouko was attracted to two of them. Tenten and Sakura both seemed so practical, mature, and gorgeous. Ino seemed...petty. But she was Ojo-sa-, er, Sakura's good friend, so Ryouko just went with it.

Still, he felt conspicuous. Despite being a fanatic about keeping in shape, Ryouko always kept his body covered. Now, in a swimsuit, suddenly revealed flesh seemed like a bad thing.

Not from Sakura's end, though.

He's got a pretty cute body! He's slender, but not skinny. He's not a mountain of muscle- he looks like a martial artist. Graceful, quick...hot...gah! I'm starting to sound like Ino! She's the type who would start commenting about his butt, or his chest, or a bulge in his shorts- gah! Stop stop stop stop!

Tenten and Ino 'ooo-ed' jokingly, immediately rushing over to Ryouko.

“Look at what I found!” Ino declared! “Never knew there was a real man under that formal attitude!”

“Kyaa! So cute!” Tenten exclaimed.

Ryouko's mouth was hanging open partly. **This should be heaven...yeah, I gotta be dead now...(gulp) I'm really enjoying this...but I wish it was Sakura who was fawning over me...no, I don't. I'm glad**

she's composed. I admire that.

Ino and Tenten dragged Ryouko over and forced him to sit down, facing the three of them.

"Look what you did! One of you made his nose bleed! I swear, if one of you elbowed him and broke his nose while acting like boy-obsessed idiots..." Sakura was holding a towel to Ryouko's nose, inadvertently making the blood run thicker.

"Sakura. Um, they didn't actually hit me. It was kind of...uh..." Ryouko hesitated. This was tantamount to admitting the girls had rattled him and turned him on at the same time. Then again, that would be expected of him. It's not as though Sakura minded, apparently.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot...all this kunoichi skin...sorry, sorry. Here, I don't want you to bleed to death. I can trust you not to look down my top, right?"

"Aw, c'mon Sakura, that's why swimsuits exist! Give the guys a glimpse of what they want- but just can't have!" Ino snickered, strutting mockingly.

"He could so have it!" Sakura shouted back. There were suddenly a lot of sweatdrops around...

"Er...I didn't mean that quite the way it came out..." Sakura winced, knowing that Ino and Tenten were just given an easy insult.

Ryouko blinked in surprise, but did his best to sit down and relax.

--

I was in my room later, dressed in my night attire. I tugged my robe straight, thinking that I really loved hot springs- they just didn't love me.

Sakura was so beautiful...well, I must store that memory away now. I'm serving her once more. But I won't forget Ojo-sama's kindness...Thank you, Sakura.

I began to lay out my bedding. I disdained beds themselves, and even futons most of the time. I was content to curl up on my Tatami mat with a couple pillows and a blanket. (True story- when my back bothered me, I slept on a tatami mat for a week, and my back healed!) To make room for my sleeping arrangements, I pushed my table and cushion against the wall farthest from the door.

When a knock came at my door, I realized my evening wasn't quite over.

--

"I'm going to say goodnight to Ryou-kun, okay? Be right back!"

I skipped out of the room, then quickly composed myself. Acting like a giddy teenager in front of my female friends was fine, but not around Ryou-kun. For him, I act...less giddy.

I always say goodnight to him, so I hope I won't surprise him. He shouldn't have another nosebleed like that; not twice in one day. It's really unhealthy. I made sure my robe was secure before I walked in. I feel comfortable with Ryou-kun, but we both agree that modesty is best.

It just shows that he's not like other sex-driven boys. He wants to do his job, and do it well. Our attitudes are alike in that regard.

I smiled as I thought of seeing him in the hot spring, blushing and looking out of place among my two playful companions.

--

I got up and slid the door open, finding Sakura on the other side. I blushed, as always, at the sight of her in her *yukata*.

"Just came in to say goodni-!"

"Ojo-sama!"

Sakura had tripped over the small step that led into my room. (I had an area near the door that was level with the outside hallway- the place to kick your shoes off- then an area that was in a 'pit', so to speak) I ran forward to catch her, but she was falling awkwardly. I got in the way and kind of caught her, but then we both tumbled to the ground. I was flat on my back, while Sakura was straddling me, her head on my chest. In all the commotion, my robe had slipped open at the chest. To my surprise, Sakura's *yukata* had slid almost all the way off her shoulders. If things were awkward before...

--

I tripped and fell, falling right toward the bottom of a pit. I quickly braced myself for impact. Instead, I felt a pair of strong arms grabbing me gently. Then there was a second fall.

I pried my eyes open. Ryou-kun had caught me. As I became more aware, I noticed that we were in a REALLY provocative position. Had it been Naruto, I would have punched him for catching me like this. I knew Ryou-kun well enough to know he just reacted instinctively and tried to catch me.

Our nightwear had gotten tangled up; our two obis had somehow twisted into a knot. The two belts pulled on each other, pulling Ryou-kun's robe open, while pulling my *yukata* off my shoulders. Both of us were modest, thankfully. But I felt a surge of warmth- and I knew it wasn't just because Ryou-kun had saved me. When his robe was pulled open, I saw them- the cuts. The scars. The bruises.

"Ryou-kun..." I stopped trying to get away and looked closer. All the fights I had been in, I almost never got hurt seriously. Now I saw where the injuries went. They were taken by my loyal protector. I had never known the hits he had taken numbered so many. One just below his left nipple caught my attention. He had taken a blade a fraction of an inch away from his heart. Now I could remember the very kunai, and even when it hit him.

"Ojo-sama... You shouldn't look. It will only..." Ryouko began, but stopped.

“Make me feel guilty, Ryou-kun? It should. I SHOULD feel guilty! I should feel terrible!”

“Not at all, Ojo-sama,” he said comfortingly.

“Yes I should! Instead of helping you, I let you do your own thing! I never tried to get closer to you! I never told you how loyal you are! I always denied that I had any feelings so hard that it must have hurt you!”

I had just admitted to both myself and Ryou-kun that I really liked him. Just saying it like that made me feel better. I stopped trying to get away from Ryou-kun- instead, I pulled myself closer. At this point, I didn't care how either of us were dressed. I felt I owed this loyal warrior so much.

The truth is that I've known how Ryou-kun has felt about me. But I dismissed those thoughts. I never even investigated my own feelings. Now that I had, I had discovered just how much he meant to me. I couldn't believe it took a patchwork of scars for me to notice.

I noticed Ryou-kun had stopped resisting. I wondered if it was because I was 'Ojo-sama' to him, or if he was confused, or he just flat out enjoyed it. Whatever, I didn't care.

“I love you, Ryou-kun. Ojo-sama to you or not, I'm still a girl. And there's no girl that wouldn't care for someone who protected her without ever sheltering her. You've kept me safe while letting me have a life. Thank you so much for everything.”

I kissed him, and I didn't stop. My hand stroked his chest, moving over the very scars that had made me realize my attraction. At this point, he couldn't have stopped me if he wanted to- his arms had been caught in his robe as it had slid down. But as our mouths met, I certainly didn't feel like he was going to stop me. Somehow, he had always wanted this, but would never ask for it.

I kissed him more hungrily- almost savagely. I was blushing now, but I didn't care- so was he. I seized his thick mane of brown hair and forced his face up to meet mine. It seemed almost violent in retrospect. What can I say- I really don't have any experience with kissing or making out. This case taught me to just follow my instincts.

--

I'm...with Ojo-sama...No, stop thinking. You have to stop her, you don't deserve her love!

Why the hell don't I?

I told the pessimistic side of my mind to stick it's opinions up it's @\$@ and I just went with the flow. That is, until Ten-chan and Yamanaka-san showed up at the door, their eyes wide as dinner plates. Didn't take me long to figure out why- Sakura and I had landed awkwardly, our clothes falling off, and she was kissing me. I was conscious of how this looked, but still disappointed when Sakura stopped. I decided to remedy the situation. I slid out from under Sakura and walked to the door.

“Goodnight, Kakaku-sans.” (Kakaku- special guests)

With that, I shut the door and resumed my position.

“Please continue, Ojo-sama.”

With a smile and a long look in my eyes, she did, giggling behind the kiss she gave me. I realized how funny it was that I shut the door on her two closest friends and didn't care one iota.

I can't believe it was my scars that made her love me. But I'll take it...who knew there were such benefits to servitude?

--

“Hey, Ryou-kun?” Sakura didn't open her eyes or lift her head from it's place on Ryouko's chest to speak.

“Yes, Ojo-sama?” Ryouko replied.

“Sorry it took me so long to do this. And...well, sorry we didn't get past kissing and cuddling.”

“It wouldn't have been in either of our best interests, Ojo-sama. Going beyond this would be a betrayal of your trust in me.”

“What if I HAD tried to go farther? Would you have stopped me?” Sakura really wanted to know the answer to this one.

“Well, um, as your protector...yes. As a guy who's been in love with you for years...it would have been difficult.”

Sakura laughed outright. “Typical of you, Ryou-kun. Honest to a fault. But we've got plenty of time for the other stuff later. Right now, I need to get to know you beyond the 'protector' role you're in. I want to get to know Ryou-kun the person. But only if you can let me close.” Sakura paused- Ryouko wasn't one to let people close to him; had she asked too much?

“I can and will, Ojo-sama. And I'll look forward to it. Forgive me if I'm nervous or clueless around you.”

“Of course. You know, I think Lady Tsunade set this up. An O-miai thing. Guess she got tired of me brooding about Sasuke.”

Ryouko chuckled in his own reserved way. “She probably got tired of me complaining about my rank...and no team...and no sensei...I'm surprised she let me near you.

...

But I'm glad she did.”

8 - Weird Pairings

Ino backed up slowly, peeking around the corner as she moved. **Can't let him see me...Not yet, anyway! I don't know to say to him yet! I could never stand him before, how the hell did I fall in love with him?! (sigh) It doesn't matter if I can't tell him!**

Ino peered around the corner again- he was getting closer!

How do I tell a guy I used to call 'annoying' that he's suddenly gotten incredibly hot?! Even though I've worked with him before it's like I'm seeing him for the first time...

=

Tenten practically ripped the scroll from Tsunade's hands.

"Suna? Absolutely, I'll go!" she said, far more chipper than usual. **I get to see *him* again! Oh man, I can't wait! Should I wear my old clothes, so he'll know it's me? Gah, too bad his sister will be there!**

Tenten hurriedly packed her weapons up, hefting a huge summoning scroll onto her back.

That dog better not get involved...she might outrank me, and our villages might be friends now, but NO ONE gets between me and true love, now that I've found it! Neji was great, but too arrogant and concerned about his stupid bloodline. THIS guy, though...(sigh) much better! Now I've just gotta tell him!

Tsunade called Tenten back to attention.

"Tenten, you'll be with a different team today- You'll go with Ino and Naruto. It's just a friendly mission, C-ranked for the travel, so there shouldn't be any problems. Contact when you reach Suna. Expect to see a couple other Leaf Shinobi there."

--

Ino couldn't stop blushing. **I'm actually on a mission- with him! I can't believe I fell for the class loser! But after Sasuke...Recently, Naruto's just been so grown up, and acted so much smarter than before. It's amazing to think only two and a half years could change someone so much! This trip is the chance to tell him how I feel...**

But something tugged at Ino. **What about Hinata? Everyone knows she's had her heart set on Naruto forever! If I get Naruto, it'll crush her! What do I do, what do I do...I know! I'll get her to love someone else! But who?! It's not like she's some hot girl I could just pawn off...**

At that moment, the perfect patsy came strolling by. Both Hinata and this guy suffered from self esteem

issues- they didn't have any! And neither had many friends, not to mention borderline unhealthy obsessions. It was too perfect!

"CHOJI! C'mere! How would you like to go on a date?" Ino began, thinking that this would be challenging.

"Does this date involve food?" Choji replied, munching on a bag of potato chips, his ample belly shaking as he spoke.

"Absolutely! And it's all on me- just go ask the right girl out. How's that? C'mon, for Korean barbeque, and as a favor for teammates? Please?!"

Choji laughed. "Ino, ya had me at Korean barbeque. Whose the lucky girl?"

Ino smirked cruelly. "Hinata. And don't worry about her not accepting- she will. Have a good time!"

--

Naruto, Tenten, and Ino met at the gates. Naruto wasn't really thrilled with his team.

Great, the dog and the weapons girl. If Ino doesn't ruin my ears with her complaining, Tenten will find a reason to cut them off or something! Well, at least Tenten's dangerous, Ino's just kinda...useless.

"To the Sand Village!" Tenten declared happily, leading the way. Usually it was Naruto yelling and then forging the path. So Ino's eyebrow went up.

"Why're you so eager to get there, Ten? Got a hot date or something?" Ino snickered. Man, girls could be mean! Guys got in fist fights, but girls...they teased each other until they got anxiety disorders or something!

"Nah! Just like to travel, that's all!" Tenten shot back, making sure not to look back- her face had turned several shades of magenta, and that would have been all Ino needed to keep up the teasing. In fact, when she stopped, Tenten got suspicious. She looked back and saw Ino walking at the same pace as Naruto. If he stopped, she stopped. When he wasn't looking, she was staring at him. There were practically hearts in her eyes.

Ah! So that's what's going on! To tease or not to tease...

Tenten started to say something, but closed her mouth. Ino and Naruto together- that was a strange thought to her. But, then again, Tenten fell for a guy with a puppet fetish; who was she to call anyone weird. Besides that, she could always tease if Ino started it.

--

It was hard to say why a girl liked a certain guy. Tenten had the simplest reason- puppets were cool! They were all weapons! Cut out one joint, and there's a knife. Destroy the puppet- no problem, the head

has poison in it! It slices, it dices, it throws kunai, it attacks from long range or short range. Everything a weapon should do. So maybe Tenten was enthralled with the weapon more than the guy handling it. That was possible, but it didn't feel that way to her.

Ino was harder to figure out. But it went something like this: Naruto liked her rival, Sakura, for a while before growing out of it. In the three years that had passed since she had really know Naruto, it seemed Naruto had gotten stronger every day. And he had a tendency to succeed. So if he became Hokage, Ino would have looks, money, a hot husband with a ton of energy (Not my view, it just sounds like Ino –NG), and he was strong- he could protect her.

It wasn't as if there wasn't a ton of strange couples these days. There was Ryouko, the model student, a hard worker, dedicated, loyal, and constantly striving to improve. And who did he wind up with? Sakura? Temari? Shizune? Say what- he's dating a bounty hunter who used to hunt him? Sure, she was beautiful, but Azami and Ryouko? That was out there. Somehow, Azami had just held up her crossbow, and Ryouko fell for her. Somehow, Azami felt the same way, and now the two were dating and working together. Naturally, lots of steamy gossip arose- the two were always away, hunting. Probably sharing a tent or a hotel room. And Azami DID tend to get what she wanted...if she wanted Ryouko she probably 'had' him.

But that aside, love doesn't happen for a reason. That's all speculation. However it came about, there were three unlikely couples around. Or maybe four?

--

Choji asked Hinata out.

"Hinata, wanna go grab some Korean Barbeque with me?"

A simple question, easy enough to answer. Except this was shy little Hinata!

"S-s-sure, Choji!" Where did that c-c-come from? C-c-choji asked me out? What's this feeling in my heart?

Hinata liked Choji. It became apparent as their night went on that it wasn't just Hinata feeling this way. Choji, too, seemed to be interested in more than the food. (Not to say he ignored the food completely- miracles DID happen, but not one that big!)

The two were eating, and Hinata had gotten more and more comfortable with Choji. He was a friendly guy; everyone knew that. When you got him mad, look out. But other than that, he was polite, kind, and gentle- much like Hinata. Neither one of them was viewed as 'hot' or even close, but they were both attractive to each other in a shy way. The food was good, the company was better, and the best was yet to come.

Choji had eaten in his normal way- he barely tasted it. A little sauce splattered onto his cheek. Hinata giggles shyly. Choji looked up in surprise, but Hinata took care of the sauce. She leaned forward licked it off Choji's cheek. That semi-innocent little gesture cemented the fourth strange couple in the making.

--

As for Ryouko and Azami, that was strange. Ryouko was twenty, never had a girlfriend. Never dated. Never been kissed. Man, it sucked to be him! But then, one day, as he's fighting for his life (Typical of him, he's always doing that. You'd think he would stop fighting, or maybe try being less noble), his opponent is a drop-dead gorgeous female. A mix of Japanese and Egyptian, with long legs, a curvy body, and a face that had an underlying innocence to it.

The two had 'tangoed', exchanging strikes with knives, swords, and fists. Azami swept Ryouko's legs, sending him down. Ryouko rolled over and struck with a knife. He found one at his own throat. Azami had him dead to rights, though- he was on his back, clearly the loser of the fight. Not that it was going to end there.

"Drop the knife. Be a good boy..." Azami let her knife clatter to the ground. Ryouko narrowed his eyes, but followed suit. Stupid as it was, Ryouko never took an undue advantage in combat. If his opponent only had fists, that was what Ryouko had, too, whether he was armed to the teeth like usual, or caught unaware.

"I've got to say...you're nice looking up close. My employers DID ask for you alive anyway. It'd be a shame to kill you."

Azami's dark eyes met Ryouko's dark eyes. There was a spark there, and they both knew it.

The rest, as they say, is history. The two now date, but Ryouko is still clueless. Azami wasn't much better, but it seemed girls instinctively knew how dates were supposed to go.

--

Now in Sunagakure, Tenten, Naruto, and Ino had to decide to proceed. Only Naruto was here for the mission, really. The girls had other plans. Ino gave up on trying to outwit Tenten. Maybe she could recruit Tenten to help, or at least get her to stay out of the way.

"Bathroom break!" Ino announced. She gave Tenten a meaningful look. It took Tenten a minute, but she got the message within the message.

"Uh, yeah, me, too! Be right back!"

-

In the girl's bathroom, Ino and Tenten compared notes.

"NARUTO/KANKURO?!" they exclaimed at each other, 'no way' expressions crossing their faces.

"I thought you thought he was annoying!" Tenten began.

"I did!" Ino admitted. "I thought you hated his sister!"

"I DO!" Tenten nearly shouted. After that lively little exchange, the girls settled down and thought.

"I'll get Naruto out of the way somehow. That way, he'll be with me. You'll have a free shot at Kankuro, and I'll be with Naruto. It's perfect!" Ino was happy. She just had to think up an excuse. She could do that.

"Should I re-do my make-up?" Ino suddenly fretted.

"Hardly. Naruto wouldn't notice it," Tenten snorted. Then she started wondering if she should...after all, what else could that purple crap on Kankuro's face be but makeup. Surely he would appreciate it!

The girls looked at each, nodded, then got to work.

--

Outside, Naruto was waiting impatiently, tapping his foot and growling 'c'mon already!' under his breath every five seconds. He liked seeing Gaara and his siblings, but the Sand Village was hot, and the people could be nasty. Blegh- he'd rather be in the Leaf. At least he knew WHY people hated him there.

"Hmm? Hey, it's Naruto!" Kankuro nudged Temari. As official representatives of the Village Hidden in the Sand, they had to greet everyone, but not too many that passed through had done so much for the village. Or them personally, for that matter.

"Oh, hey guys!" Naruto waved enthusiastically, jogging over to see his old...friends? allies? Friends was easier, let's go with that.

"What're you doin' here?" Kankuro asked. "It's not like you come by all the time."

"I'm here with a coupla kunoichi on some mission for Grandma Tsunade. Don't know what it is I'm supposed to be doing. Something about the chunin exams or something."

"That's usually that slouch Shikamaru's job," Temari murmured. "Oh well, probably couldn't interrupt his cloud watching."

"Weren't you two dating before this?" Naruto wheedled.

"NO!" Temari responded, blushing despite herself. To cover up, she muttered 'damn sunburn', and made a show looking around to find someone she knew.

Good timing, because Tenten came out of the bathroom at that point.

"Eep! Er, Hi! It's...Kankuro, right?" Tenten said cautiously. **Like I don't know!**

"Yeah, that's right. You're...Ten...Ten. That's it, Tenten!" Kankuro replied. **A girl like that...practical, useful. Surprised that Ekyt guy didn't wind up with her. Ah well, time for me to make my move. Wonder if she's into puppets?**

Tenten piped up next. “Oh, you’re the guy with the puppets, right? I’ve been meaning to say how impressed I am with them. They’re just about the deadliest weapons I’ve ever seen.”

“Heh, you sure you don’t keep deadlier ones in that scroll of yours? I seem to recall seeing them a coupla times now. Almost on the receiving end once!”

Tactfully, Kankuro asked Tenten if she had ever seen all of the Sand Village. Tenten HAD, but lied through her teeth, justifying it by telling herself she had seen it, but never had a guided tour, so she didn’t really KNOW the town so well. Yeah, that worked.

-

Ino came tearing out of the bathroom next, bumping right into Naruto.

“Ah! Sorry!” she said sheepishly, turning ten shades of red. **Damn, I REALLY wanted that to go smoother! I didn’t even take his legs out from under him. If he had landed on top of, my plan would have been perfect! Guess that proves that he’s gotten stronger if I couldn’t even budge him. GAH! I’ve been off my diet, too!**

“S’okay Ino. (Naruto offered her a hand up) Hey, have you been on a diet or something? You’re looking good!”

Ino was surprised, but guessed she shouldn’t be. **I look healthier now. Or at least that’s what Shikamaru said. And I haven’t doged Naruto out once this trip! (A new personal best!) So...I didn’t think we’d ever get to this point! What do I do?**

“Listen, Ino. I, uh, wrote this book. Pervy Sage kinda thought of using you for a main character. I told him ‘no way’, you’re too classy for his books. But, uh, if you’re interested, I could get you in the next one!”

That was typical Naruto- clueless, but kindhearted. That sentence gave Ino a surge of confidence.

“Say Naruto, are you free sometime? To, uh...you know, hang out? I was a complete dog to you in the past, and I’m really sorry!” Ino started to ramble. “But then you came back and you were all stronger and hotter and damn I just said that out loud!”

Naruto chuckled. “Y’know, you’re a lot of things, Ino. Subtle isn’t one of them. And...I’m free whenever you are. How about now?”

“Now’s good!” Ino managed, going off hand in hand with Naruto.

--

“It seems they didn’t need us after all,” an amused Ekyt/Ryouko said, watching from the rooftops.

“Well, we didn’t factor on the guys having any clue. We just assumed all guys were like you. You know, completely dense when it comes to love,” Azami told him with a reserved chuckle. **He really is...c’mon,**

say something already! I gave you a HUGE opening just now! Take it!

"I am completely dense in that respect. Maybe I just think too highly of kunoichi. Bounty Hunters are another story..." Ryouko muttered, slipping a hand around Azami's waist.

"You're learning, I'll give you that much. Now why don't you muster up the guts to ask me out like you want, and we'll get going."

"You won't say no?" Ryouko replied, apparently shocked. (Or at least faking it well. Being clueless gave you an out if you screwed up, conscious of it or not)

"Have I said no yet? I wouldn't keep hanging out if I wasn't interested, stupid!"

Ryouko shrugged. "I thought you liked my skills."

Azami shook her head. "Boys are stupid."

--

AUTHOR'S NOTES

My first weird pairing fic! I hope all of you enjoyed it! This came about as a request from YOURIMAGINARYFRIEND. To YIF- sorry it took so long! I wasn't sure how to end the fic. I was surprised at how well the pairings wound up making sense. I know you didn't ask for ChojiXHinata, but I needed a little something extra in there. No fun if you know the entire fic, right?

Anyway, everyone, enjoy, comment, and shake your heads with disdain if you must. I had fun writing this one.

Ciao for now, I'll update soon!

-NG

9 - Makeout Unlikely

RATINGS:

Sex: Mild

Sakura listened to Lady Tsunade debrief Ryouko. She started to tap her toes, wanting this moment to end. Finally, it was over.

“Alright. I’ll be back in a few minutes with that scroll, then. Don’t know you manage to weasel things out of me like that...” Tsunade grumbled.

“That hurts, M’lady- you’re not ever an easy sell. I’ve got to work really hard to crack you,” Ryouko replied, following Tsunade’s joke. Tsunade chuckled and left.

Slam, click.

“Thank God!” Sakura muttered, “I thought she’d NEVER leave.”

Ryouko turned to her in surprise. “Hmm? Is everything alright?”

Sakura pushed Ryouko up against the wall. “Everything’s fine...now...” She made her move pushed herself tight to Ryouko, trapping his arms at his sides. “Don’t struggle...you know you want this...I know I want this...so there’s no reason not to take it while we can!”

“I...don’t follow, Sakura. Where are you-?!”

Sakura put a fingers to Ryouko’s lips. “There are better uses for those lips than talking. Let me show you what I mean...”

Ryouko vaguely protested, but Sakura was going to have her way...

(Sound of breath)

Ryouko sat bolt-upright, finding that he had somehow tugged his pillow into his chest. He put it back down behind him as he stood up, kicking off his blanket to find the light. He was wide awake now; might as well make some notes.

Ryouko proceeded to write down his dream, sighing and wishing it was reality. All the same, this felt wrong. REALLY wrong.

It’s like it’s a violation of her...I hate to say it, but there’s only one man who can help me now...

--

“Let me get this straight, kid. You want to STOP dreaming about a cute girl fawning all over you, kissing you, and telling you that you belong to her. ...Either you’re the most noble guy I know, or you’re the stupidest!” Jiraiya declared, laughing. “But the Toad Mountain Sage can help you out- at a little cost.”

“What’s the cost?” Ryouko asked, hoping no one overheard this.

“Well...let me have your material for my latest book, ‘Makeout Unlikely!’” Jiraiya exclaimed. Ryouko really had to think this one through.

NOTE TO READERS: SHOULD I CONTINUE THIS ONE? LET ME KNOW!

-NG

10 - Makeout Unlikely (Finished)

It began innocently enough. Ryouko was asleep one night, tired after a long day of training. Just before he slept, his thoughts drifted off to the current object of his affection- Sakura Haruno.

Lady Tsunade's apprentice, top medical ninja behind Tsunade, more powerful than most men...and cute, too. Something sweet and feminine in a strong, sturdy package. Most guys took a look at Sakura's chest and dismissed her. Ryouko was different- he didn't stare at her shamelessly- that would be a betrayal of her trust. As a guy, he noticed she was cute. As her friend, he noticed she fun to be around. As a fellow ninja, he noticed how strong she was.

All innocent things to pick up on. But, as is the case with most guys, sometimes thoughts don't stay quite as innocent. Ryouko wouldn't think of things like this- but his subconscious might have a thing or two to say of the pink-haired kunoichi.

--+

"C'mon, no need to be shy, Ryouko. I'm JUST a girl, relax!"

*"Girls are the unknown, and therefore they're scary," Ryouko replied. **How did I get into this happy little scenario?***

Sakura was trying to coax Ryouko into a hot spring. Ryouko liked hot springs- they just didn't like him. Or that's how he felt. Ryouko was one of those guys that was never comfortable with his physique. Self-conscious to a fault, He never took his shirt off in the presence of the opposite gender. Sakura was trying to get him to do just that. But the problem was that Ryouko was tempted.

"A-a-alright. I guess...it's okay, isn't it?" Ryouko shrugged off his shirt, wading into the hot spring in his black ANBU shorts. He looked down, blushing horribly, tucking his arms in so that his chest wouldn't be so visible.

"Shy as always! It's kinda cute, y'know? Makes me really curious about what you could be hiding. Now, c'mon, you've got a girl calling to you in a hot spring!"

Ryouko hadn't noticed, but Sakura was clad only in a red bikini. He was no girl watcher, but if your crush was coaxing YOU into a bath...well, as a twenty-year-old who never had a girlfriend (Or any real female attention. The poor loser), it was hard to resist the temptation. Ryouko's mind outlined the reasons why this was okay:

-No one was naked

-Bathing suits aren't a federal offense

-It might hurt Sakura's feelings if he didn't come

-Moron, you're in love with her!

Armed with those four reasons, Ryouko treaded the water over to Sakura. She had since sunk beneath the surface of the water from the neck down.

“Finally! Now, c’mon, no more stalling. Why don’t you just go ahead and admit that you’re enjoying this? There’s no reason to feel guilty. There’s nothing wrong with hanging out with a friend...or flirting...or kissing...or making out...right? There’s no law that says we can’t share a hug and kiss in a hot spring, right? Couples do it all the time. Now then, come here, don’t make me force you!”

Sakura pulled Ryouko over by his arm.

No, I shouldn’t! She could do better than me! I can’t let her make this mistake! I...

...

why? Why aren’t I good enough?

...

I never knew a girl’s body was so...pleasant. She’s snuggled right up to me. It’s such a nice feeling! But...but...

--

Ryouko woke up with a start, blushing terribly. Stupidly, he looked around to make sure his dream hadn’t been real. Of course it hadn’t. He was at home, in bed, by himself. It was nearly four in the morning, so that made sense. Still a let-down from such a nice dream though.

Without knowing why, Ryouko got up and opened a scroll. Brush poised, he thought about why he was over here, ready to write something. What was he going to write?

That dream...

Without understanding, Ryouko wrote down his dream. He kind of wished it was illustrated. Then, of course, he began his mental butt-kicking for being a pervert. Again, his mind helpfully reminded him that he was single with no prospects. Suddenly writing down some dream didn’t seem like such a criminal offense.

--

Ryouko was ready to sleep again. As he laid down, he vaguely wondered if there would be more dreams about Sakura. They were certainly more pleasant than his usual dreams about death, killing, blood, and war. Besides, everyone had dreams like these. They were normal, natural occurrences- you couldn’t control dreams.

Something out of my control isn’t something I should feel any guilt over. Right. Ryouko nodded to no one but himself. His mind clear (well, clear enough; Ryouko carries guilt over everything twenty-four/seven), Ryouko let himself drift off to sleep.

--+

Sakura listened to Lady Tsunade debrief Ryouko. She started to tap her toes, wanting this moment to

end. Finally, it was over.

“Alright. I’ll be back in a few minutes with that scroll, then. Don’t know you manage to weasel things out of me like that...” Tsunade grumbled.

“That hurts, M’lady- you’re not ever an easy sell. I’ve got to work really hard to crack you,” Ryouko replied, following Tsunade’s joke. Tsunade chuckled and left.

Slam, click.

“Thank God!” Sakura muttered, “I thought she’d NEVER leave.”

Ryouko turned to her in surprise. “Hmm? Is everything alright?”

Sakura pushed Ryouko up against the wall. “Everything’s fine...now...” She made her move pushed herself tight to Ryouko, trapping his arms at his sides. “Don’t struggle...you know you want this...I know I want this...so there’s no reason not to take it while we can!”

“I...don’t follow, Sakura. Where are you-?!”

Sakura put a fingers to Ryouko’s lips. “There are better uses for those lips than talking. Let me show you what I mean...”

Ryouko vaguely protested, but Sakura was going to have her way...

(Sound of breath)

Ryouko sat bolt-upright, finding that he had somehow tugged his pillow into his chest. He put it back down behind him as he stood up, kicking off his blanket to find the light. He was wide awake now; might as well make some notes.

Ryouko proceeded to write down his dream, sighing and wishing it was reality. All the same, this felt wrong. REALLY wrong.

It’s like it’s a violation of her...I hate to say it, but there’s only one man who can help me now...

--

“Let me get this straight, kid. You want to STOP dreaming about a cute girl fawning all over you, kissing you, and telling you that you belong to her. ...Either you’re the most noble guy I know, or you’re the stupidest!” Jiraiya declared, laughing. “But the Toad Mountain Sage can help you out- at a little cost.”

“What’s the cost?” Ryouko asked, hoping no one overheard this.

“Well...let me have your material for my latest book, ‘Makeout Unlikely!’” Jiraiya exclaimed. Ryouko really had to think this one through.

“...Fine, fine, but change the names at least! And I don’t mean to something like ‘Makura’ and ‘Oryouko’ or something. Fair enough?”

“Works for me! Though, tell me again why you don’t want to star in a book where women throw themselves at you?” Jiraiya looked at Ryouko slyly.

Ryouko just shook his head. When it came to perverted matters, no one topped Master Jiraiya.

--

Sakura’s nights were fitful, similar to Ryouko’s. She had outgrown Sasuke (That whole ‘I’ll kill you’ thing really got to be a turn-off after a while, apparently), but that didn’t mean she didn’t want some kind of relationship. A Shinobi life was so hectic, any kind of stability was welcome. The most common of that was a boyfriend/girlfriend. Sakura was at an age where that kind of thing really mattered. Being this age and not ever kissing a boy? That was...

Pathetic!

Sakura curled up under the covers, trying to forget about this for now. She wasn’t going to be meeting any boys tonight.

-

Sakura cleaned the sand off herself, taking a dip in the sparkling blue water. Birds flew overhead; sand stretched on for miles and miles; the ocean continued on, moving endlessly and sparkling majestically. It was such a paradise here.

A pair of strong arms gripped Sakura from behind, hands falling just shy of her chest.

“I couldn’t help myself...seeing the water dripping off your beautiful body...and your shimmering green eyes...”

Sakura giggled and slid backward, pushing her body against the boy’s, reaching an arm to touch the one on her shoulder. She followed that hand up to a head. The water had left the hair on the head miraculously untouched. That was where Sakura’s hand ended it’s journey. She was cupping the boy’s head with her arm as they stood, the water up to their knees, occasionally splashing higher or sinking lower. The sound of the tide was all that could be heard as the two cuddled, undisturbed in this utopia.

Sakura sighed happily, pushing herself backward into a sturdy chest. The skin was smooth, but at the same time rugged. The boy that was attached to the chest made a small sound of affection and put an arm around Sakura’s stomach, gently giving her a small tug towards him. The boy wasn’t horribly tall, but he still bent down to put his head on Sakura’s shoulder, turning his face so it was buried in her hair. His mouth was right next to her cheek. Sakura felt his lips caress her cheek gently. She felt herself blush, mostly out of desire, though some part of her was a little embarrassed for some reason.

It occurred to Sakura that she wasn't sure who was holding her. The voice could have belonged to anyone; she hadn't thought about it. It just made her happy, being held so lovingly. Sakura turned her head, readying herself to meet the lips of the boy holding her.

"...So it's you..." she said quietly, not disappointed, but kind of surprised.

"...Yes. Forgive me if I wasn't who you were hoping for..."

"Not at all..." Sakura whispered into his ear, turning around to hug him. Her arms settled around his trim waist. She felt a flat, strong stomach meet hers as she put her head into his chest. She felt his hand fall across her head.

"...Does this have to be a dream?" she murmured into his chest. She felt small goosebumps rise as she spoke, apparently tickling him by speaking.

"It is now, but it doesn't have to be a dream...it can be a reality...we both need to want it."

"I want it...I want it..."

|||

"I want it..." Sakura mumbled, waking herself up. With a sigh, she looked around her room. It was five in the morning now, the first rays of sunlight just starting to peek through her window. It wasn't time to wake up yet.

"That dream...it felt so real..." Sakura uttered. She found she had pulled her pillow onto her stomach and gripped it so that she was laying on it. Her pajamas were two pieces of red cloth that left her stomach exposed. The way that both top and bottom had rolled, the fabric felt like a bikini.

That must have started the dream...why would I dream like that, though? I mean, that dream was so...adult. But at the same time, there was an innocence to it...like that boy didn't mean me any harm...like my desires were coming to life in a dream. But in the end, we were both begging for this dream to be real. And him...I never thought that I would dream about him that way! I mean, he's done a lot for me, but that? Oh, I'll never be able to look him in the face today!

--

Ryouko fell asleep again, this time from having no chakra left after training for hours. Again. He knew that would happen, so he stacked tatami mats, two pillows, and a blanket beneath him on his bedroom floor. The last thing he needed was to break his jaw or something when he passed out.

+

"Very good, Sakura. You've found the enemy- now, make him talk. You have one hour."

Tsunade pointed to Ryouko, who was currently 'helplessly' captured. He was blushing, of course, but

this was all just training, no big deal. Ryouko was single, so he was the perfect one to be volunteered (usually by the kunoichi, who seemed to get a cruel kick out of watching him blush and squirm when he had their attention) for kunoichi training duty.

“You’ll never make me talk,” Ryouko said, as scripted. He knew by now what the kunoichi were supposed to do. No big deal- they either pretended to seduce him, or they threatened to beat him up. He knew at what point he was supposed to give in.

“We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. I like them both, so you’re going to tell me how this is going to work,” Sakura replied forcefully. Ryouko was supposed to grade the kunoichi, since Tsunade wasn’t watching. So far, Sakura had an ‘A’.

Speaking with authority...good. Her mannerisms are fine...she knows the drill.

*“I’m not telling you anything. You can’t force me to talk!” Ryouko sneered. He watched Sakura take off her gloves, her face smiling in a threatening way. **Very nice. If I didn’t know better, I would think she was serious.***

Sakura held up her hand. It was humming with blue energy- a chakra scalpel.

An effective maneuver, Ryouko added mentally.

“How about now? Ready to start talking to me yet?” Sakura leaned close, the chakra scalpel right near Ryouko’s neck. “I could make things worse...”

Could be a false threat...let’s see if she knows where she’s going with this...

“I doubt that,” Ryouko sneered, puffing his chest up. “Nothing you can do or say can scare me.”

“mmm. Feisty,” Sakura commented, gripping Ryouko’s chin, forcing him to lock eyes with her. “Not bad looking, either. It’s too bad you’re trying to play this game with me...but I suppose it can’t be helped. I’ll have to make you want to talk.”

Sakura’s hand slashed down. Ryouko was sitting in a chair, arms tied behind his back, legs bound to the chair’s legs. He gritted his teeth (some kunoichi really got into this, and they got a little violent by mistake), waiting for pain. But none came. Instead, the sound of shredding fabric, followed by a draft on his upper body greeted Ryouko.

I guess she’s going for seduction if she cut my shirt off...hard to grade this, too, I haven’t had one go this route. Sakura could have just threatened the information out of me, like she used to. Good for her, sharpening her skills in another area.

“Time limit?” Sakura asked. Since Ryouko was technically the proctor, he was allowed to answer that question.

“Fifty-three minutes.”

"Plenty of time." Sakura walked up to Ryouko, her chakra scalpel replaced with a kunai. She grabbed his chin with one hand, then put the kunai near Ryouko's neck.

