

At War: Shinobi Mercenary Betrayal

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Submitted: April 11, 2011

Updated: August 26, 2011

A bloody tale about war, crimes, and falling in love at the worst possible time. Non-canon to the Naruto universe.

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Chapter 1 - Sounds of Battle	2
Chapter 2 - The First Day	13
Chapter 3 - Finally Broken	25
Chapter 4 - Swallowed up by Blood-soaked Darkness	34
Chapter 5 - The Hunt (pt 1)	43
Chapter 6 - The Hunt (pt 2)	51
Chapter 7 - The Solution	59

1 - Sounds of Battle

When at war, one must cast aside all emotions. Love, hate, pity, remorse, fear- all must be shunned. To know thy enemy is to kill thy enemy. To fight for your beliefs is a just fight. To turn and run is sin against your comrades. You do not belong to only yourself in battle. No, you belong to those who would fight at your side and those who fight opposite you.

War. The constant clanging of kunai lives shattered the otherwise peaceful air of the cold morning. Screams of agony and shouts of triumph cascaded across the valley in which the battle was being fought. The bodies of countless dead lay, waiting for living comrades to save them from another cold night laying where they fell.

The shinobi from the Leaf were fighting the Cloud shinobi. What started the dispute exactly was unclear. However, war had become inevitable despite the peace talks that had done everything to prevent the outbreak of another ninja war. The Leaf was still the leading superpower, but was considerably weaker than before, given their fights with both Orochimaru and the Akatsuki. Still, the quality of the Leaf shone through even in this battle, as they were easily defeating their Cloud counterparts. No one was happy about the loss of life, but the Cloud refused to admit defeat. The stubborn Raikage was finally getting the war he had been spoiling for.

The Leaf sent only advanced chunin and jonin to the front line. They were met by jonin, chunin, genin, and even some academy students. No one was happy about the death of those students during this senseless conflict. But the desperation of the Raikage knew no limits. The Leaf took pity on those who were clearly unprepared for battle. Many children were adopted and taken in by caring families.

Each day, the Leaf took control of more and more of the neutral battleground on which the bloody spectacle was taking place. They continuously drove the Cloud troops back. This was less of a war and more of a rout.

The Leaf had come in squads of three for the most part. One exception was Yuji Itou. He had always worked solo, but not by choice or punishment. That was just how things were, and it seemed to suit him. He could work with others in a pinch, but he was best left to his own devices sometimes. But he wasn't the type to just go to war. Yuji had never killed a man until he was on the front lines. At first, he tried to only wound his opponent. But one close call was all it took to convince him that he was being foolish. He had come prepared to die, as had his opponent. That was a sort of justification in its own way. This war would go on with or without Yuji, and turning a blind eye to it seemed cowardly. So he signed up.

Yuji slashed another man's neck, letting his body fall slack to the ground. The mud smeared under Yuji's eyes made the hazel orbs look more heavily burdened than usual. The blood from his victim- at least the fiftieth in this war- dripped from the knife onto the hard ground. As it fell, it reflected the face of both killer and victim.

It had been six months since Yuji had joined the front lines. He had avoided war as long as he could, but in the end he simply couldn't allow his Leaf brethren to die. In their place, he would commit this

atrocious acts of violence. In their place, he would suffer, mentally and physically. In their place, he would likely die.

The sounds of battle raged all around. Yuji stood still for just a moment, realizing that he was still unscathed. This war was senseless, and it was now all but won. The Leaf had pushed back the Cloud forces with superior skill and numbers. It was a slaughter. And yet they continued to fight, trapped in a vulgar dance.

Yuji himself had changed in six months. He had left part of his innocence; his youth; out here on this God-forsaken battleground. His face was blurred by a five o'clock shadow that made him look closer to his age, yet was still strangely out of place on his youthful face. Beneath the black mud under his eyes lay bags that had seen too much violence and bloodshed. Under his tattered black clothes lay scars from near-misses. Each time, he had managed to kill- to survive- but just barely. Now, he killed so that he didn't have to worry about dying.

A series of screams woke Yuji up. He saw five of his Leaf comrades battling one Cloud shinobi. He cleanly hacked his way through all of them, killing them indiscriminately.

"HEY!"

Yuji shouted only to get attention; not out of protest. No, this was war- anything anyone did out here was not personal.

The masked ninja looked to him. He could only see a pair of dark eyes under the mask, but that was all he needed. He drew a long knife from a shoulder sheath and flipped it to a reverse grip, matching the grip used by the opposing shinobi.

He walked toward him briskly, then sped up into a lunging slash. The opponent leaned back, dodging the strike narrowly, and returned it cleanly, efficiently, with no wasted movement. Yuji could admire that now, after all the fighting. He'd refused to kill some clearly over-matched genin. This one, he knew, would need to be killed to be stopped.

He parried the strike with the side of the blade, pushing upward to try to open up an avenue for attack. The opponent stepped to the side slightly, making Yuji's knife arm a target. He kicked backward, withdrawing his strike, then adjusted his momentum and struck again. This time, the Cloud shinobi blocked, and their blades met in a shower of sparks. They leaned in behind their strikes, struggling to gain an advantage.

Abruptly, Yuji kicked low, only to find his kick met by another kick.

This person is no amateur! I'd better end this quickly!

They withdrew their knives as one, leaning back, then striking forward again. This time, the opponent used the butt end of the blade to block, and thrust the knife edge at Yuji's face. Yuji leaned low, reversing his momentum again to bring the knife up in a sweeping arc, aiming for the opponent's knife arm. The opponent snapped his elbow down at just the right moment, knocking the knife from Yuji's hand. By then, Yuji had closed in and grabbed the Cloud-nin's knife hand, yanking the knife away. The

opponent let the knife go, giving it an extra toss so Yuji couldn't retrieve it. But in the same motion, he had grabbed shuriken and let two fly. Yuji winced and flung an arm over his face, knowing he was going to get hit. But the shuriken sailed over his shoulder, only grazing his cheek, and sunk into an approaching Cloud shinobi.

"No one interferes. This is a one-on-one duel, with no interference!" declared the masked one, watching with apparent disdain as the other ninja clasped a hand to his throat, trying to stop the blood flow caused by the shuriken cutting his carotid artery. He fell, dead, finally, and the masked one raised his hands in a guard.

"Let's resume."

Yuji obliged him, and they began a fist fight. Blocks, parries, return strikes, elbows, knees- all thrown with incredible speed and accuracy. These two were veterans of combat, and it showed. Their fight raged on for nearly ten minutes in a war where fights were lucky to last ten seconds. A few times they actually grabbed a hold of each other, but for every lock there is a counter, and these two knew all the tricks.

A few people actually halted their fights to watch. It was rare to see two people meet in such a duel these days. In the constant melees that ensued each time the sun rose, there was a mob of attacks, with only a handful of people on each side really sticking out. There two fit into that category. Facing each other, one on one made for a good show. Not everyone was content with just watching, however.

The two clashed with more punches, each catching the opposite's punch. Out of the corner of his eye, Yuji saw a Cloud shinobi coming toward him. He kicked off Mask, letting the Cloud shinobi pass between them. In one deft move, Yuji caught the man around his neck and broke it. His foot slashed out toward the Mask. Mask prepared to block, but Yuji abruptly set the foot down short and punched. Mask peeled back, but was caught by the tail end of the punch, throwing him off.

Yuji was jumped by another Cloud shinobi, this time from behind. The man tried to break his neck, or at the very least strangle Yuji. Yuji threw his head back into the Cloud's nose, threw his hip into the opponent's hip, drove an elbow backward, then spun, drew a knife that the shinobi had at his waist, stabbed him in the spine, and pulled the knife out, holding onto it by habit.

Mask roared in, driving an elbow into Yuji's sternum while knocking his wrist upward, loosening the knife. Yuji managed to hold on, and slashed down. Mask leaned back, and the knife tore only the fabric covering his face.

Rather, *her* face.

Yuji gasped in amazement. This girl was the most beautiful female he'd ever seen. His world stopped as he stared at her, completely at a loss for words or action as her long black hair fluttered down from its cloth prison.

Taking advantage, the female kicked at Yuji's hand, knocking the knife into the air. She caught it handily and pressed it to his neck. She was ready to slice when she saw him staring at her, blushing. She changed her tone and, keeping the knife at his neck, slipped around behind him.

“Hands behind your back!” she demanded roughly, extracting a length of rope from her waist pouch. Yuji obeyed, and she tied his hands together with the chakra-seal rope. No escape jutsu for him.

Two Leaf jonin came running to the rescue, but Yuji warned them off.

“She’ll only kill all of us! You know I won’t talk!”

But Yuji admitted that he warned them off because he was intrigued with the girl holding him hostage.

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The girl dragged him all the way to a small cabin in the woods. But she didn’t mistreat him like she could (and probably would normally) have. She opened the rough wooden door, revealed a largely empty space, save for a corner with a small kitchen, and a bed in the diagonal opposite corner.

She pushed Yuji into a low wooden chair, tearing off the blindfold she had put on him for the trip here. Usually, the disorienting sensation of not knowing where you were or which direction you were going made even the most solid warrior crack a little.

She sat down across from him, a heavy oak table in between them. She sat with her arms crossed, in silence for a few moments, before she began her questioning. But Yuji beat her to the first comment.

“You won’t get any information out of me.”

She raised an eyebrow at the show of bravado, knowing full well he meant it.

“I have no intention of asking you anything about the Leaf,” she said soothingly. She made no indication that she had anything else to say.

Yuji couldn’t hide his surprise, even with the blindfold. The kunoichi smirked a little, circling around behind him. She noted some small, unconscious movements of his body that noted he was following her, likely by sound.

He’s no amateur, despite his apparent youth, she decided.

“Your age?” she queried simply.

“Twenty-two.”

“Hmm. I would have guessed ‘sixteen’.”

She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned forward, making sure her breasts just nudged his back. It was the easiest way to ensure she had his undivided attention.

Yuji squirmed a little in surprise, but settled quickly enough to retain some sort of mental control of the situation.

“Pardon my saying so, but you don’t seem like the standard Cloud shinobi. You’re too...well, talented. And your skin is a different tone... No offense meant.”

“None taken. The battle is already lost. I’m simply a mercenary. Aside from not wanting anyone else to die, I really couldn’t care less for the Cloud, with their pig of a leader. They just met my asking price.”

After a moment, she tacked on “It’s no shame to be distinguished from them.”

She leaned away from Yuji, stepping back and giving her hair a toss. That damn mask always left it feeling like it had a static cling to it; like it was sticking up in ten different directions.

“So why take me prisoner, then?” Yuji asked outright. “Seems there’s no advantage in it for you or your side...”

“You want I should have killed you?” the girl replied, a question in her voice, right beside the purr that Yuji was sure she was adding just for him.

Shake it off, Yuji. She’s playing with you.

“Well, how about your name? You can give me an alias; but calling you ‘you’ all the time will get annoying for both of us.”

“Isn’t it customary to offer your own name first?”

“If we’re talking manners, then the blindfold can come off, right?”

“Uh-uh. You’re dangerous. Name first; then we’ll talk.”

I’ve got her bargaining. She knows not everything is going to go her way now. Good. Step one. Step two: selective information.

“Then my name. I’m Yuji Itou.”

“Azami. Charmed.”

The tone of her voice suggested she was distracted, or at least wasn’t very interesting in exchanging pleasantries. That left Yuji wondering what it was she wanted. So far, she had kept him in the dark; literally and figuratively. He needed to remedy that in short order. He took a moment to choose his words carefully.

“So, if you’re not going to ask me about the Leaf...”

Yuji paused, milking the moment, cocking his head slightly to show a more innocent posture from his battle-ready, straight-ahead, I-ain’t-telling‘-you-nuttin’ pose. This made him look more vulnerable- he hoped.

“Well, the heart of the matter: I want to know why a combat veteran like you froze up in combat so abruptly.”

Another pause. Apparently, she could milk the tension, too, Yuji noted.

“I saw you handle others without a backward glance. But you got a look at me and froze. I assume it wasn’t my pretty face that stopped you dead in your tracks...”

Hark, do I detect a hint of desire in there, miss bounty hunter?

“Sure it was.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere...”

“Sheesh, take a look in the mirror and a compliment!”

Azami smiled at Yuji’s wry grin. Well, she DID love a compliment, though she certainly did not thrive on them like certain superficial girls. But she still needed answers.

“Seriously now. What made you stop. Because I’m female?”

Yuji was quiet for a second. Then:

“Part of it. Like I said, I honestly saw your face and froze up. There was something about you that I was instantly attracted to. And, well, that’s when I froze.”

Azami continued circling Yuji, giving him the impression that a very sexy bipedal shark was debating on whether or not to eat him whole. The silence was uncomfortable, so he continued of his own accord.

“There’s no gender on the battle field. We clash as neither man nor woman; only as warrior.”

Yuji shifted in his seat, trying to face her, or at least her general direction.

“When you and I attacked, I knew I was in for the battle of my life. I’ve never met someone like that. People more skilled than me, or more attractive than me, yes. But someone who seemed to match me move for move...

And when I saw you were female, I just sort of...well, I decided that you weren’t like the other girls.”

“How so?”

“You’re every bit as attractive without being, well, simpering. You could handle yourself in combat; you’re practical. Yet you’re gorgeous and feminine at the same time. It’s a rare mix, and it caught me off guard.”

Azami shrugged even though the boy couldn’t see it.

“Well then, I appreciate your honesty. And I really like your flattery.”

“No flattery. All truth.”

“You do seem like the straightforward type. And you know...”

She slipped the blindfold down around his neck. Her nails, which he could now see were painted crimson, ran gently down his cheek, leaving light marks in their wake. He was awed yet again by just how sexy she was. Her lips were just the right size for kissing; her curves were in all the right places; and her long hair framed her face in a way that did nothing but add to her looks. Now that she was free of her cloak, he could see her arms taut with feminine muscle. The roundness of her shoulders; the perfectly tanned skin...

This girl was a goddess.

And he was very clearly mortal right now. Two days of stubble decorated his jaw. There was mud on his face, and his clothes were tattered, torn, and bloodied from nonstop combat. He bathed as often as he could, but in battle, that wasn’t nearly often enough for his liking.

From Azami’s perspective, this was a strong, capable warrior who appreciated her skills first and her

body second. She was in agreement with him- she'd never had a fight like that either.

For a shinobi, he had a compact, sinewy build. Wiry rather than bulky, leading to efficient movement. His face was that of a boy, despite the light beard that was forming. He had a look of innocence to him, despite the gruesome fights she'd seen him in thus far.

Without warning, she slipped the blindfold back on him. Before he could say anything about it, she leaned forward and kissed him. Her crimson lips met his embattled, chapped lips and clamped down. Her tongue forced it's way into his mouth, exploring determinedly over the roof and tongue, ignoring the shocked half-protests that he couldn't truly convince himself to make.

She pulled away, her hand stroking his hair as he gasped for both breath and understanding. She took pity on him and let him in on a little secret:

"Sometimes women are instantly attracted to a man. And your attitude and reactions thus far have led me to a couple conclusions."

Suddenly all business, Azami outlined it for Yuji, and with startling accuracy.

"The way I see it, you are- one- girl shy. Two- attracted to me. And three- submissive, and probably masochistic. How'd I do?"

How to answer that? Well, Yuji supposed, there was always the truth. But he was curious about her thought process.

"How did you come to such...accurate conclusions?"

"You made me work," she admitted. "But the kiss, for one. No guy would be that shocked over a kiss- unless it was his first. Not to mention how you froze up out there in the war zone, and then again when I took your blindfold off. That led me to believe you were girl shy. 'Submissive' came when I captured you without a struggle. A warrior of your caliber could have made things very difficult. And yet you went with me. You skin tone changed- you blushed- when I tied you up and blindfolded you."

There was nothing more to be said from where Yuji sat. She'd just called the shots on him perfectly. And he thought he was actually playing her a little! He was way off. That was obvious now. He had her reasoning, and her motive. But what did she plan to do with him?

Azami ran a hand under his chin, reaching toward his neck, pleased to note he was ticklish. She scratched him under the chin like a cat as she narrated her plans to him, as though she had read his mind.

"The war will be over within two weeks. Until then, you're going to be my 'guest' here in my little cottage."

"...I see..."

"What's more-" she told him, standing up to her full height, guessing he could see shadows through the blindfold or sense her at the very least and would get the hint. "Room and board isn't free here. You'll

have to work for it..”

Yuji suppressed an ironic chuckle. “Am I to take it that you don’t mean sweeping floors?”

“You take it correctly. It gets lonely and cold out here. You’re going to be my companion, and you’re going to keep me warm. And no, you won’t be supplying firewood. At least...” she snickered, running a hand suggestively down his chest, undoing his vest with one hand. “...not in the literal meaning.”

Yuji’s jaw dropped. If he read that blatant innuendo correctly, then-
“You’re going to...I don’t know, rape me? Or something?”

“I’m your captor; what we do doesn’t have to be consensual. But that consent depends on how enjoyable this is for you. I can leave you blindfolded and naked. Or you can submit to me completely, right now. Choose.”

As much as he liked this girl, and as hot as that little scenario sounded, Yuji couldn’t let himself be gone from home for too long. People he cared about were back in the village. But on the other hand, he really was attracted to this girl, who was ten kinds of beautiful.

Azami broke out in laughter, bending over (while affording Yuji a peak at the twin peaks of paradise), steadying herself with one hand on his shoulder.

“A-haha! Oh, I’m sorry!” she managed around more laughter. “But the look on your face. Were you seriously considering what I said?!”

Yuji nodded toward his hands, though he was very clearly embarrassed for not reading her intentions- whatever they were- more clearly.

“I’m your captive. I have to take you seriously.”

Azami sat down on his lap, making herself at home, still chuckling.

“You are DEFINITELY a submissive! I wouldn’t rape you! Probably the one crime I’m not guilty of,” she admitted, sounding both proud and ashamed. “No, no, you’re my prisoner, and I hope you won’t think I’m a slut for saying this, but...”

She hooked her arms around his neck, turning her body so she was straddling him. Yuji turned redder and redder, while Azami just seemed comfortable with him.

