

Naruto Couples 2

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1 - Tablespoon of Sake

It was a rare break in the action for Sakura. She got up at a leisurely pace, not scrambling to shower and dress like usual, lest she be late. Not that Lady Tsunade was awake that early, but somehow Sakura's master always knew. And Shizune swore she wasn't telling...huh. A mystery.

Today, Sakura didn't feel like getting all dressed up. On the list of things to do were simple grocery shopping, and relaxing. That would be easy enough. Mercifully.

Yawning and stretching, she made her way to the bathroom, getting dressed for the day. Normally, she opted for a simpler version of her usual costume. Today, however, at the beginning of the hot season for Konoha, she opted for simple black shorts that fell halfway to her knees, and a sleeveless red shirt. For a change, she pulled her hair up into a small ponytail. She'd grown it longer in the back, though not like it used to be. Her pink locks now stretched just past her shoulder blades. Her headband was slung around her neck, giving her a carefree look. It felt good to drop protocol now and again.

--

Yuji was up early this morning, downing a cup of black coffee, in contrast to his usual green tea. Now that his slight stomach ailment had passed, which had resulted in him tripling his consumption of the light green brew, he was ready to try something different. Something refreshing. Coffee was just to get him moving. He had no intention of wasting a precious day off.

Ruefully, he glanced at his futon, left carelessly on the floor. Despite his dislike for 'the norm', as Shizune called it when she gave him giggling encouragement to pursue 'the norm', Yuji had yet to find himself a girl. A female. A companion.

A soul mate.

For him, a girl was not a disposable object. He didn't believe in that sort of thing. Despite his age, when the hormones flowed freely, he didn't bow to them easily. In fact, it was a rare lapse in his vigilance against his own body that allowed him to see a girl he really liked.

Sakura Haruno. She was attractive, attentive, smart, powerful, and- he allowed himself this slight fetish (Was it a fetish? That didn't seem like the right word...)- tsundere. Maybe 'tomboy' would be better.

Either way, Sakura wasn't a delicate female. She could handle herself, and often her rambunctious teammate. That control impressed Yuji, and he found himself interested in the Hokage's apprentice. However, such a girl would normally be verboten to him. He and Lady Tsunade didn't always see eye to eye, despite having a common mentor. In many cases, they had clashed. Yuji was often told he was in the right. Whatever that counted for, since no one would DARE tell Tsunade she was wrong. The only one she might ever listen to was Shizune. Maybe. On a good day. With plenty of sake.

Yuji had put off finding a girl for a long time. Part was fear. Fear of both success and failure. With success came more choices, consequences of those choices. It was complicated. Right now, his life wasn't ideal per say, but he was content. Did he want to change all that? He was a warrior, but not a simpleton. Maybe a little philosopher ran through his blood, cultivated by his time with the Third Hokage. No matter what, he decided that he needed to introduce a third agent. An outside force, driven to ensure that SOMETHING was changed. A third party that would mess with the cohesion of every day life.

In short- alcohol.

Yuji would readily admit to being a lightweight when it came to alcohol. He never got drunk, and he rarely ever touched the stuff. But when his courage wavered when faced with such a dilemma, he made a conscious decision to allow alcohol to soothe him. He had run himself ragged; to the point of exhaustion. With missions, with worry, with study, without sleep, without caring for himself. He was a short hop away from his own incapacitation if he didn't force himself to relax. a tablespoon of some kind of sake would be all it took.

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Yuji held the earthenware cup in front of him, staring at it's contents. Said contents were a dark yellow, perhaps light brown even, before you got to the light that was reflected inside the cup. He was familiar with the tea ceremony, as part of his training with the Third Hokage, but was never tempted to employ it himself. It seemed feminine, despite the Third's assurances otherwise. It was also unnecessary. There was no one else to make tea for, and the preparation was hardly worth it for Yuji alone.

"Lightweight," the bartender, an acquaintance of Yuji's, intoned with a smirk. "You're supposed to gulp it down."

"I prefer to savor it."

"Pansy. At least drink it before it ages."

"Will that not make the brew better?"

"Wise guy."

"Indeed so." Yuji contemplated the cup a little longer. Then he half-smirked, as though mocking himself. "Kanpai."

--

"Man, this heat is brutal!" Sakura exclaimed, carrying a brown bag full of essentials. She had noted, with a hint of pleasure, that a lot of male eyes were fixed on her today. After ensuring she wasn't flashing anyone, she just took their stares in stride, pretending not to notice. Still, there was no one alive who wouldn't enjoy at least a little attention from the opposite sex.

Looking up for a moment to wipe the light sheen of sweat on her brow (which she had grown in to, thank God!), she spotted Yuji stepping outside of a bar. Inwardly, she sighed a little bit. She held Yuji in high esteem. Thinking of him as a drinker...and the smoking, too. Although that was healthy, prescription chakra stuff. And he DID paint a pretty, if slightly morose picture when he smoked while deep in thought. Sakura knew he would never damage his body with things like that. She had stitched him together many a time, always as a result of combat. And each time, his body was in perfect health- something she could not take credit for.

"Hey! Yuji!"

-

Yuji heard his name being called. By someone female? That was new.

“Sakura, hi!”

He managed to get that much out before he turned around to look at her. As he did, the next part of his greeting caught in his throat.

She’s glowing today! I love her when she’s got her work clothes on, but this...relaxed version. She’s so cute! Or hot? No, the weather is hot. And not all females appreciate such a compliment. ‘Cute’ is universal.

Dismissing the fact that he was once again cataloging a girl’s appearance as though it were a scientific equation, Yuji straightened up. He was guessing the alcohol would kick in within five minutes. He needed to be in her company at that point.

-

Sakura smiled kindly, thinking that if anyone deserved a smile directed at him, it was certainly this particular boy. Girl shy, quietly attractive, soft-spoken until provoked, and a thirst for knowledge that belied his warrior status, Sakura had always found Yuji interesting. He was a mystery, even among shinobi. His birthplace, ‘real’ name, and many other facts were unknown to everyone but him. It was just something people accepted, since he was a student of the Third Hokage. That was speaking as a colleague.

As a female, Sakura found Yuji intriguing. He was dark, sometimes melancholy, but never moody. He was in the best of health, but his skin was slightly pale and there were bags under his dark hazel eyes. Thick brown hair on top of his head somehow gave him a serious look, though that could have come from Sakura having seen him chiefly in combat. From what she could gather, he was polite, humble, and more than willing to assist when called up or having volunteered himself. All in all, he was a ‘good guy’. And Sakura would be lying if she said that the mystery and stoicism he affected didn’t earn her curiosity.

“What are you up to today, Yuji?”

Yuji shrugged a little in response. “It’s a rare day off for me.”

Sakura raised an eyebrow. “Even from your personal training regimen?”

Yuji had to chuckle a little. He was known for two things: Being girl shy and being harder on himself than anyone else even thought to be. That was from everything from training to everyday life.

“Yes, even that. I had no choice. I caught a little bit of food poisoning, I think.”

“Food poisoning? Wow, that’s rare. What did you eat?”

Now, Yuji hadn’t expected this. A real conversation. He had just blatantly lied to Sakura, something else he had done simply out of habit. It wasn’t that he was a habitual liar, but that he chose to keep his personal life guarded. His stomach illness was chronic; from stress.

“Good question.”

That was a good answer. It ended the current line of questioning, at any rate. T-minus three minutes and

counting until alcohol kicks in...

“So, how about you? What are you up to?”

Shifting the bag in her arms, Sakura half-shrugged, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. They came undone when she didn't wear her headband in her hair. (Unconsciously, her simple movement made Yuji draw in a breath. She was so damned cute!)

“I'm just shopping today, then going to relax.”

Bam. It struck Yuji. Call it 'man's intuition', if such a ludicrous thing existed. Now was his opportunity. She was shifting the bag, indicating she wanted to move on. Likely, the bag was heavy. So, an opportunity:

“Want me to carry that for you? I've kept you here talking without thinking about how heavy the bag might be.”

Oh, crap! Did I just say something weird? She's super strong! I just made THE stupidest observation possible!

Trying to hide her surprise, Sakura hefted the bag.

“Nah, I've got it, Thanks though.”

Now it was Yuji's turn to hide his emotion. Disappoint. He had failed. What could he expect? Asking such a stupid question. Alcohol countdown began: 30 seconds and counting.

“...But if you've got time to walk me home, I could use the company.”

A reprieve! A chance to redeem himself.

“Absolutely. I'd love to.”

-

Getting to her door, Ryouko was now past the point where the alcohol should have hit his system. But where was the happy feeling?

Of all the stupid times to build up a tolerance!

“Is something wrong?”

Yuji immediately smoothed his face. “Oh, nothing. It's just really hot today, you know? We used to get bouts of cool weather where I came from.”

Sakura had inadvertently got him to open up a bit. She knew for a fact he'd never mentioned his previous home to anyone. With this new information, why he worked so hard became less of a mystery. The tone of his voice showed no particular affinity toward his previous hometown. In fact, the tone seemed to be missing some kind of key emotion. She hated to pry, but...

“I was wondering about that. You've never mentioned your hometown before. What was it like? Did you have to leave a lot of friends behind?”

Sakura covered her mouth in a gasp.

“I'm sorry, that was rude of me!”

Ryouko smiled thinly. “No, not at all. If I didn’t make such a mystery of it, then no one would be tempted to ask. The truth is...well, my hometown is nice and all. But it’s lonely. At least for me. I... don’t make friends easily.”

That much was evident. Sakura had never seen him pal around with anyone besides Rock Lee, after their infamous sparring matches. Seizing the opportunity, Sakura opened her door and cocked her head. “How about coming in and getting out of the heat for a while? I’d offer tea, but that’s suicide in this weather.”

-

Once inside, Yuji knelt in the middle of Sakura’s living room, facing the kitchen. He was sitting stiff as a board, his posture perfect, his hands on his upper legs. At his age, it was pathetic to have these thoughts, but:

A girl. A girl’s home. I’m alone with a girl in a girl’s home. I like this girl. She’s being kind to me.

...

**I like this girl. Is it time for a change? Is it?
Screw it. It IS time. I will MAKE it time.**

Sakura returned, and with it, Yuji’s courage faded. But it didn’t disappear. As she set a cool cup of water (his request) in front of him, Sakura knelt opposite him. If she was as intimidated by him as he was by her, she certainly didn’t show it. She went about her business normally.

In reality, she was dying to ask him questions. Her curiosity had gotten the better of her. But she held back. He had sensed her interest, and decided to take advantage of it.

“...I think I said before that I don’t make friend easily...”

Gauging her reaction...yup, her eyes raised for a moment.

“Yes. Yes, you did say that. I can’t imagine why.”

She set her cup down, looking at him intently. This felt liberating for him. Perhaps he needed to bare his soul to someone?

“I...never stood out in a good way. And when I came here, I felt something special. Everyone knew everyone. Everyone got along. They were all proud to belong to the Leaf Village. To fight for it, and it’s honor. And each other. Where I first learned martial arts, there was little camaraderie, but only in class. People didn’t just get together out of loyalty; only out necessity. We would go to competitions ‘for the school’, and bring back trophies. But it only came down to the individual’s accomplishments.”

So far, not boring her. Better wrap it up quick, though.

“There were lots of other things, too. The school took the ‘easy way’ on a lot of their arts, cutting out things they didn’t like for the simplicity’s sake. You can’t ignore a rain cloud when it’s right in front of you, but that was the attitude. Coming here was night and day different. And, well, I’ve never regretted it. I want to belong even more. Maybe even get a normal existence out of it.”

Sakura was quiet, looking at her cup. She really was rendered speechless. Yuji’s story wasn’t horribly morbid or macabre, and not terribly sad. It still felt like he was avoiding talking about his real self, though, but that kind of trust took time.

Yuji had paused, still and quiet himself. He hadn't opened up like that in a long time. Maybe the alcohol HAD hit him. If so, then now was the time. He was alone with her. The girl he liked. He could *feel* the words in his throat; he could hear them in his head. He decided to speak them aloud:

"Sakura...Do you want to go out sometime?"

Whatever Sakura had been expecting, THAT wasn't it. She knocked her water over, then scrambled to clean it up. It gave her a second to think. In that one second, the smallest increment of time a human could measure without thinking, she had only one thought:

"Why not? I think I'd like that, Yuji."

Yuji was taken aback. He didn't expect a 'yes', let alone one that quickly. Without thinking, he mumbled,

"Wow. I wish I'd gotten up the guts to ask you out when I first got a crush on you."

Sakura stopped cleaning, her curiosity once again getting the better of her.

"Huh? You had a crush on me? That's sweet! But for how long?"

"Four years, give or take..." Yuji admitted sheepishly. Not for the first time, he was sure he was the most lame guy on the face of the earth.

"I swear, I couldn't tell! And- FOUR years? You've gotta be kidding!"

I don't think I waited four weeks to tell Sasuke how I felt!

"What good is a shinobi who can't keep secrets?" Yuji shot back, a smile in his voice to match the one on his face. "As for why I got the guts up today...I was just thinking about that. I'm not sure if it was...well, the alcohol giving me the push I needed. Or maybe you managing to get some personal info out of me. Or...my guess is...the ponytail."

"Huh? The ponytail?" She'd done it out of laziness. It was a pain to straighten her hair, and get each lock into place. The ponytail was her 'day off' hairstyle.

"Yeah. I like ponytails. And on you, it looks so good it's almost criminal. I know it's corny, but..."

Silence. What DO you make of a pick-up line like that? Perhaps Sakura should count herself lucky, since her date has simple needs? Or is Yuji lucky because he has simple needs?

All Yuji knew for sure was that he couldn't wait to show off Sakura a bit. In a friendly way. Since he managed to get a date with her after so long, he certainly deserved to have some fun, right?

"Hey...Yuji?"

Sakura looked uncomfortable. Oh no. Not good for Yuji. This could only mean she'd reconsidered, and was going to tell him 'no, never mind'. But he held his chin up- he had finally done it. He had asked her out, fully expecting a flat-out 'no'. To make it this far, even with a little help from a tablespoon of sake...well, it was a miracle for him.

"Yes?"

She paused, blushing a little. “Well...would you ask me out again? When you haven’t had a drink? I...don’t want you to think I’m special because you’re drunk...”

Yuji had to freeze-frame for a moment. First, it was really cute, the way she had just cautiously said that, hands folded together, yet speaking with conviction. Second...drunk? He couldn’t quite stop the chuckle that came out of his mouth.

“Drunk? No, no! I’ve only had a tablespoon! I don’t drink heavily!”

“A...tablespoon?” Sakura covered her mouth, laughing. **M'lady inhales more than fifty times that on a nearly daily basis!** “Haha! You featherweight!”

“You wound me,” Yuji told her around a half-smirk. “C’mon, I know better than to ask you out completely under the influence. I just needed to shore up my resolve. I mean, it took me four years. Imagine if the alcohol wasn’t in the equation. I’d be training by myself, instead of sitting here with you. If a tablespoon can do that much good...”

He trailed off, blushing. It had occurred to him that he had no idea what to do with Sakura now that he had ‘caught’ her, so to speak. Not to mention that this was the first time they’d talked at length about something not related to work. He wasn’t used to that.

Sakura could see his discomfort growing, and stepped in quickly to end it.

“What do you have in mind, Yuji? For our date, I mean.”

“Well...I haven’t gotten past you saying ‘yes’ yet...well, what do you like?”

Sakura pursed her lips, making a dramatic show of her thinking. “I’d like...a dark, quiet tea house. I’ll eat just about anything. It’ll give us a chance to talk. Get to know each other. God knows there’s a story behind you. And I want to hear it.”

2 - Birthday Kindness

Author's note: This was written on my birthday, but not posted for quite some time. It's meant to be one of those fics that makes you go 'awwww' (as opposed to the more erotic, passionate love fics I've written as of late). I know it's shorter than my customary chapters, but I hope you'll enjoy it nonetheless. It would be great if we were all extended this kind of kindness on our birthdays.

--

Sitting up on his roof, looking at the night sky, Yuji pretended that he was unconcerned that in just a short while, he would lose a big battle.

Can't do anything about it, I guess. Better just go with it.

Despite those words, it killed Yuji to think about it. Losing wasn't something he enjoyed. It was worse knowing that there was nothing he could do. So he just had to face facts.

"I am aging another year tonight, and there is nothing I can do."

Didn't make it any easier.

With a sigh, Yuji thought about how great his parents were. They still made sure his birthday was a big deal. He appreciated that more than they could know. However, now being a young man, Yuji wanted attention from certain people. Females. Specifically, one female- Sakura Haruno.

The young, pink-haired beauty had caught his eye nearly five years ago now. And yet, he had never said a word. She had grown into such a beautiful young woman. He was only four years her senior, so they were compatible age-wise. And she was certainly attractive- and practical. But all the same, Yuji couldn't just abandon his life the way it was. He was mostly content. And yet, if he could have her while the rest of his life remained unchanged, that would have been perfect.

Straightening up, Yuji looked at the sky again, his face smoothed back to normal.

"Soon I'll be past the age where I can just enjoy myself. Life will only get worse from here. There is little to look forward to. But I keep living, on the off-chance I may be important.

No, I keep living because I don't want to die.

Then, what is it I want?

I'm as confused as I was when I asked myself this same question five years ago."

"Mmm...being too hard on yourself like usual, huh? That's a bad habit. Just like those cigarettes."

Yuji did a double-take: Sakura was standing right next to him! Before he could say a word, she kept talking.

“Since those things are healthy for your chakra, I’ll let it slide,” she told him, giving him a grin and a tiny wink.

“I, uh...thank...you?” Yuji managed, still very confused. That confusion didn’t lessen as Sakura took his hand.

“C’mon, let’s go have some fun! Your birthday only comes once a year, right? So you should make the most of it!”

Yuji allowed himself to be dragged away. He still couldn’t understand what had happened. And he didn’t want to just ask, lest he seem ungrateful.

“Your medical chart,” Sakura said immediately. “That’s how I know. You’re due for your yearly physical. If you can keep up with me, you’re in good shape!”

--

They ran until they hit the center of the Leaf. Sakura leaned over and grabbed Yuji’s arm, cuddling up to him. She was playing the ‘I’m so innocent’ girl, while looking up at him, grinning at the stunned look on his face.

“Where we going, birthday boy? It’s your special day. C’mon, show me how you treat a lady!”

Cute little taunting aside, Yuji was shell-shocked at this. He numbly aimed for a favorite teahouse on impulse. Sakura held on to him the whole way, acting like this was a date.

Was it? Was it a date?

--

They ate and drank, speaking quietly to each other. It felt intimate. Like they were the only two people who existed. It was exhilarating. It wasn’t so much that they had things in common as they seemed so right for each other. Even though Yuji’s life was a total mystery, Sakura knew just how to get the best out of him.

“So Lady Tsunade tells me...” Sakura paused, looking at Yuji. She cocked her head down and to the side, looking up at him. “Hey, is something wrong?”

Yuji shook himself out of his trance quickly, shaking his head, either in disbelief or to knock the cobwebs out.

“I just...can’t believe how well this is going. I’m...you know...I.”

Sakura smiled and put a finger on his lips.

“You don’t need to tell me. I already know, Yuji. How you feel. I can return those feelings. Come on, now. You shouldn’t deny a kunoichi what is rightfully hers, right?”

She pulled Yuji away again, this time brining him home.

--

Once home, Sakura sat Yuji down on her futon, propping him up against the wall. She sat down next to

him, her head on his shoulder.

“I know you wouldn’t jump right to the intimate stuff. You’re not that type of guy,” she cooed, cuddling up to him and nuzzling his shoulder. “You want to cuddle, and play, and be innocent at first. You want to be really and truly in love. You missed out on it when you were younger, so you want puppy love now, while you’re still young. So just go with it, Yuji. Don’t fight it. Let your instincts...your heart...take over.”

Sakura climbed up onto his lap, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his neck. Yuji returned the gesture, closing his eyes and sighing.

“I...would never relax like this if I didn’t trust you completely. The whole ‘warrior thing’, you know?”

“I know. I’m the same way. I trust a handful of people. You’re one of them. I like this, Yuji- the way we’re open with each other. So trusting. It’s nice to not have to be on our guards with each other.”

Sakura pulled back, holding Yuji’s shoulders.

“You need to trust more, Yuji. You work so hard to be elite; to be perfect. Don’t miss having some fun along the way. You’re not any less strong if you fall in love. Kissing a girl doesn’t give you cooties, you know!”

“I wouldn’t know, actually...” Yuji joked. He was going to say more, but Sakura stopped him by planting a kiss on his cheek.

“That doesn’t count as your first. THAT has to be on the lips. Think you can handle that? Hmmm?”

Yuji leaned forward; Sakura did the same. Their lips met in an embrace all their own.

--

Yuji woke up with a start, looking around for the girl he had just been kissing. But he was alone, in bed. Like usual.

A dream? But it was so vivid! It felt more like a genjutsu...but it couldn’t be...

