

# Supportive Shoulders

By nextguardian

Submitted: August 17, 2008

Updated: August 17, 2008

*Asuma and Kurenai decide to help Ryouko and Sakura get to know each other by suggesting a double-date. That date turns hellish when Orochimaru makes a visit to the Leaf Village.*

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/nextguardian/53940/Supportive-Shoulders>

**Chapter 1 - Supportive Shoulders**

**2**

# 1 - Supportive Shoulders

“Come on Asuma, it would be a nice thing to do. Besides, you can trust Ryouko, everyone knows that!”

Kurenai was currently poking and prodding Asuma into doing something he had avoided- dating her publicly. There was, of course, an excuse she could use. She liked the whole ‘secret affair’ thing, but this was new, risky- fun!

“I don’t know...even if we CAN trust him, who’s he gonna take?” Asuma exhaled smoke nervously. “I mean, let’s face it, the kid is female-challenged.”

Kurenai rolled her eyes, massaging Asuma’s shoulders. “You know very well he has his eyes on Sakura, Lady Tsunade’s apprentice. This would be the perfect way to get him to ask her out. Besides, as I recall...” Kurenai’s voice gave Asuma no doubt as to where she was going with this.

“Kurenai, don’t do this...” Asuma warned, turning away slightly, red hues appearing under his cheeks as he tried to retain what dignity and defiance he had left.

“...as I recall, you seemed to have trouble asking me out. Wouldn’t you feel better about that if you helped another kid with the same trouble?” Kurenai was a strong kunoichi, and right here she was proving she could wheel and deal with the best of them. She was bringing tough, blunt Asuma to his knees with little more than a shoulder rub and a few choice words.

“Ah...alright. But how are you going to make sure he asks her out? Or at least asks someone out, for that matter. There’s always that one girl, what’s her name, one of Gai’s students...”

“Tenten?” Kurenai chimed in, thinking about it. “They WOULD be cute together, but Tenten would eat him alive. That, and she’s got a motherly instinct about her, but her team needs that more than Ryouko. Besides, Sakura could use a boy who could take her mind off Sasuke.”

Asuma knew when he had been licked. There was no winning against a wily female, especially one you hoped to be with. **Bad enough she’s a kunoichi, she’s also got a soft spot for hopeless cases...**

“Okay, I’ll talk to Ryouko. But you’ve got to talk to Sakura- Deal?” Asuma held out his hand. Kurenai swept in and kissed him on the cheek instead.

“Deal. Thank you, Asuma. You’re doing a great thing.”

Asuma grumbled, but couldn’t argue. He was wondering if he would be made legendary for getting someone like Ryouko to go out on a date. Someone that shy, who studied that hard...getting Ryouko to crack his shell would be like stealing Tsunade’s sake and living to tell the tale.

--

Kurenai knew she had to ask Tsunade before talking to Sakura. Tsunade, young at heart, couldn't wait to hear the gossip.

"I knew Ryouko liked her, but asking her out? This is a big step for him!" Tsunade mused happily, thinking about the luckless boy who poured his soul into this village. **About time someone gave him a break...If I was thirty years younger...**

"It is, My Lady. That's partially why I asked Asuma to put up the front that he and I are going out. There's just something about romance that everyone likes, I guess," Kurenai smiled, thinking of her own hidden romance. She wasn't aware it was the worst kept secret in the village. EVERYONE knew that she and Asuma were 'together', no matter how hard she and Asuma pretended to the contrary.

Tsunade cupped her hands under her chin. "All the world loves a lover..." Tsunade said dreamily, thinking back to her own romance. "Of course, you can speak with Sakura on this. I think you'll be surprised at what you find when you talk to her, though."

--

"Ryouko, when was the last time you went out with a girl?" Asuma asked right away. Ryouko looked up from his scroll, thinking about his answer carefully.

"If you mean a date...never," Ryouko responded thoughtfully, laughing at himself a little. "Why?"

Asuma exhaled some smoke. "It's like this...Kurenai has a soft spot for you, and she wants to see you with a girl. You know how women are, with marriage and romance. Everyone's gotta be married, you know?"

"Not really, sensei. I'll take your word for it, though," Ryouko said with a mild shrug, not seeing why this concerned him just yet. **So she wants to see me with a girl? I'd like to see me with a girl, too. Probably not going to happen. The girl I've got my eyes on is way out of my league.**

"Right...well, to get to the point, I want to go out with Kurenai myself, and I'm kind of...nervous over it. I'm hoping you could find some girl to go with, so we could make it a double-date thing, you know? It's easier to break the ice that way. The more the merrier, and whatnot..."

Ryouko, who had taken to smoking what amounted to a ration pill in cigarette form, coughed, smoke blowing out somewhat less orderly than Asuma's.

"Me, sensei? It's no trouble helping you, but who am I going to take? And I don't know what to do on a date!"

Asuma rolled his eyes, putting a steady hand on Ryouko's shoulder. "I can trust you, and I know you'll find a girl. Maybe...Sakura, perhaps? You two seem awfully cozy..."

Ryouko blushed. "Well, you obviously know I really like her..." **WE seem cozy? He must still be oblivious to the fact that everyone knows that he and Kurenai are together. But still...me and Sakura...How do I do this? I can't let Asuma-sensei, down. But how do I ask Sakura out?!**

--

“What? Are you SURE, Kurenai-sensei?!” Sakura asked, trying to keep her shock contained.

“Absolutely, Sakura. It’s easy for girls to tell when boy’s have crushes. They either bully us, spy on us, or clam up around us. Haven’t you ever noticed Ryouko blush in front of you? Or go out of his way to save you, even though he might have died doing so?”

Sakura thought back. “Yeah...Yeah! He took a sword for me, one time! I just thought he was doing his job...”