“...It’s not that I would object to sex either. I just won’t force you. But I warn you- I will be in charge, if and when you make your decision.”

That left Yuji with a lot to think about. But he couldn’t think too much right now. Azami had taken all his weapons and placed a chakra seal temporary tattoo on him sometime while he was blindfolded. That left her free to untie him without worry, as his speed and strength was diminished without his chakra flowing correctly.

She walked outside. Yuji followed her, to try to see where he was and if he could gauge which way to escape from. As he stepped out, his heart sunk.

He was surrounded, on all sides, by endless forest, with mountains in the distance. He had no idea

where he was at all.

Azami noticed the look on his face and smiled to herself.

I know what he's been doing. Trying to make me realize that I don't call all the shots. But the fact is, I do. And if I'm playing my cards right, he's feeling more and more helpless with each little victory I get. And the best part is, it's even more devastating for him, because each time he gets a little bit of hope, I pull the rug out from under him.

She was ready to have more fun with him. He didn't even consider running for it- not without his chakra. And only the person who set the chakra seal could remove it, with very few exceptions. Against this girl, Yuji knew he wouldn't get far.

"Okay, first of all, we'll need to get your clothes off."

Yuji wheeled to face Azami, looking horrified. "In the presence of a lady, a gentleman doesn't-"

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Azami interjected, drawing herself up to her full height- an inch or two taller than Yuji. "Now, clothes off. They got all bloody and you're going to get an infection."

Yuji was slow to strip, so Azami walked over and yanked his vest off, then pulled his shirt over his head in one motion. While the fabric was over his eyes, she undid his belt and yanked his pants off, which caused him to trip and fall to the muddy ground.

Grinning, Azami put one foot on Yuji's stomach. She didn't do any physical damage- rather, she was aiming to do psychological damage.

Not much is more humbling for a man than to have a woman not only strip him against his will, but step on him and humiliate him even more. All these little hits to his psyche are going to add up.

That in mind, she reached down, brushing her hand over his groin, and grasped the waist band of his underwear.

"I can give you an enormous wedgie, or you can let me pull these off you."

Yuji obediently raised his legs, his face flushing as she ripped off his black low-rise trunks. He saw them dangling from her hand, and he felt even more embarrassment. However, that embarrassment came with a pleasant warm sensation below his waist.

Don't tell me that she's right! I really am submissive! Yuji lowered his eyes to his exposed body, surprised to find how he was reacting. I liked her right away, and I like her even more now that's she owns me like this. And she's not even being mean! Just...in charge. And I feel like she likes me to, so I'm not offended. Just...humiliated. And I'm loving it.

Yuji's sense of duty was fading, but it called him back. He had to get back to the battlefield. He had to-

Azami put the blindfold back on. She began to push Yuji in the direction she wanted, her hand on the small of his back, occasional warnings about a low branch or a tall rock to avoid coming from her mouth.

She had taken away his clothes and his ability to see, plus the ability to defend himself. This was all clear to Yuji, who knew what game she was playing, but was powerless to stop it.

“I’m going to get your clothes cleaned,” Azami told him on the way to wherever they were going.

“Is there a place I can get cleaned up myself? I’m a little muddy now...”

Yuji could hear the smile in her voice as she told him “That’s where we’re going now. Want to take a peak?”

She lifted the blindfold for a moment, letting Yuji see a beautiful, natural pond and waterfall. It struck Yuji immediately that he wanted to train here sometime. It was so pristine and untouched by any outside source.

All too soon, the blindfold was back over Yuji’s eyes.

“I’m putting you on the honor system- don’t take the blindfold off,” came Azami’s voice from somewhere behind him.

Yuji wondered why he couldn’t be allowed to see while he bathed. Then he heard the sound of fabric hitting the ground, and he understood.

She’s going to bathe, too! That means she’ll be naked! Damn my good nature and this blindfold!

“Don’t get your hopes up. I’m wearing a bathing suit. This is for MY entertainment; not yours. Now, hold still.”

Am I coming on too strong, too quickly, I wonder. I do genuinely like him, even though he’s my prisoner and nothing more. And for all my bluster, I wouldn’t really sexually abuse him. Well, not seriously, anyway.

Now, teasing. THAT is another story.

Azami stepped behind Yuji and wrapped her arms around his gently, almost lovingly, and rested her chin on his shoulder. For his size, he had good, sturdy shoulders. The stubble on his face was attractive to her, but she was rapidly wondering if she was *looking* for reasons to like him.

She dipped her hands into the cool, clear water and began to wash Yuji. First his chest, then his back. His skin was mostly smooth, save for the scars that marred his slender frame. He was very pale, from head to toe, and apparently very sensitive to touch. Part of that was his training; the other part... She smiled at the tension in his muscles. It was clear he was both intimidated and intrigued by his female captor and her unpredictable actions. The sexual atmosphere she created drew him in like a drug.

Can I really betray him when the time comes? She wondered, startling herself. I always honor the wishes of my employer to the point we agreed upon in the negotiation. I’ve captured an agent, and I’m seducing him now. But when it comes time to turn him over to them for interrogation... I just don’t know anymore.

I don’t understand these feelings I’m having.

**He's only a target.
Nothing else.**

...

Isn't he?

2 - The First Day

Falling in love is a battle in and of itself. Possibly the hardest battle anyone will ever fight. There can be only two casualties, but you'll never know any two casualties as intimately. The loss is devastating, and even victory is costly and not without sacrifice. Like war, love requires two participants. To war with oneself is to waste life; precious life never regained. To love oneself and only oneself is to sin against humanity and oneself.

If you are to go to war, do it with another person and add meaning to two lives.

If you are to fall in love, do it with another person and add meaning to two lives.

Azami took her time washing Yuji, mockingly inspecting each part of his body. All Yuji could do was stand there, helpless and naked, while she cleaned his body like he was a child or an invalid.

Since before the war, he'd been disciplining himself to control himself and his surroundings to whatever extent he could. He avoided loud music so his hearing would be sharp; he took frequent breaks while reading to protect his eyesight; he avoided spicy foods to keep his stomach well, and drank copious amounts of plain green tea to maintain his stomach further. His sixth sense was developed by spending hours in complete darkness, accompanied by painful toe stubs, head bumps, and the like as he learned to navigate without touch, sight, sound, or even smell. Needless to say, the only thing he tasted was blood when he bit his tongue or lip. That blood didn't go to waste, either- he would use it to mark the wall he had hit after he was wounded, and used the smell and the taste in the air only as a last resort.

All that training...and when it counts, I'm helpless. Oh, I could take plenty of lives, and protect my comrades. But I see one attractive girl and my senses go mush?

Looking up at the free wilderness (while Azami playfully looked at the 'wilderness' below his waist), Yuji felt a sort of freedom. He had no control, and it was liberating. And he would be lying to himself if he said he didn't enjoy this to a good degree. The attention of an attractive female was pleasant, and something he hadn't yet experienced on a serious level.

His gaze drifted to his only other serious crush; Sakura Haruno. He hadn't even attempted anything with her. Even when he convinced himself that he could approach her, her intense loyalty to Sasuke, and even to Naruto, kept him at bay. As a result, he only knew her on a professional level, when she patched him up.

Thank God they didn't send her to this bloodbath. Not that a medic wouldn't be helpful, but somehow...

Yuji frowned seriously, his eyes lowered to the water. His reflection was there, but he didn't really 'see' it. He saw a murderer, killing those much less skilled in the name of a stupid conflict.

...war doesn't suit her.

But I can't pretend it doesn't suit me.

Yuji had long ago realized he was a paradox. He trained hard to protect peace, but given the choice to avoid conflict or embrace it, he always chose to embrace it. He avoided killing studiously up until the

war, but that notion had passed, and he wasn't sure he could ever go back to being the person he was before he cut the throat of his first opponent.

Flicking his gaze upward again, he saw a bird fly overhead, through the mist of the waterfall, leaving one of those translucent rainbows in its wake. Yuji was again struck by the beauty of this place. A paradise in which you could go naked without worry about anyone seeing.

Azami noticed her captive was distracted at about the point she finished cleaning his body up. She had been doing it more to see him squirm than anything, so if he wasn't playing along it was no fun. She was about to say something when she saw the look on his face. It killed her fun outright.

A look that melancholy on such a young man. He's seen too much...done too much. He wasn't bred for this sort of sin...

Azami's hand clenched her ample chest, squeezing the fabric of a deep red bikini top stretched over two rather generous breasts.

...he isn't like me. Not exactly. He's innocent. I am guilty. Even if he thinks he's dark and evil, he's not. He's conflicted. I know...

Because in that way, I'm the same.

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Azami tossed a towel to Yuji. It landed on his head, snapping him out of the trance he'd been in, staring out over the water. Belatedly, he began to towel off as he turned to thank her for the towel. He froze, again stunned by her.

The bathing suit seemed to barely contain her figure. Her breasts threatened to pop out from behind the deep red fabric, tied neatly in the back. All that clear, bare skin revealed her toned stomach, flat and sturdy, and her shapely legs were decorated with female muscle, but not a single blemish. Her long, black hair was wet in the back, and she reached up to toss it out of her way, with the towel slung carelessly over one shoulder. It was that pose that Yuji caught her in, and his breath caught in his throat.

Azami noticed the rapt attention he was suddenly giving her, and she found she was both happy and a little put off by it. She expected to be stared at- that was the point of this flimsy costume- but by Yuji, it seemed to throw her off a bit.

"See something you like, sport?"

Even as she said that, her mind was adding to the situation.

You're only reacting because you like him. But you have a job to do. And if he can't get past your boobs, he's not worth the time anyway.

Yuji toweled off as quickly as he could, trying hard to not leave his arms above his head for too long. This had long been a turn on, and he didn't need to give her more 'scenery' to look at. So with his upper body still speckled with droplets of water, he tied the towel around his waist, glad to be covered up.

"I'm not much of a girl watcher, I guess. I'm too shy. But I guess since you saw me naked, me getting to see you in a bikini is the *least* you can do."

A fair point. He saw my face and was attracted to me then. That means it's not my boobs he likes.

Well, being realistic, not JUST my boobs. They're probably a good part of the equation. I suppose I can't say much-

She flicked an appreciate gaze toward his bare chest, then lowered it until she could see a bulge that was visible even through the folds of the towel.

Considering the fact that I've been 'sizing him up', so to speak.

"Well then, let's go find something to eat after we've had a little chat," she offered pleasantly, setting a pace toward her cabin. As a second thought, she doubled back and led Yuji toward a dock that had been pulled out of the water.

"Yeah, that'll do..." she murmured, seeing the rope that had been used for the small boat she kept here. It was so peaceful and relaxing on a warm, sunny day with a slight breeze. Floating there for hours; drifting aimlessly; and forgetting about all she had done, or what she would still do in the name of survival.

Azami gripped Yuji's chin and kissed him lightly. One hand wrapped around his neck; the other dug into the flesh of his shoulder. She guided him backward until his back met the wooden dock. The dock was on it's side, leaving four long supports hanging out.

"I'm sorry. But..."

Azami secured Yuji's left arm to the dock, tying a knot with one hand, the other around Yuji's neck to keep him under her control. She began work on his second arm, leaning her head close to his, bracing it on his shoulder so that he couldn't bite her.

"...your duty requires you to oppose me. My duty requires me to break you."

Yuji's left leg was now secured to one of the lower supports of the dock, bound by the thick, white rope that had been neatly coiled next to it. If he just had his chakra, he could snap those ropes like nothing. "Break me?"

Azami stood up for a second to meet Yuji's eyes before dropping back down to secure his right leg. "Yes. Break you. Psychologically..."

She gave the rope a tug., giving a satisfied nod. Yuji's feet barely touched the ground like this. He was tied in an 'X' shape, arms and legs spread. He was totally exposed this way, to any sort of punishment she could dream up.

"...and emotionally."

She blindfolded him again, apologizing silently to him. Even if he was going to enjoy this to some degree, as she expected he would, she wanted to be doing this when she knew for sure she had his consent. It would be so much hotter if she was his girlfriend right now. Then again, there was a certain charm to the kunoichi capturing and dominating a shinobi scenario, too. One was hot; the other was slightly less hot, but much more wholesome.

Instead, they were enemies, at least in name. And now the loyalty to their respective sides was going to be put to the test.

Azami left Yuji's towel in place at first. Being blindfolded left him defenseless against her onslaught. "Now, tell me a bit about the Leaf's troop count..."

Yuji looked defiantly ahead, his jaw firm. "I thought you weren't going to ask me about that?"

Suppressing a sigh, Azami ran a reed she had plucked from the water down his chest. It wasn't a whip or a belt, but it would still sting pretty well.

"Yes, I know. But I have to ask. And really, it'll be easier for you if you answer."

Yuji turned his head to one side, away from Azami. "No. I won't tell you anything."

With a resounding crack, the whip slashed down his back from shoulder blade to hip, leaving a long, thin trail in its wake that turned an angry red color. The reed was young and green; easy to bend but hard to break.

"Let's try again. It can't hurt to tell me, right?" she asked sweetly.

"I won't say a thing. You want troop numbers? Go count 'em yourself. You can't miss them- they're kicking Cloud @\$\$."

The reed cracked across his back twice in rapid-fire succession moving sideways, once forehand stroke and one backhand stroke, first high then low.

Azami shrugged. "It's true. I won't deny that. And frankly, I don't care. But you need to answer anyway."

"No."

The reed flashed down again across his back, cutting across his other shoulder blade to the opposite hip, leaving him with a pulsing, throbbing roman numeral ten across his back.

As she withdrew the reed, Azami ran it across Yuji's groin, sending an unspoken message. Deciding it could be more clear, she used the reed to flip Yuji's towel to the ground, leaving him naked and helpless before her yet again. This time, the effect was visible.

He's not just humiliated, angry, and infatuated- he's one short step away from giving up completely. I've taken his means of escape, his dignity, and his sight at will.

It was true- Yuji was still being belligerent, but his chest was heaving from breathing heavy from anxiety and pain, and perspiration soaked his body, mixing with the drops of water still on his body from his bath. His muscles strained at the ropes despite having no hope of escape. His knees strained together to try to cover his groin, but the rope left him unable to do so.

I'm completely at her mercy. She's playing at a deeper level, too. She's trying to break me...

The reed came down again, this time across Yuji's stomach. He winced against the onslaught of pain, but didn't cry out, save for exhaling heavily.

...Even though I know what she's doing, I can't stop it. I don't want to stop it.

The reed struck him across his upper chest this time. The curve of the flesh ensured he'd have a nasty welt.

I've been lonely for so long...lonely for a purpose, for a female companion...

The reed struck the inside of his thigh, eliciting a gasp or pain and worry. That was damned close to the 'danger zone'. That area was sensitive in it's own right, to be fair.

She's so sexy, and I love a strong woman. She lives here alone, so she's independent. In combat, she's strong. And the upkeep of her house suggests she's very mature in that area as well. Could she be lonely, too? Living alone, training alone...being a mercenary doesn't make you friends, either. So maybe-

A light smack to the groin brought his attention *flying* back to her.

"If you're distracted this way, then..."

In a few moments, Yuji was now lying on his stomach, wrists and ankles tied together, which were then tied to the dock. As an extra touch, Azami made a makeshift collar out of the belt she'd taken from Yuji. She made a loop, put it around his neck just tightly enough to be uncomfortable, then slipped a rope through the loop and threw it over the dock. She placed a big rock on it on the other side. This forced Yuji's neck into an uncomfortable position. It added to his feelings of helplessness, and this time he knew his stoic mask had cracked. She'd seen the worry on his face, and it would only be a matter of time before she decided which of her actions were responsible for that look. So Yuji took a desperate chance and told her, hoping to throw her off.

"I never liked anyone touching my neck," he noted, eyes averted. "Only the people I trust most are allowed near it."

Azami squatted down so that he could look her in the eyes. Her toned calves were certainly a welcome site, but the face that had stopped him cold on the battlefield was even nicer.

"I appreciate your honesty. Now if you'll be that forthcoming with the information I want, then this will be over sooner."

shoot, that backfired. She took control right back. Well, the attempt didn't cost me anything, at any rate.

"Please tell me the Leaf's plan of attack."

Yuji took a deep breath. "No. Even if I knew what they were doing, I wouldn't tell. The attack patterns rotate by battle, and no one knows the next one in advance except for the jonin commander."

The reed trailed down Yuji's back until it met his tailbone. The area where you back ended and your butt began was a surprisingly sensitive area. He drew a sharp intake of breath, feeling the weight of the belt around his neck tighten uncomfortably. He closed his eyes and gulped.

"Then the name of this jonin commander? His appearance?" came the voice with the sexy undertone, even as the reed was rubbed across that sensitive area again.

"No. I actually like that guy, so I'm not going to tell you."

The reed flew down and smacked that tender spot. Yuji convulsed involuntarily, and the makeshift collar tightened. Azami's hand was on the back of his head in an instant, forcing it into the ground. Yuji panicked- he couldn't breathe! His hands and feet kicked in worry; his training and stoicism long gone.

Another ten minutes passed, and Azami changed Yuji's position again. By now, he was bleeding, hyperventilating, and was genuinely afraid for his life. He was now on his knees, his arms suspended above his head, tied at the wrists. He sagged; exhausted from the interrogation. His body was a patchwork of red, black, and blue marks from the abuse he'd taken for just over a half hour now.

But he was making progress, too. Azami was actually sweating, and her hands ached from swatting Yuji's face and bottom, both with the reed and empty-handed.

He's an impressive man to have held up this long. Maybe it's time to change tactics...

Azami spun the dock around to face the water. She saw the panic on Yuji's face, and both smirked and winced inwardly. She hated hurting him like this, but she had no choice. She'd learned he feared asphyxiation in any form, and probably drowning.

She dove into the water, then surfaced, tossing her wet hair back. She turned from Yuji methodically, reached back, and undid her bikini top. It came free in her hand, and she tossed it onto Yuji's face. She imagined the redness creeping across his face as he realized what she did, and she swam out, topless, smiling widely. When she got out to just the edge of his sight, she pulled off her bikini bottom, too. That probably had a good effect on him. And this sort of effect was one any kunoichi knew how to use. Granted, he got to see her naked butt, but from that distance it made little difference. He would see the general shape, but hell, that was the same when she was wearing the bikini.