--

Tsunade ended the jutsu, smiling to herself.

“Was that really okay, M’lady? To do that, I mean. With Sakura...”

“She gave me permission to go that far,” Tsunade informed her, stretching as she got up. She was holding the scroll that allowed her to perform this jutsu. “Besides, a little bit of happiness on your birthday...nothing wrong with that. I just wonder if it will translate to courage in real life...”

“M’lady?”

“Dreams can change people, Shizune. That might have been just what Yuji needed...”

--

Yuji waited outside Tsunade’s office the next day, rehearsing to himself over and over. Toward the end

of the day, Sakura stepped out, looking surprised to see Yuji there.

“Yuji? What’s up?”

Beginning what he had started practicing after his dream, Yuji gulped and said:
“Sakura, do you have a minute? I’ve been wanting to ask you something...”

3 - Red Love

Sweating profusely, I looked one more time to make sure my target was in range. I half-hoped she would have moved off, or rejoined the pack. Peeking around the corner, I saw that she had started to rejoin her group. Part of me sighed with relief.

“Pathetic!”

“GAAH!”

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the voice behind me. The chastisement came from an odd source.

“Naruto?”

Arms behind his head as he relaxed casually, he stared at me with squinted eyes, as if scrutinizing me. His laid-back ways never failed to make me question my own situation.

“What was that?”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to be casual. “What was what?”

“THAT,” he said forcefully, pointing at my target. “Did you just wuss out *again*?!”

I shushed him, crouching even lower behind the telephone pole I was hiding behind. “To ‘wuss out’ *again* I would need to ‘wuss out’ a first time!”

“Pfft. Whatever, you perv.”

“Huh?!”

“You heard me,” he said, accusing finger arched toward me. “You’ve been watching her, and you won’t just talk to her! Look, it’s obvious you’re in lo-”

I clamped a hand over Naruto’s mouth. “Okay, okay, you win! What buys your silence? Ramen? Money? Letting you win in a sparring match?”

Naruto’s grin turned wicked. “Nuh-uh. My silence comes at a heavier price this time.”

I winced, and Naruto took full advantage, making me wait until he announced his demands.

“This time, you’re gonna ask her out. In fact, you’re not going anywhere until she leaves that locker room and gives you an answer!”

I balked; anyone with morals would, right? (Probably just me, I realized belatedly) “I’m not going to stalk her outside the girl’s locker room!”

“She’ll be flattered!”

“She’ll pound me into mush! And more than that, what’s in it for you?!”

I regretted my harsh voice instantly; Naruto may seem carefree, but he’s actually a pretty tender guy. He lowered his eyes to the ground and told me in a low, somewhat sad voice:

“Listen...Sakura-chan...she needs someone in her life. I mean, Grandma Tsunade is one thing, and I’m another. But she needs...you know...a guy. One who isn’t me or Sasuke. She needs a stable friend...lover...someone more mature than me, and less bitter than Sasuke. And...well...if she’s my teammate, I want the best for her. And I think you’re the best thing for her.”

I would be lying if I said I wasn’t both stunned and moved. I’d never known Naruto to understand that kind of courtesy.

“So, are you going to wait for her, or do I have to get things moving?”

I looked up, but I didn’t see Naruto. Instead, I saw “Naruko”- the name Naruto had given his ‘Sexy Jutsu’. His girl form was, dare I say, quite stunning. It was clear he knew exactly what most guys would drool over. Amazingly, he had made this perverted move a combat weapon. But now, he looked like he was going to sneak into the girl’s locker room.

“Hey, you’re gonna get caught!” I protested. He had already gotten caught so many times already.

“I know. And I’m counting on the fact that Sakura will be the one to do it! Then you step up and make your move!”

“How?” I asked, not following.

“Duh! Play your goody-goody role and tell me off! Drag me behind the building and pretend to hit me or something. This’ll probably save my life- even if you DO hit me, Sakura-chan hit’s a million times harder, believe it!”

Before I could stop him, ‘Naruko’ strutted into the building. I waited about a half of a second before I heard the sound of girl’s shouting angrily. Right on cue, Naruto came flying out. But no one particular girl had dragged him out.

Feeling responsible despite myself, I walked over to him and picked him up, dusting him off. My hand ran down ‘his’ breasts, and I withdrew immediately.

“C’mon, it felt soooo good!”

I punched him in the gut. “Don’t toy with me!”

“Heheh! Sorry! Trying to lighten the mood! By the way- red.”

“Huh? Pardon me?”

“Red. Sakura’s underwear is red. Thought you should know.”

Now, THAT was interesting. Red was my lucky color, declared by no less an authority than my horoscope! (Yeah, I guess even non-believers have revelations, huh?) But...

“You @\$\$! I’ll never be able to look her in the face! All I’ll see is...red.”

Naruto squared my shoulders, nodding resolutely. “Then solidify your resolve. You deserve her; and she deserves you. Now, go to it, man! If you get stuck, I’ll bail you out.”

--

Waiting outside the hospital, I muttered under my breath as I tried to work out what to say to her. Asking her for anything else would be easy. Bur a date? Not easy in the least.

I was halfway through my tenth failed approach and completely lost to the world when I felt a hand on my shoulder and nearly jumped a foot.

“I had no idea I had that kind of affect on you, Yuji-kun.”

Sakura’s voice was so sweet and innocent, and the little giggles she seemed to be having a hard time controlling made her that much cuter. It made me want her in the worst way. Maybe that was what I needed.

What if your parents object? my inner-voice chided.

They won’t.

What if they’re sad?

They won’t be.

What if she doesn’t like you?

Don’t know ‘till I try. Now SHUT UP!

“Sakura, I’ve been meaning to talk to you. How about going out some time?”

I said it as casually as I could, but I’m sure my eyes gave me away as to what answer I was hoping for.

-

How, I wondered, could I be so lucky? She hadn’t even hesitated before saying yes! My mind started to assign a negative meaning to her lack of trepidation, but I squelched it. This was MY not. My subconscious be damned!

I was at our meeting point incredibly early. I chose to wear a black, long-sleeved shirt with a collar. I briefly considered a western tie, but that was going to far. Plain black pants, and finally a pendant with a wolf’s tooth completed the look.

Sakura looked stunning- no other word- in her mini-skirt, normal sandals, and red blouse. Something about this look appealed to me. She was an extraordinary girl who was unaware of how beautiful she was. While she didn’t tear herself down, at least to others, she didn’t act like she was hot stuff. She calm, demure, sweet, and just about everything I desired in a woman. About the only thing she didn’t have was a ponytail, which I admit I am a sucker for.

"I just don't get you, Yuji," she was saying, her head resting on her right hand, propped up at the elbow. She extended a single finger out, poking me gently in the forehead. She had a curious expression on her face, and I got the distinct feeling that she was experimenting with me a bit. "You aren't like the other guys."

I smiled and raised an eyebrow. "How so?" I knew what I thought, but I was curious. She was, after all, a girl. The great unknown as far as I'm concerned.

"Well, you mentioned you've had a crush on me for four years, but you've never said anything. You're a hard worker who stays invisible in the village- somehow. You're a good looking guy, Yuji. I can name at least three kunoichi who should've been all over you. And..."

She hesitated for a little too long for it to be a normal break in the conversation. So I prompted her with an "and?".

"And, well..."

She paused again, and this time blushed a little. Man, she's so cute! Such a rare mix of power and femininity in one package!

"Well...you decided to like me?"

I hadn't seen that coming.

"Why wouldn't I like you?"

"Well, I'm...y'know. Average. My...proportions are nothing special, and ninety percent of the time you've seen me, I've been hitting Naruto or obsessing over Sasuke. So, I'm curious: why me?"

I didn't answer right away, so she added:

"Tenten is good with weapons and likes to train; You and Hinata have the same disposition toward the opposite sex; It kills me to say that Ino has a better figure than me; and that's just the *younger* women! There's Anko-sempai, Shizune-sempai, That purple haired ANBU agent..."

I was taking a sip of my drink, suddenly feeling more relaxed. Thank you, alcohol!

"So basically, out of all the women, why did I fixate on you?"

"Yeah. That's what I don't get."

I shrugged a little. "All the girls you mentioned have redeeming qualities. And I could offer you theories on why anyone likes anyone else. The best I can do is to say that there's plenty about you I find special. It's not just your looks, though I like your figure just the way it is. And your eyes, too. Green eyes are, well, cool. I like that you're determined, strong, and don't mind getting your hands dirty in combat. You don't come off with an attitude to anyone without good reason, and you're willing to do anything for your friends."

My hands were sweating now. I gulped back hard, but still felt tears welling up.

"...When I heard about Sasuke leaving, and how you tried to stop him, all I could think of was how lucky Sasuke must be to have someone adore him so much. I thought that if I had a girl who cared about me

that much, I would be a happy man. Love, to me, is not a disposable feeling. You can't turn it on and off, or it isn't love. It's something you take seriously. And for you to go that far...well, loyalty is a big thing for me."

I paused for a second to take a drink, then felt a little daring. I smiled at Sakura, letting a little mischief flow into my eyes.

"And I love your *tsundere* personality, too."

She half-shrugged, acknowledging that, joking or not, I had a point. Mercifully, she was taking the lead on our date. I maintain that girls have an instinct for dating that guys are not born with. It just comes naturally to them, and they could, at any given time, be in charge if they wanted. I don't know if Sakura was naturally taking charge, or if she was just kind enough to help me avoid looking like a clueless idiot. (I would have been guilty as charged, in all fairness)

"How about a walk?" she suggested amiably.

"Oh, sure!"

We both stood up and let the feeling go back into our legs. I tossed the proper amount of money for the bill and a generous tip (I spend money when I'm happy. Good thing I'm usually miserable). We made for the door. Having been raised right, I stepped back to let her go through the flap first. When I stepped out, she was waiting, looking at me a little expectantly. I ran through my mental rolodex of etiquette and could find none to fit the occasion. Sensing this, she snaked her arm through mine and pulled herself tight to me, her head resting on my shoulder.

"Okay, now walk," she instructed, stifling a laugh as I had to remember how to work my feet. It actually took a deep breath for me to get going. Having a warm head on my shoulder and my arm tightly tucked against my crush, it was just amazing to me.

"The moon is beautiful tonight. Cliché, I know, but I enjoy it."

She didn't seem to mind my dorky banter. "Mmm. It is nice. Makes everything glow so peacefully, doesn't it? You'd never know that there are wars going on outside the village."

"Something to be thankful for," I agreed. "Even the most hardcore warrior would cherish such a peaceful moment."

For some reason, Sakura blushed. I wondered if it was a girl thing, before remembering that I typically was the one who turned red. Sakura's skin was pale by comparison, especially bathed in the tranquil white glow of the moon. The reflection of the celestial body danced in her eyes as she looked at me.

"I just don't know what to make of you, Yuji. You're so...I don't know. Dark and mysterious, maybe? I don't know if it's just me, but I really feel like I can trust you despite that. As if maybe I can learn about you. Make us both happier people."

"I'd like that," I replied simply. "I'd love to do this with you again sometime. ..."

My voice trailed off as I left her the option of saying yes or no. Surprisingly, she picked another option

entirely.

She seemed to radiate light as she blushed. She took my hands, working her way slowly up my arms, her movements both unsure and full of emotion.

“Don’t you have...impulses?”

My mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. I managed an answer around the desert that was my tongue. “Of-of course!”

“But passionate impulses? You aren’t like other guys. That’s one thing I really like about you. You’re your own person.”

She was now holding my shirt lapels with strong hands, and was leaning closer. Her body language was screaming so loud I couldn’t have ignored them if I wanted to. And no part of me wanted to reject this girl. Never before had I allowed someone to get this close to me. Never before had I let myself be this open and vulnerable. It felt liberating. I had to make some kind of move now, before she thought I wasn’t interested.

“My impulses are limited. I force that kind of discipline on myself. And I swore to only break that discipline for the most special people.”

She inched closer, her creamy skin and slight yet intoxicating aroma now filling my senses. Our chests were touching; her hand was now moving around my the back of my neck.

“Am I?” she asked. “One of the special people?”

I smiled and made my move. I put my arms around her waist, gently pulling her into an embrace she was eager to return. The slight height difference was no problem. She possessed enough romantic instincts for both of us, it seemed. Thankfully, my body always knew how to respond in a clutch situation. As she pulled us ever closer, my grip tightened as a way of conveying increasing passion.

“I’ve...never been the type to just go with the flow,” I whispered to her. She started to pull back, but I kept my embrace tight. “But for you...I’ve never wanted to follow an impulse so badly.”

It was to be my first kiss. And we didn’t stop there. Passion possessed us both, leading us to her apartment. In what could only be described as a kaleidoscope of emotions showing itself through physical passion, we both let our inhibitions slide off with our clothes.

--

At the end of it, we both lay panting, exhausted but fulfilled. She looked over at me and smiled sweetly, belying the act we had just committed. Somehow, with her, sex was pure and natural. And it was love, not simple desire that it arose from and vice versa.

“Girls still scare ya?” she asked softly, playfully rubbing my bottom.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But I’d sooner live with them than without them,” I intoned, smiling a little.

“Woooooww,” she said in pretend amazement, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” I began, sitting up and facing her. “I mean that I don’t want to live without you. I love you.”

She smiled back, blushing. For the first time, I had the upper hand in the relationship it seemed. But I didn’t care to keep score like that. If she said the four words I hoped to hear, then I would be fine.

“I love you, too.”

There they were!

“Give me time to adjust, though, okay? I’m still...”

She trailed off, suddenly uncomfortable. I drew in a breath that seemed to rattle my bones.

“You have a mission. I understand. And...you have...him...”

She sat up suddenly. “No, I don’t mean like that! I-”

I held up a hand to stop her, then drew her body to me. Her skin, even damp with sweat, was still so smooth and inviting. I spoke into her neck, my mouth just below her ear.

“If you get the chance...I’ll understand. I don’t mean I want you less. But I want us to be open and honest. And he’s still in your heart. If the chance arises, go for him. And I’ll be behind you, all the way.”

She squeezed back, running her hand up and down my back, nuzzling me with her chin. I felt hot, wet tears fall from her face and land on my shoulder. I had made her cry; the last thing I ever wanted to do.

“How could you say something like that after we just...”

I closed my eyes and spoke solemnly. “Because you needed to hear it.”

I could both hear and feel her sigh. It continued into her sweet voice.

“Thank you. I DID need that. And you need to hear this: I mean it when I say I love you. We wouldn’t be here, like this, if I didn’t.”

Breathing in, I held her at arm length, choking back tears myself.

“I agree. And...well, I never sleep well if people I don’t completely trust are nearby. I slept more soundly than I have in years with you right next to me.”

She smiled and touched my nose; now less a woman and more a cute girl teasing an innocent boy.

“Maybe that’s cause of all the exercise...”

I felt my face flush with red, but I had no desire to object. It was a nice feeling.

“If you could change one thing about me...” Sakura started.

“Not a thing. Well...”

She sat up, a little alarmed. I grinned and planted a kiss on her shocked lips.

“Maybe a ponytail...”

She responded by rolling her eyes, laying her head on my chest, and going to sleep. Good deal as far as I'm concerned.

--

Naruto knew something had clicked between the two. He stifled a little sadness at the thought that he wasn't getting Sakura. But, he told himself, he had just made one miserable person happy. Everyone deserved a little happiness in this world. And if Naruto helped someone else find happiness, then he was happy, too. He just hoped his turn for romance would come. It would be a big job, juggling a girl and the Hokage chair, but he wanted both. And with Naruto, that determination was usually sufficient to get the job done, regardless of what logic dictated.

4 - Teacher's Secret

Kakashi had decided, almost on a whim, to see how Sakura's training was coming. Of his team, he had spent the least time with her. At first, she'd had potential that was blinded by her love for Sasuke. Now, that same love (albeit in a different sense) was helping to drive her. But Kakashi had noticed Sakura being extra nice to Naruto, too. They were comrades, and they supported each other very well. Kakashi had done a good job training them, as had their various other instructors.

But in all these years, he hadn't really gotten to know her or her combat style personally. Not one on one, anyway. So today, he decided, was the day he would rectify that.

Kakashi was also a healthy man, and relatively young despite the silver hair that decorated his head. He couldn't help but notice that Sakura had developed into a beautiful young woman over the years. She had gone from little girl with a big forehead to a female with a good build and matching skills. That was normal, he thought. It was simply noticing the growth of one of his students. Kind of like an indulgent uncle, maybe.

She even looks a little like Rin. Their personalities are similar, too, he thought to himself, recalling how Rin how to break him and Obito up, just as Sakura had done with Naruto and Sasuke, and now Naruto and Sai. That tsundere type...

Even I'm a little intimidated.

-

Sakura showed up at noon, dressed just like usual, tugging her gloves into place. She was just on time; Kakashi never showed up on time, or even close to on time, so it she knew not to rush. But today-

"Kakashi-sensei?"

No way. It was the unthinkable- Kakashi was on time!

"Wow, what got into you?"

Kakashi shrugged at the comment. "Well, no black cats on the path or anything today."

Sakura raised an eyebrow at that because she had never bought his lame excuses. There was no point in calling him on those excuses, though. Kakashi was untouchable. Unshakeable. The ever-standing guard.

What's under that mask? Sakura wondered, not for the first time. She might have joked about it with Sasuke and Naruto, but she more than a little curious, and had thought about it more than she probably should have. But there was just something about that kind of mystery...

I can't believe I've been having thoughts like...that...about sensei! I mean, really! He's only ten years older than me, but still...There've got to be plenty of guys that I should be fantasizing about! Okay, Naruto and Sai irritate me, and who knows what goes through Yuji's mind. If you

put the three of them together, you'd get the perfect guy! Strong, dependable, respectful, and yet demure and tender.

Sakura's thought had been drifting to love and sex more often recently. It was normal for her age, so she just shrugged and dealt with it. But the desire to have some kind of male stability in her life- or, on the other side, an exciting fling- was getting harder to resist. But what could she do about it? Naruto was obnoxious, Sai had no emotions, and Yuji so incredibly girl shy that he'd have a heart attack if she asked him out.

"Are you ready?"

Kakashi's voice reached her ears, smooth as butter, bringing her out of her trance.

"Ready!"

--

They sparred for nearly a half-hour. Sakura had improved quite a bit, pushing Kakashi to his limits. Or, well, at least as far as he *let* her push. He was still in a different class skill wise.

Man, it'd be hot if this was strip sparring. Or if I lost, I had to...Sakura! Stop it! This is your teacher! Besides, you've got a flat chest, a big forehead, and no redeeming qualities!

Kakashi leapt at her. Sakura, in her haze, swung at him way too early, as Kakashi peeled back. But something happened- she caught the fabric of his mask around her fingers. Before she could think, she tugged- and Kakashi was unmasked!

Silence. Kakashi was frozen for a moment before he covered his face. Sakura had gotten a good look, and her curiosity had been satisfied. But now, a new problem had arisen. The face behind the mask...

I want that!

--

Kakashi tried to take his mask back, but Sakura jerked it out of his reach. He was surprised at that, not believing that she'd play games with him like that.

"I got a good look, sensei. Which is interesting...I could tell people what I saw. Or..."

Kakashi knew blackmail when he saw it. "What do you want?"

She grinned, happy to have the upper hand.

"You're going to take me out and do whatever I want tonight. And no skipping out of it, or I tell everyone what you've been hiding under that mask."

-

Sakura had no idea where the confidence in that statement came from, or even how she got the guts up to make such a demand. But after having a peek, she needed more. She'd never thought about taking the lead in a relationship like this, but why not? She was a strong female- why not throw her proverbial

weight around? If Kakashi wasn't protesting harder, even if he WAS being blackmailed- maybe that meant that there was some kind of attraction on his end? A loli-shoujo complex, maybe?

Either way, Sakura couldn't wait for their date, even if it was kind of a shotgun tactic.

Then again, if Kakashi-sensei wanted to shut this down, he would have.

--

Kakashi had no idea what to do, or even why he said yes to Sakura. He had been thinking about her development, both physically and skill wise, but that shouldn't have led to this. Romance with a student was...forbidden. Bad, wrong, immoral, evil, sinful, and so many other adjectives. But it was also hot, in a naughty way. Kakashi was a pretty straight-laced guy, so maybe the need to let his hair down was asserting itself.

Regardless, he gave his word to Sakura, and he was going to show up tonight. He had already decided to keep letting her call the shots. It was just easier that way, instead of playing some inane guessing game with her that would serve no purpose but to quiz his (lack of knowledge of) the female brain. But there was one more thing Kakashi had to do. Ordinarily, his business was his business, but there was something to be said for respect...

--

Yuji was, quite frankly, stunned. A little stunned, actually. Very jealous, and certainly regretful that he wasn't in the position Kakashi was in. But he gave the older man a brave smile.

"I appreciate the honesty, sensei. I'm rooting for you. You two would make one powerful duo, you know?" he had said amiably, meaning every word despite the envy he was clearly concealing.

"I know how you feel about her, Yuji. And I want to make sure that we'll be okay after this."