Kurenai’s smile grew wider. “Oh, he was. But he was also silently begging for your attention. You know as well as anyone that Ryouko doesn’t fit in well in many places. It makes sense he’d like you, because of how you treated him. You didn’t treat him like an outcast, you treated him like he already belonged here, back when he was new to the village.”

Sakura remember that she had. She had, in fact, tended to his injuries, which had been pretty severe. And Ryouko DID seem to blush a lot in front of her. Not to mention the politeness, and the insistence of adding the ‘sensei’ suffix to her name, despite her being younger (though she DID outrank Ryouko for a while).

“But how come Ryouko hasn’t said anything to me, I’ve known him for more than four years now...” Sakura asked. Kurenai laughed a little, thinking of Asuma.

“Boys aren’t very good at conveying their feelings. Especially that boy. All I’m saying is think about giving him a chance, you know? You might like him. And if not, you know he’ll still be your friend. It’s win-win, Sakura.”

--

Ryouko paced around, wondering how to ask Sakura out. **I like her, but how to do I TELL her that? Maybe I could just say something like “I wanted to thank you for helping me study...” Nah, she won’t believe that! Gah, I don’t know the first thing about dating, and Asuma-sensei was no help!**

-

At the same time, Sakura tried to decide what she thought about Ryouko. **Well, he’s polite, cute, and he DOES go out of his way to help me. Maybe I could give him a shot. But what about Sasuke? Is this betraying him?**

Sakura shook her head.

**No! I stopped loving him when he tried to kill all of us! He’s not the boy I fell in love with! I want to give Ryouko a try!**

-

Ryouko couldn't gather up the courage to go to Sakura's house. It wasn't just rejection that he was afraid of- what if Sakura's parents hated him, for some reason? That would end the relationship before it started, and even kill off their regular friendship. No, it was better to ask when someone supportive was around...someone who knew how he felt about Sakura...someone Sakura saw all the time, with a knowledge of romance.

"Kakashi-sensei?! No, that's PERV romance! Wait, what if she likes that?! No, no, no, she's a classy girl, she won't like that! Let's see...Lady Tsunade!

--

What Ryouko didn't factor in was that Tsunade would enjoy watching him sweat while trying to ask her apprentice out. It was too much fun to pass up. A tough warrior like Ryouko brought to his knees by the charm of a female...Tsunade could have sold tickets! She watched from behind her desk as, about ten feet away, Ryouko was facing the fear usually reserved for Itachi's Tsukuyomi Jutsu.

"So, Sakura, I wanted to thank you for all you've done for me. Asuma-sensei told me to meet him and Kurenai-sensei at this place, and, uh, he told me to bring a female friend...would you, um, want to go?" Ryouko choked out. His face turned whiter than usual, to almost Orochimaru-ish proportions. His fingers moved in odd, jerky motions, as if they were trying to spell out what he was speaking. His normally stoic face was riddled with the pain of trying to convey an emotion that he couldn't quite speak yet.

If Ryouko was nervous, Sakura was flattered, amused, and a little embarrassed. Traces of pink appeared on her cheeks as she thought: **So, he really DOES like me. Ryouko's so nervous, how did I not notice this sooner?**

"S-sure, I'd love to! Where and when?" Sakura answered, stammering a little in the beginning, but recovering quickly. **So he really got the guts up to ask...I guess Kurenai-sensei was right!**

--

Ryouko and Asuma waited for the girls. Asuma was less nervous, while Ryouko was all but shaking. Asuma nudged him, and Ryouko nearly jumped a foot.

"Kid, do yourself a favor and smoke one of those chakra cigarettes. Sakura will either think it's sexy, or she'll look disappointed. But you're not going to impress if you jump out of your skin, either."

Asuma had a point, Ryouko conceded. He also wondered if Asuma smoked so much because of Kurenai. It was a valid question, but Ryouko didn't ask. He had his own concerns right now. Like, what the hell do you do on a first date? On ANY date? Was he supposed to hold her hand? Give her flowers and chocolates? Was she on a diet? Would he be saying she NEEDED to go on a diet by not giving chocolates? All these questions and more, but Ryouko was plagued by two HUGE questions.

"Am I supposed to kiss her?" Ryouko said out loud, looking at Asuma for advice. Asuma stroked his chin thoughtfully for a few moments before answering Ryouko's question. Rolling his cigarette to the

other side of his mouth, Asuma gave Ryouko a sideways glance, then answered expertly.

“You’ll know. Either she’ll lean forward, or she’ll pause and give you an opening. Either way, if she gets close to you, she’s expecting a hug. If her mouth gets near yours, try a lip lock. The worst that happens is she’ll slap you across the lickers.”

Ryouko wondered if this was Asuma’s personal experience speaking, or whether he was just going by some standard of dating that Ryouko didn’t know. One was as likely as the other.

“Okay then. If I somehow, miraculously, attract her...what if she...you know...wants to...sleep together?” Ryouko blushed at his own question, feeling stupid and naive. But this was a legitimate question, wasn’t it? I mean, who didn’t worry about that coming up on a first date?

“If she does...then you’re a lucky guy, and did better with her than I did with Kurenai on our first date,” Asuma pointed out, ruffling Ryouko’s hair. But Asuma left himself wide open to retaliation.

“So this means that you two HAVE been together before this, then?” Ryouko asked, knowing full well that they had. Asuma removed his hand from Ryouko’s head, then clapped him on the shoulder, leaning down to explain something in the voice that had earned him the bounty on his head.

“There IS such a thing as being TOO smart...understand?”

--

“Okay Sakura, are you ready?” Kurenai asked warmly, tugging on her outfit to get it just so. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Sakura smoothing her skirt for the ten thousandth time that night.

“I guess so, Kurenai-sensei...I’ve never been on a date before...and, I mean, I know Ryouko, but this is different!”

