

### Shoulder Devil Ch. 3

"He didn't even look at me," came the sad whine. "Even though I fought so hard!"

Sakura sighed and gave her best friend a hug. "Come on Ino, don't be sad. He doesn't look at anyone. But at least the teachers let you spar with him! That shows how much you've improved!"

"Hmmm..." Ino melted into the hug, then muttered, "It hurts."

"Where?"

"My back from when he knocked me down."

Sakura snorted. "You just want another backrub." Sometimes Sakura regretted using Ino to test the tips on using pressure points that she'd picked up from a medical text. Now the girl would use any excuse to talk Sakura into giving her a massage, and she was utterly shameless about it.

Sure enough, Ino was smirking at her, "Well then, you shouldn't be so good at it." Then she was pouting at her with watery eyes. "Besides, the love of my life just beat me up in a spar. As my best friend, isn't it your job to help comfort me?"

Sakura didn't bother holding back her eye roll. "And where were you when Sasuke kicked my butt two weeks ago?"

Ino turned up her nose. "That's entirely deserved after the way you cheated him out of a victory that first time."

Before meeting the soul inside the clockwork jewel, Sakura would either have left in a huff or meekly accepted that remark. Now she placed a hand on Ino's shoulder and squeezed down on her collarbone with chakra-enhanced strength.

Ignoring the resulting whimper Sakura cheerfully said, "Ino, you're right. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to train my pressure point technique. After all, there's so many interesting points on your body I haven't tried yet."

"Ow ow ow I'm sorry I'm sorry I didn't mean it!"

Sakura huffed and relented. Ino scrunched up her face as she rubbed her shoulder. "Mou, so mean Sakura! Can't you take a joke?"

"My tolerance for your jokes is at about the same level as your tolerance for pain." Sakura teased.

"Hmph. What happened to that sweet shy girl I used to know? I want old Sakura back!"

Sakura only chuckled. There had been no heat in Ino's words, only artificial whining. Over the last several months Sakura had asserted herself more and more within her social circle. She had not

noticed it at the time, but some of Tanya's mannerisms - particularly her attitude of taking absolutely no shit from anyone - had rubbed off on her own. However, instead of offending Ino, it only seemed to make her happier. The two of them regularly traded barbs that would send any other girl running in tears, yet their friendship only seemed to grow stronger for it. Even their newfound ambition to climb the taijutsu rankings only brought them closer together instead of causing more rivalry.

Sakura mentally sighed as she started carefully working on the muscles of Ino's back. *"At least one of my relationships is working out."* she mentally commented to the Type-95 jewel hidden under her clothing.

*"Well, it's arguably the more important one."* came the voice of Tanya von Degurechaff. *"Besides, I told you the reason Sasuke is probably ignoring all girls is because he simply hasn't gone through puberty yet. He's probably still at the 'girls are icky' stage. Late bloomers are a thing, you know?"*

Sakura tried not to let her frustration show on her face. Since that first time she had been up against Sasuke twice. She had lost both times. The trick with the sparring ring would only ever have worked once, so she didn't embarrass herself trying to repeat it. But without it, her defeat was almost assured given Sasuke's massive advantages in talent and training. Even so, she had surprised herself. She'd managed to drag out both spars for minutes, landing several solid hits before going down. Furthermore, she'd managed to rack up wins against every other top taijutsu ranker. It was a far better performance than she had ever believed herself capable of, yet instead of finding it attractive Sasuke just seemed frustrated at her growth.

*"Maybe he doesn't like strong girls after all? Maybe that's not his type?"* Sakura sent.