"Hey, I didn't make a move. I'll get over it," he said dismissively. "Good luck. And...thanks for coming to me like this. I really do appreciate it. You're a class act."

Kakashi wished he could agree. He felt like this was wrong, and he told Yuji so. In a reversal of their usual roles, Yuji did the teaching. He put down the glass of sake he had been sipping at down on the bar (where Kakashi had asked to meet him, hoping that, if Yuji was violent about this, the alcohol would slow him down enough to avoid a fight), turned to face Kakashi completely, and spoke up:

"I didn't think I had a shot with her, you know? That's cowards talk, really. I asked myself, 'why did I pick someone out of my league,'? And you know what I heard in return?"

Kakashi didn't, of course. So Yuji elaborate after the dramatic pause.

"You can't help falling in love, and you don't get to pick who you like. That's just the nature of the beast."

--

Sakura got ready for her date, hardly daring to believe this was really happening. She put on her sexiest underwear, just a touch of make-up, expertly applied after years of practice, put on a skirt and a blouse

that accentuated her good points and would look good in any light, and finally shook her hair loose from her headband. It fell down, bangs over one eye, hoping that it gave her a demure, alluring look. A quick check in the mirror, and she was off.

--

Kakashi was already waiting by the time Sakura got to their meeting point. He was dressed casually, with blue pants and a button-up black shirt that was opened just slightly at the chest. He was reading his book, like usual, but looked up when she was still a good distance away, and gave a friendly wave.

All thoughts of blackmail were gone from Sakura's head. She hadn't plan to dangle it over him all evening. If all went well, maybe there would be no more need for blackmail. Maybe all she needed was a chance to show Kakashi that she was a fun girl. Maybe then he'd see an attraction between them, and who knew where that would lead?

The date was fun, mostly because it was so wrong. A teacher and a student on a serious date. To make things even more interesting, the two had clicked. They just hit it off so well it was amazing. Sakura had found Kakashi to be handsome, and surprisingly well-read in things beside trashy novels. Kakashi had found Sakura to be the bright, charming girl he always knew she was, but now even more so. This was the point that posed a problem for Kakashi. While the date continued, and he acted on autopilot, he began to make decisions. Important ones.

I really do like her. I've neglected romance for so many years. Since Rin... It's not natural for a man to have a life devoid of female companionship. But is it okay for her? She's younger than I am by a decent margin. But if she likes me and I like her, is that wrong?

Yuji's words ran through Kakashi's head.

You can't pick who you fall in love with, eh? That might be true.

By the time Kakashi had finished his food (none of which he had actually tasted due to his thoughts), he looked over at Sakura, who seemed to know that Kakashi's mind had been elsewhere.

"Sakura, let's take a walk."

--

Kakashi led Sakura to their training site. There was the post Naruto had been tied to during the bell test. There was the spot where Sasuke had been pulled underground by Kakashi. Oh, and there was where Sakura fainted from Kakashi's genjutsu. There were so many memories.

"You've really grown, Sakura," Kakashi told her, looking at the memorial obelisk. He felt a bit of warmth, which he took to mean he had Rin's blessing for this. "I've spent our date trying to figure out if this is okay or not?"

"What? What part do you mean, 'okay'?"

"This."

Kakashi slipped his mask down over his neck, bent down and kissed Sakura gently on the lips. He pulled her into a fond hug. Leaning over, he whispered in her ear.

"I'm glad it's you who saw under my mask. Now you've seen it twice. But I'll trust you with that secret."

Sakura grinned happily into Kakashi neck, giving him a fond squeeze.

"Our little secret," she replied. "Hopefully, that won't be our only secret."

"Well, considering you now know my most intimate secret...that puts you in charge."

That sent a charge through Sakura, as Kakashi had meant for it to. They embraced, clothed in the darkness that nighttime afforded them, each happy to have finally found someone. It was their little secret, which only made their bond stronger.

5 - Sakura's Game I&II

“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. Just sitting there when Sakura settled next to me. I noticed that she slid closer and closer after each passing second, 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.

--

It had been a few weeks now since I had made my move. Well, maybe that's putting it too casually. It's not like saying 'it rained for a few weeks'. That's abnormal, but not unheard of. Letting a girl bite you and suck out your blood and life force...yeah, a little more out there, isn't it?

Either way, I've now got THE most adorable pink-haired vampire for a girlfriend. It took desperation on

both her part and mine for me to tell her how I feel. But, man, it's worth it. I can't believe myself that I have such a beautiful girl on my arm. Granted, it's just as likely for her fangs to be on my arm, but I digress.

It's already time for her daily feeding. As I'm her only 'game', I have to be ready for this myself. It's actually a pretty hot little ritual. I lay down on my bed, shirtless, while she straddles me, pins my arms, and puts her fangs to my neck. It's a little painful, very sensual, and totally worth it on my end. It keeps her alive, and gets me the most violent hickey ever. No objections here. My parents are kind enough not to ask questions.

I lay down on the black sheets. But then I frown- black sheets? My sheets were white before, weren't they?

Things like this were becoming commonplace. At first, I wrote it off as memory farts on my end. Then I thought 'Well, Sakura DID move in with me, and I told her to make herself comfortable'. That wasn't quite right either. What DID seem right was that something about Sakura was changing. As if a darker side of her was emerging.

"You ready?"

The shyness was gone from her voice. Between that and her new attire, I knew something had to be done.

A black evening gown now adorned Sakura's shapely frame. She looked...well, stunning. So stunning my objections caught in my throat. But as she ghosted towards me, I had to say something.

"Sakura, wait a second."

She paused, uneasy. She wants to sink her fangs into me, and right now. Telling her to wait is a detriment to my health. But I'm more concerned with *her* health at this point. This wasn't normal for her.

"What is it?" she finally prompts me, running her tongue across the two prominent fangs on her upper gums. They gleamed dangerously, and strangely sexily. I had to steady myself, reminding myself that I had her best interests in heart. Even if the next thing in my heart would be a kunai, I had to tell her. It was part of love.

"Things have changed, Sakura. You've changed. It's like there's this darker side of you coming out..."

She gave me a shove down and reached for my shirt. Normally, she either slipped it over my head or unbuttoned it, as my attire called for, but this time, she began to tear it at the collar.

"Do you have some objection?" she hissed, dangerously close to my ear. I can feel her breath on my ear and neck. She doesn't normally do that. We're a couple, but we're pretty timid.

Well, minus the whole exchange of plasma.

This was pushing it, though. I'm a healthy young guy; I can only take so much 'stimulation' before I start to get 'ideas'. I had to stop this, for her own good.

Mustering my courage, I put my hands on her shoulders.

"Think about it. You're dressing in a black evening gown. You've made the whole room darker. Now you're threatening me; the one person you should be able to trust. You know I'll do anything for you.

ANYTHING. But think about-”

I never had a chance to finish. Without warning, she pinned me. I struggled, surprised, but her fangs were in my neck immediately. She began to gulp blood down. Greedily. Hungrily. More than usual. I felt my face freeze in horror as the color drained out of it. My girlfriend was slurping down my blood like it was a never-ending supply. I was powerless to stop her.

Roughly, she yanked her fangs out. Unlike usual, she didn't bother to heal the holes she left. She just put a hand over it, applying pressure so I wouldn't bleed out. She stared at me, my ashen face still in a stunned position. Then she posed the question that I couldn't take lying down, blood or no.

“I thought you said you'd do ‘anything for me’. Where's the love and trust? WHERE IS IT?!” She barred her teeth at me, inches from my face. “You tell me ‘things have changed’?! Now you tell me- what's changed?!”

“YOU!” I snarled, giving her a hard shove at her ki point, three inches above her navel. It bent her over, and before I could stop myself, I kicked her. Not hard; but a precisely aimed kick at the inside of her leg. Hitting the pressure point I'd aimed for, she dropped to her knees. Her arm reached for me; I countered by striking another pressure point. Her arm hung limply at her side.

“Look at yourself!” I demanded. “Look at yourself! I'm the man who loves you! Who would do anything for you! And you ATTACKED me! You tried to hurt me. You threatened me! I only said what I had to out of love. And so help me...”

I began to break down. I couldn't finish my sentence. But I had to. For her sake. I hoped this was all it would take to snap her out of it.

“...so help me, if you force me...I'll end this. Your existence. It's my job to control you. Once you've used me up, you'll start hurting someone else. I won't allow it. It can all end here.”

My strikes had worn off, and the blood loss had affected me. I was panting from the effort, and my heart was beating three times faster than normal. It doesn't sound like much, but when there's not a lot of blood to go around...

I put one hand on my bed, reaching for a brass candlestick holder. One of Sakura's new decorations. I had every intention of defending myself, if necessary. I meant every word I said. I would almost be killing myself, but I couldn't let her hurt herself or anyone else. I loved her. I made her my responsibility. I had to protect her with all I had. Failing that, I had to protect the world from her.

She pounced, and before my weakened arms could swing my weapon, she had me trapped again. I readied myself for her fangs, kicking feebly against her attack. She pinned me down with little effort. Then I felt her mouth at my neck. This was it.

Only a kiss.

I opened my eyes, which had squinted out of fearful anticipation. But I could see it- my gentle, pink-haired, wide green-eyed girlfriend, was back. She had battled the demon in her and fought it off.

“...help me...” she begged weakly. “I...can't fight it alone. The urges...they've become worse. So painful I can't sleep anymore.”

By now, she had collapsed into me, a sobbing mess. I held her tight, murmuring comfortingly. "We'll get through this. We can do it. You know I love you...so trust me. Put the same trust in me that I put in you when I allow myself to be your game."

She sniffled. But I could feel her agreeing with me. We had spent a lot of good time together now. She didn't want to throw that away any more than I did. She had trusted me with her most dark secret. I had, in turn, trusted her with my very existence. She depended on me for her own existence. As her 'game', I should have been nothing more than prey. But it didn't work out that way.

I felt it again- a surge in her strength. I was too weak to fight back very much. I just held as tight as I could, forcing my warmth onto her body, hoping that would counter whatever kind of darkness it was that was plaguing her. But I have to say, I'd never felt this kind of weakness from her, despite the apparent 'strength'. It pained me to think of how she was being torn apart inside her own mind and body; places I couldn't hold or comfort with a kiss. I was sharing her helplessness. I might be young, but to me, she was a commitment that I made readily. I would feel everything she would feel, if I could. I would take her pain and suffering on myself. I would die in her stead. I would defend her with every last breath in my body.

The Sakura I knew- and fell in love with- was a tomboyish, yet lovely female. Delicate as a flower, yet able to withstand the worst of storms. The kind who didn't get angry over something petty like a broken nail. Tsundere through and through. And yet, to me, the sweetest girl in the world. We were in a relationship where we HAD to be ready to die for one another. And we were willing. I for her. And as I felt her fight herself, I knew it. And her for me.

By now, my blood loss began to make me dizzy. It was still flowing a little from my neck, though Sakura seemed to be after my wrist now. Her fangs met it, and gently bit down as she restrained herself. She left only a small mark, with two tiny dribbles of blood. Then she moved back toward my neck, and I was afraid she was going to kill me. But instead, she went to my ear.

"There's only one thing that will appease this new side of me."

I would have done anything, and I told her so.

"You need to belong to me...forever. And you need to prove it."

"Tell me how," I said instantly. "I'll do anything. I swore I'd get you through this."

She grinned uncharacteristically, showing her fangs. It was pretty intimidating.

"The next time, after I bite you, you have to kiss me..."

Good so far...

"But not on the lips..."

Getting hotter...

“To show that you belong to me, you have to kiss my thigh. You have to be on your knees, completely submissive to me, and kiss my thigh. It’s the old way that game showed their submission to their master or mistress. Will you do that for me?”

I had a choice to make. This was no longer my sweet, innocent girlfriend talking. She was changing, somehow. Would doing this help her, or would she completely change into an unrecognizable being that owned me?

She pulled me up by the arm, hauling me right to my feet. I stumbled a little from the dizziness, but held my ground. Blood dripped onto the dark wooden floor, gathering in a small pool of crimson. I held my wrist while pushing my neck against my shoulder. Sakura’s hand was around my neck again now, not gently but not without passion. She was near my ear again, and I was simultaneously turned on and scared. What was she going to do? But she only spoke, with her voice becoming closer and closer to her ‘real’ voice with each word:

“You have one day to decide. But remember- you promised me you’d do anything.”

With that, she walked out of the room, without even glancing back. I slumped to the floor, defeated physically and mentally. Why had things gotten so out of control? Was I not good enough somehow? Was I too good? I had no idea. My options were rapidly fading. I decided what I would do. I would appease her one last time. If she pushed after that, then I would stop giving her my blood. If she wanted it, she could take it by force. I wouldn’t lift a finger to harm her or to help her, until this demon either took her over or it was expelled from her body.

TO BE CONTINUED

6 - Love Served Cold

Two ANBU agents rushed Yuji, who wasn't quite ready to attack them. Why should he? They were on the same side as he was- weren't they?

When he was knocked unconscious, he realized it had been a mistake. Now, it was too late to fight back.

"One down. Proceeding to next target," said one faceless agent.

"Acknowledged," came the voice on the other side of the earpiece and microphone. "Well done."

--

Sakura was in the same situation. The two agents rushed her just outside of work, grabbing her from behind and pressing something over her mouth and nose. She registered that it was a knock-out drug of some kind and began to regulate her breathing while fighting back however she could. She soon succumbed to whatever it was on the cloth, and passed out.

--

Yuji and Sakura woke up, finding themselves tied back-to-back, wrists above their heads, with chakra wards all around them.

"What the hell happened?" Sakura asked, trying to shake the cobwebs free.

"Dunno," Yuji grunted, still goofy from being knocked out. "ANBU got me."

"Me, too."

"That makes no sense. Why would ANBU attack us?"

The two agents came in.

"Do you know why you're here?" one asked. The other was brandishing some kind of weapon. Yuji's hazy eyes couldn't make it out.

"No. Enlighten us, please," he managed to say.

"Torture and interrogation. You already know what our questions are. Answer them!"

The weapon swung toward Sakura. Yuji swung around so he was hit instead. This happened several times. The agent, apparently giving up, ordered the two to be cut down. The room was laced with chakra seals, so there was no threat.

"It gets cold at night. Better cuddle up, kiddies."

--

It did indeed. The room was freezing, or there was only one futon and a threadbare blanket. Once the temperature got to within barely tolerable limits, Yuji finally huffed to himself.

“They’re going to force this. Well, no time for modesty...”

He began to strip, until only his boots and black trunk underwear remained. He handed the long pants and t-shirt to Sakura, along with his socks. He only kept his boots because he didn’t want to lose his toes to frostbite, and Sakura already had some of her own.

“Here. Take them. They’ll help,” he insisted, holding out the bundle of clothing, his red face turning away from her.

Sakura shook her head, despite her chattering teeth. Now a sleeveless vest, short skirt, and short black pants didn’t seem like such a good idea.

“No way, Yuji. We both need to survive.”

Yuji waved a dismissive hand. “I grew up in a cold place. I’ll be fine. Besides, I’m not putting those back on now, so if you don’t wear them, they’ll just go to waste.”

Sakura looked at Yuji, who was pretending to not be phased by the cold, situation, or his lack of clothing. She felt her heart warm. This boy would give everything- even his dignity- for her. Without really thinking about it, she pulled his head to her breasts and held him lovingly. The sensation was not dulled by the dual fabric of her vest and his shirt. He felt her warmth and love; she felt happy and secure. How long she held his head in her chest she did not know nor care. He simply lay there, apparently not feeling the need to object. For once, Sakura did not lament her lack of bust size. Clearly Yuji didn’t mind, either.

“If we have to be trapped like this, I’m glad it’s with you.”

Yuji’s simple admission made Sakura’s heart leap, which Yuji could feel through the thin cotton keeping their skin apart. He felt a slight additional pressure on the back of his head, pushing him deeper into the warmth. His instincts activated here, and he wrapped his arms around her thin torso, physically telling her that he was comfortable. His hand snaked around her waist and upper back. Sakura laid down, pulling Yuji’s weight on top of her. It was the ideal thing to do when trapped in a cold dungeon like this, but neither one was thinking about that. Yuji tried to slide to the side, moving the bulk of his weight off her, but Sakura raised her objection by coiling her legs around one of his, silently asking him to not move. He obliged her, hooking his leg around one of hers.

“I won’t let them touch you,” Yuji whispered into her breast. “I’ll do anything for you.”

Sakura whispered back, stroking his head and back. “Thank you. I’ll do the same for you. For now, you should rest. We’ll have to fight them eventually.”

She could feel him shiver again, and tried to decide what to do. With him being naked, save for his trunk underwear, there was no way it wouldn’t be awkward. But who cared? They had said everything to each other except “I love you”. So Sakura had no qualms about gently sliding him off her, rolling onto her side, and then pulling him back in. Her arms and legs were wound around his back and legs, cradling

him into the only warmth she could give him. She knew he wouldn't accept his clothes back. She knew all too well what kind of man Yuji was.

The kind who would comfort you with his dying breath. The kind who would serve you food while he starved. Well, we're both going to make it through this. No matter what it takes.

Sakura found she liked Yuji's head on her chest, so she guided it there once again, but she draped one of her arms over his ear, to stop the heat from escaping his rapidly-cooling body. She gave him an affectionate squeeze, then closed her eyes, silently willing him to do the same. They fell asleep like that, intertwined with each other in the most pure of embraces.

--

When they woke up the next morning, it was to the sound of their tormenters coming back. Yuji gently pushed Sakura behind him, glaring at the attackers. But he made no move to counter.

"Do whatever you want to me, but don't touch her."

The two agents shrugged. Why not? They proceeded to give Yuji a good beating, leaving him scratched and bloodied, but with no real damage. His stare never wavered, as if daring them to keep going.

"... You're tough, Yuji. I'll give you that. But what if I go for the girl?"

Yuji was on him in a second, the man's arm trapped behind his back.

"Well, you'd be breaking your word And then I'd be breaking you."

"Oh? Why is that?" the agent chuckled. "You love her or something?"

"Yeah, I do," Yuji said defiantly. "I do love her."

"Yeah? But how much?"

"Enough to be willing to kill you, if it means keeping her safe. Don't make that an option," Yuji warned, cinching up his hold, looking for the other agent out of the corner of his eye.

The agents looked at each other, nodded, and left.

"Did you mean that, Yuji?" Sakura asked in a placid voice. "I mean...about loving me?"

Yuji, his adrenaline rush gone, knelt down next to her. He screwed up his courage, looked her in the eye, and said:

"Yes. I meant it. Every word. I've sat on this crush for years. For too long. And now I...I'm just glad it's out there."

Sakura pulled him again into the comfort of a hug. Maybe she was overcome with the emotion of the moment, but she felt a surge of affection for Yuji and gripped him tighter. He returned that grip, setting his head on her shoulder.

In the cold room, they curled up together underneath the thin blanket, shivering in each other's arms. But there was an unspoken tension in the air. This felt...natural. Being like this. Sakura shifted tighter to Yuji. Yuji pulled her in closer, sliding his arms around her waist to pull her closer. They were exchanging a tight embrace that was laced with a deep affection for each other.

Sakura could feel Yuji hesitating as they sat in the cool darkness. He wanted to do or say something more, but couldn't get it out. So she took the initiative. She'd already held his face to her breast without feeling any shame. So why would a kiss be any more awkward?

It wasn't. She pulled his head in, making herself the 'aggressor', thereby letting him know it was okay and that she was in charge. He returned her kiss, sliding slower so that her head was above his, letting her know that he was fine with that. They kissed a little more, but despite the obvious temptation to go further, they stopped there, holding each other and silently enjoying each other's company.

The door opened the next morning, and Yuji was ready for them. He immediately leapt on one agent, striking a series of pressure points to paralyze him. The agent fell to the ground, while his partner tried to go for his sword.

Sakura's hand trapped the sword in its sheathe as her elbow connected with the agent's face, shattering the mask. Yuji, meanwhile, had the sword he had taken at the neck of the other ANBU agent. As per their plans, Sakura held her agent hostage while Yuji checked the hallway. The other agent could now move again, and he charged. Sakura threw her hostage at him as Yuji pulled the heavy iron door closed on them.

Yuji closed his eyes, and exhaled.

--

Yuji let himself awaken slowly, his hands still clasped in the sign for the genjutsu. He looked at the clock- he had held himself in that genjutsu for nearly a full day.

I'm getting better. I could never hold it that long before. Although I guess I was motivated, since I got the girl in the end.

That was a little too pathetic for Yuji. Dreaming about his crush in a genjutsu like that (he wondered why, even in his fantasies, did he get his @\$@ kicked). He decided today was the day to do something about it. Maybe he would celebrate his achievements in genjutsu by going on a date. And he knew just the girl to ask out. He looked at himself in the mirror and began to practice.

7 - Blossoming Love

Ino and Yuji stared at the spots vacated by their friends.

“Did you just see that?” Ino asked, shocked.

