

NaruNozo Files

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Here is my collection of short stories that tells about my OC, Nozomi Kubota, and how she met and came to get together with Naruto Uzumaki. :3

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1 - A Fateful Meeting? {Oneshot}

A Fateful Meeting?

It was a bright, sunny day. Not a cloud was in the sky, as a gentle breeze blew by every now and then. Birds were singing, and bees were buzzing to and from flowers, gathering pollen. Yes, it was a perfectly wonderful day, and everybody was happy.

Everybody, that is, except for the blond haired boy under the tree. One look at his bright orange and navy blue jacket, and his insanely spiky hair, and you just knew right away. This kid was none other than Naruto Uzumaki, the boy who had the nine tailed fox spirit sealed inside him. This same kid was also the one who claimed he would be the Hokage one day.

Said ninja let out a deep sigh as he glanced at the pale blue sky above. "Man, this is boring." he grumbled, "I should be training, not laying around like this!" He jumped to his feet. "Pervy Sage, where are you anyways?!" he shouted, shaking his fist at the sky. "Aren't you supposed to be helping me with my training?!" The blond haired boy let his shoulders sag slightly as nobody answered. Ok, so he hadn't actually *expected* an answer, but still...

Naruto pumped a clenched fist into the air, a glint of determination in his eyes. "Ok, Pervy Sage! I know you're out there somewhere, and I'm gonna find you no matter what it takes!" A drop of sweat trickled down the back of his head as a thought hit him. "Knowing *him*, he's probably doing 'research' for his dumb book! Hah..why'd I have to get stuck with HIM of all people?"

Naruto shook his head as an undesirable mental image appeared in his mind, and he started to search for his teacher; the one who went by the Toad Sage, but had been dubbed the "Pervy Sage" by his younger student. As he ran on, Naruto glanced around him for any sign of the white haired sennin. He found nothing of the sort, but this didn't discourage the young ninja. He just kept on looking.

"C'mon, Pervy Sage! Where *are* you?!" Naruto growled under his breath, frowning as he came to the village gates. "You'd better be in the village!" He was about to take another step forward when he heard a loud thud nearby.

"Eh?" Surprised, Naruto glanced around the area, and his gaze soon landed on the form of a fallen girl. "Hey, girl, are you all right?!" he inquired loudly, hurrying over to her. He stared down at the girl in amazement.

She was clothed in a black and green zip up dress, held on snugly by a deep purple belt. On each side of her dress was a small slit, as well as a zip shut pocket for carrying things like kunai or shuriken. Her shoes were dark blue sandals, held on by a strap and a single gold buckle. Her medium brown hair was long, going just a little past her shoulders. Her pale skin glistened in the sunlight, giving her a ghostly white complexion.

However, all this wasn't the cause for the look of amazement on Naruto's face. Oh, no. What he was

staring at in awe was the fuzzy black cat ears and tail that were attached to the girl.

Naruto chuckled to himself as he put his hands on his head, wiggling his fingers together in an attempt to imitate the twitching of the girl's cat ears.

Almost as if sensing what he was doing, the girl's eyes fluttered open enough for her to see what was going on. "Who are you, and what do you want?" she asked in a small, timid sounding voice.

"Eh?" Naruto stopped what he was doing and glanced sheepishly at the girl. "Oh, you're awake!" he bellowed loudly, an enthusiastic grin plastered on his face. This caused the girl to wince, and her ears flattened against her head.

"Oh, hehe, sorry." Naruto lowered his voice. "Anyways, my name is Naruto Uzumaki. Who are you?"

The cat girl smirked at him as she sat up, and Naruto was able to see her eyes clearly. They were a deep gold, with a glimmer of yellow in the center. For some reason, staring at them too long made you feel like you were in a trance, which Naruto found out the hard way. "S-so...what's your name?" he sputtered, the tone of his voice dull, as if he was under a spell of some sort.

"What's it to you?" the girl replied, this time her voice coming out hard and threatening.

The tone change was enough to snap Naruto out of his trance like state, and he sweatdropped. "Oh, I was just wondering. Since, you know, I told you my name."

"Ohh...whatever. It doesn't matter anyways." The cat girl glanced away. "...The name's Nozomi."

"Nozomi...?" Naruto pressed, waiting for the rest of her name.

Nozomi heaved a sigh. "Just Nozomi." she said, twisting a piece of her hair around her finger carelessly.