Ryouko knew now was the time to start talking. Sakura just needed to ask, and the game would be over.

"Fine, fine, you win! I'll talk! Tell me what you want to know!" Ryouko played the part of the defeated prisoner to the hilt.

"I'm not interested in battle documents, or even troop numbers. What I want to know is...do you really think you have some hope of escaping?"

*Ryouko was caught vaguely off guard with that question. He recovered quickly, though. **Ah, she's trying to 'break' me. Let's see where she goes with this...***

Sakura reached around Ryouko and grabbed his hands. Ryouko frowned- this wasn't part of the drill. He really WAS stuck. The drill ended when he escaped with a Rope Escape Jutsu. But chakra restraints?

"You aren't going anywhere. See, I've decided to keep you. So...I guess what I'm saying is...let your heart do the talking now."

Damn, she's really convincing!

"Yeah, right. I know how you operate. You either try to force info out of me, or you try to seduce me."

"I CAN seduce you. You're tied up, and I can tell from your blushing, heart rate, and other, ahem, signs that are unique to males that you are already partially seduced. One little push and you'll belong to me. I can give you the push, or you can take the leap. Either way, I'm going to get what I want."

*Ryouko's eyes widened. **She's not following the script anymore. That means she's serious. I've got to...damn it, those restraints!***

"Wanna know how else I can tell you're into this?" Sakura asked, taking the kunai away from Ryouko's neck. She used it to indicate his arms. "See those restraints? They're unique- they depend on the captured person's will to escape to stay at full power. If you really wanted to escape, they would have disappeared. But since they haven't...you don't want to go anywhere. You're happy where you are."

Ryouko didn't know what to say. She was right, of course, but still...this was so awkward. But with Ryouko's naturally bad instincts toward kunoichi, he couldn't tell if this was a 'natural' awkward, or a 'perverted' awkward. Some sardonic part of his mind told him 'Either way, she's paying attention to you now'.

"S-so what if I am? Any guy would love to be in my position! Captured by a cute girl. What's to say that I'm not faking my reaction?" Ryouko said stubbornly, still in the context of the drill.

"One way to find out," Sakura said pleasantly. She put the kunai to his neck, using her other hand to

pull his head in for a kiss. Ryouko fought it at first, but eventually just gave up. It's what he wanted anyway. In the drill, he had already admitted defeat anyway. This was just a bonus.

***If only she wasn't just messing around!** Ryouko thought, not really thinking about the kiss- not until Sakura pressed herself in closer, sitting on his lap and kissing him like she hadn't eaten in days and the inside of his mouth was a juicy steak. When she let go, Ryouko was completely bewildered. Did that count as a first kiss?*

"The drill ended when I used the chakra restraints," Sakura informed Ryouko, still holding the kunai at his neck. "In other words, everything you just experienced...I guess you'd call that an admission. I'm really interested in you, and I couldn't wait for this drill. In real life, I'd never get the guts up to do this to you. Not until you said it was okay. Even then, I couldn't ask. This drill was just perfect. Since you're sitting there with those chakra restraints, at least I know you're being honest."

"You're right. If I wanted to escape, I would have. It would never occur to me to ask you for something like this ordinarily. You're just too out of my league, you know?"

Sakura smiled kindly, belying the kunai in her hand.

"Well, I've still got you as my prisoner for forty-five minutes. I'm going to make the most of that time...From now on, you're my dirty little secret..."

*"What if Lady Hokage comes back?" That realization just hit Ryouko. **Tsunade'll KILL me for this! Even though I'm the one tied up, it'll be my fault somehow!***

"Relax. If she does...well, you're a cute boy, and I'm a cute girl, and we're both attention-starved...nature WOULD take it's course. It's been proven medically."

Ryouko blinked. "I guess I can't argue with that logic, or the research behind it..."

Sakura flipped the kunai to a standard grip, then put it away. "You'd be foolish to argue it, given your position...Now, this won't hurt a bit..."

=\=

Ryouko woke up, feeling his wrists. That dream had been so real he was SURE that he had to untie himself. But there were no rope marks, and his clothes were in tact.

"That was out of line. WAY out of line! I've got to get control of this! How could I dream something like that! ...

...

Because it's something I want. I really, really want..."

Ryouko fell silent as he went about cleaning up, but his mind kept working.

It IS what I want. All these dreams...their content is different, but the theme is always the same- Sakura and I. I know you can't control your dreams, but this latest one...I'm still blushing. It was

really potent...I wonder if Sakura would be that aggressive...no no no, stop stop stop! You like her, okay, that's fine. It's NOT okay to drool over her like that! Get some control, you horny freak!

--

Sakura had fallen right back to sleep, the allure of her soft sheets and pillows too much to resist. But she dreamt again. If her first dream was tempting, then this one was equally, if not more, tempting, but in a weird, morbid way.

-|

Sakura felt herself falling. But why was she falling? And where to? She looked down to find out.

Water. There was water below her. She didn't know where she was, and she felt panic settling in. Desperate, she looked around for something to grab. But there was nothing.

"Sakura!"

*Sakura heard the shout. She knew that voice. Part of her was afraid to answer. **What if he jumps, too?** But she couldn't let him think she was dead.*

"Ryouko!" she yelled back. Then she saw him.

Ryouko had taken a running start and jumped off the cliff. He snapped his arms to his sides and kicked his legs down, attempting to catch up with her. She was falling sideways, so she had less speed. Ryouko caught up and grabbed her.

"Hang on!" he said, blushing already and he pulled her in close. "Do you have chakra?"

Sakura couldn't sense any. "No!"

They had to shout now, over the roar of a waterfall. It was beautiful from up here, Sakura realized. If only she wasn't about to die.

"Then hang on tight!" Ryouko yelled back. He reached out and grabbed her chin, promptly kissing her. Sakura blushed, but closer her eyes, going with the feeling. A feeling of warmth and safety. And...chakra? But now her own chakra. This chakra was foreign, but it was so inviting and comforting...

"Sorry! I just gave you some of my chakra! Focus it to your feet when we land! And...I guess I wanted to kiss you before I die!"

*It occurred to Sakura that Ryouko couldn't swim. **Then what the hell was he doing jumping off a cliff?!***

...

He must really care about me to this. And I...I care about him, too. We're both going to live! We're both going to survive this! His chakra...it's so powerful! Unless he gave me...no...

Sakura looked at Ryouko. His arms were closed around her. He was breathing, but that was it. Sakura couldn't sense any chakra from him. And she didn't know how he transferred his chakra to her, so she couldn't give some back.

He was going to die to protect me...I shouldn't be surprised...all the times he's already done that...but each time he lives. Fate isn't ready for him to die yet, and I won't let fate take him! Not now! No one will take him from me!

SPLASH!

The chakra on Sakura's feet kept her above water. Not knowing what else to do, she ran for it. She had to get Ryouko to a safe place until his chakra returned. As she skipped over the waves, Sakura realized that she was holding him awkwardly. She shifted him so that he was riding piggyback. Despite how it looked, it didn't feel awkward- not even sexual. Just...innocent.

Both of us...we're innocent. Even though I dream about him, I never think about sex. Just about how loyal he is, and how much he does for me. How he protects me, how he always shies away from credit...

It must be love. On his part and...

And...

On mine, too.

Sakura reached the shore, immediately setting Ekyt down on the warm sand. It was a warm day, sunny and bright. Sakura didn't really notice that until her clothes started to dry. She was too focused on Ryouko. He had moved, and even groaned once, but other than that he just laid still.

Water, Sakura thought. She put actions to thoughts and got up to get water. Her sandals crunched over the sand, until she hit a wire. The wire pulled tight. **TRAP!** Sakura's muscles screamed. But she couldn't move. It was like some invisible force bound her to the spot.

Schwing! Whoosh! Whoosh whooshwhoosh whoosh whoosh!

Not one hit her. Not one kunai, or shuriken, or knife. Everyone one of them missed her. No, they hadn't missed, they had been blocked.

"Ryouko..." Sakura whispered, in tears. Ryouko's upper body was riddled with weapons. Blood dripped from his mouth.

"Y'alright?" Ryouko asked, staggering forward.

"No...no...Ryouko, lay down, hurry!"

Ryouko didn't listen. Instead, he stood up, directly in front of Sakura. She suddenly had a feeling of worry, a horrible pang that shot through her like a kunai knife. Then she saw it; the cause of her worry. She saw it in the most gruesome way possible.

A sword was jutting through Ryouko's chest and out the other side.

"Sak...ur...a..." he managed. "Couldn't let...sword...hit...sorry...so sorry..."

Ryouko's chakra that was inside Sakura flared up. She could do anything- anything. Right now, that meant saving his life. With that much blood loss, and so many wounds...Sakura would need bandages. She didn't have any that weren't soaked and useless. That meant she had no choice- Sakura stripped off her skirt (thanking her mother for warning her to wear something over her panties under her skirt, for just such emergencies. Sakura briefly wondered how the hell her mother had foreseen something like this), Sakura cut it into strips, intending to use them for makeshift bandages while her Chakra Palm Jutsu healed them, one at a time.

-

That night, Sakura sat with her legs curled up to her chest, a fire going. A shirtless Ryouko was lying next to her, the shadows of the flames dancing on his chest. He would live. And Sakura would admit she loved him when he woke up. For now, she was content to curl up next to him and use his chest as a pillow. She needed some rest after all that healing.

--

This time, when Sakura awakened, she didn't panic. That dream was all too familiar.

That's right...he's always doing things like that, isn't he? On a lot of missions, I should have been hurt or killed. Instead, he took the pain and the scars. Does it mean what this dream says it means? I know a dream is just a dream, but is there something more to it? It's not like I'd object to liking Ryouko...he's cute, strong, and he tries so hard to make everyone happy. And all he wants in return is to belong to the village. Maybe I want him to belong to me, too...

With that, Sakura got dressed. If her gut was right, today was going to be a big day.

--

Ryouko stood up, dressed and ready to go. He was going to do it. He was going to tell Sakura...

...

Tomorrow.

I don't have the guts to tell her...oh well, at least my dreams have become more pleasant.

Ryouko walked out the door, shutting and locking it behind him. He turned to see Jiraiya sitting on the railing of his porch.

"Alright kid, I said I'd help you stop having these dreams. A legend always delivers on a promise. So, come with me. Sakura is with Tsunade at the moment, and I need her around to get these dreams out of your head."

Jiraiya led Ryouko into Tsunade's office.

"Tsunade, got a minute to grab a drink?" Jiraiya asked hopefully. Those were the magic words to Tsunade.

"Sakura, you handle things until I get back! Ryouko, DO try to stay out of trouble for a few minutes while I'm gone, okay?" Tsunade ruffled the hair of both the kids, then walked out. Jiraiya started toward the door, but stopped.

"Oh Sakura, by the way...did you ever dream about a certain guy, and when you did, you just knew 'that's him, he's the one?' 'Cause, funny story- Ryouko loves you!"

"You bastard sage!" Ryouko roared. Sakura grabbed him around the waist while Jiraiya escaped, giggling away.

"Easy tiger, easy! It's alright, calm down!" Sakura cooed.

"How can I be calm?! He just admitted my feelings for you! That's cheating, I'm supposed to say it!" Ryouko protested, not even noticing he had just admitted the feelings himself.

"You just said it. And I'm honored. It's funny, because I was dreaming about you..."

Sakura launched into an explanation about her dreams. When she got to the part about him being riddled with kunai and then taking a sword for her, Ryouko had to chuckle.

"That's about right. I WOULD do something like that. I think I have, once or twice for that matter! I had this dream..."

I feel so...comfortable wit her. Why didn't I say this before. Even if she had said no, I wouldn't have lost much. Well, I've said it now. And now I'm telling her my dreams. It's so nice to finally have this off my chest!

While his thoughts went one direction, Ryouko's mouth went another. Specifically, do the dream he had about him and Sakura in Tsunade's office, just after Tsunade stepped out.

"...And then you pushed me against the wall and said something like 'I want this, you want this; why not have it?'; then you moved like you were going to kiss me, but I woke up."

Sakura's eyes gleamed mischievously. **Typical of him, he didn't think about going past kissing either...well, not serious stuff, anyway. I wonder how he'd handle it if I DID kiss him. One way to find out...**

"Hey, Ryouko? Ever have a dream come true?"

11 - The Fever

Ratings:

Sex: mild-moderate

Nudity: moderate

PLEASE NOTE:

This is not my usual type of story, I know that. What I've tried to do is take an innocent gesture of love and keep it that way. I think I might have failed and this became completely perverted sounding ^^'. At any rate, please understand that wasn't my intention at any point. (also note that, strangely enough, this content is real to some degree. Got a fever? The perfect excuse to get that special guy/girl to cozy up to you!) Anyway, please enjoy, comment, and take the story in context.

-NG

--

Tsunade shook her head.

"He's fought his last battle, physically. His fever's too high; there's nothing I can do for him now."

The room fell silent. A disease? THAT had been the end of Ryouko? Everyone felt this was tragic- the young man was too young to die, especially like this.

"My lady...did you think of..." Sakura paused. This was SO embarrassing to bring up! **No, no, he's saved you! You owe him this! At least try! You're always saying that you aren't going to stand by and let others do the work anymore!**

"Think of WHAT, Sakura? If you have an idea, you'd better say it, quick. He doesn't have long..."

--

Ryouko wasn't aware that he was dying. He wasn't aware he was alive. He was just...there. In a hospital bed, monitors beeping, machines clicking. It was so familiar he didn't pay any attention to it. His unconscious mind had told him to relax, so he did. This was nothing new. Hospitals and such...nothing new.

--

Sakura took a deep breath to steady herself.

"Have you thought of attacking the fever directly by...(gulp) absorption?"

Tsunade's eyes glimmered. Quickly, she pushed everyone out of the room, closing and locking the door.

"Sakura, that might be his only chance! Shizune, get an ice bath ready, and get Ryouko in! Sakura...take whatever mental preparation you need. I know this can't be easy for you, but you might be his best chance."

"Y-yes, m'lady."

Tsunade smiled at her apprentice. "Doing something like this...you've really become a great healer, Sakura. Willing to do anything to save the patient...I'm proud of you."

-

To attack a cold directly through absorption, that means skin contact. Once part of the fever has been absorbed by the second party, the immune systems of both parties kick in. After that, it's a simple matter of sweating the cold out. But the first part...

I've got to do this!

Sakura unzipped her top, blushing. But she shook her head. **No! He's as innocent as they come, and unconscious! He won't remember this! Just do it!**

Sakura dropped her top over a chair, lifting the covers over Ryouko. The boy never stirred. That simple fact raised Sakura's determination. Nodding to herself, she laid her bare upper body against Ryouko's bare chest. His body had already heated back up after the ice bath- a bad sign.

Sakura settled her head onto his shoulder, wishing that she didn't have to do this. At the same time, she didn't feel TOTALLY uncomfortable. The topless thing, yeah, as Sakura was never inclined to take her clothes off. But Ryouko didn't seem like a threat. Even if he DID wake up and remember this, he'd be too noble to tell anyone, and would most likely look away and blush.

Seeing me like this might sweat his fever right out of him. I'd rather it didn't come to that...?! His fever peaked! It's already dropped one degree! Five more degrees and he'll be out of the woods!

--

"All I could think was that I was going to die without ever experiencing all life has to offer. Y'know...female companionship. Now I've got time to try again!"

Naruto looked at Sakura, who was already blushing. He started to talk, but found himself getting hit by Sakura.

"That's right! Make the most of life!" Sakura encouraged. **If he remembers that...**

"Hmm? Sakura, do you have a fever?" Ryouko put a hand on her head. To his surprise, she really did!

"I do? Oh, that's not good..." Sakura slumped over, falling into Ryouko's arms. Ryouko was no medic, but he knew that this wasn't good. He picked Sakura up.

"Naruto, you go ahead and tell the Fifth to be expecting me! I'll be along as soon as I can!"

--

"I'll do anything, Lady Tsunade."

"There's nothing to be done now, Ryouko...she'll live or she won't..."

"I CAN'T ACCEPT THAT! I'LL DO ANYTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND? ANYTHING! I LOVE HER!" Ryouko pounded the desk, nearly snarling with anger and grief.

"...We could attack the fever directly. BUT- that means you'll have to do something that I guarantee you've never done before."

"What is it?" Ryouko demanded.

"Sakura might kill you for it..."

"WHAT IS IT?!" Ryouko shouted, this time making himself one hundred percent clear.

Tsunade sighed. "You'll have to press your body against hers. No shirt."

"Fine!"

"For EITHER of you..." Tsunade finished. She saw the color rise on Ryouko's face. She also watched his face stiffen.

"I'll do it. Even if she hates me for it, I can't let her die. Just promise me that you won't tell her."

--

Ryouko dropped his vest on the chair next to Sakura's bed. She was so red from fever... That stiffened Ryouko's will. He pulled off his shirt. Then he realized he had to get hers off.

"Oh..."

Tsunade put a hand on Ryouko's shoulder. "You can't half-@\$\$ this. Either do it, or don't. If you're worried about touching her chest..."

"I feel like a pervert...(gulp) But if you say it has to be done..."

Ryouko unzipped Sakura's vest. He closed his eyes, but the temptation to look; to stare shamelessly-

that was nearly unbearable. After a moment, Ryouko was over Sakura in a push-up position. Slowly, he lowered himself down onto her body.

So warm...so soft...

Please hang in there, Sakura. Just live...if you do, I'll tell you everything. Even how I feel...all of it...

Ryouko, without thinking, actually hugged Sakura. He let go immediately, but not before feeling it:

Her fever is falling...oh thank God.

When she stirred, Ryouko collected his things and bolted from the room. All the same, he was sure that he could never again be in the same room with her. Not without remembering how her chest felt against his.

I wish I could experience it more than once, but that is out of the question.

Ryouko had no idea that he'd already felt Sakura's touch once before. For him, saving her was enough.

--

The next morning proved to be awkward. Sakura and Ryouko met on a deserted road- both were on their way to the Hokage mansion to check on the other. Upon seeing each other, they both blushed and bowed.

"Good morning! I hope you're well!" they said as one, their faces looking at the ground.

I can't let him/her know what I did. He/She would freak out!

Ryouko's promise suddenly kicked in.

"Sakura, I need to be honest. The other day...I, um...listen, you're gonna hit me, and I'm gonna deserve it, there's no getting around that. But when your fever hit, Tsunade ran out of options. I asked her...well, no, I screamed at her...I made her tell me what I could do for you. And I..."

"...attacked the fever directly..." Sakura said, her mouth dropping in shock. **So that's why I recovered! Oh no! He saw my...!**

"...Yes. I promise you, I didn't look. I didn't want to take advantage of you, so please don't think that I don't think you're worth looking at. You really are! But, anyway...I did it, and while I was laying there, I felt you burning up. I swore that I'd be honest with you if you'd just stay alive..." Ryouko's eyes met Sakura's. But they weren't shy, blushing eyes. They were the eyes of a man who spoke of his word, then followed what it said to the letter.

"I swore that I'd tell you how I felt. And no getting around it now- I'm attracted to you. But I could never tell. I guess it's a fair trade- your life for my honesty. I'm just glad I lived long enough to be honest with you, as I should have been when this attraction first began."

“...You’re attracted to me because you saw me half-naked...right?” Sakura asked quietly, almost threateningly. The wind blew, sending a shower of cherry blossoms falling behind her. (Right about now, Ryouko’s heart leapt up into his throat)

“...No. I was attracted to you before that. Two full years before that. It wasn’t just your body- it was your mind, and your attitude. You’ve always treated me like I...like I belonged here. Like I was one of you. I know I’m not...”

Sakura had a unique ability- she could judge when someone was speaking from the heart. Ryouko had just done so.

The way he just said that... ‘I know I’m not’...he really feels that way. And now he’s opened up to me and said everything...

Ryouko closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Thank you for everything, not least of all saving my life. I’ll just be on my way now. Please don’t let what I said bother you. I just had to be honest.”

Ryouko turned to walk away, but found himself staying in one place. **Is my conscience stopping me? No, wait...OW!**

Sakura had grabbed Ryouko’s hair to stop him. He hadn’t noticed and kept walking. Sakura finally gave a sharp tug that jolted Ryouko back to reality.

“Don’t think you’re gonna ‘Kenshin’ your way out of this!” Sakura admonished Ryouko. (Note- Reference to Rurouni Kenshin. Kenshin’s simple-minded act [The ‘I’m a wanderer, that I am!’ and the ‘Oro’, or the ‘This one’ thing] is what Sakura’s referring to.) “You spout a confession straight from the heart, then try to just walk away?! Ugh, you ARE clueless about women! AND you’ve felt my chest *twice!*”

“Huh? Twice? When was the second time? Oh, when I was dying! You absorbed my fever then? I knew you saved me, but I didn’t know that much...”

Sakura looked as if she regretted saying anything. She quickly covered up with a big sigh and a “You really don’t get girls at all! Not only have you felt my chest, you’re also trying to run for it after you tell me you love me. How am I supposed to take that?”

“Like I confessed my feelings to you, and then I tried to escape because you’re going to hit me?” Ryouko said hopefully, already wincing. Instead of moving again, Ryouko closed both eyes and clasped his hands behind his back. He made his back military straight, and stood firm, jaw set.
“...Hit me.”

“W-what?” Sakura wasn’t sure she’d heard him right.

“Hit me. If you feel it’s necessary. I knew the risks full well when I did what I did. I can’t regret it,

because it worked. But I DO regret violating your trust. For that, I deserve to be punished. Please hit me as many times as you need to so that you can feel at peace. I won't fight back, I deserve this."

Sakura just stared at Ryouko. **He's serious! He's actually serious! He wants me to hit him! It'll ease his conscience somehow. If that's the case, should I hit him so he'll feel better?**

...

No. The poor guy is so simple when it comes to this stuff that I just can't bring myself to hit him! Look at that, he's just standing there like a loyal puppy, waiting for me to give him what he deserves! Well, I can do that, I guess, if it'll make him feel better.

Sakura strode forward purposely. "Are you ready? I'm going to give it to you. No complaining afterwards, right?"

"Right. I promise."

Sakura wound up and...

BONK!

She hit him on top of the head lightly. "Don't be such a fool, I'm not going to hit you! In fact, I thought about what you said- you didn't even look at me when you did your typical hero stunt. I trust you entirely, Ryouko. If any other guy had done this, I would have been sure that he molested me or something. But you...you're just so pure and innocent! It makes me laugh to think that you're feeling this guilty over saving me! Listen, whether you saw my chest or you didn't, I know how you are. You would have rather fought Orochimaru without chakra than see me like that without my permission. It took you a lot of bravery. And now it's so clear to me...you've always done anything and everything to protect me."

Ryouko bowed his head. "It's not that you NEEDED to be saved...it's just that I couldn't bear to see you hurt."

Ryouko's face flushed yet again, a crimson hue over his normally pale cheeks. Sakura put a hand on one of the cheeks.

"You mean a lot to me, too. I've always admired your strength as a person. Having so many obstacles to be come strong, and all the people who wanted you to fail. ...But I never knew how far your feelings extended."

"My feelings are what they are. I can't ask you to accept them. Not when you could do so much better than me. It was selfish of me to say anything at all, really. I've put you in a terrible position."

Sakura blushed, looking away. "Terrible? There's no girl alive who wouldn't enjoy being told she was loved...Is it the same way with guys? I'm sure you've had tons of girls confess to you..."

Ryouko gave a hollow laugh. "Hardly. You were the first one to really speak with me. But, to answer your question...I can't speak for all guys, but this one enjoys hearing it...at least, he thinks he does."

Sakura gave him another sharp tug on his hair. "I keep saying it, but boys are stupid! Look, does the

fact that I'm still here talking to you tell you anything?"

Ryouko just stared, not following her. Sakura sighed and told Ryouko to 'come here'. When he did, she told him to close his eyes, because he was going to get what was coming to him.

Ryouko braced himself for impact.

Smak.

A kiss on the cheek. Ryouko put his hand to his cheek. "That didn't hurt..." He seemed surprised by that fact.

Sakura just shook her head. "You've got a lot to learn, don't you? Kisses don't hurt...but I'll bet it'll take a few practice kisses for you to understand that..."

12 - Sakura's Winter

Ratings:

Nudity: Moderate

Sex: Mild

Sakura wanted a boy. As in, boyfriend. As in, relationship. Lovey-dovey, kissy, romance-y relationship. Not strange, considering her age.

No matter how strong I get, I still feel so out of place. And lately, this longing for a boy to call my own...it's gotten stronger. Sasuke leaving only made me want a boyfriend more. But because of how I worshipped him, no boy will touch me! (sigh) It figures. I'm finally ready to date, and now no one will take a second look at me. People say I'm cute, but that's it. Not beautiful. Cute. As in, 'you're so cute and young-looking, Sakura'! I hate that! If it's a cute guy saying it, then fine! But it's just some snotty kids who want an older woman who say that!

Sakura Haruno, Age: Seventeen (I'll be eighteen in March! CHA! 00' Haven't said 'cha' in a long time!). I've got pink hair, a slim figure, and a big forehead. And I got gypped in the T&A department! My mom nags me, and my sensei is hard on me. I've gotten stronger, but not any cuter. Damn it damn it damn it!

Sakura resisted the urge to childishly pummel her bed. It wasn't the bed's fault that she was single, after all. The fault was probably her own. After being so gung-ho about Sasuke, she had scared any other potential suitors away.

With a sigh, Sakura got up to make tea. It was winter in the Leaf Village, and though her apartment was warm, the cold weather outside made tea sound like a great idea. Only one problem:

"I'm out of tea? Great! That's just perfect!"

Sakura slammed the cupboard shut before shuffling over to her teakettle. She dumped the near-boiling water into the sink, then hung the teapot on the faucet so that it would dry. While doing this, Sakura considered her option.

The store? No, it's too far in this weather. Same with Ino's house. She's probably all cozy, playing some hentai game or something! Blond pervert! She is SO drooling over some yaoi or something, I bet!

Let's see...Naruto's apartment isn't far, but he might not be home. Going all that way for nothing wouldn't be worth it.

Ah! Ryouko! If anyone is at home, drinking tea right now, it's him! (giggle) The poor guy! Others his age are out drinking or partying. He's having tea and cookies and reading a scroll instead! (giggle) Like I can talk -_-' Still, that kind of thing makes him unique. Kinda cute, in a way. Well,

I'll just pay him a visit to borrow some tea.

--

Ryouko was at home, sipping tea and reading a scroll. He frowned over it's contents. He sneezed suddenly and violently.

"Guess someone's talking about me or something," he said in reference to an old legend. It was similar to getting a shiver when someone walked on your grave. In this case, you sneezed when someone spoke ill of you. "Now let's see...genjutsu...enough of that. Let's try single-hand handsigns. That'll be handy when I'm using my sword. Now, which Jutsu-?"

Knock knock

"Who would be out at a time like this?" Ryouko wondered, getting up to answer the door. **An important mission, maybe?**

When he opened his door, Ryouko found Sakura on the other side. He immediately stepped out of the way to let her in. She took the gesture as the invitation it was and stepped inside.

"Sorry to bother you, Ryouko. I was hoping I could borrow some tea." Sakura brushed the snow off her clothes before kicking her boots off.

"Oh, sure. Just a second." Ryouko walked toward his kitchen.

Is it polite to ask her to stay? I DO have some tea made. And it WOULD give me an excuse to talk to her. Girls always travel in packs, and right now the one I like is away from the herd! I should talk to her! In fact, I'm going to!

"Oh, Ryouko, you shouldn't have!" Sakura exclaimed. "Your tea is perfect! I don't know how I drank anything else before this!"

"I'm glad you like it. The tea isn't near as perfect as you, though," Ryouko commented, smooth as silk.

"You bad boy, was this a set-up? Hmm? Well, I suppose it would be rude of me not to indulge. C'mere now. I need you to keep me warm..."

Yeah, that'd be great. If I only had the balls to tell her how I feel^^'

-

Sakura watched Ryouko as he fished out some tea from a cupboard. He moved graceful even then, showing how much he trained.

He trains so hard that he unconsciously practices like that. I wish he was on our team, instead of that damn Sai! Ryouko's ten times more talented! It's funny to think he's only a little older than

me.

“Here you are, Sakura. And a cup for the road, too. I don’t imagine that it’s very pleasant outside right now.”

Sakura stopped daydreaming and took the tea from Ryouko. He had put it in a little bag, sealed tightly against the cold and snow. When he handed her the steaming tea mug, their hands touched for a brief moment. Ryouko blushed a little, but knew that Sakura would shrug it off as his normal behavior. To his surprise, Sakura’s cheeks had reddened slightly as well.

-

What was that, just now? When I saw him blush, I had to blush, too! And I smiled! I guess it’s kind of sweet how he does that. I hope he doesn’t think I’m mocking him or something.

“Thank you for the tea, Ryouko! Have a good night. And don’t stay up too late studying- doctor’s orders!”

Ryouko gave his trademark half-smile. “Yes ma’am, I’ll behave. Stay safe on your way home.”

Sakura gave a little laugh at his formality. **‘Yes ma’am’? C’mon, that’s a little formal, Ryouko! You’ve known me for years now!** Sakura thought, pulling her boots back on. Once they were securely on her feet, she opened the door.

“!” Ryouko’s cup clattered to the floor as he leapt up and raced past Sakura.

“Look out!” he called to her, stepping between her and the door. WHOOMP!

Sakura dropped the tea mug. “Ryouko!”

A ton of snow had fallen off the roof when Sakura opened the door. Ryouko had somehow heard it and bolted to get in front of her. As a result, he got buried in the snow, while Sakura only spilled a little tea on her boots. Just as she began to panic, Sakura saw two eyes blinking in front of her. She had to stuff her fist in her mouth to stop from laughing.

“Hahaha! You look like a snowman!” she chortled, pulling Ryouko inside. She used her strength to shut the door against the pressure of the snow.

“I’d l-l-laugh, b-but I c-can’t thaw o-out!” Ryouko shot back, unintentionally comically. He had burned through all his chakra during his training, and now he couldn’t even produce a small flame to melt the snow.

“Go in the shower and thaw yourself out. I’ll make some new tea.”

Ryouko was too cold to argue with an idea that made sense.

-

Once in the bathroom, Ryouko stripped his clothes off, still feeling the sting of ice and snow against his flesh. As he pried off his pants, his brain fed him a message:

You're naked and your crush is here.

Another message soon followed:

Your clothes are in the other room. You're going to have to parade past her in a towel.

Not that it could be helped now. All the same, Ryouko had made the mistake of thinking of the situation at hand. He was naked, in the shower, and there was a female present. Not just any female- his ideal woman. And while she might not be right here watching him, she was still going to see at least his bare chest. Of course, now Ryouko's brain passed on yet another message:

She'll be staying here until the snow melts. That could be days!

As the hot water defrosted him, Ryouko wondered if Sakura felt the same trepidation he did.

Probably not. I'm no threat to her, and she knows it. Now would be the perfect time to tell her how I feel, but she'd have no place to sit down and think it over. Damn it! It all comes down to one thing: I can't say it!

--

Sakura made the tea, then poured two steaming mugs. Now, hanging out with Naruto, Sakura had seen a guy in an advanced state of undress. But Naruto was Naruto- he was a teammate, and the kind of guy you bring to a party to make it entertaining. A conversation piece.

Seeing him naked is like seeing a mother seeing her baby naked. But Ryouko...I can't help but be curious...I've never even seen him without a shirt, let alone completely naked! I wonder what he looks like...

Sakura's mind conjured up an image of an overly-muscular, oiled-up hunk with pecs as big as her head.

What am I doing?! He's not built like that, and...and...why would I even think that? Get it together, Sakura! You want a boyfriend so bad that you're seeing a sweet-natured boy as a male stripper! Cut it out! Don't molest him in your mind, that's wrong!

--

Ryouko finished defrosting, looking carefully out of the shower. The coast was clear. Well, duh, the bathroom door was locked, and he was alone in there to begin with. Trying to calm himself down, Ryouko strapped a towel around himself. Too tight. Too loose. Too tight. Too loose...

"Damn it!" he swore, a little louder than he meant to. From the other side of the door came Sakura's concerned voice.

“Is everything okay, Ryouko?”

Ryouko covered up quickly, panicking. “Everything’ fine! It’s all good! Uh, I’m...I’m coming out now!”

--

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

Sakura found that she was excited at the prospect of seeing Ryouko in nothing but a towel.

Maybe it’s just puberty? Or curiosity? I AM a girl, of course I want to see naked guys. It only makes sense that I’d wonder. (nods to herself) And what am I getting all worked up for anyway? It’s just Ryouko, I’ve known him forever!

The bathroom door opened. Sakura tried to avert her eyes, but her body turned instead of her head, so she wound up shamelessly gawking. Out walked Ryouko through the steam.

Sakura was pleasantly surprised to find that Ryouko wasn’t hiding anything terrible- just an ordinary physique. He was a little muscular, built like the martial artist he was. Here again, Sakura noticed the grace with which Ryouko moved. She gulped hard.

Something’s wrong here...

--

Ryouko pulled on his sleepwear. Today he had settled on a pair of black briefs. They were somewhat low-cut, but that was because his ANBU shorts went over them. They were black in color in case his pants ripped; an old trick Ryouko had learned from exam proctors.

BAM!

Ryouko turned, seeing Sakura standing at the door. His first instinct was to cover up, but for whatever reason, he didn’t. He just stood there, mostly undressed.

Sakura jogged in, smiling and laughing. She playfully tackled him onto his bed and tickled him. He counter-attacked and tickled her, pulling her in tight to him so that his stomach was against hers.

All this happened in black and white, and there was no sound. But each image was clear.

Sakura nuzzled his chest with her head, then curled up and went to sleep, feeling safe with his strong arms around her.

Sakura blinked. Once. Twice. Three times. Nope, that daydream had definitely happened.

I can’t believe I just...I mean....How did...?! Is it him? Is it the situation? Is it both?! I’m trapped

here, with a cute guy, while the snow is falling outside. He just took a shower, then walked by me in a towel. It's just the situation, right? Isn't it?

"Sakura? Are you okay?"

Sakura half-jumped, spinning around to find a fully-dressed and snow-free Ryouko standing there.

"I-I'm fine! Just daydreaming!" Sakura waved her arms around, as if dispelling that dream. Her heartbeat sped up. Her face flushed suddenly, as if she had a fever. But that was because:

He looks so serious!

Ryouko did indeed look serious. In fact, he leaned forward and kissed Sakura. Right out of the blue, he kissed her. As for Sakura, she just went with it. She didn't fight back. She wanted to see if her day dreams were meant to star Ryouko, or if they were just the heat of the moment. When their lips met, Sakura knew it was the real deal.

--

"I insist you sleep in my bed. I couldn't, in good conscience, let a female guest sleep on the floor."

Sakura didn't really argue, aside from the obligatory 'are you sure?'. That bed looked warm and comfortable.

"You can borrow a sweat suit, if you'd like something to sleep in."

Sakura considered it, but instead she buried herself under the covers. "No peeking!" she said, just a tad playfully. She obviously hadn't thought she'd be staying the night, so she didn't have pajamas. Just underwear. (upon thinking of this, Ryouko's heartbeat sped up to nearly unchartable levels) Sakura had thought of the same thing, but shrugged it off. Ryouko wouldn't look. Then again, he WAS still a guy...of course, if he DID peep, Sakura could simply beat the crap out of him for it. Make sure he earned that look. Though Sakura had to wonder whether or not she was being this teasing on purpose. She had admitted to herself she wanted a boyfriend, so maybe she had subconsciously planned on how to treat him? No, only Ryouko would react to this sort of thing in the way Sakura was looking for.

"Okay, you can look now, I'm covered."

Ryouko took a *Yukata* from his closet and hung it up next to the bed. Sakura could toss that on if she had to get up.

"Well, good night. I hope you sleep well," Ryouko offered, smiling instead of bowing as usual. The smile caught Sakura by surprise, but she recovered quickly.

"I sleep better if I've got something to cuddle..." Sakura shot back at him, playfully seductive. **That's what he gets for that teasing little smile of his!**

"Are you serious?" Ryouko asked, completely innocent, eyes wide. Sakura felt bad for deceiving the boy. He was obviously a simpleton when it came to love.

“No, *baka!* We’re not THAT close yet!”

“But you said cuddling, not...y’know!” Ryouko protested, waving one arm in frustration/surprise.

“If you were in your underwear, too, then it’d be different!” Sakura fired back.

“Are you serious *now?*” Ryouko questioned, this time just kidding.

“Just go to sleep!”

--

First thing in the morning, Sakura put on the robe Ryouko had left. She saw him laying on the floor, a too-small blanket covering him. The scene was kind of cute to Sakura. **Kinda like a puppy...**

“But he’s gonna catch a cold that way...guess I’d better cover him up.”

Sakura dragged the blanket off the bed, but stopped. **Then I’LL be cold...**

Thinking on her feet, Sakura draped the blanket over Ryouko. Then she grabbed her pillow and put it next to his. Sighing at the innocence of the situation, Sakura pushed herself against Ryouko to keep him warm. She took a look at his face, seeing the same innocent expression she always did. A guy who had seen the horror the world had to offer, but remained pure in heart despite it. Again, it was comforting to see that someone could still be that way in this day and age. She quickly fell asleep herself. Her last conscious thought:

I wanted a boyfriend...thanks to some bad luck, I’ve finally got one. Huh. Coulda sworn I said we weren’t ready to cuddle yet...

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Once again, I got bitten by the ‘romantic comedy’ bug. And once again, it’s Ken Akamatsu’s work that’s to blame. This time it’s *Negima* at fault. If you aren’t a fan of Akamatsu-san’s work yet, I hope that this recent rash of romance/comedy fics will be inspiration enough for you to check his stuff out.

-NG

13 - The Bounty Hunter

Mild Violence
Moderate Swearing
Mild Sex

Please note: I've done a lot of RyoukoXSakura fics. This time, it's Ryouko X Azami, and it's a continuation of a scrapped story I did a year ago. It was an interesting one to write. Not sure I'm satisfied with it, but I never am when it comes to my work. So, please comment and enjoy!

-NG

Ps: Coming soon- Bleach. Anyone like the idea?