“Yeah,” Yuji replied. “Not sure I believe it.”

“I know! Sakura with Kakashi! And Hisako with Yamato! It’s...It’s...”

“Un-be-lievable,” Yuji finished for her, shaking his head. “Huh.”

“Well, we can’t let this go!” Ino half-shouted, standing up, her fist pumped. “We have to avenge your crush on Sakura, and the fact that she bagged a hotter guy than I did!”

“You’re single, too,” Yuji pointed out dryly. **Does EVERYONE know about my crush on Sakura except Sakura herself?**

“Not for long! Yuji, their double-date is going to turn into a triple-date!”

“Yeah? Who are you taking?” Yuji asked, dead serious. Ino looked at him as if his head had detached and started swiveling.

“Who? You, stupid!”

“Me? You can’t stand my type...can you? I don’t know the first thing about you!”

Ino seemed deflated by that. “You...you’re right. I mean, I can’t just do something like that...”

For once, it hit Yuji. Ino was cute! If you got past her ditzzy exterior, there was a real girl down there. She probably had a crush on her teammate, who wound up with some Sand Village girl. And Sakura had beaten her at everything, except for Sasuke, who nobody won. Her sensei was killed right before her eyes, and she was unable to help him, despite that being her job.

What am I doing? I never took her seriously before, because she was my complete opposite. But...well, they say opposites attract, right? And I’m sure it won’t hurt me to do a good deed...Oh, hell with it! Quit analyzing and get on with it!

“Come on, Ino!” Yuji exclaimed, grabbing her hand and pulling her away in what was an astonishing role reversal. “We’re gonna tag along! Like it or not, we’re chaperoning for them!”

Ino went along with it, shock etched onto her face.

My God! Is this really Yuji? Two seconds ago, he was telling me he didn’t know me at all! And now he’s the one in charge?

“Hey, you said you didn’t know me!”

Yuji gave her a grin that would have made Kakashi proud. "That's what dates are for, right? You know, you're really cute up close. You're quite the catch. Hope you don't mind being caught by me."

Ino's confidence returned. **Thanks, Yuji. You're a good guy.**

"Hmph. I could do worse!" she shot back, taking the lead again. Yuji shifted back into 'passive' mode, letting the blond kunoichi go for the gusto.

Well, I could do worse. She IS cute at that, I guess. I think I got a rare glimpse at Ino's true nature today. Maybe this'll work after all. And if not, we'll walk away friends who were forced together by the circumstances.

Yuji felt vaguely guilty about intruding on Sakura and Hisako's good time with the older men they had gotten fair and square, but Yuji decided that, since Kakashi had him to thank in a roundabout way for his new girlfriend, that this was an apt was to make sure that all his sacrifice wasn't in vain.

--

Ino and Yuji met up later, both dressed up for the occasion. Yuji was adorned in a black, short-sleeve shirt that could pass for casual or dressy as necessary. The same with his long pants and neatly shined sandals. Ino had chosen a short purple skirt and matching top with white trim for the occasion.

"You look great!" Yuji told Ino, being quite truthful. She was quite the charming girl, when she chose to be. For some reason, the silvery-purple lip gloss and eyeliner stuck out to Yuji. It was an odd feeling. He was never impressed by make-up. Obviously, part of that was the fact that he was a guy, but the other part was that he tended to like girls in their natural state. But there was something quietly yet unabashedly sexy about Ino's cosmetic choices. Yuji was seized with a desire to taste those lips; to see if their taste matched their beauty.

Whoa! Reign it in! He exhaled, mentally centering himself. **Okay, you've gotta calm down, sport. You might be lonely as hell, and even desperate. But this ain't about you! It's about Ino getting some kind of closure. Remember, good deed. Good deed.**

Yuji thought Ino blushed a little at the compliment, and was almost sure she had adjusted her skirt nervously at his appraisal of her appearance, but both motions were done so quickly he couldn't be sure.

They had decided where to intercept Sakura, Hisako ((Hisako belongs to YuniexTidus)), and co. It was a small, intimate teahouse that couples went to. The menu was not largely popular, but then again, very few people spent their time here simply eating and drinking. Conversation and body contact were more important to the clientele of this establishment.

Ino and Yuji seated themselves in the darkest corner, eyes fixed on the door flap that they knew the four would be entering through shortly. Ino's information on this was solid, or so she said.

--

Sakura could hardly believe her luck. She had landed the hottest guy in the village. A guy who could have his pick of the kunoichi. And he had chosen her!

“Kakashi-sensei is mine.”

The girl next to Sakura rolled her eyes. “E-nough, already! We get it, Sakura! He’s yours!” Her eyes lit up in a smile as she sized up her good friend of many years. She clapped Sakura’s shoulders, intending to give Sakura some good advice.

“Remember, you’ve got to stop thinking of him as the unapproachable, untouchable ‘Kakashi-sensei’. He’s not. He’s YOUR Kakashi now. Not some unattainable dream!”

Sakura nodded in agreement, blushing out of sheer happiness. “I know, I know! But, come on, you know I’m not that special!”

Boy, Hisako had to bite her tongue a bit there. Good friends though they may be, a grade-A beauty Sakura was not. She didn’t need to hear that right now, though. Not ever, actually, unless her ego ballooned. But that was unlikely. That was one thing Hisako liked about Sakura. She was down to earth. They both were.

“Incidentally, how about you and Captain Yamato? How did that happen, again?” Sakura weeded, poking Hisako playfully on the shoulder. “After all that lecturing about what kinds of trouble Kakashi-sensei and I would be in?”

“Oh, c’mon, lay off. I didn’t expect Ten; er, Yamato to wind up with me!”

“So it’s okay then?”

“For you and I, yes.”

“That’s a double-standard,” Sakura pointed out.

“So? We’re within the standard,” Hisako shot back, grinning at her best friend. After that, they both broke into giggles, silencing themselves only when they promised each other they’d be as adult as possible for the older men.

“We’d better finish getting ready,” Hisako noted, looking at the time. “Even though Kakashi won’t be there on time, Yamato will.”

-

Kakashi and Yamato were almost ready themselves. Both were marginally relaxed. Granted, these were younger girls, but how unpredictable could they be? It’s not like either guy had never been with a girl before. So there was no reason to get worked up.

Right?

“Breath, Kakashi-senpai! Breath!” Yamato urged, trying to jolt Kakashi into remember his basic body survival functions. “It’s just a date.”

Kakashi inhaled, then exhaled, not quite exuding his typical calm, stoic demeanor. “I know, Tenzo. I know. But so much could go wrong. For all of us! And isn’t it dangerous to indulge a school girl crush?”

“Unless you’re referring to us as well, senpai...” Yamato began, but trailed off. There really was a lot of margin for error. But that was nothing new. Shinobi danced with death at any given time. Besides, there was parental and Hokage allowances made for dating like this. It wasn’t some clandestine affair. The legal issues were gone- they were free to date.

But the stigma remained, Yamato knew, and that’s what was bothering Kakashi. Sakura had more to lose, and Kakashi obviously cared deeply enough to be concerned about that. But there was no use crying over spilt milk. This date, at least, was going to happen.

“Senpai, you need to be the man Sakura fell for...” Yamato said uncertainly. Though rank wasn’t involved in this, he still wanted to maintain Kakashi’s respect. It wouldn’t do to criticize too much.

In a few moments, Kakashi had steeled himself, cooling his gaze to his usual relaxed, only semi-interested stare. When he held up “Makeout Tactics”, Yamato breathed a sigh of relief. Kakashi was normal once more.

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“Here they come!” Ino hissed to Yuji, pulling his head deeper into the shadows. “Watch them! Let’s see if this is real!”

Yuji was actually more interested in the fact that Ino had stuffed his face nearly into her breasts. In his position, he couldn’t help but note that they were of a fair size and pleasant shape. But something niggled at him, and he couldn’t figure out what for a few moments. Then it hit him.

Oh, crap! This isn’t good! Now I’M falling for a younger girl! She’s, what, sixteen? I’m twenty-two! I don’t know what kind of situation those two (Kakashi and Yamato) have, but there’s no way this is right...right? I know Ino’s father, and I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t object to me dating his daughter. No, no, dating is fine. I just can’t touch or feel. I can be here as a friend.

But Yuji knew that wouldn’t cut it. Not while he was watching his age-old crush with another man. The horrible loneliness he now felt was tearing a hole in his heart and soul. It needed to be filled, at least for a time, and he wanted Ino to be the one. How you could fall in love in the course of one afternoon after looking with disdain at a person for so long was beyond him, but it had happened.

For Ino’s part...what was she thinking? Was this simply recon (read: spying)? Or was she following the trend of falling for an older man? Would it be so bad? After all, their ages weren’t nearly as far apart as Sakura and Kakashi, or of Hisako and Yamato. ..

--

Yamato and Hisako were chiefly the ones making conversation, as both their friend had stiffened up. Sakura was trying and failing to engage Kakashi in talking about himself, which wasn’t helping, as she was trying to follow the age-old advice about ‘making the other person talk about themselves. Make them feel special’. She was trying to avoid talking about old times too much, and especially trying not to gush like a schoolgirl over some of the cool things Kakashi had done over the years. There were plenty of those.

“Hey, you remember that time we tied Ino to a tree?” Hisako said in an exaggerated tone, giving Sakura an elbow in the ribs.

“Oh, yeah! Man, she squealed like a pig!” Sakura giggled, remembering the exact moment. (The booth in the corner was suddenly a flurry of activity as one person threw themselves on the other. Some lucky couple, no doubt. Sakura hoped for that kind of passion. The whole ‘teacher and student clandestine meeting’ thing was so hot!) “But even she eventually admitted she had it coming for adding that herbal laxative to our tea that one time.”

“Good thing we didn’t drink it,” Hisako added. “If I hadn’t caught her, who knows what would have happened?”

“Well, you could probably hazard a safe guess, Sakura, being a medic-nin and all,” Kakashi chimed in. That gave all of them a laugh.

“True, no mystery there,” Yamato added. “Although I would prefer a little mystery.”

His eyes shifted to Hisako, silently begging her to speak only to him, at least for a while. This might be a double date, but there was no way he wanted to spend the whole time with Kakashi and Sakura, who he saw every time they functioned as a team. It was much harder making time with Hisako. Thankfully, she was a good-natured girl who could handle most situations with ease and come out without her feathers ruffled. This included being separated from her boyfriend, unfortunately. Although, if she kept pace with her training, she would be in ANBU in no time, and then they could be partnered together.

Sooner rather than later, I hope.

Glancing at Kakashi, he noticed that he was finally talking to Sakura somewhat animatedly, and reaching into his waist pouch for something. When it was a copy of “Makeout Violence”, the second book in the “Makeout” series, Yamato had to shake his head.

Same old Kakashi. I really should do something about his peddling porn to minors, but then again, neither of us can really talk.

-

Ino had thrown herself toward Sakura when she started about the tree story. To do so, she had to go over Yuji, who caught her around the midsection and wrestled her back into her spot, whispering warnings to be quiet and just watch. Eventually, to pacify her rage, he told her to ‘get revenge later’, while silently apologizing to Sakura and Hisako for something Ino hadn’t yet done.

-

It was a good date, all four agreed. But they also agreed on something else: They had been watched the whole time. Hisako took the lead, suggesting they all go out for some air and a view of the moon. They stood up as one and walked outside, noticing the shadows in the corners following them almost immediately.

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Once outside, the four walked, exchanging small talk and trying to observe something about their followers. One chakra was very obvious, and the other was conspicuous in its near-absence. The absence shone like a beacon in the night compared to the other inflamed, very emotional chakra.

And then Sakura and Hisako knew. One of the two was Ino. But who on earth would be with her was a different question. Most guys had a hard time stomaching Ino. Even as her friends, Sakura and Hisako had to admit she was an acquired taste. But who the hell would bother to acquire her?

Again, through some silent signal, they all stopped and turned as one, demanding that the stalkers identify themselves.

“Come on out, Ino!” Hisako taunted. “Come and get your slop!”

Predictably, Ino roared out of the shadows. Or tried to. Whoever was with her pulled her back by virtue of her ponytail, earning himself a straight punch to the gut.

“Now!” Kakashi called. All four leapt in different directions. The girls dove for Ino. Sakura missed, but Hisako managed to put Ino in an arm lock. Sakura dove for the legs to stop Ino from kicking. They turned to watch the guys, who were putting on a show at this point. Kakashi was flicking in and out of the shadows, attacking in a predictable pattern, while Yamato waited for an opening. His wood slithered silently along the ground, eventually grabbing the other guy. Boof! Replacement Jutsu!

--

I’ve always wanted to spar them, anyway, Yuji decided. They won’t kill me, since I was with Ino. So I might as well enjoy this a bit.

As he dodged Yamato’s wood, Yuji knew he’d made a mistake. He’d deflected instead of dodged, and he was about to pay.

“Earth Style: Headhunter Jutsu!”

Kakashi sprang up from the earth, aiming for Yuji’s legs. Yuji dodged back, but Kakashi yanked one foot, tripping him up. Wood flowed around him instantly. But he had one hand free. Enough to escape...

“Try it and you’re done,” came Hisako’s voice. Yuji swore she was eight feet tall, holding one first menacingly. “You’re restrained right now. I can have you permanently restrained in a body cast if you try to get away.”

It was over.

--

Yuji and Ino were bound with wood, back to back, before the four. Yuji was sporting a black eye and bruised rib from his sparring match. Ino was unharmed, but fuming.

The tension was gone now. Ino had explained her actions. Sakura and Hisako found it amusing, while their dates did not. But they couldn’t say anything- not to Ino, anyway. Yuji, though...

“Why WERE you involved, Yuji?” Sakura asked plainly.

“Yeah, didn’t you get over your crush on Sakura yet?” Hisako added, arms behind her head in a relaxed position. “Cause stalking is pathetic.”

Yuji turned his head in a blatant show of defiance. "You two don't scare me. You're both 'taken'. You're no threat to me."

That was such a ridiculous statement. Sakura could have cubed Ino and Yuji by herself, never mind the help Hisako could give her. But they were reading something here. Something that they were picking up on through experience.

"You came willingly." A statement, not a question, by Sakura.

A bead of sweat shot out of Yuji's temple.

"With Ino, huh? What does this mean, Yuji?" Hisako added in a teasing voice.

Yuji gulped.

"Oh, I see," Kakashi intoned. "You didn't want Ino to feel left out, so you came with her as an accomplice."

Yuji was ready to smile and nod tiredly, right on cue, when Yamato shook his head.

"No, senpai. He has ulterior motives, I believe. He was a little bit too into this. Besides, Yuji would never go along with such a ludicrous thing...unless he had a very good reason."

Yuji just about melted. But what the hell, he decided.

"Okay, checkmate. I came with Ino willingly because I like her."

Shock all around. Despite the fact they kind of new, THIS was surprising. Not only had Yuji admitted liking someone, but he liked *Ino*?! The loudmouth, blond, dogy Ino? They were total opposites!

"It's new to me, too," Yuji admitted. "But something just clicked tonight."

"Yeah," came Ino's voice. It was quiet and sad, and damn near broke Yuji's heart.

"It's not hard to get it. You felt bad for me. Or maybe...Maybe I'm a Sakura substitute."

"What? No!" Yuji tried to spin around, forgetting he was bound by wood and hurt. Not to mention too old for her. His promise not to touch her flew out the window. "You're you. And I like you! And...I'll wait two years!"

Ino, still sad, didn't miss a beat. "Oh, don't be stupid," she said flatly. "My dad knows I'm going out with you, at least tonight. He said it was okay, and got the okay from Lady Tsunade, too. I'm not stupid- I don't want to get in trouble."

With a shared glance, Hisako and Yamato quietly agreed to release the two captives. No harm, no foul, after all.

"I'm a sucker for romance," Hisako grumbled.

“Yeah, but it’s cute,” Yamato told her, drawing her closer with an arm around her shoulder. Hisako snuggled up, feeling happy with her head on Yamato’s chest. He cradled an arm around her head protectively as his other hand released the wood holding the other two.

Sakura was still bewildered by this odd pairing. “I don’t get it.”

“Mmm. It’s not too different from later in the Makeout series, actually. Forbidden romance is the sweetest kind.”

You would know...sensei, Sakura thought happily.

Ino and Yuji were both on their knees, sitting across from each other awkwardly. Ino hadn’t responded to Yuji’s admittance yet, and Yuji was definitely showing signs of worry. They could practically read what his thoughts were as though it were branded on a billboard on his forehead.

I’m too old.

I’m not good enough.

Is this it?

He stood up slowly, drawing in a deep breath through his nose, and exhaling out his mouth. He spun, clicked his heels together, and bowed low, from the waist.

“Forgive me for interrupting your date!” he half-shouted into the street below. He stayed bent over for a full thirty seconds, illustrating his sincere remorse.

After that, he walked away, his hand shaking from his frayed nerves. He reached for a cigarette that was not there, realizing he’d left his chakra enhancing cigs at home. He needed to do *something*. Anything.

From the ground, Ino’s hand snared Yuji’s. She held it tightly, her tears speckling the ground below her. She tugged, trying to pull him down to her level. He sank unsurely, an arm tentatively snaking around her shoulders, hiding her tears from the others (who were all being nice and pretending not to notice).

“...Yuji. You’re a good guy.”

Oh my God. That sounds like it has a ‘but’ following it. She’s going to dump me. Be strong, Yuji. For her sake. Let it go.

“...and I’ve messed a lot up. Please don’t think I don’t like you...”

Oh yeah, definitely a ‘but’ coming. Yuji steeled himself, forcing himself to stop shaking.

“...but I didn’t think you’d like me back.”

Yuji immediately pulled the still-sobbing Ino into his chest, feeling a thousand pounds leave his shoulders. She liked him! She liked him!

“I do. I promise, I do.”

The other smiled quietly, intending to see this played out. They were going to continue their date afterward. No one wanted to go home after this. Something about a blossoming romance made you want to fall in love all over again.

Ino’s eyes met Yuji’s. He had never seen such entrancing blue orbs before. He wanted to kiss her, but had made that mistake once before (read YunieXTidus’ excellent fic to find out what Yuji’s talking about). He thought again about her silvery-purple lips, and wanted to follow his instincts. He meant to settle for kissing her on the cheek, but Ino beat him to it. She planted a big kiss that was somewhere between his cheek and lips, making sure she just tagged the corner of his mouth.

“Not on the first date. No matter what they (her head cocked toward the other four) say.”

--

Kakashi and Sakura split off, saying their goodnights. They were going to one of Sakura’s favorite spots in the village for some quiet time.

That left Yamato and Hisako together. They had none of the problems that Kakashi and Sakura had. Both were naturally more relaxed and saw this date as no great shakes. Another day in the life. Granted, a better day.

“That warmed the heart,” Yamato said, breaking the silence. He had linked his arm through Hisako’s, letting her snuggle up to him. They read each other so well. Little things that would be imperceptible to the average couple. The unspoken signals were easy for them to pick up.

“Yeah. But it tired the feet,” Hisako quipped. “How about a piggy-back ride?”

Yamato obediently bent down to lift the slender girl onto his back. She clung on tightly as Yamato gave her a shock by walking across the water and pretending to lose his footing.

“Not funny!” she scolded, while laughing herself.

“Sorry, sorry,” Yamato managed around his laughter.

“Thanks for a good time. As always,” he offered.

“Yeah, likewise. How about we go to that meadow of yours and train a bit before bed?” she suggested amiably. “I’ve still got my stuff there. Only one sleeping bag though.”

They shared a grin as Yamato picked up speed. Granted, their night would probably be an innocent one. But that didn’t lessen the effect in the least.

*Love blossomed like a flower,
up through the cracks in places that life should not have existed.
Young and old, neither is exempt from feelings of romance.
To be cherished, the feeling endures.
In the most unlikely of locales,
Love spreads it's seeds, infecting all with the bittersweet toxin carried within.
Love is hellos, goodbyes, and resilience, and surprise.*

A poem, written in the back of Makeout Paradise, had come from a surprising source. But it suited the three couples as they parted ways for the night.

8 - Doctor, Doctor, Give me the news...

I know it's short, but I got a kick out of this one and couldn't honestly think of something better to add to it. Hope you enjoy it! Happy Valentine's Day, everyone!

-NG

Yuji always hated his yearly physical. Standing around in his underwear while some quack poked and prodded his body, culminating in fondling his testicles to 'check for hernias'. It sucked, put simply.

It would be so hot if Sakura was the one giving me the physical, Yuji thought, amusing himself as he stripped to his black trunks. They were something in between boxer-briefs and regular briefs, and Yuji found they moved into uncomfortable positions less often than their counterparts, eliminating the need to attempt to discreetly adjust the necessary components when everything got bunched up.

The door opened, and in walked someone in a white lab coat, holding a clipboard.

"Okay," said the familiar voice, "This is just a yearly physical check-up, correct Mr... Yuji!"

Yuji was frozen; he felt like someone had caught him with his pants around his ankles.