"Ehh?" Naruto blinked at this, eyebrows raised in surprise. "You mean...you don't have a last name?!" he gawked. "How is that even possible? Do you guys not have last names in your village? Hey...where *are* you from, anyways?"

Nozomi scowled at the babbling blond in response to his question. "Look, kid! My last name and where I come from are none of your business! Don't be stupid enough to ask me when you barely even KNOW me! Ya got that?!"

A drop of sweat rolled down Naruto's face as he recoiled slightly. He hadn't expected such an outburst from the cat girl. "Err..yeah, sure...got it." he mumbled in reply, frowning. How was he supposed to get to know her if everything he said made her lash out like that?

"Good." Nozomi muttered, rolling her eyes.

A long silence followed as neither Naruto nor Nozomi said a word.

"...Soo...what brings you to the Leaf Village, anyways?" Naruto asked, breaking the silence.

Nozomi blinked, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Leaf Village? What?" she said.

"The Leaf Village!" Naruto repeated. "You know, the Village Hidden in the Leaves...Konoha. Any of that ring a bell?"

Nozomi just shook her head back and forth. "Sorry. Never heard of it." she mumbled. Then she got to her feet, appearing to be in pain from the grim look on her face.

"Hey Nozo, are you all right?" Naruto asked, beginning to look concerned.

Nozomi was about to answer, but at that moment, the boy's words sunk in, and she glared slightly. "**What** did you just call me?" she demanded, taking a menacing step toward him, her ears lowered.

"I called you Nozo." Naruto said cheerfully. However, his grin faded as he saw the look on her face, and he gulped. "..Is there something wrong with that?"

"**Don't** give me any special names like that!" Nozomi hissed. "It's not as if we're friends!" She said this in a cold tone, then turned her back to him and crossed her arms in what Naruto guessed was annoyance. As she turned so suddenly, a jingle sounded from somewhere.

"Eh?" Naruto stepped in front of Nozomi and gave her a good examination, (which made her want to slap him) trying to find what had caused the noise. Soon he located the source: a gold bell on a black strap, tied around her neck. Naruto winced and clutched his neck. The bell sure looked uncomfortable, being tied on so tight.

"Heh, nice bell." he said simply.

The only answer he got was a snort. "Gee...you could at *least* say thank you, y'know." the young ninja grumbled.

"I'd rather not." the cat girl huffed.

"Why not?!" Naruto demanded, getting annoyed.

"Because...I HATE this bell with a passion." Nozomi muttered.

"What? Then why do you even wear it if you hate it so much?" Naruto questioned her. "Can't get it off? Cause if that's it, I could help you!"

"Look, just mind your own business, ok?!" Nozomi snarled.

Naruto just eyed her for a minute or two, a perplexed look on his face. "You know, you're kinda weird." he said bluntly.

"Your point?" Remarked Nozomi with another snort.

"What are you, anyways?" Naruto questioned, curiosity finally getting the better of him. "Are you somebody's pet cat? Wearing a bell that looks that much like a collar, I think you are! Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" he teased, flicking the bell that was around her neck, causing it to jingle again and again.

Nozomi just rolled her eyes. She was used to being called "kitty" and the likes. This wasn't the *first* time someone had done something like this to her. But usually when that happened, she beat the person up.

This time around, though, she was just too tired. Too weak. She'd traveled too much and eaten too little. Needless to say, Nozomi wasn't in the best health at the moment. To pick a fight with someone would practically be asking for death. This, Nozomi wouldn't particularly mind, however, she'd rather drop dead than lose in a fight with this kid. He infuriated her so!

The cat girl heaved a sigh and turned her back to Naruto (who was still going on with his teasing), plopping down onto the ground and letting her head hang, eyes shut in annoyance as she waited for the cat jokes to stop. Her eyes shot open a moment later, however, as she felt a sudden tingle go through her. "What the..?" She glanced sideways and snarled in annoyance as she saw the cause of the tingling sensation she was experiencing.

Sitting cross legged next to her was Naruto, and he was stroking her ears! "Does the kitty kitty Nozomi like having her ears stroked? Good kitty!" he teased, breaking into laughter as he saw the look Nozomi was giving him. "Hey, don't look so mad...How about a chin scratch?"