Kurenai tapped her chin, trying to think of a way to make this less scary to the young kunoichi.

“You know what, Sakura? I bet he’s just as scared as you are. I KNOW Asuma’s been talking to him, trying to get him to calm down. It’s just another sign he likes you. So you’re both kids, neither of you know what to do on a date. It’s better than one of you knowing, and the other being clueless. Asuma was clueless on our first date, and we wound up fine.”

“Does that mean you and Asuma-sensei still date?” Sakura asked innocently, though a mischievous smirk was playing on her pretty face.

Kurenai looked away, reddening slightly. “Sakura, you’re a smart girl. Smart girl’s know when to speak up, and when to keep quiet...right?” Kurenai’s tone ended that series of questioning.

“But...what if...am I supposed to kiss him? Or does HE kiss ME? Or no kissing?” Sakura didn’t get that. She knew what she wanted. But would it be rude to kiss, or just as rude not to?

“You’ll know, your heart will tell you if you’re going to kiss him. And his heart will tell him if he’s going

to kiss you. It sounds like a fairy tale, but that's how it goes." Kurenai was dreading the next question. The one that was inevitable.

"But..." Sakura began, looking at the floor as she pulled her headband straight for the umpteenth time. "...But what if he...what if he wants to have sex?" Sakura managed to say. "And what if I want to have sex? I mean, I don't know if I'm ready..."

Kurenai gave Sakura a reassuring hug. "Ryouko is a guy, of course he wants to have sex. But that's a guy thing. Ryouko, while being male, is different. He's probably afraid to, and even if he wants it, he'll make it all about what YOU want. He's the kind of guy to put the girl he likes in a shrine." Kurenai was sure of that. "But, at the same time, you'll both feel something. It's indescribable feeling of want, of desire, of mutual love. Sometimes it happens on a first date, but most of the time it doesn't. The major thing is to remember you're both adults in our world. You make your own decisions, and do what you feel is right. That's the easiest way to understand dating, and even love."

--

Ryouko dropped another cigarette on the ground, tamping it out with his boot. He had been through twelve of them. His chakra couldn't get any higher, but this was something to do to keep from thinking about all the possible ways he could screw up tonight.

"Ah, here they come! Follow my lead, Ryouko," Asuma said with a wink. He walked over to Kurenai and offered his hand.

"Kurenai- you look great tonight!" Asuma glanced meaningfully at Ryouko. Ryouko got the message, and strode over to Sakura, giving her a small bow before offering his hand.

"I'm glad you could come, Sakura. You look beautiful today."

-

Kurenai had told Sakura to watch what she did, and pick out what to do herself.

"Thank you, Asuma. You're looking good tonight, too."

Sakura watched, and took mental notes. Kurenai had linked her arm through Asuma's, but they had been together for a while. Sakura guessed that taking the hand Ryouko offered would be good enough to start with.

"Thank you, Ryouko. And thank you for inviting me. You look handsome tonight." Sakura offered Ryouko a warm smile, inadvertently causing Ryouko's heart to skip a beat. After skipping that beat, it leapt up into his throat, then splashed back down where it belonged.

**Hmm...Ryouko's different tonight. Oh, he's not wearing his mask! I'd forgotten about that! He's not as muscular as Sasuke, but he's that much better looking for it. He's got a quiet kind of attractiveness to him, not the kind that the girls giggle about in the hot springs...**

-

**I've got it bad for this girl**, Ryouko thought. For someone who had tried so hard to be more than human, right now Ryouko felt vulnerable. Strangely enough, it wasn't an unpleasant feeling to him. In combat, feeling vulnerable meant you most likely WERE vulnerable, and that usually meant that you were, at the very least, going to be injured. **Vulnerable...is that the correct emotional response? Does an appropriate response exist in my rolodex of emotions?**

-

Asuma and Kurenai smiled at the two kids trying to keep their cool. Ryouko's hands were shaking, while Sakura was unnaturally still.

"This was a good idea, Kurenai. We can kind of lead the kids through a date. Where do you plan on going tonight anyway?" Asuma asked. He had noticed that Ryouko was kind of unconsciously acting like a gentleman. Holding doors or flaps open for a girl seemed second nature to him. Things like 'speaking' and 'breathing' seemed to be difficult, though.

"Let's go to that little teahouse, there isn't likely to be too many people there. It'll be easier for the kids. And us, I suppose," Kurenai added, one red eye turning to see how said kids were doing. Sakura was more nervous than was usual for her. She was less stiff than Ryouko, but she seemed to be thinking a lot. About what was an easy guess- this was her first date, and it wasn't with the boy she pictured. When you had your heart set on someone, it was hard to force that person out to make room for another.

-

The teahouse was empty, except for two other guests, tucked away in a corner. They were talking in a low mutter, so it didn't disturb the four seated in a brighter area on the other side of the small café. Seated or kneeling on cushions that were dotted around a low wooden table, Asuma and Kurenai decided to create some small talk to start the two younger Shinobi off. Inadvertently, Kurenai picked a sore topic for Ryouko.

"So, the chunin exams this year. Who's the favorite again? Ryouko, you keep close tabs on those exams, right?"

Ryouko eyes didn't light up like they normally did when talking about training. They were downright dulled, in fact.

"Well, I've heard that the Grass Village has a strong group this year..." Ryouko stopped there, letting that be discussed. Of COURSE he couldn't take the exams again this year. He was ready- but not having a team posed a problem. Something that Sakura and Asuma knew. Sakura took the initiative to steer the conversation away from that particular topic, while Asuma gave Kurenai a warning glance. Kurenai got the message, mentally smacking her self for making an already tense situation worse.