Just like a gift, it's the *thought* that counts.

She ducked underwater again, sitting calmly on a rock, one leg crossed on the other. She'd never failed to crack anyone before. She'd never actually needed to go this far, furthering her impression that he really wasn't just going to see her body and melt.

Well, if he won't talk, he won't talk. I'll keep trying a bit longer. Then I'll give him a break- for today. He might last a day, or even two, but I'm wearing him down.

She surfaced and swam over to the waterfall, which was directly opposite Yuji. She had a few changes of clothes and weapons hidden in a cave behind the waterfall, stored in an airtight box so they wouldn't get damp and be ruined.

She selected a black half-tank and a pair of shorts that fell halfway to her knees. As an afterthought, she grabbed Yuji some clothes, too.

Hope he likes lace thongs and a mesh T.

--

“I’ll ask you once more: Where is the Leaf’s military headquarters?”

By now, Azami had carved her initials on Yuji’s chest, turned his face and his bottom a beet red, and cut his back open in several places. She was now speaking near his neck, letting him feel her teeth brushing up against one of his weak points. And he was reacting, but he still hadn’t cracked. He was reaching his limit physically and emotionally.

When she had come back from her swim, she had taken care to walk around him, just outside his line of vision, while staying naked. The teasing was definitely taking its toll on both his burdened mind and desperate body. The poor boy was clearly starved for female attention. His utter sensitivity to her touch; to her very presence; was such a glaring weakness that Azami knew it couldn’t have been there by choice. Unless he truly thought he was immune to any sort of feminine wiles?

Certainly no man plans to die a virgin, she thought, surprised by that thought. Most men were grabby, obnoxious, misogynistic jerks. So maybe Yuji was an exception.

He seems like the ‘nester’ type. Picking one girl and sticking with her.

Only a few seconds had passed, but it felt like hours, and Yuji had yet to respond to Azami’s question.

“...”

“You know I don’t want to do this, right? That I’ve got no choice, and that it really does hurt me to have to hurt you?”

When he didn’t respond with anything besides a silent gaze, Azami pressed his head into her shoulder and gently kissed him on the forehead. She could feel his battered body trembling. It genuinely made her feel bad, but this was a further psychological ploy. Give trust and understanding, then take it away. Azami would do it, but she wouldn’t enjoy it. Her hand fingered one of his nipples, working its way steadily down to his navel and below. She leaned her body heavily on his, enjoying it but studying the effects it had on him.

Azami sighed heavily. “If you won’t talk about the Leaf, then let’s talk about MY pleasure,” she added with a big smile. She shrugged, and noted that “I DID warn you that you’d be keeping me warm at night, and not by getting firewood.”

She snaked her hand down his body, feeling every line where her whip had struck him. She put her lips near his neck, teasing him, reminding him how vulnerable he was right now. It was obvious that he was enjoying it despite the radical embarrassment.

Yuji only looked up at her, but his eyes were no longer defiant. They were almost dead, reflecting nothing of his surroundings. Azami untied him, and he fell slack to the ground at her feet. He stayed there, gulping in air for a moment, before pulling himself weakly to his knees first, and then to his feet. He nearly stumbled, but Azami caught him under the arm and around the waist.

“Come on, let’s get you some food and water. And I’ll even let you get dressed, too.”

She thrust the garments she had taken from the waterfall cave into his arms. He took them, looked them over skeptically, and looked up at her, a little life in his eyes.

“You’re joking?” he asked wearily.

“Nope. Either wear that or stay naked. Your clothes are filthy with blood and mud. With all those cuts I gave you, you’ll get an infection. And I’m no medic.”

Leaning heavily on her shoulder and having no choice but to do so, Yuji commented on his earlier observation. “You know your way around anatomy. You’re hitting me in just the right spots, and with just enough force. If you were an amateur, I’d be passed out or dead by now.”

She brushed the compliment aside, tossing her wet hair off her face. “You flatter me.”

“Again, no. Mirrors don’t lie, and neither do I.”

They journeyed back to the cabin in silence until Azami told Yuji to get ready for dinner.

“You’re my guest,” she said with a ravishing smile. “Whether you choose to dress for dinner or not is your choice.”

She began to walk away, but Yuji called weakly after her, his arm raised in a halting gesture.

“Wait, please. Just tell me this: Do you personally enjoy this at all? I can’t believe that you don’t get some pleasure from this. You’re too good at your work.”

Azami thought for a moment.

“Do you get pleasure from killing?”

“In some backhand way, it’s gratifying to know I have some sort of strength. But the actual taking of life that I cannot give back...that I regret very much. But it’s not the same thing, is it?”

Azami cocked her head, considering his words. “No, I suppose it isn’t. And to answer your question- it depends on *who I’m interrogating...*”

Her words left an unspoken intonation that hinted at the true meaning of her words.

-
-

Yuji plucked at the garments in disgust.

“Comfortable,” he said sarcastically. “But they’d look better on you.”

Azami leaned on her arm, staring at him from across the table. She couldn’t believe he’d actually put the things on. She fully expected him to stay naked. So it was win/win for her.

“You look hot. Anyone ever tell you that you would’ve been a cute girl?”

Yuji snorted and rolled his eyes.

“No one who wished to *live*,” Yuji growled as he pulled off his clothes and threw them back to Azami. “I’d rather be naked than put those things back on.”

He means it. Well, that’s fine. He looked cute, but I’d have my concerns if he stayed in a lace thong for too long...

“Why put them on at all? If it bothered you so much...”

For some reason, Yuji blushed worse than before. He was actually sweating, Azami noticed. He had more composure while she had interrogated him. What could have been so heavy on his mind.

“I...wanted you to be happy. That’s all.”

Whatever Azami had expected, that wasn’t it. No one tried to please their captors, unless they were traitors or snitches. And if Azami knew anything, Yuji Itou was neither of those things. He was an honest, decent boy who had happened upon her in battle. Unless he was playing a game with her. Do what she says, placate her, then turn when she least expected it?

She narrowed her eyes. No. That wasn’t it.

“Why would you-”

“Because our circumstances are forcing us both to do things we’d rather not do. But that doesn’t mean there can’t be positives. Right?”

Azami said nothing, but she got up from the table and went over to her bed. She dug underneath it for a moment, then pulled out something.

“Here,” she said, tossing the thing to Yuji. He caught it and studied it. He realized it was a swimsuit; a swimsuit for a male. A one size fits all thing, which indicated that it wasn’t meant especially for him. He was just ‘lucky’ enough to get captured.

“I can wear this?” he asked, a little skepticism in his voice. At her nod, he gratefully pulled the garment on, finding it to be just a little too baggy. Yuji sat back down at the table very tenderly. Man, his body was sore. His captor had really put him through his paces.

A hottie like this WOULD moonlight as an BDSM queen, he mused. Even as he did, he felt guilty because he wasn’t complaining. He was so taken with her that he honestly didn’t care about the abuse she was giving him. She was completely in control, and Yuji knew there was nothing he could do. He hadn’t felt this helpless since he first began his training in various combat arts. He was humbled completely by this beautiful woman who was stronger, faster, and overall better than him.

After he shook himself out of his trance, Yuji asked “So what’s going to happen to me after this?”

For the first time since he’d seen her, Azami looked uncomfortable. She stalled for a minute, then replied:

“Honestly? I’m supposed to turn you over to the Cloud army as a prisoner of war. What they’ll do...I don’t know.”

And that’s the first lie she’s told. She knows what’s going to happen to me. What’s worse is

that she doesn't like it. Which means she cares for me on some level, right?

Focus, Yuji! You need to escape! You can't be killed because you're infatuated with this girl!

"Don't make it more painful, okay?" Azami requested quietly. She was downcast now. "Me hurting you is one thing. You belong to me. They don't own you."

Those words resonated with Yuji. He *belonged* to her? Hearing those words, and understanding what they meant...it made Yuji feel happy. He already knew he liked Azami, but he hadn't expected to enjoy being interrogated by her. Moreover, he knew he should be appalled that she thought she owned him.

Even if it's true...

On some level, Yuji wondered if this was another psychological game that Azami had played with him and won. But every other level didn't care.

-

Azami already hated much about herself. Her profession, for example. The fact that she had no stability in her life. No family, no boyfriend, no real home. Nothing except her skills. She'd been forced to be smart for as long as she could remember. No one had accepted her outright. With no family, but a high skill level, she was treated like an object rather than a person. Her success rate was one hundred percent, so everyone naturally assumed that she would not only get the job done, but that she would enjoy it. She'd never gotten a kick out of a job until Yuji. Maybe that was because they had a lot in common.

Well, I have two weeks before I have to turn him over. But if I know that obnoxious Raikage, he'll come bounding in here, demanding results, in two days or so. I'll keep trying, but I think Yuji might just hold out. The question is 'what comes next'?

"Come on, Yuji. Time for bed," she said aloud. "There's only one bed, so you'll be staying-"

Yuji had already curled up in the corner. He had pressed himself in as far as he could, his bare back against the cold wood. He laid his head on his hands and closed his eyes. He tried not to, but between the cold and the fatigue, he couldn't quite suppress a couple shivers. It got damned *cold* near the water at night!

I'm showing weakness. Why? Because I don't care if she sees it? Because I'm giving her an opening to keep up this dominatrix act? Or am I really too weak? Am I this weak; this inept? Am I-

Azami grabbed him under the arms and pulled him over toward her bed. She made him put his hands behind his back while she tied them together while he laid face-down. She threw the blanket over him and promised to torture him if he so much as peeked out.

"I need to get changed for bed, and I can't have you peaking. Or getting it in your head that it's a good idea to try to attack me while I'm changing. But I'll tell you what- have you ever listened to the sound of a woman changing her clothes? I'm told it's quite...sensual."

Yuji cocked his head, sort of understanding. Azami kept going- this was too much fun!

“The sound of clothes hitting the floor; the rustling and rummaging; the snap and click of a bra...imagining just what could be under all that clothing. Wondering if you’ll get to see...too touch...”

She leaned close, putting her mouth right near his ear.

“...Too taste...To understand the most primal, forbidden pleasures...To ravage her; to be ravaged in return...all before you see what she’s hiding with her modesty.”

Yuji was all but drooling.

“Is it the same for girls, listening to a guy undress?”

Azami shrugged. “I wouldn’t know, really. I’ve never gotten to listen.”

Yuji’s look suggested shock, so Azami created the correct response, knowing full well he’d meant no offense.

“What? You think I’m easy because I look like this?”

“No,” Yuji said instantly, with no trace of haste in his voice. “I think that men would have a hard time resisting you. Surely there was one decent guy among your admirers...”

“Maybe there was. But most of them didn’t stick around long enough to get to know me past my cup size.”

The statement surprised Yuji. He sensed she could use a supportive ear, so he sat down on her bed and waited. She hesitated telling him at first, but decided that it couldn’t hurt.

“Not every guy is okay with a strong woman like you are, Yuji. Most men want submissive, docile mattress ornaments. They want cooking, cleaning, and sex, and that’s it.”

“I get it. Once they saw you in action-”

“-they realized they were outclassed and didn’t want anything more to do with me,” she finished sadly. “But I learned to be self-reliant; independent. What I didn’t learn was that it’s okay to trust people. Because I’ve never met any trustworthy people. Until now.”

“I’m trustworthy to you?”

Azami blushed, her arms crossed on her chest. Her eyes flicked upward toward the ceiling as she exhaled in exasperation. “I’m letting you sleep in the same room as me, aren’t I?”

Yuji bowed his head, feeling that he understood his captor a bit more. There was a shy, vulnerable girl inside her. But her independence was just as real as that shy girl was. Given the shallowness of some of his friends, Yuji completely understood where she was coming from. With that in mind, he turned to face the wall and allowed her to throw the blanket over him.

He listened as he heard the sound of clothes hitting the floor, the snap of a bra, the rummaging for new clothes. He imagined what was under her clothes.

She was right. That really is a turn on.

-

Azami gave Yuji a blanket and pillow of his own, and even gave him a tatami mat to curl up on for the night. He fixed his bedding until it was as comfortable as possible under Azami's watchful eye. She thought it was kind of cute. Sort of like watching a puppy kneed it's bedding until it was perfect.

Yuji pulled his blanket over him and put his head on the pillow. He looked up and said a quiet 'good night'.

"Sleep well," Azami offered in reply. She got into her bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. As an afterthought, she created a Shadow Clone to keep watch, in case Yuji tried something stupid. But she didn't think he would. He was, at least, an honorable opponent.

Sleep well so that my interrogation tomorrow won't kill you. As much as I hate to do it, we're going to keep playing this game until you talk or the Raikage's goons show up.

It was so easy to forget there was a war going on outside this tranquil hideaway. Both of them knew that reality would soon reassert itself, and they would need to get back into the fray. In the face of so much more killing, this little diversion seemed all that much more welcoming.

3 - Finally Broken

Male and female- two sides of the same coin. Each one needs the other to display full potential.

The female- graceful and cunning.

The male- strong and robust.

Both genders are each at the mercy of the other in a never-ending game that neither is aware has no end. Teasing, flirting, sex- all physical pretenses for what the mind wishes. But does the mind know for what it wishes? Forbidden gestures, taboo touches, feelings that border on insanity, yet remained controlled for those who are at least 'aware' of the game.

When the traits of the two genders meet, a rare event occurs. Physically, new life is given to each. Martialy, the practitioner becomes complete. Grace meets strength; cunning become robust. Those who can master both female and male- yin and yang- in and yo- in and out- are those who can truly master their craft.

The next morning came without incident. It was a bright, clear day. The sun danced on Azami's bed, kissing her face sweetly. She had kicked her covers off during the night, revealing her black half-tank and shorts. She opened one eye sleepily, checking the room by habit for any potential threats. She didn't see any threats, but she did see something out of the ordinary.

"Good morning."

Yuji's voice came from across the room. To Azami's surprise, he walked right over to her, the belt already around his neck. He handed the loose end to her, then got on his knees and put his hands on his head.

"What's this?" she asked, pleased despite herself. She always dreamed about waking up next to a handsome boy. And this one-

Handing me himself on a leash? Well, it's refreshing to know he hasn't given up yet. Still trying to throw me off by giving me exactly what I want. Good tactic.

"I...attempted to cook for you," Yuji said shyly, indicating a variety of food on the table. It was only now that Azami noticed his swimsuit was wet. The fresh fish on the table explained what had happened there.

"I'm not the greatest cook, but I figured that we'll both need our strength today," continued Yuji, oblivious to the very real smile Azami was trying to suppress.

He's making more progress on me than he knows. The one weak spot I know for sure I have is that I want some sort of stability. He's acting like the perfect boyfriend. I don't think he's aware of what he's doing yet, but he's smart. He'll figure it out eventually. I need to prepare for that eventuality.

Allowing herself to smile at her captive, she said “Well, I’m not in the habit of wasting food. Itadakimasu!”

Yuji raised an eyebrow. In spite of himself, he couldn’t help but ask: “Did it occur to you that I poisoned that food?”

Azami shrugged. “My clone kept an eye on you. But even so, you aren’t that type of person.”

“Oh? What type of person am I?”

Swallowing a bite of fish, Azami wiped her mouth before answering. “You are the type who makes damn sure your enemy has a fighting chance. Unless there are lives at stake, you always give your enemy a good look at you. So they always know who it was that bested them. Poison...no. If you were to assassinate, I would say your style is...kunai at the base of the neck.”

Yuji cocked his head. She was right, of course. But how? So he asked her.

“How do I know? Well, it’s efficient, and death is instant and painless. You understand suffering, so you don’t wish it on anyone else.”

She was dead-on. He had expected that. It wasn’t so surprising. It just proved Yuji’s suspicions that Azami was a very good observer, and that he’d better start either lying more or letting her find out only what he wanted her to find out.

“Are you hungry?”

Yuji had to admit he was. He began to sit opposite her, but she tugged him back in her direction with the leash.

“No no. I’m going to take care of that. I couldn’t trust you to bathe yourself, so I’m not going to trust you to eat by yourself, either. Now, come here and sit next to me. Formally, please.”

Yuji did, blushing already. Again she was treating him like a little kid. But on the upside, she was feeding him with the same chopsticks that she had used.

An indirect kiss! Is she sending a message here?

--

This time, Azami had Yuji tied up, wrists and ankles together, legs spread. She put her foot on his throat, releasing the pressure when she asked a question, then returning it when he didn’t answer satisfactorily. Soon, fearing damage to his throat, she switched positions and simply hung him by his wrists, his feet weighted down by a rock.

“Troop number?”

“Never.”

SMACK!

“Commander’s name?”

“No.”

SMACK!

“Location of headquarters?”

“...”

SMACK! SMACK!

The second day was worse. Yuji’s wounds from the first day were still very fresh and raw, and this treatment was reopening them, plus creating new ones. Azami had planned on this and doused Yuji with water every ten minutes. But really, that wasn’t a kindness- the hot pain came back feeling even hotter once the initial effect of the water wore off.

SMACK SMACK SMACK SMACK SMACK!

Exhausted, Azami leaned one arm against the dock, breathing in and out somewhat heavily. She was actually sweating from the exertion.

“Damn it. Can’t you be less stubborn?”

Yuji was breathing heavy and sweating, too. After she had finished with his neck and back, she had turned his butt into one giant, searing whip mark.

“No. Sorry. Ask me something else. I’ll be happy to tell you what I can- just not about the war.”

SMACK! Across the stomach, this time.

“Well, we’re both doing our jobs, that’s for sure. But that idiot Raikage will be plenty pissed when he finds out I haven’t cracked you.”

“So let me go?” Yuji asked hopefully, raising his bound wrists up as much as he could.

Azami bent down toward his face, actually looking kind.

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Come with me, then!” Yuji insisted. “If you hate the guy so much, to hell with him! Whatever he’s paying you, I’ll match it!”

“Trying to escape torture?”

“No,” he replied flatly. “I don’t care if you torture me the rest of my life. But if this clown is as big a jerk as you say, he won’t stop with killing me. He’ll take *you* out to. Unless we both get the hell out of here!”