--- Desperation ---

"...I now pronounce you man and wife; you may kiss the bride."

At this, Ekyt looked away. Sakura and Sasuke kissing...even though they were both friends, it sickened him in a way. They were both 18, making Ekyt 22 years old. The man who had just married the two looked up. Naruto Uzumaki, the sixth Hokage.

Also at the ceremony were a jonin Lee (He had become a spending ninja, with only taijutsu), a Hinata engaged to Naruto (She had admitted it!), and Shikamaru and Ino tolerating each other.

It seemed everyone had lived their dreams. With that, a sardonic half-smirk rose under Ekyt's mask. **Except me...I never told Sakura how I felt...not that it would have mattered...it was all about her and Sasuke...and Naruto- the sixth Hokage? Amazing. And he's engaged? Wow. But it begs the question- just how pathetic AM I? Ekyt walked out of the hall, skipping the reception. He wouldn't be missed, he knew. The focus was the newly weds. It was NOT on Ekyt. And why should it have been? He was a genin, and he was single, having lived 22 years without a hint of romance in his life. He had never led a mission, and he had never been part of a team- at least not permanently.**

Ekyt pulled off the annoying piece-of-shoot formal uniform and pulled on his comfortable clothes- his combat clothes. His normal gear. While Sakura and Sasuke would have time for a honeymoon, business continued as usual for Ekyt. Work meant life. Even if it was the same D-ranked crap. The next, he noted, would be his 2008th mission. BFD. He felt his anger build up, and his emotional chakra started to leak from his body. He couldn't have that happening, not now, not until he was in combat. Instead, Ekyt tied on his headband. Then, not knowing why, he strung seven senbon together, dipped them in a small pool of blood (From his last mission- damn cat scratched him to bits), and then sank them into his shoulder. It was a tattoo, now reading "Ryouko", or "Dragon Boy". With the remaining blood, Ekyt whipped out a scroll and let it fly, running his thumb down it.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" he called flatly. With a poof, his Chinese Water Dragon, Umisu, landed on his

shoulder. Ekyt stroked him with one gloved hand.

“Umisu, please deliver the usual message to the Hokage. Here, for your trouble.” Ekyt tossed his dragon a specially-blended treat that always contented the dragon. It winked at it’s owner, then zipped off to find the Sixth Hokage. Or, rather, his office. Ekyt didn’t need to tell Umisu not to bother him at the wedding reception. Part of Ekyt wondered if it was wrong to ignore the reception. These two WERE his friends. Well, Sakura was, anyway. Sasuke, who could tell? He treated everyone the same. Ekyt decided that he had braved the wedding, and their first kiss as man and wife, he could do without the formal reception. He wasn’t a partier. Instead, he wandered the empty Konoha streets, cursing when an empty beer can hit him in the face. He reared back and threw it at a garbage can- direct hit. That gave Ekyt the idea to work with his throwing weapons. Senbon were his weapon of choice, but he kept kunai with him.

The wedding had been perfect. The reception had lasted nearly a full day and night. Sasuke had returned, had married Sakura, and Naruto had been named Hokage. Dreams come true. Of course, the next day, everyone was dragging. Naruto especially. He stumbled into his office, barely awake, and saw the scroll on his desk. He opened it, and it’s contents perked him up quickly. He quickly used a Summoning Jutsu himself and asked Gamakichi to deliver a message to Ekyt. No, Ryouko. Ekyt refused to be known as ‘Ekyt’. That was his failed identity, or so the message read. He now lived his legacy- “Ryouko”.

Ekyt/Ryouko threw the last eight senbon. Direct his, 7/8. DAMNIT! It wasn’t perfect. He had no right to expect perfection from himself, but that’s what he demanded. That moment was when Gamakichi appeared.

“Hey, letter from the boss, Ekyt.”

Ekyt nodded his thanks. “It’s “Ryouko” now, Gamakichi.” It would take getting used to, but that was his name. Ryouko.

“Whatever. But you’d better hurry up, the boss wants to see you.”

Apparently, Ryouko didn’t care.

“Tell him to kiss my @\$\$. I’ll show up when I’m good and ready. Thanks for delivering the message.” Ryouko spat out the first part, then spoke warmly for the second. It wasn’t Gamakichi’s fault that Ryouko was pissed off.

-

Naruto waited impatiently. A puff of smoke told him that Ekyt had arrived.

“What took you so long, Ekyt?!” Naruto demanded.

“It’s Ryouko now, Lord Hokage,” Ryouko informed him dryly.

“Look, I got your scroll. What’s this about you leaving?” Naruto nearly snarled.

“I thought I was clear. I am leaving the village and renouncing my citizenship here,” Ryouko replied as though discussing the weather.

“You didn’t even say why!” Naruto shouted, throwing the scroll at Ryouko. Ryouko caught it, ripped it in half, tossed it in the air, and threw two senbon, pinning the pieces to the wall.

“Do you see a chunin vest on me? Or ANBU armor? Or a squad? Naruto, you, of all people, know that I have been trapped as a Genin for 6 years. I have no self confidence, and even I am saying that it’s bullshoot.”

Naruto couldn’t believe this was Ekyt, er, Ryouko talking.

“I can’t stop you. But I’m not giving you chunin status for no reason.”

“NO REASON? 2000 MISSIONS? YOU SEE FIT TO PISS ON THEM?! OR THE TRAINING? OR THE FACT THAT I GOT SCREWED AT EVERY TURN WITH THE CHUNIN EXAMS? HAS THAT FACT HIT YOU YET?” Ryouko calmed himself quickly. “Three Hokage’s during my time, and none of them has seen fit to give me a promotion in rank, one I am 5 years overdue for. You and everyone else, you’ve all realized your dreams. But me? Nothing! I’m a loner, and I’ve kept things to myself that would have made lesser men than me crack! I see only one way to rectify that, and that is to make my own destiny, rather than wait for a board of directors to make it for me.”

Naruto leaned forward, trying to stare Ryouko down. His eyes had turned red. The demon fox chakra had awakened.

“Are you insulting the Leaf Village? Because we haven’t catered to you? I have no place for pissy attitudes in my Village, so shape up, get the hell out!”

Ekyt glared back at Naruto, his blue chakra welling up. At that point, several jonin rushed into the room. Lee, Shikamaru, Sakura, Sasuke, and Kakashi were among them. Apparently, Naruto had passed the message on. Ekyt didn’t care. He bit his thumb open again (the cut from the previous night not healed yet) and made a line of blood through his headband.

“If Konohagakure has no place for me...then I will FIND a place that does. And- don’t touch me!”

Ryouko snarled. He didn’t care whose hands had just been on him.

“We can’t let you leave...not like this. If we have to fight you, we will,” Sasuke informed him.

“So be it,” Ryouko shot back. But he couldn’t move. Shadow Possession Jutsu? “Damn it!” Ryouko swore.

“Sorry, but if you honestly thought we’d let you go peacefully...” Shikamaru had him trapped.

Sakura and Sasuke stood to one side, Kakashi to the other, Naruto behind him, and Shikamaru in front of him. Ryouko closed his eyes, defeated.

“Treason...You committed treason...WHAT on earth made you want to leave?!” Naruto asked. By now,

Tsunade and Sarutobi had joined them. Shikamaru kept Ryouko pinned with his Shadow Possession.

“We all...all have had dreams...you’ve all recognized yours...But me...” Ryouko laughed hollowly. “Well, I’m a genin, I’m single, and apparently, I’m not fit to clean the Hokage’s sandals.”

“No one said that!” Lee protested.

“And yet, D-rank after D-rank, order after order...Just let me go. I have no dreams, they’ve all been destroyed. But maybe...maybe I can make new ones...because you’ve stepped on my dreams, and crushed the pieces to dust. Now, I’ve explained myself. Let go.”

Shikamaru didn’t. Ekyt let his emotions surge through him. Shikamaru put a hand to his chest- it hurt so much. But he didn’t let go of the Shadow Possession Jutsu.

“You have felt only a fraction of what I feel every day. It’s a blast, isn’t it? Your dream was to have carefree life among the clouds, to have a wife, to retire, to play Go and Shougi, then die, wasn’t it Shikamaru? My dreams...my dreams no longer exist, and therefore mean nothing. I’ve failed to validate my existence. I wish to do so, and now I see my allies standing in my way...”

Everyone could feel Ekyt’s cold look.

“Too bad. For your crimes, you are to be imprisoned.” Naruto’s information sent a stir through the small crowd. This time, the surge of emotions Ekyt let loose forced Shikamaru to let go. He fell back in pain. Ekyt bit his thumbs.

“Twin Summoning Jutsu!” He called. Poof Poof! His dog, Holly, and his Dragon, Umisu, appeared at his side. Umisu and Holly had come ready to fight, but stopped.

“Kid?”

“Attack them,” Ekyt said flatly.

Holly stared at him. She looked at the others, then back at him.

“No,” she said firmly. “You’re making a mistake. My collar has Konoha’s symbol on it. Not yours.”

Ekyt looked in desperation. “Holly...and Umisu...have abandoned me...I should have known. People and animals...the world is full of them, but neither are worthy of trust. Well, you can always trust two things: yourself...(Ekyt flipped a kunai to a reverse grip in his hand) and death...”

Ekyt put the kunai to his throat. “It’s a shame we won’t get to fight. But now, I’ve got to realize my own visions. Don’t worry, they have nothing to do with the village. You won’t hear from me again until I’ve completely succeeded, or completely failed.”

Ekyt backed out of the room, no one daring to attack.

“He’s gotten desperate...Kakashi, you know what you have to do...”

Kakashi lifted his headband. "Yes, I do. It's a shame...but it seems the Raikiri is his future..."

"Wait, there's one other option!" Sakura protested. "What about bringing him back alive? I mean, we did it for Sasuke, didn't we? Doesn't Ryouko deserve the same? It's not as if he committed treason- he told us to our faces he was going to leave. If that's the case, then he must have a reason for wanting to leave. Beyond what he said, I mean. There's another side to that story that Ryouko isn't telling. We need to hear it before we prosecute him as a criminal."

"Yeah, but how are we going to do that? He'll fight, and he'll probably win."

"Nope! I know just what to do! Ryouko's weakness is an easy one- he won't hit a girl. So we just need to find the one to do the job!"

"What about you, Sakura?" Naruto/Lord Hokage asked.

"No, I won't work. We need someone...well, single. Once a girl is taken, Ryouko doesn't see her as a 'threat' anymore. Not only won't he fight me, but he knows my fighting style too well and can dodge my attacks. We need someone he's never seen before. And to do that, we need to go 'black market'..."

--

"No way, I won't agree to this!" Sakura stubbornly crossed her arms.

"But it was YOUR idea! Or are you afraid that she'll...ya know...with Ryouko...hehehe! Y'know, that might be just what he needs. A little female attention! OW! Sakura, you're not supposed to hit the Hokage!"

Naruto was massaging his head, while the others were looking at the girl hired to bring Ryouko down.

Waist-long black hair, a figure that would make anyone drool, and eyes cold as ice. The first things you noticed about her.

Azami was a bounty hunter. Male or female, she showed the same amount of mercy- none. Only nineteen, the girl had already bagged several major targets with ease.

"Show me a picture of your target, and he'll be back in your care before long. I have a one hundred percent success rate."

The girl was clearly foreign, at least somewhat. She had some Japanese features, but she was tall with darker skin. Truthfully, that skin came from her Egyptian background, with the other half of her heritage being Japanese. She was as alluring as she was deadly.

Naruto handed over a picture. It was slightly outdated, but Ryouko hadn't changed much over the years anyway.

"Cute kid. How old is he? Fifteen? Sixteen?" Azami asked.

"Twenty-two!" Sakura half-shouted. She didn't like hearing Ryouko slighted.

"Huh. Well, no matter, he'll be yours again all the same. I'm off."

--

Ryouko walked along the dirt path in the forest, feeling slightly better. He had escaped the village with nothing more than a bluff. But he couldn't stop moving. He had to keep going, or his past would catch up with him. And the past was the last thing Ryouko wanted to face now.

Ryouko looked different. Wearing his old samurai wear, and even carrying his sword, the only thing that remained unchanged was his face. Said face stayed expressionless, even as he heard a twig crack.

A girl came running to him, panic in her eyes.

"Sir, please help me! These men are after me! I beg you! I can't beat them alone!"

Ryouko pushed the girl behind him gently, drawing his sword. On cue, four men came charging out of the bushes. Without waiting for them to get closer, Ryouko made handsigns with his free hand.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Wall!"

While the wall blocked him from view, Ryouko ran toward it. He protected himself with his chakra as he barreled through the flames. Using genjutsu, Ryouko took care of all the talentless thugs in a heartbeat. It was no testament to his skill- these men were just weak. Then he felt it- a blade at the base of his neck.

"Alright, you're caught, Ryouko/Ekyt. Time to go home..."

Ryouko's eyes narrowed further. "You know...my name? Don't tell me those bastards...! Gah! Er, forgive me. I make it a habit to not swear in front of ladies...wait, no, I'm not apologizing! Screw that, I'm outta here!"

In an instant, Ryouko was away from Azami's knife, spinning around and grabbing her wrist. But Azami proved why she was rated the top bounty hunter in the underground. Her leg flashed out, stuffing Ryouko in the guy. He skidded down the dirt road, his eyes peering out from under his straw hat. His hat was off his head quickly, as he had to knock down an incoming kunai.

"They were right, it seems!" Azami twirled a kunai, smirking. "You won't hit a girl. Am I correct?"

"..."

"I thought so. All the more reason this struggle is pointless. Now listen, I'm only gonna say this once, so pay attention: I don't care why you left that village. I don't care why they want you back. All I care about is collecting my bounty. My success rate is one hundred percent, and I'm not gonna let you ruin that. So

if you just surrender, this can be painless.”

Ryouko was caught. But the worst feeling was that he didn't WANT to get away. He was tired of running.

“Alright, I give up. Do whatever you want with me. This is no way to live. I had just planned to wander around anyway. I'm tired of this cat and mouse game.”

Azami aimed her crossbow at his neck. “I don't blame you, you know. And this is nothing personal on my part. I just do what I'm hired to do. I'm sure you can...understand...”

Azami felt herself blush. She had never bothered to explain herself to a target before. She was also one to tell the truth, even to herself.

I like him. He's cute. Look at him, sitting on the ground like that. He's completely defeated mentally, even though he could fight physically. I wonder what it is that wounded his heart? It's all over him- regret. And he's a smart guy, so that regret must be a pretty big one...

“What is it that plagues your heart, wanderer?” Azami lowered her crossbow, squatting down to Ryouko's level. With his arms behind his back, Ryouko propped himself up against the base of a large tree.

“Do you ask every client this?”

Azami giggled a little at that. “No, can't say I do. But I've never chased one quite like you, either.”

Ryouko sighed. “I suppose it doesn't matter, since I'm dead anyway.”

“Oh, they won't kill you. You have quite a few worried about you at home.” Azami thought of Sakura's face upon seeing her. **An old lover, perhaps?**

“They can all bite me. If you take me to that village, my life is over. If they don't kill me, I'll kill myself. I can't live there anymore. So I'll be dead regardless. So I might as well tell you...I was in love with a girl there. I never told her, so she didn't know. She got married the day I left the village. I was refused promotion that same day, so I guess it all came to a head. All the anger and frustration. No matter what I did, I was never given what I deserved in return. So I had to leave. I've never had an ounce of female affection...(sigh) Well, whatever. Either kill me, or bring me back so I can kill myself. Truth be told, you're a gorgeous creature, and you've earned your bounty.”

Azami was taken aback by this. **He just told me all that? He IS planning to die, that much is certain. Why do I feel as though I can't let that happen? And more importantly...why can't I look away from him? He's 'just a target', but I can't keep my eyes off him. Look at him, just sitting there, staring at nothing. How easy would it be for him to break those ropes and escape? And yet, he's not...**

Azami swept away some sticks and sat down. She grabbed Ryouko by the gi and yanked him toward her, so they were sitting back to back.

"Maybe we can work this out. I hate to see such a promising young man throw it all away. Are you certain you can't love someone else?"

"I'm starting to wonder..." Ryouko muttered, turning red himself. "I meant what I said about you being gorgeous, you know. And I know this'll sound corny and crazy, but I can't stop looking at you. I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't say that, but I should be honest..."

Azami stood up quickly, (Ryouko's head went 'crack' on the ground when Azami moved) apparently uncaring that Ryouko's line of vision would be directed under her dress when he regained consciousness.

So he's really just a good guy who got screwed at every turn...I can't turn him in. I just can't. He all but said he loved me. Me, the girl who was hunting him. What a strange guy he is, but how...adorable. He's completely clueless about love. If he could have said to that girl what he just said to me, he would have had her, no doubt. But it took death to force it out of him? Well, surprise Ryouko!

"Okay you, stop staring at my panties. We're going to make a deal, and saying no is not an option."

Ryouko felt the ropes binding him being released. He stood up with some help from Azami.

"This is how things are going to work: I'm going to let you live, but you're going to come back to your village with me. Then, you're going to leave your village with me. I'll wander with you, until you're ready to return. But you owe them a check-in, nothing less. And this time, we'll both escape."

Ryouko could have ran. He could have fought. Instead, he stayed still. He looked Azami in the eyes, seeing the stone-cold hunter's eyes melt away. They were replaced by a look of longing from a lonely girl. Much like the look of longing that Ryouko had kept private all this time.

"It's...it's a deal," he stammered.

Azami nodded. "Good. You won't fight me, right?"

"Right."

"Good. Hold still. We've gotta make this look good..."

Azami tore Ryouko's gi top, yanking off one sleeve while cutting up the chest section. Ryouko's skin was exposed now. Carefully, Azami placed her sword on his chest.

"This'll hurt for a second, but we need to do it. Just trust me."

Ryouko found he did. He felt the blade dig into his flesh, but only superficially.

"I get it. An illusion of a struggle...that's smart," Ryouko commented. Azami got to work on his hakama, making the edges torn and tattered.

“Yeah. Now, hold still again...” Azami reached around Ryouko, leaning her head on his shoulder. She sunk her teeth gently into his neck, just enough to create a bite mark.

“Evidence of close combat,” she explained, blushing. “You’re a guy, you’re naturally more powerful than me, so I’d have to kick and bite. And- hey, stop blushing like that! You pervert!”

“You stop first! You just bit me on the neck like some vampire! I won’t pretend it’s not a turn-on, but geez! You...coulda warned me.”

“Warning,” Azami said flatly, biting his shoulder, this time drawing blood. “That’s what you get for whining.” Azami licked the blood up, realizing just how fun it would be to wander with such a shy kid.

I wonder what would happen if I...

“Now me...let’s see...”

Azami took a knife to her dress, making a rip from the hem all the way to her waist. She made a couple small cuts, and one on the shoulder of her dress, cutting it so it fell off her shoulder.

Should I...I’m going to!

“It WAS Ryouko, wasn’t it?” Azami asked, apparently unconcerned.

“That’s right.”

“Oh, good. Hold still, Ryouko.” Azami seized a handful of Ryouko’s hair, then pulled toward her- hard.

“Ow! What’s that f-”

Azami’s mouth was locked with Ryouko’s, cutting him off in mid-sentence. She held the pose for quite a while. Ryouko’s mind didn’t register what was going on until about thirty seconds had passed. When it DID, Ryouko found one arm snaking around Azami’s waist, while his other arm moved across her shoulders. He finally closed his eyes.

Azami let go, smiling while she stared at him warmly. “Sorry to pull your hair, tough guy, but that’s the only way you’d open your mouth...Don’t bother lying and acting like you didn’t want that. Besides, it’s okay- I kissed YOU, so you can still say you’re shy. Oh, and next time we do this, don’t grip my shoulder so hard. Or, at least, don’t use your nails. You’ll draw blood. I don’t mind you holding tight, though.”

“Azami, can I ask you something?” Ryouko said earnestly. “You planned this, right? you had a feeling, the same as me. You couldn’t stop looking, and neither could I. What are you REALLY going to do with me?”

“Are you seriously THAT clueless, Ryouko? Think about it while we walk. Oh, right, hold on, I’ve got to replace the ropes. While we’re making this look good and realistic.”

As Azami wound the ropes around Ryouko’s arms again, it dawned on him. Boy+Girl+Love= ...!

“Oh...THAT!”

Azami batted him in the head. "Not 'THAT', you pervert! Not right away!"

"You're blushing again. Who's perverted, again?" Ryouko pointed out.

"You wanna die, you little punk?!"

"You wanna try to kill me?"

"Don't tempt fate..."

"Well, I DO like feisty girls..."

"So that means I must like stupid men..."

"Oh, bite me..."

"I've already done that, genius!"

"Good point. And you enjoyed it, too. What, you have a blood fetish or something?!"

"If I do, you're in for a world of hurt!"

The two locked eyes. They shared a single thought:

This is fun. Where has he/she been all this time? This must be love...

...

Love's fun.

--

14 - Tsunade the Matchmaker

NOTE:

This one was done very quickly. Unlike one of my last stories, which had the two characters thinking (all of you who commented had that right about them thinking too much. Can't say that one was one of my favorites. It could have been way better Sorry about that!), this one is on-the-fly humor, and a strange romance. I know I did the 'Ojo-sama' thing already, but this is a different kind of story, so bare with me!

I was in a goofy mood, and it shows. I had other things- Ryouko living in a box or a pen in Sakura's room. Some Love Hina-ish moments. But for simplicity's sake, I scrapped them. Though they might see the light of day yet...

At any rate, I feel the need to redeem myself for submitting stories that just don't seem to work. I'm giving all my effort, but they just aren't working right. I'm going to fix that soon. Please stick with me, I'll deliver a better quality product soon- starting, hopefully, with this fic!

-NG

--

Tsunade had long grown tired of Sakura's weary sighs and wistful gazes out the window. **Her mind's barely on her work anymore. It's all because she can't get her mind off Sasuke. That damn dirty traitor...Even if he didn't make any commitment to her or lead her on...crushing a young girl's heart...I won't forgive it!** Unknowingly, Tsunade had put one foot on her desk, her fists clenched, and fire in her eyes.

"M'lady? Why are you standing on your desk?" Sakura asked curiously.

Tsunade got off her desk upon Sakura's voice snapping her back to reality. "A cramp in my leg, that's all." Tsunade couldn't tell Sakura she had just jumped onto her work station in anger of something that happened nearly three years ago. Tsunade was trying to get Sakura to be more mature, but if she herself acted like that...

I need to get this girl married up or something! No, too soon. A boyfriend. That's what she needs. Some cute little boy that doesn't irritate her. That cuts out Naruto. But who to pair her with? I can't pick a coward- she could kick a lot the men's asses around here. I need someone non-threatening, at least to her. But he's gotta have a spine...

Ryouko walked into the room, ready for missions. Tsunade looked back and forth between Ryouko (just standing still, waiting) and Sakura (putting files away). Tsunade was pretty sure she had seen Ryouko give Sakura a quickly glance on the way on. It was only natural, of course- boys checked out girls, and vice versa. Not that it was any surprise that Ryouko liked Sakura- it was painfully obvious to anyone who dealt with either of them on a regular basis. Time for the acid test.

I know Ryouko likes Sakura. It's so obvious! How HASN'T Sakura figured it out yet?! Well, I hope this works- if not, Ryouko'll likely go through life neutered...

"Whoops!" Tsunade 'stumbled' and pushed Sakura. She fell toward Ryouko who stepped forward to catch her. He caught her around the waist and by the arm from behind as she stumbled.

"Gotcha! Ah..." Ryouko turned progressively redder as he helped Sakura to a stable position.

"Nice catch!" Sakura said cheerfully, patting Ryouko's shoulder. She somehow missed the deep blushing and the obviously infatuated expression. "Are you okay, M'lady? It's not like you to just trip like that..."

Tsunade's grin turned wicked. "Never better. With that (points at Ryouko), I can cure this (points at Sakura). Things are great!"

(sound silence)...

"I'll get a blanket and a cold washcloth," Ryouko said, running out of the room to do just that.

"hmm...you don't have a fever M'lady. Are you alright?" Sakura felt Tsunade's head, checked her pulse, and listened to her breathing. "You seem normal...HEY!"

Tsunade picked Sakura up around the waist and waited. When Ryouko came back, she threw Sakura like a SCUD missile. Ryouko caught her, but fell down. They both skidded backwards until they were outside the Hokage's office, leaning against the far wall in the hallway. Ryouko back was to the wall, and Sakura ended sitting on Ryouko's lap due to his attempt to make sure she didn't hit the wall.

"Uh..." the two said in unison, staring wide-eyed at the (in their eyes) certifiably insane Hokage.

"You and you- don't come back here until you're married, or dating, or have kids! Whatever!" Tsunade shouted, slamming the door on the two stunned kids.

"What was that about?" Ryouko wondered aloud.

"I'll tell you when you let go of me..." Sakura gave Ryouko a look. He immediately let go and apologized. He didn't understand that Sakura was just kidding with him.

It's kind of sad that he can't see that kind of humor...it's like part of his personality is missing...poor guy. Sakura had wondered about Ryouko's 'constricted' behavior before, and always felt a little sad for him. It seemed like he had never done any of the things that children normally do. He didn't seem to have any mischievous bones in his body- not even innocently mischievous bones.

--

"So she's been acting strange for a while now?" Ryouko was sitting formally on the ground, staring up at Sakura. She was occupying a bench in the park.

“Oh, for the love of- will you sit like a human?! Get off the ground and sit next to me! What are you so afraid of?!”

Ryouko scrambled up on the bench, REALLY not wanting to answer that question. He sat down next to Sakura. They both sat still for a while, until Sakura wilted and fell with her head on Ryouko's shoulder.

“Hmm? Sorry, just kind of tired from training today...I've been worrying about Lady Tsunade every night, too...not getting enough sleep, I guess.” Sakura had left out the fact that she had also been moping about Sasuke.

Having a pink head on his shoulder relaxed Ryouko at first. But he had a scary girl (that he just happened to like) nestled up to him. Wasn't this bad?

Alright, the girl's got a problem. You help her solve it, you're in! Then you've got an excuse to talk to her!

“Sakura, why don't we find out what's bothering Lady Tsunade. Or, you know what, I'll go. You can get a little rest, and I'll find out what's going on.”

Sakura was too tired to argue. “Okay. Carry me?”

“What?” Ryouko asked, not sure he heard her.

“What?” Sakura replied. She knew of Ryouko's shyness, and teasing him was too much fun sometimes. He wasn't like Naruto, who took any advance (joking or otherwise) as an excuse to perv things up.

--

Ryouko jumped through the window to get in to Tsunade's office. She wasn't happy to see him without Sakura in tow.

“What, dumped already? You had BETTER be- if you're here, she'd better be hunting you down. If not, get out or I'll kick you in the-.”

Y-eah, something's wrong. She's not usually THIS doggy...or is she...? No, no, not THIS doggy...

“M'Lady, is something bothering you? You seem kind of...tense...” Ryouko struggled to use words that wouldn't cause Tsunade to fly off the handle. He kind of liked the family jewels right where they were besides that.

“Agh, you stupid kids! How retarded can you be?! Listen, fool, you love her! Don't even deny it; that's insulting to my intelligence. I give you the perfect chance- pretty girl, needs a shoulder to cry on- and you come back here empty-handed. Just how stupid are you?!”

Ryouko bowed his apology. “She was worried about you, M'lady. I only wished to relieve her worry...er,

what IS bothering Sakura?"

Tsunade clasped her hands behind her back and looked out the window. "Lately, she's been feeling lonely, Ryouko. As in the teenage girl 'I want a boyfriend' lonely feeling. Her heart was set on Sasuke, and because of that, she burned a lot of boys without knowing it. You might be the only one left who'll give her a chance. It's all over your face- you love her. She hasn't seen it yet, but she DOES think highly of you. I'm sorry I was so harsh earlier, but her sighing every day just irritated me so much!"

"This is a concern of Sakura's? A boyfriend? She could have anyone in the village...I can't ask her to settle for me..."

Tsunade gave Ryouko's head a pat. "You know, you're speaking coward's language. You're afraid of girls AND of success, yet you want both. Ryouko, life won't stay the same. If YOU don't take steps to change it for the better, someone or something else will start things in motion that will make it change for the worse. What'll happen if she turns you down?"

"I'll never be able to look her in the eye again. I'll probably die old, alone, and full of regrets. My youth will be destroyed, and my mental health will deteriorate, until I'm a drooling vegetable who will drown in his own pathetic slobber."

Tsunade's rolled her eyes. "Poetic, Ryouko. Did you get that out of a fortune cookie or something?"

"Same question to you..."

BONK! (Tsunade had smacked Ryouko on the head) "Don't talk back! Little fool! You leave me no choice: Your mission- the only one you get until it's completed- is to serve Sakura. Be her companion, and do whatever she asks. And don't leave her side. If I find out you've disobeyed these orders in any way...well, you'll regret it. BADLY. Don't even tempt me."

Ryouko's eyes were wide. "What're you gonna do to me?"

"..."

"You don't know, do you..."

"SHUT UP! Now, go! Remember- ANYTHING she wants. Oh, and call her 'Ojo-sama'. She might like that title. I just hope she asks you to do something naughty...heheheh."

"Yes, Lady perv-"

"Finish that sentence and die..."

"..."

--

Sakura swung her feet, sitting on her bed. She rolled over on her belly and stared at Ryouko, who was

sitting on the floor, waiting for some kind of order. They stared at each other for a minute- both clueless kids.

“So you’re my slave now?” Sakura asked incredulously.

“I would prefer ‘servant’, but yes...”

Sakura giggled at the reaction. Seeing this strong, stoic warrior humbled...

“Okay, so you’ve gotta do what I say, right?”

“That’s right.”

Sakura dropped the act for now. “And you aren’t suppose to leave my side, right?”

“Yup.”

“Huh. So how do we do stuff like bathe...or pee...Well, we’ll worry about that later. For now, let’s get your bed set up. Hmm...the closet! Oh, cool! You’re gonna live like Rukia from Bleach! Kido 46 beeyotch!”

“...Isn’t there a better comparison, Ojo-sama? (I mean, Rukia’s cool, but I’m a guy...)”

“Why? You don’t like the idea of coming out of the closet?”

“Hey, I may be single, but I-”

“Ahaha! Sorry, sorry. Okay, we’ll call it ‘your room’. Anyway, you can sleep there. ...” Sakura poked Ryouko in the forehead, a mild expression on her face. Ryouko just stared at her stupidly, feeling his face grow warmer and redder.

“I thought so...you’re actually scared, aren’t you? Of girls! You’re not just shy, you’re scared! I can’t believe it! The tough as nails warrior is afraid of a cute lil’ girl!”

Ryouko shrugged off her joke. “You’re right, actually. I am. But...” (Big, fake inspection of her face) “...Is something bothering you, Ojosama? All joking aside, you’ve been kinda down lately. Is there anything I can do? I mean, I know I can’t be of much use, but I can at least listen to you...if you’re comfortable talking to me, I mean. I don’t want to pressure you...”

Sakura thought of Sasuke. **How could he leave me? And why...why won’t anyone love me? I know I’m not that cute, and the only thing big about me is my forehead...but still...Look at Ryouko. All his problems, and he’s concerned about *me*. He’s such a loyal friend...I feel like I could tell him anything. He won’t turn it into a joke, or make me feel worse. Maybe that’s what I need. Is that why Tsunade ordered him here? IS this even orders anymore? Or did he say this by himself? Maybe both?**

Sakura opened her mouth, and it gushed out. All of it. The loneliness, the longings, the desire for someone to love her, and someone to love back. It all poured out in one straight hour of tears. After an

hour, Sakura's eyes were finally out of tears. She had slunk off her bed and onto the floor, kneeling opposite Ryouko.

Ryouko's first instincts were jumbled. Fight or flee? But then Tsunade's words rang in his head.

I can either make a good change, or wait for fate to change things for me, and hope it's good. I don't let others fight my battles! Leave nothing to chance!

Ryouko slid forward and pulled Sakura tight to his chest. They were both kneeling, and Ryouko was only a few inches taller, so Sakura's head was on his shoulder. Stunned by the sudden aggressiveness, Sakura stopped sniffing. She returned the hug before she knew what she was doing.

"It's alright, Ojo-sama. We've all got problems like that. If it's any consolation...I really care about you. That is to say, I have feelings for you. And I don't know if I'm who you're looking for, but...whatever your answer, I'm still the same friend you've had for years now. But now seemed like the perfect time to admit how I feel..."

Sakura pulled away from Ryouko, holding him at arm's length to study him.

It's true...I can tell he's being sincere...but how do I answer? How do I feel?! Wait, I'm hugging him...I don't know I was, and I didn't think about it. If I feel comfortable enough to just hug him like that...Not to mention I spilled my guts to him completely...

Sakura pushed Ryouko down and pinned his arms. He cringed, waiting to be punched, or kicked, or set on fire, or whatever the scary, pink-haired kunoichi was going to do to him. When he dared to open his eyes, he found Sakura staring at him. Her face was really close...

"All that is true?" she questioned, not breaking her stare.

"...Yeah. All of it."

"Lady Tsunade didn't make you say it?"

"No. She DID help me get the opportunity, though...and motivated me a little. Otherwise I wouldn't have gotten the guts up..."

Sakura leaned down and kissed the stunned boy. He stared stupidly at the ceiling until Sakura bit his lip to get his attention. After that he cooperated a little better, remembering that kissing was generally a joint effort.

But a vision from hell was to ruin this perfect moment.

"Oh...I forgot to tell my mom that you're a servant now..."

Ryouko's eyes widened. He was suddenly reminded of why he was so scared of girls before that perfect moment. Sakura was still pinning him down, so running wasn't an option. Instead, Sakura leaned down near Ryouko's ear.

“Just play dead. It’ll all be over soon...” she whispered, giving his ear a kiss.

Sakura’s totally worth the beating I’m about to get...I hope the broom Ms. Haruno’s holding doesn’t hurt too much...

--

One beating/explanation later...

--

“Sorry, Ryouko. I guess our family gets a little defensive over our girls. I hope I won’t stop you from giving me grandchildren (either by scaring you or by possibly hitting you in the nuts)...”

Ryouko scuttled backwards into the closet. He was sitting on his futon, knees tucked into his chest, shaking. He shut the door.

“Well, Sakura, I guess I’d better leave him to you. You’ve got a lot of healing to do...if I hear any strange sounds, though, you two will have some explaining to do...I wish my parents had been harder on me about this. You girls today wear those short skirts and those sexy tops and all you think about it sex! I heard a rumor that the Yamanaka girl is pregnant! And your sensei, wearing those tops! Don’t you even THINK about it, young lady! Just because you’ve got a boy drooling over any scrap of attention you give him doesn’t mean you get to ‘flash’ any more leg than you are now! If you were a sensible girl, you’d let me make that skirt longer! One of these days it’ll be some enemy that notices you, and what then?! You and I are going to have a long talk about protection before you slip in the sheets with him! That ‘innocent boy’ act doesn’t fool me! All boys want to have sex with girls, so you just better not drop your guard, and-”

“Mom!” Sakura shouted. She pointed at Ryouko. “That gentle boy would NEVER do anything to hurt me or my future! What I wear is my business. I understand ‘the talk’ and all about it- I’ve read the freakin’ manual! And more importantly, I think you’re scaring my boyfriend! Now, go on, shoo!”

Why am I getting treated like I’m their new pet? Ryouko wondered, his eyes still wide. He tugged his blanket around his shoulders tighter. Violent woman had torn his shirt...**I see where Sakura gets it from. I must NEVER, EVER piss her off...**

Sakura climbed onto the futon next to him, shutting the closet door behind her.

“Maybe a little darkness will calm you down. Settle now, c’mon,” she coaxed, petting the back of his head. Little by little, Ryouko stopped shaking. (Until it occurred to him that he was locked in a closet with Sakura. But the other option was leaving the closet and being at the mercy of Mrs. Haruno...easy answer. He was staying put. Kissing hurt way less than a beat-down with a broom. Besides, he had just confessed his feelings, and now the girl he thought he’d never have was making sure he was okay. It was kind of cool, sitting with her like this. Ryouko had been sure he’d never have this type of relationship and interaction. It was just as Tsunade had said- he WAS afraid of success and the change that went with it. But change wasn’t so bad now...

S’pose I should be thankful that Sakura’s mom didn’t have a rolling pin or something in her

hand...

--

Somehow or another, Ryouko managed to fall asleep. When he woke up, he received a shock. Sakura was next to him.

Uh oh...did her and I-?! If we did, why can't I remember! I wanna remember! PLEASE let me remember! Was I any good?! Wait, wait, we're both dressed! Okay, calm down. She locked us in the closet so that her scary mother couldn't get me anymore...then I fell asleep. She must have stayed put...she really is a sweet girl. That's the kind of thing I should do for her.

Eventually, Sakura woke up, too. She nearly panicked, but saw Ryouko sitting up, looking calm.

"C'mon, we'd better make this look more innocent!" Sakura urged, grabbing Ryouko's hand and pulling him over to her bed. She pushed him down (his heart rate sped up), then laid down. Her head was on the pillow, while Ryouko's feet were next to her head. She quickly scooped up a random magazine and read.

To anyone else, it looked like a boyfriend and girlfriend relaxing together on a lazy day. It was the kind of moment both of them wanted, but never dared to expect. It was one little slice of 'normal' in a world caked with chaos.

For once, 'normal' was good.

"Hey, wanna make out?" Sakura sat up quickly, shifting close to Ryouko.

"You bet!" he said happily, sitting up to face her. **Oh boy! I've never done this before! And how far do I go with this?**

Sakura laid back down. "Sucker!"

"That's really mean, Ojosama..." Ryouko whined, laying back down.

"Oh, stop whining. You'll get to someday. Besides, do you REALLY wanna risk my mom catching us?"

"Kinda..."

Sakura rolled up her magazine and playfully tapped his head with it. "Poor affection-starved little pervert."

"...So?"

Sakura rolled her eyes, but couldn't help but laugh. "You have such a cute face. I guess we could makeout...just a little."

Ryouko stared at her blankly, though he had turned several shades of red. Sakura put a hand on each of

his cheeks and moved in to kiss him. That lasted pleasantly for about thirty seconds.