A drop of sweat ran down Nozomi's head, and she growled under her breath. "You do that...and you'll regret it." she threatened, trying to hold back the urge to purr. This was one thing she *really* hated about her cat demon. SHE disliked being petted...but the feline in her ENJOYED it immensely! Of course, she didn't go around telling people like Naruto that. What Nozomi REALLY hated was that as hard as she was trying, she knew she wouldn't be able to contain herself for long.

Puuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurr.

Naruto blinked in surprise. He stopped stroking Nozomi's ears and just stared at her, blue eyes wide.

Nozomi, in turn, blushed faintly and shot him a death glare that clearly said "You say ONE thing and I'll KILL you!"

For a minute, nobody said anything. It was completely silent as Naruto just stared open mouthed at the annoyed and blushing Nozomi. Then, a few seconds later, the boy threw his head back and laughed loudly.

"Ahahaha! Man, Nozo, you really *are* a cat! I mean, c'mon, *purring?* Ahahahahaha!"

Nozomi growled, her eyes twitching in annoyance as her blush darkened. If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was being laughed at! It was just so embarrassing!

Finally, her anger reached its limit, and before either of them realized what was happening, Nozomi lunged at him, clamping her jaws down on his hand, hard.

In response, Naruto screamed like a maniac, his eyes going wide with pain. "AHHH! What are you, CRAZY?! Let go!"

And Nozomi did. A few minutes later, she freed his hand from her jaws and turned away, a smirk on her face. "It's unfortunate what happened, yes, but you had that coming, kid."

Naruto scowled at her as he held onto his bitten hand. "What, can't you take a joke?! I was only messing with you! Apologize!"

"Hmmm...let me think..." Nozomi placed a hand on her chin, appearing to be deep in thought. ".....No can do, kid."

"Yes! Hey, stop calling me kid already!" Naruto yelled, getting angrier. "My name's Naruto, and besides that, I'm the same age as you!"

"Whatever." Nozomi rolled her eyes as she once again got to her feet. "Well, it's been real, kid, but I gotta go now." she said over her shoulder.

"Hey, wait! Where are you going?!It's *Naruto!* Na-ru-to!" The blond ninja protested.

"I'm out of here." Nozomi said, ignoring him. "Later." She gave a slight wave as she began to walk away.

"Hey, wait!" Naruto yelled, grabbing her arm. "I'm not finished with you yet! Stay here!"

"Well, I'm finished with you." Nozomi said, trying to remain calm even though she was getting extremely ticked off. Who the heck was this kid that he thought he could treat her the way he had, then demand she stay like some stupid dog?!

"I won't let you leave. Not yet!" Naruto insisted, tightening his grip on the cat girl's arm.

Nozomi sighed and rubbed her temples. This kid was giving her such a headache! "Fine then, I guess there's no other choice!"

Before Naruto could figure out what she meant, Nozomi turned and, with amazing speed, slashed his hand with her claws.

"Yeow!" he cried, falling backward and losing his grip on her arm in the process.

The brown haired girl just smirked at him. "See ya, kid."

"I already told you! You're not going anywhere!" Naruto growled, and grabbed the nearest part of her to him, which was her tail, and gave a rough jerk, stunning Nozomi. A wave of pain washed over her as she suddenly felt even weaker than she had before. The cat girl's eyes snapped shut, and she collapsed face first onto the ground.

Seeing this, Naruto's eyes bulged. He released her tail and hurried to her side. "Nozo? Hey Nozo, you all right?" he asked, shaking her.

When she didn't answer (or budge, for that matter), he panicked. "Oh man! I killed her! GAH! What do I do now?!" An idea hit him then, and he scooped Nozomi into his arms, then hurried into the village.

"SAKURA!!"

2 - Rainy Days & Ramen {Oneshot}

Rainy Days and Ramen

Drip drip. Pit pat. Splish splash.

Nozomi shivered as a cold gust of wind kicked up, giving her goosebumps all over her legs, as well as her shoulders. *'Stupid baka!* she scolded herself silently. *'You should have at **least** grabbed a jacket!'*

True, a netted top and knee length slitted dress with sandals was anything but appropriate attire for this weather.

The cat girl sighed. "Then again, I didn't exactly get a *chance* to grab anything before I left." A drop of sweat rolled down the back of her head as she thought back to what had happened only moments before.

...:FLASHBACK:...

Nozomi had been lounging lazily in a chair with a blanket, silently listening to the rain fall. She hated it when it rained, absolutely *hated* it! This was all due to the fact that having a demon cat in her made her feel drained and exhausted on rainy days. Nozomi's eyes had just slid shut when suddenly the door slammed open, revealing none other than the silver haired Jonin, Kakashi.