*"Since he's never shown any interest in any girl, there's no way of actually knowing his type. I'd say you'd have an easier time proving he prefers his own gender."*

*"Don't even joke about that!"*

*"Ah, not a fan of yaoi? Strange, I always thought girls were into that sort of thing."*

*"Ugh! Don't tell me you like that stuff?"*

*"No. But then I was never a very normal girl."*

As Sakura continued working the kinks out of Ino's back and bantering with Tanya, she appreciated how both her friends helped distract her from her romantic problems. Still, she couldn't help but keep an eye on the calendar. The date of the final exams was only two months away. After that, they'd all be broken up into teams and it would be much harder to catch Sasuke's eye then. She really hoped Tanya was right about him being a late bloomer, because she refused to accept the other theory.

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"HEY SAKURA!"

"ARGH!" The dark green glow around her hands flew out of control, and the apple she'd been working on withered and fell apart. Sakura whirled around in a fury. "GODDAMIT NARUTO! Can't you ever learn to talk in a normal voice? I'm not deaf!"

In a fine twist of irony, Sakura had actually developed some tolerance to the loud and annoying boy over the last year. This was not because he had improved his behavior, but because of how virulently Tanya hated him. So vitriolic were Tanya's rants about the blond boy, Sakura had actually found herself defending him, pointing out that many of the faults that Tanya identified could only ever be fixed by a good role model, something Naruto, as an orphan, lacked. Since then she'd tried to be a bit more patient with him, but sometimes, like now, he made it very hard. Medical chakra was dangerous enough without someone yelling in her ear.

Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Sorry, Sakura! But I saw you and I just wanted to say hi! And hey, you want to come Ichiraku Ramen with me? They're having a special sale! It could be our first date..."

Of course, the trouble with trying to be patient with Naruto was just how quickly he could burn through it. He was almost as frustrating as Sasuke. Sometimes, Naruto could show flashes of genuine insight. And then he'd almost immediately regress to being a buffoon.

"Naruto," Sakura bit out. "We have been over this before. Just because I'm willing to talk to you doesn't mean I want to go on a date with you! What sane girl would?!" She hadn't meant to add that last line, but annoyance loosened her tongue.

"Hey! I'm going to be Hokage you know! Everyone will look up to me then!"

Sakura felt something snap. Today had been a day of ninjutsu practice in class, and Naruto had again demonstrated he couldn't do the Clone technique to save his life. That he would have the sheer unmitigated gall to make such a boast when Sakura was finding so much difficulty self-teaching anything beyond the Academy basics was a step too far.

Her voice was steady and calm as she spoke. "I don't believe you."

"Huh?"

"I don't believe you when you say you'll be Hokage. I've never believed you. Do you know why?"

"Look, just 'cos I'm last in class - "

"No Naruto. It has nothing to do with you being last. It's because you. Never. Try."

"What? 'Course I try! Naruto Uzumaki never gives up! That's my ninja way!"

"Liar." Sakura's hiss was almost serpentine, and her face must not be any better, judging by how Naruto took a step back. "All you do is the exact same thing, over and over again, and then acting

surprised when it doesn't work. That's not trying! That's just being lazy! You tell everyone that you never give up, but the truth is, you're too lazy to try anything new!"

"T-that's not..."

"You keep asking me out for a date in the exact same way. I say no every time, yet you never even try to figure out what you did wrong. I've called you too loud a hundred times, yet you still can't control your volume! There's only six weeks left until the finals, and you still can't do the Clone! Yet instead of practicing or trying to get help from Iruka sensei, you're here wasting my time!"

Naruto was looking down at the ground now. As Sakura paused to take breath, he mumbled something. "What was that?" Sakura asked.

"I said, I've tried the Clone tons of times. I just can't make it work," Naruto muttered.

Sakura raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "So you just gave up? I thought Naruto Uzumaki never gives up?"

Watching Naruto's face turn red with shame, Sakura decided to drive home the point. "Naruto, do you know I spend an hour each day working on my chakra control and techniques, even on school days?"

"Oh..umm..."

"Do you know why I spend an hour a day on it?"

"So you can get real good at it?"

"No Naruto. The reason I spend an hour on it, is because I can't spend more time training without getting chakra exhaustion. I have so many things I want to train, and I can't because of my natural limits. Do you know how jealous I am of you?"