BAM!

“WHAT?! YOU'RE DEAD, BOY!”

Mrs. Haruno was back, toting her broom.

“Aw snap...” Ryouko moaned. **Still worth it!** Ryouko thought. He gave Sakura a genuine smile. Then he turned his head so his teeth didn't get smacked by the broom-wielder nag currently upsetting Ryouko and Sakura's special moments.

Not married yet and I already hate the mother-in-law!

--

BONUS: SCRAPPED CONTENT!

The entire story was goofy, but some of my thoughts were just too out there...

Sakura dragged a box up into her room. Ryouko had been sitting on the floor, waiting for her to come back. Then Sakura dropped the box in front of him.

“Here ya go! You can sleep in there, okay? When you get bigger, we'll build you a pen so you can run and play, okay?”

-

Mrs. Haruno hit a homerun. Ryouko sailed out the window. Amazingly, he survived the impact.

My boyfriend is indestructible...lucky for him ^^'

15 - Valentine's Day

It was that hellish day of year.

That day where single, hopeless cases such as myself sit back and reflect on what makes our life suck so much. And what makes it suck is the absence of female presence. I used to not care. Now look at me. The years have made me soft.

...

Damn.

Yes, Ekyt/Ryouko was sure about one thing- he was hopeless. Let's look at his statistics, shall we?

Name: Ryouko/Ekyt (aliases- not a trusting fellow)

Age: 20 years, six monthes

Years spent w/o a girl: 20 years, five monthes (Oh...sucks to be him)

"Valentines day...my 20th valentines day, and still not one, single, solitary female. Girl...yeah, gotta stop saying 'female'. Sounds like a scientific analysis that way."

Ekyt yanked the cigarette from his lips. He thought about having a real smoke, instead of chakra crap, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"I'll kill you!" a voice dripping with murderous intent.

"Hi Gaara." Ekyt sounded bored, and he probably was. Been there, done that. Besides, Gaara was somehow less scary with a girl beside him. Granted, Ekyt didn't really know her, but how could a gentle-looking girls like that fall for a bloodthirsty monster? Or was it the vice-versa that was more perplexing. Who knew?

"Uh, Ekyt, right?" Gaara's girl companion pointed, asking Gaara. (To know who the girl is, go see YOURIMAGINARYFRIEND's stellar fic 'Blood Ties'
-NG)

"You can refer to him in the past tense," Gaara said in reply to her question. "He won't live much longer."

Ekyt checked his wrist. "Huh. My 'give a damn meter' must be broken. That...or I just don't give a damn. It's hitting a big zero, Gaara old fruit. Now then, I need to remind you, I'm sure. It's valentines day. In other words, chocolate for the little lady. Or flowers. Or perhaps... 'tis the night for romance?"

The girl blushed girlishly, while Gaara fumed Shukaku-ishly. Ekyt smirked and went on his way.

He had changed his look, just for today. He had dug out his trench coat. From the back, he was told, he looked like Shinimori Aoshi. Was that a compliment? Whatever- the black coat suited his depression.

For now, he was putting on a brave front- truthfully, he couldn't wait for this day to be over.

"Hey, Ryouko!"

Ekyt/Ryouko nearly swallowed his cigarette.

"Azami?!"

It was her indeed. The tall, Egyptian/Japanese beauty that he had fallen so hard for. They had been together for a month. Then she had turned on him and ran off with Hidan of the Akatsuki.

"Whaddaya think? I needed a guy's opinion..."

Azami was referring to her clothes. DUH- Ekyt had noticed. It looked like...

"A uniform from Negima? Cosplaying as Tatsumiya, maybe?" Ekyt murmured. She looked enough like the character to pull it off.

"Yeah! Hidan loves that book! And- Hey, WHAT?!"

Ekyt had to shove his fist in his mouth as he turned around. **Hidan loves Negima?! Oh YES! Next time we're in combat, I'm SO gonna razz him for that!**

"Sorry, sorry. But seriously...you look great. With your looks, you could pull anything off, though, so I doubt I'm being helpful..."

She pulls off the school uniform nicely... How did I let this one get away? ...

...

Oh yeah, she stabbed me. That's right. How could I forget?

Azami gave Ekyt a pat on the head. "Valentine's day, huh? Well, I'm sure you replaced me, so..."

Ekyt rolled his eyes. "Nothing worse than an ex giving you too much credit. Nah, I'm single. What can I say- any female who strikes my fancy seems to either want me to be paralyzed (Linda), stabs me in the heart literally (Azami), or stabs me in the heart figuratively (Sakura)."

Azami paused for a half-second. "Well, there's this girl I know...nah, you two wouldn't work. Her being a criminal and all... Well, I've gotta run! Hidan'll kill you if he thinks I was flirting with you."

"Tell him to bring it on. I'd welcome a fight today..."

-

Ekyt's next trip was to drop off chocolate to Lady Tsunade. It was just Giri-choco*, and it was practically a 'have-to' thing between friends.

(* Giri-choco is given to friends and associates. Honmei-choco is given to lovers)

“Here you go, m’lady. I...oh God...” Ekyt squeezed his eyes shut.

Tsunade smirked, happy Ekyt had walked in at such a perfect moment.

“What’s the matter? Never seen a devil, a jailbird, and a maid all in one place?”

Sakura was wearing a maid outfit- the kind that shows up on maids who can really make the look work. Short skirt and whatnot. Tsunade pulled off a nice devil, complete with pitchfork. Though the costume seemed to be a bit small. Last was Shizune, who was rocking the jail-house stripes. Ekyt massaged his temples.

“Okay, I get Shizune, and I get Sakura- they’re dressed up for Genma and Naruto- but you, M’lady?”

Tsunade stood up- tipsily- and swayed over to Ekyt.

“Maybe it’s for you? You ever think of that? Maybe I wanna tap that...hehe!”

Ekyt took a step back as Tsunade toppled over. “How drunk is she?! It’s only noon now!”

“Well, you know Lady Tsunade and holidays...”

“And work days, and days off, and vacations...” Ekyt muttered in response to Shizune. “Well, okay then, I’m off. Glad I didn’t get her the sake-filled giri-choco I had my eyes on...”

At that moment, Yukao, Hayate’s wife and an ANBU agent who Ekyt thought was gorgeous, walked in. She was wearing a nurse’s outfit.

You MUST be kidding me. Where the hell are all the ugly girls?! And what’s with these costumes?!

-

“What...is...with...all...these...costumes?!”

Ekyt sat cross-legged by the river, trying to sort things out.

“This is ridiculous! And...”

“Ekyt, hey! What’s with the long face?”

Kurenai jogged up. Ekyt never thought much of talking with her. She was a nice lady. Ekyt got along good with her and Asuma. But today, of all days, he would regret turning around to face her.

Gah! I’m eye-level with her breasts at this height! Oh, this is bad! And...another costume?! You MUST be kidding me!

It was true. Kurenai seemed to be dressed as an R-rated bumble bee.

“Uh, please excuse me!” Ekyt bowed hurriedly and took off.

Kurenai wondered what was wrong with Ekyt. She always worried about him. He was always by himself, and did nothing but study, it seemed. She had thought of trying to get him to date Hinata, but there was no way- those two wouldn't even progress to hand-holding until ten years after marriage.

“Ah...” Kurenai figured it out. “The one day of the year where being single must really eat at him. Poor kid.”

-

Ekyt's day wasn't over- there were too many girls in this village. He couldn't avoid them all. Not less those who were really proud of their looks and showed it in somewhat less than modest ways. Ekyt had finally say down on top of the Fourth Hokage's head when he was kicked.

“Move, lump!” Ino's shrill voice told him. “This is where Sasuke and I are gonna...Y'know...”

Ekyt spun around, ready to tell her off. But Ino's bikini greeted his eyes before he could even start.

“Don't stare, pervert!” Ino shrieked.

“Then don't parade around like that, you nudist!”

“ 'Scuse me, do you NOT see the bikini?!”

“Okay then, if you don't want attention, don't parade around seven-eights naked!”

This went on for a while, before Ekyt gave up- Ino was too stubborn. He really didn't have the energy to argue today. So he left, more than willing to give Ino and Sasuke all the time in the world to do whatever it was they were gonna do.

As if I didn't know... I'm shy, not stupid!

-

By the time Ekyt reached Ichiraku ramen, he was mentally spent. He had never seen so much female flesh in his life! It would have been pleasant, had each girl not been taken.

“Here y'go! Say...Listen, Ekyt, could you help me with a problem I'm having?”

It was Ayame, the ramen maker's daughter. Ekyt had been face-down on the counter. He looked up, too numb to even avert his eyes.

“Western cheerleader costume? Looks good on you,” he finally managed to say. “So, how can I be of service?”

“Well...” Ayame blushed, then pointed. “I've...kind of got a crush on someone. Could you help me talk to

them?”

“Sure.” I never say no to a good deed... Wow, she IS good looking! Too bad she’s too young...too old? Whatever, she’s not my age, and not interested in me...

Ekyt shrugged off his trench coat. “Put that on and follow me.”

-

It turned out that Ayame liked either Izumo Or Kotetsu. Ekyt couldn't tell. It didn't matter- where you found one, you would find the other.

“Okay, good. Now, walk over there. When you get in front of the guy you like, stop in front of him, and lose the coat. I'll come pick it up later, so don't worry about giving it back now.”

Ekyt watched from Ichiraku as Ayame did as he said. It seemed she scored more than one guy's attention. Upon seeing that, Ekyt picked up a bottle of sake and flavored his ramen with it. The concoction didn't taste great, but it was better than eating delicious ramen and souring it's taste with hatred for everyone and everything.

-

“Ah! That damned festival is tonight!” Ekyt suddenly remembered- the Valentine's day festival.

“That cursed festival where single people pray for bad things to happen to their 'taken' friends, ex-girlfriends, and even themselves. Not that I know, of course- I wish nothing but the best for all in that category.”

Ekyt sighed loudly. “My story never has a happy ending, does it?”

“Awww, single on Valentine's Day? You must want a girl in the worst way...”

A patronizing voice made Ekyt spin around, a knife in his hand. “What do you want, Orochimaru?!”

Orochimaru laughed amiably. “I can give you what you desire...It's easy as One...Two...”

Orochimaru tugged at his face. The female Grass Ninja whose body he had taken years ago replace his own.

“...Three. What do you think?”

Ekyt proceeded to leave Orochimaru in a bloody heap.

“You freak! I'm single, and yes, desperate, but not THAT desperate!”

-

Naruto came running by, seeing Ekyt pummeling the crap out of the remains of Orochimaru.

“Man, I feel sorry for him! Valentine’s Day certainly eats at ya, doesn’t it?!” Naruto said, poking Orochimaru and somehow managed to avoid being helpful at all.

“Kinda...I just wish I could have a girl. One that won’t stab me...”

Naruto put an arm on Ekyt’s shoulder. “Well, you could get Sai to latch onto you for a while... (Ekyt’s fist came up) I’M KIDDING, DON’T KILL ME! Seriously, if it’s a date ya need, all you had to do was ask me! I can help ya, no sweat!”

“How can YOU possibly help me? If you’re thinking of something weird with Sakura, I’m not gonna play any part in it...”

“Nope! This is easy! NINJA HAREM JUTSU!”

Ekyt was caught flat-footed. He couldn’t shut his eyes in time, and soon sailed through the air with a nosebleed. Unfortunately, he sailed over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he thought in wonder:

Just when I thought being single was the worst thing that could happen on Valentine’s Day...

THIS FIC IS DEDICATED TO ALL THE SINGLE PEOPLE ON VALENTINE’S DAY.

BONUS: UNUSED MATERIAL BELOW!

Ekyt woke up in the hospital. He wasn’t seriously hurt, aside from blood loss.

Thus ends another Valentine’s Day. Well, at least I’m in the hospital. No one should bother me here, and I can’t see the stupid party. I should just sleep until tomorrow...

Before he could, a girl walked in. She wore a sword at her waist, and had a serious expression on her face.

“You are...Ryouko, correct?”

Ekyt just nodded.

“I’ve come to collect the bounty on your head! The Mist Village will pay top dollar for your head!”

“Huh...They sent an assassin? An incredibly cute samurai girl?” **What am I saying? She must be taken...**

“Listen, come kill me tomorrow,” Ekyt said, though he made no move to get away. “Today is a day you should spend with your husband, or boyfriend, or whoever’s special. I mean, y’know, ‘special’ to you. I’ll be here tomorrow, come kill me then. I won’t run. Though I WILL fight.”

The girl was small- maybe five foot seven or so. She had black hair that was pulled into a ponytail in the back. She was dressed traditionally, with a hakama, though it was torn up the sides to make a 'woman's cut'. She also wore a kekkou gi top. She had it open, so that you could see the wrappings over her breasts. Her mannerisms screamed 'tomboy', while her appearance was a mix of 'warrior' and 'cute girl'.

"If I had someone special, I would not be out hunting... It was horrible luck. My boyfriend was cut down during a war. I watched him die, and I swore I wouldn't let that happen again. I have not loved since. ..."

the girl stared at Ekyt.

"What's the matter?" Ekyt managed to ask.

"I...I did not think my target would be a cute boy. I pictured you to be a horrible, full-grown man. An assassin who would have killed me the instant I had drawn my sword. But instead I find a boy in his mid-teens?"

"I'm twenty, actually...I just look younger. I suppose, in ten years, that'll be a good thing."

The girl bowed an apology "I am in my eighteenth year, though I am often mistaken for someone much younger."

Ekyt nodded. "I can see it. You're still cute, though. Pardon me for saying so."

"I- I do not mind so much..."

The girl blushed, looking at Ekyt out of the corner of her eye.

He is very nice! I cannot believe that he is wanted for destruction of a sacred ceremony by my village! And he is young looking as well! Perhaps I could...

"I am sure a man such as you is spoken for..."

Ekyt noticed the girl spoke hopefully, as though she was...

Interested? In me?! No way!

Ekyt laughed. "Nope. I'm single as single gets. And, you know, I think I'm ready to get out of the hospital. I shouldn't be alone right away though. If you might accompany me for a drink or something...On me, of course..."

The girl playfully drew her sword and pointed it at him. "I would not have it any other way. I would have physically insisted."

Now THERE is something I'd like to see... Ekyt thought. **But, for now...I'll just be happy with having a cute girl walk around with me. Happy Valentine's Day to me!**

16 - Sakura's a Tease!

Language: mild

Sex: moderate

Nudity: mild

Sakura was very happy with her boyfriend/servant, Ryouko. He did her chores, gave her attention, and all that other boyfriend/servant stuff he was supposed to do. It was almost Sakura's eighteenth birthday, and her first thoughts were on how to celebrate. While she thought, she absently tossed laundry in a hamper.

"Ryouko! Laundry time!" she sang out. Ryouko emerged from the closet, wincing.

"Laundry day, the most foul day ever created," he spoke with a grimace.

"Aw, c'mon, this load has my panties..."

"Be that as it may, Ojousama, (And don't think it's not cool to handle your delicates...) there's a problem. Please observe."

Ryouko bent down to pick up the hamper, then walked outside the door.

"HANDS OFF MY DAUGHTER'S PANTIES, PERVERT!"

After a 'SMACK', Ryouko came running in. He dove into the closet and shut the door. An angry Mrs. Haruno came flying in after him. Her ever-present broom nearly beheaded him as she caught the door. Ryouko was trapped. There was nowhere to hide, and nowhere to run. He burrowed under his blankets and pillows, hoping to cushion the worst of the blows.

Sakura watched thoughtfully as her mother kicked the crap out of her boyfriend/live-in servant. She saw the problem pretty quickly, as Ryouko was soon reduced to a quivering, bruised mass huddled amongst the solace of his bedding.

"AND DON'T LET ME CATCH YOU WITH HER UNDERWEAR AGAIN! ESPECIALLY IF IT'S ON HER! I SWEAR, YOU BOYS! ALL YOU THINK ABOUT IS SEX! I PROMISE YOU- IF YOU LAY A HAND ON MY DAUGHTER, I WILL PUT YOUR BALLS IN A SLING!"

SLAM!

With that, she was gone. Ryouko coughed, then stood up straight. "So you see the problem, Ojousama."

"Yeah, I do," Sakura nodded. "You really blush around ladies' underwear! I even say the word and you light up like a Christmas tree!"

Ryouko stumbled over his words. “That’s really not the point, Ojousama. It’s the fact that I get beaten up every time your mother catches me around the house. I mean, I can understand protecting your daughter, but why’d she hit me when I ate a cookie?”

“What time was it?” Sakura asked.

“Four O’clock.”

“Silly, an hour before dinner?! Of COURSE she’ll beat you up; you’ll spoil your appetite.”

Ryouko pointed at his stomach. “She doesn’t feed me! Why should she care?! I don’t mind her hating me for being your boyfriend, Ojousama, but for doing chores?”

Sakura laughed and gently sat down on Ryouko’s bed. She tugged him by the arm and made him sit down. He sat down formally on the floor, as though awaiting orders. Sakura sighed heavily, but rolled over onto her stomach so she would be eye to eye with him.

“You CAN function in boyfriend mode, you know. I mean, Ojousama’s cool and all, but there are times when I want you to use my name. ‘Cause, y’know, we’ve seen each other naked. It’s about time we acted closer.”

“We’ve never seen each other naked, Ojousama...”

“No? Not yet? Huh. Oh, right, you didn’t see ME, but I saw you. Oh, okay, that makes sense.” Sakura cocked her head to the side, remembering that awkward moment when she totally spied on Ryouko out of pure, girlish curiosity.

“That’s not fair, Sakura,” Ryouko whined. “How come you get to see me naked, but I don’t get to see you naked?”

Sakura tapped her chin thoughtfully. “ ‘Cause I’m a girl, and my Mom would really kill you. I mean, if you think a good look is worth it...” Sakura found herself blushing at the prospect of stripping for her boyfriend. Blushing out of desire, embarrassment, and curiosity. It was astounding how much she could be like a normal girl, despite her great abilities.

Ryouko shook his head and backed up. “No, no, not worth death. Well, it is, actually, but I’d like to live long enough to enjoy it. So, uh, let’s wait until you’re moved out, or at least not home...”

It hit Sakura suddenly. What she wanted for her birthday. “Ryouko...” she cooed, sitting up and crossing her legs, then turning her head and looking away with red on her face. “I’ve got this...desire...”

Ba-dump. Ryouko’s heart was currently residing in his throat. He scrambled for a response. His mental rolodex gave him this:

- a. “Oh, really” (seductive tone)
- b. “Anything, Ojousama! Command me!” (Bowling)

- c. Take her hand, squeeze it gently, look into her eyes (boyfriend mode?)
- d. F*** you, asshole (Terminator dialogue)

(Sorry, sorry, I couldn't pass it up! –NG)

Option c was chosen, in conjunction with choice b. Ryouko knelt before her and picked up her hand. He caressed it tenderly, even bringing it to his lips.

“Anything within my power, Sakura.”

Sakura turned away. “Oh, you're so serious! And those bedroom eyes! We must want the same thing... There's no doubt about it...” Sakura said huskily, climbing closer to Ryouko. She gave him a shove-

“OW!” (Ryouko's head bounced off the floor with a 'thud')

-“Sorry!”

She put her hands on his chest, straddling his torso with her legs. She giggled as he turned progressively redder. She leaned closer and closer, reaching for his vest.

“That tag always sticks up!” she growled, tucking the tag into his shirt. “Right. There's no way. We're both at that age... We think certain things... have certain... desires...”

Sakura leaned into Ryouko's shoulder, her mouth near his ear. Ryouko's eyes widened as he felt warm saliva in his ear.

“Wet willie!” Sakura declared, laughing at Ryouko's face. “What, did you think I licked you?”

“Of course not!” Ryouko shot back. His red face belied his words.

Sakura leaned closer even more, laying on top of Ryouko. “Do you know what I want, Ryouko? It's something only you can give to me... That's right, only you. Are you ready? Are you ready to give it to me?”

“H-hhuh?”

“For my birthday, I want you to give it to me. I want...”

Sakura reached for the zipper on her vest. She pulled it down slowly, teasing Ryouko. He couldn't have moved if he wanted to. He knew that Mrs. Haruno would kill him for this, but such a tantalizing kunoichi in front of him, about to give him a look at a forbidden desire... It was too much. Ryouko was still male, after all.

Sakura flung the vest to the side, revealing-

An undershirt.

“Wow, that’s better! It’s so hot in here!” Sakura exclaimed. “You must be dying with all those clothes on. Want me to help you take them off?”

Ryouko shook his head. “N-no, I’m fine, Sakura. I’m good! Uh, you’re the hottest thing in this room!”

Ryouko flung the comment without thinking. Sakura blushed heavily, giggling at the compliment.

“You’re so sweet! I promise you, you’ll get to see this heat up close. Because, for my birthday, I want...”

This is it. If she asks for it, I’m going to give it to her! I’d do anything for her, and now I’ll prove it! So long, V-club! Ryouko cheered inwardly.

“...I want you to take me to a hotel.”

“Of course, Sakura, anything you ask!” Ryouko replied brightly. **I’m finally gonna get laid! There’s no other reason for her to ask me to take her to a hotel on her birthday! Oh, hell yeah!**

“...And after we visit my family that’s staying at the hotel, I want you to take me to your house...”

Yes! Okay, perfect! A hotel was kind of sleazy for a classy girl like her anyway!

“...And there, you know what happens?”

Ryouko shook his head.

I’ll play dumb and let her have the fun of telling me...

“...There, you and I- unpack my stuff! Y’know, changes of clothes and stuff for when I stay over at your house!”

Sakura got off Ryouko and happily began to put things in a suitcase. Ryouko slunk into the closet, shut the door, and buried his face.

So close... I think...

17 - Desires

It was the spring of my twentieth year. I had been planning for a year now, and I couldn't wait anymore. Sakura was seventeen and eleven-twelfths, and though I would have to two weeks, it couldn't hurt to get an answer now, right? It beat wondering. I had the guts up to ask her now, and I was going to. I had to struggle to think of how to ask her, though. The only time I have contact with her is when I get hurt, it seems. So it was simple- I had to MAKE a reason. Showing up at her house would likely get me hurt, and I didn't want that. I had to think of something. There was only one place I knew for sure I would find her...

But there would be hell to pay, in the form of razzing.

-

"Finally got the balls up, huh?" Lady Tsunade commented, grinning at me from across the room. I hadn't dared approach her desk. If she didn't like the thought of me talking with her apprentice...I would be in for a world of hurt. Why do I fall in with such dangerous women? More importantly, is that what I like about them?

"Not yet. I'm kinda...waiting for her to show up here. I don't know where else to find her without seeming like a stalker..." I admitted, as much to myself as to her. "I guess I should ask you, though, M'lady- are you okay with this?"

Tsunade rolled her eyes. "Of *coursel*'m fine with it, you dope! I'm soooo tired of the two of you moping around 'cause you're single! Every day she's gotta sigh at least ten times over Sasuke...Oh, forget I said that!"

Tsunade had inadvertently destroyed the small confidence I had mounted. "I guess I knew she still thought about him. Is she...does she still...love him?"

Tsunade sighed deeply. "I would guess so. But, listen, Ryouko, you've gotta shoot straight with her. She needs a guy who'll do that. And as good as she'd be for you, you'd be better for her. You want a girl, and she happened to be the one you set your sites on. She wanted Sasuke, but I would stop that relationship at all costs. She needs to move on to something better- someone better. That's you. Because you truly care for her, not your own selfish ends. And I will support you all the way."

"Thank you, Lady Tsunade. I needed to hear that." I smiled, then tugged at my uniform. I was a new chunin, and suddenly felt horribly unworthy of her. She had been a chunin for at least a full year longer. That, and I had never asked anyone out before- see, I'm kinda scared of girls. Not that it lessens the desire to call one my girlfriend; it just makes it next to impossible.

Tsunade got up and grabbed my hands. "Don't get cold feet now."

"It doesn't matter if I do," I sighed heavily, "I'll have to wait two weeks until she's eighteen, and by then any courage I have will have withered and died, likely along with my pride!"

“You DO realize that you have known the girl for more than two years, right? No one is going to yell at you for going out with her. Now, if you get her in bed, I will see that you are incapable of reproducing. But a date is just a date. Just like going out with friends, but this friend you hold hands with, hug, and kiss. In other words- it’s not illegal to date, hug, kiss, hold hands, make out, cop a feel, etc (in fact, I kind of encourage it!)- just no slipping between the sheets, comprende?”

Again, Tsunade didn’t help me much. “I know, but, I mean...well...I don’t HAVE friends. I don’t go out. That’s why I got decently strong. I have nothing to do but study. I just don’t understand people. They seem so petty and worthless sometimes! Sakura’s the first girl I’ve seen that isn’t like that! She’s strong, independent, and- pardon my language- doesn’t dress like a slut! She’s a classy girl...and she’s cute, too, plus intelligent. She’s all I’ve ever wanted in a girl. But she’s also so incredibly out of my league! It’s so pathetic I’ve known her for so long but never said a word! I’m such a loser! Maybe I should just drop this...”

Tsunade picked me up by my collar, holding me face to face with her. “You will NOT back down. You will ask her out. If she says yes, you’ll go and have a good time. If she says no, you will bow, retain your dignity, and go on as though nothing happened. In fact, if she says no, I’ll help you- I’ll give you an extended mission in Sunagakure or something. Alright?”

The thought of having a way to cope with rejection really helped. I expected rejection, really. But I couldn’t help but think/speak: “What if she says yes?”

“What do you mean, ‘What if she says yes’?!” Lady Tsunade wasn’t sure she had heard that right.

I pointed to myself. “Dateless wonder here. No idea what to do with a girl after she says yes.” (Right about now, I think Tsunade would have strangled me)

“You dumbass! Get a clue! You don’t know what she likes? Okay, I’m not gonna do this for you- you’re gonna have to ask me. Just say this: Lady Tsunade, what does Sakura like?”

“Lady Tsunade, what does Sakura like?” I was ready to break out a notebook here. I’ve gotta say, I was seriously curious!

“Hell if I know.”

“That’s mean, Lady Tsunade! That’s really mean, even for you!” I moaned.

“EVEN FOR ME?! WHAT WAS THAT?!”

“Nothing M’lady...”

“Good. Now then, in general- girls like guys to be gentle. They’d like polite, well-dressed, socially acceptable boys. If they don’t like those things, then they aren’t worth your time. You’re handsome enough for her, and I know you’re polite, and all that. There’s one thing above all that makes me want you to date her. Do you know what that is?”

I shook my head. "Nuh-uh."

"It's because you really care about her. The fact that you're all flustered about her, and you're worried about that legal stuff, and the fact that you light up like the sky on Chinese New Year- it tells me you would honestly do anything for her. Well, maybe it was the reports she's given me about you protecting her in fights. But, either way, the point is that you aren't just after her for looks. Tell me what you like in a girl."

I thought for a minute. "Uh, well, I like them to be cute. And beautiful. But not slutty in any way. Um... I like it when they're smart, and strong physically and mentally... Oh, and I like girls that look young, too. I guess that's given. I just want a good, honest, hard-working girl."

Tsunade tapped her fingers on the desk. "So you like Sakura, since you just described her. Oh- the reason I'm letting you date her, since I'm more or less her guardian, and you're older than her. See, being scared of girls works in your favor. Because I know you won't dare poke around in any of the 'forbidden zones'. Now then, Sakura will be here any time. Go get 'em tiger. Oh, and don't ask her out in here. Find an excuse to walk with her somewhere."

Thinking quickly, I took out a blank scroll. "So, uh, does anyone need a memo from you, for some reason?"

-

Sakura made her morning rounds, humming a cheerful tune. It was a nice day out. She had slept well. Things were looking up.

Something good is gonna happen. I wonder what, though? I've got no reason to feel so happy...

Her mind still clouded with thoughts, Sakura walked habitually to Tsunade's office.

"Good morning, My Lady! Good morning, Ryouko!"

It wasn't odd to find Ryouko here. **Probably after a mission or something. Something's different about him today, though... What is it? He's dressed like he always is... He's blushing...nah, that's not weird. The poor guy is girl shy to the nth degree. I wonder if he has a crush on Lady Tsunade or something? Nah, that's ridiculous. Shizune is much more likely. Now then, what's different... Oh!**

"Hey, Ryouko, you've got a new headband!"

Ryouko blinked- he hadn't thought about it, but he had. He used to wear a full head covering, but he had traded that in for a black, normal hitai-ate. "Oh, that's right, I'd forgotten. It, er, doesn't look stupid, does it?"

Tsunade gave a small smile to Ryouko in her mind. **So, small talk? I'm impressed! I thought for sure he'd back out! He's not a dumb kid. Some of my ninja couldn't outwit a retarded rock. But him...just no damn confidence! I wonder how long before he realizes he's talking to the scary,**

pink-haired girl?

That thought seemed to hit Ryouko, but he shrugged it off. "Oh, M'lady, that scroll- I'd forgotten that I need to speak with Sakura privately. Is it alright if I borrow her for a few minutes? I mean, if she's okay with it..."

Damn, confidence is falling! Gotta help him! "Sakura, go with him, that's an order."

-

Sakura was a little surprised at Tsunade's sharp tone.

The order from Lady Tsunade was pointless. I would have gone with Ryouko regardless. If anyone needs a friend, it's him. He's always by himself, studying or staring at nothing. I feel really bad about that. I wonder what he thinks about? It seems to separate him from the rest of us. That's a shame. I know so many kunoichi who would love to just talk with him. He really knows his stuff, and he's kinda cute, too. If your name comes up in the hot spring or the locker room, then you're something special.

I wonder if any boys gossip about me? Probably not, since I'm not really nice looking. If a guy could see past my tiny boobs and big forehead, then maybe... (sigh). And maybe if I could consider someone besides Sasuke. He's been gone for almost three years. It's time to move on. I'll never stop caring about him as a friend, but I don't want to be single forever because of a one-sided crush.

-

While Sakura was deep in thought, Ryouko was walking silently beside her, trying to figure out what to say.

Maybe I could write it? No, no, that would be cheating. I've got to just ask her...but how can I? Look at her- she's not over Sasuke, and I'm not half the man he is. He might be a traitorous bastard, but what am I? Some new chunin that isn't special in any way? But at the same time, things can't continue this way. I can't keep pretending I don't feel anything. Now then, remember the steps: Say hello- check. Smile- not gonna happen right now. Small talk- that's up next. Then, ask her out...right.

-

Sakura looked a little troubled, which actually gave me my opening.

"Sakura? Er, not to intrude, but is something wrong?"

Sakura's head snapped up as though she came out of a deep sleep. But she shook her head, smiling a little. "No, not at all. Just thinking, that's all!"

"You were doing a good impression of me. I guess I do space out a lot. Mostly thinking about my life

and the regrets I have.”

Smooth, dumbass! That just begs the question you need, which is good, but you sound like a confused little kid! You're just begging for attention! Have you no shame?!

...

No, I guess I don't. I really do want her attention, and I don't care how I go about getting it.

Sakura turned her head toward me. I expected sarcasm, but I got a sincere reply:

“Regrets? About what? I've been curious about what it is you think about. If you wouldn't mind telling me. I've heard it's helpful to share your problems, y'know?”

My flip-flopped in my chest. Life had just given me this incredible opportunity. I couldn't pass it up. There was no way. I had to be honest. Right here, right now. I took a deep breath, exhaled, yanked on my sleeves (an odd nervous habit of mine), and finally managed to talk.

“I think about being single, truth be told. I mean, I'm twenty, and I've never once had a girl interested in me seriously. It's my fault for never having the guts to ask. I've always been a little scared of girls. The great unknown, you know?”

Sakura nodded vigorously. “I know! I'm the same way with boys since Sasuke left! It's soooo hard to confess to someone you like them! And when you get rejected...It hurts. A lot.”

Sakura folded her hands over her chest. Just for a second, I saw a girl who was completely vulnerable and needing attention. I had answered the right question, because now I saw that she was just like me. Scared of the opposite gender, and of rejections- we were no different, anatomical structure aside. I felt a fresh surge of confidence. It was just like in combat, when I felt the best- I was protecting someone. Someone needed me. I was necessary. And now I felt that outside of combat for the first time in a long time.

“Sakura...oh boy, this is hard to spit out, but uh...If you want, maybe we could go get food sometime, or something?”

Sakura immediately perked up. “You mean...like a date?”

Did he just ask me out? Ryouko?! The shyest guy in the Leaf Village?!

“Well, uh, yeah, if you'd like that. Please don't feel obligated to say yes. Just, y'know, thought I'd throw that out there and see if you're interested.” I shrugged like it was no big deal, but my red face likely gave me away.

Sakura eyed me curiously, her face turning red to match mine. “And you just...managed to say that? You? No offense, but you asking me out is nothing short of a miracle. You asking ANYONE out is nothing short of a miracle. And damned if I'm gonna miss that miracle! Where and when?”

Unfortunately, somehow, that bastard 'truth' came flying out of my mouth. “I don't know. I never actually thought you'd say yes.”

Sakura seemed to expect that, and smiled kindly. "Well, I like the Maebeko myself. How about that?"

I nodded stupidly. "That sounds good. So, uh, when are you free?"

"Hmmm..." Sakura licked her lips as she thought. "How 'bout tonight, at sunset? It'll give you time to calm down. As a medic, I'm worried about what the stress is going to do to you, y'know?"

"Sound advice," I answered, smiling weakly. Now, I swear, girls can read emotions. I'm as stoic as they come, but somehow Sakura had zeroed in on me. Sensing the kill she dove in.

"Awwwww, does the widdle giwrl make da big, bad warrior nervous? Hmmm?! (giggle) How cute! You're a lot of fun, Ryouko! Do you do any other tricks?"

"I change colors, apparently," I murmured, referring to my blushing. Sakura touched my cheek, and I turned red. Yup, I changed color, and you didn't even need to use water!

"So cool! I had a doll that did the same thing when I was little!" she announced happily, apparently having fun.

Was this flirting? It was fun! I had no retorts, but that was okay with me! It was fun having a girl's attention all to myself, and not for some stupid, heroic, noble stunt that may or may not have saved her life. She was hanging out with me because she liked me, not because I was strong. That was a novel concept, let me tell you!

"So, uh, this place. It's...casual dress, right?" I knew, of course, but I didn't want the conversation to end.

"That's right," Sakura nodded. "And make sure you don't wear something that clashes with my skirt!"

"I'm a boy. I don't understand fashion." (I readily admit that)

Sakura walked around me in a circle, kind of making me nervous. I couldn't help but liken it to a shark that's circling it's prey. It was kind of sexy, really. When she tugged at the back of my vest, alarmingly close to my @\$\$, I stood up even straighter.

"You're fine, dressed as you are. I'm gonna warn you, though- I'm taking the opportunity to dress as a civilian. I've kind of pictured my first date in my mind a bunch of times, and I was always wearing this..." Sakura blushed femininely, playing with her fingers nervously, not quite making eye contact with me. I vowed I would be impressed, even if she was wearing an empty rice sack.

"A-alright then. So, I'll see you at sunset," I said/asked boldly.

"Absolutely! Oh, wait..." Sakura frowned. "Aren't you...too old for me? I mean, I'm only seventeen. Should we wait two weeks, until my birthday?"

I carefully explained what Tsunade said, sans the sexual reference, of course. Sakura brightened, really thrilled to be going out for the first time. It was my first time, but I couldn't get any energy up- if I did, I

shook with anticipation/anxiety.

“So, in other words, we can do everything up to...y’know...” Sakura was deep in thought. If her thoughts were anything like mine, they were borderline scandalous. Like, we’re talking super forbidden here. And pretty hot, too. Like you’ve never had one of those thoughts!

I nodded in agreement. “That’s right. But don’t worry, I wouldn’t have brought it up on the first date. Unless you did, of course. I mean, I’ve got to be honest- you’re really in charge here. I’m just along for the ride. But, whatever happens tonight, let me say this now: My crush on you, and finally getting the guts up to ask you out- they’re two of the best things to ever happen to me.”

Sakura’s eyes got wide. “That is adorable! How come you know just what to say?”

“I’ve had two years to practice,” I admitted lamely.

“What, did you practice kissing, too? Like on a mirror or pillow?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” I asked in mock certainty. I wasn’t about to outline how I had practiced. Like she hadn’t done the same thing anyway!

Sakura didn’t say anything, instead giving me a warm smile. She reached up toward my face. I inadvertently winced- no one ever aimed for my face with good intentions.

-

Sakura sighed inwardly at Ryouko’s wince.

That poor boy... A small gesture of affection, and he’s afraid of it. What made him that way? And how long has he been wanting to ask me out? He’s really a brave guy. Fights are one thing. Asking who you like out is another matter. I think he would have had an easier time fighting Orochimaru on one leg.

But he DID ask me out. That must mean he cares a lot. And since I said yes so instantly, and I’m taking the time to analyze a small wince, then I must like him, too.

-

Her hand brushed my face. It stopped on my cheek for a moment while Sakura looked me firmly in the eyes. She softened her gaze once she emerged from her thoughts. She leaned forward a little bit, and my heart leapt up into my throat.

A kiss?!

-

Should I kiss him? ...No, not yet. I always dreamed of how my first date would go. The kiss comes later.

Sakura didn't mind inching a little closer to the already blushing boy, though. Her medical training could make her a very sympathetic and comforting person at times. Seeing the picture of clueless innocence next to her (in the form of a shaking bundle of nerves), she decided to ease the tension. If she understood his mind, she would know she had just made him more nervous. But as far as nerves went, this wasn't so bad.

-

I felt Sakura's hand slip in mine. She tightened her grip, giving me a shy smile.

"C'mon, it's just me. It's not like you're dating a total stranger, right? So, let's just relax and have some fun."

"Oh...Okay!" I stammered, finally spitting out the easiest word in the world to say. "Sorry, I'm just...like this. I'll get over it. So, I'll see you tonight, then?"

"Yup! See you later!"

And she ran off. I watched her go, thinking I was the luckiest guy in the world. I landed a date with the girl I loved. That had to be a good sign. Now I just had to keep calm on the date. That, and figure out what it meant to actually date. I had no idea. None whatsoever.

-

I waited in the appointed spot for Sakura. She was a couple minutes late, but man! She was totally worth it!