-



Things went smoothly after that. Asuma had the good sense to order sake and force Ryouko to have a drink. One cup made Ryouko a little more social and jovial. Sakura, who didn't drink, was hit pretty hard by the rice brew at first, but that didn't last long. It seemed she also had Lady Tsunade's ability to drink alcohol while showing no sign of it.

Asuma and Kurenai smiled at each other- this was going well. Not only were the two kids hitting it off, it was pretty clear that Ryouko really cared for Sakura. And Sakura hadn't once mentioned Sasuke, or looked sad that she was on a date with someone other than the raven-haired turncoat. Things going this well meant that Asuma and Kurenai had to make their next move. Exchanging glances, they gave a slight nod.

"Wow, it got late pretty quick. Listen, I hate to say this, but Kurenai and I have to go. Keep this between the two of you, but her and I have been seeing each other for a while now. We're trying to keep it quiet, so we can't stay out too long. It's early enough, why don't you stay and have some more fun?"

Asuma and Ryouko exchanged glances, while Kurenai winked at Sakura and leaned over to whisper something to her: "Remember, you hold the cards, Sakura."

-

Sakura and Ryouko watched the two jonin leave.

"Do they really believe no one's figured out that they're together yet?" Sakura asked with a small laugh.

"No one can be that naïve," Ryouko replied. He struggled to think up another topic of conversation. His wandering eyes caught site of the tea in front of him. Forcing himself to look Sakura in the eyes, he asked her a simple question.

"Should I order some more?"

Sakura, who had been trying to think up something to say, nodded instantly, despite not really wanting any more tea or dumplings.

Ryouko twisted on his cushion to talk to the waitress. As the waitress walked over and Ryouko ordered, through the loop in her obi (belt), he saw the two in the shadows still sitting. But now their eyes were focused on Ryouko and Sakura. They looked away quickly, but Ryouko had felt a chill. His instincts were usually right, and he decided to follow them now.

"Pardon me, but I need to cancel my order. Could you just bring the check, please? Thank you."

Sakura's antennae perked up- Ryouko had canceled the order? Something wasn't right. Her back was to the two in the corner, so she didn't see it, and Ryouko couldn't tell her. Instead, he offered her a rare smile.

"I just realized that I'd much rather have your company on a walk. It's a beautiful summer night, and we're still sitting inside."

Sakura was struck by how romantic that sounded. Even as she knew there was a situation, Sakura wondered if Ryouko meant what he'd just said. The check came, and Ryouko took it, paying quickly.

"Do you mind if I keep a copy? I want to write the address of this place down, and I'm out of paper. I'll definitely be back," Ryouko told the waitress, who smiled and wrote out a second receipt. Ryouko pulled out a brush and wrote something on the check, thanking the waitress as he stood up. He offered a hand to Sakura, who took it, surprising herself by blushing.

-

It was a beautiful night for a walk. The leaves were just starting to change, turning shades of red, yellow, and brown. Along the river, complete with a bright moon, Sakura felt a rush of appreciation.

"It's a nice night..." Sakura said, looking up at the moon. The moon's reflection shimmered on the water of the Konoha river, while a few leaves fell down from the trees lining it, sending ripples through the crystal-clear water.

"It is..." Ryouko said carefully, looking over at Sakura. "...really had a good time with you. I hope I wasn't too stiff. I really was having fun. No matter what I said, or looking like," Ryouko chimed in with a laugh at the end.

That had seemed odd to Sakura. **No matter what I said or looked like...he looked like he always does...I wonder...**

-

Ryouko hated to do this. Right now, all he wanted was to hold Sakura's hand, or maybe even have her link her arm through his, and walk, drinking in the scenery and Sakura's beauty.

**I'm nineteen...I'd love a hug and kiss, too...but I also want to make sure she's okay. She couldn't see what I did from her angle...I'll make it a point to make this up to her. If she'll give me a second chance.**

Ryouko, very carefully, took Sakura's hand. It felt incredible, holding a soft female hand, coupled with the knowledge that she could break him in half with that one hand. Ryouko hated to tarnish the moment with note passing, but the feeling in the air left him no choice in the matter.

-

Sakura's eyes widened as Ryouko's hand found hers. He was looking straight ahead, his red cheeks highlighted by the moon. It was about then that Sakura found Ryouko handsome. His profile impressed her, and his actions toward her even more.

Then she felt the note in her hand. She read it silently, dreading what it might say.

++ We're being watched ++

Sakura narrowed her eyes and tried to sense something, anything. She felt a presence of two people, both in the water. Sakura made her move. She hooked Ryouko's arm and leaned into him, laying her head on his shoulder.

"What do we do?" she whispered to him, feeling him tense up.

"They're following us...I'm pretty sure they're enemies...we've got to fight them, and hold them off until ANBU arrives."

"You're right," Sakura answered.

"Sakura..." Ryouko said as quietly as he could.

"What is it?" Sakura asked, on the alert.

"I'm sorry about this...I really didn't want to have a fight on my hands while dating you. I really meant what I said. I had fun, and I hope you did, too."

With that, Ryouko leapt into the water. A stunned Sakura followed him shortly after.

"Okay, out of the shadows, you two. If you've got something to say, come out and say it to our faces!" Ryouko called. He stepped in front of Sakura to protect her. Sakura, in turn, put her back against his, not knowing from which direction the threat would come.

-

The two figures landed on the water.

"We aren't here to fight you. Not you personally, anyway," came the voice of the silver-haired right hand man of Orochimaru, Kabuto Yakushi.

"That's right. We're after a great prize...a prize that you two children can lead me to!" Orochimaru's sinister voice declared.

Ryouko took a lower stance, his hand reaching for his kunai holster. "And just what is this 'prize', Orochimaru?"

Orochimaru took a step closer. "It's Naruto Uzumaki, of course! Once I heard that the Akatsuki were hunting him, I had to get him myself! The lesser of two evils, wouldn't you say?" Orochimaru took another step closer.