"Of me??"

"Yes, you! You can't sense chakra can you? Well I can, just a little bit, and even that's enough for me to tell that you have more chakra than anyone in the academy! Even Iruka-sensei!"

"R-really?"

"Yes! And what do you do with all that chakra? Nothing! You waste time goofing around and pranking people and bothering me! You could easily spend all day playing around with chakra and hand signs and trying to figure something that worked, but you don't! And that's why you'll never be Hokage! Because whenever something gets too hard, you just keep trying the same thing and whining about it instead of actually using your brains to come up with a new idea!"

"Y-yeah? Well I'll do it! Just watch! I'll come up with some awesome stuff!"

"Don't say it, idiot. Just do it. And while we're at it, when's the last time you sat down to study your text books?"

"Uhhh...."

Sakura sneered. "Let me guess, you had a hard time understanding the material, so you just called it boring and gave up, didn't you? You sure do give up a lot."

That stung Naruto into showing a bit of anger. "Yeah well why do we even need to learn all that useless stuff?"

"Oh? So you're suddenly smarter than the Hokage who set up the academy and all the sensei who teach in it? You magically know what is useful and what isn't?" Sakura sighed deeply, growing weary of this argument. She'd forgotten how stubborn the idiot could be. "Just... just go away Naruto. You have all the chakra in the world, you actually somehow got to be Iruka-sensei's friend... and yet in spite of all that, you never learn anything, you never try anything new, you just keep half-assing everything and then complaining when it doesn't work."

Something about Sakura's tired tone got through Naruto's thick skull when all her earlier yelling hadn't. He blinked and sniffled, then wiping his eyes he said, "Yeah? Well you'll see! I'm gonna work so hard, I'll figure out all sorts of awesome ideas! It's the promise of a lifetime!" With that declaration, he turned and ran off.

Sakura was tempted to get in the last word and point out the finals were only in six weeks, but she decided she didn't want to bother. She sighed again, feeling a bit guilty. Unlike many of the brats in her class, Naruto was never malicious. It was just that under the buffoonery she could see glimpses of genuine talent that Naruto was just carelessly wasting. It was frustrating for her and it drove Tanya into a frothing fury.

And speak of the devil... *"I have to admit, I am impressed,"* came the spirit's voice. *"I do believe you've managed to simultaneously get rid of that annoyance and eliminate what little chance he had of graduating the academy."*

*"You don't know that! He could actually figure out where he's going wrong. Combine it with some serious cramming, and he could get a decent grade."*

*"Hah! As if! This is Naruto we're talking about! If he had six months and a proper training plan he might get somewhere. With only six weeks? He'd have to literally work night and day or get ridiculously lucky to actually make any improvement. And what are the chances of that? No, he's just going to waste time experimenting instead of actually studying. With any luck, he'll be too embarrassed to talk to us any more after he flunks the final."*

Sakura's guilt only grew worse. But not enough to waste time holding Naruto's hand. She had her own concerns. Like figuring out how to safely use medical chakra. Not to heal, of course. Healing someone else with chakra took months of intensive training. Trying to apply medical chakra without

training would at best result in no effect, and at worst give the patient hyper-cancer. And that's leaving out the very real danger of chakra backlash burning out the medic's own coils.

But, as Tanya pointed, hyper-cancer or instant blood poisoning could be incredibly useful against enemies. If Sakura could just figure out how to rapidly shove medical chakra into someone without suffering any backlash, she might be able to mess them up something fierce. Of course, without proper medical training there would be no way of predicting what random applications of medical chakra would do to a person. And getting that medical training was extremely expensive without recommendations from higher up, meaning she would have to wait to get a jounin-sensei before asking. Still, with proper care and careful experimentation, she might have something useful by graduation.

Nodding with determination and putting Naruto out of her mind, Sakura reached into her pack and brought out another apple.