"Sorry I'm late!" she told me, her cheeks red from the combination of running and the still-nippy March weather. She had to catch her breath. While she did, I admired her.

For the occasion, Sakura had put on a white sleeveless shirt. On it was a slogan in English that said 'Broken Hop'. I assumed that it was supposed to say 'Broken Hope' or something, but like many other nonsensical shirts, it's comical slogan was part of it's charm.

Beneath the shirt was a black skirt. A real skirt, not the usual skirt-ish thing she wore. It was evident that she didn't wear her black shorts under this one. Instead, she wore black stockings, making her look like a normal, incredibly attractive girl.

"I wasn't waiting long," I informed her, distracted. "You look beautiful tonight, as always." (I may be stupid when it comes to women, but even I know that compliments are good- Especially when you genuinely mean them. And I did, that was for sure)

Sakura blushed a little, lowering her head in embarrassment. "Oh, you're just being nice!"

"No, really! I mean it, you really do look cute."

Sakura grinned at me. "And so do you! I never thought I'd see you in civilian clothes!"

“Me either,” I admitted. For the occasion, I broke out a pair of black dress pants, a short-sleeve black dress shirt, opening slightly at the neck so that you could see the cross I wore around my neck. I imagined that, for once, I looked like a normal, nervous kid. (As opposed to a normal, nervous jonin, I guess)

“Oh, hold on, your collar isn’t straight...”

Sakura moved close to me and reached around me to fix my collar. We could have touched noses if we each leaned forward a little. Couple that with the fact that she seemed to take her time straightening my collar, and you’ve got one red-faced Ryouko! When she was done, she leaned back a little bit, sticking her tongue out playfully.

“There, all fixed!” she declared happily. “So, you ready to go, tiger?”

“Oh, yeah!” I managed to say.

“Good!” she said perkily, and started to head toward the Maebeko at a jog. I matched her pace, occasionally looking around. When we ran past Ino, I swear, if I could have packaged the look on Ino’s face, I could have been a millionaire.

“Hiya pig!” Sakura called over. “Looky what I’ve got!”

Sakura tugged at my sleeve, pulling me closer to her, holding my arm as if I was some treasure she was guarding.

“GAH! Okay, forehead, I’ll congratulate you! You might have had your first date before me, but my date’ll be hotter!” Ino shot back.

“In your dreams! You’ll have to look outside the village. The hottest guy is all mine! Neh!” Sakura stuck out her tongue and pulled down her eyelid.

She’s flaunting me?! Am I that much of a catch or something? I thought to myself. I didn’t have a rival or anything, so I couldn’t flaunt her. Man, I wished I could! Then I grinned to myself. I DID have a rival of sorts. Oh, if we could just run into her!

‘Her’ was Linda Mawashi. I had liked her, but, man, she had it in for me! Her and my buddy, Rock Lee, were tight. I hated that dog, but I put up with her for Lee’s sake. Wouldn’t it just be a great bit of serendipity to run into her and show her my affections had upgraded to a better model?

Oh yes, fate was on my side! There was Linda!

“Oh, hey, Linda!” I called out. I couldn’t help it- I owed her a great deal of abuse for us to even come close to calling it ‘even’. “Look at me! See her? This is Sakura, the Hokage’s apprentice, and the most adorable thing in the Hidden Leaf! Eat your heart out, wench!” I crowed. Her expression made Sakura laugh, and I knew I had a winner on my hands. There was chemistry here, and we hadn’t even gotten to the restaurant yet.

-
If dates are supposed to help two people get to know each other, then this date was going to be interesting. Sakura's life was an open book. No dark secrets, no hidden illnesses, no scandalous affairs. My life, however...

"Oh, go on, tell me about yourself! I'm not gonna blackmail you or something!"

Sakura was urging me to share something about myself. I thought hard, and I couldn't think of anything that didn't make me sound pathetic. Not one thing about myself seemed like a redeeming quality. So, I finally chose something that seemed kind of cool.

"Well, I've wanted to be a jonin for a while, but I didn't know what kind of career. I always liked what Asuma did. That whole twelve Shinobi Guardians thing. If I could do that and stay in the Leaf Village, I'd try. But I couldn't leave this place. Too many things I love here. And people, too..."

Oh wow, that was sappy. It came straight from the heart, but man, that was cheesy! Sakura seemed to get a kick out of it.

"I never knew you were such a normal guy under that formal exterior! I figured I'd have to work harder than that to get anything out of you! And that's a nice ambition! I've been thinking about mine lately. I always thought I'd be just a housewife, you know? Take care of the kids, and let my husband work. But I can't do that. I kind of admire Kurenai-sensei and Asuma-sensei. They seem so perfect together, you know? I can just see my husband and I on the battlefield together. Then we get home, play with the kids, and fall asleep in each other's arms..."

Sakura sighed, a girlish blush spreading across her cheeks. She leaned forward, her head propped up by one arm.

"Really?!" I couldn't believe it- Asuma and Kurenai were kind of like my idea of an ideal couple, too! "You know, I really admired both of them. They're both strong individually, and when you put them together, it's like they're two halves of the same whole. A relationship like that is so cool! I mean..."

I stopped, wondering if I should say anymore.

"You mean? Keep going! Don't stop there! You can tell me anything, you know." Sakura leaned forward a little more, clearly very interested.

I sighed outwardly, but finished my thought. "I admire girls that are strong. I guess that's part of what attracted me to you. You're beautiful, but you're also the most practical female I've ever met. You don't complain about your hair and clothes, and you don't whine about hard work. And yet you're still perfectly feminine."

"And you're not a macho-y showoff. You're respectful and courteous, and that's really rare! You've gotta be the only guy I know that won't hit a girl without thinking three times about it. Not to mention holding door and stuff. It's really rare to find a thoughtful guy these days."

We had finished our food now, and didn't even notice. It was a little sad, because the evening was over. It was scary, never-wracking, fun, sweet, sour, spicy, and worrisome, all in one. But I loved it. As I stared at Sakura, I knew that this was her. The girl I loved. The question is, did she love me back? We were both kids, did we even know what love was?

"I...guess it's time to go home..." Sakura semi-whined, not really wanting to leave. But she still had a curfew until she turned eighteen on March 28th.

"Would you like company?" I asked pleasantly.

"Sure!"

-

All too soon, we were going to reach Sakura's house. It was in site. You could feel the mood of our date turn sour. But it turned sour because we didn't want to say goodbye yet.

There was a dark stretch of walkway on the way to Sakura's house. I was on my guard- who knew what kind of sickos were around, waiting to prey on cute little girls and their (in my case) scrawny dates? I felt a pair of hands grab me, but they weren't threatening. They were rough and gentle at the same time. They were around my waist, tugging me in tight to my attacker. But this was one attack I wasn't going to fight.

I got 'smak-ed' on the cheek.

"No lips on the first date," Sakura whispered to me, sticking her tongue out. "But maybe the second date..."

"Name the day and time," I said instantly. **Hot damn!**

"I will. I'll see you tomorrow morning, when M'lady grills us both for details."

I laughed- Lady Tsunade would, too. She'd ask us both separately. No matter what we said, though, Tsunade would hear what she wanted.

I opened my arms for the big, friendly hug. Sakura stepped in obligingly. Wow, a female was this close to me?! How cool was that?! And she wasn't shying away OR trying to kill me! This was so awesome!

"Make sure you wipe your face before we get to my house. Unless you want my Mom to know I kissed you..." Sakura warned.

"She, er, DID know I was dating you, right?" I asked, stammering slightly out of panic.

"Nah. You're my dirty little secret," Sakura whispered, dangerously close to my ear. Now THAT was a tent-pitcher.

"Oh..."

Sakura giggled. "Yes, she knows. (Honestly! Did you think I could keep you a secret?!) And she approves. In fact, how about meeting at my house next time? Say, Friday?"

"Sounds great to me! I'll be there. Should I bring anything?"

Sakura shook her head. "Nah, but you might want to practice your kissing on your pillow again. 'Cause I expect *you* to kiss *me* next time, 'kay?"

Despite the mild insult, I was really looking forward to this next date.

TO BE CONTINUED!

18 - Double Your Fun

NOTE: This is a fic I did as a gift for YOURIMAGINARYFRIEND. (Hope it's alright, YIF!) Ame and Gaara go out with Ryouko and...Tenten? That's right, something pried her away from Neji. But very real feelings come spilling out during this date. Two girls and two guys on the date, but when it comes to the end of the date, one of them will be out of luck!

Enjoy!

-NG

'Ame' is property of YOURIMAGINARYFRIEND. I've obtained permission to write this fic from her. I also encourage you to read YIF's work.

Tenten sat back and watched- the boys were at it again.

"Say that again?!"

"I will, Neji-tan: Back off!"

The two butting heads were Neji and Ryouko. It was over Neji's rough treatment of Lee on a previous mission. Ryouko happened to have been included, and didn't exactly keep it a secret that he thought Neji was an egotistical prick.

To her surprise, Tenten found herself agreeing.

He's right. Lately, Neji's really let being a jonin go to his head. Lee works way harder than Neji does, too. It's really getting to me. Why does Neji have to do that? He's a great guy otherwise. Well...not to hear Ryouko say it. (sigh) He shouldn't add the high school girl honorifics to Neji's names, no matter how funny...

By instinct, Tenten knew the fight was about to come to blows. She casually stepped between both boys.

"Will you both grow up? Neji, don't treat Lee like that! And Ryouko...don't be so...uh...right!"

Tenten noticed something odd as she pushed the boys apart: Ryouko blushed heavily as soon as her hand touched his chest. Now, it wasn't a surprise to Tenten that Ryouko blushed like that; his kunoichi shyness was well known. What was surprising was that he was blushing around her.

I'm one of the few who knows he has a crush on Sakura. So why start blushing around me...unless... I wonder...could it be ME he has a crush on?

This got Tenten thinking. Big time.

Neji's been really distant lately. And it's not like we're boyfriend/girlfriend. Or he doesn't act it, anyway. Him and his stupid fate. Maybe I should look into Ryouko...If for no other reason than to get a measure of revenge on Neji.

...

Then again, it's not like Ryouko isn't kinda hot himself. Especially since he became a jonin.

Tenten found herself blushing at the prospect. For now, she just gave Ryouko a good smile, while favoring Neji with a glare.

--

Tenten had her head in the clouds all day. She had the day off, but didn't know what exactly to do. Usually, she trained with Neji. But she was still kind of ticked at him for how he treated Lee.

Another preoccupied girl was about to create a 'clash of fate' so to speak, with Tenten. Hinata had her head down, dreaming about Naruto. She didn't see Tenten. Neither one of them displayed anything like shinobi skills as they butted heads like little kids.

(crack!)

"Ow! Oh, I'm so sorry, Tenten!" Hinata fretted, playing with her fingers, apparently scared of Tenten. (and her shadow)

Tenten shook the cobwebs out. "S'okay, I'm fine. I wasn't paying attention. What are you up to, anyway?"

"Oh, I was just heading to breakfast! A friend from out of town is here today! Well, two actually. Why don't you come with me?"

With nothing better to do, Tenten followed Hinata down the street.

--

Ryouko had been kind of a lost soul for as long as he could remember. Lots of things went wrong for him. It had taken a long time to get promoted to jonin, among many other things. Chiefly was the fact that he was twenty, single, and had no prospects- only two vague crushes.

One crush was about to disappear.

"Ryouko! You won't believe this!"

Ryouko heard the sound of the orange-clad hurricane of a knucklehead ninja, Naruto, storming up behind him. He sounded as if he was in really high spirits. That made Ryouko genuinely happy for his friend. (although the fact that he was happy also invoked jealousy. That was nothing new. Ryouko ignored it)

“What’d you do? Sexy Jutsu to Iruka again?”

“No way, even better! I got Sakura to go out with me!”

(Ryouko’s eyes widen for a second, as if in pain. Then settle back into their normal expression. Sharp intake of breath)

“Really?!” he forced himself to exclaim. “That’s awesome! Way to go, Naruto! Man, I envy you- I could never get the guts up to ask a girl out.”

So Sakura picked someone else...I waited too long...Oh well. As long as she’s happy with Naruto...and he’s happy with her...that’s what matters. My dream is to see their dreams come true.

“I don’t see the big deal. Man, they’re just humans, y’know? And if they so no? Big deal!” Naruto exclaimed with his usual enthusiasm.

Only one with no shame could say that... Ryouko thought, though he knew it was more likely that Naruto was just a free spirit.

Now, it’s needless to say Ryouko is devastated. But it wouldn’t be Ryouko-ish to show it or tell anyone. So he kept quite, smiling for Naruto and Sakura’s sake. All the while, he pictured himself at age sixty-five, an assistant to a Hokage. Destined to die just as his teacher, the Third Hokage, did- in vain, with a seal of shame on his stomach.

As Sakura came striding up, Ryouko decided it was time to go. There were limits as to how far one could fake happiness. He couldn’t give in in front of these two. Their hardships had been so terrible...

Using a Body Flicker, Ryouko leapt down to the street, deciding to take a walk for the time being. In his haze, he bumped into someone. Well, two someones. He, of course, apologized.

“Sorry about that, Shikamaru. Oh, and Lady Temari! Is it time for the chunin exams already?”

“You can lose the ‘Lady’ stuff, Ryouko. We’ve known each other for too long. Besides that, we’re both jonin,” Temari informed him.

“I suppose so,” Ryouko was forced to agree. “Well, don’t let me keep you two. Oh, wait- Temari, is your brother around?”

Temari narrowed her eyes in thought. “Which one? They’re both here, and...oh...right. Sorry.”

Ryouko didn’t need to look up. It was common knowledge that he and the new Sand Kazekage hated each other with a burning passion. Maybe the Leaf could forgive Gaara, but Ryouko couldn’t. Not for nearly killing his friends and destroying so much land.

“It’s alright. I’m the one who holds the grudge. Enjoy your stay, Temari. See you later, Shikamaru.”

That left Shikamaru with Temari.

“So what ARE you doing here, anyway? Chunin exam meetings are still a week away,” Shikamaru asked.

“I’m here to see some old friends. Is that a crime?”

“Geez, you’re troublesome. Typical woman.”

--

Hinata led Temari to a small coffee house that seemed to go unnoticed normally. You had to go down a set of stairs to reach it.

“Never knew this place was here...” Tenten muttered to herself, looking around. It was quaint and kind of cute. Delicious aromas rose from everywhere, trapped in the low confines of the café. It made her hungry just thinking about what might be on the menu.

“I usually sit here.” Hinata pointed toward a corner table surrounded by comfy-looking cushions. She led the way over to the table and sat down delicately on one that allowed her to have her back to the wall.

Tenten chose the spot across next to her, figuring that Hinata would want to talk to these friends of hers, and that it was easier to do so when sitting across from them.

The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs caused both girls to look up to see who was coming in.

“Tems! Ame!” Hinata squeaked in delight.

Tenten didn’t really know the first girl who walked in. Short hair, pretty, though she looked as though she could hold her own in a scrape. The girl coming after her, though...

“YOU!”

Tenten jumped to her feet, weapons scroll at the ready. She was staring down Temari, the humiliation of chunin exams three years past fresh in her head.

“Get over yourself, girl. Push pause- do you see anyone else losing it ‘cause a Sand Villager walked in? The war’s been over for three years!” Temari said flippantly, angering Tenten all the more.

“You know what I mean, sand scum!” she snarled. But after a moment, she shook her head and sat down. “Whatever. I’ve got no reason to fight you. Nothing to prove.”

“Well, sure. Not that you COULD prove anything against me...” Temari hid the last part under a cough.

“WHAT WAS THAT?!” the normally-calm Tenten fumed.

“Uh...It was Tenten-right?” Ame asked carefully, not wanting to add more fuel to the fire.

Tenten almost snarled at her, but managed to reign in her temper. “Yes. Sorry for that (giant sweatdrop). Just, uh, hahaha, a little leftover aggression.”

“Riiiiighhhhttt...Well then, girl- shall we get to the topic at hand?” Temari spoke up. Coffee had been set in front of them. Apparently it was a courtesy at this place, since no one had ordered het.

“What topic’s *that*?” Tenten wasn’t privy to that information.

“Boys!” the other three girls told her in unison. What happened next was a mish-mash of conversation and gossip that only those involved could follow.

“What about Shikamaru, Temari?”

“Oh, shut up!”

“You totally want ‘shadow boy’!”

“Yeah?! Okay, what about Hinata and Naruto?!”

“Oh! U-u-ummm, I...”

“Are you still with Gaara, Ame?”

“Oh, yes!

“And what about you, Tenten? Still hanging with Neji?”

Tenten, who had been struggling to keep up, kind of shrugged. “Sorta. I thought about...y’know...playing the field a little...”

That kicked off a discussion on who would be good for Tenten. Despite Tenten’s protests to the contrary, it was somehow decided that she should find someone and double-date with Gaara and Ame.

-

Ryouko hadn’t gotten far when Izumo caught up with him.

“Lady Hokage wants to see you, Ryouko. She says it’s ‘mildly important’.”

Ryouko rolled his eyes. “Ah, thanks. Crap, it’s my day off. I was gonna train. And...well, it’s been a bad day. Oh well, maybe this’ll be interesting. Thanks, Izumo.”

-

“A note to where, M’lady?”

Ryouko's trepidation was understandable- he, like most of the village, had never heard of this 'Kimika' person.

('Kimika' is also owned by YOURIMAGINARYFRIEND)

"Yes, that's right. She runs a café. It's hardly your type of place, Ryouko. But I need someone to deliver the rent notice."

"And...Izumo couldn't be-cause..."

Tsunade pinched Ryouko's cheek. "Because it's more fun to boss you around. Besides, kiddo, you need a distraction. I know about the whole 'Sakura' thing, and I thank you for handling it graciously."

Ryouko straightened his back, just as he had seen Iruka do when addressed like this. But Tsunade shook her head.

"No, you can relax. Listen, not to heap on the bad news here..."

"But you will anyway. Just tell me," Ryouko half-snapped. Tsunade was understanding of that, apparently.

"I have to inform you that you failed your teacher's qualification test."

Ryouko shook his head. "That...can't be right..."

Tsunade nodded. "It is. Instructor isn't your best spot. We need men like you in the field. For blacker operations. Such as the Akatsuki. But we can leave that discussion until later. For now, just- for once- follow orders."

Ryouko inclined his head, then disappeared.

-

"Where the hell is this place?!"

After an hour of looking, Ryouko was ticked. Big time. Where could this place be? How had he not noticed it before? He had investigated every crack of the Hidden Leaf at one time or another. So where?"

As he was wondering, Shikamaru wandered by again.

"Hey, you lost?"

Ryouko nodded. "Where the hell is 'Kimika's'?"

To Ryouko's surprise, Shikamaru knew.

“Yeah, it’s down Tea Leaf Street, first on your right. Go down the flight of stairs you see.”

“Ah, okay. Thanks.”

--

Another set of steps coming down the stairs made all four girls turn their heads to look.

“Huh? Ryouko? What’s he doing here?!” Tenten whispered, ducking her head a little, wondering why she was doing that even as she did it. Temari, sensing the kill, smirked.

“HEY! YOU, HOTTIE!”

Ryouko didn’t answer- no way someone was talking to him. Temari didn’t like being ignored, so she got her point across by swinging her fan at him, smacking him painfully in the back of the head. THAT got his attention. As he spun around, he had two kunai out, ready to throw. He stopped short upon seeing who it was.

“Huh? Oh, sorry about that. Good morning,” Ryouko bowed his greeting as well, speaking carefully.

Ame nudged Tenten. “Go on- ask him! C’mon, what’ll it hurt? I can tell from here he’s girl shy! No WAY he’ll say no! Besides, I still need to learn my way around the Leaf, and it’ll be weird if it’s just you, me, and Gaara!”

Tenten gulped, but raised her hand. “H-hey, Ryouko?”

Now, this was a well-guarded secret, but Ryouko’s second crush had been on Tenten. But he had put paid to that thought- for her affections, he would have been up against Neji. And that was an impossible battle. Against a memory of Sasuke, Ryouko had stood a chance against Sakura, if he had just gotten the guts up to ask her out.

“What’s up, Tenten?”

Tenten gulped again, but stood her ground. “Say, uh, are you free tonight?”

“I am. Am I needed on a mission or something?”

Temari smacked her forehead in exasperation. “THAT’S WHY YOU’RE SINGLE, DUNCE! Gah! Boys are so stupid! She’s asking you out!”

“Oh...”

That had caught Ryouko beyond off-guard. Unfortunately, even though Tenten knew how gun-shy he was when it came to kunoichi, she was kind of taking his surprise as a turn down. So she was as surprised as Ryouko was when he said:

“Sure, I’d love to, Tenten. Where and what time?”

-

Ryouko's silence had been partly due to shock. But there was another part to it. A worse one.

I'm a 'revenge date'. That must be it. She saw me and Neji fighting earlier, and agreed with me. So she's going to take a swipe at Neji by dating me. I want to date her, but this is happening for all the wrong reasons.

...

All the same, I can't be sure. Maybe it IS me she likes. The only way to find out is to date her. At least I won't be alone with her. God only knows what might happen. (Note- he's probably thinking about Tenten's proficiency with weapons, not...uh, you get it) So that girl is Ame, then. But who's her date?

-

"You?!" Gaara rasped/Ryouko exclaimed. Ryouko immediately took up a formal stance.

"It's uh...a pleasure, Lord Kazekage..." he choked out. **Wow, that was as big a lie as I've ever told...**

"...Idiot..."

Tenten shifted closer to Ryouko, giving him a warning nudge. Ame gripped Gaara's arm, silently bidding him not to attack.

I don't know how strong those two are, but they can't be a match for Gaara. This date is off to a dubious start... Ame breathed out, trying to keep calm. Never a dull moment in the Hidden Leaf, that was for certain.

"C'mon guys, let's just get the date going. No fighting. Just relaxing."

I've had enough fighting for today. Is it Ryouko? Does he make other guys jealous or something? Or just guys who are strong? Ugh, I've gotta stop thinking about that. It's no better than Neji bullying Lee. In this case, Ryouko is Lee, just standing up for himself.

...

Wait, why am I dating Ryouko? I mean, Neji and I were never 'official' or anything, but still... I mean, isn't this kind of cheating on him? If we were never together, then no...technically. But this doesn't feel right...

The date just started, Tenten. Give it some time. You know Ryouko well enough to just relax and take it easy. And if worse comes to worse, and we get a brawl...well, he can handle Gaara... I hope.

-

Dinner was alright. No one really noticed the food. Some kind of seafood. Ryouko was too nervous to taste what he was eating; Tenten was uptight; Gaara was focused on Ame; Ame was fixated on Gaara.

Look at them. They're so relaxed around each other... Ryouko noticed. He played with his

chopsticks. **How come? She looks like too nice of a girl to hang out with a hellish monster like that. Then again, I don't know her. Maybe she's a hellish monster, too?**

Ryouko's trying, but it's pretty obvious we both lack dating experience. Or are first dates always this awkward? I'm usually with Neji, but I've known him forever. I don't know what to think when it comes to Ryouko. I mean, it's not that I don't like him...I'm just confused...

Gaara and Ame's thoughts were on each other. Clearly, they had a clue when it came to dating. Ryouko and Tenten didn't have any idea. Both of them were combat specialists. On paper, it seemed like they would be a good match. But their collective awkwardness was embarrassing.

That, and one other thing. While Ame and Gaara sampled off each other's plates, Ryouko decided to see what was going on with Tenten.

"Are you alright?" he asked, trying to figure out a way to explain what he meant.

"I'm fine, Neji...I mean, Ryouko!"

Ryouko closed his eyes, nodding to himself. He stood up, pushing his chair back.

"Gaara, do you have a minute?"

Gaara glared at him. "...No."

"I think you'd better make a minute..."

"...No."

Ame rolled her eyes. "Will you boys knock it off?! Gaara, just see what he wants. I'm not going anywhere." Ame exhaled in exasperation. "Sorry about that, Ryouko. You know how Gaara is..."

"All to well..." Ryouko muttered. He nodded in the direction that he and Gaara should go.

-

"What the hell do you want?" Gaara snapped at Ryouko the second they were out of earshot.

"Do me a favor and get Tenten and Ame talking. I've got a plan that will make this night more enjoyable for everyone."

"You're going to let me kill you?"

Ryouko put a hand on Gaara's shoulder aggressively. "No, you stupid sand demon. You'll see. Just keep them both put."

-

Ame and Tenten had tried to make small talk. It hadn't gone well.

"So, uh, what's Gaara like when he's not scaring the hell out of people?" Tenten managed to spit out. **A-kward...**

"He's a sweetheart when you get right down to it," Ame replied, shrugging. "Just like any other guy when you find their sensitive spot. How about that Ryouko guy?"

Tenten laughed a little. "Well, he's scared of kunoichi. But he's really a good guy. That's why I feel kind of bad..."

"What do you mean?" Ame wanted to know. Tenten had been speaking cryptically, as if responding to her own thoughts rather than Ame's questions and answers.

"Well, I...you see...I had a fight with a guy who I really, really like. I took Ryouko's side in the fight, and I think I dated him out of..."

"Spite?" Ame filled in the blank.

"Yeah. I wonder if Ryouko knows...I don't know what to do. I mean, I like him, but just as a friend. 'though he's my second choice..."

Ame smoothed her dress, buying herself a few seconds to think. "Well, I don't know either of you personally, but I would say a guy that upstanding needs to hear the truth."

Immediately, Tenten knew she was right.

"I'm going to tell him as soon as he gets back." Tenten paused for a second. "So, uh, is Gaara...y'know...a nice guy?"

Ame had to stop and think for a minute. "W-ell...he's brave and strong, and nice to me personally..."

The pregnant pause that Ame left at the end gave both girls a giggling fit, to the point of tears. They were laughing so hard they didn't notice Gaara had come back.

But he didn't have Ryouko with him. Instead...

"NEJI!"

-

Ryouko smirked to himself, albeit a little forlornly. "That's how it should be. Heh. I'm such a dork...Well, I'm out, might as well go get a drink..."

"Hey, Ryouko!"

Ryouko winced as he always did when Lady Tsunade wanted something from him. "Yes, M'lady?"

“Looks like you’re free! Come drink with me! It’s on you! Haha, who says I’m out of the game? I’m dating a guy less than half my age!”

Ryouko didn’t dare say a word. **There’s no correct way to respond to this except to pony up for the sake...**

Then again, I guess I can say I dated Lady Tsunade. Until she sobers up and kills me for it... My life sucks.

19 - Affair of the Heart

NOTE: PLEASE READ 'DESIRES' (CHAPTER 17) FIRST.

I couldn't wait for Ryouko to come. I had heard other girls talk about how they couldn't wait for their boyfriends, or they were gonna date this guy, or whatever. I have to say, I never say the big deal.

But now, what a difference! Ryouko isn't even my boyfriend yet, and I can't stop thinking about him! When I think of his face after I kissed him on the cheek, I get all gooey inside! And the only way to stop feeling gooey is to remember how he shied away from me when I went to touch his face that first time.

So now, my mission is to make him trust me. It won't take long. Call it women's intuition, but I think he really cares about me. He is two and half years older than me, but who cares? That's nothing!

I yawned and stretched myself. It was time to get up to go see Lady Tsunade. She would grill me for details, no doubt.

Trying to rub the sleep out of my eyes, I stepped into the shower. I lathered up and washed quickly. I enjoy my bath time, but I always wash as fast as I can, in case I have to get out quickly. But when I don't, I get the added bonus of being able to just stand under the hot water and relax. It's so comforting, especially on my achy body. I may be strong, but I had to pay to earn that strength! Lady Tsunade packs a wallop, and even more so on her apprentice. She's hard on her assistants, too, but that's only because she wants us to be excellent. And I think we are. Our mortality rate is really low, especially considering our dangerous line of work.

I giggled to myself- That was how Ryouko had first gotten the idea to ask me out. He's a frequent...customer, I guess. He always needs to be patched up. He's one of the bravest guys I know, but he pays for it sometimes. I don't know how many knives have hit his body, but most of them were ones he could have dodged. He didn't dodge because there was someone behind him he needed to protect. I guess I'm envious of that kind of bravery.

As I was standing in the shower, I thought of this one time when Ryouko had to fight without a shirt. It was soooo hot! His body isn't horribly muscular, but it fits him. He's built solidly without being showy. Seeing his body move with his martial artist's grace, and sweat dripping off his body...

I shivered, thinking of the boy I was meeting tomorrow night. He was so innocent about love, and that's just what I wanted.

Being that he's twenty and I'm still seventeen, we've got to take things slow; at least until my birthday. That's tonight (well, tomorrow morning, technically), and I'm really excited! I mean, I'm not going to jump into bed with him, but at least I won't have a curfew anymore! Finally, I'll be an adult, and I can have some independence. I love my parents, but they're so overprotective! My Father wouldn't let me date just anyone. In fact, he would rather see me date Sasuke than Ryouko. Sasuke might be a traitor, but his bloodline is that of a powerful clan. Ryouko has no such distinction, but I don't care. I know that

Ryouko is both ten times the man that Sasuke is, and ten times the warrior. Sasuke fights on borrowed power, while Ryouko makes do with what he had, all the while seeking ways to improve himself. This isn't some sexual innuendo, but that kid's gotta have a huge set of balls to do what he does.

I shivered slightly at that thought. When I was a young girl and thought of love, I didn't think of anything past kissing. When I got older, I thought about kids. What was always missing was (1) the way kids are made and (2) The fun you have in-between getting to know each other. Even the awkwardness in of first kisses and touches, and the mixture of feelings you feel as you get to know each other...all of it felt good, even when in any other situation, it would have been a horrible feeling. It was kind of a right of passage. Could you stand each other at both their best and their worst? Could you keep secrets from each other? Could you keep each other's secrets? Was there a spark there? All questions that dating answers- if you can sweat out the awkwardness.

I stepped out of the shower, studying my body in the mirror. I always felt fat, pasty-skinned, small-breasted, big-foreheaded, and generally unattractive. But Ryouko thought I was beautiful, and he made me feel beautiful. We had only dated once, but I had fallen hard for him. It was strange that I had just said 'yes' to a date on a whim, but I haven't regretted it. And tonight he was coming over! Ryouko was coming over!

Frantically, I glanced around my room. I was nearly eighteen, but I still had stuffed animals on my bed. I started to put them away in my dresser, but stopped myself. Ryouko wouldn't care about that. If the two of us got in my room, we wouldn't be thinking of stuffed animals.

I squeezed the bear in my hands as I blushed. I put the bear in front of my face, though there was no one to hide the redness from but myself.

I told him it was his turn to do the kissing tonight... But I don't know how! I mean, I guess there's no set way to kiss, but how do I know if it feels good to him? The last thing I want is for him to be uncomfortable while we kiss.

-

I was horribly distracted when it came to studying today. I tried extra-hard, too, so Lady Tsunade wouldn't think my dating Ryouko to be a bad thing. When one of my healing salves somehow exploded, Lady Tsunade turned to me, almost angry. I winced, knowing how vicious her temper can be. But she just shook her head, smiled, and said 'ah, love!'

"Sakura? Are you okay?"

It was Shizune, Lady Tsunade's chief aide. Her and I get along well. We've both seen the best and worst of Lady Tsunade, and lived to tell the tale. That makes us automatic friends. Shizune was never someone I could just talk to, though. We were friends, but she was older. But maybe on a matter of love, she could help? She was dating Genma, an exam proctor and a friend of Ryouko's. So maybe...

"I'm fine," I answered earnestly, brushing my hair aside. "I was just thinking about Ryouko..."

"Oh, I see! Good thoughts? A special date?"

I knew she wasn't trying to pry. She just needed more information in order to help me.

"Both," I replied, blushing. "He's coming over tonight. And he's never met my parents. Even though I live on my own, my Mother is still really protective of me. And Ryouko is twenty... I mean, not that two years is a lot! But I don't know how my Mom will feel. And my Dad...well, he wants me to keep after Sasuke. Oh, damn it! It's all because of his Uchiha blood! But I want someone who I can really love, without worrying about grudges and all that. Sasuke isn't the same guy anymore. And Ryouko's just kind of..."

"He kind of worships you, doesn't he?" Shizune intoned, looking up at the sky.

We had wandered to the top of the Hokage mansion, taking a break from our duties. Lady Tsunade didn't seem to mind today. Maybe she understood I needed to talk to someone? I had considered talking to My Lady, but she was too high strung for this.

"I mean, having a crush on you for two years like that, and not saying a word. And he even tried to make sure you got your wish. He would have delivered you to Sasuke if you had asked. (sigh) It's so romantic! I bet you didn't notice, but he always blushed around you!"

"He blushes around every 'available' kunoichi, though!" I protested, thinking of him. "I mean, why not Tenten? I know he liked her, too..."

Shizune put a thoughtful hand under her chin. "Well, true. But I know you were the original. And besides, everyone knew Tenten only had eyes for Neji anyway. Besides, it was YOU he asked out, right?"

"...I guess so. (Giggle) Boys are so shy about their feelings!" I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, c'mon, we're not always that much better as girls! I mean, either boys are skittish, or we come on too strong. That, or boys are clueless about emotions, while we're too in tune with them. Either way, love is a hard game. But it's worthwhile."

I smiled and hugged Shizune. "Thank you. I think that's what I needed to hear."

CRASH! BONK!

Shizune and I glanced at each other, nodded once, then took off for Lady Tsunade's office.

-

"DAMN IT!"

I ducked as a scroll flew my way.

"My Lady, what's wrong?!" I shouted over her rampage. As I surveyed the carnage, I saw that she had thrown her chair out the window. (Not for the first time, either. She has an explosive temper. We're all

just thankful it isn't her desk that she tends to throw during these fits.)

"That damn Danzou! Trying to demand that I change the way I do things! Ugh! I hate that old, crippled, shriveled, crotch-rot, worthless old bastard!"

Her temper tantrum not quite over, Tsunade picked up her heavy wooden paperweight. She flung it out the door. Unfortunately, my date was walking in at that moment.

THOCK!

The paperweight smacked Ryouko dead-center of the forehead. It slid off his face, leaving a comical look of shock on his face, along with a cut that allowed blood to run down his forehead.

"Coincidence, or good aim?" Ryouko said with a grin, massaging his forehead. "Have I done something to incur your wrath M'lady?"

Even M'lady, wound as tight as she was, had to lighten up a little bit at that statement. It was pretty common knowledge that she and Ryouko used to get along as well as cats and dogs. In fact, that was why Ryouko wasn't a jonin yet. He seemed to notice me at the moment I thought that.

"Oh! Good morning, Sakura-Ojousama."

I shook my head. "Nope. Wrong title, kiddo. Try again."

"Sakura-dono?"

"One last try..."

"Sakura-sama?"

I finally gave him a little smack in the head. "No! If you've GOTTA add an honorific, don't make it so formal! Are you being dense on purpose?"

"No, it's my nature," he shot back, getting my drift. "Sorry, Sakura...chan?"

"Oh, we're that close now, are we? For pet names?" I play-scolded, hands on my hips. I had to sigh as he recoiled immediately.

"Sorry, my mistake!" Ryouko said, panicked. This caused me to sigh.

Before we had started dating, I had always felt bad for Ryouko. Things never seemed to go right for him. And when they DID go right, something else went wrong. But he was a genuinely nice guy. So when we started dating, it made me even sadder. What was simple flirting to me was a whole different world to him. One he hadn't been in before.

"S'okay," I finally said aloud. "M'lady, I'm taking my break now. I'll be right back."

-
Once outside, on the outside staircase that led to Lady Tsunade's office, I gently explained to Ryouko what I had meant about the honorific thing. To my surprise, he seemed to understand. He, of course, apologized. He couldn't quite meet my gaze as he spoke. To most, that would be an indication that someone is lying. As for me, I just knew it to be Ryouko's shy nature kicking in.

"I...don't mean to be so...skittish. I trust you...I mean...sorry."

That's what he said. He had to work hard to say it out loud, I'd imagine, but he did.

Ryouko is like a dog someone kicked for fun once too often. Now his first instinct is to bite, rather than show affection. But he tries so hard! It's both cute and sad. I can literally see him forcing himself to fight his first instinct. But this was easy to fix- I would simply have to train him.

I patted him on the head. "It's fine. I know how you are. Okay, Ryo-kun?"

I had hoped by giving him a pet name, he would see that it was okay, too. **Lead by example and all...tho I can't wait to drop the formality entirely.**

"I follow, Sakura...-chan."

I grinned as he said it after that moment's hesitation. It was just so funny to think that a warrior like him could be humbled simply by a girl's request. He's got the whole 'mystery' thing going for. Plus a little roguish five-o'clock shadow, and that baby face. The bags under his eyes from stress were even cute in their own way. They were just a cool little quirk. The eyes, hazel in color, were almond-shaped and expressive. I wondered how he analyzed my looks?

"Oh!" I smacked my fist against my hand, remembering why I had wanted to talk to him to begin with. "Tonight! Can you come at five?"

"Five's good."

"Great! Um...Listen, I've, uh, never brought a boy home before..."

I was nervous now. My palms were sweating, and my throat was dry. I kept fidgeting, too. This was a hard one to get out.

"And my parents can be kind of...overprotective."

"I expected as much," Ryouko replied. "I'll be on my best behavior. If you just tell them I'm afraid of you, I'm sure they'll warm up to me."

I giggled at the little joke, then told the hardest part of my warning to him. "My mom is okay, but she'll question you a lot. It's my Dad...he's, um...well, nothing's too good for his little girl. He's expecting someone with a prestige like Sasuke's, you know? Not that you're not prestigious in your own way, but, I mean..."

I watched Ryouko as he stepped forward, closer to me. His hand shook, but it found its place in mind.

His hand was sweating as much as mine was, though he either didn't notice or didn't care. He gave my hand a quick squeeze.

"Don't worry. If your parents weren't wary of me, then they wouldn't be good parents. I'm an older boy who they see as a threat to their little girl. I'm sure that's normal. But don't worry about that- it's my job to make them like me. Or, at least, tolerate me. I can be convincing."

I hadn't seen this coming. Ryouko was smooth, calm, and confident. He said and did just the right things to put me at ease. It was only our second date, and I didn't call him my 'boyfriend' yet, but I was pretty sure I would be soon. I really had to talk to the other girls about him. Tenten would be perfect, since Ino was still seething with jealousy (heh).