Azami rubbed Yuji’s aching back gently; soothingly. “Don’t flatter that blustering fool. He couldn’t take me out on his best day. And I won’t let them kill you, either.”

shoot! He just got me to say something I shouldn’t! Now I’ve lost some of my leverage.

Yuji smiled inside, but he couldn’t let her get flustered now. It was a delicate balance- he was going to need her to escape, but at the same time he needed to guide her in the right direction. He liked her; genuinely liked her, but survival was too far ingrained into him for him to just give up.

“I didn’t hear that,” he said, giving her a half-smile. “As far as I know, I’m going to be turned over to the Cloud authorities if I don’t talk.”

Azami smiled at him, running her fingers under his chin.

“You’re a good guy, Yuji.

...

Bet you never get the girl, though.”

Yuji rolled his eyes, but felt the reed rubbing against his butt again. He winced, waiting for the pain.

“Everyone tells you that you’re a good guy, but you always go home alone. Now I wonder- is that by choice? By design? Or are you as afraid of women as I think you are?”

“I fear what I don’t understand. You’re the great, unknown, whip-wielding goddess. But I can’t tell what you see when you look at me.”

He looked up, eyes grim and determined, with an energy he hadn’t displayed in a long time, and a hopefulness in his voice that betrayed his mental barriers against emotions.

“I can’t tell if you see a target, or if you see...something else. I’m no threat to you, but you’re still keeping me at arm’s length. From what I can gather, either YOU’RE afraid of ME, or you don’t *want* to get closer for some reason.”

Azami nearly lost it there. He had hit in the on the head. She had taken him too lightly, and now he was onto her. If she told the truth, he lost the weapon he’d just gained, and might feel even more helpless. So that route was easiest.

“I am a tad intimidated by good-looking, intellectual men. Usually, of course, they’re just like girls- so superficial that they’re easy to manipulate. They think they’re being smart, when really they’re so transparent it’s pathetic. You know- you see things too.”

Yuji gave a forlorn chuckle. “Yea, I see things. But nothing I want to see. And certainly not into the hearts of women like you do.”

“It’s a girl thing, ‘kay? Probably the most pleasant girl thing, besides ‘women’s intuition’.”

“Girls DO have it rougher than guys,” Yuji admitted. “At least, from where I sit.’

“Mmm. Maybe so. But then again, men are born blind, and they stay blind. Women are blind, but they DO eventually see, to some degree, at least. We all know how it goes, and how to keep men guessing. It’s instinct.”

“Killer instinct.”

WHAP.

“Ow.”

“If I were using my ‘killer instinct’, your manhood might not be so intact.”

“Then how could I keep you warm at ni-”

WHAP!

"You only need *one*, remember," she told him, using that seductive little purr voice that made him snap to attention.

"No."

"No? You need two?"

"No, I mean that's not why you've avoided my genitals. You could have done any number of sexual things that hurt worse than what you're doing. It's not that you don't know what they are- you're avoiding them. Which brings me back to my question- Why are you keeping me at arm's length?"

shoot! I beat around the bush, but he got around to the other side quicker! I don't have any good answer!

Wait, yes I do!

"Is that an invitation? I DID say I wouldn't rape you..."

Yuji looked over his female captor. She was wearing a black gown today, slit far up the sides. She held the reed like an accessory to that outfit. From his vantage point, he could see toned calves up to inner thigh, and the bottom of fabric-covered breasts.

It was temptation in female form.

But...

"I didn't say that. But because I don't want to take advantage of you."

Azami laughed. Seeing Yuji's situation right now, how could she take him seriously? He was tied up, naked, in front of her, completely helpless. How could *he* take advantage of *her*?

"You're as lonely as am I," Yuji challenged. "Maybe even more so. I thought I was isolated, but I was wrong. I have a few friends. I think it's you who's more lonely. And I wish I could do more for you. But raping me won't do anything except give you a moment's satisfaction."

Azami didn't know what to say, so Yuji pressed on.

"You said that it was okay for you to hit me like this because you owned me. *Because you owned me*. You wouldn't have said that unless I actually meant something to you. And believe it or not, you mean something to me. You mean...well, a lot to me. But our roles are stopping us from playing that game."

"Duty before pleasure," she agreed, sighing for what felt like the millionth time today. "Well, we ARE loyal, aren't we?"

"Yeah. Loyal to the point of being stupid," Yuji confirmed.

"Well, like you said, you belong to me. Maybe I can work in the best of both worlds here."

For a minute, Yuji's heart fluttered. Did she mean that she was going to have sex with him after all.

"You're going to get a tattoo."

--

“OW!”

Azami smiled at Yuji. She had tied his feet together, with his wrists over his head, and had him laying on his back. That way he could watch as she began to carve a tattoo on the bottom of his foot.

“This hurts worse than that damned reed!” Yuji growled. Azami sighed and grabbed her half-tank pajama top from the previous night.

“Here, bite this. The pain will pass.”

Yuji opened his mouth and accepted it gratefully, concentrating on the cloth. It dawned on him that this very shirt had been against Azami’s very body last night. He could taste the tiniest bit of a cold, odorless sweat. He wondered what part of the fabric between his teeth had been stretched over her breasts.

It was over after a few minutes. Azami smiled at her handiwork.

“Since you can’t see it, I’ll explain it to you. It says ‘Property of Azami’ in a gothic sort of writing. I didn’t know you could even make a mix of kanji, hiragana, and katakana look ‘gothic’, but I took a try.”

“What would have happened if you’d messed up?” Yuji wanted to know.

“Well, I own your whole body, so I think I could have found another place to put it. Maybe your armpits... That would hurt. A lot.”

“So, this tattoo means you own me, right? It’s just proof?” Yuji played with his foot, trying to get some of the stinging pain to stop.

“That’s right.”

“..That is SO hot, on so many levels.”

Azami, taken aback, managed to ask “You like being domin-; er; ‘owned’ that much?”

Yuji blushed and nodded. “It’s humiliating. But somehow so hot. A kunoichi captures me- fantasy one. Decides she owns me- fantasy two. She’s mature, independent, and a total knockout- fantasy three. Need I go on?”

“No, I get it. I’m glad you’re enjoying this.”

“May I make a request?”

“Sure, what?”

“Can we get me some new clothes? If I’m going to fight, I’d rather not do it naked. Not unless you and I are sparring.”

That was an interesting point. The Raikage would be furious over this development. So maybe she

should help Yuji. It was return investment- if she helped him get stronger, but not as strong as her, then he could help her escape, too. Because at this point, she wasn't going back to the Raikage.

The nearest outpost town was five miles away. That was about a thirty second run, if Yuji had been allowed to use chakra. But since he was still a captive, Azami kept a tight leash on him- literally.

"This is so humiliating..." he murmured under his breath. He was wearing a long, black coat with his swimsuit underneath. Oh, and the collar around his neck.

"You could always be naked," Azami told him pleasantly.

They found a place with clothes. Azami did the picking, and she forced Yuji to try the clothes on- without the benefit of a changing room. He'd never been so thoroughly humiliated. Strangers seeing his naked body...but he was at the command of the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. So he stomached it. By the end of that embarrassing tenure, he had found himself with a slew of clothes that Azami wanted to see him in. He wouldn't have picked many of them himself, but then again she was paying, so it was her choice. He prayed that the miniskirt and various panties were for her.

"Okay sport, you pick your combat clothes," Azami told him at the end of that. "Anything you need. And our friend you-"

She gave the clerk a dangerous look, suggesting she had some big secret on him.

"-will be giving us excellent discounts. Yes?"

"Yes, of course!" the clerk bowed several times.

So Yuji wandered around the store, opting to be naked rather than try on more of Azami's clothes. He picked out a few things. A new trench coat, black in color with three metal buckles holding it closed across the front, a charcoal gray shirt, black pants that had a good amount of pockets, and a thick belt (which Azami seemed to like herself. He wondered what she would do with it, and that made him shudder). Finally, he picked out a pair of sunglasses. That wasn't normally his style, but he decided he could fashion mirrors in them, so he could peer behind him. He figured he would be spending at least some time as a fugitive, so the move made sense.

Last, he chose a sturdy pair of boots that went up just past his ankle and that were adorned with a few straps and buckles to hold them in place. He figured that he would need to scale rough terrain to escape his captor, including mountains and forests, and he didn't want to have ten bleeding toes by the end of it. All it took was meeting with a rock the wrong way, and his ability to run or fight as necessary would be impeded.

With that in mind, he began to pick out some female clothes. Azami was certainly interested at that, wondering if she'd really broken him this time.

"Don't get your hopes up," he told her flatly. "I want to make sure you're prepared to run or fight, too."

Azami sighed happily, savoring the feeling of someone genuinely caring about her for- what, the first time? Quite possibly, actually.

It was too bad she had to break him.

--

Back at 'home', two days later, Azami had been working on Yuji for three hours, pushing the limits of his endurance. He was sweating, panting, and exhausted- for all the wrong reasons. The whip marks on his body were now less individual gashes and more like one continued mark that ran the length of his body.

"Come on, will you tell me something?! ANYTHING! Lie if you have to!" she begged him, even as a proper whip this time met his embattled flesh. He grimaced, but refused. She dropped the whip.

"I hate to permanently mar your body, Yuji. But you aren't leaving me with much choice."

In her hand was a butterfly needle. Yuji recoiled as much as he could, being tied up as he was. He couldn't help but blatantly show his fear.

"What's that for?"

She reached forward and grabbed a nipple.

"You're about to get some piercings..."

Yuji pulled away as hard as he could, but she yanked him back.

"Don't squirm if you don't want me to pierce a more available target," she warned dangerously.

"Will you please just kill me?" he begged finally. His limit had been reached. Abruptly, without warning, he couldn't play this game anymore. He went limp in his restraints. "Just kill me. If you have any mercy in you, end it. Please..."

Azami dropped the needle and held the boy's head to her breast, making soothing sounds and stroking his hair. She could feel him shaking from pain and fear, and she knew that he wasn't lying. This was no game on his part.

It had taken five days, but she'd cracked all his mental barriers. He had lost weight, despite being well-fed and being allowed to exercise. That was the scariest part; the dangerous way the mental strain effected him.

"It's alright now, Yuji. It's alright. Just rest."

Sobs wracked his body, with no strength left to reign them in. This was what Azami had been waiting for. And yet...
And yet...

There was no feeling of joy. No 'victory'. Only the battered husk of one of Konoha's war heroes. And that, to her, was no trophy.

The days spent with him took it's toll on Azami as well. She had been detached emotionally for too long. Now those emotions came flooding back, more powerful than ever. She wondered when she had grown cold enough to torture someone she loved to near insanity. What had happened to the idealistic girl who

did what she could to help people? She just happened to be deadly good at her work. But where had her morals vanished to? Maybe she had heard the hype that she was 'ruthless' and 'never missed a mark on an assignment', and enjoyed the praise. Praise she was missing from parents, long dead.

Whatever the cause, she found that she too had no more tolerance. She just held his head protectively, near tears herself. After a few more moments, she raised his head back up. He didn't fight her; so devoid was his body of strength.

Her own emotions running over, for the first time, she kissed him truly lovingly. There was no psychological ploy behind it; simply pure, unadulterated love and desire.

Even as her lips met his, she was untying his ropes with one hand; the other steadying his back. She could feel the rise of flesh where cuts were left in the wake of her whip. Her hand traced the patchwork of these cuts, and each time she touched one, she thought:

I'm sorry.

Another one; another 'I'm sorry'. And again, and again.

He fell into her arms, now free of his bindings. She laid him on the floor gently, setting him down as though he were made of glass.

Between her own emotions and her surprise at wanting to save him, she found herself pulling off her black, one-piece dress and flinging it aside as she knelt down and straddled his body on her hands and knees. In two more moves, she had removed her bra and panties, matching his naked state. What began as a genuine, sweet kiss soon turned into passionate lovemaking. There were no inhibitions- she'd broken those mental barriers as well, both on herself and him. There was no point to being shy now- not at this stage of the game.

Once they were able to move, that night, for the first time, they shared a bed. She held him protectively, occasionally feeling a shudder or another round of cold sweat despite the mental and physical therapy they'd just shared together. Come the next morning, his head would be once again in her chest, cradled there protectively.

It was during the first night, though, that she'd made a decision:

I won't let those bastards take him. Not after what I've done to him. Not after what I've learned he means to me.

If they come and try to take him, they're be facing all the fury I can muster.

4 - Swallowed up by Blood-soaked Darkness

All things, in time, will break. Bodies grow old; are influenced by the passing of time, and become weaker, eventually succumbing to death. Our journey is a short one. How long one lived matters not; what one did with this one, short life is paramount. Fleeting though it may be, a life is not to be wasted through senseless killing, or indeed senseless love. To find success in life is to find balance of all things, and to leave an indelible mark on this world.

Whether that mark be good or evil, those that leave such a mark are always remembered. Especially by their victims.

Though the embrace of Yuji's surprise bed companion was warm, he found himself wracked with cold sweats and shudders. He had failed after all, and it was only Azami's pity that spared him from giving out information, or anything else she wanted.

No. She could not make herself ask, so she lost as well. After five days, we pushed each other to our absolute limits.

It stunned Yuji at first to notice that he was naked, as was his companion. But slowly, a small smile of comfort flickered on his face. In the midst of all that pain and suffering, there had been that bright spot. A bright spot he would never forget, neither due to circumstance nor due to the actual nature of the act.

As he lay there, Azami peacefully sleeping next to him, Yuji wondered about a few things. Mostly, he was curious why he had finally cracked. A pierced nipple...sure, it would hurt, but he was already in pain so often that it wouldn't have mattered. And the damage was reversible. No, there was some other reason why he had finally given up.

It hit him after maybe ten minutes of lying there, contemplating the breathtaking female curled up next to him. It dawned on him as he recalled the restrained passion they had both exercised until last night. Then it was clear to him.

At some point, I stopped caring about this 'battle of wits' we were having. I would never reveal the secrets of the Leaf. But I also stopped caring about my freedom. I wanted to belong to her. I welcomed the way she treated me. Belonging somewhere; to someone- that was the desire that finally got me.

Maybe it was healthy. Certainly it wasn't good to deny yourself anything. Any little shred of happiness Yuji might have had he threw away without a second thought. All in the name of a greater good. An esoteric concept he could barely grasp at this age. Somehow, though, the battle never seemed impersonal. It was always close to his heart. Personal indulgence had been a luxury he'd foregone.

Until now.

Next to him, his raven-haired mistress; his tender lover; his captor- she was all these things. He looked at her, sleeping peacefully next to him, and he knew that he could belong to no other. He belonged to

her, for better or worse. He had known it was coming deep in his heart- perhaps the moment he saw her on the battlefield. Somehow, both covered in blood of enemies, regretted their deeds, they shared a deep bond without ever speaking a word.

Azami sat up, stretched her arms high above her head, and reached right over Yuji to grab her whip.

“Just kidding,” she told him, playfully kissing his chin. “We don’t need to go down that road, Yuji. Not unless we’ll be in bed together afterward.”

She cocked her head, seeming to note that his gaze had lingered on her eyes for a while before dropping below the neck.

“Do I need to get dressed, or can you focus on what I’m saying like this?”

Yuji assured her it was the latter, naturally. He’d had enough of being the only naked one for at least a little while.

She nodded, arms folded on her breasts. Okay, so that was a bit distracting...

“Here’s the thing: That stupid Raikage is going to be coming to look for us. We either need to run for it, or we need to deceive him.”

Yuji rolled his neck to one side, trying to get it to be less stiff. Not just awkward positions during a first time romp, but a new bed, too.

“I’m not one to run from a fight normally, but why borrow trouble? We make it to the Leaf, we’re golden. They had to have won by now.”

Azami nodded again. This time, she leaned forward, on top of him, and gently bit down on the side of his neck. Yuji felt a strange, icy feeling moving through him. He guessed it was chakra of some sort. Warmth came in it’s wake, and he felt the return of his chakra flow.

“I’ve released the seal on your chakra. It means I trust you...and that we need each other to get out of here.”

It was so amazing, feeling the chakra coming back into his body in a steady flow. He felt like he had the power to do anything. He wondered if this was like having a cigarette after sex for some people? He mentally noted to try that someday. Because now he was getting out of captivity and into a new life with a gorgeous woman. Part lover, part mistress, all perfect. Maybe it was the mental and physical torture he had endured, or maybe it was just his tendency to be submissive to women, but he felt no urge to try to run for it. He was free for all intents and purposes, but he had no desire to leave her side.

“I can make sure you’ll be welcomed in the Leaf. We forgave the Sand when they attacked us. I hold some sway, so that’s not a problem.”

Azami started to smile and reply, but silenced that quickly.

“shoot! They’re here!”

Yuji had been without chakra for so long that he had been delayed in sensing the approach of four powerful chakras. He cursed, looking around for something to work with. Then he had an idea.

“Here!” he said quickly, stuffing Azami’s whip into her hand. He put his arms behind his back. “Tie me up, quick. We can still make this work.”

Azami did, quickly getting dressed. She made up for lost time by beating Yuji up quickly. She looked up when the door opened. In came the Raikage and three of his aids.

“I didn’t expect you for two more days, Lord Raikage,” Azami noted amicably, giving Yuji a good smack with the whip across the stomach. He did his best to look beat up, which wasn’t hard. He just remembered how he felt when he really did give up and let the emotions play across his face.

The Raikage strode over, tall and imposing. “Have you cracked him yet?”

Azami indicated Yuji. “He’s stubborn. But he’s breaking. He’s given me approximate troop numbers.”

“It matters little. The war is over,” the Raikage told her. “The Leaf routed us, even without this-” he indicated Yuji “-pest.”

Yuji made sure to not register anything they had said. Instead, he lay on the floor, completely devoid of any motion or fight. He just lay like a used up rag.

“You can kill him,” the Raikage told Azami. He was clearly eyeballing her, though. Attired in her sleepwear, she was a tantalizing image. It took a lot of control to stop Yuji from getting up and removing the man’s eyeballs.

Azami strutted over to Yuji, running the whip down his chest to his groin, then back up, using it to lift his chin. She gave him a dark-eyed gaze and an evil smile.