Nozomi jumped, surprised by the sudden intrusion, and shrieked. Kakashi sweatdropped, putting a hand on his ear. "Nozomi, calm down. It's just me." he said, his slightly monotone voice hard and firm as he fought to be heard over the cat girl's shrieking.

Nozomi stopped and frowned at him. "Kakashi-sensei? What are you doing here?" she asked, raising an eyebrow in suspicion.

"I'm here to inform you of your next mission." Kakashi replied.

Nozomi nearly went through the roof at this. "Whaaaaat?!" she yelled. "Oh no, I'm afraid it'll have to wait, sensei. I am NOT about to go out traveling on a day like this!" she yelled, pointing one clawed finger at the window, where rain could be seen coming down so thick you couldn't see anything else.

"Who said anything about traveling?" Kakashi shook his head. "Your mission is simple. Just find Naruto and bring him back."

Nozomi sweatdropped. "What do you mean, bring him back? He's not at home?" When all she got for an answer was a nod, Nozomi sighed. "Why can't *Sakura* go? You *know* how much I hate the rain!"

"Sakura is down with a cold." Kakashi said matter-of-factly, "So that just leaves you."

Nozomi groaned. "Why can't *you* go?"

"Because, I'm the sensei," Kakashi said, "and I'm telling *you* to! Now go on before Naruto catches a cold, too!"

"Whatever." Nozomi growled, climbing off the chair and taking the umbrella the silver haired Jonin held out to her. "I'll bet it's 'cause you want to read that dumb book!"

"I can assure you it's not." Kakashi said, sweatdropping. "Now get going!"

"Yeah, yeah, all right already! I'm going!" Nozomi snapped as she stepped outside, only stopping to open her umbrella, and walked off.

Kakashi stood watching her from the doorway for a few moments, before shutting the door and sitting in Nozomi's chair. He pulled out a small, hand sized book with a red restricted mark on it, flipping rapidly through the pages. "Now...where were we?"

...:END FLASHBACK:...

Nozomi groaned and squinted her eyes, struggling to see through the downpour. The rain was coming down so hard it was difficult to see *anything!*

Nozomi shivered as she walked past the academy. It was here where all Hidden Leaf ninja started. They were taught, trained and tested to determine whether or not they had what it took to be a ninja.

Nozomi was snapped out of her thoughts as she heard a loud sneeze nearby. "Ah-choo!"

"Naruto?" Nozomi glanced around, though it seemed futile as hard as the rain made it to see. Somehow she was able to make out the blond haired boy on the steps of the academy. Most likely because with a navy blue and bright orange jacket, he was hard to miss. Even in the rain.

"Oy...Naruto that baka...he doesn't even have an umbrella!" The cat girl muttered in frustration.

As carefully as she could, Nozomi walked up the steps and sat down beside the wet ninja, cursing Kakashi in her head for giving her such a small umbrella that she'd need to sit practically hip to hip with the boy. "Naruto?" she said softly, holding the umbrella so it covered them both.

Naruto glanced up in confusion at the umbrella that shielded him from the rain, then at the girl holding the umbrella. "Nozomi?"

Said cat girl sweatdropped. "Hello, Naruto." she said then glanced away, bracing herself for a loud, enthusiastic greeting. To her surprise, the spiky haired boy just nodded his head and said, "Hey."

Another drop of sweat rolled down Nozomi's head. What should she say now? A long, heavy silence fell over the two, and the only sound heard was the loud pitter patter of the rain.

"So...uhh..." Nozomi trailed off, struggling to think of something, anything to say.

"It's crazy."

"Neh?" Nozomi's head shot up and she stared at Naruto. His face was sober, his eyes seemingly emotionless with just the slightest hint of a sad smile on his lips.

"It feels like it was all just yesterday," Naruto began (whether he was talking to himself or to her, Nozomi wasn't sure), "when I was just starting out here as a student. Sakura, Sasuke and me."

Nozomi was about to correct his grammar, but he spoke again, not giving her the chance.

"Sasuke...Man, he *really* ticked me off sometimes with that attitude of his." There was a hint of a chuckle in his voice. "He was always doing things better than me without trying. That made me so mad, I went out of my way to challenge him to a competition of anything that came up."