"What's the matter, are you still angry with me for killing your sensei? He was my sensei too, and I haven't shed tears over him! He deserved to die, trying to fight me at such an old age!"

Ryouko's eyes were down at the ground now, and he was shaking.

“Sakura...run and get anyone you can find. I'll hold them off...”

Sakura didn't move. “Forget it, Ryouko. We're in this one together.”

Ryouko shifted his weight, indicating he was about to move. “Please, trust me,” he said simply.

Sakura didn't want to leave him. But if that's what he wanted...he had faced Orochimaru once before, and would know better than she would. Sakura nodded.

“Right!” Sakura took off running, but found her path blocked by Kabuto.

“Please, let them finish speaking. I can't allow you to go get help. Lord Orochimaru has a proposition for both of you, please hear him out!” Kabuto was strange like that. He was polite one minute, demented the next, and always seemed to respect his enemies. The enemy you underestimate is the one that kills you, Kabuto believed. So he wasn't going to underestimate anyone.

**Especially not the apprentice of none other than Princess Tsunade herself. If Tsunade has taken her on as a student, then that must mean she's good, and very powerful. If it comes to a fight, she may even match me...**

-

Once Orochimaru saw Sakura was stopped, he started to speak to Ryouko again.

“Lead me to Uzumaki, and let me kill him. In return...I'll give you your precious sensei back!”

Ryouko, who had lit a chakra cigarette, nearly dropped it. But he regained his poise quickly.

“Forget it, Orochimaru. Lady Tsunade wasn't fool enough to make that deal with you, and neither am I. It's not what Sensei would have wanted. He'd want me to finish you...” Ryouko's eyes lit up, and he zipped forward, courtesy of an adrenaline rush.

“I've never killed, so be honored that you're going to be my first!” Ryouko declared, his kunai slashing through Orochimaru. But Orochimaru had used a replacement jutsu.

“If I must kill you to get to Uzumaki, I will!” Orochimaru informed Ryouko from behind him. Ryouko suddenly melted- a water clone! The real Ryouko aimed a head-high kick at Orochimaru. Orochimaru ducked and brought his foot up, aiming for Ryouko's chin. Ryouko stepped to the side and pushed Orochimaru's foot, throwing him off-balance. Ryouko followed with a punch, but Orochimaru blocked the punch with his forearm. He tagged Ryouko in the face with his other hand, sending the genin down onto the water. Orochimaru's head and neck extended, aiming to bite Ryouko on the neck. Ryouko recovered and kicked Orochimaru's head viciously, sending it back toward its owner, which gave Ryouko time to roll to his feet and charge again. Orochimaru was surprised that the genin kept trying to get into close combat, so his knee strike wasn't as subtle as he wanted. Ryouko kicked at the knee, forcing Orochimaru to set it back down awkwardly, with his weight distributed in a way not conducive for battle. Ryouko took advantage and elbowed Orochimaru in the chest, knocking him back to one foot. From the elbow, Ryouko used the back of his fist to hit Orochimaru's nose, then used his left fist to hit

Orochimaru in the stomach, toppling the evil Sannin.

-

“Lord Orochimaru!” Kabuto shouted, trying to run towards Orochimaru. His leg suddenly gave out underneath him. He turned to see Sakura’s hand glowing an electric blue, signifying that she had activated her chakra scalpel.

“Can’t have you running off to get help! Isn’t that what you said?!” Sakura snarled, taking another slash at the retreating Kabuto.

“Ugh! Damn it! You HAVE improved!” Kabuto muttered. He had healed his leg by now, he was only pretending to be having problems with it. He wanted to lure Sakura in close. He achieved that goal when Sakura’s leg came into his view. Kabuto slashed at it with a poisoned knife.

“Ah!” Sakura yelped, leaping backward on her good leg, immediately deactivating her chakra scalpel to use a poison removal jutsu. Kabuto darted forward, his curved kunai ready to cut Sakura. Sakura was in a bad position- or at least Kabuto thought. He hadn’t seen her fight in a long time.

“Hya!” Sakura struck the water below, her power creating a tidal wave. Kabuto had to stop and focus his chakra hard to his feet, or he would be swept away. When the water cleared, Kabuto was ready to strike again, but Sakura beat him to the punch- literally! Kabuto barely had time to dodge aside as Sakura’s fist came flying in, one after the other.

**If she lands even one strike, this fight is over for me. Even with my regenerative healing abilities, I couldn’t heal fast enough. She’d be on me too quickly. I’ve got to halt her chakra flow...**

Kabuto made the handsigns necessary for his “Temple of Nirvana” jutsu. This forced Sakura to use the ‘release’ technique, which consisted of halting her own chakra flow. Just the opening Kabuto needed...

-

Orochimaru got up, marked up from Ryouko’s punch. But he was ready to play his trump card.

“That was very impressive. But I’ve got something more impressive for you. I told you I would resurrect the Third Hokage if you agreed to my terms...but now, I think I’ll go ahead and bring him back anyway, as punishment for your defiance! I hope you’re prepared to fight your sensei!”

Ryouko was stunned as Orochimaru used his Reanimation jutsu. Even as the Third’s casket came up from the water, and water flowed around it as if it were a rock in a stream, he couldn’t move. Part of him wanted to see the Third Hokage again. But this was wrong- he had to stop this, at any cost!

“I can’t let this happen, Orochimaru! I’m going to kill you right now!” Ryouko shouted. Two Shadow clones fanned out on either side of him, then rushed toward Orochimaru. Ryouko himself made hand signs as fast as he could.