“If it’s all the same, I think I’ll keep him. Since I’ve come so close to cracking him that it’s become a personal challenge. And maybe I’ll use him for pleasure.”

A very ugly look crossed the Raikage’s face. It made Azami recoil immediately, and she was not an easy girl to scare. Something had gone wrong...

“You’ve already done that. You slept with him.”

Azami gasped- of course! They’d been watched.

“I never thought you’d turn traitor- not for the price I paid you,” the Raikage snarled, the ugly sneer still on his face. He nodded, and two of his aids seized Azami’s arms.

“Did you say ‘pleasure’? Maybe I’ll use *you* for pleasure, you traitorous slut!”

Yuji rammed into the Raikage from the side, knocking his head into the wall. The recoil knocked Yuji down. He tried to get up, but an aide of the Raikage seized him and threw him hard into the wall, head-first. Yuji blacked out.

“Yuji!” Azami said, but couldn’t do anything else. A chakra seal was placed on her. She was thrown onto her bed and tied up, the same way she had tied up Yuji. Except now there were four men glowering at her, lust in their eyes. Undressing her first with their eyes and then their hands. Soon she was naked and defenseless as they removed their own clothes. And then came the pain, and the shame, and the

fear.

--

It took a full day for Yuji to wake up. Something smelled odd- odd enough to wake him from his unconsciousness.

Then he noticed the heat. Red and orange tongues of flame were licking the walls. That was horrifying enough. But then his eyes wandered toward the bed. And he saw Azami.

Rage immediately consumed him. Those bastards! They had raped her! Those four sons of doges! Yuji burned their faces into his memory. They had obviously not counted on him or her surviving either the rape, burning cabin.

Yuji started toward her, but found that his hands were still tied behind his back. Undeterred, he put his hands right into the fire, burning the rope off. He was heedless of his own injuries right now. The second the rope fell into a twisted, burning mass off his wrists, he was off toward Azami.

She was unconscious, mercifully. She had been battered horribly. Abrasions all over her body, but especially near her anus and vagina...it made Yuji so angry he was sure that he was going to explode. But he put that aside, freed her from the bed, paused only to grab some clothes of theirs, and took off from the burning cabin.

--

--

Yuji rushed until he was back at the Leaf. He had stopped to bathe Azami, heedless of the infections he may contract. He washed her body carefully, scrubbing every bit of the filth those rapist pricks had left. She hadn't woken up yet, and that was both worrisome and a relief. He had carefully clothed her in modest clothes that kept her covered up, even across his shoulders as she was now.

He pushed past the guards in front of Tsunade's office. He barged right in and laid Azami on Tsunade's desk. He hit the floor in a formal bow, his head to the wooden floor.

"Please...help her."

Tsunade was stunned, and understandably so. Yuji had been captured, and was presumed dead when a search didn't find his body. He had been hailed as a hero, helping to pave the way to the Leaf's overwhelming victory. He had obviously not talked while interrogated, because the Leaf routed the enemy just like before.

And now, he was here, carrying an enemy soldier who had been badly beaten and raped. Tsunade didn't know what to think of it. Ordinarily, the medic in her would have sprang up and helped. But Yuji was alive? The two shocks combined stalled her reflexes.

Yuji's head snapped up. Tsunade was stunned at the urgency in his eyes.

"Will it take money? My life?! WHY AREN'T YOU HELPING HER?!"

He began to pace her office, muttering to himself, gesturing with his hands with abandon, his stoic demeanor gone. He then raced back to Azami's side. Tsunade called for Shizune and Sakura. Together, they carried Azami off to a private room to recover. Her life was no longer in danger. But her

body was still damaged. And more worrisome yet was her mental state. Being raped for a full day by four men would unhinge anyone.

That in mind, Yuji knew there was nothing else he could do. He let his own minor wounds be healed, then returned to his apartment. He needed a bath and a change of clothes. Then he would decide what to do. With the war over, his tour of duty had ended. As a jonin, that meant he would either be assigned a team, or possibly some other special duties. That was what he had always dreamed of. But now that dreamed seem far and distant. Like a big shadow covered it.

--

The water stung the hell out of his body, cut as it was from both torture and pleasure. His mind hummed in tune with the shower's rhythm. Ideas floated through his head. Bad ideas. Scary ideas. Things he'd never considered. Things he knew he shouldn't be thinking of. Things that his pre-war self would never have considered.

He rested his head against the shower wall, massaging his temples. He righted himself, unable to keep still, and began to wash up. When his hand went to clean his groin, a smile spread across his face. A virgin no longer.

Then the thoughts of what Azami had endured hit him. They hit him so hard he sunk to the floor of the shower in despair. How long he sat there, he didn't know. The cool, wet tile seemed to mock him, laid in an endless pattern. Just like his life. One setback after another. The water swirled down the drain, and Yuji was sure that was where his life was headed. If he could just get back on the front lines, he would be okay. His mind and body would be occupied.

The water had long turned cold, beating down on Yuji's head.

He heard a knock at the door. Hastily, he shut off the shower and flung a towel around his waist, not bothering to dry himself off or cover up any further. There was only one reason someone would be at his door right now.

Sure enough, it was Sakura. She seemed surprised to see Yuji half-naked, but she didn't comment. "Yuji...she's fine...but..."

"But?!" he demanded.

"But she's in a coma," Sakura finished. She hated delivering this sort of news. Especially to Yuji. What this girl was to him, she didn't know exactly, but if he'd found someone, even a friend, it made her happy for him. Her own obsession with Sasuke prevented her from looking for a relationship, or maybe she could have acted on the obvious attraction he had for her.

Yuji wobbled, but grabbed a wall for support. "When will she come out of it?"

"We don't know. Her body is fine, but her psyche..."

BOOM!

Yuji had put an enormous hole in the wall with his fist, smacking it with the side of his balled-up hand.

Sakura remained sympathetic outwardly, though she was worried privately. His reaction wasn't uncommon, she supposed.

"Thank you for all you've done," Yuji finally muttered, bowing carefully. "Will you please pass on my gratitude to Lady Tsunade? I just...can't go there right now."

He looked up at her pleadingly. It was not like him to ignore social protocol, but this was a special occasion. No one would blame him, and he really did need some time alone.

"Is there anything I can do for her?"

Sakura shook her head. "No. She can't hear you or see you."

That was where the conversation ended. Yuji thanked Sakura again, then turned to head toward his room.

--

Yuji returned every day, just to look at her. The very site of Azami lying helpless brought him to tears each day. How could the one girl who had managed to turn his head so sharply be lying in shambles? And right before his eyes, where she should have been protected?

"How...?" The anguished question burst from his lips after a month of sitting at her bedside. "How could I have let this happen?"

There was no one to answer that question. It wasn't even a fair question, Yuji knew. He was being too hard on himself. They had been taken by surprise, and he had played the role he had been dealt the best he could. But that seemed to be of no consequence now.

He replayed the situation in his mind over and over, and yet he found no winnable scenario.

-

--

Finally, a year had passed. Each day, Yuji visited her. Again and again, no change.

Yuji trained and worked missions, trying to piece himself back together. He could now admit that she hadn't really broken him, nor had she been trying. There had simply been an attraction between them, and neither one knew how to make it work any other way. So he played the part of a prisoner; she his captor. It was sexy, it was fun, but it was masking their true feelings, up until she finally 'broke' him and they connected physically.

It seemed an eternity since he had held her. Since their lips had meant.

Sitting on a bench, Yuji stared directly ahead. Some children ran by. What right did they have to be happy?

A couple walked by arm in arm

Why should they have each other?

The rain began to fall.
That seemed right. The vindication of all things depressing.

Yuji glared at nothing. At nobody. No one even approached him anymore, save for his closest friends. They each had opinions about where he should be now. Someone had even dared suggest that he leave her behind and enjoy his life. That it was what she would want.

What she would want?! How could he possibly pretend to know her?! It still made Yuji furious. The well-meaning jonin had gone flying through the door as a snarl erupted from Yuji's very soul. The man was no longer quite a friend, but neither was he an enemy. Just another raindrop.

Rain. The Rain village had hurt the Leaf. They had caused pain, given birth *by* Pain.
Pain? The war had caused a lot of pain. The Raikage had caused pain.

And all at once, it came. Heaping upon him like a rain with a vengeful torrent. Despair, anger, frustration—all mingled within Yuji. He sank to his knees, hands over his head in the position of defense known even to the earliest of men.

The images flashed through his brain in rapid-fire succession. Them storming the cabin, raping Azami. Again and again and again. Those bastards.

“THOSE BASTARDS!”

Out loud, this time. But no one heard the cry for help, spoken through rage. Not in these empty streets, inhabited only by an upturned garbage can. A sign, maybe? No one would oppose him, if-? Surely not? He would only be doing what was necessary to save the next girl.

That, Yuji decided, is what Azami would want. He knew her like no one else. She wouldn't cry for revenge. No, she would want to ensure that no more pain came at the behest of that man and his fellows. And really, was that so different from his own mission? He wanted to protect people. Yet he had taken lives. Shed blood. And it made sense...all of it. What he could finally do for her.

--

Inside, Yuji's room was dark, save for what little light shone through the blinds. He got dressed in the dark, welcoming it's embrace. No one could see him suffer in here. And under these clothes, no one would see him suffer at all.

He put on the combat clothes he'd gotten with Azami. First came underwear with a protective cup built in. Then came black socks from the west that came up halfway to his knee. The pants came next—thick but breathable material, with shin guards and kneepads built in. Next, he put on a light black t-shirt, over which went a charcoal-colored vest, held in place by two straps that ran across his back and shoulders and fastened in front. From there, he put his boots that were held in place by crisscrossing straps. Next came his long coat with three metal buckles in front to hold it closed. A pair of black, fingerless gloves and a pair of sunglasses completed his look for the most part. As an afterthought, he tied a surgical mask over his face. No one would question it; it was common to wear that when you were sick so as not to spread the germ to others.

-

“Bigger nose...yeah, that’s him. And the other guy, he was bald, with a mustache...It was a little thicker than that...yeah, that’s it, that’s him.”

Sai was happy to sketch the men Yuji was describing. It was good practice for him, both from an artistic standpoint and from the standpoint of practicing his interpersonal skills. Yuji was pleasant enough to talk to. They were acquaintances through Team Kakashi, which allowed Sai to pick Yuji’s brain for ways to not irritate his oft-pissed teammates.

It took a couple hours, but the drawings were done. Yuji nodded, thanking Sai again, and took them with him.

“Oh, Sai?” he turned back at the door. “You didn’t see me. I was never here.”

That would have been a peculiar statement to anyone without ANBU training, but Sai read the meaning immediately.

“You were never here,” Sai echoed.

Yuji smiled and left. Sai frowned more than usual, however- that was not right. There was something not right about Yuji. His smile, perhaps?

Ah. Vicious. He seems more vicious. Even with a smile...

Sai shrugged mentally. He hadn’t yet mastered the art of the smile, so he could hardly say anything to Yuji. He could have just misinterpreted the gesture. It was possible.

--

Yuji handed the three drawings to Shizune.

“I’d like to know their names, if we have them. Last location, height, weight, what they had for lunch- you know, the usual stuff,” Yuji smirked behind his mask.

Shizune began to rummage for the files, smiling a little bit at the joke. Yuji was one of her favorite people to deal with.

All the stress he’s under and he’s still always so polite!

“Do you have a cold?”

Yuji looked up, wondering why she would ask, then remembered the mask on his face. He smiled again behind it.

“I think that’s the case. I’m feeling a little better than yesterday, though.”

Shizune held out three green folders.

“Here you go,” she said cheerfully. She straightened up a small a few falling folders and scrolls. “So, what are those for, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Yuji coughed, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth despite the mask. “I think I’d better get going. I don’t want you to catch my cold. I don’t know what Lady Tsunade would do if she was deprived of you...”

There was a scary thought.

--

Aido Namikawa
Denryou Miyazaki
Masahiro Harunobu

All of them in the BINGO book assigned to the Leaf. That would make Yuji's job easier. Well, at first. The biggest problem would be the last of the four.

Killing the Raikage meant war. But perhaps it was necessary? Besides, with their leader and three of his aides killed, the Cloud would fall easily, if they chose to fight at all. Yuji hoped they wouldn't- he would feel guilty for starting a war. Innocents did not need to die. Only the four on his list. They would pay for their crimes.

Rape
Attempted murder
Arson
Assault

I have no proof. So this would make me..the bad guy.

At that moment, Yuji came to a fork in the road, both literally and figuratively. To his right lay a brightly lit path; one he knew well. The place where he'd first seen Sakura and began crushing on her. The place he went to after his promotions to celebrate. The picnics he'd come to when he was a little boy were in a park not far down the path.

To the left lay a dark path that Yuji had always been a little afraid of, even now as a jonin. He hadn't ever traveled down it. There were stories about it being haunted; an old, forbidding shrine lay a ways down.

To the left,evil.
To the right, good.

"...So be it..." Yuji said softly.

He walked down the path to the left.

5 - The Hunt (pt 1)

Love and Desperation- two of the most potent feelings in the human spectrum. Love for a woman can drive a man to ruin. Desperation for a man can force a woman to compromise herself. Each is flawed yet complimented by the other. Bound by chains of love or by chains of desperation, one will find oneself on an unnatural path. To be alone is not human nature; to love is natural; to feel desperation for that love is common.

It is desperation that causes wars. It is desperation that causes death.

It is love that prevents wars. It is love that causes death.

Either may be fatal, but which to choose should you be offered the option:

Feel no love in your life or feel no desperation?

Regardless of the answer, if that choice is made, then that life is no longer 'human' nor beast. It is simply existing for the sake of existing. To live without meaning is the same as dying.

==

Aido Namikawa
Denryou Miyazaki
Masahiro Harunobu

Those three would suffer first, Yuji decided. In order, just for simplicity's sake. He would collect the bounties attached to their heads from the Leaf. He would give some to his parents and some to Azami. Given the major crime he was planning to commit, he doubted he would be allowed to live. If he managed to escape, then at least Azami would be taken care of. But even better would be if she could come with him...

He smiled behind his surgical mask. A man and woman taking on the world, alone save for each other.... It was such a romantic concept.

In an strange way, so was destroying the rapists behind his girl's traumatic incident and attempted murder. Azami had made a career out of bounty hunting until the war started. Then she had worked as a mercenary. She had made her money, and was all set to retire at age nineteen. How cruel was it to deny her that? So destroying them; dedicating their destruction to the woman he loved...

Yuji's chakra sparked, causing a few leaves falling in the still-crisp spring air to burst into small flames. He didn't bother to calm himself right away. He'd been playing the 'good boy' for too long now. He needed this release.

--

Aido Namikawa had seen his share of battles. The eye patch told the story of his first and last major injury. His head was shaved, showing scars, save for a small ponytail in the back. His body was a patchwork of scars. Scars that ran so thick and criss-crossed so deeply that knives could become lodged in them. There were rumors that he was so tough that he cut himself up, then had genin attempt to stab him. If they lost their nerve, they were removed from the program. If they stabbed him, they passed.

Rumors, of course. Namikawa let them grow unattended. It was best to have fear in the eyes of friend and foe alike.

He disdained the formal guards that most people of his status took for granted. Those hands were needed elsewhere; to rebuild the fallen Cloud home. The war with the Leaf had taken its toll. The Leaf had been gracious in victory- they had not entered the Cloud village even once. That was kind of them. Foolish, but kind.

The damage was caused by the Raikage's rage. How useless.

Namikawa respected the man's formidable power and presence- he had modeled himself after the Raikage- but was unsure of the man's intelligence and mental stability. Perhaps that was why Namikawa was considering assassinating the Raikage. He was next in line, after all, to take the title. He was at the perfect age. Old enough to be wise; young enough to remain active and visible without being doted to.

Sitting in his home, he only entertained the thought. He would not actually do it. The Raikage was respected, and needed to die in a 'good' way, to ensure that his successor could promise revenge. The game was politics, and if he were to take charge, he needed a good platform. Perhaps hiring an assassin; someone not directly involved...

The slight flickering of a candle noted the presence of an intruder. Namikawa looked up, intending to reprimand whatever fool had dared disturb him. Instead, he saw a nightmarish vision in black. He couldn't place the man, but he knew him. And for some reason, despite not remembering his face or name, terror gripped him.

Such malicious blood thirst...This man has come here to kill me.

"Who are you?!" Namikawa demanded in his fiercest warrior voice. That alone could send a man scrambling for cover. But apparently, not the man in front of him. He stood firm in the doorway, blocking the moonlight. The surgical mask over his face moved as he began to speak.

"My name is Yuji Itou. I was supposed to have died in a fire a year ago."

Namikawa smirked; he had overreacted. This was just some insane man. Some harmless creature who was mistaken.

"I am sorry to hear that. But that is an odd way to introduce oneself, is it not?"

Yuji took one step forward, closing the door behind him. "Not when that is the only thing you need to know about me. Considering you set the fire in the first place. Right after you committed the crime that brought me here tonight."

Namikawa decided to keep him talking; having a house alone in a bamboo forest now seemed regrettable. No one would hear him if he yelled for help. He would have to incapacitate or kill the intruder; then run for back up. Namikawa was brave and strong, but not stupid. He realized he had been backed into a corner.

“What crime have I committed against you?” Namikawa asked, genuinely unsure. He had set a lot of fires during the war a year ago. It was standard during war time, after all.

Yuji took another step forward. “You were the one who threw me into the wall. The blow that left me out cold while you and three others raped my mistress. Azami- does her name ring a bell?”

“The bounty hunter...”

Realization struck Namikawa. “You were the captured Leaf shinobi! How dare you invade here?! The Leaf and Cloud are no longer at-”

Yuji closed the distance between them, a hand over Namikawa’s mouth. He spoke in a whisper that chilled Namikawa to his very core.

“You think I care? This isn’t about your war crimes, you disgusting vermin! This is about what you did to Azami. You’re charged with attempted murder, arson, and rape.”

Yuji lowered his voice even more, sounding horribly dangerous now.

“Technically, you should be charged with *two* counts of attempted murder. But I’ll let the one on me go. You protected your leader. I can respect that.”