Nozomi sighed inwardly at this. She remembered hearing about Sasuke. He had been the original third team mate in Kakashi Hatake's squad, until he had betrayed them and gone with Orochimaru. Shortly after that, Nozomi had stumbled across the Leaf Village. More like collapsed outside of it. Anyways, Naruto had found her, and after a long fight of one knuckle head verses another, he'd talked her into staying and living her life as a Leaf Shinobi. Afterward, the fifth Hokage, Lady Tsunade had assigned Nozomi to Kakashi's squad (to her dismay), insisting that they needed someone to take Sasuke's place, at least for the time being so that the squad could continue.

Nozomi sighed again, shivering as another cold gust of wind went by.

"Are you cold, Nozo-chan?" Naruto said suddenly.

This shocked the cat girl. She'd assumed he wasn't paying attention. She sweatdropped and nodded her head sheepishly. "A little." she admitted reluctantly, "But that's beside the point. Not important." she glanced away again.

"Well...if you say so." Naruto said, looking away from her and resuming his walk down memory lane, the sadness still plain on his face.

Nozomi couldn't stand seeing him like this! Sure, the kid annoyed the heck out of her, but still...Her heart felt like it was breaking in two seeing him this down.

'Darn you, Sasuke, this is all your fault!' she cursed him in her mind, 'You caused such a hurt that nobody can heal by leaving! I don't even know you but right now, I HATE you!'

Nozomi sighed and lowered her head, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. Just the sight of him, his form bent, head hung to hide the sadness on his face, it hurt her more than she could understand. *'It's because he's always so darn happy.'* she realized. *'He's always had that big, toothy grin on his sweet face while la-- wait...SWEET?! I did NOT just think that!'* The gold eyed girl sweatdropped, smacking herself mentally. *'Anyways, I have to at least TRY to cheer him up...Otherwise he'll never come home, and Kakashi-sensei will punish me for failing! Ahhhhh! I don't even wanna **think** about what*

methods he might use!

She furrowed her brow and frowned, thinking about what she could do to try and help. Then she suddenly had it! Ok, it wasn't anything big or special, but it WAS a stretch, especially for someone like Nozomi. The cat girl sweatdropped, her cheeks coloring slightly. Hopefully Naruto would appreciate it. She gulped before shifting the umbrella to her other hand, and putting her arm around Naruto's shoulder gently.

This act alone snapped Naruto out of his thoughts, and he cast a blank, wide eyed look at the girl. "Uhh..Nozo-chan? What is it?" he asked, looking extremely confused. This was way out of character for someone like Nozomi!

Nozomi blushed faintly, knowing what he must be thinking since she usually kept her distance from him...and now here she was hugging him.

"Nozomi?" Naruto said again.

Nozomi just wrapped her arm around him tighter and leaned against his shoulder, though her instincts told her to jerk away. The fact that she didn't was what surprised Naruto the most. Here was the girl who acted like she despised him, who jumped away if he happened to be standing only a few feet away from her...and now here she was *hugging* him?!

"Naruto..." Nozomi began, unsure of how to word the things she heard in her head, "I know the things I say can't heal you..or even help you...so I don't know WHY I'm saying this, but..I *do* believe you'll get Sasuke back one of these days...but you have to keep trying harder and harder...and you can't give up! No matter what happens, even if it means fighting to the death! You aren't to quit if you want to get him back. You can't give up." She sweatdropped, mentally slapping herself. Ok, that had sounded really bossy to her...not at all like the motivating speech she'd heard in her head.

Feeling awkward, Nozomi removed her arm from around his shoulders and pulled away from him. "Of course," she said, looking at her feet, "You don't have to listen to me...d-do what you want."

Naruto stared at her, still surprised. He had just opened his mouth to answer when she spoke yet again, cutting him off.

"...Listen. I know I can't take Sasuke's place on squad 7...or in your heart. I can't fill the hole he made..but..." she paused, "Still, I will try my best to help you get him back...and when you feel lonely, you can come to me. I'll listen...you can cry on my shoulder...or if it's just a hug you need...I'll be here."

Nozomi broke off her sentence in disbelief. Ok, once again, that had come out different than she'd heard it in her mind. Instead of sounding like someone trying to console a friend, she had come out sounding more like some girl trying to comfort her boyfriend! She frowned, feeling the blood rushing to her face. Had seeing him so down honestly made her sympathy level rise so much that she couldn't comfort him without sounding like some love crazed school girl?!