That was a surprisingly accurate metaphor.

Then he shook his head to dispel the thought.

There was his crush, Sakura Haruno. There were his clothes, folded neatly on the exam room table. And there were the trunks that seemed to offer so much support before, now seeming to bare his physique in the worst possible way at the worst possible time.

-

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Oh my God! I didn't realize I had Yuji!

Sakura could hardly keep herself from smiling. First of all, Yuji never even took off his shirt in front of girls, let alone showed himself in any kind of advanced state of undress. Second, he was so girl-shy that this had to be painful for him. But it was a lot of fun from Sakura's end.

He'd kinda hot, she noted, clipboard to her mouth. **Especially all embarrassed and fidgety like that. Makes him seem like a real person that way. I wonder how this little scenario will play out...**

"Okay, well then," she said, clearing her throat. "Let's get on with it."

She took out a stethoscope first and placed the cold metal piece on Yuji's chest. His heartbeat sounded like a drum roll.

Normal. For Yuji, anyway.

“Okay, now take deep breathes. Breathe in...Breathe out...one more time...Breathe in....Breathe out...Good. Sounds like your lungs are normal.”

Normal for hyperventilating. But I can't stop! Teasing him is so much fun! The big, strong, warrior boy is completely at my mercy. Wow, I'm growing a sadistic side. Must be all the time I spent Lady Tsunade.

Sakura made some notes on her diagnostic chart. She asked Yuji to continue breathing, and to try to get his breathing back to normal, for that matter. She had taken his height and weight, and was working under the premise of organizing the data.

In reality, she was making a sketch of his body. As the only girl to see Yuji so close to naked, she decided that a sketch for posterity wouldn't hurt. Besides, it gave her a chance to see his muscles expand and contract as he tried to slow his breathing.

Once she had a fairly good sketch done, Sakura returned to his medical exam.

“Any pain, illnesses, changes in medication?”

Yuji shook his head. “Nothing besides the usual aches that go with the job.”

Sakura nodded, making a note. “I see. And here it says that you were treated for severe anxiety. How has that worked for you?”

Yuji tried to appear nonchalant, but to Sakura's eye, he was dripping with emotion as he told her “Well, it's pretty frustrating that I couldn't do so much of the normal stuff for a long time. Training filled the void somewhat, but I still wish I could have a second try at the time I lost.”

“What do you feel you missed out on?” she asked. The question was in the line of medical duty, so she didn't feel too guilty about asking it. Thank you medical loop holes!

“Well, stuff like just relaxing, making friends, playing...and, well, dating, having a girlfriend, stuff like that.”

He laughed in a self-deprecating way. “It's probably on the pathetic side, at my age, to not have ever dated.”

At this point, Yuji became aware that he was saying things that he'd only ever admitted to himself and to his parents. Maybe part of him was hoping for Sakura's sympathy?

Sakura frowned at that. She knew Yuji had been having a difficult time with this sort of thing, but she never knew just how deep the problem ran. Not all of it was his fear of girls, either. But she could tell that he was longing for a companion.

He's always alone. It's no wonder he's lonely. What's amazing is that he's in this good of shape. Having such little human contact is bound to have adverse affects. Dating is one thing; making friends is another. He doesn't seem to be doing either very well...

Sakura chewed the end of her pen thoughtfully, looking up at Yuji through her eyelashes. A smile played on her lips as she watched him squirm and try to appear as though being more than half naked in front of a girl wasn't bothering him.

He's damned cute, and not at all vulgar or abrasive, like a lot of guys. So why...

Sakura straightened up. "Okay, Yuji. I'm going to check for hernias now, alright?"

Yuji gulped and nodded, trying to ignore the pleasant feeling below his waistband. He was cursing himself for enjoying this even somewhat. Not that he'd never had a fantasy about Sakura as a nurse before, but still! This was real life, and it was a medical exam. If Sakura could be mature about this, so could he. It's not like they were playing doctor or X-rated house or something! This was standard procedure.

Sakura was completely professional as her hand rummaged around 'down there', her hand only making slight contact with his genitals at one point. It tickled like hell, and Yuji had to try not to squirm. He was determined to be adult about this.

"Okay, looks like you're clear of any hernias," Sakura told him with a smile. "I think we'll skip the prostate exam, though. I've put you through quite enough today."

Yuji had to admit that was funny. He briefly entertained the idea of it, though, had it been required. Would he have been okay with it? Yes, he decided, as if someone had to do *that* to him, he'd rather it be a girl he liked, rather than any guy or an evil Lady Tsunade (God only knew how *she* would torture him).

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Yuji? Any medical problems?"

Besides severe loneliness?

Yuji was reaching for his clothes, but stopped. "Yes. There is something else. Because I won't get another chance like this. How about a date sometime?"

Sakura actually laughed; a genuine, spontaneous laugh. She hadn't seen that coming. "You picked an, ah, interesting time to ask me," she intoned, eyebrow arched.

"What the heck. It's not like I could get more humiliated if you said no, seeing as how you've seen me practically naked already. Doctor-patient confidentiality, besides, so I know you wouldn't tell anyone."

Sakura admitted his logic was sound. But she had to mess with him a little.

"You sure it's not because I've seen you nearly naked? Maybe you hoped I'd like what I saw and jump you?"

He winced. "Well...I guess we all have fantasies."

Another incredulous laugh from Sakura. "God, you're so honest! You're like this innocent creature or something! Ah well...here."

Sakura tore two sheets off her prescription pad. One bore the name of some drug that Yuji knew handled anxiety; the other had her answer on it, in her neat little handwriting:

I get off work at seven. My number is xxx-xxxx.

Yuji smiled at her. She returned the smile, then turned to walk out the door, giving a smile over her shoulder.

“I look forward to seeing what you’ll wear tonight. If it’s anything like what you wore for your physical, I’ll be pleased.”

9 - Just Friends?! (YuXAza)

Yuji returned to his apartment after a long day, peeling off his shirt as soon as he had shut the door. He was grimy from the workout, which had seen him lose his footing and fall into the damned bog he had been training near.

Hell of a thing for a shinobi to do, he mused, growling at his clumsiness more so than the mess. Shinobi didn't just trip and fall, for God's sake!

He was so flustered that he forgot about his roommate. Luckily, she wasn't in the bathroom when he stormed in. Mentally chiding himself, he worked off his pants and boots, grimacing at the mud that had squished uncomfortably between his toes.

The bathroom was probably the room that had received the most care since he had moved here. It featured a western-style shower just for occasions such as this one. The shower was an area separated by frosted glass, offering semi-privacy. Of course, Yuji hadn't expected to have a female guest who would mind being seen in the shower if she was living here.

Then again, Azami isn't modest. At least not around me.

Now THERE was a happy memory. The first day she'd moved in out of necessity, she had been standing there in a black tank top and her panties drinking a bottle of water. She hadn't bugged when Yuji had come in, and didn't even seem flustered. Yuji had panicked enough for the both of them, he guessed. That didn't mean he didn't want a repeat performance.

The hot water hitting his skin in a pitter-patter rhythm was heaven. It hit certain shallow cuts and stung like hell, but that didn't dull the sensation it gave him. Yuji was low-maintenance, and could survive with little to no gear, but that didn't mean he didn't enjoy amenities when they were afforded to him.

Yuji was a slender man of twenty-two years. He had a wiry martial-artists build, with sinewy muscles and just about zero body fat. A combination of active lifestyle and high metabolism made sure he stayed in this state more or less indefinitely. He wasn't as tall as he wanted, but he could get over that. Some other problems were more glaring to him. Such as his chronic anxiety, his homesickness, and his recent near desperate yearning for a female companion.

Not for sex, he assured himself. **Not for *just* sex, anyway. I want a real companion. Someone I can...well, someone special. I'm twenty-two; I've never had a girlfriend. I just want some of the normal experiences that others have.**

The water began to cool. Yuji frowned, wondering if there was a problem with the water heater. With a start, he realized that he'd been in the shower for nearly twenty minutes. He scrambled out, immediately toweling off with the first towel at hand. Azami would be back any time now and-

Azami.

Yuji felt the towel. He squeezed it, feeling the fabric contract beneath his fingers. This towel was far too damp. He'd only dried off his back at this point. As if it were on fire, Yuji dropped the towel and backed away, swearing to himself that he hadn't meant it.

I didn't mean to use her towel! I didn't even think! Dammit, this is what comes of being a bachelor for too long!

Reaching for his own towel, Yuji dried himself off the rest of the way. He looked around the bathroom, quietly proud that his remodeling had gone so well. The previous owner had left the walls a bare white. Yuji had taken the time to repaint them since, and even retile the floor in black and white. Everything looked shiny and new, even after six months of living here.

Yuji dressed himself in a pair of black workout pants and a charcoal gray t-shirt, ready to relax. It had been a hard week. However, his job wasn't something he'd trade for anything. In fact, it wasn't his job that was making his life miserable right now. It was the damned council and their archaic rules. The chief problem at the moment was that they were looking for any excuse to deport Azami to the Sand Village, where she would be arrested.

Yuji was harboring her, giving her asylum from this, acting as lawyer, character witness, and friend to the female he'd come to respect. They'd started off flirting- at least to him; Azami's agenda was different- then they'd fought, and she'd thoroughly humiliated him. But at the same time, they had an affinity for each other. Azami began to open up to Yuji, and he likewise to her. He felt unfamiliar sensations. He knew what a crush was- he'd had one on Sakura Haruno for years- but this was different. Azami felt...attainable.

They were both goddesses from Yuji's perspective. But Sakura should have been less intimidating. Maybe it was because Azami was so relaxed about gender differences, or maybe it was because Sakura trained with no less than one of the Legendary Sannin, but Azami felt like she was within his reach.

Damned if she hadn't turned him down. She said all the right things about it not being his fault and all. Their situation was unique in a few ways, not the least of which was that Azami was guilty of all the crimes of which she stood accused. Murder, robbery, assault, breaking and entering. All of it fair, just crimes that she had committed.

And yet.

And yet she was reformed. She had done those things to survive. Survival was not a crime. She had no choice. Mitigating circumstances, as Yuji had said to the council. But no one was buying it. They only saw the charges; no one investigated her as a *[person]*.

It made him grind his teeth in frustration. She couldn't accept his love for some esoteric reason he couldn't grasp; the council wanted to get at her; ANBU wanted a piece of her. And through it all, he had finally admitted to himself that he really cared about her. He wanted to protect her. And she accepted his help, relieved his loneliness, and certainly made his life brighter.

But when she leaves...

He would sink back to the depths, he knew. Back to existing just to exist; fighting for some large cause, wondering about what kind of good he did, if any. Coming home to an empty apartment to study; to train; anything to improve marginally at his craft. It was all he had.

False modesty aside, Yuji was one of the better shinobi. At least in the upper third of the Leaf's group. He was generally well liked, or at least tolerated. He was different, sure, but no one held it against him. He would have taken a kunai for just about any of them. He was the type of guy who, if you dropped your wallet and he handed it back to you, you didn't need to count the money. You knew it was all there. But there was an ever-present feeling to Yuji. A feeling of depression. As if he existed in the confines of another world; allowed to look at the others but not to belong to them. A horrible deep, dark, blackness to his chakra, not unlike a swamp.

Stiffening his lip, Yuji went to work preparing dinner. He would not wallow in self-pity. He had his pride, even if he had little else.

His mouth twitching up at the corner, Yuji lit a cigarette. Not a chakra cigarette, but the real deal. He needed to calm his nerves, and he didn't want to turn to his drugs. Prescription or not, legit or not, he didn't like them, plain and simple.

Azami entered the room at that point, dressed in a long-sleeve mesh shirt with a black half-shirt complimenting it. A leather jacket was hanging on her body, not zipped or buttoned up, allowed her navel to be seen through the mesh. She wore low-slung black jeans, held in place by an S&M-ish looking belt. Her figure was always alluring, but with this get-up even more so. Apparently she had been out, as she had expertly applied makeup adding to her already perfect features. Her mixed heritage allowed her slightly tanner skin than the others, giving her an exotic look. Especially with an oddly alluring silver eye shadow and lip gloss, and even a bit of black mascara.

Yuji didn't know anything about makeup. He just knew that he was in love with the way she looked right now. Her hair was even in one of his two favorite styles. No ponytail today, but her bangs were covering one eye.

"Watcha up to, Yu?" she asked brightly, trotting over to him. She leaned over his shoulder, seeing what it was that he was attempting to cook.

What the hell was I thinking? Yuji wondered for the ten billionth time. **You don't confess your love to a girl like this! Not when you're not in her league! Hell, I'm not even playing the same game!**

Azami looked a little confused; likely wondering why Yuji was so quiet. She was one of those girls that either had no idea just how desirable she was, or didn't care. The confused look was out of place on her, as she was normally so sure of herself. And yet, it made her even more irresistible.

"Just, uh, cooking. Beef," he added belatedly.

"Enough for me?" she asked, hanging up her jacket near the door. She was a great roommate. Not just hot; she didn't leave a mess, she didn't complain, she even trained with Yuji when they could get together.

“Absolutely,” he replied, hoping to add a smile to his voice. He reached for the cigarette smoldering in the ash tray, finding it gone. A finger with black polished nails pulled the tray out of his reach. Disapproving dark eyes scanned Yuji.

“I thought you quit...?”

Yuji didn't like the tone of question. He knew she hated it when he smoked. He'd had maybe ten cigarettes in his entire life. It wasn't a habit. Just a stress reliever that, used in moderation, wasn't all that harmful. But Azami had made it clear that Yuji didn't need to smoke. He was ninja, and he needed his lungs to work in order to continue to survive.

“I...yeah. Sorry. Just stressed today,” he managed, withdrawing his hand. He knocked over the pepper, halfway through a curse when he stopped himself. He looked up sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Azami had seated herself at the low table near the door, resting her head on one hand which was propped up by the elbow. “Sorry? C'mon, you know I've heard worse.”

“I don't swear in front of women,” Yuji replied stubbornly. “It's in poor taste. And you know I don't think of women as weaker than men.”

Azami smiled at that, leaning forward in a way that could be suggestive, depending on how you took it. “You know better than that.”

“Aye, I do. It'll be a woman that'll do me in,” he joked, managing to smile back. “Look at me. I'm already tied to your apron strings.”

“Sure it's not my bed you're tied to?” she purred. “You've been looking at my belt. Are you wondering if I do anything with it but wear it?”

Yuji gulped and reddened, trying not to let her get to him. It was her little game. She liked to see him squirm and blush. She only played this game with him, so far as he knew. It made him feel special. And this game had no loser.

“Yeah, I was. What else DO you do with that belt?”

As soon as he said it, Yuji knew he'd handed her the match. Part of him wished she'd go into detail.

She smiled at him, as a snake might smile at it's prey, if it could.

“You wanna find out?”

His reply was setting a plate of beef, rice, and stir-fried vegetables in front of her, before quietly seating himself opposite her. They ate in silence for a while, the only sound being that of their chopsticks clinking against their dishes.

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Azami's day had begun at ten the night before. She didn't have many friends in the Leaf, but the few

she did told her to get ready, because they were going out. She felt a little guilty about leaving Yuji, her best friend, behind, but he was nowhere to be found. Probably training. That was no way to meet people, but Azami understood Yuji pretty well, and knew this was his way of coping with stress, anxiety, and everything else.

She showered, taking a moment to admire herself in the mirror. Well, admire wasn't the right word. Azami was aware that people found her attractive. She didn't let it go to her head, but she also did not use false modesty. She had good looks and a great figure. Besides, Yuji had said that, and Yuji simply did not lie.

As she stood under the shower, she smiled at first, thankful to Yuji for taking her in like this. He wouldn't accept money from her and he cooked, so she had no living expenses. She repaid him in the only way she knew he would accept: friendship. Yuji didn't make friends easy- especially girls- and Azami was more than happy to spend time with him. Beneath that dark exterior lay an interesting soul who could feel lonely in a crowded room.

As she ran her hands through her hair, then underneath it in the back, her expression turned more serious. She thought of Yuji, and when he had confessed to her.

I was a criminal. I acted like a complete slut toward him, and I humiliated him, not to mention kicked his @\$\$ in a fight. But he looked past that, and past my boobs. If he only understood that I don't deserve him.

Azami knew full well that Yuji thought she was out of his league. That strictly wasn't true, either in skill or in looks. He was an attractive man, if you liked the darker, lone-wolf type. He had handsome features without any of the swagger that some of the 'alpha-male' types she had seen possess. He was really quite a catch for a kunoichi, if he'd only put himself out there. The girls gossiped about him a little, but he didn't give them any material, which was both good and bad..

God, I wish I could have said yes to him. Instead, I had to lie. Because I'm punishing myself. How stupid is that?

Very, she decided. Very stupid indeed, especially when you consider he's the one who put her on the straight and narrow. But that was how she thought.

After drying herself off, she draped the towel over the towel rack, careful to leave things in perfect order. The least she could do, she figured, was not give Yuji more work.

She smiled as she thought of him, shirtless and cut-up, yet exuding a strange power that spoke to you. It was as if you knew you'd be safe fighting alongside him. Most of his injuries did not come from mistakes on his part; they came from him defending you. As long as you were on the same side, Yuji's life was yours. In turn, you somehow just trusted him. That made Azami think back...

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Hidan had stabbed himself in several places, all in the name of torturing Azami. He had no choice- the two here, Ryofu Housen (Property of Andr28a), and the other, known as 'Kimihiro Tadayoshi', though

that was an assumed name, had the ability to kill him. He needed a distraction, and the girl was perfect. He and Kakuzu, his partner, withdrew quickly.

Ryofu made to kill Azami, a former member of the Akatsuki. Kimihiro blocked his path, and when Ryofu saw the Akatsuki cloak that Kimihiro had been given by Itachi Uchiha, all hell broke loose. When Kimihiro had rushed to Azami's defense, he had been thrown violently into a rock, causing a temporary paralysis. That had left him at Ryofu's mercy, and still he fought for Azami's sake. In the end, he had given her his chakra through a clone, and that enabled her to get the drop on Ryofu just long enough to help them both escape.

That night, they huddled in a cave. The ever-shy Kimihiro gave her his shirt and Akatsuki cloak both to keep her warm, planning to brave the frigid mountain air in the dead of night by himself.

It was that memory that really made Azami's heart warm. When she thought of the discomfort Yuji must have felt at that point, and just what he was willing to do for her, it gave her a kind of warm, gooey feeling towards him.

Memories aside, Azami had to get ready to go. Her new friends were taking her to a club, hoping that she would make some new friends. The more important she was to as many people as possible, the harder it would be for the council to justify getting rid of her.

She did her make-up quickly, enjoying the thoughts of the male attention she would get. She also knew that if there was any attention she didn't desire, her friends would get rid of it. Shinobi; especially kunoichi; tended to take care of their own.

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At the club, Azami danced a bit, met some new people, had a couple of drinks and the like. As the night wore on, she found herself drifting farther and farther from the dance floor and bar, until she wound up in a secluded back corner, the sounds of the music in the distance. The candle on her table illuminated her in such a way that complimented her slightly tanned features. The way the light kissed her made the shadows show in just the right way as to make her look alluring.

She'd had many guys talk to her tonight; but she knew that she wouldn't be going home with any of them. None were her type. They looked at her like a side of beef. While she might enjoy the attention, she did not like their intentions.

That's a nice thing about Yuji, she mused, letting her head rest on her hand. He doesn't expect sex, even though we're living together. I'd have a hard time telling him no if he did ask, just because I feel so comfortable with him.

It was now about three in the morning. Yuji wouldn't be home yet. Or if he was, he'd just be reading or training quietly. Azami decided to drop by and freshen up. She needed to ditch the club scene for a little bit anyway. It got old after a while, and it was becoming increasingly clear that she'd made very few real friends here tonight. Superficial bastards.

That goes for the girls, too, though. The trouble with independence is that you can only be independent by yourself. That sure gets lonely.

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When she got back, Yuji wasn't home. Azami quickly used the bathroom, touched up her make-up, and left again, swearing to train again tomorrow. The Leaf was a great place to vacation, she had to admit. But she couldn't slack off too much. There were still bounty hunters after the hefty price on her head. Yuji hadn't managed to clear her yet of all the charges before her in the Leaf, let alone the other villages. That would be a long, hard process. The fact that his reading material had recently changed from martial arts to law techniques indicated that he wouldn't be giving up the cause anytime soon.

Azami lifted the book, and a few pages fluttered to the ground at her feet. She stooped to pick them up, when a section of writing caught her eye. She raised an eyebrow; Yuji tended to write to calm his nerves at night. Usually romance fiction. Probably because he couldn't get the real thing.

*"And she...
She is a goddess, and I a mere mortal."*

Azami had a hand to her mouth, first in surprise, then out of laughter. It was sooooo like Yuji to write something like that. It probably reflected his real feelings, and the grandiose wording was certainly corny enough to be one of his lines. Yuji had a hard time getting right to the point on matters like this.

Azami allowed herself a wide smile. So she was a 'goddess', was she? Is that how he saw her? Now that was food for thought.