Yuji pushed Namikawa hard into the wall, his hand still over his mouth. Namikawa, now desperate, tried to fight back. Before he could move his arms, both had been stabbed with kunai and pinned to the wall. The hand over his mouth muffled his cry of pain.

“...But the second you touched her, you became guilty. There is no honor in rape and torture.”

Yuji removed his hand, allowing Namikawa to speak.

“And yet you torture me?!” he roared, hoping to appeal to the young man for at least a fair fight. “*You* are without honor!”

“MY HONOR DIED WHEN I COULDN’T PROTECT HER!” Yuji roared at the top of his lungs. The candle flickered from the sound of Yuji’s voice. The doors rattled and the windows shook. The only sound that could be heard was the wind flittering through the bamboo.

“Well, your time is up, Aido Namikawa,” Yuji declared after a moment or two. He struck the man hard on the chin, knocking him unconscious.

-

Namikawa awoke from a smell that he couldn’t quite identify at first. He noticed that he was bound first. The smell that woke him up was unimportant. He had to get free while he could!

The smell again. Smoke.

Ah, a cigarette! That was it!

“Good morning, sunshine,” came the voice that Namikawa had, in a short time, learned to fear. It was Yuji, sitting calmly across the room. His mask was around his neck, and in his mouth was the offending cigarette that had caused Namikawa to wake up. “So, now you’re helpless- how does it feel?”

Namikawa managed a sneer, despite his circumstances. “What? You want revenge? Is that it? Are you

going to rape me?”

Yuji laughed as he stood up. The floor creaked a muted warning as he walked over. “Don’t flatter yourself. My body is hers and hers alone. I wouldn’t defile myself with you.”

Yuji leaned close and blew more smoke in Namikawa’s face.

“I wouldn’t give you the pleasure.”

Yuji turned away, just for an instant. Namikawa didn’t even have time to squirm as Yuji whirled around and kicked him in the side as hard as he could. He felt his ribs cave and shatter from the force of the blow.

“Let’s see...you broke her left arm, I think.”

Yuji put his foot on Namikawa’s shoulder, stomping down while he pulled up. Namikawa was restrained at the elbow and wrist, which meant that-

SNAP! SNAP! CRACK!

-His elbow and wrist would break along with his shoulder.

“AAAGGGGHHHHHHHHH!”

Yuji let him squirm for a moment. He made sure to smile. He didn’t truly enjoy this, but at the same time it was right. That in mind, he stamped his foot down on the destroyed arm, holding it in place as he took the most dull, jagged kunai he had and began to cut at the shoulder. Over the screams of pain, he told his victim:

“If it hurts, we’ll just take it off. That way, the pain goes away.”

The arm came off. Yuji threw it aside, causing a shower of blood to leave droplets on the wooden floor. Then he turned to his victim, staring down harshly, a smile on his face. His sunglasses were still in place, and he replaced his mask after one more drag on his cigarette.

“It’s almost over. But I don’t think you understand the severity of your crimes just yet.”

Before Namikawa could even think to reply, Yuji raced over and pried open his eye. He took off his mask and sunglasses.

“Take a good look! This is the last thing you’ll ever see!”

Yuji ground his cigarette into Namikawa’s good eye. He left it smoldering there, and began to walk heavily around Namikawa, making sure he could hear his footsteps. It was horrifying; being able to only hear and guess at what your captor was going to do next.

“I won’t kill you...” From the right. Unseeing eyes shift that way...

“You didn’t kill her...” From the left. A tormenter whose footsteps you never hear...

“That is either your saving grace...” From the back. ...And yet, his voice comes from all over...

“Or your damnation...” From above.

“Go ahead, go insane. I encourage it. But just remember...” From the back.

“...I won’t be the one to end your suffering.” From the front, inches from the face of his victim.

Namikawa screamed and screamed, but no help came. Yuji let him go for a while, not intending to do anything else. He had avenged Azami's rape and assault, and that was enough. Whether this fool rebounded was up to him.

Namikawa bit his tongue off. Blood flowed out of his mouth until he snapped it shut. He soon perished, having drowned in his own blood.

Yuji watched dispassionately as death overtook Aido Namikawa. He shrugged mentally- he hadn't killed the man. He hadn't forced him to bite his tongue off. That was all his doing.

Just as it was his choice to rape Azami.

A choice the man would not, apparently, live to regret.

Yuji untied the man and laid him on the floor. He closed the man's eyes and even said a prayer for his soul. Then he raised a small dagger with his name on it and jabbed it into the eye socket with burn marks around it. That was one way to identify your kill on the battlefield.

Making handsigns, he tapped the body and had it sent to the Leaf village. He would have delivered it himself, but to even carry the rapist coward's body would have brought dishonor to Yuji. Besides, his business was not yet concluded. He had more people to...deal with.

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Denryou Miyazaki lived on a mountain. He was young and largely unmarred by battle. That was partly due to his skill.

Skill at evading battle, that is.

Truth be told, at nineteen, he had never actually fought for his life in real battle. He simply paid the right people to give him credit. Those same people served as his protectors. If they tried to betray his trust (well, whatever trust a bribe could buy), he would know instantly. He was no fool, after all.

What was the expression? Ah.

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

He smirked, curling his arm around the lucky kunoichi who'd shared his bed last night. She had been alright; maybe a little stiff. Worth an seven on his private scale. He notched his bedpost accordingly, then began to work an excuse to not ever see her again. Perhaps, if money didn't work, she would 'accidentally' fall to her death.

What a romantic notion. She was just *dying* for his company, after all.

BOOOM!

The sound shook Denryou's house. He leapt out of bed, pulling on the nearest thing- unfortunately, his female companion's kimono had been closest. He was halfway out the door before he realized his mistake. But he couldn't very well go back- not seeing what he had.

One of his guards was being held up against the house. His head hitting the wall had made the sound. There was a gloved hand over the man's mouth, but that wouldn't have mattered. The man was too scared to speak, and Denryou didn't blame him.

The man holding him in place seemed twenty feet tall. Adorned in all black, his face covered with a

surgical mask and sunglasses, he was imposing even before you got to the bloodlust. That was easy to sense even to a talentless brat like Denryou.

“Denni, what’s going on?”

His idiot, stupid, fool, useless one night stand had come out to investigate, attired in nothing but a curious look, one arm across her chest, the other covering her crotch.

This made the man in the sunglasses raise an eyebrow. But he ignored the naked woman, fixated on Denryou.

“Well then, it seems I DO have the right place. I’ll give your guards credit-not one of them sold you out. This one-” Yuji dropped the man, who began gasping for breath “-even put up a good fight.”

Yuji strode forward, one step at a time. He looked at the girl finally, shaking his head.

“You idiot. Give her back her clothes. I don’t know what kind of game you were playing, but don’t leave a naked woman outside in public view!”

Denryou was so frozen with fear that he barely noticed Yuji ripping the kimono off him and handing it to the woman. She, too, was surprised, and her reddening face fixed on Yuji’s. He seemed to be smiling under his mask.

“You should go now, miss. I’m afraid ‘Denni’ here is a convicted rapist who is about to be brought to justice. So please, go get yourself tested for any medical diseases you may have contracted thanks to this pig. If anyone asks, I’m Doctor Ishibashi from the outpost town Karakuri.”

The woman shrugged into her kimono, bowed to Yuji, and ran for it, apparently horrified. Yuji shook his head- stupid woman. It was fairly obvious he was no doctor, but she had believed him.

Denryou still hadn’t moved, despite being buck naked. Yuji had his back to Denryou, expecting to be attacked. When no attack came, Yuji understood.

His power is bought. He’s a naïve, foolish child.

However, he cannot go unpunished. He will learn life lessons from me- the hard way.

“You should have attacked while my back was turned, you incompetent little child,” Yuji taunted, wagging his finger as he looked over his shoulder. “And you’re hardly dressed like a military aide. Seems your only abilities lie in bribery.”

“H-how much to spare my life?!” Denryou was stumbling over his words, so afraid for his life was he. “I-I’ll give you anything you want! Name your price!”

Yuji closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye, his hand around Denryou’s neck. He pushed the young man back into his house, banging him against the walls as he went. There was a low table near the door; Yuji threw him through it. The fine bit of ikebana in a rare vase bloodied Denryou’s nose when it fell onto his face.

“Do you remember me? A year ago, I was supposed to have died in a fire.”

Yuji picked Denryou up by the neck and threw him through a set of sliding doors and into the next room.

Denryou scrambled to his feet, holding a piece of wood from the shattered doorframe like a weapon. Yuji grabbed it and tore it away, throwing it into the hallway.

“But I didn’t die. Instead, I woke up in time to find my mistress tied up, having been raped for a full day by four people. One of them was you!”

Denryou fell backward, pushing himself away on his backside. “N-No! I didn’t! I wasn’t there!”

“DON’T LIE!” Yuji roared, kicking the remnants of the door out of the way. Denryou jumped and pushed himself back even farther, until his back hit the far wall. He was all but sobbing now. He tried to scramble away, but Yuji grabbed him by the hair and rammed his head into the wall.

“That very blow knocked me unconscious and unable to protect my mistress. Being helpless is an awful feeling, isn’t it?”

Yuji said all that in a low whisper, holding Denryou’s hair tight. He spied a bathroom and pushed Denryou in, knocking him into a large mirror.

“Put your arms above your head and I won’t kill you,” Yuji said simply. Denryou carefully complied, looking for Yuji’s approval. Yuji smiled underneath his mask and nodded.

“Good.

THOCK!

He stabbed a kunai through both of Denryou’s hands, pinning him in place. Denryou screamed, but there was no one to help him. Yuji had ran off all the guards.

“Kick me even once and I’ll kill you. Now hold still!”

Yuji held out a knife, close to Denryou’s face. He put it lightly against the flesh on his cheek, adding more pressure gradually until blood dripped down. Then he began to rake the knife back and forth across Denryou’s cheek, just deep enough to cut skin and cause pain. He made a circle, then stopped his cutting. He reached up to Denryou’s face, grabbed, and pulled.

“AHHHH!”

Yuji held up a slice of skin that looked vaguely like a piece of roughly circular bologna. He let it drop onto the floor with a sickening sort of ‘splat’ sound.

“Not quite the ladies man now, are you, ‘Denni’?” Yuji mocked him, carving what seemed like a roadmap over Denryou’s chest and stomach. Denryou screamed and screamed, but Yuji didn’t stop. He kept talking to his captive as he calmly dissected him.

“You didn’t stop when my mistress begged you to stop. You kept going. And you knew it was wrong, didn’t you? You disgusting little freak!”

Yuji stepped back to admire his handiwork. He frowned at it, worried that Denryou might die before he was done.

“Because you’re rich, I assume you’re stupid, sheltered, arrogant, and spoiled. And women...they just don’t say no to Denryou Miyazaki! No, not to him, for whom all women pine!”

Yuji pulled a roll of toilet paper off the holder on the wall and attached it to a part of the sliding wooden door he had broken on the way in here. He had made an effective torch. He held it up near Denryou’s face. Yuji’s face was lit by the fire, and with his sunglasses and mask on, he looked very much like a deranged surgeon. Which, considering what he’d just done to Denryou, wasn’t too far off the mark.

“I don’t want you dying on me, Denni. So I’m going to close those wounds.”

Yuji lowered the torch toward Denryou’s skin. Embers spitting from the fire fell on his exposed giving him just a taste of what was to come.

“This might sting a little...”

6 - The Hunt (pt 2)

To make a decision is to make a promise to yourself. You weigh everything and everyone involved, from friends to family and moral consequences to legal consequences. At the end, the decision you make needs only be approved by one mortal- yourself. At that moment, the thoughts and hopes of others matter little. To make a decision is to show absolute conviction in your choice. The ability to wake up and see oneself in the mirror is crucial. If you cannot live with your decision, do not expect others to.

Self-perception means everything.

Should your decision hurt others, embrace it. The choice you made, the consequences that come with them- what they mean to you the individual is all that matters. If others are hurt, you are not affected unless you believe you are affected. Perception is reality.

To choose to love.

To choose to defend.

To choose to hunt.

To choose to kill.

To choose, knowingly, the path of evil and self-righteousness.

Choice is limited only by our own thought process. You can choose a great many things. But remember: Others have the same right, and you yourself may be a casualty of their choice. If you allow yourself to choose, remember that you are opening yourself to the consequences of other's choices.

Yuji burned Denryou in all the places he had cut him, leaving a horrifying patchwork of scars and burns. Denryou would live, but he would be in pain for quite some time. He was a stupid kid, Yuji reminded himself, which is why he was getting off easy.

Denryou's breathing was labored but steady, and his eyes were closed in pain. He opened them only once, to get one more look at his attacker so that he could remember every detail possible. But the man's figure was totally covered. No eyes or mouth, or even a nose to judge him by. No birth marks; no details of any kind.

He was going to get away with this, and Denryou knew that. It made him give up more than the pain. Until he saw his glimmer of hope. His miracle.

One last bodyguard left to him was sneaking into the room. This man had been an elite assassin for years; an old friend of Denryou's father. The man had sworn absolute fealty to the Miyazaki family for once saving his life.

Yuji hadn't noticed, apparently. He was too preoccupied with cleaning up any evidence he may have left behind. Denryou smirked, and kicked out. He caught Yuji in the chin. The bodyguard poised his knife in a thrust and-

Yuji spun and kicked the bodyguard in the back as he twirled. He hadn't planned to do it; he had just reacted with pure instinct. The bodyguard flew forward- and straight into Denryou. The knife pierced his abdomen in a fatal place, causing Denryou to cough up blood while it simultaneously cascaded down his stomach and onto his protector and killer. The older man's eyes widened in shock and surprise;

emotions he genuinely felt. He had cared for the young master in the way his neglectful father never had. He'd made time for the boy- trained him, even though he chose to avoid combat and use ill-gotten money to finance a frivolous lifestyle. He thought of the boy as his own. And now-"

The older man spun, but Yuji was gone. His mission had been accomplished. He was on to the next target.

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Masahiro Harunobu was the most intelligent of the Raikage's aides. He surrounded himself with guards, kept out of politics, and led a clean, open life. All his life, he had done what he had been ordered to do. Even if it was personally distasteful, he had done it. If worse came to worse, he could tell the truth about his deeds- they had been orders, after all.

This era was an era of reason. With all the existing alliances and treaties, no one could simply harm anyone anymore. Not without consequences. The case with the Hyuuga of the Leaf was the forerunner to that, he imagined. One side had been wronged; the other responded in kind. Truthfully, it was not an era meant for an old warrior anymore. Rather, they were supposed to lead into a new era where the blade was suspended and the pen pushed to the fore.

The smart adapted to their world.
Then they made the world adapt to them.
Not the other way around.

Harunobu knew this, so he played by the rules. Intelligence before power, so it went. Diplomacy made for a great shield to those who understood it's workings.

Standing up, he ran a hand through his graying hair, cut short into a severe military style. The salt and pepper color of his hair had not yet reached his mustache, which was still black, just as the hair on his head used to be. It was short but thick. His ex-wife had loved the feeling of it as he kissed her. Unfortunately, she found more to hate about him.

Just a year ago... Masahiro mused, stroking his chin. **And during that volatile period, I made a mistake. That young woman...Azami...I should never have participated in that spectacle.**

There had been no other women since, which was perhaps why Masahiro clung to the thought of her so. It was war, he reasoned- people did things they wouldn't do normally. No one would hold a grudge. Not for a dead bounty hunter. The prisoner she had captured...now he was worthy of pity.

Harunobu's life had been narrowly spared on the battle field when an aide threw himself in the way of a knife struck that was delivered by the young man of the Leaf. This man had been making waves, his progress hindered only when he stopped to help struggling comrades. Or, indeed, even the occasional Cloud shinobi who lay dying but not dead. Most of the time, granted, the young man had been forced to kill, but his sentiments had not been lost on Harunobu. Compassion, indeed, was rare. Foolish, and maybe even pig-headed, but rare nonetheless.

His eyes flashed to a set of scrolls. There were hundreds, all of them sheathed in black and tied with a

red cord. Each one represented a life lost under Harunobu's command during the war. He promised to remember each of them, and this was the easiest way how, as not all had bodies to be returned and cremated.

Harunobu wished he had an entire army of this 'Yuji' fellow. A young man who took no joy in killing, but was remarkably efficient. Those were the types that made up the backbone of an army. There were too few of that type these days.

TWEET! TWEET!

The whistle! An intruder!

Harunobu grabbed his officer's sword and moved outside quickly and quietly. He stood on his porch, surveying the scene. His breath caught in his throat, and his heart sped up.

That man attacking...he's just like Yuji!

The attacker had hacked his way through the guards one at a time, two at a time, even four at a time. He moved forward as though unstoppable. It made Harunobu shiver to see such battlefield prowess. The lives being lost hit him next. Until he looked closer.

No one was being killed. Hurt, incapacitated, and those who resisted maimed, but not killed. In fact, the attacker was unarmed.

Twenty-five guards...empty-handed? Who is this?

--

As the last guard fell and the shrill warning whistle stopped, from a good hundred feet away, Yuji's eyes snapped up to meet Harunobu's. Neither man's eyes held any fear. It was the most resistance Yuji had faced so far on his 'mission'. In a way, it was refreshing. The other two had died, and not even by his own hand. Foolish bastards.

The very thought of why he was here put Yuji back in the moment. It didn't matter what kind of opponent this was. He needed to pay all the same. His strength was of no consequence. But it was always good business to confirm your target.

"Are you Masahiro Harunobu?"

Harunobu didn't draw his sword yet. This was exciting. A mysterious intruder, clearly aiming for him. Such malice! Such shock! Where would the man attack from? The left? The right? Would he come in close, or attack from a distance.

Ah. Formalities *did* need to be observed, didn't they?

"Giving your own name first is customary," Masahiro offered calmly, belying the excitement he felt anytime he did anything outside of orders. He never broke the rules, but here came a 'rule' right up to his door. Just begging to be 'broken'.

Yuji stalked closer, sure of his target now, despite the rather flippant answer.

"I am Yuji Itou. I was supposed to have died in a fire a year ago."