"I-I'm sorry. Th-that was a dumb thing for me to say." she broke off again, handing Naruto the umbrella. "Here, I'm gonna go home..and you need this more than I do." She inched away from him, cringing as

she felt a drop of rain soak through the netting on her shoulder, freezing her skin. "Anyways...don't stay out here *too* much longer or you'll catch cold." she said. '*And then Kakashi-sensei will KILL me!*' she added silently.

Suddenly Naruto put his hand on hers, stopping her. "N..Naruto?" she stammered, turning her head and looking at him. Her face turned red and she wished she HADN'T looked as she saw the expression on his face.

His eyes, though still clouded with some sadness were brighter and shining; his mouth curved into a small sad, yet grateful smile as he stared into her eyes. "Thanks, Nozomi. You did help a little." His smile widened slightly.

Nozomi looked surprised. "I did? How?"

Naruto's smile grew slightly. "Well, it's not what you said, though it was nice of you to try and make me feel better."

Nozomi sweatdropped hearing this. "Then how *did* I help you?" she asked in confusion.

Naruto's face broke out into his regular grin, teeth exposed and all. "It helped a lot to have a cute girl sitting with me of her own free will...and sitting so close with her arm around me!"

Hearing this, Nozomi's face turned a dark shade of crimson, and she was forced to turn her head away, otherwise face the headache of coming up with an excuse as to why she was so red. "W-well, you were getting r-rained on, and-and Kakashi-sensei **said** to go find you, so I-I really didn't have a choice in the matter!" she stammered.

Naruto nodded his head, a smirk on his face. "Uh huh...sure. Whatever you say. Though I think it's because you *like* me."

As impossibly as it seems, Nozomi's face turned even redder, and her eyes grew to about the size of saucers. "Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?! I do *not!*" she stammered. "I don't like you in the least! I hate your *guts!*" She growled at him and turned away, her back facing him.

Naruto still just smirked. "Well *I* don't believe you...and you're in luck, you know," Still clasping the umbrella with one hand, he leaned against Nozomi's shoulder. "Because," he said softly into one of her cat ears, making it twitch, "I can't get Sakura to date me, so that means I'm available!"

The fur on Nozomi's tail spiked up, and she turned to glare darkly at him. "Well STAY available, 'cause I'm *not* interested!" she spat.

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "Oh really...then...why are you so *red*?" he asked with a smirk, knowing he had her trapped.

Nozomi glanced away, one of the veins on her forehead popping up in anger. Darn it, he *had* her there! As she sat there, silently struggling to think of a come back, Naruto threw his head back and let out a big, hearty laugh.

"Oh, Nozo-chan...you're so silly!" he laughed, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. "Why do you always choose to fight instead of just admitting it?" He laughed again. "Man, I feel so much better...thanks, Nozomi." he grinned at her and she sweatdropped. *Why? Because he managed to get me so embarrassed?* she wondered silently.

"D-don't mention it." she managed to say.

There was a brief moment of silence which was broken as Nozomi suddenly sneezed loudly. Naruto looked at her, concerned. "Nozo-chan, you sound like you're getting a cold." he said, leaning in close and putting a hand on her forehead. She felt warm. "I guess that's what you get for not wearing a jacket." he said. "You should know better."

Nozomi sweatdropped and rolled her eyes in annoyance. "Look, Kakashi-sensei practically *shoved* me out the door! I didn't have a CHANCE to grab a jacked- Ah-CHOO!" she sniffled, groaning softly. Great, it was beginning to seem like she *was* coming down with a cold!

"C'mon, Nozo-chan." Naruto said suddenly, getting up. He grabbed Nozomi's hand and pulled her to her feet.

Nozomi's face colored to a light shade of pink at his touch, and she jerked her hand away. "Wh-where are we going?" she asked, looking confused.

Naruto smiled. "To get ramen, of course!"

Nozomi blinked and raised an eyebrow at him. "Ramen?" she repeated, sneezing again.

Naruto nodded his head enthusiastically. "Of course! There's no better cure for a cold than nice, hot Ichiraku ramen! You'll be better in *no* time!"

Nozomi stared at him, her expression softening. "...You don't have to do that, you know."

"Hey, I want to." Naruto replied. "You helped me out, now I'm gonna help *you* out!"