Orochimaru cursed to himself when he saw the set of signs Ryouko was making. **Not that jutsu again!**

**The Third Hokage was too old to pull off that Sealing Jutsu, but this one might! I've got to stop it, now!**

Orochimaru opened his mouth wide, his sword, the Kusanagi (aka 'Grass Longsword'), protruding from his snake-like jaw. Orochimaru threw it at Ryouko, who, in the middle of handsigns, was forced to stop making them and dodge the sword instead. Unlike the Third Hokage, he wasn't ready to die yet. Once he finished the jutsu, he would die happily. But Ryouko's discipline wasn't great enough yet to focus his chakra AND battle a sword inside him at the same time. Ryouko spun around, but it was too late. The Third Hokage had been resurrected.

"Damn it...no...I wasn't good enough..." Ryouko was shaking with frustration as Orochimaru took Sarutobi's will away.

"Now play nice, your sensei is getting old and fragile! Besides...you don't want to lose him AGAIN, do you?! Kill or be killed, Ryouko-kun!"

--

Kabuto managed to kick Sakura, sending her skidding across the water. She got up quickly, only to be batted hard by Kabuto, causing blood to drip from her mouth. Sakura looked Kabuto in the eyes, while her hand reached for her medical bag. She didn't have any poisons made, but she could improvise. With a flick of her wrist, Sakura threw a ground-up herb into Kabuto's eyes. This particular herb was used to help eyesight- but that was in its natural, leafy-state, or when mixed with certain other herbs. In powder form, it could blind temporarily. The temporary blindness allowed Sakura to take another swipe at Kabuto. But Kabuto leapt straight up.

"Just because I can't see doesn't mean this fight is over! My eyesight already isn't the greatest. I can read your chakra and listen to your movements, and STILL make this fight interesting while I can't see!"

--

The Third Hokage stepped out of the casket, his eyes staring at Ryouko. But there was no grandfatherly kindness in them. Now they were cold eyes, narrowed by age and stress. But besides that, this was the Third Hokage of old that Ryouko was fighting. That much was apparent when he called his first Jutsu.

"Mutli Shuriken Shadow Clones!"

The barrage of shuriken nearly caught Ryouko by surprise. He had time enough to make handsigns.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Fire Wall!" Ryouko yelled. Fire came from all sides, protecting him from the incoming shuriken. From inside the protective dome, Ryouko launched his counter-attack.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" From Ryouko's hand came tongues of fire that seemed to strike the Third Hokage. Ryouko knew better, and wasn't surprised when the Replacement Jutsu the Third must have used yielded dried mud. The water moistened the mud, and allowed Sarutobi to use yet another jutsu.

“Moving Land River!”

Ryouko countered with “Ryuuza: Dragon Constellation!” The water below Ryouko’s now-muddy feet raised up, taking the shape of a dragon. The dragon aimed for the Third Hokage, aiming to drown him with sheer volumes of water.

“Earth Style: Mud Wall!” Sarutobi countered. The mud wall blocked the dragon’s attack, though the dragon destroyed the wall. Ryouko cursed under his breath- that was one of his best attacks!

**I haven’t had to use the ‘Dragon Trio’ on one ninja yet...something tells me this time I’ll have to...I’ve already used ‘Ryuuza’, there’s two more left...**

Ryouko took the offensive, drawing two kunai, lodging them in his mouth while he made the Tiger handsign. His clones also took out two kunai.

“Sickle Moon Dance!” A take off of Hayate Gekkou’s ‘Crescent Moon Dance’, two shadow clones attacked in a hard-to-follow pattern in tandem with Ryouko. The key to the attack was the speed and evasiveness. It also used little chakra by itself, though the Shadow Clones cost a fair amount. Now the three Ryoukos zipped forward, cutting and slashing at the Third Hokage, their first attacks being blocked by his metal arm guard, their second wave, cutting his black combat attire, and the third and final wave reaching Sarutobi himself. The two clones disappeared after the attack, during which they left four kunai sticking in Sarutobi’s back. Ryouko himself lodged his jammed his kunai into the Third’s shoulders. That meant that he was face to face with the Third Hokage. Since this version of the Third couldn’t be killed, the attack had done little damage. But it had a specific purpose to Ryouko.

**So he can’t bleed...that means he can’t summon Enma, the Monkey King. That’s one less thing I need to be worried about. But still...how do I beat the Third Hokage? I can’t do it, I was only his student! No...no...this is for your village! You’ve got to think of something! The Reaper Death Seal...damn it, my chakra is too low, I’ll never pull it off! There’s only one other way- kill Orochimaru, or force him to run out of chakra. Either way, that means attacking him directly...**

Ryouko leapt back, away from the Third Hokage, who seemed to be having some difficulty moving with the kunai in him. That gave Ryouko time to bite his thumb and use a Summoning Jutsu.

“Summoning Jutsu: Ryuujin!” This wasn’t one of Ryouko’s ‘Dragon Trio’, but it was arguably the best in Ryouko’s repertoire for a fight on the water. This Jutsu would summon Umisu, a Chinese Water Dragon. Umisu was smart, and he had a huge supply of chakra, despite being very diminutive.

“Umisu: Water Style, Water Wall- Maintain!” Ryouko barked. Umisu closed one eye in a wink of understanding, then performed the jutsu. Walls of water sprung up around Sarutobi, and stayed there. As long as Umisu’s chakra held out, Sarutobi was out of the equation.

“Alright, snake bastard. Now we finish our fight!” Ryouko declared, running at Orochimaru, in the process of making handsigns. Orochimaru was beyond shock and anger at this new development, and charged at Ryouko.

“I’m going to kill you myself!”

--

Kabuto heard Sakura move on the water, and spun in her direction. Feeling for his kunai pouch, Kabuto flung one, and heard the sound of fabric tearing. He smiled, knowing he had hit his target, all the while he was using his chakra to restore his vision. Just because he COULD fight like this didn't mean he WANTED to.