Putting the papers down, Azami left again to rejoin her friends. That bit about a goddess and a mortal stuck with her all night.

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As they finished their meals, casual conversation began. The 'how was your day' sort of thing. Their answers were radically different, as to be expected. Yuji had trained, fallen in the mud, and just gotten home. Azami was out all night and planned to go out for a little while, then rest. Yuji had nothing special planned; just training and studying. That led up to Yuji's paper.

"I, er, read a bit of your work," Azami told him. That was nothing new. He sometimes asked her opinion. But never about this end of his work. He didn't know that, so he answered with a cheerful 'oh, what did you think?'

Azami kept eating in a relaxed way, taking a drink before she answered him.
"Well, it's not every day you get compared to a goddess."

Yuji immediately sputtered and stood up, turning progressively redder.
"Oh, no way! You read that trash? Don't take that crap to be- that is to say-"

She had him.
"You mean I'm *not* like a goddess?"

“No, no, I don’t mean you’re not like a goddess! I mean, the sex thing!”

“You WANT to have sex with me?” Azam hadn’t read THAT part, but it was best to let him keep talking. She was curious and not at all offended. There was an attraction between them, and Yuji, being ridiculously polite, would never mention sex to her.

“No! Yes! Dammit!”

Yuji was so much fun sometimes. It wasn’t hard to talk him into a corner, if you knew how to lead him. And Azami certainly did, and she employed that ability often enough to make Yuji realize who was in charge.

As if he didn’t know.

With an amused grin, she began to tug him toward his bedroom. He panicked, and she slipped him into a headlock to force him to calm down.

“Go get dressed; you’re coming to the club with me. You don’t mind going with a goddess, right?”

“B-But I don’t dance!”

“I’ll teach you. No shame in learning from a goddess.”

“After I wrote that trash, I mean, don’t think that I would even ask- I’m not like that!”

Azami let him go. She stood before him, eyes searching him.

“You think I don’t know that? You write what you can’t say. And I know you aren’t asking for sex. You’re not that kind of guy, and I’m not that kind of girl. I think you know that by now.”

He nodded, apparently to scared to say anything else. That, or he was learning. You couldn’t talk yourself in a corner if you didn’t say anything.

“Good. Now, c’mon, as friends. Besides, you need to get laid. A guy your age, a virgin? THAT is the only pathetic thing here. If you want to get a girl, you’ve gotta get out there! Now, go get dressed!”

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Yuji knew a lost battle when he saw one. But he had to say one more thing. He couldn’t let it go.

“I’m sorry I wrote that trash. Even if it’s what I’m feeling, it’s wrong. I just...”

He ran a hand through his hair, then down his cheek and across his jaw. He tossed his head back a little, as if he planned to gargle the words.

“I just wish I could have been more normal sometimes. Instead of training so hard, maybe I would have made more friends, or had a girlfriend, or been less lonely, at least. I made my choice and I stand by it. It’s not that I’m not interested in sex; it’s that I just can’t see myself doing it with someone I don’t love, at least on some level.”

Before he even got the word out, Azami was already leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

“I know,” she repeated. “I know you better than you know yourself. Sex isn’t something you do with just anyone. It’s nice to know that someone else feels that way, too. Takes the pressure off, doesn’t

it?”

To his surprise, Yuji agreed. He nodded that, not quite meeting her eyes. So Azami spun him around, seized him by the shoulders, and shoved him into his room.

“Get dressed! Leather jacket, dark clothes. Got me?”

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Yuji stripped totally, pulled on a fresh pair of underwear, and stared at his clothes. Dark clothes? Aside from plain white t-shirts, that was all he owned. That didn't narrow it down. A club scene, huh? Maybe his black jeans? He pulled them off, finding them a little loose. He had a belt handy, so that was one problem solved. What else? He thumbed through the rack, not wanting to look like complete crap tonight. Not if he was out 'with' Azami.

Just friends...alright, I can deal. She seems intent on finding me a girl, whether I want one or not. She's not stubborn, just always right. So I have been feeling the sting lately. I DO really want a girlfriend. Some kind of companionship. Hell, sex, if I'm honest with myself. But not 'just' sex. I can't lie to myself that way, either.

He finally selected a black, collared shirt that had silver lines running across it in a grid pattern. That would do the job. Sneakers, not sandals. Leather jacket, not his old, comfy trench coat with the three metal buckles that held it closed. Okay, looking...how DID he look? Whatever. Azami would tell him what she thought.

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Azami gave Yuji the once-over as he exited his room, nervously patting at his hair and tugging at his sleeves.

Awww, he's so nervous! It just adds to how cute he can be. It's easy to forget that even stone-cold, stoic warrior can be vulnerable sometimes.

“Don't you worry; we'll get you back here soon. But hopefully you'll have some hot little number with you, and she'll probably get those jeans off you before you're in the door. That's just what an uptight cutie like you needs.”

She clapped Yuji on the butt, leaving her hand for a long second to tease him. She guided him out the door and toward the club. It was hard on her part. Maybe a little like sending your child off to school by himself for the first time. She didn't want to let him go, but she had to. It wasn't fair to him to keep teasing him when she would never say 'yes' to him. Maybe if he found another girl, she'd feel better, too?

The thought had crossed her mind that he might not keep being interested in the case to make her a citizen if he had another girl, but that was a risk she had to take. She did love him back, even if she could only have him as a friend.

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They both had a good time at the club. It took Yuji a while to get comfortable, but once he relaxed a bit, he managed to have some fun. He didn't really hit on anyone, but a few girls flirted with him. It was progress. Azami hadn't really expected him to grab some girl right away. You had to work up to these things. At least, if you were Yuji, you did.

After a few hours, they agreed to call it a night. It was early by club standards, but Azami hadn't slept in over a day and was starting to feel it. It was hard to work off no sleep when you had no adrenaline going.

As they walked home, Yuji looked over his shoulder at her, blushing a bit.

"You know, you were easily the hottest one there. Which is weird, because I don't normally say 'hot' when referring to a girl. It seems like an insult."

Azami laughed. "No, no, 'hot' is the right word for the club scene. You can't say 'pretty'. Outside of a club, maybe."

"Yeah," he agreed, falling silent again. He was taking time to arrange his thoughts, as he genuinely had no idea how to approach this subject. He'd never had a roommate before, let alone an attractive female one.

"Listen, uh, if you ever do find a guy you like, you know, uh, feel free to bring him home. I mean, I know I'm uptight, but..."

She saw where he was going with this and spared him the trouble of continuing.

"Thanks."

A pause.

"Well, if I'm ever with a guy or girl, and you wanna jump in..."

Yuji rolled his eyes. "I thought you kunoichi were possessive creatures and didn't like to share."

"We don't. But we also have twice the sex drive of normal girls. It can wear a guy out pretty easy, trying to keep up with a kunoichi. Girls match each other sometimes, though, if the guy isn't up to the task."

"You're just screwing with me."

Azami's eyes gleamed mischievously. "Am I? Believe what you want..."

They were back now, and on Yuji's doorstep. He dug for his keys, placing them in the lock. He turned and held Azami's upper arms. She moved into a combat crouch, wondering what he had seen, and how she had missed it. When she realized Yuji was amused by her reaction, she stood back up.

"It's out of character for me, I know, but..."

He leaned in and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"Thanks. If you hadn't dragged me out, I would have been sitting there feeling sorry for myself. I would never do the club thing by myself, and I had a great time. I owe you."

For once, Azami was left as the speechless one. Yuji, for his part, just turned the key in the lock and opened the door, going in first to turn on the lights. Azami followed him in, a sudden surge of affection

gripping her. She caught up with him as he was going toward the bathroom, spun him around, and had every intention of tearing his clothes off. She didn't care about her promise to herself at this point; that last kiss had done it. She wanted nothing more than to rip off his shirt, yank off his jeans, and jump him then and there. The whole world could watch and she wouldn't have cared.

Something stopped her. She wasn't sure what, and she turned her headlong passion into an awkward kiss on the cheek. Her silver lip gloss left a print on his cheek, and had the side effect of making her want to decorate the rest of his body with the same color.

She just smiled quietly and forced herself to walk to her room, shaking her head and mentally whipping herself for nearly jumping Yuji's bones.

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It was about three in the morning when a groggy Yuji got up. He looked down at himself, wearing a black tank top and black trunks that clung to him a little snugly. He normally covered up more, but tonight, he didn't really care if Azami saw him. He'd seen her in her nightwear before. No big deal. And in a way, it would be kind of hot for her to see him like that.

He opened the door, his mind lost in thought about earlier. He was far from an expert, but he felt sure that kiss on the cheek wasn't what Azami had in mind earlier. You didn't practically fly up to your roommate, who you saw everyday, to kiss him on the cheek.

I'm thinking about this the wrong way. She's a beautiful girl, and we're probably thinking the same thing and both holding back. That's so stupid. Why don't we just-

He had no answer for the question he was about to impose on himself. He had always thought about sex as doing something with someone you loved. And that was still true to him. But he loved Azami. And she clearly felt something for him. If it was lust, she would have already been on top of him. If it was just friendship, then this was more dangerous. But again, he thought about her kiss and how she shook her head and walked away. It didn't add up.

He glanced toward Azami's room, finding the door open, but the room empty. She probably went to the bathroom or something. He heard the shower running and felt a small chill. He really wanted to be in there with her. He'd had some *very* vivid fantasies about that. But there was no way he was going to act like a horny little troll on that fantasy. But he was going to wait for her until she came out.

As an afterthought, he flung his tank top back into his room. Somehow, it felt right.

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What are you doing, Azami?

She had stripped and put the shower on almost ten minutes ago, but hadn't gotten in it. Instead, she was sitting there, thinking about what she had almost done. Thing was, she wasn't so certain it would have been a mistake. That overflowing affection she felt might have been a sign that she could forgive herself and have Yuji, like she really and truly wanted. But she couldn't get past her crimes.

With a sigh, she shut the shower off and put her black half-tank and boyshorts back on. She Her hair swished behind her, reminding her that she'd left it untied tonight, and that she still had her make-up on. She was too depressed to care about that for the moment. She might put on a cheerful face for Yuji, but living with him, while fun, was making her ache for a man in her life.

She glanced at herself in the mirror, knowing full well that if she was really so inclined, she could go find someone. Anyone would have jumped at a chance to be with her. Those that could look past her statistics as a criminal, anyway. The Leaf bunch was surprisingly forgiving about that kind of thing.

She exited the bathroom, and spied Yuji standing in front of the window. She drew her breath in a gasp, a hand to her mouth.

Yuji was almost naked. His wiry frame suddenly seemed more muscular under the shadowy light that the moon put into the room. She could feel an intensity from him; a nervousness. But that was nothing new. She had seen that before. His anxiety was horrible sometimes, and she'd occasionally catch him struggling and offer her support.

No. It's not anxiety. Doesn't feel like it.

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Yuji turned his head to face Azami, secretly pleased at the stunned yet enraptured gaze she was giving him. It was humiliating, but it felt...good. Yuji always knew he would be submissive when it came to girls. They intimidated him, so the role came naturally. It was easier, besides, to let them take the lead. It didn't have to get kinky. Unless that was what *she* wanted.

Azami fumbled over her words, her usual cool and teasing demeanor gone. Yuji turned fully toward her, forcing himself to leave his arms at his sides and not cross them over his bare chest. He'd never realized how damned *cold* it was in here at night. It felt kind of good, as his insides were burning up.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you," he said plainly, hiding nothing as he padded towards her. "Azami, you know how I feel about you. And that's enough for me. I think we've both had the same thing on our minds tonight. Maybe we could compromise and...I don't know. Cuddle or something."

God knew that's not where either of them wanted it to end. But Azami nodded anyway, taking Yuji by the hand and leading him to her bed. He had insisted she take the larger bed in the master bedroom, and he moved into his storage room, where towers of books threatened to topple over. Her room was big, empty, and yet welcoming.

Her bed was covered with black sheets and a black comforter. It made for good camouflage, as she slept in total darkness. If her enemy couldn't find her, he couldn't do anything. She, meanwhile, could maneuver nearly uninhibited in the dark.

She took her side of the bed, allowing Yuji to roll into bed next to her. She slid into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and lifting her waist so he could get an arm underneath her. His other hand curled around her shoulders. She buried her head in his neck, her hair fanning out over his hand.

He slid his hips closer to her and squeezed her tightly, determined to be content with this. If he truly loved her- and he did- then it was worth waiting for. He would MAKE her love him.

To hell with this!

Azami's thoughts and movements came fiercely, as her rush of passion toward Yuji returned. She rolled over on top of him, this time holding nothing back. She kissed his cheek first, seeing the silver marks she left in the wake of her lips. It didn't matter; he was going to be hers NOW. She met his neck next, picking the most vulnerable spot in the side, guessing (correctly) that Yuji would like that. The neck was a vulnerable place; to offer it to someone like Yuji did by extending it denoted an extreme, intimate trust. Azami took full advantage of that, leaving a mark right where she would have bitten him. What the hell- she did bite down, gently. He gasped, possibly flashing back to when she tried to kill him when they first met, and his body stiffened, but his grip around her tightened again.

She looked him in the eyes, took aim, and planted a kiss right on the lips. Their breathing synced up unconsciously as their lips and tongues danced over each other. Azami's hands were on Yuji's chest and were pressing hard enough to make small bruises and even draw blood. Yuji clearly didn't mind, but he didn't reciprocate. He kept his arms safely around her waist, clearly unsure as to what he was 'allowed' to do.

When Azami backed off and pulled her nightshirt off, putting it around his neck to hold him still as her kissed moved down his neck and chest, the rulebook as he knew it was gone. He pulled her tighter, feeling their bare chests meet. She paused to allow him an opening. He slid her waist closer to him, until she was perched on his stomach. When she leaned forward, she was in just the right range for kissing, which was pretty much as far as he thought things would go.

"C'mon," Azami urged, guiding Yuji's hand to some more interesting areas of her body. "Oh, y'know what? We're gonna stain the sheets with that lip gloss all over you. We'd better get cleaned up." She lowered her voice an octave, giving a husky sound to her voice. "I'll wash your back."

**What the hell was I thinking? Things ending at kissing? I didn't know she'd get so into it so quickly! I just meant to tell her how much I loved her, and I was going to prove it by asking her out every day until she said yes.
I guess she's ready to forgive herself for her crimes.**

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It was practically a wrestling match all the way into the shower. They moved as fast as they could with their underwear pooled around their ankles.

Azami planted one more kiss on Yuji's lips, pressing their bodies as close together as possible. With a smacking sound, she pulled away, arms around his neck. She was actually his height, possibly a little taller, so she couldn't peer adoringly up into his eyes. She wanted to say how much she loved him, but that might screw up what promised to be a very nice evening. There would be plenty of time for that afterward. It would be healthy for Yuji to have one instance of casual sex.

Starting tomorrow, he would belong to her, after all.

As promised, she pushed him into the shower and washed his back. Then his front. And then made him do the same to her. She literally had to force his hands to certain places, as he was still having a hard time believing this was really happening. She nibbled happily on his neck and chest as he finished her body. She put one leg in between his, backing him up into the wall and keeping his legs spread, first with her knee, then her thigh, and then with her hip. She pushed his arms above his head and even nibbled at his armpit a little.

They were laughing at themselves by the time they were drying off. How stupid it was to wait so long when they were clearly in love?

“You can’t back out now, kiddo,” Azami teased. Yuji was past the point of blushing. He just nodded and gave her another hug. They stayed that way until they got back to Azami’s room.

10 - The Substitute (Pt 1)

Yamato/Tenzo was at a crossroads in his life. He was needed now, more than ever. That was nice, in one way. In another area of his life, it was horrible. Even damning from his perspective.

He'd recently fallen in love. Maybe not for the first time, but it was love at first sight, and as serious as he'd ever felt the bittersweet emotion. The beautiful female had returned his affection, despite a nearly ten year gap in their ages.

But now, Naruto needed him. Were he left without Tenzo, the demon fox inside him would rampage without abandon. And to Tenzo, neglecting his duty was the same as death.

It was not as though Hisako wouldn't understand. She was on a very short career path to being one of ANBU's best. She had an innate talent for the shinobi arts, and her thirst for training was never quenched. That was one thing Tenzo admired so- her best was never enough to her. Being a bit of perfectionist himself, he totally understood that, and in fact embraced it.

But he had to give that up. Give up the sweet girl with the life from hell. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. But how to break it to her. True, they weren't 'official' by any means, but that didn't make the situation any easier to cope with.

Yamato tossed his mask to the ground in frustration, then cursed as it smacked him painfully in the shin on the bouncing rebound. Worst of all, this did nothing to alleviate his concerns.

Defeated for the moment, he sat down with his head in his hands, hoping to find a miraculous solution.

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Hisako frowned, studying the quivering knife in the target. It was a straight shot, and dead center. But the angle must have been off slightly, because the butt end of the kunai had tipped upward, preventing her from getting a perfect straight shot.

She knew she was too good to make a rookie mistake like that. She'd been distracted lately. With a guy. An older guy. A guy who was probably out of her league; at least in her eyes. Granted, they'd had a date or two, and some good conversation, and there was a spark, but all the same.

I'm used to it, she had convinced herself. **But you never really get used to being alone.**

Hisako had seen guys come in and out of her mother's life for a while now. It sickened her. And here she thought she'd finally found some stability. But Tenzo was really out of it lately.

Focus! she ordered herself, lining up another target with a new kunai. Training was a good way to lose yourself. She did so often, and so her skills grew. But there was something missing.

A feeling of fulfillment. That was it. That was the missing piece of the puzzle.

That's typical of a face who can vanish in a crowd so easily, she thought cynically, grimacing at her own perceived flaw. Tenzo had nearly managed to cure her of that thought, too.

Don't borrow trouble, Hisako. You don't know what's going on yet. He might just be caught up in work.

Thok. Bullseye.

I hope.

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Ryouko...Kimihiro...Yuji...

His name seemed to change with his moods. Each name brought a distinct personality forth.

Ryouko was a gallant warrior who would ride to the rescue at the last moment, sacrificing his own body to protect those who needed it.

Kimihiro was an elegant speaker who exuded a quiet power that ended some fights before they began.

Yuji was more of a loose canon. A young man wishing to regain his childhood while adding to the number of responsibilities on his shoulders- at the same time.

So what did that make Kojiro?

Kojiro, apparently, inherited the rotten luck that Yuji and the others had. In the span of two weeks, he'd managed to take a kunai in the thigh, leaving him with a limp that would last at least another week. He'd followed that up with an errant strike to his eye that broke the orbital bone, recently mended. He now had to wear an eye patch until it healed. At least another week or two of that. And finally, the whipped cream on top: He'd just seen his longtime crush, Sakura Haruno, pair off with another guy.

Kojiro stalked darkly through the Leaf village, restricted to D-rank missions while his batter body recovered. He felt out of place in his civilian clothes. And he was sure he was getting stares for some reason. Maybe because he was smoking and he didn't look old enough?

Kojiro was the same person as the other three, really. The difference is that his flaws her becoming more pronounced. The stoic armor he'd worn since donning the name 'Ryouko' was beginning to chip away. More and more people could read him, and Kojiro hated that. It made him feel transparent. Being insecure for no good reason didn't help either.

Look at me. An eye patch, a cigarette, and a bad leg. And the girl I've been watching for nearly five years is finally paired off with someone. I should've made my move. But I just can't talk to girls!

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Tenzo decided to step out for a drink. A little alcohol would do wonders for the beleaguered ANBU agent. So he picked out the nearest watering hole, ambled into the bar, and took a seat. He raised his hand, which the bartender acknowledged, and brought him his usual. Roasted tea and rice cake, plus aged sake, chilled to perfection.

As he murmured his thanks for the food, he spied a familiar face walking into the bar. Well, trying to, anyway.

What the hell has he done to himself now? Tenzo wondered, watching Kojiro limp his way toward the bar. **Kid's gotten more injuries...**

Kojiro and Tenzo got along well, despite being opposites in personality. And it was no secret that Kojiro envied Tenzo a bit for scoring a place on Team Kakashi. Kojiro had applied for the spot and been denied twice. First when Sai joined, then when Yamato was assigned. That left Yuji as a 'floating agent', which was a nice way of saying he didn't fit anywhere.

Kojiro noticed Yamato, nodded a greeting, and made his way over.

"Evening, senpai," he said. Rather, rasped.

"Kojiro-kun, what happened to you this time?"

Kojiro ordered his personal favorite- Shochu- and settled in on the story.

"Ran into some trouble at the Fire Daimyo's temple. One of the mikos there is a friend of mine. I guess there's been some trouble there recently with some of the monks who aren't taking their studies seriously. I was told to put them in line. Long story short, one of them tried to flip this friend's hakama, I lost my temper and decked him, and the next thing I knew a bo cracked me in the eye. Well, almost in the eye," Yuji amended, raising his glass in a small salute. "It would seem M'lady doesn't even think I can handle weeding a garden without trouble anymore. And who's to say she isn't right?"