Nozomi could only stare at him, a small smile forming on her face. Naruto...Sure, he could be wreckless, and a knuckle head, but he could also be sweet when he chose to be. At first, she'd perceived him to be nothing more than a loud mouthed, slightly perverted (at times) show off who liked flirting with her. But maybe, just maybe she'd been wrong. Perhaps this was how he acted with all his friends that were girls...maybe..

Nozomi snapped back from her thoughts as she heard Naruto snicker. "What? What's so funny?!" she demanded.

Naruto grinned mischievously and stuck his tongue out. "Nothing. I was just thinking what a great first date this will be!"

Nozomi's face heated up yet again, and she knew she had to be blushing again. "It's *not* a date!" she

insisted, still blushing furiously. Why did he always seem to have that effect on her?! She sweatdropped and shifted her gaze away from him.

Naruto just smirked. "You know, you better move closer if you want this umbrella to keep you dry!"

Nozomi groaned. "I'm already *right* next to you! What else am I supposed to do?!"

"You could walk with your arm around me." Naruto suggested with a sly grin.

Nozomi nearly socked him for that one.

"What? If you don't hang on, you might walk out from under the teeny tiny umbrella!" The blond haired boy's grin widened.

Nozomi growled as she backed away slightly. "You're exaggerating! I'll be fine!" No sooner had these words left her mouth then a cold drop of rain splashed against her back, and she jumped. "Kyaaa!"

Naruto's face broke out into a big, toothy smile. He knew he had won. The boy fought back the urge to say "I told ya so" as he extended an arm out to the cat girl. "You comin'?" he asked in an innocent sounding voice.

Nozomi growled and cursed under her breath, sneezing again and again. Darn. That stupid cold was really beginning to get annoying.

"Nozomi?" Naruto pressed.

Nozomi growled again as another rain drop hit her, this time on her ear. "Fine!" she grumbled, wrapping her arm around his shoulders, closing the space between them.

Naruto snickered softly and put his free arm around her middle, nearly doubling over with laughter as he saw how plainly this simple motion affected her. "Well then, let's go before you get so sick you can't walk and I have to *carry* you there!"

A drop of sweat ran down the back of Nozomi's head and she gulped, nodding and letting him lead.

God, this was so embarrassing! *'It's all Kakashi-sensei's fault!'* she thought angrily. She could hear Naruto snickering under his breath. He thought how worked up and embarrassed she was was funny! It was almost unbearable!

'Darn you, Kakashi-sensei!' she thought, face flaming with embarrassment, *'Next time, give me a bigger umbrella!'*

3 - Be Mine {Valentine's Oneshot}

Be Mine {Valentine's Oneshot}

"Valentine's Day." Nozomi smirked and rolled her eyes. "What a stupid, pointless holiday. Not to mention insulting. I mean, come on, it's only around for one thing, and that is so that couples can rub it in the faces of people like me that we're single." The cat girl sighed softly, a small, sad smile on her face. "Hard to believe it used to be my favorite day of the year...yeah, back before...that..." The girl sighed again, letting her shoulders droop.

"What is it with you and rooftops, anyways?" came a nearby voice.

Surprised, Nozomi glanced up and looked around, her gaze finally landing on Naruto Uzumaki, her fellow teammate and, though she'd never admit this outloud, her secret crush.

Nozomi's ears sprung upward, eyes widening slightly in surprise. How long had he been sitting here next to her?!

"N-Naruto! L-listen, this isn't a good...uhh...I mean...can you...umm.." there was a pause as she struggled to think of an excuse to make him leave. "What are you doing up here anyways?!"

Naruto snickered, amused by the jumpiness in her voice. "I was looking for you," he began, "and I figured this was a good place to look since you seem to love hanging out on rooftops." He glanced at her curiously. "Why *do* you always come up here?"

"Heh, no real reason." Nozomi said, staring down at her toes. "I guess it could be the affects of having a feline side...or it could be that I find it peaceful up here." she smiled slightly. "I do come up here to think about things, and I like that I can be alone since nobody ever cares to follow me." A drop of sweat trickled down the back of her head. "At least," she began, looking up at the blond haired boy, "I **thought** nobody did...how many times have you followed me here?"

A sheepish grin spread across Naruto's face as he said, "Well...pretty much ever since you first came to live here."

Nozomi face palmed at this and groaned. "Stalker!"

"Hey! I'm no stalker!" Naruto protested. "Following you was the only way to learn about you in the beginning, since you wouldn't talk to me...and now it's the only way I can keep up with you since you've been avoiding me for some reason you won't even tell me!"