Harunobu's face fell a little. Fires were such an impersonal way to fight. Really, he took no joy in victory that way. Truthfully, it was a coward's tactic. Your enemy always deserved to see your face, save for assassination missions where more than one life was riding on the outcome. In singles combat, a name and face needed to be given.

Masahiro licked his lips as his opponent stalked closer. There was something vaguely familiar about him...

"Maybe I can refresh your memory."

Masahiro froze- Yuji was right next to him on the walkway!

Harunobu jumped back, a mix of anger, shock, and happiness filling him. This man was a combat veteran- not one easy to sneak up on. And yet, this opponent had done just that. And without the aid of any sort of clone jutsu!

It was a rush!

"...You raped my mistress. My beloved..." Yuji whispered, still advancing. "For a full day. You, the Raikage, and your...deceased comrades...Denryou Miyazaki and Aido Namikawa..."

Masahiro was surprisingly nonplussed by that. It made Yuji miss a step, which made him look foolish. Which made him more angry.

"Denryou and Namikawa...you killed them?" he asked placidly. His dark skin was showing signs of perspiration now. Beads rolled down his arms, to his hands, and down to the ground below. There was a slight shake to his hand.

Yuji shook his head. "Denryou was killed by a bodyguard. It was an accident. The poor guard was devastated when my kick threw him into his 'young master'. Pathetic creature. All those guards who stayed loyal to him, and he repaid them with weakness."

Yuji stepped forward hard, then blurred and disappeared, landing once again behind Masahiro.

"Namikawa at least put up a fight. A failure of a man, unfortunately. I cut off his arm and destroyed his eye. He bit his tongue off and drowned in his own blood to escape me."

Again, Yuji blurred and disappeared. This time, Harunobu heard his voice from above:

"Tell me: How will *you* make your penance for ruining my mistress' perfect body? Her exceptional mind? Her life...our life. Together...How will you make amends for the suffering you've caused, knowingly and willingly?"

Masahiro nodded solemnly. "An act I took no pleasure in. I followed orders like a good soldier. Though that does little to excuse it."

He turned and went inside.

"Tea, Itou-san?"

Yuji froze, unsure of how to react. He had blatantly announced his attentions, had he not? And now this man was inviting him in for tea? That didn't make any sense.

Which was probably why he did it, Yuji reminded himself. To catch me off guard, and possibly to poison me. As if I'd drink anything he served up.

"I'm curious," Yuji called out, making his way closer. A pleasant wind whipped through the air, tossing his hair and coat, cooling him down from his 'workout'. He put one foot on the porch, apparently as calm as Masahiro.

"Do you regret what you did?"

Harunobu reached inside the door. Yuji braced himself, but Masahiro withdrew only a picture in a handsome wooden frame. In it was a pretty woman, maybe ten years older than Yuji at the time of the photograph.

"This is Mihiko. My wife."

Masahiro clutched the picture to his chest, sighing deeply, a forlorn smile on his features.

"You see, she left me. Before I participated in that rape. To which I answer your question- yes. I regret it. I haven't stopped regretting it. Orders aside, I could have said no. But I think you can understand this:"

Masahiro took another picture out from inside the house. This one made Yuji's blood boil.

"I serve my master with the same loyalty you give to your mistress."

Yuji stepped up onto the porch. He was quiet, his eyes down. No surprise attack came. Nothing happened. Just he and the older man stood there for a long while. Eventually, Yuji looked up, bowed at the door, and took off his boots.

"I'll hear your story," Yuji told him. "Don't make anything for me; I won't eat or drink because I don't trust you. But you aren't like those other two, either."

Harunobu returned the bow, grinning as he welcomed Yuji into his home.

Two hours later, they were still talking.

-

There was nothing left to be said. Well, on Yuji's end. Masahiro still had a question.

My, how our conversation took twists and turns. The young man is very complex. He's accepted my story. Is that because I agreed to turn myself in to the Leaf authorities? Or is it because we are indeed kindred spirits? Oh well. I'm old now; it's my duty to pass knowledge on to the next generation.

"Before we depart, Itou-kun, may I ask one more question of you?"

Yuji looked up from the tea that had been set in front of him out of politeness. He nodded once, slowly, agreeing to hear Harunobu out.

"The drug...how long have you taken it?..."

Yuji didn't even blink.

“Not for long. And once I’ve turned you in, it won’t be necessary anymore. What gave away my use of it?”

“That drug...it’s nearly tripled your power since we last met...” Masahiro noted sagely. “But your body...Is that why you’re so covered up? So no one else will see what’s happened to your body?”

Yuji gave another slow nod. “The effects are reversible, so long as I stop within a month. My skin should return to normal. The psoriasis will stop.”

Harunobu gave him a stern look. “That is not what I meant. You *do* know what that will do to you internally?”

“There’s a girl, lying helpless in a hospital bed,” Yuji told him, voice solemn. “She’s been that way for a year. I don’t know if she’ll ever wake up. But right now, she’s helpless, and with each passing day, her chances for being the girl she was dry up. Every day, her muscles atrophy, and her brain functions drop.”

Yuji stood up, his face set firm in an expression of defiance.

“I belonged to her for only a short while. And only once did we truly connect. But to me, that one moment was an eternity. A wonderful, blissful eternity. One that was going to continue the rest of my life. We were going to build a life together. And then, just as that’s going to happen, she’s raped. Emotionally and physically scarred. And I was broken along with her.”

Yuji reached into one pocket, a gloved hand extracting a syringe.

“A comrade from the Leaf was stolen by power, in the form of the evil Orochimaru. His power grew impossibly in a short time. This is part of what allowed that. This drug. I tried every ‘honest’ way to get the power I needed. I trained constantly for a year. But it wasn’t enough.”

Harunobu shook his head sadly. “But to resort to this! An honorable warrior... You were strong on the battlefield.”

“Because I had conviction!” Yuji declared powerfully. “I knew that I was fighting for the right reasons. There had to be a happy ending! It wasn’t possible I could be wrong. Failure was not ever an option. But when all was said and done, and peace came, what did I have for it?”

Yuji’s eyes narrowed as he stared at some memory that was almost tangible in front of him.

“I saw happy couples, promotions, families...and even prayer and offerings for those who had died. I saw a world that had changed for the better. And yet...In the midst of that ‘new world’, there was a black spot. My own failure to protect what mattered most to me. The one thing I had to really show for, besides the guilt of ending so many lives. I had failed. There was nothing left. No reason to go on.

So I thought: Why not just die?

But that doesn’t happen easily to someone who’s whole life has been about survival. So there was a choice: Inject something lethal and die, or inject something bad and live. Because if I didn’t do something, I would die, mentally or physically.”

“So this drug is saving you and killing you at the same time?”

Yuji's gaze darkened. "It allows me to avenge my mistress. That's all I need. Besides... If she never recovers, this drug can be synthesized into a neuro-toxin. An easy way out."

Harunobu didn't flinch outside, but inside his guts writhed.

The horrors he saw- and committed- on the battlefield, with the added shock of seeing his lover raped... coupled with all that, the drug has changed his personality. I may be speaking to the last remnants of the respectable man who had me dead to rights in combat.

"For your own sake, Yuji, stop using the drug. Do you want Azami to awaken to a man who is no longer the one she remembered? Is this revenge so all-encompassing to you?"

"..."

Masahiro believed he'd gotten through to the boy. That he'd convinced him that this was the wrong way to go about doing this. But then:

"My mistress will not be the same, even if she awakens. Why should I stay the same? To protect her this time, I'll need to be ruthless. *Beyond* ruthless. Whatever is necessary to restore her life and vitality, that is what I will do. No matter what."

Harunobu inclined his head, acknowledging that he understood. He stood up slowly, careful not to make Yuji think he was attacking. He put his tea kettle away neatly, but pulled one cup out from a cupboard. He put it into a small bag of things he was going to take with him to prison.

"That cup...the first time my wife came over for tea, she drank from it," he explained, turning the rather plain earthenware cup around in his hand. It was black, save for a small pink cherry blossom on one side. It was faded slightly with age and use. He smiled at the cup, then set it in his bag.

Yuji looked at the cup, too. He was starting to feel bad for this man. But then he pictured what remained of Azami, and he had to grit his teeth to stay calm.

"I have no such moment of my..."

He stopped, realizing that wasn't true. He indicated his feet by nodding toward them. It was impolite to show the bottom of your foot to someone, so unless Harunobu asked, Yuji's description would have to suffice.

"She gave me a tattoo as she tortured me. It was one of the things that finally 'broke' me. At that point, I belonged to her, whatever she wanted to do to me..."

Masahiro opened his mouth to say something sympathetic, but Yuji cut him off.

"Let's go. If you're coming with me to the Leaf to stand trial, we need to leave. Now."

Harunobu lingered only a moment longer, picturing his wife sitting across from him, sipping tea and laughing at his stories. He hoped the memory would sustain him the rest of his life.

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Yuji waited in Tsunade's office, looking out the window. Tsunade herself was counting out his bounty money.

Denryou Miyazaki: 5000000 Ryo
Aido Namikawa: 1000000 Ryo
Masahiro Harunobu: 15000000 Ryo
Plus 'alive' bonus: 500000 Ryo

Tsunade looked up to Yuji, a smile on her face. "When we've collected the money from the people who have the bounties out, you will not ever have to work again. You're beyond rich now, Yuji."

Yuji still looked out the window, only nodding to acknowledge what he'd said. She frowned at that, wondering what he found so fascinating out there. He hadn't taken his sunglasses off. He usually observed the rules of courtesy better than that. Then again, he'd had a hard time of things recently, so she supposed she could let him go a bit.

Oh, he's looking at the hospital. Azami's room...

Her smile grew. He sure as hell wasn't going to find her there.
Shizune, who had been standing quietly by, smiled to Tsunade and left.

"Yuji?" Tsunade called softly, recalling his attention. He slid his gaze toward her. At least, she thought he did. With those sunglasses on, she really couldn't tell. He turned his body to match his eyes.

"Sorry. I'm just tired," he told her, letting a smile drip into his voice. "I've been away for too long."

Tsunade nodded her head, agreeing with him. She'd actually missed him. Moreover, she'd been worried about him. In his mental state, he could have been capable of anything. But it seemed like he'd been healed.

She pulled him into a hug. Something didn't feel right. His chakra...it was too big. And agitated.

That last bounty he brought...Harunobu...he told me to check Yuji's chakra. It couldn't be that he-

They were interrupted at that point. Shizune opened the door, holding it and trying to coax someone in from the outside.

"He won't care!" she said, reaching out to grab an arm.

Yuji's eyes widened. He took off his sunglasses, his mouth dropping open. It couldn't be...

7 - The Solution

There is nothing more fragile than the human heart.

Bent as reeds in a storm; broken as bones. Susceptible to thoughts, feelings, emotions- love, hate, fear, bravery, loyalty, honesty, good, and evil. So much is allowed in, unless we cut out hearts off from everyone and everything. If that is your choice, then you will feel neither pain nor love. You will not truly live. You will simply 'be'. You will exist just for the sake of existing. And that is no existence at all. It is a wasted, empty shell of a life. Giving nothing, taking nothing. Leaving no mark on humanity, be it good or bad.

There is nothing stronger than the human heart.

The heart can be shattered, and yet it can likewise be mended. Pain will turn to acceptance; acceptance to solace; solace to life anew. For those who can open their hearts, there will be no shortage of second chances to find happiness and comfort. Each being has a place in this universe. All one must do is accept the joy and pain of the heart.

Azami came into the room. She seemed reluctant, as though worried or embarrassed. If Yuji had been thinking anything other than “is it really her?”, he might have figured out that she was just as surprised as he was. Besides, this had been awful for her. She was sure she wasn’t her old self. Was she like he remembered? Would he still find her attractive? She wasn’t sure she could in his position. Was she ‘damaged goods’ now?

Yuji took a tentative step toward her, unsure of what to do. Was this real? An illusion? And if it was really her, how did he act? Did he kiss her? Did he bow and assume his position at her feet? Did he put a leash around his neck and strip naked?

“Yuji...” she said in a half-whisper. She took a step toward him, too. She met his eyes with hers, and thought she’d never felt such happiness.

When she had heard he’d left a month and a half ago, she’d been almost hurt. But as her attackers began to show up (or at least, she had been told they’d be brought in), she realized that he was simply making sure the world was safe. He was alright. He was the old Yuji.

So she worked hard, asking that he not be informed of her recovery. She had looked like hell when she woke up. Her muscles were mostly gone; her breasts sagged; her skin was pale, and her face gaunt from trauma.

The coma had healed both body and mind to a large degree, but she still wasn’t the Azami he would remember. She needed weeks of rehab for that. From the second she’d woken up, she’d done everything to get back in shape. Even now, six weeks later, she knew she wasn’t perfect. Her muscles weren’t back completely, but her skin was a normal color, her face filled out to normal, and her insides sterilized of those rotten frackers who’d invaded her body. She would never forget that awful memory. So instead, as she rehabbed, she thought of Yuji. Of how he had fought bravely; desperately, even helpless as he had been.

And now, he'd brought her rapists to justice. Except that prick Raikage, but he was untouchable.

My tits don't sag anymore, so I've got that at least. she thought sardonically. But more, she thought about the man who'd waited for her.

I lost my parents...they didn't want me anyway. Now I've got someone who does. I'm not a scared little orphan girl, fighting off rapists. I'm not tied to that bed, with those pigs humping me. I'm free to be with who I want. And he's here. He waited.

I love him.

With that, she bolted across the room and jumped into his arms, knocking him down. She began to maul him with kisses and whispered words, straining to touch every bit of him. She laid fully on top of him, seizing his head and kissing first his lips, then his cheek, and finally his ear.

"God, I missed you!" she whispered, nibbling at his ear.

He didn't respond with words. He just held her tight to him. Her tears fell, salty to the taste, mixing with the ones that were tricking down his cheek. They were going to get a second chance at life. They were going to-

Then he saw it. The scars. On her neck. On her arms. Those bastards! When he'd been unconscious, they must have carved her up like a turkey! With knives, or nails. To hear her scream. To listen to her beg. To-

"Azami...we can have a life together," he told her, kissing her neck lovingly, cutting off his own thoughts in the process. "I have one more bounty to collect, and then I'm done. I'm yours forever."

-

Throughout the happy reunion, Tsunade and Shizune had been comparing notes. They had come to the same startling conclusion.

Yuji had been using an illegal drug. At least, they thought it was illegal. It wasn't anything they'd seen before. Quite a feat. Between the two of them, they possessed entire volumes of information. But this drug...

They tuned back in to the conversation the young lovers were having, to hear the last part.

"...one more bounty to collect..."

Tsunade carefully moved toward Yuji. She smiled down at the couple happily entwined on her floor. But she was the look of concern on Azami's face, too. The last bounty...

"Yuji...who is this last target...?"

Yuji note the dangerous tone in her voice. Disapproving. Worrisome. He turned his head to face her, his sunglasses back in place. His tone was stern, leaving no room for argument.

"The Raikage. He's as guilty as the rest of them."

To say he was targeting the head of a nation so brazenly...to even think it! The repercussions wouldn't end with death for him!

"Yuji, we know about the drug..."

More dangerous tones. Yuji didn't like this. He looked to Azami. But there was no comfort there, either. Her face held the same worry.

"He is no more immune to justice than anyone else," Yuji stated quietly. Azami had let go of him, pulled back as if he had the plague. But why? That didn't make sense. Why would she be repulsed. Hadn't this been what she wanted? Wasn't it right to rid the world of rapists? Why should anyone be immune?

Tsunade reached for him, but Yuji pulled away. He seemed to ignore her after that. He was focused completely on Azami.

"So, this is how it is? I did this to protect you. I love you. And you're disgusted by me."

Ignoring her feeble protest, Yuji stalked up to the roof, followed by all of them. He stood in the center of the roof, looking out across the village.

"I lived to protect this place. The people. All of them. It didn't matter who. And I just protected them again. The women don't have to live in fear of these pigs. They can feel safe."

He turned to face the three women, his arms outstretched.

"So what is so wrong about me wanting to deal with one more? The man who started the war. The man who caused all those lives to be lost. The man who made me into a murderer..."

Yuji clenched his hands into fists. "The blood on my hands will never come off. So one more stain won't matter. It will prevent others from doing what I had to do."

The three girls approached carefully, but stopped when Yuji reached into his waist pouch. He pulled out a syringe. It was full of a deep purple liquid, with lines of an even deeper purple in it, as if it had veins. It almost looked more like a solid than a liquid. It was the consistency of blood, or so it seemed. He held it up in front of his face.

"This is my last dose," Yuji announced to them. He pushed the syringe into his upper left arm, pushing the plunger down slowly. He closed his eyes, but from pain rather than ecstasy.

"Mm...I hate this," he grumbled, pulling the syringe out of his arm. "I hate relying on drugs for strength. I'll have to earn all the strength legitimately...
After I take down the Raikage."

"I can't let you do that, Yuji," Tsunade told him, moving slowly toward him. "You're under a lot of stress, so you'll be forgiven, of course. But you've got to let this go. Azami is alive, safe, and now a citizen. Isn't that enough?"

Yuji didn't move against her approach, but he exuded a dangerous aura.

"Now that I've disgusted her? No. If I can't have love, then all I have is a mission. And that mission is to make sure no one suffers as she did."

Tsunade appealed to Yuji's common sense first. His bond with the Leaf was unbreakable, surely, even through this drug-and-pain induced haze!

"If you try to kill him, you'll start a war."

"They'll be in so much disarray there won't be a war. They're not in any hurry to try us again, anyway. Besides- kill? I didn't intentionally kill anyone on this little crusade. If he dies, it's his bad luck."

The casual manner in which Yuji spoke worried Tsunade even more. Was his mental state more damaged than she originally thought? It couldn't be good that his level of morality had done a complete one-eighty. Not from a man who seemed to carry guilt as often as kunai.

"Don't make me call for backup on this, Yuji. Just relax and let me get that drug out of you..."

Her fingers were inches away from Yuji when he pulled away. Tsunade stepped back, partly in shock and partly in self-defense.