Out loud, I managed a nod. "Good to know. Five o'clock, then?"

"I'll be there at five. Uh, just one thing...I know where you live, but what about your parents? I mean, you normally live alone, don't you?"

In all the chaos, that had slipped my mind. I usually had my own apartment, while my parents lived in a house that wasn't too far away. We would be eating at my parent's house. I wasn't ready for Ryouko to meet my parents, but I didn't want to wait, either. And if anyone saw him coming to my apartment...well, gossip is a jutsu that everyone in the Hidden Leaf knows.

"They live on Leaf Tea street, off the main road. Right near the fruit and vegetable stand. On the other side there's an oden cart. Red roof, green door..."

"Oh, I know the place, I think. If worse comes to worse, my dog can help me find the place."

I brightened again, giving a flirty smile. "Okay, it's a date!"

"Oh, really?"

I turned red with embarrassment. Asuma-sensei and Kurenai-sensei were coming up the stairs behind Ryouko. Now, Ryouko was tight with Asuma and Kurenai, but I wasn't. Ino was on Asuma's team, and to be honest Kurenai's team (Shino, Hinata, and Kiba) weirded me out a little.

"That's right, I'm going out with her," Ryouko told them happily. But I could sense a dangerous edge to his voice. "So, is it the same with the two of you, then?"

Kurenai and Asuma dating was the worst-kept secret in the Hidden Leaf.

"Fine. I won't tell if you won't..." Asuma murmured, backed into a corner.

"Deal," Ryouko replied.

"But I want details, Ryouko. Y'know, after you...y'know...if you have a cigarette-"

"O-kay, thanks sensei! I'll see you later!"

--

Sakura's father was a harsh, brutally-honest man. Usually clad traditionally in a hakama, gi, and haori jacket, he was no great Shinobi. But he was a genius when it came to the crafting of weapons. He didn't make them himself- he appraised their worth. His opinions were regarded as the best and most honest in the Fire Country.

With that kind of prestige, it seemed natural that he'd want the best for his little girl.

"Who is this boy again, Sakura?" he asked, flipping his fan shut.

Sakura gulped- that wasn't a good sign. It meant he already disapproved of Ryouko.

"His name is Ryouko. He's a chunin, but he's easily as strong as a jonin," Sakura was ready to defend Ryouko. She wasn't letting this one get away.

"And Uchiha was stronger than a jonin. So tell me again why my little girl is settling for this...this...nameless street thug?"

"He's not a nameless street thug! He's already worth more than most of ANBU! And he really cares about me! Blood isn't everything, Dad!"

At this, Sakura's father stood up. He snapped his fan open at Sakura.

"You are still a child. You know nothing of this world, no matter what ridiculous notion that woman (Tsunade) fills your head with. It would be better for Uchiha to leave you with a bastard child than this pedigree-less commoner to put the world at your feet."

"Don't you DARE say that to Ryouko, Dad! I you do, I swear I'll...I'll...!"

Sakura's mother came in, waving her broom to settle the two down. "No more fighting! Dear, we owe it to Sakura to give her a chance to pick a boy on her own. She can be trusted with that."

Sakura smiled at her mother. Though that didn't last long.

"But if that boy mistreats her, I'll make sure he never touches her again!"

"Agh, you don't get it; either of you! He loves me! This is a boy who worshipped me from a distance because he didn't think he was good enough for me! That should tell you how he is!" Sakura half-screamed. This was why she moved out as soon as she became a genin.

"It means that this fool had a measure of sense. He was right- he is NOT good enough for you."

"Save your judgment for after you meet him, at least! Gah, I knew I shouldn't have gotten you two involved! I knew it! Do you ALWAYS have to criticize my choices? Can't you ever support even *one* of them?! You didn't like me learning from Lady Tsunade, you don't like my clothes; and that's fine! At least you've seen them to judge them!"

-

Ryouko stood outside, his heart flip-flopping in his chest. A girl had never invited him over before. How was he supposed to act, again? Like himself? Yeah, that worked SO well when it came to playing nice with other ninja. He couldn't let this go bad- for Sakura's sake.

Unknowingly, Ryouko was walking into a hellish scene.

-

“AND DON'T YOU DARE TELL ME HOW I SHOULD TREAT MY OWN DAUGHTER!”

Sakura backed up- her father was scary when he was this angry. Waving that fan around, too...

It's made of metal, and he's coming too close!

CLANG!

In a split-second, and in one smooth motion, Ryouko had caught Sakura around the waist, spun her away from the danger, and blocked the fan with the back of his hand. But he wasn't glaring or anything. He only gave a shy grin.

“And you must be Sakura's father. How do you do, Haruno-san? I'm Ryouko, the one meeting Sakura. Your daughter is certainly a well-bred young lady.”

Sakura shook her head a little. She flashed back to Kakashi-sensei. Back in the Land of Waves. Stopping Zabuza's attack with the back of his hand, then talking so calmly.

Could it be that someday Ryouko will be like Kakashi-sensei? I mean, it's possible, isn't it?

Sakura's father glared at Ryouko. But Ryouko only smiled in return, though his eyes held a note of challenge. That wasn't like a 'haha' challenge- that was a 'if you hurt my girl, there'll be hell to pay' challenge. In other words, Sakura's new boyfriend had already figured out how her father worked.

Haruno snapped his fan open. “Fine then. I see you aren't impressed by me.”

“Just the opposite, really. But first priority is Sakura's safety. I'm sure you could appreciate that,” Ryouko replied calmly. “I didn't want her perfect looks to get marred by that fan you're swinging. Would I be correct to say that it's Chinese in origin, used primarily in tai-chi?”

“Oh? And how would you know that?”

“I own one myself, actually. It's an interesting weapon.”

Sakura couldn't help but smile. **Checkmate by Ryouko. Playing on Dad's weakness. I love this guy!**

But that was a new thought to Sakura. Love? It seemed like such a strong word. Was it wrong? It was so hard to tell what was true and what wasn't.

But it didn't *feel* wrong.

Ryouko knew just how to deal with my Father...who would've guessed? Then again, it must only be girls that make him shy. Anything else he can handle, apparently. And that line about my safety- that wasn't just to pacify Dad, either. He's demonstrated that again and again against worse enemies than Dad.

"Oh, so you're the one whose dating my little Sakura, are you? Well, welcome! Forgive my husband, he tends to get over-excited..."

Sakura's mom had since walked in, giving her husband an even gaze.

"Shall we eat?"

-

I sat across from Ryouko, wondering how things were going to work. Of him and I, I was certain. But my parents...

It began immediately.

"Ryouko? What kind of name is that?" Dad asked, not bothering to hide the hostility in his voice.

"Oh, it's an alias," Ryouko answered pleasantly, as if there was nothing strange about saying your name was an alias during dinner conversation. "My second. My first is 'Ekyt', if that's any more comfortable for you."

"What's your real name?"

"I can't say. ANBU policy, sir. I apologize."

Huh? His real name? I've wondered for a while what it might be. But I got so used to calling him Ryouko, that I forget all about his real name.

"ANBU? Black ops? Well, I guess that means you aren't a criminal..."

"Dad!" I growled, willing him to shut up. This was ridiculous. My mom stepped in. I was thankful at first, but not for long.

"So, Ryouko, tell us a little about yourself," my mom requested.

"Let's see...I've been a citizen here for seven years. I'm a chunin, and...well, that's really it. I work with Sakura a lot. That's how I met her."

“My girl’s a medic. Why would you see her so often? You don’t do stupid things like the Uzumaki boy, do you?”

Ryouko chuckled a little. “Not quite. Well, actually, I protect...”

Ryouko’s voice trailed off. I knew it was because he realized that saying ‘I protect your daughter’ would mean that I might seem weak. So he bit his tongue and tried to recover.

“...I get added to squads to protect them, when necessary. That’s really my job. And it means risk, so I do get hurt. But never seriously. Even if I did, though, your daughter could patch me up easily. She’s very talented.”

Nice save, Ryouko! I cheered. If my parents knew how much danger I was in during any given mission...

“And you believe yourself able to protect my daughter?” my Mom asked sweetly.

“I do, ma’am. But as I’ve said, she’s a strong girl. Should she ever need me to protect her, I would do so with every last breath, and every drop of blood,” Ryouko told them, a dead-serious look on his face and absolute conviction in his voice.

Aww, that’s so sweet!

“Sakura, leave us for a moment...”

My Dad had just commanded me to leave my date. Alone, with my parents. This was going to work out one of two ways.

One:

Dad: You’re the perfect man for my girl! Marry her!

Mom: Give me grandchildren! ^^

Or Two:

Dad: Never touch her again!

Mom: Bastard!

I shuddered- I knew which one was more likely. This was my first boyfriend, and my parents didn’t like new things. They didn’t like surprises, and bringing Ryouko to them was most certainly a surprise.

“Okay, Dad...” I said carefully. I gave Ryouko a fond glance. He met my eyes, giving me the tiniest of winks while mouthing ‘it’s fine’. I sighed with a sad smile and left the room.

Though he had been in worse danger, I couldn’t help but feel like I was leaving Ryouko at the mercy of his worst nemesis yet.

I propped myself near the kitchen door. No way I was going to let Ryouko get grilled by my parents to

some set of unknown questions. I apologized to him in my mind, and started to eavesdrop. (easy for a ninja, really)

-

Sakura's parents circled Ryouko. In his mind, Ryouko couldn't help but picture a shark waving a fan and a shark in an apron.

"So, how old are you?"

"I'm twenty."

"Ah! You're too old for my little girl!"

Ryouko shrugged. "I disagree, sir. As I recall, she'll be eighteen today. Two years age difference hardly means that much. Just my opinion, of course."

Mr. Haruno slapped the table with his fan, pointing in violently at Ryouko. (Ryouko didn't flinch) "It's not your opinion that matters!"

Ryouko didn't even blink. "You're right. It's Sakura's opinion that matters. It might help, sir, if you'd tell me why you don't like me. Is it my blood? My looks? Or have I offended you somehow? Or is it that your daughter likes me?"

"Are you telling me that my opinion doesn't matter?!" Sakura's Father snarled, snapping his fan on the table again.

"I'm only asking you why you don't like me. But if you're asking about opinions...no. I'm only saying that it's Sakura's opinion I value more. Which should be the case, also in my opinion."

Sakura's father stood up, clearly trying to intimidate Ryouko. "Never again...NEVER AGAIN! NEVER SEE HER AGAIN, YOU LITTLE SMARTASS! NOW, LEAVE!"

Ryouko stood up, glaring at Mr. Haruno mildly. "The choice is your daughter's. Now I understand why she was so nervous about tonight. She was worried you would browbeat me, just like you tried to do just now. And I made you angry because I had answers for you, right? Here's a fact: I love your daughter. I haven't told her as much, but I will. Tonight, she turns eighteen and can choose whether or not she loves me. The choice is hers. And if you don't want her to hate you, I would suggest leaving it up to her-she's more than looks. I know she's a capable girl. That's one of the reasons why I love her."

With that, Ryouko bowed slightly to Sakura's Mother, then stepped out the back door.

--

Outside the door, Sakura's hands covered her mouth.

Oh my God! He said he loved me! And he stood up to my Dad! But he's leaving! No, I'm going

after him! To hell with this! I'm a woman, and I want to choose who to be with! And I pick Ryouko!

Lots of crazy ideas ran through my head. It was about 6:30 pm now. I wouldn't be eighteen until midnight. No, actually, at 5:30 in the morning. I was born at dawn on March 28th.

But I felt like an adult. I had done so much, and without my parents help. How they could do this to who I loved was beyond me. I hadn't told him that I loved him, but that was going to be the subject the next time I saw him.

Giving way to my anger, I crashed into the kitchen. Without waiting for a greeting, I shouted at my parents:

"HOW COULD YOU? HE LOVES ME, AND I LOVE HIM! HOW DARE YOU TRY TO DICTATE TO ME WHO I SHOULD AND SHOULDN'T LOVE! I'M TELL YOU THIS NOW- I WILL HAVE NOTHING ELSE TO DO WITH YOU OR MY CLAN UNTIL YOU ACCEPT RYOUKO!"

With that, I stormed out after Ryouko, one crazy idea in my head bubbling to the surface.

--

I finally caught up to Ryouko. He hadn't gone far. He was probably waiting for me.

"You heard that, I guess?" he said, a little smile in his voice.

"Yeah..." I answered. "And it was really beautiful!"

I watched him blush. "Yeah, well...I should say it to your face, I suppose. But I owe you more than that..."

I wanted to know what that was, but words fell out of my mouth faster than I could comprehend them. "Ryouko, I love you! I...I can't stand my parents anymore! I...I want you! Let's just run! Let's elope!"

I saw the shock on his face. But I didn't see him hate the idea, and that gave me hope. Therefore, I was saddened when he said:

"We can't....I'd love to, but we can't. You're still seventeen for another few hours. I care about you too much to get you involved in some legal battle. And after that, you'll be free to make your own choices anyway. If I'm still what you want then...well, we can take our time and do it the right way. Besides that, your teacher would kill us both! I don't even want to think of what she'd do to me..."

I laughed and had to agree. "Yeah, she would! She would totally maim you first, though!"

Ryouko's mind was somewhere else. He was thinking about something. He was still so reluctant when it came to me. I wanted him to open up to me. To let me into his life. To let his problems become mine. He has a heavy burden, and I want to share it's weight. But he's so shy...

“What time were you born, if I can ask?”

It had taken him a while to think of his question, I guess. “I was born at 5:30 or so. At the dawn.” I had always been proud of that fact, for some reason. It seemed cool to be born at sunrise.

Ryouko gave me a smile. It was shy, but it was there. Slowly, he pulled off his glove, then extended his hand to me.

“We didn’t finish our date. We can’t elope, or run away, but we can walk and have some time alone. That’s what a date is for, right?”

Whoa, I didn’t see that coming! It was so romantic! But I was tired, and I said so. But Ryouko surprised me once again.

“Well, if you fall asleep, I’ll just carry you. Unless you’d rather just go home. That’s fine, too. It’s your barbeque.”

I smiled and wrapped Ryouko up in a hug. “Nah, let’s go paint the town red!”

--

A couple hours later, we had seen a lot of the village. I was getting sleepy. But it was almost my birthday! I was determined to stay awake. I hadn’t said anything to Ryouko, but I wanted him to be kissing me for a full minute straight as I went from age seventeen to age eighteen. I wanted his lips and tongue to be the first things I tasted as an adult. I hadn’t ever kissed anyone on the mouth before, and it was a safe bet Ryouko hadn’t either.

That would just make this time all the more special. A first time, with someone you loved...there was just no beating it. It was one of the things every girl dreams of when she’s little.

It was now 4:30 in the morning. I hadn’t ever had so much fun! But I was getting tired. So I sat down on a bench. Ryouko, who always trained really hard, wasn’t tired in the least. (Though it might have been nervous energy- he still shook while I was near him. Poor guy. I can tell when he’s fighting himself.) Apparently, he possesses good instincts for never dating before.

He knelt down, facing away from me.

“If you’re tired, I’ll carry you like I promised.”

“Ryo-kun, you’re something else! But you’re shaking so much. Try not to drop me, okay?” I joked, climbing up on him piggyback-style. I felt his arms wrap around me upper legs to brace me. I’ve gotta say, he was pretty uncomfortable with this! But much like anything else, he was uncomfortable with it because he really desired it.

“Don’t worry, Ojousama. I won’t drop you.”

I smacked him on the head. “We had a talk about titles this morning, you know...”

“I know. But I suck at flirting, so...”

I giggled and cuddled up to him, resting my head on his shoulder. I made sure to hold on nice and tight, too. He was blushing so hard the heat was rising off his face. I could feel a little five o'clock shadow on his cheeks, and immediately thought that it was kind of sexy. I thought that until we started running up at a 90 degree angle!

“What the hell?!”

“Can't see the sunrise from down there!” Ryouko called back to me. (We were running up one of the village walls, apparently) “I'm not wearing a watch, so I've got to guess at what time it is.”

As we reached the top, it was about two minutes until 5:30. Ryouko caught his breath, then turned to face me. He hesitated for a second, then gave me a tight hug.

“I love you!” he managed to say, though it must have taken a lot of guts for him to spit that out. Then, before I could respond, he kissed me full on the lips.

Just like I imagined!

We held this position for over a minute. With the sun behind us, overlooking the village, it was as if this had been set up just for us. I pulled myself closer to him until I couldn't get any tighter to his body.

All too soon, the kiss was over.

“Happy Birthday, Sakura.”

Eighteen years of birthdays- I don't think I need to say which one is my favorite. It might have been corny, but to anyone who's been in love, you know what I mean. That special someone kissing you at a special time...there's just no beating it.

TO BE CONTINUED!

20 - The Shore (WIP)

Everyone was having a good time, Sakura noticed. Even Ryouko seemed to be enjoying himself. It was rare that they all went to the beach, so everyone was doing their best to relax.

To Sakura, a single girl in her late teens, this was a veritable cornucopia of hot guys. She was normally serious, so it didn't seem to matter if she cut loose and boy-watched once in a while. A few guys around were taken, but the ones she knew were single...

There was Naruto; he had matured into a solid young ninja. Well, maybe 'matured' wasn't the right word...He had gotten bigger and stronger, anyway.

There was Kakashi; too old for her, but still quite a catch!

Sai; ...ew.

Yamato; Not bad...but those weird eyes of his...

There was Ryouko; !

Oh wow! I've never seen him without a shirt! Sakura put a hand to her mouth, trying to keep her watching as candid and casual as possible. **He's...hot!**

Ryouko was sitting off to the side, by himself like usual. He gazed up wistfully a few times, as if thinking about joining the others. But he'd shake his head a little and go back to his studying. Clad in black shorts that fell just shy of his knees, black sandals, and with a short, blackened ANBU sword across his back, he came across as a pretty studious guy.

Man, there is something so sexy about shirtless guys with weapons like that... It's like 'don't mess with me!' is written on them! And I guess that that's a modest swimsuit, but for Ryouko...That's pretty darn generous!

-

A day at the beach. Had no else really figured out that this was odd?

Tsunade's words rang in Ekyt's head:

"There's no reason for the others to know there's been a lot of suspicious happenings in that beach village. That's why you're going."

Tsunade had paused for a second, letting that sink in. Then she continued.

"But, I want you to have fun, if at all possible. Your anxiety needs to be kept in check, and relaxing will do it. And maybe, if you flash a little skin, you'll land a certain kunoichi. You

know...pink hair...cute butt...tiny bo-"

"Yes, m'lady!" Ryouko had butted in quickly, already reddening. "I'll take care of it. What's supposed to be going on?"

Tsunade steepled her fingers. "The tide has been...malicious."

"Could she be any more vague?!" Ryouko muttered. "How the hell do I interpret 'the tide has been...malicious'?!"

"HEY! RYOUKO!"

Ryouko turned quickly, hearing Sakura's voice. For the first time today, he really noticed her.

Pink bikini...Oh man, she's so beautiful! Smooth skin, gorgeous hair, those green eyes that are so incredibly astute...the cute butt...Whoa, hey, perv, slow it down! Wait, isn't it normal to think things like that? Agh, focus!

Instead of yelling back, Ryouko jogged over to her, suddenly feeling naked. That feeling only grew when she playfully sized him up.

Sakura put her hands on her hips, head cocked as if studying him. She reached for him carefully (It was a good instinct- even if it was her, Ryouko's first idea was to put her in an armbar. No one ever reached for his face with good intentions), knocking a slightly overlong bang out of his face.

"There you go! How're you gonna girl-watch with hair in your eyes?" Sakura asked him, sticking her tongue out. "Just kidding! I know you're not the girl-watching type."

Wanna bet? I'm looking at you right now, and man, it's hard to look away! Ryouko thought to himself, gulping at the cute kunoichi's touch while blushing at the attention she was bestowing on him.

"Too true. So, uh, are you having fun?" Ryouko managed to ask. **I've got it so bad for this girl!**

"Yeah! Hey, did you know about the legend of this beach?" she asked, her eyes shimmering with a bit of mischief. "It's said that if you do something special for the guy or girl you like, you'll be given a golden opportunity to tell them how you feel! That would be so cool, wouldn't it!"

Ekyt smiled a little. "That would be great. That would make life easier for all those shy people."

"Oh, like yourself, hmmm?" Sakura nudged Ekyt playfully with her shoulder. "C'mon, fess up- is there some girl you like?"

IS THIS WORTH CONTINUING? LET ME KNOW!

-NG

21 - Untainted Love

(NOTE: PLEASE READ 'AFFAIR OF THE HEART' BEFORE CONTINUING WITH THIS FIC)

Sakura and I have been seeing each other steadily since our bold move on her birthday. Her parents hate me. But, really, I couldn't care less. I wasn't as worried about my parents- they'd just be happy for me. My Mother is one of those rare, empathetic people that will genuinely be happy for me. She's seen me suffer from loneliness, anxiety, depression, and a lot of other stuff. She hasn't yet seem me in the midst of this akward 'love' thing, but she'll be happy for me, and that's what matters.

Dad...not so sure. He's not like Sakura's father, but he has a tendency to joke too much, or say something embarrassing. No guy wants his new girlfriend exposed to that. But, my Dad's harmless.

Really, I'm mostly worried about me. I've fallen very hard for that girl, and I feel like I have to prove my worth to her. And even scarier, I'd do anything to prove that worth. Sakura doesn't see the need, but she doesn't have the massive inferiority complex I do.

--

"So, this girl is Lady Tsunade's protégé?"

My Mom didn't sound skeptical. God bless her, she thought any girl was good enough for me.

"Yeah, that's right. You know, the pink-haired girl?"

Man, I was seriously nervous! This was my first girlfriend! I'd never even brought a girl home before!

"Well, ---- -chan, she's pretty cute. Is her hair color naturally pink?"

"Mom! --chan?! I'm a twenty-year-old boy! And, please, it's *Ryouko* now! ANBU and all that! And I don't know! I think it's pink! I...haven't gotten that close yet. She's still new to me and all..."

My Mom laughed- she had gotten me again. She was just messing with me, to help me ease the tension I was so obviously feeling. I had to ask her something important, before I forgot.

"PLEASE- no stories, and no grilling her! And don't let Dad act like a jerk to her! I know he's just kidding, but...but...I'm really serious about this girl!"

I blurted it out. My Mom, who knows me better than anyone, was shocked. But she seemed genuinely happy, too. I never dated, at least partially, because I didn't want to abandon her and Dad. But I couldn't hold off the pursuit of my own happiness anymore. And, we lived close- I hadn't lived with them since coming to the Leaf Village anyway.

"Well then, Ryo-chan, at least tell me what Sakura-chan likes to eat."

I blinked. "I have no idea. I don't know much about her yet. But, uh, dumplings! Girls seem to like those

things! Don't they?!"

My Mom chuckled a little at that. "Clueless as ever about girls, are you Ryo-chan? You were never very good with the opposite sex. Girl-shy, I think."

"Yeah, you've got THAT right," I muttered. I hadn't told my parents about my near-legendary skittishness when it came to the kunoichi. "What I know about girls can be inscribed on the head of a pin. But that's why I'm dating her. Kindly don't tell her I said I was serious about her, okay?"

Mom hugged me quickly. "Sure thing, Ryo-chan. It's your business when it comes to telling her things like that."

I smirked a little. "Can I drink? Please? My heart's gonna beat out of my chest unless I can gulp some sake..."

"Absolutely not! Do you want to seem like a drunk in front of your date?! And no cigarettes inside the house!" Mom scolded, yanking a cigarette and lighter from my hand just as I was about to light up. "Tell me you at LEAST plan to dress up for her!"

"Make me dress up and I'll go goth!" I shot back. "She's wearing her work clothes...I think...Well, no matter what, she'll look great! As for me...hey, you can put perfume on a pig, but it's still a pig..."

Mom shook her head, laughing at my phrase. "Well, it takes a big pig to admit that. At least go walk your guest here. It's not right for a girl to show up on her own. I raised you better than that, Ryo-chan!"

--

Ryouko was waiting for Sakura outside the Hokage's building. He was a fierce shade of red, and his hands were shaking.

"A little nervous, hmm?" Sakura murmured, leaning up to kiss Ryouko's cheek. His cheek was burning so incredibly hot! "How long is it gonna take for you to get used to me, anyway?"

Ryouko gulped, standing up straighter. "I don't know. You're the first girl to treat me like this. Special, I mean. But, uh, I really do feel comfortable with you."

Sakura took one of his hands, holding it in both of hers. "Calm down! The big, scary girl isn't going to hurt you, okay? I'm not going to bully you...unless you're into that sort of thing..."

A week ago, that would have made Ryouko's mind stop. Now, though, after a week of having the cute little Haruno girl as a steady date, he could kind of understand 'flirting'.

Kind of.

"Uh...are YOU into that sort of thing?"

Sakura reached up and grabbed both of Ryouko's cheeks. Her eyes bored into his. Her greens and his

hazels seemed to mix for an instant in the sun. They seemed oddly like a normal couple. Except that the girl was more powerful physically, and she had to restrain herself when gripping his head like that.

But there a small change that made Sakura smile a little more.

He's still shaking and blushing, but he didn't wince when I reached for his face. He trusts me. That's a great start. Trust is the basis of any relationship. Now, to really form the relationship...

"I might be into it...but we should try to go a little slower. I don't want to miss anything along the way. Y'know...that extra bit of tongue that turns 'kissing' into 'making out'..."

Ryouko couldn't have moved if he'd wanted to. This was what he had always wanted, and with who he had always wanted. This was as close to perfection as life ever got. Or so the battle-hardened warrior believed.

Sakura gave Ryouko a little breathing room, worried what would happen if she pushed a little farther. He needed to be introduced to the idea of his new life slowly, or it might have an adverse affect on him.

"So, what are your parents like?" Sakura wondered aloud as the two walked in a meandering path toward Ryouko's parent's house.

"The opposite of yours," Ryouko murmured, laughing a little. "My Mom will have adopted you by the time you get your sandals off. Dad...well, he can be irritating, but he's really a mellow guy. He just jokes a lot. And you know Holly, of course..."

"They sound so...nice," Sakura commented, kind of surprised. "I mean, you're a nice guy, but I thought they'd be more...combat oriented."

"Oh, my Mom and Dad can handle themselves. They just aren't as into the whole combat thing as I am. They're pretty up to the times."

Sakura tugged at her clothes, frowning. "My skirt's not too short, is it?"

"Pardon my complete ignorance, but is than an invitation to look at your legs more closely without being a pervert?" Ryouko asked, somehow seeming entirely honest in spite of the ludicrous question.

"I should hope not!" Sakura pretended to be appalled by the idea. "We're dating! You were supposed to have checked me out before then!"

"I didn't know, I swear!" Ryouko raised his hands in mock surrender. "Well, okay, I DID check you out. But I never took a really good look. Otherwise I'd have had to explain myself. And you might have hurt me..."

Sakura shrugged. "Yeah, you're right. But, seriously, I'm going to stare shamelessly at you. It's fine for you to do the same."

This was fun. A moment between couples. They seemed so right for each other. Ryouko had never

dared to dream that he would someday meet his perfect match. Sakura had never thought of anyone but Sasuke. Maybe boys with a 'dark' side were her weakness? Either way, she hadn't found a Sasuke substitute- she had moved on to someone much better for her.

"We should eat. Making out takes energy, and M'lady rode me hard today!" Sakura said, groaning a little as she stretched her arms out above her head, fingers locked.

"Oh, right! This way, then."

--

Dinner was quiet, at first. Introductions were made first thing.

"It was Sakura, right?" Ryouko's mom, Shinobu, asked, setting the table.

"Yes ma'am, that's right," Sakura answered in the affirmative, seeking out Ryouko's hand for comfort. His parents might not be scary, but it was still nerve-wracking; introducing others into their previously private relationship.

"And how long have you known Ryo-chan?" Shinobu continued pleasantly. She didn't look behind her, so she didn't see the mild look of contempt Ryouko gave her for using that nickname.

"Three years or so," Sakura replied.

"Oh, then you must be really tolerant of Ryo-chan's mistakes! Girls aren't his strong suit, as I'm sure you've figured out."

"Mom..." Ryouko growled, making a mental note to discuss this with her later, in private.

Sakura stifled a giggle. "That's true. But he's sweet-natured, and you obviously raised him as a gentleman. So, to me, he's quite a catch!"

Ryouko looked ready for a drink already. Since Shinobu had forbidden his drinking in front of Sakura (at least while she was looking), he would have to make do with Sakura's calming gazes.

Shinobu smiled happily at Sakura. "Well, I'm glad to hear that! Tell me, how did you and Ryo-chan meet?"

Sakura glanced at Ryouko, not sure whether she could say or not. Ryouko gave her a small smile and a nod. He hadn't told his Mom this part of his job, but now was as good a time as any for her to find out.

"Well..." Sakura began, thinking carefully, "I met him when he first came here. But I really got to know him after he took a knife in the chest for me. Luckily, I'm a medical ninja. And I got to see a lot of him that way."

Shinobu immediately ordered Ryouko to take off his vest, even giving him a smack in the back of the head. "You idiot! I know you don't understand girls, but to play the 'damsel in distress' card? How

desperate were you?!”

Ryouko rolled his eyes. “Mom, it wasn’t just her. You know how I am. I would have taken a knife for anyone! And I’m glad, since that’s how I got to meet Sakura. Hey, don’t touch the wound!”

But Shinobu was already probing Ryouko’s chest, about three inches over his heart. There was only a small white scar. Considering the extent of the injury, this was quite a feat of medical ninjutsu, and a testament to Sakura’s skills.

“Mom! Stop! I don’t take my shirt off in public! Not in front of my girlfr-”

Ryouko and Sakura made eye contact.

Did I just say girlfriend?! Oh, man! That’s not true yet! I’m just a date, not a boyfriend! Ryouko began to panic, wondering how Sakura would react. Hit him? Dump him? Turn him over to Tsunade?

Sakura’s thoughts were different. **Did he say girlfriend! Yes! Yes yes yes! Just say it again! Please! I’d love to be your girlfriend!**

Shinobu hadn’t noticed. “Oh dear. She hasn’t seen your chest? Well, it’s only been a week, right Ryo-chan? Not that there’s anything to show off...”

“MOM!” Ryouko yelled, reached away from her probing fingers. “First, that *hurts*, please stop poking my injury! Second, who the hell says something like that to her son?!”

“Don’t swear when a girl is present!” Shinobu shot back mildly, giving him another hit on the head. “Especially when the girl is your mother, or your girlfriend!”

“Yes ma’am,” Ryouko said weekly.

Perhaps it was Ryouko’s destiny to be conquered by the opposite sex.

--

Dinner had been pleasant. Ryouko’s Dad behaved, and Sakura liked the dumplings that Shinobu had made. It was time for desert very quickly. Ryouko didn’t often partake in desert because he was health conscious. But it was a special occasion, after all. Why not?

As dessert was served, Ryouko saw Sakura blush. He was perplexed by that sudden display, and he wasn’t sure how to react. Was she having a girl moment of some kind? Something Ryouko didn’t want to know about her? Or maybe a fantasy? Or was the desert ecstasy to her?

They may be human, but for me...girls might as well be another species entirely.

Carefully, Ryouko reached under the table to squeeze her hand. She took it gratefully.

“So, Sakura-chan, have the thought of children crossed your mind?”

By Sakura's sudden intake of breath, and sudden Ryouko-ish blush, she must have been surprised. Ryouko felt her squeeze his hand.

"I would love children," Sakura responded confidently, even a little happily. Perhaps pensively as well? Thinking about the children she wanted already?

"Mom! Don't ask that!" Ryouko murmured.

"That was rude, wasn't it? Forgive me, Sakura-chan," Shinobu said pleasantly, as though her son hadn't said anything at all. As if children could be mistaken for a comment about the weather.

"Oh, not at all! Actually, the thought had crossed my mind recently," Sakura admitted. "I'd love one of each. A boy and a girl. Maybe more. But at least one of each."

"Well, I hope Ryo-chan is up to the challenge for you, then," Shinobu commented.

Ryouko's face first drained of all color, then flushed bright red.

Does she think I don't know where babies come from? Okay, maybe the physics are a little sketchy, but don't you pick that up with practice? And repetition? Lots of repetition?

"Please excuse me," Ryouko said, shaking his head in disbelief even while walking away.

Shinobu stared after him. "It seems I've embarrassed him. Oh well. Boys get like that around such topics. But while he's gone, Sakura-chan, please tell me- how do you feel about Ryo-chan? Are you serious about him?"

Sakura sensed that this was a concerned mother asking. She wasn't gossiping- it was straight-up question about her son's well-being. And perhaps Sakura's as well.

"Well..." Sakura stammered, not sure what to say. "...yes. I really, really like him. And I hope it's okay with you."

Shinobu noted that Sakura's voice was almost desperate at the end. **I see... She cares very deeply for Ryo-chan. And he for her, of course. But she couldn't use the word 'love'. I wonder if Ryo-chan said it to her yet. Well, I'll have to prod them both in the right direction. After that, I'll let fate take it's course.**

"Of course it's alright, Sakura-chan. I don't think there's another girl in the village I'd be happier to see Ryo-chan dating. Now then, make sure you two get some time to yourselves before the night is over. I'd imagine you two have a lot talk about."

Sakura looked a little sad. The reason soon became apparent.

"I never told him I loved him. I was so caught up when he told me, on my birthday. I just can't find the right time to tell him."

Shinobu gave a knowing smile. "Well, unless you say something, Ryo-chan won't make another move.

It's up to you, the female, the superior one (small giggle), to be precocious. You'll know the right time when it comes. Then, you just say it, and don't hold back."

That made sense to Sakura. It was clear that it had taken Ryouko all the courage he had to get to this point. Now he needed a poke in the right direction.

"Thank you. I'll make it clear to him how I feel."

Sakura stood up and stepped out toward the back deck, where her boyfriend was standing, a cigarette in hand. His face was half-lit by moonlight, and the way he held his cigarette gave him a thoughtful-looking silhouette. He was lost in his own thoughts as Sakura slipped outside and stood next to him.

Shinobu watched the two for a minute, a light smile on her face.

"Time to let them find their way. If it's meant to be. She's such a nice girl. She'll be very good for him."

She looked away when Sakura leaned toward Ryouko.

--

"Ryouko...I never said it to you. On my birthday..."

Ryouko narrowed his eyes. "What was that?" he asked, looking up at the moon.

"That I love you."

She just said it. There was no right or wrong time to say the four words that made the human race what it was. The ability to love another, even above oneself, was what made you want more strength. To protect what's dear to you. That was what mattered.

"Come on, let's take a walk," Sakura urged, pulling Ryouko out toward the street. She towed him along, searching until she found a spot not spoiled by streetlight. It was near a bridge, toward the center of the Leaf Village. A private spot.

Here goes... Sakura thought, leaning in to Ryouko while snaking her arm around his.

It started out as a quick kiss under a beautiful night sky. But as the two leaned away, something bugged Ryouko. Sakura had been the one to take all the steps in the relationship. Maybe he should try something?

As she started to turn away, Ryouko grabbed her tighter, pulled her in close, and met her mouth to mouth. Sakura, surprised at first, was quick to recover and go on the offensive.

Her hands dug into his shoulders, tearing and clawing desperately- passionately. They wrapped around his slim torso, looking for a way to draw the stunned boy even closer. Scratches were left on the thin fabric of tee-shirt in the wake of the powerful hands with sturdy nails, but the boy paid them no mind. He was too busy forcing himself to match her near-frantic pace with his own tongue and lips. When her nails

broke his shirt, and then the skin beneath, he turned redder yet.

He could feel her breasts against his chest. Their legs intertwined in an embrace of their own. Neither participant was willing to let go of the swirling emotions they were feeling.

Sakura ran her hand through Ryouko's hair, seizing it roughly with an iron grip. Again attempting to bring him closer. She could sense any little bit of trepidation he still held, and she was going to tear it away. There was no way she would let herself be denied.

They broke away, both needing to breathe. A thin trail of saliva connected their lips and tongues. It would have been disgusting to anyone who hadn't yet experienced this. A stage beyond a kiss, yet a stage below love making itself. Call it passion with restraint.

"I love you!" Ryouko gasped, out of breath despite all his training. There was no way to train for something like this.

As Sakura chomped on his neck and shoulders, she managed to whisper "I love you, too!"

They kissed a while longer. Sakura was pretty clear that she wasn't letting Ryouko duck out of this. She stepped her right leg directly in between his legs, trapping his feet. Never mind the fact that her upper leg was grinding into Ryouko's groin- if he moved, it would cost him.

Finally, both were out of air again. The heat of the moment had passed, and they both slowly calmed down. They kept their embrace tight. For a time, they just gazed at each other. It was the kind of moment you couldn't appreciate until it happened to you. Then the other person's eyes became the most fascinating thing in the world.

"I...guess I should be getting home..." Sakura muttered, disappointed that things had ended so quickly.

"Oh...yeah..." Ryouko replied, apparently feeling the same way. He scratched his head, not quite meeting Sakura's gaze. "I, uh...could...move closer to you."
He almost said it as a question.

Sakura liked the idea, but had a revision.

"No, I'll move. You've made enough sacrifices for me. It's time I made some for you. But believe me, it's not chore moving closer to you."

As they walked toward Sakura's house, each wondered what the next step in their relationship would be. It wouldn't do to move too fast; nor would it do to move too slow. For the moment, they would be content.

That's how it should be, Sakura thought to herself as she snuggled up against her man. **Happiness, and a relationship untainted by lust. This is love as it was meant to be.**

TO BE CONTINUED...

22 - The Shore (Finished)

Everyone was having a good time, Sakura noticed. Even Ryouko seemed to be enjoying himself. It was rare that they all went to the beach, so everyone was doing their best to relax.

To Sakura, a single girl in her late teens, this was a veritable cornucopia of hot guys. She was normally serious, so it didn't seem to matter if she cut loose and boy-watched once in a while. A few guys around were taken, but the ones she knew were single...

There was Naruto; he had matured into a solid young ninja. Well, maybe 'matured' wasn't the right word...He had gotten bigger and stronger, anyway.