Kojiro took another long, slow sip. That gave Tenzo the opportunity to study the younger man.

He was just growing a touch of five o'clock shadow on his face. Still looked very young, despite being twenty-two. He looked maybe sixteen, seventeen. His body was a sinewy, martial-artist build that had a surprising amount of strength to it. But there was something different about Yuji; er, Kojiro. Something Tenzo couldn't quite put his finger on at first. As Kojiro turned to add to the conversation, it hit Tenzo/Yamato.

"Kojiro-kun, you're rather talkative tonight."

Kojiro paused with his cigarette just above an ashtray. He cocked his head thoughtfully, then shrugged noncommittally.

"Wouldn't shock me. I think I've been living and working alone for too long."

Kojiro said more, but that was where the conversation stopped for Yamato. In the back of his mind, he'd found a solution. It wasn't perfect, but it would take a little bit of stress off his shoulders.

"Kojiro-kun, I need a favor..."

Through all his name changes, Kojiro's willingness to help had never faded.

"Yes, senpai?"

"I'm seeing this girl, and..."

Silence. Kojiro let his gaze wander uncomfortably. He couldn't imagine this conversation was going to go in a comfortable direction. It was plenty awkward now, with Tenzo giving Kojiro a stare that actually made him agree with Naruto- he DID have creepy eyes, if he stared at you and didn't blink.

"...and?" Kojiro prompted.

"...and it can't work. There's too many problems."

Kojiro licked his lips, deep in thought. "Either you think I can help, or you want a friendly ear," he observed.

"Both," Yamato admitted, as much to himself as to Kojiro. "Look, I...there's just too much going on. She's a great girl, and the problem is me, one hundred percent. So, what I need..."

Kojiro prepared himself to hear about sexual inadequacies, forgotten anniversaries, belated birthdays- all the things his friends who had girlfriends came to him about. Couldn't the tell he had 'Virgin's eyes'?

"I need you to take her off my hands."

Kojiro's jaw dropped. He hadn't seen that coming by any stretch of the imagination.

He held his hand up in a halting gesture.

"Hold on. Run that by me again. I couldn't have just heard you correctly..."

Tenzo gave Kojiro a bow, despite being his superior.

"I can't just leave her alone. I need to know she'll be taken care of. And I know I can trust you..."

Kojiro dropped his glass, fumbled it, and then ignored the shochu now soaking his lap.

"Tenzo, I've never even dated seriously before. Not to mention I know Hisako, and she's going to ask questions..."

"You're scared because she can kick your @\$\$. "

"Aren't you?" Yuji shot back. "Look, I get that you're in love with her. And I get that you're busy. But what I don't get is what you think I can do. Am I supposed to be some...some bookmark for you? Hold your place until you're free again?"

“No, no, this would be for keeps!” Tenzo insisted. “Look, I’m desperate. If you know Hisako, you know that she needs some stability. I can’t provide it. But you can. You need a training partner, you need a teammate, you need a girlfriend. She’s all three in one adorable little package!”

“Adorable, deadly package,” Kojiro added. “Look, if we can do this without her feeling offended, fine. I like Hisako; don’t think I don’t. But I’m not going to be a placeholder, and I’m not going to let her feelings get trampled with my name attached.”

Tenzo gave an eager nod. It occurred to him that the stress on Kojiro’s face had been growing constantly. The corners of his eyes seemed to sag tiredly, and his face was locked in a grim expression. He was even more pale than usual. Coupled with the physical injuries he had accrued, Kojiro was a mess. Tenzo guessed that, at first, having a girl in his life would add to the stress. But in the long run. Hell, in the short run, she’d done a ton of good for Tenzo. But he’d be lying if he said that he was more concerned for Kojiro than Hisako. Kojiro seemed to be damned, either by design or by choice. Hisako had not yet resigned herself to that. And maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t too late for Kojiro, either.

“Understood,” Tenzo said finally, finishing his appraisal of Kojiro. “Believe me, I wouldn’t ask if I weren’t desperate.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to read you the riot act. I trust you, Yamato,” Kojiro told him, completely honest. It made Tenzo chuckle. A shinobi who was forthcoming like that. Kojiro was a walking contradiction.

“So, let me guess, Kojiro: Everyone tells you that you’re a great guy, but you wind up going home alone. Am I right?”

“...all too correct,” Kojiro managed, with a hint of a smile. “But then again, I don’t try very hard, either. I just don’t want to rush into anything. But if you know me that well, you know that the burdens of my allies are my burdens as well.”

“How very Buddha-esque of you,” Yamato chortled.

“Nah, nothing so exalted. It’s just easier if I only have myself to worry about. Besides, you’ve got a lot on your plate. I’d like a village to come home to, provided M’Lady ever lets me leave again. That’ll be easier if Naruto is intact.”

Kojiro set down his drink.

“Fact is, I’m jealous of you. You’ve got a clear place in the village, and you’re highly respected. Me...I’d settle for being despised if I could feel like I belong.”

Something is wrong, Tenzo thought automatically. **Kojiro never opens up like that. There’s something else going on...**

11 - The Substitute (Part 2)

Note: Hisako belongs to YunieXTidus.

Hisako sat up against the bamboo wall of the hot spring, glad to be soaking in such a nice place. It sure beat going home. And as much as she loved her meadow, it could get cold at night. This bath was just the thing to warm her up. At least, in body.

Her heart was rapidly freezing.

There had been an odd sort of 'finality' to anything Tenzo had said or done during their date tonight. He seemed at odds with himself; even distracted. Normally, his focus was impossible to break. Hisako took it more than a little personally that her man was distracted while being out with her. She reflected on the date and decided that she hadn't handled things in the best way.

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"Yamato, snap out of it!" Hisako demanded, her fist thundering on the table. His attempts to remind her to use her indoor voice only served to irritate her more, and she was two seconds away from wringing his neck before she remembered she was in love with him.

"You wanna tell me what the hell is so fascinating? Because your attention doesn't seem to be on me tonight!" she snarled, glaring at anyone who had dared to turn her way during her little outburst. One rather busty brunette stared a little too long, and Hisako was starting to wonder if that, maybe, was Tenzo's cup of tea.

Yamato framed her shoulders with his hands, but it was not the placating gesture that Hisako originally thought. He held her still to look deep into her eyes, as if into her soul.

"I just...want to remember all of you perfectly. That's all."

What did he mean by that? Hisako wondered for the millionth time. She leaned back and sunk lower into the hot water, until only her head and neck remained above it. Her washcloth was precariously placed on her forehead as she relaxed.

Is it another girl? Yamato is the cream of the crop...and I'm the roots people throw away. No one took a second look at me until he came along. It was always Sakura getting the attention. That rotten Uchiha elitist; that cute oddball Lee; that mystery Yu; er; Kojiro.

She heard the sound of splashing water in the men's side of the hot spring, on the other side of the wall she was sitting near. When she heard two familiar male voices, she pressed her ear to the wall to listen.

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Tenzo and Kojiro were both normally solo bathers. Neither one was particularly keen to show off to other men, no matter what a few yaoi fangirls clamored for. But meeting to discuss business was fine.

Now, Kojiro was an insecure guy to begin with, and he was certainly no fan of male genitalia, save for his own, naturally. He needed look no lower than Tenzo's upper body to feel inadequate. The size difference between them was sort of startling, as they seemed to have the same build underneath their uniforms. But to Kojiro, his wiry body was insignificant compared to Tenzo's broad shoulders. Normally, it wouldn't have bothered him at all. He liked girls, despite his apparent ability to alienate any potential mate in an instant with a stupid slip of the tongue, or his idiotic decision to not talk to his crush of five years until it was too late. But he couldn't help but think, on the off chance things worked out between him and Hisako, that he would be found woefully inadequate. He already felt as though he was a substitute for Tenzo while he sorted things out. He wasn't really sure what he was supposed to do. There was no way Tenzo was going to just let go of this girl, no matter what his intentions.

"So, please explain more of this to me," Kojiro requested formally, speaking to Yamato as his kouhai. "I'm not sure I understand my role."

Yamato settled into the water, sinking in up to his shoulders, exhaling over the span of a few seconds to truly relax.

"Fall in love with her, or pretend you love her," he finally answered with a strained patience. Kojiro had asked this question several times now, and Yamato knew that it was to force him to reconsider his position. In other words, Kojiro thought this was underhanded, and disapproved, but wasn't about to tell his superior that. Well, Yamato wasn't about to back down, either.

"I don't want to place certain cards, Yuji. But I know things that-"

Kojiro stood up abruptly, startling the other bathers.

"You listen to me! Do you know how lucky you are? That sweet, loyal girl thinks the world of you. I did, too. Now I'm wondering what in the hell she ever saw in you! You must have seven faces if you can show her one Yamato, then show me a different one!"

THAT was a nasty insult, and Kojiro knew it. But he didn't stop there. His finger swung in an accusatory arc, and his voice became louder and more commanding.

"If you love her, make it work! If you're thinking about protecting her, that's stupid! If ANYONE is mature enough to handle that sort of thing, it's her! I agreed to help you, but the more I think about it, the more I think that you disgust me! To have such a loyal girl..."

Kojiro had shattered the silence of the peaceful bath, and he still wasn't done.

"When I heard about how Sasuke left the village, and what Sakura did to stop him, I damn near cried. For her, and even for me. Because if I was the one with such a nice girl, I would damn sure never let her go! So it pisses me off that clowns like you blow off their girls because it's convenient! They are not disposable objects, and neither are feelings!"

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Hisako heard Kojiro's speech. All of it. It bothered her that he was badmouthing Tenzo so much, but at the same time, apparently, he'd been given good reason to do so. She had never heard him talk to anyone that way, superior or junior. Something had clearly set him off, and she was betting that it had something to do with the way Tenzo was acting on their date tonight. She staved off her murderous impulses and sat down, ears trained toward the sound of Kojiro and Tenzo's fight.

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Tenzo now stood up, feeling himself sufficiently slighted to elicit a response. And that response was almost a punch to Kojiro's face. Except for the fact that Kojiro was right. His reasoning was correct, but he didn't know the feeling. He'd never pursued someone so far his junior. Granted, Sakura at seventeen would have posed problems for him, but he'd made no move toward her. So he couldn't understand.

"Look, you agreed to help me out. If you don't want her to suffer, then man up and deal with this!" Tenzo snarled back. "It's impossible for it to work between us. It's not fair to her or to me! When the shoot hits the fan, her and I will both be suffering. And you can thank your own greedy self for that!"

Kojiro and Yamato were chest to chest now, making their physical differences all that more apparent.

"YOU man up, senpai! I said I would do this, and I will. But you'd damn well better figure out a way to make it work. Because it's not me she's in love with, and I won't change that! If you want me to play 'house', fine."

He jabbed a finger in Yamato's face.

"But you'd damn well better get your act together!"

Then the wall exploded.

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Hisako lost her temper. Before she knew it, she had demolished the wall separated the men and women, causing both genders to flee. Before her stood a picture of masculine beauty that she was too angry to appreciate.

Kojiro and Yamato, baring nothing, were standing chest to chest, paused in the middle of a heated argument. The looks on their faces alone were worth the property damage. Tenzo didn't so much mind being seen naked, but Kojiro all but dove into the water to avoid giving Hisako any more of a view than he'd already had. But she'd gotten the full view. He was at a $\frac{3}{4}$ angle to her, meaning she saw his entire behind and gotten a good glimpse of his genitals. Tenzo was fully facing her, and the very site of him wet and naked would have caught her breath at a different time.

Right now, she was heedless of her own nudity. Her attitude was that nudity really wasn't a big deal, depending on who saw you. There was no reason to be embarrassed in front of other girls, for example. And if someone saw you naked, well, life went on.

The boys reacted in different ways. Kojiro had assumed a formal kneeling position under water, either out of respect or because he was mostly covered that way. He faced away from her. Tenzo stared straight at her, the red hue on his face indicating that he was very interested. The reaction below his waist certainly confirmed that.

"I do not appreciate being treated this way, Tenzo," she said quietly. Tenzo winced- it would have been better if she'd yelled. He could tell that she was building up to something else.

“If there is a problem, I expect you to tell me, so we can face it together! Damn it!” She kicked at the water angrily. The manager of the hot spring had come out to yell, but one glance from Hisako sent him scampering. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

“And YOU!” she started toward Kojiro, grabbing one his shoulders to spin him around. He’d never been so close to a naked female before, and was tempted to both stare and run for it at the same time. “Stand up and face me like a man!”

He reacted to her voice without thinking, again displaying himself fully. He wanted to cover up, but he wasn’t sure if Hisako would allow it. He shivered, but not from the cold.

Hisako surveyed them both, and found that two men in a hot spring was a hot concept. Especially when you threw in the teacher/student thing that had been so hot when she was involved in it. A brief fantasy about the two stunned, naked men in front of her nearly distracted Hisako from her mission of ripping these two apart.

“Come here!” she ordered. They both did, heads bowed in concern. Her hand flashed out and grabbed each of their genitals. She began to squeeze the, um, more vulnerable part of that area. “Now, both of you, fill me in on what’s going on!”

Apparently, Kojiro wasn’t so willing to sell Tenzo out. His anger had stemmed from really not wanting to mess up what was, in his eyes, a perfect couple. A quick twist by Hisako caused an unmasculine gasp of breath to come flying out of his mouth.

“You try a replacement jutsu, and these-”
She glanced down.
“-stay here. Clear?”

“Crystal!” Kojiro half-yelped.

“Good. Now, Tenzo, we are going to work things out. If you need time, fine. I will spend my time with Kojiro here. You just better pray I don’t fall in love with him instead. Now, get your act together, or I’ll crush your heart as well as your testicles. Get me?!”

“Yes!”

“Good!” Hisako stated enthusiastically, releasing her grip on the two men, who immediately hit the ground on all fours, panting from the pain that she had inflicted. Hisako bent down, grabbed Kojiro’s arm, and dragged him toward the now-deserted woman’s side of the bath.

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Kojiro had managed to grab his towel, but apparently that wasn’t going to be in Hisako’s plans.

“I heard what you said, and I think it’s sweet,” she told him right away. “I get where Tenzo’s coming from, but I had to make it seem like I really disapproved. Which I do, I suppose.”

Kojiro bowed. "I'm glad you understand. I really wanted no part of this deception. I said 'yes' originally, but I intended to only make sure that things worked out between you two. Now that I don't find you attractive," he added hastily.

"Yeah, yeah," she murmured, "You just find Sakura MORE attractive."

Kojiro shook his head, smiling a little. "No. I saw her first. I've been carrying a torch for her for too long to just let go. If I'd seen you first, it would be a different story."

Hisako found herself honestly flattered and surprised by that. Kojiro did not lie, simply put. Not outside of missions. She barely heard him continue. He said something about how she was most certainly beautiful, and how he was such a downgrade from Tenzo, but to please be understanding if she were to allow this to continue while Tenzo worked things out.

"I'm not Tenzo; certainly not physically. And you two are a great couple. You belong together."

Hisako gave a broad grin and faced him. "...You're hard to stay angry with, you know. And- oh, grow up!"

Kojiro was back in his formal posture, facing away again.
"Sorry, sorry, but in the presence of a lady..."

Hisako rolled her eyes. "Geez, you're so uptight. You've already seen me naked! And I've already seen you naked, for that matter."

"Yes, well, there is...it's kind of..."

Hisako put a washcloth on Kojiro's back, making him jump. She began to wash his back.
"Look, I'm going to punish Tenzo. You're going to have to put up with me for one date. Then I'll forgive him. But he needs to be punished. So, make sure you tell him I washed your back, and you washed mine."

"Eh? But I haven't washed your-"

"You're going to."

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Truthfully, Kojiro had a good time with Hisako. Even though he knew that it wasn't going to go anywhere...no, rather, because of that, he relaxed and actually acted like himself. Hisako found that charming, and decided that if she'd maybe seen this side of Yuji before Tenzo, she might very well have found her interests change. It's true that Kojiro was inferior to Tenzo in almost every way. But what he'd said in the hot spring had really resonated with her.

As their dinner was gone, and their conversation wound down, Hisako felt it was time to be honest with Kojiro.

“You know, you’re a good guy. If I didn’t have Tenzo, you, me, and Sakura could have had a really good time...”

“...It’s not nice to tease.”

“Yeah, but it’s fun.”

Kojiro leaned one elbow on the table, a rather odd grin spreading across his face. “How Tenzo could resist you when you smile is beyond me.”

Hisako crossed her arms, mockingly indignant. “He *can’t*.”

“Heh. So the weakness is a male thing, then,” he decided. “Rather, you seem to inspire trust when you smile. At least from where I sit. Maybe that’s why I feel I can tell you...”

Hisako leaned forward, all ears.

“I’m a virgin.”

“...Duh. If THAT’S your biggest secret, you should be a politician. Definitely no skeletons in your closet.”

“That hurt,” Kojiro murmured, wincing. “But it’s a fair assessment. Actually, the real thing I wanted to tell you was what I had planned to tell Tenzo.

Because of my health, I need to go to a temple that a friend of mine lives at. If I don’t lose my stress, I’m going to die. And sooner rather than later.

...

I’d meant to tell Yamato, but I just couldn’t. His problem seemed more pressing.”

How is a relationship more pressing than life or death? I knew Kojiro always took on the burdens of his friends, but this is too much...

“So I don’t want to leave worried. So how ‘bout patching things up with Tenzo, so I can go with a clear conscience?”

Hisako nodded numbly, thinking about all that Kojiro had said and done recently. Maybe that was why she leaned across the table and kissed him on the cheek.

“I will. So go heal up. And try to get some Shrine Maiden tail while you’re at it. Sex is healthy. I think there’s actually therapy involving it.”

“There is,” Kojiro answered instantly. Then he knew he’d messed up.

“How’d you know that off the top of your head?”

“Fantasy, simply put. She IS a doctor, after all...” Kojiro admitted, blushing. “Sakura, I mean.”

Hisako again felt a slight inferiority toward Sakura. Kojiro must have known, because he said:

“Can I fantasize about you in the hot spring?”

He narrowly dodged the pot of tea a laughing Hisako chucked at his head.

Thanks, Kojiro. I needed that. Now to go get Tenzo woken up. Seeing me naked probably has kept him ‘busy’ all night. Maybe he’s got time for the real thing.

12 - Sakura's Game III

Sakura had changed, and not for the better. Well, that wasn't true, I suppose. I loved her, no matter what. I had to admit that since she'd become more aggressive, she was that much sexier for it. I would have done anything for her before; now, I could never resist her, and she knew it.

Whatever dark power was trying to overtake her had manifested itself more strongly as of late. As her 'game', her sole source of food, it was my job to take care of her dietary needs and general well being. That means, each night, laying down prostrate before her and letting her drink her fill of my blood. I never present my neck as a target to an enemy. It requires an intimate trust to let anyone near. I have no wish to die.

That said, I needed to respond to Sakura's ultimatum quickly. She had asked me to make a choice: Swear an oath to belong to her forever, or to break off ties and allow her to hunt again. This was almost marriage, and I'm too young for that. But the alternative...I cannot and will not let anyone else suffer because of this. And she herself...she is suffering.

To me, there was but one choice.

There was a note on the bed we had been sharing (only for sleep, sadly. This was even more of a hardship due to her being ten times sexier than usual before her feeding). It told me how to dress to answer her question, and also what to bring, plus a guideline as to what belonging to her really meant. Among other things, I was responsible for her health, physically and mentally, and I was supposed to satisfy hunger and sexual appetite alike. I was to dress a certain way when serving her, although it was noted that I was to continue treating her like a girlfriend in terms of time, meaning I could still live my own life so long as I didn't neglect her.

Despite how incredibly hot this list was, I cringed, because this night would certainly end with me being bloodied once again, and likely in pain. But love is not a matter to be taken lightly. I made my choice, knowing full well that there would likely be consequences like this.

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The moon was full, and it suited the mood. Sakura was out on the deck, waiting for me. I tried to see which Sakura awaited me: The cute girl I'd fallen in love with, or the dark mistress that I served. When I saw the black eye shadow, just visible in the dim moonlight, I knew. It would be my mistress to whom I answered.

I was dressed in black dress pants, with black shoes and socks, and a white dress shirt, opened slightly at the collar as per her instructions. In my hand I carried a large dagger, sharpened on both sides. It had been hard to procure, since it was illegal to own one of these. I wouldn't own it for long, so I let that thought pass.

She looked me over, her eyes appraising me. Her hand flashed out. I was stunned, but didn't move as her nails slashed across my cheek, making a shallow cut, just deep enough to draw blood.

She withdrew her hand slowly. I suppressed a worried sigh, as I noticed she had let her nails grow to a good length, and had painted them black. They added to her new look, and she was even sexier for it. But I was worried about what was happening to her.