Sakura dodged the kunai almost completely. It tore her vest, high up near the shoulder on her left arm. She felt a minor cut grow, and decided to heal it. Kabuto was the type of fighter who could take advantage of a small injury like that. As she healed and stayed as still as possible, Sakura tried to come up with a battle strategy of some kind.

**Clones are no good, they don't effect the landscape. What I need to do is to confuse Kabuto before his vision comes back. But there's no way to attack from more than one place. Maybe I don't NEED to attack...if he's blinded, then Ryouko would have no trouble with him. I can make a run for it and get enough help to run Orochimaru off!**

But something stopped Sakura. She saw Ryouko fighting for all he was worth, even as his anger at the Third Hokage being resurrected hit it's apex. He had said he'd had a good time- with her. Sakura decided she wasn't going to go anywhere. She set her nimble fingers to work, attaching exploding tags to kunai. Once she had enough, Sakura leapt from the water, over the railing, to the sidewalk. Kabuto threw a kunai, letting her know he could find her. That was fine with Sakura. She hadn't used a trick like this in a couple years, but it was her best chance. Uncoiling from a crouching position, Sakura jumped throwing ten kunai. Kabuto knocked the kunai down, not noticing the exploding tags, as he was too focused on the sounds Sakura's skirt made as she jumped over him. From there, Kabuto threw his own kunai, which was headed right for Sakura. Sakura used a replacement jutsu, and Kabuto's knife lodged in a log. Sakura landed, and had seconds to use her jutsu.

"Detonate!"

When Sakura had thrown the kunai, the exploding tags had landed in the water around Kabuto. They had only seconds before their effectiveness wore off, but Sakura was in that time frame.

KABLAM!

--

Orochimaru and Ryouko clashed, but bounced away from each other as rain began to hit them. A cut formed on Ryouko's shoulder where Orochimaru's sword had cut him.

"Not rain...Kabuto..." Orochimaru was actually worried for his right-hand man, one of the two in his ranks he couldn't replace.

"Your fight is with me!" Ryouko reminded Orochimaru. 'Reminded' meaning 'punching Orochimaru in the head'. Orochimaru spun around and kicked. His foot hit Ryouko's chest. Once there, Orochimaru pushed off and kicked away from Ryouko, landing a good distance away, Kusanagi raised.



“How forgetful of me...Striking Shadow Snakes!”

Ryouko countered with “Tatsunokuchi! Dragon Gargoyle Head!” This jutsu was the second in Ryouko’s ‘Dragon Trio’. Water, mud, and fire came together and made a stone ‘Dragon’s Head’, which protected Ryouko from most attacks. Ryouko, however, was left inside of what amounted to a statue. But that had it’s advantages as well. With his chakra so low, Ryouko decided to take a last gamble. If nothing else, THIS jutsu would get garner some attention.

“Hikouryuu! Flying Rain Dragon!”

The last of Ryouko’s ‘Dragon Trio’, this jutsu was a last-ditch attempt to kill. The user of the jutsu was coated in layer after layer of water. The water was condensed until it was almost a solid mass. But even then, the speed was also key. The user of the jutsu was raised into the air, then hurled at their foe. The water formed a dragon around the user, to allow as much protection as possible. This jutsu was originated by Ryouko, and he’d never had to perform it. But as his chakra dwindled, and time ran out, Ryouko knew he had to bring attention to Orochimaru’s return. It was the only thing he could do for the village. Orochimaru’s chakra had to have suffered as well, so maybe someone stood a chance. But either way, Ryouko was making this last jutsu count.

As the water rushed him, Ryouko looked at Sakura. Kabuto was defeated, for the time being, and Sakura was making sure he didn’t interfere. A surge of appreciation ran through Ryouko. Then it was time to make his move.

Orochimaru couldn’t dodge a target so big. All he could do was put his Kusanagi in front of him, and hope that his body would survive the impact.

SPLAAAAASSHHHHH!

Orochimaru had been using the flat side of the Kusanagi to block when the water struck him. It tore away at his body, driving him backward into one of the stone walls that kept the river in check. Water washed up on all sides of the river, dampening roof tops and even uprooting trees. But Orochimaru had weathered the storm. His Kusanagi still in front of him, Orochimaru felt the sensation of warm blood tricking down his sword and onto his hand.

Ryouko’s head hit the flat of the sword as the water glanced off it. His chakra nearly gone, Ryouko was lying face-down, at the mercy of Orochimaru. Laughing hysterically, Orochimaru picked Ryouko up by his collar, staring at the wound on Ryouko’s head.

“You gave me a fight, I’ll give you that. You pushed me to a limit I haven’t faced in years. But I survived all you could throw at me! I’ll do you the honor of killing you personally!”

--

Sakura looked over at Ryouko’s fight. Her eyes wide, she dashed across the water, over an unconscious Kabuto, and to Ryouko. She kicked water into Orochimaru’s face, blinding him, and punched his arm, breaking it and freeing Ryouko, who fell back onto the water, barely conscious. Sakura

picked him up, but found herself staring down the Kusanagi. The injured boy she was supporting seemed to give her a rush of adrenaline.

“Go to hell! If you’re going to kill him, or anyone else, you’re going through me!” Sakura shouted, standing in the way, arms out protectively.. Ryouko twitched, then moved to his knees, then raised himself to one knee.

“This is your chance, Sakura. Make a run for it. I’ll take him with me, or at least hold him off.”

“The hell with that!” Sakura shouted, wanting to say more. But Orochimaru’s sword coming at her caused Ryouko to jump in the way, hoping his metal arm guards would slow the blade down, at least. But the blade never reached him.

-

Asuma’s twin trench knives blocked Orochimaru’s strike. The blade was suspended in the air. Ryouko fell back onto the water’s surface, nearly drained of all his chakra.