There was Kakashi; too old for her, but still quite a catch!

Sai; ...ew.

Yamato; Not bad...but those weird eyes of his...

There was Ryouko; !

Oh wow! I've never seen him without a shirt! Sakura put a hand to her mouth, trying to keep her watching as candid and casual as possible. **He's...hot!**

Ryouko was sitting off to the side, by himself like usual. He gazed up wistfully a few times, as if thinking about joining the others. But he'd shake his head a little and go back to his studying. Clad in black shorts that fell just shy of his knees, black sandals, and with a short, blackened ANBU sword across his back, he came across as a pretty studious guy.

Man, there is something so sexy about shirtless guys with weapons like that... It's like 'don't mess with me!' is written on them! And I guess that that's a modest swimsuit, but for Ryouko...That's pretty darn generous!

-

A day at the beach. Had no else really figured out that this was odd?

Tsunade's words rang in Ekyt's head:

"There's no reason for the others to know there's been a lot of suspicious happenings in that beach village. That's why you're going."

Tsunade had paused for a second, letting that sink in. Then she continued.

"But, I want you to have fun, if at all possible. Your anxiety needs to be kept in check, and relaxing will do it. And maybe, if you flash a little skin, you'll land a certain kunoichi. You

know...pink hair...cute butt...tiny bo-"

"Yes, m'lady!" Ryouko had butted in quickly, already reddening. "I'll take care of it. What's supposed to be going on?"

Tsunade steepled her fingers. "The tide has been...malicious."

"Could she be any more vague?!" Ryouko muttered. "How the hell do I interpret 'the tide has been...malicious'?!"

"HEY! RYOUKO!"

Ryouko turned quickly, hearing Sakura's voice. For the first time today, he really noticed her.

Pink bikini...Oh man, she's so beautiful! Smooth skin, gorgeous hair, those green eyes that are so incredibly astute...the cute butt...Whoa, hey, perv, slow it down! Wait, isn't it normal to think things like that? Agh, focus!

Instead of yelling back, Ryouko jogged over to her, suddenly feeling naked. That feeling only grew when she playfully sized him up.

Sakura put her hands on her hips, head cocked as if studying him. She reached for him carefully (It was a good instinct- even if it was her, Ryouko's first idea was to put her in an armbar. No one ever reached for his face with good intentions), knocking a slightly overlong bang out of his face.

"There you go! How're you gonna girl-watch with hair in your eyes?" Sakura asked him, sticking her tongue out. "Just kidding! I know you're not the girl-watching type."

Wanna bet? I'm looking at you right now, and man, it's hard to look away! Ryouko thought to himself, gulping at the cute kunoichi's touch while blushing at the attention she was bestowing on him.

"Too true. So, uh, are you having fun?" Ryouko managed to ask. **I've got it so bad for this girl!**

"Yeah! Hey, did you know about the legend of this beach?" she asked, her eyes shimmering with a bit of mischief. "It's said that if you do something special for the guy or girl you like, you'll be given a golden opportunity to tell them how you feel! That would be so cool, wouldn't it!"

Ekyt smiled a little. "That would be great. That would make life easier for all those shy people."

"Oh, like yourself, hmmm?" Sakura nudged Ekyt playfully with her shoulder. "C'mon, fess up- is there some girl you like?"

"Uh, well...you see...WHOA!" Ryouko was spared answering as a giant wave seemed to home in on Sakura. She stared wide-eyed. Since she hadn't been privy to the whole 'the tide has been malicious' riddle, it was no wonder she was shocked.

Ryouko shook the cobwebs out quickly. Kicking his feet into the sand, he picked Sakura up and took off at top speed. The wave was going to get them. There was only one more thing to do.

“Earth Style: Mud Wall!” Ryouko barked, making handsigns with a single hand. “Sakura, can you hang on to me? We’ve gotta keep moving, and I think I’ll be needing another hand!”

Sakura responded to something in Ryouko’s voice. She swung around so that she was hanging on to him piggyback style. That surprised even her.

He’s a natural leader. I just...reacted...HUH?!

Ryouko looked over his shoulder to see the wave change in a peculiar way. There was a sword, seemingly made of the waves themselves, jutting out of the front. Further than that, a hand was holding it! But that was just a diversion.

SLICE!

Ryouko’s left arm was cut by a whizzing kunai. Blood spurted from the wound. Grunting in pain, Ryouko skidded backwards so that he was facing the wave. The ANBU sword on his back was drawn and in his right hand.

The wave made contact with the mud wall, giving Ryouko a few seconds to plan. He was quick about it, too-

“Stay here!” he told Sakura, kicking off again. Aiming for the wave, Ryouko swung his sword and struck the arm holding the sword. There was a grunt of pain, and the wave retracted.

But just as suddenly, the wave aimed for Sakura. She was still frozen in shock, but only for a second. She cocked her fist back, ready to smash whatever was in that wave.

“Hyoh!”

Ryouko had somehow caught up with the wave, leapt from underneath it, and stabbed. Blood mixed with the water in a gruesome way. But Ryouko leapt up and kicked, destroying the tip of the wave. He yanked his sword back out, landing in front of Sakura, poised to defend her.

“Are you alright?” Ryouko called over his shoulder, his voice deadly calm.

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. What the hell was that?!”

Ryouko prepared himself to lie. It was never easy- especially not to Sakura.

“I’m not entirely sure. But it seemed more interested in you than me. It might be best to get you back with the group...”

-

That night, the Leaf ninja were going to camp out on the beach. The soft sand was cool at night, and the

moon provided enough light to get things set up. Seeing as this was a chance to get away, Kakashi just happened to look away when Naruto broke out some alcohol.

Ryouko was sitting away from the group. He always thought it best to let team seven have their time together. He was the outsider, and didn't think he should interfere.

"Ryouko?"

"Yes, Kakashi-sempai?" (Ryouko is a jonin. As such, he doesn't add –sensei.)

"Do you know something about these waves? It's not like you to want to come along on a day at the beach, so I'm guessing you know something..."

Ryouko looked up at Kakashi. "It's best I say that I don't know anything, sempai."

Kakashi got the message. "Well then, it's best I say that if there IS an enemy, hypothetically, that you can't talk about due to orders...would I be correct to say that I should be on my guard?"

"Hypothetically speaking?" Ryouko asked to confirm. "Speaking that way...yes. Also, quite possibly, your more gifted students might be the target, if I were to make a completely unfounded, uneducated guess."

Kakashi patted Ryouko's head. "Well then, I'll leave you to your mission. But...wouldn't you be better off protecting us by sitting with us. Hypothetically speaking, if I were to order you to do so..."

Ryouko shrugged. "Orders are orders."

Kakashi offered Ryouko a hand up. Pulling him to his feet, he gave Ryouko a gentle push toward the group.

-

It was evident very quickly at who could hold their alcohol. Ryouko and Kakashi sat across from each other, their faces slightly red from the alcohol. Yamato was already making his version of 'camp' (A giant house made from his wood jutsu). Sai was drawing the sunset, using charcoal for some reason. It didn't make sense to Ryouko, but he didn't know art. He DID know what he liked.

"Hey, you! Ryouko! Thanks for the save earlier!"

Sakura crawled over to Ryouko, sprawling out on the sand on her stomach. She looked up and giggled.

"Yer all red! Sunburn? Or are ya just nervous 'caush a girl ish tawkin' to ya?!"

Ryouko smiled tolerantly. "Probably because a *drunk* girl is talking to me."

"I'm not drunk!" Sakura protested, climbing up Ryouko's back, wrapping her legs around his torso. "If I was drunk, I woulda been all over you!"

Ryouko said nothing. He just blushed more, smiling in a reserved way.

Sakura climbed around him until she was in a piggyback position, her head on his shoulder. She was holding her drink in front of him, as if she wanted him to take a gulp of it, too.

“Man, you really do turn red aroun’ the ladies, dontcha!”

Sakura kept crawling around him until she finally collapsed- right on his lap.

Ryouko didn’t know what to make of that. He looked to the other members who were still sober. None of them said anything. Indeed, they even pretended not to notice. It was no secret that Ryouko liked Sakura. She was snoozing quite comfortably on his lap for the moment, so no one saw any reason to get upset.

Ryouko considered his position.

Well, the girl I’ve had a crush on for nearly three years is sleeping on my lap. She’s wearing a bikini, and she hit on me while she was drunk. The sun is rising, and it’s beautiful here. That should be it- perfection.

But I can’t rest. I can’t enjoy this. That wave thing...damn it.

I’ll make sure to get even with whoever is behind this wave thing for ruining this perfect moment.

Ryouko paused to look down. Sakura’s ‘sleepy face’ was incredibly cute, and for a moment, Ryouko fell for her even harder. He smiled and gently flipped a lock of hair out of her face. She didn’t even stir.

Could she feel comfortable with me, somehow? No shinobi, no matter how drunk, let’s themselves fall asleep unless they’re certain they’re safe.

If that’s the case, that’s the highest praise I’ve ever gotten. For her to feel safe with me like that...

Unless, of course, she just doesn’t consider me a ‘threat’...or a guy...

Shoulda quit while I was ahead.

--

Ryouko forced himself to stay awake. The others were asleep for the time being, so it only made sense there should be a guard.

“Mmm- Mmh?”

Sakura woke up, moaning a little as she tried to gain her bearings.

“Ah...where’d I get a pillow? Oh!”

Ryouko simply said 'Good morning', not stating the obvious.

"Ah he he...Sorry 'bout that!" Sakura said sheepishly, hands clasped in apology as she got up. "Guess I was kinda...drunk."

"Just a little," Ryouko replied, shrugging as if it was nothing.

Get drunk more often, okay?

"Any idea about what was up with that psychotic wave the other day? Why'd it chase me?" Certainly a valid question on Sakura's part.

"I'm not sure. More than a freak tide, that's for sure," Ryouko responded.

"Mmm...Hey, how 'bout a quick walk? I bet you're sore after having me in your lap all night. How'd you sit in seiza for that long anyway?"

"Training. Try doing that under a waterfall."

Whoa, that was close to flirting! Points for me!

"I might get my chance if that wave comes back."

With that, they started to walk down the beach. Ryouko actually pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

'kay, let's push pause for a second. I'm walking down the beach with a hot girl who I just happen to love. She's comfortable with me, and seems genuinely happy right now. And me...screw that stupid wave! Who gives a rat's @\$\$ about wave?

"Hey, y'know, you never answered my question earlier..."

Ryouko froze. She WOULD bring that up.

Sakura gave him a playful wink. "C'mon, you can tell me! You've totally got some girl on the mind! It's all over your face! So, who it, huh?! Tenten? Temari, maybe? Tell me it's not Ino! Anyone but that! Even Lady Tsunade!"

Ryouko made a face. "No offense meant to our Hokage, but...yuck. No, um, actually...yeah, there is someone. But I shouldn't even bring it up. I'm not sure how she'd take it."

"Oh, go on! I won't tell her, I promise!"

I've gotta know who this guy has a crush on! It's one lucky girl. He's strong, a hard worker, a hottie... If he'd just loosen up a little...

"I'm not concerned about you telling her. It's impossible," Ryouko informed her, trying to laugh off his nervousness. "Since you're the girl I meant."

Ba-dump. It was one of those moments where you could hear every little sound. Every heartbeat, every grain of sand moving, and the lack of breaths being taken. Both shinobi has stopped taking in air out of pure shock.

Oh s*! What have I done?! I just told her! Okay, okay, calm down. She thinks you're a total freak, so while she's deciding what way to kill you, you can summon Taleo and get up high, out of her reach.**

As for Sakura- well, she had never had anyone admit their love to her. This was new for her. How to respond? She debated that for a few seconds. Ultimately, though, what came to mind was:

- I've known this boy for years.
- I fell asleep on his lap so easily.
- I'm not offended by him confessing like this.

Her physical response, once she assured herself that it didn't make her 'easy', was to simply tackle Ryouko and pin him down. She could overpower him when it came to raw physical strength. And beyond that, he wouldn't raise a hand to any female, let alone her.

It took her all of two seconds to start kissing him. It took him maybe five seconds to kiss back. Her hand ran down his chest, feeling the definition of each muscle from the chest to the abdomen. His skin was smooth yet clearly tough. There were still cuts and scrapes from the countless knives that had hit him, and no doubt marks from his own training.

Ryouko's hands were wrapped around Sakura's back. He didn't have a whole lot room to move. Not that he would if he could. The instant their lips met, any struggle he had even considered mounting was gone.

He pulled her in tighter reflexively. Their chests met in the embrace and his heart skipped a beat. His hands on her back, running down her smooth skin and occasionally hitting the knot of her bikini top in the back were gentle. So gentle that they raised little goosebumps in their wake, prompting Sakura to move her head to Ryouko's shoulder.

"Hug me for real already! I can handle it!" she whispered, giving his ear an affection peck.

He responded by actually listening to her. But when he did, she rolled over so that he was on top of her now.

"Go on. Don't be shy. Believe me, I'm cool with making out with you like this." Sakura reached up to force Ryouko's head down.

"Are you sure? I, uh..."

"I'm not letting you get away. If I have to cut your muscles up to keep you where you are, I will. This isn't immoral- we've known each other for two long. We're not two strangers making out."

That was good enough for Ryouko. What he knew about kissing and making out was far less than the bare minimum knowledge for a twenty year old guy, but he could go with the flow.

--

Kakashi watched with satisfaction as his little Sakura tackled her first boyfriend.

“Well well, about time. If those two moved any slower, we’d never get to the fourth book in the ‘Makeout’ series.”

Master Jiraiya nodded vigorously, taking notes. “Wow, she really blossomed! Such a supple young female. And Ryouko- he’s the perfect protagonist for my new book. Kakashi, for helping me set up with wave thing, I’ll give you the first copy, plus my sketches.”

Kakashi briefly felt bad for deceiving those two. But he rationalized it with ‘we’re all happier this way. Sakura gets a moody, brooding boy. Ryouko get the right girl. Hinata can go after Naruto freely now. Lady Tsunade doesn’t have to watch Sakura mope anymore. (I can’t believe Lady Tsunade agreed to this!)And I get my book.’ So that made it okay!

“It feels good to do a good deed, doesn’t it?”

23 - Jirayai's Manuscript(WIP)

Makeout Hopeful (Volume 1)

By Jiraiya

"I can't believe I'm doing this..." Ekyt muttered, blushing terribly.

"C'mon, lighten up! You're paying me good money for me to write out these little scenarios for you, so you might as well enjoy them! Now, here's what I've got. Let me know what you think."

Jiraiya handed over this manuscripts, and Ekyt took them. He had a bad feeling about this...

--

Ekyt was in the middle of his workout. Shirtless, sweat glistened off his body. His body was muscular for his slim build. He was slightly tanned from exercising like this. His movements were crisp and clear, and looked powerful enough to vanquish any enemy.

Sakura watched silently from her spot, feeling guilty for spying on him. But she couldn't help herself. She wanted to do more than just watch, though. She wanted to train with him. He was one of the village elite, and got that way by working hard.

But Sakura had a hard time getting past his shirtless body. Especially when he moved so gracefully, she couldn't help but feel a quiet sexiness about him. He didn't go out of his way to project it, and he was downright shy. But that made him all the more desirable.

The affection-starved kunoichi licked her lips, watching the sweat drip off his body as he punched an imaginary foe. He held his pose just for second, to make sure of his aim. In that second, though, he made Sakura decide what to do.

-

Ekyt heard the sound of someone approaching. He turned to face them, reaching for a towel to wipe the sweat off his face.

"H-hi, Ekyt," a red-faced Sakura greeted him.

"Oh! Hi, S-Sakura!" Ekyt exclaimed, suddenly feeling naked. He was like that. Even though it was perfectly fine for a guy to be shirtless, he always felt naked when he was. Especially in front of girls, and twice as much in front of Sakura.

"I, uh, came to, uh, train with you!" Sakura managed to squeak out, being shy and not at all like her usual self. "I hope you'll allow me to join you!"

Ekyt blushed- no point in trying to clothe himself now. "Sure. Uh, what kind of training?"

"Whatever kind you do!" Sakura told him. "I'm determined to become stronger for the man I love!"

For Sasuke... Ekyt thought sadly. He didn't know the Uchiha boy very well, but he definitely wasn't a fan of his being so popular with the girl he had his eyes on. Not that he could blame Sasuke for that. Heck, Sasuke had done everything he could to lose Sakura's affections.

As this was running through Ekyt's mind, Sakura was making her next move.

"So, we train like this?"

Ekyt turned around, and immediately turned red. No, beyond red. Several shades of red.

Sakura had pulled off her top, leaving her bare-chested. She was just staring at him innocently; almost curiously. He was sputtering for an answer, but couldn't seem to come up with one. He had never been in this situation before.

Sakura was sweating, and blushing with embarrassment. She had never gone so far with Sasuke. But now that she was older, she felt it was alright- after all, she loved this boy. He would just have to realize her feelings. Although Sakura suspected that he had feelings for her.

"I, uh..." Ekyt stammered, not sure what to do or say. "Uh, if you're, uh, comfortable..."

"I...am. Let's begin," Sakura told him, shuffling around and stretching to warm up. Ekyt didn't know whether to stare or look away. He knew what he wanted to do.

"Well, uh, we do this first. Er, I do, usually. It's called a 'kata', and it's an imaginary fight. Most of the moves are kinda worthless in a real fight, but it builds stamina and good reflexes."

They did katas for a half hour. Then came the harder part.

"There's also sparring, grappling, and weapons. Do any interest you in particular?"

Sakura took a look at Ekyt. She knew just what she wanted. "Grappling!"

Ekyt couldn't believe it. This wasn't a real situation. It couldn't be! A topless girl he had a crush on wanted to do grappling exercises with him? It was such an awesome idea! But completely unrealistic. There was no way this was happening.

Then Ekyt felt it- her hands on his bare shoulders and arms. She jockeyed for position, getting in tight to him. With a quick shoulder feint, she swept his legs, sending him down to the ground.

"Sorry, I slipped! Between the sweat on my hands and the sweat on your body, I kinda messed up," Sakura told him apologetically. She knelt down to help him up, easily hefting the light boy to his feet. He couldn't help but be in awe of her again. Her cheeks tinged with pink, and her body becoming slick with sweat, it was a major-league turn-on.

He would be more turned on a split-second later when Sakura hugged him.

“Ah, sorry, I’m getting you all sweaty! But I know how to fix that!”

Using her strength, Sakura dragged Ekyt toward a waterfall. She looked at him expectantly. He looked back at her, knowing there was no way he could be right about where she was going with this.

“Oh, okay!” Sakura sighed mockingly, stripping the rest of her clothes off. “I guess the big boy needed a little help. Now, c’mon! You’re gonna get your pants wet if you bathe like that!”

Ekyt actually reached for his pants before he started to wonder what the hell he was doing.

But I wanna! his mind said, while his body was in complete agreement. But was this really okay? I mean, a boy and girl naked together? That shouldn’t be happening, right? Sure, they were friends, but that was all!

I want to be more than friends, and she’s practically telling me ‘it’s okay, let’s get closer!’ I’m an idiot if I pass this up...

Ekyt pulled his clothes off and joined her. For a while, they stood in silence. It seemed awkward for Ekyt, but Sakura felt right at home. They kept a slight distance for a short time. Then Sakura turned toward him.

“I can’t believe I had to do this much to get you to notice how much I liked you!” she finally exclaimed.

GLOMP!

Sakura had moved closer to Ryouko, reaching around him from behind.

“I’ve been wanting to scrub your body. I’ve been wanting to do more than that, to be honest. I want to...I want to make you a man.”

Sakura’s eyes grew wide, and she blushed hard. Her hand took Ryouko’s.

“So, please...will you make me a woman?”

And Sakura put Ryouko’s hand on her chest.

“Can you feel my heart beat? It knows what it wants, and what it wants is you...”

--

“Well, whaddaya think, huh? Is this gold or what?!” Jiraiya exclaimed. “Man, you wouldn’t believe the amount of research I had to do for that! I mean, we’re talking hours here!”

Ryouko was blushing heavily, imagining this playing out in his head.

That would be soooo awesome!

“What the hell?! This isn’t even remotely realistic!” Ryouko yelled, still turning red. An image of closet-perv Ebisu ran through his head. He stifled his act.” It’s unrealistic, but it was easily worth my money. Just don’t tell anyone about this!”

Jiraiya smirked. “An extra 500 ryo would help me remember that..”

“I’m warning you...” Ryouko snarled.

“Now I SHOULD or SHOULD NOT tell her about this? Which was it again?”

Ryouko sighed and ponyed up the dough. What else could he do?

--

IS THIS WORTH CONTINUING? LET ME KNOW!

24 - Anxiety

Heaven's Temper
Ryouko.
Dragon boy.
Ekyt.

Whatever name you called him by, you could always count on Ryouko being depressed, it seemed. Even with such a beautiful winter day all around him, he couldn't muster a smile. This very day, he had been asked why. It had been an innocent question, from an innocent child.

"Mister, why don't you smile?"

Ryouko instantly told the boy:
"I can't. I have no smile."

**The reason...why? It doesn't matter. No one can understand this suffering. The endless torment. I wish to God I was being dramatic. But all they can see is what their eyes can see. They can't feel as I do...
It's a curse.**

Ryouko's hand crunched up in a ball, the leather of his gloves squeaking slightly. His gaze was straight ahead, and never wavered. His dark eyes had been devoid of emotion for a long time now. It was as if part of him was dead.

It's been hell. Six years of life stolen from me. No one knows why, and no one can help. All I can do is cope? Is that really all there is? It's a small cross to bear; I know. But why is the suffering so lonely?

At age twenty-one, Ryouko had better control over his 'disease'. But that didn't mean he could lead a normal life. No matter how bad he wanted to, 'normal' just wasn't a possibility for him.

The snow began to fall, crissing and crossing silently as the flakes fluttered to the ground. It didn't matter to Ryouko. There was no reason for him to come in out of the cold. The discomfort of 'cold' helped mask the emotional discomfort that had no description.

And yet, I feel it as strongly as anything else...even more strongly.

Head down, facing the snow-covered street, Ryouko kept walking. The movement was the only real sign he was alive. That thought amused Ryouko, for some reason. It wasn't as if his life was horrible. His parents had done everything they could for him. But he just couldn't make his life normal.

I live for them. I want my parents to be happy with me. Then I can be happy with myself. But I've given them nothing in exchange for their twenty-one years of love. And their love is perfect for

me. But...the love of another...a girl. In my condition...it's out of the question. But why? If I could just have some answer, I could make myself stronger than this! I could beat this inner demon into submission. But no one can see it to help me! I'm alone! I'm...always alone... Always.

"Damn it!"

In a rage, Ryouko's right fist swung out and hit a wall. Pieces flaked off around his fist as he held the pose for a moment. He couldn't believe he'd lost his temper like that. It was childish, and it didn't achieve anything other than nearly breaking his own hand.

Ryouko knew that. But his disease had set in. ANYTHING to stop this horrid pain! This inexplicable, emotional pain. There was nothing that he could do! Nothing! He was helpless! Powerless!

Defeated.

Ryouko's fist swung out again, this time smashing a window. It was a window at the base of the Hokage building, and the sound caused a couple people to come running.

What happened here? How do I explain this?

Ryouko's glove was torn, and there were shards of glass sticking out of his hand. All the same, he just looked at his hand, feeling his illness come again. Once more, the bastard that no one else could see or feel hit him. He screwed his eyes shut, crunching up into a standing fetal position. The snow had ceased to feel cold. Ryouko's shins and forearms were numb, and not because of the cold.

It's getting worse...I can't feel them. My hands are shaking...my throat is knotting up...my hearts is going to beat out of my chest. There's nothing I can do but hope it ends soon. Some warrior I am! Brought to my knees by some stupid disease!

It was anxiety, and nothing more. But the pain and suffering was real. VERY real. And it was lonely. How did you explain to your friends that you couldn't come out to play because, well, you didn't know why? How did you tell your girlfriend that you couldn't go out on the date you promised because you were ill, but no one else could tell? This wasn't living. This was nothing short of a personal hell.

All of those people who told me I just need to 'get on with my life'...how could they ever understand. Those ignorant fools! Those bastards! Those damned, inconsiderate scumbags! I hate them! I hate myself! This torment will never end!

Then Ryouko felt it- a warmth in the cold night. A gaze on his back. It wasn't a threat, Ryouko assessed by gut feelings. No, it was someone watching out for him. Patiently waiting, watching his back and silently offering assistance.

I...don't want anyone to see me like this! I'm supposed to be so strong and brave! And yet...I'm losing this battle. This must be what death feels like. This helpless feeling. This feeling of hopelessness.

“Come on, Ryouko. Stay with me, okay? I’m right here. How can I help?”

Sakura’s soft voice cut through the harsh night, like the beacon of a lighthouse. Ryouko felt even worse, though not from anxiety. He was dressed for the cold, and must have looked normal from the outside. So being bent over and muttering to himself.

Looking pathetic in front of my crush...why does this have to ruin my life?

Ryouko straightened up to face Sakura, tears in his eyes. They froze quickly to his cheeks, which were reddened from the cold. He met Sakura’s eyes for the briefest instant. The shining green gems were wide with concern. Concern for him. And pity, no doubt.

I don’t want her pity! I want her love! But how can I ask anyone to tolerate this? I don’t even know what to say!

“There’s nothing anyone can do!” Ryouko finally snapped, immediately feeling bad. “It’s not something anyone can help with.”

Sakura stepped closer to Ryouko, putting her warm hand on his cold cheek. She undid the scarf around her neck and wrapped it around his. It was red and white striped, and not the most masculine thing, but it did the job.

“Maybe I can’t help...but I can at least give you a cup of tea and some company. No one should have to suffer alone.”

Sakura’s hand squeezed Ryouko’s, gently towing him toward her small apartment. It was such a gesture of kindness that Ryouko forgot his illness for a moment. He had always been fond of the pink-haired kunoichi. But for her to see through his harsh words, and into the ball of weakness he really was at the moment...

She’s a special girl.

--

Sakura opened her door, guided Ryouko in first, then slid it shut again. She gave a quick shake of her body and stamp of her boots to rid them of the snow. Ryouko hadn’t thought to be that considerate, but Sakura didn’t seem to mind.

“You were out there for a long time. Can you tell me why?” Sakura asked. Then she looked shocked at her forwardness. “I’m sorry! I don’t mean to pry! Don’t tell me unless you’re comfortable telling me!”

It would feel good to tell her...but how do I explain? Ryouko wondered, feeling anxious again. So he talked fast, pinching his arms and groin to distract himself from his anxiety.

“It’s a panic disorder, I guess. I can’t explain it, and it can’t be seen. It just...Every nasty symptom you can think of...I can’t feel my shins or forearms. I can barely breathe. I’m shaking. And there’s nothing that can be done about it.”

“There must be something you do to combat the problem. Think hard, okay?”

Sakura was a good medical ninja, and this was one reason why. Her genuine concern, and the time she took with her patients. And in this case, she wasn't going to give up. She could always sedate Ryouko if he couldn't settle down. But she didn't want to do that.

“I take a hot bath and have a cup of tea. But I can't do that here. (Sharp intake of breath!)” Ryouko grasped his pant leg, bit his lip, stepped on his own foot. It was all involuntary, but the pain had to go away. He was sure he would go insane if he didn't settle down!

Sakura immediately put on some water for tea. She had a three-room apartment. Kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom.

“Go on. Take a bath here. I can help you. But you'll have to trust me, okay?”

“I can't ask you to do that!” Ryouko protested. “It's wrong of me to impose this much, not to mention the burden I put on you by telling you this! No one can cure what I have. There's no hope.”

Sakura unbuttoned Ryouko's trench coat. While she knelt down to get the lower buttons, she kept talking. She had already noticed that, when distracted, his symptoms weren't as bad.

“That's not true, is it Ryouko? We've been on missions together. We've taught together. And both times, you've stayed tough and not let this bother you.”

Sakura successfully tugged the frozen, black garment off Ryouko. He had begun to chew on one glove to distract himself, so Sakura removed the other one. The black leather glove came off easily. Now to get his boots...

“You're alone too much. When you think, bad things happen. You need to keep yourself moving, and talking.”

Now his boots were off, leaving him dressed normally. But his head was still full of snow. Sakura couldn't help but giggle as she fluffed his thick brown hair and watched as the snowflakes fell out.

“Now, go on to the bathtub. And I promise I'll get you an antidote to this anxiety. Okay?”

Ryouko's anxiety was in control, and now it showed. He would never yell at Sakura, but he couldn't help it now. Biting his hand so much he drew blood, he shouted around it:

“Didn't you hear me? There IS no cure! There's nothing anyone can do! It's hopeless! This damned stupid thing has ruined me! It owns me, Sakura! It owns me and there's nothing I can do! It's just going to eat me alive until my sanity is gone!”

Sakura grabbed Ryouko by vest, slipped it off, grabbed his shirt, and slapped him. All in one graceful motion.

“You're just going to quit and cry about it? Now you listen to me! I'm the medic, and I say you can be fixed. Get in the bathtub and RELAX!”

Sakura used her strength to stuff Ryouko into the tiny bathroom. She locked the door from the outside as she left.

--

Ryouko stripped the rest of his clothes away, grimacing at the unpleasantness of pulling off a wet shirt. His groin felt frozen, but that distracted him, so he didn't complain.

His martial-artist's build shone in the dimly lit bathroom. He bent over, aware and embarrassed over his nudity. He had just taken an order from Sakura, and had obeyed without meaning to.

The old brass faucet squeaked as Ryouko turned on the water. The hot water rushed into the tub, filling it quickly. Steam rose from the liquid, creating a ripple in the air of the darkened room.

Ryouko sank down into the tub, letting the water splash over him. He felt a little more at ease, though his nerves made him jump up a couple times, splashing water all over the tiled floor. But then he sank back down, feeling his butt hit the bottom of the tub. He sank in to the water, all the way up to his chin.

-

Without knocking, Sakura opened the door and walked in, two cups of tea in her hands.

"This'll help you," she told him happily, holding out a mug. She avoided looking directly at his groin, despite a healthy curiosity. "And even better- there IS help, Ryouko. We need to keep you busy, for starters. But beyond that...well, there is medication. I put some in your tea for now. It's going to hit you pretty hard, the first time you take it, so you won't be going home. But it'll help you, I promise."

With that, Sakura sat down on the edge of the tub and began to sip her tea. She giggled a little bit at something in her mind. She decided to tell Ryouko what it was.

"You know, it's funny. We all get anxiety. And we all have our crosses to bear. Did you ever wonder why you got a certain cross? And then you realized that you're one of the lucky ones?"

Ryouko nodded quietly, taking another sip of his tea. The green concoction warmed him from his very core. But he felt something else. It was too small and vague a feeling to describe. But it was warm. If there was one word for it...perhaps 'hope'?

"I have thought that way. But I always forgive myself for being selfish. I guess it's because I know my disease isn't fatal, or even really dangerous. But all the same, no one else can see it. Even people who have the same anxiety have it for different reasons. So maybe it's selfish, but I almost feel like...well, like it's okay for me to feel sorry for myself."

By now, whatever Sakura had laced the tea with was really taking effect. Ryouko was so relaxed he was sliding into the water. Sakura heard the splash and deftly pulled Ryouko's upper body back above water.

"Time for you to get out. Then right to bed. Don't worry about pajamas."

--

Sakura's bed was a twin bed. Small with a soft red comforter. She helped a towel-clad Ryouko to one side of it.

"Okay, time to lose the towel. I need to tuck you in."

But Ryouko, being so mellow, had to say something. Right here and now, while he was able to.

"I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me. And I need to tell you that I fell in love with you three years ago. And right now, I'm even more in love with you. Because you took the time to care. It's lame to say, but it means a lot more than you know."

Sakura was clearly taken aback by that. Her face flushed, and she fidgeted. But amongst that, there was a clear smile growing on her face.

"...You reminded me of Sasuke. So much pain, but you wouldn't tell anyone about it. You suffered alone. It hurts me when you try to keep your pain to yourself. Share it with me, Ryouko. That way, it won't hurt so much. I can understand what you're going through as well as anyone. So, how about letting me into that 'inner circle' of yours?"

Ryouko didn't say anything right away. He just kept thinking about what had happened tonight. So when he finally answered, his words probably sounded rehearsed. That was fine, as long as they sounded genuine, too.

"Sakura...do you want to get a cup of tea sometime, or something?"

Sakura smiled and nodded.

"Yes. I'd like that. I'm glad you figured out that, if I came and talked to you, that I liked you."

Now it was Ryouko's turn to be surprised. "That didn't really cross my mind. I just thought I'd throw that out there."

For now, it was time to rest. They could plan their first date later.

Ryouko didn't have any pajamas, and all his clothes were frozen. So he dropped the towel from around his waist and hopped into bed as fast as he could. He felt bad taking Sakura's bed, though. (Although it was so comfy he hated to give it back all the same)

"I'll sleep on the floor," he offered.

"No, there's good," Sakura replied. She climbed into bed next to him, pulling him into a hug. "I'm probably not as warm as the tub, but I hope it's okay..."

25 - Jiraiya's Manuscript II

There she was!

Ryouko looked away quickly, hoping she hadn't noticed him looking. What a mess it would be if he was caught!

She's absolutely out of my league! The Hokage's apprentice! How did my eyes wander to her? It's unforgivable! It's almost the worst slander a warrior can commit; falling in love with one's superior! It's not unheard of, but...

Ryouko was the newly-appointed captain of a rare shinobi division- the Sword Corps. A group of elite shinobi had mastered the sword (various types) as well, and were put in a special squad for the Hokage and her immediate advisor's protection. Among them:

Captain Ryouko Asakatsu- Brigade chief, captain of defense unit A1

Katsuyori Akamadori- Second in command, leader of defense unit A2

Chin Park- Chinese sword master, second in command A1

Okayo Akamadori- Roving patrolman; older brother of Katsuyori Akamadori

The Sword Corps were admired, but only as a novelty. Most shinobi believed they could best their sword-wielding brethren easily. It was untrue, as each one had shinobi skills of at least jonin level, but the old tension between shinobi and samurai was still alive and well. The ninja even made fun of the Sword Corp's lengthy weapons and traditional hakamas and kekkouges. Never to their face, of course- no one wanted war, after all.

"Alright, back at it," Ryouko muttered. "Split off, A1 and A2. Chin, you take charge. I'm going to confirm orders from the Hokage and her advisors."

"Understood!" Chin replied crisply.

With that, Ryouko made his way to Sakura. He narrowed his eyes a little- Sakura was leaning causally against a building, flipping a kunai to reverse grip and back, her mind clearly elsewhere.

Whoa...she's even cute when her head's in the clouds! AH! No no no, stop it! Idiot! You can't have her, so get over yourself!

On one knee at her feet, head down and one hand on the ground, Ryouko gave his greeting:

"Pardon my interruption, Ojousama, but I thought I might confirm my orders..."

Sakura gave him a little smile, followed by a tap on the head.

"You don't have to call me that! I'm Sa-Ku-Ra! Sakura! Not 'Ojousama!' Don't make me chastise you, Sword Corps Captain and Brigade Chief..."

Ryouko enjoyed this little exchange, which happened daily. It was really his only contact with Sakura on any kind of personal level, so he stretched it out as long as he could.

“Begging your pardon...Sakura. So, my orders...”

“Your orders have changed, Ryouko! You’re to accompany me to the woods for some private training. We won’t be disturbed, and I don’t expect you to hold back.”

--

I stood in the woods, horribly confused about what had just happened. I had to fight her as a swordsman. But I didn’t want to hurt her. And if I let her hit me, my body would be destroyed. So what was the point of all this...

I didn’t even notice her, so preoccupied I was with my own thoughts. She landed behind me after free-falling from a tree, trapped my hands, and put a knife to my neck.

“I expected a better fight than that, swordsman! But render unto a kunoichi what is hers, after all!” she whispered in my ear. Her knife bit into my neck just a little bit, causing a trickle of blood to fall. With that, she dragged me away using her superior strength.

--

I was disturbed to find I was helpless, as Sakura tied me up with chakra-reinforced rope. I had no idea of what role I was supposed to play now. But I HAD noticed something was clearly different about Sakura.

“It’s sweet how you’re staring into my eyes, begging me for mercy, swordsman. I wish I could oblige...not!”

Sakura was in front of me, smiling nastily. She moved in to my neck, and began to lick at the wound she had given me.

“It must shame you to be caught so quickly! But...well, haven’t you always thought about it?”

I was baffled. “Thought about what?”

Her grin grew, and her eyes widened. “About how hot it would be...a samurai and a kunoichi...mortal enemies, yet the samurai finds himself attracted to the kunoichi. The kunoichi, whose only aim was to seduce and kill, finds herself strangely attracted to her prey. Out of it rises a forbidden love...”

She leaned in closer, our noses now touching.

“You’ve thought of it, haven’t you? Don’t lie, you naughty boy!”

I HAD, of course. It was only natural, wasn’t it? Kunoichi were sexy, sassy, deadly, and most certainly verboten to samurai. You always want what you can’t have, naturally. And as for it being hot...absolutely. And, strange enough, this was how I always imagined it.

“...I have thought about it. But, Sakura, tell me now- is this an act?”

She chuckled a little bit. “How naïve you are, for such a seasoned warrior! I can’t believe I literally have

to seduce you! But, I suppose it can't be helped. And I've always wanted to know what it was like anyway...well, you have time to watch, since you aren't going anywhere."

I tugged at my ropes- she was right! I wasn't going anywhere.

And I care why?!

"Now...first your little skirt (read: Hakama) has to go. Wait, no, it's MY skirt that goes first, since I'M seducing YOU...haha, well, I'm new at this. But from certain signs, I can certainly tell you're into this. (giggle) It seems the clean-shaven, innocent-minded warrior that you are has a dirty side. Well, we'll make sure that both our dirty sides are satisfied, won't we..."

--

Jiraiya was clearly proud of his work. "So whaddaya think of THIS one?"

"What the hell?! Where did you get the idea for this, anyway?!" Ryouko demanded, looking at the manuscript in his hand.

"5000 ryo and it's yours," Jiraiya said, ignoring the question.