“So you aren’t totally gutless, I see,” she sneered, without changing her facial expression. The venom in her voice was enough. Why this was such a turn on I don’t know. But part of me wondered how I could mean so little to her. She was more concerned with licking my blood off her fingers than checking on my condition. She happened to make eye contact on me, and moved- faster than I would have thought possible- and trapped my arms at my sides.

I was helpless against her, and she knew it. The low-cut black gown she was wearing was entrancing; her hair, recently dyed black, made her pale skin stand out even more; the odd amulet around her neck made sure my attention hovered around her neckline. If only this was a game couples played.

But it was getting closer to murder.

She let me feel her fangs running across my neck, her tongue in their wake. Like an alcohol pad before a shot. But she didn’t bite me- not yet. No, now she was teasing me. And it was downright mean, because I really loved her. It hurt to see her this way, and yet...and yet...

I was intoxicated.

Absolutely captivated by her transformation. It was as if she was casting some sort of a spell that made her irresistible to me.

I had to fight to remember to care that this wasn’t her. Sakura didn’t do this. I had to keep control. I was her only hope. If I gave in to my desires, and I let her give in to this strange power, it would all be over.

She stepped back from me, standing in front of me imperiously, totally in control. She seemed taller, so I looked down at her feet. Yup, black high heels. Definitely not Sakura’s style. But this cruel mistress of the night...yes, it suited her well.

“Have you decided?”

I prepared myself to answer. It wasn’t going to be easy, but:

“Yes. And I’ve decided I’ll take the oath to belong-”

I paused, forcing myself to meet her pale green eyes.

“-But not to you. To Sakura.”

The high heels I had noticed just seconds ago were thudding toward me. A pale hand reached for my neck. I raised my head, but took a step back.

“Not you. Her. Sakura.”

“She and I are the same person!” she snapped, snatching my collar. I grasped her hand with mine, but made no other move.

“No. She is a sweet, innocent girl. You are a blood thirsty demon. Allow me to speak to her. Sakura. To her, I’ll make the oath.”

For a moment, she seemed unsure. If worse came to worse, I had the dagger in my hand, but God knew I didn’t want to do that. Murdering anyone, let alone the girl of my dreams, was sickening to me. All the same, my hand tightened around the material on the handle. My knuckles were white from the tension, and I was sweating so much that several times I thought I might lose my grip.

Finally, the power let Sakura reappear. She took only a second to orient herself to her surroundings. Then she dove into my chest, weeping.

“I’m fighting it...I swear, I am!” she promised me.

I stroked her hair, pulling her head into my chest protectively. Whatever the other side of Sakura offered, it was this Sakura’s sweet embrace that I fell in love with. It was for her sake I would fight.

“She’s a part of me...I can’t get rid of her. She IS me.”

“I know. But we’ll get you in control again. Now, quickly, please- let me kiss your thigh.”

She knew what that was about, thankfully, because making a request like that without her understanding would be more than a little awkward. Her memory stayed in tact throughout both personalities. Instead, she pulled up the folds of the long gown until she revealed a milk white, femininely muscular thigh. I knelt down, hands gently gripping her leg. I bowed my head until my lips graced her thigh. I felt her hand running gently through my hair, and even felt her body shake a little. We were such a timid couple that this was very radical to us. But I loved it; I was honest enough with myself to admit that.

I now belonged to her.

I got up and stepped back. In an instant, I knew the evil mistress version was back.

“Good. Now- swear it to me as well!”

I shook my head, refusing. I didn’t belong to her.

“You know, her and I are two sides of the same coin...”

“Then I already swore my life to you, while the good side of the coin was in control.”

I knew that bit of sarcasm would hurt me. But to my surprise, there was no attack and no threat. Instead:

“I am as lonely as she is. My personality may be different, but I am still female. To me, you are my boyfriend. To hear you refuse...no, deny me so adamantly...it makes my heart break.”

Her logic was sound, I had to admit. If she was Sakura, then... No, I had to stay focused. I had only one advantage now, and I needed to stick with it. If I gave up and allowed myself to fall in love with ‘both’ girls, then I would be tearing myself- and her- apart. But then she played an advantage I hadn’t seen

coming.

In a flash, her hand shot out and grabbed my dagger- edge first. I watched in horror as the skin on her hand was marred by the blade. Blood circled around her palm to the back of her hand and fell to the ground.

“I could kill ‘her’. Or, myself, rather. If you don’t swear to me as well, you’ll be responsible for sending us both to hell.”

I sunk to my knees, defeated. She strode over, closing the small distance between us. She held the sharp, cool edge of the knife at my neck. It bit into my flesh just slightly. Her blood and my blood were mixing just outside my wound.

“Now, do it again: swear to belong to me!”

Her knife hand slipped down the front of me and began to tear my shirt. Then, with both hands, she continued the break, ripping it right off my body.

“If you’re stalling for help- don’t. I’ve already arranged for your parents to be gone for the night.” Her voice took on a mocking, sweet tone as she elaborated: “Sweet little Sakura had her parents ask yours out to dinner, to talk about their adorable, well-behaved children.”

I had no more reason to hesitate.

“I’ll belong to you. But let her out more often. The ‘other’ Sakura. I belonged to her first. She’s who I fell in love with...”

The dark mistress nodded in consent. I bowed my head, leaned forward, and kissed her thigh. Her hands seized my hair roughly, reinforcing the fact that I was now at her beck and call. She ground my face into her thigh for quite a while. Finally, she let go, and I gasped for breath.

“It seems our blood has mixed on this blade. That gives me a good idea. A bonding of blood is the oldest form of a contract. The more ‘bonds’ between us, the better. So...”

Sakura was behind me, and she forced my mouth open. She inserted the tip of the knife into my mouth, letting our combined blood drip off into my mouth.

“Swallow,” she commanded. I did. Now that she was holding herself hostage, there was nothing else I could. I couldn’t let her hurt Sakura. But I had to let her know that she didn’t have control of me except for that reason.

“If you kill her...Hell awaits only you...”

She smiled nastily, using my discarded shirt to wipe the blood off the knife.

“Defiant to the last, huh? Good for you.”

She pushed me down roughly. She put one foot on my shoulder, gradually putting more weight on it. Her high heel dug into me. She stepped her other leg over me, straddling me. I knew what this meant, and I

tried to prepare myself for it. If I had thought of her feeding as a sexual experience before, then this was equivalent to rape. But while she held my girlfriend hostage, I had no choice.

Her fangs sunk into my neck, gently but not tenderly. For a long few moments, she fed to her heart's content. As I lay there, I got an idea. Slowly, I raised my arms. I could feel her gaze at them, but she didn't remove her fangs. The sounds of her feeding continued. My arms wrapped around her trim waist, pulling her tighter to me. She wriggled a little bit, allowing me to pull her even closer.

She herself had said it: She was a lonely girl, the same as Sakura. That may have been her one weakness. It made me hate myself, because I felt like (a)I was living a lie with this girl and (b) I felt like I was cheating on Sakura, with Sakura. But at least I could live this lie convincingly. I had learned that I truly loved being submissive to this girl. I knew at what point I would tell her no, but saw no reason not to enjoy the ride until that point. Her and I would fight it out one day, and I would free the real Sakura, or at least get her control again.

She finally freed herself from my neck. This time, she gingerly healed my wound. Her other hand explored my upper body, starting with my chin and stopping just above my belly button. Her hand traced that path back up until her hand was resting on the middle of my chest.

She looked at me, her eyes more pale than usual. Her lips parted, as though stunned. She let the knife clatter from her hand and she dove forward, kissing me aggressively. She didn't go beyond that, but I could feel that she wanted nothing more than to keep going and have her way with me.

Then she said something that created a problem for me:

"...You'd never forgive me if I took you first. The other, then, first. She must have you. Then I."

The problem with that: I had fallen in love with both of them.

TO BE CONTINUED...

13 - Surprising Affections

The players:

Name: Yuji Itou

Age: 22

Sex: Male

Hair: D. Brown

Eyes: Hazel

Info:

A loner by habit, Yuji has recently discovered the desire for a female companion. He treats women with respect, and lives a chivalrous life. He is afraid of the fairer sex because cannot understand them. He had a crush on Sakura for years without ever saying it, though it seems to be known by all except for her. More recently, he admitted having affection for Azami, but she turned him down. He is now focused on his studies. He battles constant depression and anxiety, but boasts a fair amount of skill with various weapons and ninjutsu, with a proficiency for genjutsu.

Name: Sakura Haruno

Age: 18

Sex: Female

Hair: Pink

Eyes: Green

Info:

A girl best described as 'cute' and 'tsundere'. Mourned the defecation of her friend/crush Sasuke Uchiha, while swearing to bring him home. She has been more lonely lately, and is thirsting for male attention. If she would just stop hitting Naruto, maybe the boys would be less afraid of her. She is now competing with Azami for Yuji's affections. Previously, Yuji has admitted to having a crush on her, but acknowledged his defeat as long as Sasuke was still in her heart.

Sakura is a top medic, and excels in chakra control to the point of being able to punch with monstrous ferocity.

Name: Azami Tsukiyama

Age: 19

Sex: Female

Hair: Black

Eyes: Dark, deep blue

Info:

A former bounty hunter, she fell in love with Yuji when he fought her as an equal, rather than becoming distracted by her body. She has not believed until recently that she is worthy of him due to her past

crimes. She is a clear beauty with a dangerous edge. She has since renounced her life of crime and has been granted asylum in the Leaf under Yuji Itou's care.

Azami's chief abilities are in wind style, but she is also skilled in fire style and genjutsu, plus many hand to hand arts. Her mixed ancestry is Japanese and Egyptian, making her an exotic beauty.

The story: Sakura and Azami have both fallen for Yuji, who they have both previously turned down. He is unaware of the rising conflict between the two kunoichi. They have agreed to fight fair for Yuji's affections. But how long can two attention-starved females caught in the throes of potential love and certain friendship last without fulfillment?

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It had been a long, agonizing wait. Really, only a month had passed, but for two girls in love, it might as well have been an eternity. Damn their agreement to play fair!

Yuji had a crush on me for a long time. So I've got the advantage... thought Sakura.

Yuji's seen me naked, and admitted feelings for me. I've totally got this sewn up! decided Azami.

Both girls looked at each other, smiled and nodded once, acknowledging their agreement, then returned to thinking about their various thoughts. Both were surprisingly worried about how Yuji would take the news. He'd never had one girl confess love to him, let alone two at once!

Is he gonna be okay? Sakura wondered, walking on autopilot into the locker room. She found her locker and began to unzip her vest, not paying much attention to anything but her thoughts. She had plenty of images of Yuji in her mind, nearly all of them with him blushing or stammering around any attractive, available kunoichi. That is, when he was conscious and his life wasn't in danger.

Maybe that's what made Sakura finally fall in love with him. The dark hair, dark eyes one-two punch was a big part, combined with his melancholy nature, and his tendency to keep to himself. It was so cute! He wasn't going around, beating his chest like a gorilla like the other idiot boys near her age. Instead, he quietly studied, and his power and knowledge grew. He exuded a quieter power, and yet was more trustworthy for it. You never fought alone if you were with Yuji. The countless little cuts and scars across his body told the story: He got hurt, but no one else under his watch did.

It was only because of her role as a medic that she got to know Yuji. He was a frequent patient. She had etched his half-clothed, usually bloodied and battered body into her brain. It was so hot, seeing him without a shirt. Sakura wasn't a boy watcher, but seeing Yuji without a shirt was special, because he simply did not take it off unless he absolutely had to. That kind of mystery was hot. Even though she'd seen what he seemed to keep jealously hidden, she still couldn't stop herself from staring every chance she got. She always made sure to be the one to give him his physicals, too. The hernia exam was her favorite part. Watching him blush and squirm...

Sakura shivered with pleasure, thinking about how he'd tried to play it cool while she had her hand down his pants. She'd neatly skirted his genitals...mostly.

Sakura had pulled off her vest and skirt, and was in the midst of tugging down her shorts, leaving a pair of low-rise blue and white striped panties and a white bra on. She undid the snap of the bra with practiced ease with one hand, letting the undergarment fall into her other hand. With a flick of her wrist, she tossed it into a basket in her locker, then went to work on her panties. She bent over, waiting for the moment when her boobs might finally get in her way. It took a depressingly long time.

Aren't you two bigger yet? she thought with a sigh, cupping them briefly before letting them bounce back into place (which only served to depress her more). These things were the two biggest holdups in snagging a man. The damned kunoichi around here were endowed with melons! Sakura didn't think her high, perky little breasts stood a chance.

And yet, Yuji had paid attention to her. Yuji had gone out of his way to make her feel special. Yuji had never commented on her physical assets with anything besides 'very cute'.

He must love me! And he'll pick me...despite the fact I shot him down like a one-winged duck...

Right?

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Azami had no such worries about her physique. She was gifted with a slender waist, perfect hips, a solid butt, and good sized breasts. Sakura could never compete in that category, she knew. But then again, Yuji had seen past Azami's looks, making him the only guy who ever did. If looks didn't matter, then...

Of course they matter. He blushed like a little girl when I confronted him in the hot spring. But it's not the only thing. I know he likes girls who can handle themselves...independent, strong, beautiful, intelligent...okay, I'm all those. False modesty aside, I'm competent. But why do I want Yuji so bad?

Her body was practically begging to be released from its cloth restraints. Somehow, it seemed as if Azami's body should never be hidden. And yet, she was modest...well, except for with Yuji. She had approached him naked, in a hot spring, and had known right away that she'd be letting him live, despite the good bounty on his head. He'd immediately taken up arms, and even blocked her initial killing strike, meaning that he had ignored the bouncing beauties she had thrust in his face. No one before him had seen them and lived.

And yet, she felt no shame; no offense. No nothing. It was as if the incident was as natural as meeting on the street.

Thoughtfully, she slid the rest of her clothes off, wishing that Yuji was here with her, instead of all these girls.

Although if I'm honest, Sakura has been looking hotter lately. She's trying to so hard as my rival...

Azami could see the sweat glistening off Sakura's nude body now. It looked so natural, and yet so verboten. A sudden urge to run over to Sakura and lick her all over seized her, and she sat down hard, her breath coming in gasps.

What the hell? I love Yuji! But Sakura is so...

The thing that had once described Yuji so well- 'cute'- now described this pink-haired kunoichi perfectly.

Azami shook her head fiercely, trying to clear out those thoughts. It was just her age, coupled with her being a virgin. She wanted love, or lust, or anything. Something, anything, anyone she could love to ravage her body, and allow her to do the same. The most primal urge that humans face had her well in it's grips.

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Sakura noticed Azami sitting down, and glanced curiously, her towel in hand. Not that she'd complain if her rival was too sick to compete for a certain boy's affections, but Sakura didn't want to win by default either. Those were her initial thoughts. However, she found herself moving closer to Azami, her hand extending out. Her hand was extending to Azami's left breast, and she had to pull up short.

What was I doing?! I mean, it's not like I haven't noticed those watermelons jutting out from her sickeningly perfect skin, but was I just going to touch them?! That'll just make them bigger!

A very vivid image of Azami reaching out and massaging Sakura's breasts up to a healthy size hit the kunoichi with an intensity that surprised her. She found her hand reaching for Azami again, but on a decidedly lower trajectory this time.

Azami's hand shot out and grabbed Sakura's. But it didn't stop her hand. Instead, Sakura's hand was guided to it's intended destination. Azami looked up at her, blushing terribly.

"I..."

Sakura spared her. "Me, too."

They leaned in to each other and kissed passionately...

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Yuji waited patiently under the giant tree in the park. He vaguely wondered what Sakura and Azami wanted with him. He entertained love confessions in his mind, and practiced accepting them, but he knew that he wouldn't be using those skills. Both girls had already turned him down.

Frowning, he lit a chakra cigarette just to kill time. They weren't damaging like they're tobacco counterparts, so there was no harm in them. It was pleasant, really. The relaxing effects without the harm, under the shade of a tall tree on a beautiful, warm day in a peaceful village.

I really need to get a girl, he mused, flicking his gaze upward toward the growth of the tree. It's brown bark was rough to the touch, and it's leaves were lush and fresh. Yuji reached up to feel them, appreciating for once the simple beauty in them. Someone had once told him that he could never see the forest for the trees, and he wondered if that was still true.

“Yuji!”

He looked up, hearing Sakura’s cheerful voice calling him. It struck him, as it always did, how cute she was. Unlike other girls, she was mature and independent, and he would have been proud to be with her. Another thought of ‘what if she confesses to me’ hit him, but he shook it aside and made sure he got ready to help her with whatever task she needed assistance with.

To his surprise, Azami was with her, running behind her. She was so incredibly sexy from every angle. She was a tall, graceful beauty. Yuji didn’t mind the fact that she was just a little taller than he was. Most of Yuji’s fantasies about her were darker. She certainly seemed to be a ‘top’, and he was probably submissive anyway, he figured.

The two stopped short of him, and Yuji gave them a big grin, while the question ‘what if they want to share me?’ floated through his head. He immediately chastised himself, reminding himself that he was loyal to one girl. He just wondered who that one would be.

The girls looked at each other, nodded once, then turned to Yuji, and said in unison:

“I love you...”

Yuji’s jaw dropped, and his heart did a flip up into his throat, then splashed down to somewhere in his stomach. The cigarette fell from his mouth, smoldering on the ground.

“..,but I can’t be with you.”

Yuji’s heart righted itself, but he was still in shock, and now a little angry.

Then what the hell was the point of telling me you loved me?! And what’s with two of them at the same time! April Fool’s Day was like a week ago!

“Can I ask why?” he asked, barely concealing anger.

The two giggled, then clasped hands.

“We’re together,” Sakura told him, nuzzling Azami’s cheek with hers.

“We were competing for you, but somewhere along the way, we just kind of...” Azami said, tugging Sakura closer with one arm around her waist.

“We’re hoping to still be friends. Which is why we had to tell you what went on,” Sakura finished.

The two girls looked at Yuji, pleading in their eyes. Yuji’s eyes were dark and deep, and didn’t quite mask his disappointment or shock adequately. But he finally closed his eyes, smiled slightly, and nodded.

“Of course. Nothing has changed, except I’m single and you’re not,” he told them both.

“Congratulations. I hope you’re very happy together.”

This was why they had fallen for Yuji originally. He genuinely cared about them, and self-sacrifice was nothing new to their luckless friend. From the very real, meaningful effort he put forward to show them that he accepted, they knew that his pride had been bruised, but he meant every word.

“Thanks! How about joining us for lunch?” Azami offered, knowing it was a poor consolation prize.

“Or maybe Yuji-kun would prefer to watch us get...closer?” Sakura added innocently.

Yuji had froze up. It was lucky his cigarette had fallen earlier, because he would have swallowed it right about now. He was in a very happy position, he supposed. His hormones had made the decision for him, even though his mind was chastising him for the thoughts racing around his head.

“Well...that is...I can't,” Yuji sputtered, looking ready to kill himself. “I'm such a loser. But I think love is one of those sacred bonds. And no one should intrude. No matter how horribly...awfully...miserably tempting...”

The two girls exhaled as one, remembering how cute his innocence was when they were sizing him up as boyfriend material. Somehow, things didn't look all that different, now that they were together. It was still cute. It just didn't make them want to jump his bones anymore.

“C'mon,” Azami said forcefully, rolling her eyes. “This is once in a lifetime, and you've got permission. It's the least the two of us can do, after we led you on like that.”

“Please don't punish yourself this time, Yuji!” Sakura begged, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “We had to tell you how we felt because we care about you, and it wouldn't be fair of us to start our relationship without being honest.”

“And we need you to have our backs, just like you always have. You're the strong, capable man- that hasn't changed. And you'll still be sleeping alone- THAT hasn't changed, either,” Azami intoned with a snicker.

Yuji allowed them to lead him away.

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The girls made themselves comfortable, seemingly oblivious to the male presence. Yuji was displaying an astounding bit of...lameness would be the best term. He was sitting in the corner, looking but not really seeing two of his closest female friends begin to fondle each other. As their kisses grew more passionate, and their hands reached more and more forbidden places, a battle was waged in Yuji's mind. He had come with them partly out of curiosity, and partly to let them know there was no hard feelings. But Yuji still didn't feel right about being here.

He gave a forlorn smile to no one, wishing that he could let himself enjoy this. Had they been two strangers, or at least two people not as close to him, he probably would have stared and felt no guilt. But these were girls he had been in love with; to see them in love with other people, even themselves, was painful.

And how do I resolve a pain like that? Yuji asked himself. Then he answered himself:

The only way I know how.

As he always did, Yuji decided to redouble his training efforts. He would protect this love from any who would destroy it. He had taken his oath before, and had yet to break it. In the end, he was glad for his friends.

His quest for companionship, however, would continue.

Smiling his sad smile, Yuji let a genjutsu seep over him as he closed his eyes to the passion in front of him. He awoke within a genjutsu paradise. He began to train, the promise to protect love and peace in whatever shape it came pushing him on through the pain and the horribly strong desire to return the real world and watch.

I'm so lame...

So very, very lame.

I made them into lesbians without ever knowing it.

...

I suddenly feel...inadequate...