He was affected by the trauma, too! shoot! I didn't even think about the cumulative effect of thinking about her rape so long! I was more worried about her mental state! But of course Yuji would feel it, too! He watched it happen! He was as helpless as she was!

"Shizune...call for back-up. He's a danger to everyone right now, including himself."

"R-right!" she stammered, running down the stairs to find the nearest able bodies.

-

Within thirty seconds, Yuji was surrounded. Kakashi in front; Gai behind. Tenten, Lee, Neji, and two ANBU guards surrounded him.

"Don't make us fight you," Kakashi warned, his hand hovering over his headband. He was ready to use the Sharingan if he had to. "We all want to help you."

Yuji didn't miss a beat. Standing tall, sunglasses in place, and mask around his mouth again, he didn't even blink.

"Then let me go and do what I need to do."

Kakashi held firm. "I can't do that. Now, please. This is your last chance to come peacefully. You're surrounded. There's no escape."

Yuji looked around dramatically. "One, two...seven of you? For me?"

Kakashi's hand tensed. That was it! The trigger for the battle to begin!

"Not nearly enough!" Yuji declared, shooting forward, grabbing the hand Kakashi was going to lift his headband with, and throwing him to the ground. Before anyone could move, Yuji closed the distance between himself and Gai with one step. He struck with the heel of his hand, right on the center of Gai's chest.

"Gah!"

Gai flew across the roof, hitting one of the giant concrete pillars hard enough to crack it and stick in place for a full three seconds. He peeled off and fell to the ground, staying where he laid.

“That’s it! Let’s go!”

The ANBU agents mobilized, dancing in and out of some kind of pattern that was unreadable. Their swords began to flash out with stabs and slashes.

Yuji dodged effortlessly, leaping and twisting through the air. The longer the attack went on, the more he could read their pattern. He waited for the right moment, before he faked a leap and stood still. Two swords slashed by his head. He leaned just enough to dodge them both. His hands flashed out, catching the hands of assailants and stripping their weapons. He send one sword spinning end over end straight off the roof. The other one he kept, elbowing it’s owner in the stomach hard enough to knock him all the way across the roof. Only a last-second reaction by Kakashi stopped the man from plummeting to the ground.

Yuji stopped, as did all the attacks. Then, abruptly, he threw the ANBU sword toward a tree about fifty meters away. There was a scream, and an agent fell from the tree, hands pierced by the sword.

“That’s better. Without that annoying Paralysis Jutsu she’d been casting, I can move much better...” Not even a hint of remorse or worry in Yuji’s voice. He seemed to cast an incredibly long shadow, so imposing was he at the moment. All these solid jonin and no one had hit him yet. It was several levels beyond Yuji’s power to pull off such a feat. It was almost an Orochimaru level of power, had Orochimaru not been inhibited by his constantly-failing bodies. Yuji was young and physically healthy. So his accumulation of power would be more similar to Sasuke’s, perhaps. That was not a calming thought.

Lee and Tenten both made their move. Tenten’s bo went low, then high, while her other hand threw a series of kunai. Yuji leapt, then tucked and rolled in between them all, landing crouched. His palm hit Tenten’s shoulder, sending her spinning away, but otherwise unharmed.

From the sidelines, Tsunade noted that particular strike.

He isn’t trying to kill. He’s still in there! He’s still himself! But how do we bring him out of this stupor?!

“Perfect, Tenten! I am ready now!”

Lee’s foot cracked Yuji under the chin, sending him high into the air. Lee leapt up, perfectly aligned with Yuji’s shadow. He had Yuji in the perfect position for one of his most devastating attacks.

“Primary Lo-”

Yuji spun around, seized Lee by the vest, and hit him several times in the stomach, rapid-fire with his right hand.. Lee began to free-fall fast, blood falling from his mouth as he began his descent toward the hard rooftop.

How is this possible? When we sparred, he could not even land one hit! And now he has defeated my best technique!

Yuji turned his head, seeing Gai leaping up behind him. Yuji threw Lee hard into Gai, putting both of them back into the concrete pillar. He landed back on the roof, in the center. Immediately, he knew he'd fallen into a trap.

“Eight Triagrams, two palms-
Four palms-
Eight palms-
!”

That was the farthest Neji got. Yuji had begun hitting back, matching Neji blow for blow, then surpassing him. He was halted midway through the attack. He recovered and tried to restart, but now Yuji was dodging the strikes with a minimum of effort.

“That’s it! We’ve got to stop him!”

Shizune held her forearm steady, her hand tensing on the pull string of her spring-loaded needles. They were dipped in a special toxin that would paralyze at the slightest touch. She just had to get a clear shot...

Meanwhile, Neji found himself on the defensive and quickly transitioned to his Rotation defense. Kakashi jumped over the spinning Neji, a Lightning Blade aimed right at Yuji.

Yuji dodged him by a paper’s width, giving him a hard roundhouse kick to the back. Tenten’s bo was thrust toward him. He leaned back, caught it as she tried to pull the strike back, and threw it- and her- across the roof.

Now!

Shizune fired her needles, a full spread of six. They were aiming toward Yuji, no way they could miss.

Abruptly, Yuji did a back flip, dodging the needles. As he landed, Tenten had him lined up with shuriken. She threw them, and he seemed to defy logic as he dodged each of them with blinding speed. He blurred as he moved, closing the distance between them, grabbing her hands and smacking them into his knee to release her hold on her weapons. They clattered to the ground. Yuji jumped backward, avoiding her leg sweep as she cradled her injured throwing hand.

Silence. And no movement. Everyone tried to recover and strategize. And this drug! What was it?! And how did it work so effectively?!

“Are we done here? I have a mission to see to. I really don’t want to fight you. Any of you.”

What could they do? They would have to kill him to stop him. And that was fast becoming an option. One no one really wanted to consider. To kill a man who’d been so traumatized that his personality had changed...the very thought left a bad taste in their mouths. And moreover, Yuji was still Yuji. A war hero. They couldn’t let him become a villain. They couldn’t let him start the next war.

Tsunade began to step forward. She was the last of those who were unharmed. And the best hope for taking him down regardless. If Yuji was in there, he would not hit her. There was no way. Not unless she

struck first.

And one blow was all Tsunade needed to finish a fight.

Abruptly, someone stepped in front of Tsunade.

It was Azami.

“It’s my fault he’s like this. It’s my job to fix him...” she said, her voice full of a conviction that her expression did not match. She closed her eyes, tears barely contained within, and looked right at Yuji. “...Or destroy him.”

She walked out to him, her eyes boring into his. She tried to swagger as she did before the rape. She needed to be the Azami he remembered. She wanted to be the girl he fell in love with. The one who defeated him in combat. The one who finally broke him in interrogation. The girl who had taken his virginity and given hers in return. They had a bond. For a week, they existed outside of reality. It was only the two of them.

Capture that feeling. Capture him and pull him back.

After what seemed like hours, she reached him. No one moved or spoke as the two stared at each other.

“Yuji, you can’t kill him.”

“...”

“If it’s what you think I want,” she continued slowly, not breaking her eye contact with him. She couldn’t see his eyes under the dark sunglasses concealing them, but she could feel his gaze. “You’re wrong. It’s not what I want. Even though I understand why you’d think I would.”

Azami reached a hand out slowly toward him. Before, she’d been more powerful than him. Now, she knew, she was no match. Even if he hadn’t been so enhanced by that drug, she’d been in a coma for a full year. She needed more than six weeks of therapy to rebuild herself. So she had only one other tactic.

“I don’t need you to kill him to feel safe. I feel safe with you. I trust you. Like I trust no one else.”

Her hand inched more toward him. She could see his expression soften behind the mask. He needed just a little more prodding.

“Do you remember the time we spent together? That last night when we both finally broke down?”

Her hand was inches away from him. His hand raised to meet hers. The bare tips of his fingers closed around hers. His other hand pulled off his sunglasses and lowered his mask. It was odd to see his eyes again at first.

“You...can forgive me?”

His voice cut through the silence like a kunai through manju. He sank to one knee, still holding her hand. She looked down at him, a smile on her face.

“Of course! You did it for me, after all. How could I not forgive you?”

He brought her hand to his lips, kissing tenderly.

“Mistress...”

She ran her hand through his hair, feeling the scar underneath his hair. The scar he’d gotten when he’d been thrown into a wall while trying to save her. She bent down and kissed it.

“Not mistress. Not now. You belong to me, but right now, I’m Azami. The girl you waited for. The girl who drove you to do all this...I should be asking forgiveness. If we had just run for it like you said...”

Yuji’s eyes snapped up. “No! You can’t blame yourself for that! I should have protected you! I should have done more! We were strong! We shouldn’t have been helpless! They got lucky...nothing more.”

It seemed as though she couldn’t stop smiling. She held her hand out to him, offering him help up. He took her hand gratefully.

They hugged. The others watched, blushing a bit themselves. All the world loved a lover, after all. But no one was watching the ANBU agent on the far side of the roof. He was busy taking aim with a knife.

Azami saw it first. She spun, putting herself between the knife and Yuji. It struck her high up on the back with enough force to make her hit Yuji’s shoulder with her chin. She slumped into his chest with a moan. He held her up, shocked and confused at what had just happened. It took only a moment for the confusion to wear off. Yuji’s head snapped toward the agent who attacked.

“I gave no order to attack!” Tsunade shouted as she and Shizune ran to Azami, beginning to tend to her wound immediately.

“I don’t follow your orders!” the agent declared. “I-”

A piece of concrete from the shattered pillars smacked him in the face in mid-sentence. Yuji had thrown it with all his power behind it, enraged once again. Had the agent not leaned back, he would have been killed instantly. Instead, the porcelain mask cracked, then crumbled. The remains of the mask fell to the ground.

“You!” Yuji snarled. This is what came of not tying up all your loose ends!

It was the servant of Denryou Miyazaki. The one who Yuji had kicked, accidentally causing Denryou’s death.

Yuji was across the roof and at holding the man’s throat within half the time it took to blink an eye. He held the older man up high by his neck, holding over the edge of the roof. The servant began to cough and choke, turning progressively more purple as he kicked his feet in desperation. He grabbed Yuji’s

wrists, as that was all that was in reach.

“So you’ve failed twice. You couldn’t save that rapist frack, and now you failed to kill me.”

The older man kicked out suddenly. Yuji didn’t move, but that was a mistake. The servant’s boots were tipped with spikes, and very quickly four deep, narrow puncture wounds were in Yuji’s stomach. Yuji retaliated by squeezing harder, turning the servant purple. His free hand flashed out and pulverized the man’s stomach with thirty punches thrown in two seconds. From there, he dropped him, letting the man fall until he was just barely within reach. Then he caught him by the fingers and jerked up, breaking all ten in one go and then holding him up by just the destroyed digits. The scream of pain could be heard all around the Leaf.

“YUJI! SHE’LL BE FINE!” Shizune shouted.

Yuji looked at her, nodded, and then let go with one hand. He knelt down close, staring Denryou’s servant in the eyes, squeezing the broken fingers tightly, grinding the small bones together.

“I’m going to let go now. Because you didn’t kill her or me, I’ll let fate decide whether you live or die.”

The servant spat in his face.

“I don’t need my hands to activate the paper bombs on my chest! With no master to serve anymore, I’ll take you with me to my gr-”

Yuji let go, and the servant plummeted at a speed that even a shinobi at full strength would have a hard time surviving. Yuji watched dispassionately as he hit the ground nearly a hundred feet below. He could see his knees blow out from the impact. He crumpled to the ground with a scream that could be heard even up this high.

Leaning over the edge, Yuji looked down, his sunglasses replaced. A neutral, almost placed expression was on his face.

“Fate wasn’t with him. He didn’t die. But he won’t walk again.”

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After a few days, all had been forgiven. Yuji hadn’t seriously hurt anyone, after all. And they could all understand his desperation.

“It was so romantic, wasn’t it?” Tenten gushed to Neji. The story was common knowledge now, and among the females, considered quite romantic, if a little on the psycho end of things. “I mean, the desperation he had to protect her! (sigh).”

Neji grunted non-committally. “But to turn to drugs...Yuji, of all people...”

Tenten looked down. “You know, I can’t bring myself to dislike him for it. We all did things we weren’t proud of in battle. But Yuji...”

She shook her head, wincing on his behalf. “Between the people he was forced to kill, the rape of his girlfriend, and then a year with nothing to do but think about it... I don’t know how sane I’d be.”

This time, Neji agreed outright. “Yes. It was enough to unhinge even Yuji, who was among the best of

us. I hope that this therapy will work for him. But I wonder...what did Azami want with those chains of yours, Tenten?"

Tenten blushed, giggling a little bit. "Well, it's not what you'd think, Neji..."

Neji looked at her with a curious expression. "What do you mean?"

Tenten laughed again, whispering to him: "Some girls like to play rough."

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Azami secured Yuji from the ceiling, his wrists and ankles bound by chain. She caressed his face lovingly, her black-painted nails leaving scratches down his face as she dug in farther. He winced, and she snapped forward and grabbed his chin.

"You know you love it," she whispered, her lips so close to his that he could *taste* the words coming out of her mouth. She kissed him sloppily, tongue and lips prying their counterparts apart and invading his mouth.

Her free hand found the collar of his shirt. She dug in and began to tear it off. She left a long, narrow scratch down his chest. She broke her lip lock on him and licked the scratch slowly while she pulled the tatters of the shirt off his body.

Her hand went to work again, tugging at his belt, then undoing the button and zipper on his pants. She paused there, looking up at him, a teasing smile on her face.

"I can stop..."

His eyes pleaded with her. Both sets of dark eyes danced across each other, having a conversation all their own.

Don't stop.
Never stop.

I won't.
I never will.

She smirked, lazily giving his stomach a lick, culminating with her tongue flicking in his navel.
"Mmm...tasty. Even with that poison defiling your body."

Her glance flicked to the tattoos on his shoulders. It had taken two to restrain his chakra this time. All that power had been difficult to control. But in the end, she achieved control, as she knew they both preferred it.

It made her shudder happily. She had tamed all that power. It all belonged to her. It was at her beck and call. Even though Yuji clearly desired nothing more, she took comfort in knowing that she could have forced him if she had wanted to. Having such a powerful man completely dependent on her...

She looked at her chained-up boyfriend. The sweat glistening off his body from the potent mixture of

emotions and endorphins. Desire. Pain. Humiliation. Love. Obedience. Lust.

There was no pretence of 'interrogation' this time. Simply torture and sex. Pain and passion. This time, they would really have fun. Azami had been allowed to bring anything and everything to help Yuji through the withdrawal period he would have coming down off the drugs. It was going to be a nasty, nasty process. Thankfully, she had been allowed a counter-drug that was normally forbidden outside of the most torturous, darkest interrogations.

Azami absently finished undressing Yuji, ripping off his pants and underwear, since she didn't want to untie him to remove them. She'd already brought spare clothes...for when she was ready to let him have them. She also had a selection of whips, paddles, and even some small electricity-based devices. She had also gotten him a new collar and leash for the occasion. All of her favorite things. So many ways she could play with her new toy.

She hid her surprise behind her back, sauntering up to him. She tossed off the black gown she had been wearing. She knew he liked it. It allowed her to flash just the right amount of chest and leg, even letting a garter high up on her leg, concealing a knife, be viewed. The combination of bare flesh and weapons was definitely a turn on for Yuji. The sight of the small knife concealed in said garter was absolutely enticing to him.

She let him get a full view of her in her bra and panties, both of which were black with just the right amount of lace to hint at femininity, but not so much that she seemed to be shamelessly baiting him. No, this underwear wasn't for show. It was functional. Again, she knew Yuji very well.

"So you like drugs, do you?"

She knew he did not, but it was all part of the game.

"Well," she continued, holding up a syringe full of an ominous, colorless liquid, "This was a gift from Lady Tsunade. We'll be using this in place of your other drug. It won't give you power. Instead, it will give you hunger...desperation...and pain. You see, it's a powerful aphrodisiac. Restrained as you are, you'll have to beg for relief. And my body is the only antidote. And were I to drug myself as well..."

She pushed her body close to his, rubbing his chest while she bit down -hard- on his collarbone and shoulder. His blood dribbled down onto her lips, where she lapped it up happily.

"Well, kunoichi are known for their passion. If I add this, you may not be enough to satisfy me. Can you really allow me to suffer? If not, I suggest you try your best to take care of me..."

"I love you," he breathed, wanting to say it now, before lust took over. They'd made sweet, honest, passionate love their first time together. This time, if she was into the BDSM thing- well, so was he. Perfect. He hated himself so much. But Azami put him at ease.

Azami gave him a light, sweet kiss. A quick show of love before she began to torture him again. His body was so incredibly hot, all cut up like this. His power rendered helpless...

"I love you, too."

And she meant it.

She put an ice cube on his right nipple, letting him think about what was about to happen. Last time, a needle near his nipple had broken him. This time, it would have far more pleasant consequences. The fact that this was where she'd chosen to inject him with the aphrodisiac (cleverly mixed with another mixture of herbs that would take the edge off his withdrawal. She wouldn't dream of this ridiculous 'drug play' otherwise. If left unchecked, however, Yuji would have let himself suffer the full effects of the withdrawal as a means of punishing himself for cheating his way to power. He had never lost his morals) was no accident. She played on his memories and fears.

He watched the needle approach warily, worried. He even pulled his chest back as far as his bindings would allow. But he had nowhere to go, and so didn't make the effort.

Finally, she injected him. She forced his head towards the syringe, making him watch the liquid inside drain into his body.

"You have thirty seconds until the effects kick in..."

He smiled at her, shaking his head slightly. "I have to admit, I enjoyed being the super-powered bad guy. Instead of the clean-cut hero."

She gave his chin a little tickle with her fingers. "I loved being bad, too. Everything is sexier when you're bad. But you are fated to be a good guy."

Ten seconds.

"I'll be a 'dark' hero, then. And if you're willing to stay with me..."

She had used a black lip gloss, specially treated to help keep him distracted from the suffering he'd soon feel. She hadn't applied it right away. She hadn't wanted to mark him up yet. Now, though, she pressed those painted lips to his tenderly. Then, before she spoke, she added her tongue into the mix, to accentuate her words.

"Let's be bad...together..."