"Deal!" Ryouko said, almost too quickly. "But keep this quiet! If Sakura finds out..."

"She won't. Just make sure to come back again for more 'study material'...heheh."

"Oh, shut up. You're writing the smut. I'm a healthy twenty-one year old with no prospects."

"Whatever you say. Come again now, y'hear? Oh, wait, one more thing..."

"Yes, Master Jiraiya?"

"Did you ever think about how hot it would be? A kunoichi and a samurai?"

"...no..."

"Liar."

"Yep."

26 - Sis Mea Pars

Sakura and Ryouko continued dating for the next two months. They both kind of wondered if the novelty of having a new boyfriend/girlfriend would wear off, but it never did. Each time they got together it meant something to each of them.

Ryouko had been in love with Sakura for nearly three years before he could even ask her out. Sakura, by contrast, had noticed him and certainly liked him, but didn't feel love. Not until she agreed to go out with him on a whim, and they clicked.

The two were finally being assigned missions together when it was possible. Naruto was off training a lot, Kakashi was busy on his own, and Yamato and Sai didn't usually do conventional level work. That meant Sakura was often paired with random shinobi, or sent alone. Tsunade was more than glad to pair her with Ryouko- even though Sakura was now eighteen, Tsunade still felt that she had to coddle her a little. And if she could coddle Sakura through the ideal boyfriend, it was that much better for all involved.

-

Sakura couldn't help but notice Ryouko was more melancholy than usual. When they were together, he lit up, just like always. But when he was by himself, before Sakura came up to him, she could see his face stuck in a thoughtful position, his shoulders slumped forward, and dark circles under his eyes.

I'm his girlfriend...shouldn't he tell me what's wrong? Sakura wondered. Did this mean that Ryouko didn't trust her?

Today the two were meeting near the gates. They had a mission in a nearby village. Sakura was really looking forward to it. Spending some time alone with her boyfriend on a simple B-ranked mission was going to be great! But Ryouko just seemed like he lost his spark.

Gulping, Sakura approached him, trying to find the right words to ask him what the problem was. Before she could, he got up.

"Good morning! ..." he greeted her, then paused. After a moment, he pulled her into a hug. That was more affectionate and forward than usual. It stunned Sakura, but she was happy to clutch her man.

"Good morning to you, too! You're in an affectionate mood today, huh?"

"Huh? Uh, I guess so!" Ryouko covered up quickly, kind of shaking his head and rolling his shoulder. It was a nervous habit that Sakura had noticed.

He's not telling me something...

"Are...are you okay? You seem...tired..." Sakura chanced, only partially lying.

“Oh, I was up late studying. The usual thing before a mission like this. It’s my job to protect my girl, right?” he responded cheerfully.

“You got that right! And it’s my job to stitch you back together when you do something risky, stupid, yet somehow sexy and self-sacrificing to save me.”

“That’s so accurate it’s scary,” Ryouko told her, chuckling in his reserved way.

Sakura giggled and shrugged. “It’s my job to know my boyfriend. Now c’mon, we’d better get going.”

His face twinged at the word ‘boy’... But why? Something is up with him. I’ve got to find out what it is!

-

In the outpost town of Hizawa, there had been an outbreak of violence. The Fire Daimyo had commissioned the town to be turned into a military installment. The residents had responded fiercely, even attacking one of the Daimyo’s retainer’s. There had been an outbreak of fighting, and several people were injured. That was where Sakura and Ryouko came in. Sakura would heal the wounded, while Ryouko would put an end to the fighting.

Ryouko had a rank under the Fire Daimyo. He had a waistcloth, much like Asuma’s, but with a small ‘ni’ (number 2) on it. It meant that, should the Daimyo be in his presence, be it in person or in the Leaf Village, Ryouko would immediately act as a proxy for the Daimyo. Considering the conflict that had just broken out, he wondered if the waistcloth would make him a target.

As three shuriken came flying at him, he knew it would. He ducked and drew a kunai to block the further incoming metal. Maybe it was because he was so out of it, but Sakura noticed something.

His stance is off...that next one is gonna- oh no!

Sakura threw her own body in the way, stopping the star with her shoulder. That stopped the onslaught from the town.

“No!”

Ryouko hit the dirt next to her, putting his hands over the wound. Blood came from between his fingers. Then it stopped, and Sakura calmly sat up.

“That’s cute and all, but I’ve got this,” she told Ryouko, giving him a little smile. He met her eyes, then shyly looked away, blushing.

This was my fault...Damn it. I’ve got to tell her what’s going on with me before this happens again.

Unfortunately, that would have to wait. A LOT of angry townsfolk were now surrounding Ryouko, farming tools held at him threateningly.

“Bearing that crest? Here, of all places? Leave the medic ninja and get the hell out of here. We wouldn’t want any accidents happening to you, now would we?”

The de facto leader was a tough, old farmer, speaking around the pipe he had clenched between his teeth. His weapon of choice was a pitchfork. The others all held sharp gardening tools, long pieces of wood, and a very ninja tools.

“I’m not here for trouble. I’m escorting the medical ninja. We’re both from the Leaf Village, and”

“She stays, you go. Now!” the leader demanded. But Ryouko put his foot down.

“You’ll have to kill me to pry me from this girl’s side. If you’ve got a problem, we can take it up like men. But hurting or threatening her is not permitted.”

Sakura suddenly slumped over, groaning slightly.

“That poison is a dog to get out, too,” the old farmer said. “I was aiming for you, figurin’ she could’ve healed you once you’d left. But I guess she’s done for...Unless you beg me for the antidote. Not that I’ll give it to you. You’ll have to pry it from my cold, dead fingers.”

Ryouko advancing threateningly, drawing his two tonfa. He stood up menacingly, his eyes watching everything.

“You’d be surprised at how much that appeals to a man in love. Am I going to have to hurt you, or will you give me the antidote?”

All at once, the townsfolk attacked. Ryouko was off, kicking, blocking, dodging, knocking away weapons, and hitting anyone who came too close. But at no point did he actually really hurt anyone, nor did he use any jutsus. He fought on equal terms with his enemies, and didn’t advance a step into their turf. In fact, he never left Sakura’s side.

After an hour, the town gave up. The antidote was passed to Ryouko. He picked up Sakura and ran.

He should have known it was too easy, but all he cared about was Sakura.

--

In the forest nearby, Ryouko hid Sakura under the roots of a giant tree that had grown around a rock. He did all he could to remember his basic first aid training. He cleaned her wound, administered the antidote, then bandaged her up. But she was burning up from fever, and there was nothing he could do for that. He didn’t have any medicine, and he had already put a cold washcloth (Actually his headband soaked in water from a nearby river) on her head. The rest of her was sweating, except her hands which were like ice.

Ryouko sat in silence for a while, wracking his brain. His vest was under Sakura’s head as a pillow. But what else to do for her?

Gradually, it dawned on him. Back at the academy, he had heard Iruka-sensei tell a story about how a kunoichi saved a squad member’s life by absorbing his fever through direct skin contact. That was

something Ryouko could do!

But he stared at her for a moment.

If only I hadn't been so upset about my birthday. My stance wouldn't have been off, and she wouldn't be hurt like this. It's all my fault. I've got to make up for it. Even if she hates me for what I'm about to do, at least she'll be okay...

Ryouko pulled off his blue shirt, then his mesh and chain mail undershirt. That was hard enough for him to do with her present. But now he had to unzip her top. When he did, he saw (only a glance- he swore he wouldn't look or touch more than he had to) a white bra. Being very careful, he reached around her to unhook the bra. He had never done that before, so it took some fumbling before he unlatched it. After pulling it away, Sakura's bare breasts were right there. But Ryouko didn't stare, or even fondle. He just laid his body gently across hers. He was going to take in her fever.

I had hoped that someday we would do this. But the circumstances I dreamed up were a lot different. We were both conscious, for one thing. Oh well. This doesn't count as a 'first time' anyway.

Ryouko snuggled up to her as tightly as he could, then closed his eyes. He doubted he would sleep, but it was best to at least rest his eyes. The two were protected by three genjutsus. If any were broken, Ryouko would know and could fight off the attack. For now, though, he just rested.

--

When Sakura woke up, she felt a lot better. She stretched her arms above her head, giving a small yawn. It was then she noticed that she had Ryouko's shirt covering her.

"Wha?" escaped her lips.

"Oh, you're awake! Thank God!" Ryouko exclaimed. He had been busy making a clothesline out of two kunai and a length of wire. Sakura's newly-washed shirt was hanging off it.

"How are you feeling?"

Sakura didn't know at that moment. She was too busy covering herself up. Ryouko seemed to understand and didn't persist. He just used a light fire jutsu to dry Sakura's top. It was still warm in his hand as he handed it back.

"...I'm sorry. It's my fault you got poisoned," Ryouko finally admitted, sitting down near Sakura. His face was one full of shame and anger.

Sakura tugged his shirt to her chest, then scooted over until she sat back to back with him.

"What was bothering you the other day, anyway?" Sakura asked. She realized that it sounded almost like a demand, and immediately apologized. "I'm sorry. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to..."

Ryouko gave a small, derisive snort. "You're my girlfriend. You've got a right to know. After all, it got you hurt."

He looked up at the foliage, smiling to himself. The girl he loved was sitting with him, back to back, on cool grass on a warm summer day, in the shade of a beautiful old tree. It was almost an ideal situation. The scene calmed his mind enough for him to finally tell her.

"I...know it's stupid...but it was my birthday yesterday. I was depressed about getting older, I guess. I mean...you know how I was...am. I never did anything precocious, or rambunctious, or anything. Until I met you, having a girlfriend was only a fond dream. Strength and loyalty, and belonging...it's what I want, but it never seemed attainable. And I never had any of the fun you're supposed to have when you're younger. And...that's it."

Sakura had an idea of how to cheer Ryouko up. "It was your birthday yesterday? I never knew that. That's the kind of thing you're supposed to tell me."

"I know...sorry."

Sakura shook her head. "Don't be. I can understand. I'm only eighteen, but in our world, some don't even get that long. Neither of us had a normal childhood. I spent my time chasing Sasuke, while you spent it with that illness. But you know what? We're past that. We've got to live in the present."

Ryouko felt Sakura's arms wrap around his torso. He sighed and let his head drop onto his shoulder. Sakura laid her head on top of his, giving him another squeeze.

"The present isn't so bad. And being older has its advantages."

Ryouko's shirt was in his lap. He immediately blushed- this meant that Sakura was topless, and right behind him. The man in him wanted to turn around and stare shamelessly. But his hormones held off- he loved this girl. When they were both ready to get rid of the clothes and go farther, they would. Right now, he had to respect her.

Sakura, of course, had to tease him a little. She knelt close and whispered in his ear:

"I know you're just dying to turn around to take a look, you bad boy. Maybe it's only fair, 'cause now I've seen you topless."

Ryouko felt Sakura's hands on his chest, and her head on his shoulder.

"Such a strong chest you have. I'm glad I get to see it. Maybe I should give you a birthday present, hmmm? What do you think? Want to unwrap your gift?"

Ryouko blushed, his hormones now raging.

"Is it really okay?!" he blurted out.

You pervert!

Sakura took her hands off his shoulders.

"...You...you can turn around now..." she said shyly. Ryouko could *hear* her blushing. "I...want you to see this..."

Ryouko turned...to find Sakura clothed and sticking her tongue out.

“Perv!” she told him, giving him a small smack on the head.

“That’s so mean of you!” Ryouko managed to say around his laughter. “A lie like that can undo a man!”

Sakura put her hands behind her back, bending over to get close to his face. “Oh, I wasn’t lying!”

Sakura reached behind her, into her waist pouch, and extracted a package wrapped in red paper. “I just meant you can unwrap this. YOU’RE the one who took it a certain other way...”

Sakura put her hands behind her head, looking up at the sky innocently. Ryouko just shook his head, knowing he had talked himself into a corner. He commenced unwrapping her package. Inside it were a pair of chainmail arm guards.

“I know that the Third Hokage wore that kind of thing in combat. I really didn’t know what else to get you, so...Oh, by the way, Lady Tsunade spilled the beans about your birthday. Hence the present.”

Ryouko pulled Sakura into a hug so suddenly it shocked her. Her eyes were wide open, while his eyes were closed as his chin rested on her shoulder.

“Thank you. ...This means more to me than you know...”

Sakura hugged back, sagging her head onto his shoulder.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you like them.”

Ryouko let her go, holding her at arm’s length. With a confused look on her slightly reddened face, she looked so cute that he couldn’t help putting a hand on her cheek. His hand was surprisingly smooth on her silky cheek. He nodded, as if confirming that this was really happening.

“I was never really good with letting girls see me like this. Especially up close. With you...I just trust you. And I’d really like to kiss you right now.”

Sakura leaned in just a little. He was going to work for the prize.

“What’s stopping you?”

Ryouko just kissed her, their lips meeting fondly. Their tongues flicked just a little, adding a little sizzle to the kiss. It was over pretty quick, but both felt pretty satisfied.

“Now, we should get to work. Let’s heal those people so we can go home. I’ve got time off coming...”

Ryouko started, but hesitated. Sakura gave him a look that practically begged him to continue.

“I’d...well, I was wondering if you might want to live together? I’m buying this old farmhouse, and it’s pretty big. I could use the company...if it’s cool with you?”

Sakura was caught off-guard, and couldn’t answer right away. Ryouko seemed to understand, so he added:

“It doesn’t mean we have to...y’know...sleep together or anything. But I’ll be honest: I can’t imagine being with anyone else. I love you. I know things are never that clear-cut and simple, but that’s what it comes down to. I love you, and I want to be with you. So there’s no pressure to accept my offer- I can love you from across the village.”

That put Sakura’s mind at ease.

“I’m in! And you know...I feel the same. I really do. From now on, we belong to each other.”

“Sis Mea Pars,” Ryouko quoted. “It means ‘May you be a part of me’ in Latin. Corny, but you get my point.”

“I do indeed. Now, let’s do our job so we can go home.”

Ryouko actually objected. “I was...thinking. Maybe we should give them a day to cool off. Send for an official order from Lady Tsunade. There’s this town a few miles over, and...well...I’d like to spend some time with you. Just you and I. No fighting, no healing, no nothing. Just getting to know each other better.”

That was surprising, coming from Ryouko. Blow off the mission to hang out together? But man, it was tempting!

--

The hotel was nice. One hitch: only one futon. Ryouko glanced nervously at Sakura, but she just bustled over to it and undid her headband.

“Come here. You look tired. And I’m bushed! How ‘bout we take a little nap together?”

Sakura pulled Ryouko’s vest off, giggling at his blushing face while thinking of her own reddening cheeks.

“It’s hot in here. C’mon, take your shirt off, too! Strip, already! Man, you’re so shy...”

Ryouko seemed reluctant, but did as Sakura said.

Sakura didn’t seem to mind Ryouko’s reluctance. She just turned around, dropped her skirt, then rooted around in her waist pouch, extracting a white t-shirt. She pulled off her vest, put the shirt on, and then dropped her black pants. Ryouko wasn’t looking, no matter how tempted. If he had been looking, he would have seen a little pair of low-rise white panties.

“C’mon, turn around! If I’m comfortable enough to undress with you right there, it’s okay for you to look!”

Ryouko did. But Sakura was up against his body immediately, giving him a huge hug and kiss. Then she pinned him down, laying on top of him to whisper in his ear.

“Don’t fight back. You don’t need to, right? Besides, right now, it’s your birthday. Being the boyfriend of a kunoichi means something: you belong to that kunoichi. You and I are going to take a little nap together now, and you’re not going to fight me about it! And I want to hear it, once and for all: Do you love me?”

“I do. I love you. And if that means that I belong to you...then I belong to you.”

Sakura kissed him, moaning a little with pleasure against his cheek. “Good boy. You belong to me. Now, you lay down, and I’ll curl up next to you.”

Ryouko did, and Sakura snuggled right up to him, gripping him around the waist and shoulders. Ryouko carefully returned the embrace, pulling her in tight. Her smooth skin felt good against his slightly rougher skin, and her warmth seemed to reach inside him and warmed his very being.

She gave his chest an affectionate nuzzle, picking out his shoulder for her pillow. That put her dangerously close to his ear as she began to breath progressively more calmly as she settled to sleep.

27 - Jiraiya's Manuscript 3

Ryouko was ashamed, but he was going to Jiraiya again. For the last time, he kept telling himself.

The tales that Jiraiya fashioned about Ryouko and Sakura were fascinating, and erotic- as a single twenty-one year old boy, with a crush on a certain pink-haired kunoichi, it was becoming almost a necessity to read what Jiraiya wrote. Ryouko paid for it, though; in cash. Jiraiya was greedy. But it was a fair price to Ryouko- once he put aside his shame.

Jiraiya was waiting in the usual spot, by the hot springs. Ryouko just shuffled over, stuck out his hand, and kept his head down.

“Hmm...well, you’ve finally understood that you need me. Unless, of course, you take a gander in there right now. Your girlfriend- in my stories, anyway- is taking a nice hot spring soak. Because of that, I think you’ll find this one extra...spicy.”

--

Sakura, Tenten, Ino, Hinata, and Temari were all sitting around. They had nothing to do today; Temari was just visiting, so the girls got together. But what to do with their time?

“Boys!” they said as one. Each one imagined for a moment their dream guy. Temari thought bad things about what Shikamaru could do with his Shadow Possession jutsu; Hinata blushed as visions of Naruto danced in her head; Ino thought about quite a few different guys; Tenten imagined her, Neji, and weapons; Sakura had to choke back tears. Sasuke...

Temari noticed Sakura’s face, and decided to bring a tradition from home to the Leaf village.

“You know, back in the Sand, we play a game when it’s just us girls. To play the game, first we have to pick one of us to go get a single boy. The more easily flustered the better. Some guy who’s sweet, and will do what we say- even if he’s reluctant. Ah! I’ve got it! Ryouko!”

“Yeah, he’d fit perfectly!” Ino chimed in, giggling to herself. “But who goes to get him? I mean, I know I’m not his type. Someone strong...”

“Tenten is pretty strong. You are too, Temari, but he’ll be less likely to say ‘no’ if it’s someone he knows better...” Sakura pointed out.

Tenten gave Sakura a look. “Ye-ah, maybe, but *you* work with him the most. He’d be the least suspicious if you got him.”

She had a point. Ryouko had been patched up by Sakura more times than any of them could count. And Sakura really didn’t have any reason NOT to go get him. If there were two obviously single people in the group, it was her and Ryouko.

“Yeah, okay. I know where he’ll be, I think. Studying, of course. I’ve had to chase him to all his favorite spots by now...”

--

Ryouko was sitting by himself in the corner of a tea house, trying and failing to grab his cup of tea while keeping his eyes on his scroll. He had succeeded in finally grabbing the rim of the earthenware cup when he felt someone get close to him. He looked up, wearily expecting a mission from one of Tsunade's cohorts. Instead, he found Sakura. Immediately, he looked up from his scroll to say hi.

"Hi, Ryouko. More studying? Don't you ever relax?"

"I AM relaxing," Ryouko replied, grinning a little. "How are you tonight? Would you like to sit down?"

Sakura plunked down across from him. A waitress came by to take her order. She brightly said 'whatever he's having', knowing Ryouko would redden- it was too close to a date for him to be comfortable.

"I'm doing okay tonight. A little bored; thought I'd look around town. Then I spotted you, so I dropped in. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"No, not at all," Ryouko told her. "Just re-reading some old material. I'm trying to slow down on how fast I go through scrolls.

"Wish I had that kind of dedication," Sakura muttered, leaning over to look at the scroll. It was complex, and looked like gibberish to her. "How can you wade through this stuff? More power to you, but man!"

Ryouko blushed a little at the compliment. "Well, I'm at a disadvantage, still being relatively new here. So I'm trying to play catch-up."

An opening! Sakura thought, quickly seizing the moment.

"Well, how about getting better acquainted? I've got a couple friends at home. How about joining us? We were all just talking about getting to know you better."

Ryouko's first impulse was to decline- his second impulse was to just go with the flow. He ignored his gut and decided to hang out with Sakura and her friends.

"Sure. What do I bring?"

Sakura rested her head on her arm, thinking. "Hmm...well, sparring gear for taijutsu. Bathing suit for sure; my friends love hot springs, especially after sparring. And that's it, really. We'll have food and drinks there."

The invitation delivered, Sakura gave Ryouko a little wave and headed for the door.

--

The girls were waiting for Ryouko. As soon as he came in, they swooped in like birds of prey and sat him down. It was a calculated move- he was outnumbered, and they were rubbing it in. The boy in him would love it; the warrior in him would be worried. Those two emotions colliding would leave him more vulnerable.

“Okay, we have all we need to play my game!” Temari announced. She grabbed Ryouko by his vest, tugging him closer. “Here’s the deal, girls! We’ll have a series of challenges; the winner gets the grand prize- this!”

Temari held Ryouko up. His eyes were so wide it was comical. He looked to an exit, but there was a girl by each one. No escape...

“Game one: Crimson hue! I’ll start, so you can all see how it’s done.”

Temari kept a grip on Ryouko, leaned over his shoulder and started to talk to him.

“You think you’re going to run? Huh? There’s no way I’ll let you escape. All these girls are here for you. Don’t make us tie you up. Who knows what’ll happen if we do that? Or is that what you’re already thinking?”

Ryouko turned a good shade of red. The girls all rated her, best of five. Temari earned two threes and two fours.

“Okay! Seventeen out of twenty- good! Let’s see...Hinata, your turn!”

Hinata walked up to Ryouko. Their eyes met, they both blushed. That was it. Hinata earned four threes and one four.

“Okay. Tenten, your turn!”

Now, Ryouko liked Tenten. She was cute, strong, and had a way with weapons. Tenten knew this; she and Ryouko hadn’t pursued each other because she liked Neji (Ryouko hated him for being arrogant). Tonight, all bets were off. She knew just how to play this. Twirling a kunai with one hand, Tenten opened a weapons scroll with another. A chain flew out and wrapped around Ryouko. Once it was tight, Tenten strolled over to Ryouko. She stopped short of him; he was on his knees, so even diminutive Tenten towered over him. She got down on all fours and smiled at him. The kunai in her hand was now at his neck.

“Well? You like weapons, right? Nothing hotter than a girl waving weapons around, Ryouko. Especially when that girl is...so desperate. You don’t know WHAT she’s capable of. Maybe it’s best to just do anything she says...”

That stunt earned Tenten two fives and two fours.

Ino was up next. While she was doing her thing, Sakura was thinking about what she might do. Even if she SHOULD do it.

He’s so innocent...should we really be teasing him like this? That bonehead, Naruto, would like it. It looks like Ryouko does. But he’s kind of...I don’t know. Is there someone he likes already?

“Sakura! You’re up! Go for it, girl!” Ino cheered, swatting Sakura on the butt.

“Hey! Keep your hands to yourself, pig!”

That turned into a brawl. Ryouko was still bound with Tenten's chain (That was a rule of the game- you could leave the last person's gimmick in place to use against them). The two kunoichi hit the ground and rolled. They rolled right over him, in fact. Ino smirked, and flipped Sakura over, dodging out of the way so that Sakura was sitting on all fours, straddling Ryouko.

The girls all agreed there- perfect score!

"Bonus points for you, Sakura. If you can give him a nosebleed, you get extra points!"

That brawl had given Sakura just the competitive edge she needed. Putting on her most sultry face, Sakura lowered her upper half toward Ryouko.

"You know, I've never been with a boy like this. I've never had a guy kiss me; I've never had him do anything. I want a special guy to be my first kiss; my first make out...are you the special someone, Ryouko? In those chains, you don't really have much of a choice, do you?"

A trickle of blood leaked out Ryouko's nose.

The other girls made eye contact- so far, so good. This had to keep up. The next game would see to it that it would.

"Next game! Trivia! Ryouko can play, too, and earn some points himself! In fact, he can go first! Ryouko, are you ready?"

"W-w-wait a second!"

"First question: What is Sakura's bra size?"

Ryouko just froze. "You're kidding, right? I don't know. It's not...right. Y'know...to stare...it's wrong...no gentleman...I mean..." He was just rambling- clueless.

"Eht! Times up! Too bad, Ryouko. Tenten, if you please."

Tenten yanked Ryouko's vest off him.

"Sorry. It's STRIP trivia," she said with a wink.

"Okay, next question is for Sakura. This is a special one, with someone in this room who can verify it. Sakura: Have you ever felt another girl up?"

Sakura didn't even try lying. She kind of shrugged. "Yeah...it's normal to be curious. Me and Ino...It was just comparing breast sizes!"

Ino nodded. "It's true. Forehead didn't have the guts to go any farther!"

"You WANTED to, pig?"

"Er...damn it!"

Temari laughed. "Okay, no wrong answer there. So you keep your clothes. Let's see...Hinata! Have you ever seen a boy naked?"

Hinata shook her head. "No! Of course not!"

Tenten grinned wickedly. "Wow, Hinata CAN lie! Funny thing, Hinata; we both saw the boy's changing that one day? Remember?"

Temari raised her eyebrows. "Ohhh, lying is bad, Hinata! Okay, strip!"

Ryouko felt his shirt being pulled off! "What the hell?! Why am I the one getting stripped?!"

Tenten made a face of mock horror. "You'd let a girl strip in front of you? You'll take a kunai for a girl, but you won't take off your shirt?"

Ryouko had no way to answer that. That was no right answer.

These girls...they're more precocious than they seem! And downright tricky! I never COULD read girls. This is unfair! What are they going to do with me?

"Okay, last question: Sakura, you ask one- to Ryouko. And it had better be naughty!"

Sakura set her face. "Ryouko- and no lying. Ryouko...have you ever kissed a girl?"

Ryouko didn't make eye contact. "...No. I always wanted my first kiss to be special. It sounds unguuy-ish, but that's how I feel."

The girls 'awww'ed' at Ryouko's response. That was really something. None of them had ever heard a guy talk like that before.

"I can't think of one boy who would say something like that. Okay, now it's time for the physical round. Ryouko, you're going to fight one of us- Sakura, actually- in hand to hand combat! Hope you're wearing your cup! Oh. Yeah. We're going to seal your chakra, too. Ready? Go!"

They hadn't given Ryouko his clothes back yet. Now he had to fight Sakura- with no chakra. He couldn't let her hit him! But he couldn't hurt her, either. So he did the only logical thing. He GAVE Sakura an opening.

"Ugh!" Ryouko tripped. Sakura ran forward and trapped him by the neck, smacking him into the wall. In seconds, she had his arms pinned over his head. Her strength was too much, especially without chakra.

"I caught you...now what to do with you? Or maybe you'd like to stay like this for a while?"

Sakura pushed in a little closer.

"It's pretty obvious you enjoy this. Letting a girl own you like this. It's so funny to think that in actual combat you're so strong. But when it comes to a girl catching you like this, you just melt. And now, I could do anything I wanted to you, couldn't I. Maybe you KNOW what I want to do, huh? Tell me what

you think I want to do.”

Ryouko had no answer, of course. Nothing he'd say out loud. So Sakura kept talking.

“Maybe you want to be spanked? Maybe stripped the rest of the way? Or maybe you want to go to the hot springs? All that kunoichi flesh...and you, as our hostage...

Have you ever thought about the forbidden love between a samurai and a kunoichi? Kinda hot, huh?”

Sakura firmly established she was in control. Ryouko found himself liking it. But he couldn't! He really liked Sakura. Wasn't this taking advantage of her? Then again, if she was into it, too...wasn't that okay?

--

The kunoichi cleared the hot springs for their party. They plunked Ryouko right in the middle as they stripped to their bathing suits.

“You can't go in like that. Did you wear your bathing suit under that?” Temari asked, nodding at Ryouko's pants.

“No. I didn't know I'd be kidnapped.”

“Your oversight, not mine. Oh well. Here's a towel- girls, those pants have to go!”

Ryouko barely got the towel around himself when his pants were pulled down to his ankles. He managed to cover up, but the girls still giggled. There were obvious reasons why.

“Huh...I always figured you as a brief's guy, Ryouko. Boxers are your thing?” Tenten held up his underwear, chuckling. Ryouko gave her a deadpan look.

“It's healthier for the sperm that way. The male reproductive system prefers cold temperatures to warm. Briefs lock in heat and sweat, and therefore damage sperm.”

Ryouko grinned to himself- that had done it. A medical response like that they couldn't respond to. Except Sakura.

“I see...if you're that concerned about your sperm, maybe I should give you a prostate exam right now.”

--

“Now hold on!” Ryouko put a hand to his head. “First of all, the story can't end there. And second of all, she wants to give me a prostate exam? I don't deny that if it has to happen, I would want her to do it, but c'mon!”

Jiraiya laughed. “Kid, this story doesn't end because YOU haven't decided the ending. You talk to Sakura yourself.”

Ryouko looked to see a swimsuit-clad Sakura looking curiously over the fence.

“I... had no idea! Ryouko...why didn't you say something? Come here, you shy little boy!”

Before he knew what happened, Sakura had pulled him over the fence and stripped him. Sitting in the warm water, she pulled him into a tight hug, her hand running down his back.

“Silly boy. There’s no girl who wouldn’t like to be told that she’s liked. And...you’re such a cute boy, I never thought you’d want me. I’ve always wanted a boy of my own to play with. Are you the one?”

Before he could answer, Sakura pulled his face toward hers for a kiss...

--

--

“So, kid, what do you think? I even anticipated your reaction and gave you a false ending! Is that worth the money or what?!”

Ryouko just held out the Ryo, ashamed. “It’s worth it. Every penny. But don’t back on our deal, please. If Sakura finds out...”

“She won’t. My lips are sealed.”

Ryouko nodded, then walked away, stashing his goodies in his vest.

Jiraiya grinned and looked back into the hot springs. It would only be a matter of time before Sakura came asking for a story of her own.

28 - Jiraiya's Manuscript 4

“...I'll be right back, then.”

Tsunade got up and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

That left Ryouko and Sakura alone. Sakura didn't seem bothered- Ryouko was already nervous. He just wasn't any good with girls.

“...Hmm...Hey, Ryouko? Hold still for a sec? 'kay?”

Ryouko just turned his head to face Sakura when she kissed him. More than that- she latched onto him, making out with him almost desperately.

“You don't know what it's like to not have a single boy ask you out! I'm eighteen, Ryouko!” Sakura protested around very provocative tongue movement. “I need male attention! I've seen how you look at me!”

Ryouko was absolutely stunned. His back hit the wall. Sakura squirmed even closer to him, chomping at his neck. He still hadn't returned the favor- he was barely aware that this was real! And Sakura was just getting closer to him.

My body...and her body...so close! This warmth! It's...so...nice! A girl's body is really...nice...Wait, this is...wrong? Right? I don't know! But I like it! What do I-

BAM!

“WHAT IS THIS?! I LEAVE FOR TWO MINUTES, AND YOU TWO GET IT ON LIKE DOGS IN HEAT?!”

Tsunade had Sakura and Ryouko suspended in the air, holding each one by their collars. Ryouko was absolutely petrified. He chanced a glance at Sakura, and saw her completely freaking as well. Love makes you do stupid things.

“It's my fault, Lady Tsunade. I started it. You know how I felt about her. And I...just got a surge of...affection...”

Tsunade put Ryouko into the wall- hard.

“Really, now? You think it's fun to get it on with my apprentice? In my office? Huh? Is that it? Is it fun? Well, now you're going to see how fun it is to get CAUGHT!”

Sakura timidly tried to interject, but Tsunade ordered her to ‘Go home!’ and ‘Stay out of it!’

--

Tsunade settled once Sakura was gone. In fact, she dusted Ryouko off.

“Sorry. I know that you’re lying for her, by the way.”

“Huh? How?” Ryouko wanted to know.

“You’d never get the guts up to pull that stunt. And you don’t know how lonely Sakura’s been lately. It’s affecting her performance. And...well, you know I’ve got a soft spot for her, Ryouko. It hurts to see her so lonely. That’s why I want you to help me...”

“Help you? How, My Lady? I’ll do anything.” If Sakura was suffering, Ryouko WOULD do anything. He was stupid like that.

“It just so happens...Sakura’s birthday was in March. But maybe I can give her a late gift...You’ll help me pick it out.”

Tsunade poured two drinks from a pitcher on her desk, handing one to Ryouko. He stared blankly at the sake, wondering why Lady Tsunade would suddenly decide to share with him.

“You DID say you were thirsty, didn’t you, Ryouko? Or is twenty year old sake not good enough for you?”

There was plenty of threat in Tsunade’s voice.

Ryouko downed it. Immediately, he felt something take effect.

I...I can’t summon any chakra!

Tsunade grinned wickedly. “You were even easier to poison than Jiraiya! Now then...let’s talk about this little gift I’m giving Sakura. There are two. One she’ll get if you DON’T cooperate.”

Shizune bustled in, told Ryouko ‘I’m sorry about this’, then restrained him with chakra-reinforced rope.

“The first gift- you. You’ll be at her beck and call until that poison wears off. She can do anything she wants to you, with you- whatever. Got it? Good. The second gift...this won’t be as nice, Ryouko.”

Tsunade held out a small tube.

“See this? This is lip gloss. Typical gift for a teenage girl, right? WRONG! THIS kind is special...it contains an aphrodisiac. If she puts this on, she’ll go mad with hunger for the first male she sees- you. BUT- you’ll have to make a choice. Either you’ll have to satisfy her (or try. Kunoichi have the twice the sex drive of normal girls. And with the aphrodisiac...heheheh)...or you’ll have to let her go out of her mind with lust. IF you can stop her. Her strength would be too much for you WITH your chakra...”

Ryouko started to protest, but Tsunade had him beat.

“Oh, what? You suddenly don’t love her anymore? Or you don’t think she’s good enough? Or maybe you want to see her suffer? Or fail as a kunoichi? You KNOW you want this. I know you’re the submissive type when it comes to girls. Don’t even try to fight it. Tell her you love her, and see what she

says. In your condition, you have no choice.”

--

Tsunade delivered Ryouko to Sakura’s apartment. She had stuck a bow on his head for the occasion, though she dropped him roughly at Sakura’s feet.

“My lady!” she protested loudly, bending down next to Ryouko. “What happened to him? You didn’t punish him, did you?”

“No, Sakura. In fact...Happy belated Birthday! This boy is yours until my poison wears off. He’ll do anything you say...oh, make him do something naughty! Obviously you like the idea, if you could corner him so easily before, in my office! And no, he didn’t tell on you. If you meant to keep it a secret, you should have picked someone who’d have the guts to pull that kind of stunt! Ryouko would NEVER try that with you!”

Tsunade looked at Ryouko, giving him a little smile. “If you choose NOT to make use of Ryouko, he’ll give you a second gift. And he’ll even help you with it.”

Sakura looked just plain scared. So Tsunade bent down and ripped off Ryouko’s shirt and vest.

“C’mon, give her some fan service!”

Ryouko couldn’t protest, physically or verbally. So he just laid there, hoping that this was something Sakura really DID want. If not, then he was being humiliated. Big time.

Sakura knelt down next to him. She placed her hand on his chest. Then she moved, just slightly. Ryouko drew in a gasp of breath.

Being touched like that...it wasn’t ordinary! As to be expected of a medical shinobi, she knows just the right spots to touch...spots I wasn’t even aware of!

“Is this really okay, My Lady? I mean...isn’t this...I don’t know. Illegal, somehow?” Sakura asked, her hand hovering just over Ryouko’s body. He was wondering the same thing. But he turned his head just in time to see Tsunade reach into her pocket for the lip gloss. Ryouko rolled over and nudged Sakura’s legs with his body. He was blushing pretty badly, and could only imagine how he looked as he met her eyes.

“...It’s okay. Please, do that again...I...don’t mind at all...”

Tsunade smiled wickedly, taking her hand out of her pocket.

“You see? He’s fine with it. Now, play a little. You’d be surprised at the cards you hold over any given male. Especially this one. Simply by being female and giving him attention, you own him.”

Sakura reached down and touched Ryouko again, up near his armpit. His whole body jerked suddenly, then stayed tense as her hand stayed put.

Tsunade grinned proudly. “Now, one more thing. Lay him on his back; use that nerve stroke I showed

you...”

Sakura did. Ryouko kind of seized up, then went limp.

“Good. Now, like you’re breaking a genjutsu, focus your chakra and put it in him. But put your hand just below his navel. That’s the body’s ‘Ki’ point. If you hit someone there, they’ll automatically bend over. But if you put the tiniest bit of your chakra into him at that spot, you can control it so that you can manipulate his chakra flow. If my poison should wear off early, then do this, and you can direct the flow of his chakra however you want- including away from his arms and legs to keep him helpless.”

Ryouko could just sit there as he felt Sakura’s chakra hit the very spot Tsunade had just described. It had a paralyzing yet euphoric effect. He could see just the bottom of her face- her smile. It wasn’t her usual ‘cute’ smile- it was more mature, somehow. Bewitching.

Her other hand stroked his throat gently, rubbing over his adam’s apple lightly, which actually unknotted his throat a bit. Her fingers reached up and grabbed his chin, her middle and index finger running over his lips lightly.

“So soft...good lips for a boy...the ‘tough warrior, tender lover’ type. I like it.” Sakura looked to her master. “I’ll keep him.”

Tsunade took a small, brass tube out of her pocket and handed it to Sakura.

“If he doesn’t behave, use this. Just show it to him. He’ll do what you want.”

--

--

Jiraiya shuffled the papers, counted them out, then handed them to the blushing female recipient.

“So, you like? I knew you’d come along eventually...Sakura.”

Sakura took the manuscript and put it in her waist pouch.

“Not a word to anyone, Master Jiraiya. Please. Especially not to any of *them*. Boys or girls.”

Jiraiya chuckled. “No, of course not. Most of them are customers anyway. But I’ve gotta ask- why Ryouko? He’s not my most popular subject...”

“He’s shy, innocent, and sweet. He’s also got the dark side to him. I don’t know...something about him. He’s attractive in a quiet way.”

Sakura took the manuscript, clutching it to her chest.

“I’d love to act this one out...with him.”

“...I could do one about Naruto and Sasuke. It’s not my thing, but the customer is always right...”

(Note: Sorry, not gonna make that one a reality in one of ‘Jiraiya’s manuscripts. Lol)