“Now, Kurenai!” he called back. Kurenai disappeared in a wave of pink flower petals. Orochimaru lost track of her. He tried to move away from Asuma’s knives, but couldn’t- he was bound to a tree by it’s branches. He struggled to free himself, but found that the tree had him trapped very well. Even Orochimaru’s snake-like body couldn’t writhe out of the death grip the tree had on him.

“Okay, let’s end this!” Kurenai appeared from a branch, a knife at the ready. As she stabbed down, Kabuto’s hand flashed up and cut her triceps, forcing her to drop the knife, while the physical pain ended the genjutsu. Kabuto had saved Orochimaru once, and now he would have to again. Ryouko was back up, a fresh chakra cigarette in his mouth.

“End the jutsu or we kill you,” Ryouko growled. “Let the Third rest peacefully again, or I’ll murder you. You know I can perform the Reaper Death Seal. So don’t screw with me. Get out of here, or I seal your soul.”

Orochimaru was frozen by the demand. But with his chakra low, his back-up ruined, not to mention he was outnumbered, there was no choice but to end the Reanimation Jutsu. Sarutobi fell back into leaves and dust. The body of a Sound Village genin was uncovered, revealing who had hosted the soul Orochimaru had summoned.

“Fine, for now! Don’t think this is over! I’m going to destroy this village and all who live in it! Come, Kabuto!”

Kabuto and Orochimaru leapt off through the trees, soon followed by an ANBU unit. Asuma, Kurenai, Ryouko, and Sakura watched until the five disappeared.

“Good thing we saw that jutsu of yours, otherwise we wouldn’t have known to come. ...”

After Asuma’s quiet words, no one spoke for a while. Ryouko was still on one knee, panting. Sakura was next to him, and Kurenai and Asuma behind him. Ryouko slowly toppled to the side, his chakra

finally gone. His chakra cigarette fell out of his mouth and floated down the river. Sakura and the others looked on quietly.

“How long did the battle go on? I’ve never seen him use all his chakra before...” Asuma hadn’t seen Ryouko this bad off in a long time, not since he had been nearly killed by Itachi Uchiha.

“We left the teahouse at nine...” Sakura said thoughtfully, remembering the position of the moon. “And now it’s...eleven o’clock?!”

“Two hours...two hours with Orochimaru...that’s how long the Third Hokage lasted,” Kurenai remembered. She had been a new jonin back then, when the Third Hokage faced off against Orochimaru.

“Seemed he had thought about using the same seal as the Third did, that Reaper Death seal. I’m surprised he didn’t try it, truth be told,” Asuma breathed out a sigh, bending down to shoulder the unconscious Ryouko.

“He must have known he couldn’t...Someone like Orochimaru, with such a vast well of chakra, and even knowledge of how to cheat death...it would have been a waste...” Kurenai murmured. “At the end, though, Ryouko stood up to him again...Didn’t Orochimaru KNOW that Ryouko was bluffing? It’s pretty obvious Ryouko didn’t have enough chakra to seal Orochimaru’s pinky, let alone perform the entire Reaper Death Seal.”

Sakura finally piped up. “He had to. That was the only way we were going to get rid of Orochimaru. Ryouko tested that earlier in the fight, by making the handsigns for the jutsu. Orochimaru stopped him pretty quickly, and almost desperately. What the Third Hokage did must have made Orochimaru wary of that jutsu.”

Asuma shouldered Ryouko’s weight. “Well then, off to the hospital for him.”

“Sensei, wait for me!” Sakura ran to catch up, falling into step with Asuma and Kurenai.

“You can go home if you want, Sakura, he’ll be okay,” Kurenai said reassuringly.

“I know. But, well...he and I were on a date, and I don’t think I should leave him like that. Our date hasn’t ended yet.” Sakura said all this casually, but to Kurenai and Asuma, she was saying something else.

**So she DOES care about him...**

--

Ryouko woke up, finding himself lying on an all-to-familiar blue blanket. Mercifully, he was still fully clothed. He hated hospital gowns. Not only did they seem to invite death, they were revealing and embarrassing to wear.

“That was fast. You’ve only been out of it for an hour or so,” a surprised Sakura said around a

concerned smile. She put down the book she had been reading and walked over to Ryouko, who was busy yanking an IV out of him. He knew the drill- a little pain when he pulled it out, and that was it.

"I'm sorry..." Ryouko muttered, flopping down again, apparently still a little tired. That, or he was depressed, each one as likely as the other.

"Don't be! You didn't ask for Orochimaru to interrupt our date, and I know you didn't ask to pass out. I had a really good time before that..."

...Maybe we could do it again sometime?" Sakura said quietly. She saw Ryouko's eyes light up, and knew he liked the idea.

"I won't pass out next time. And anyway, THIS date isn't over yet." Ryouko pushed himself off the bed, pulling on a light black jacket, mostly to cover his chainmail armguards.

"I meant what I said about wanting to take a walk with you. And I didn't finish holding your hand. If it's okay, I'd like to pick up where I left off..."

--

Ryouko held out his hand. Sakura took it as they walked outside, back down the river. Only the light of a few paper lanterns showed their path, and it was that much better for it being dark. It seemed more romantic to Sakura and even Ryouko seemed to lose a little stiffness. It came flooding back when Sakura pulled herself closer to Ryouko and laid her head on his shoulder, blushing lightly.

Despite the chaos of the night, this would remain a special one in the hearts of both ninja. The promise of more dates to come, and a newfound respect/admiration for each other, Orochimaru had inadvertently bettered two lives. When Ryouko and Sakura were promoted to jonin for their bravery (among other reasons), Kurenai and Asuma were the first two to congratulate them. The four exchanged knowing smiles, silently thanking each other for helping. For Ryouko, it had been one of his most unlikely dreams come true.