Nozomi didn't say anything. She just sighed deeply, and looked away. "Whatever."

'I still think you're a stalker!' she screamed in her mind.

"So." Naruto said after a few minutes of silence had passed. "What happened?"

"Hm?" Nozomi glanced at him in confusion. "I'm not sure I understand your question."

"I mean, what happened to make you not like Valentine's Day?" Naruto said bluntly.

Nozomi sweatdropped at this, and the fur on her ears and tail spiked up a bit. "...So...you *heard* that." she mumbled, embarrassed. "Well, I'm sorry, but it's not any of your business."

"Aww! C'mon, Nozo-chan! Please?" Naruto begged.

Nozomi raised an eyebrow at him. "Why do you want to know, anyways?"

"I'm curious." Naruto replied with a grin.

"Sorry, *not* telling." Nozomi folded her arms and looked away again.

"Aww, Nozo-chan! Tell me! If you tell me your reason, I'll tell you *mine*." Naruto bribed.

Nozomi looked at him in surprise. "You don't like Valentine's Day either? How come?"

"I'll only tell you if you tell me *yours*." Naruto repeated, grinning, glad that his bribery was working.

"Ohhh! Fine!" Nozomi sighed.

Naruto just grinned and watched her, waiting for her to begin.

Nozomi took a deep breath and lowered her head, shadows casting over her eyes. "...When I was three, my Mom died of pneumonia...I always felt like it was sorta my fault, cause she caught it while trying to make me come indoors during a storm. My Dad knew how bad I felt...and because of that, he always treated me like I was the most important thing to him. Like a princess. He even called me Nozo-hime. Especially on Valentine's Day. He would do everything he could to make me feel loved...every single day." she paused. "I loved him so much...we were so happy together...but, like every other happy story, tragedy struck."

Nozomi stopped talking then, fighting back the tears that were forming in her eyes. Crying in front of somebody else...even if that somebody was Naruto...it went against her number one rule; never cry when others are present, no matter how great your pain may be.

A few minutes went by, and Nozomi was able to talk again. "It all happened just a few days after I turned 7. Our village was invaded by enemy shinobi, and my father was killed. From that day forth, I was alone. The only thing I had of my dad -which I still have to this day- was the kunai that was used to pierce his heart. After that happened, I never knew the feeling of being loved or cared about again."

Her story done, Nozomi lowered her head, once again fighting back tears, leaving Naruto to just stare in shocked silence.

"Nozo-chan, I'm sorry...it sucks, what happened to your Dad."

Nozomi raised her head so their eyes met, and Naruto was able to see the tears that clouded her eyes as she spoke. "It's ok," she said, her voice cracking, "Now you know, though, why it is that I don't like Valentine's Day. It brings up too many memories for me."

Naruto just stared at her, not knowing quite what he should say. For awhile, neither of them spoke as they both just stared up at the sky. Finally, Naruto broke the silence.

"Well, since your Dad can't do it anymore, it's my job now!"

"Wait! What?" Nozomi sweatdropped, looking in bewilderment at him.

"Oh, c'mon, you know what I mean." Naruto scooted closer and put an arm around her, giving her a little hug. Then he said in a voice that was barely above that of a whisper, "Nozo-hime."

Upon hearing this, Nozomi's face flushed, and she turned her head to face him. "What?! No, Naruto! That's not your job! D-don't make it your business!" She sputtered, feeling her face heat up, an indication that she was blushing.

Naruto just grinned at her, not seeming to care or notice that she was going red in the face. "Sorry, but it's too late, kitty! As of right now you are *my* treasure, and MY Nozo-hime! It's now my job to make sure you feel loved, since your Dad's gone."

Nozomi's blush deepened, and she sweatdropped, pushing his arm off her and inching away.

"Hey, where're you going?" Naruto asked, stopping her by putting a hand on top of hers. "I still have to make you feel loved!"

"N-Naruto, that only works with parents." Nozomi stammered, blushing. "Because the parents make sure the girl feels special...but a BOY might do the same thing in hopes of showing that he likes that girl as more than a friend...and that he wants her. It sends an entirely different message!" As she finished her babbling, Nozomi jerked her hand away and got to her feet.

However, she was stopped from leaving yet again, as Naruto grabbed her tail, giving a tug. Gentle enough that she didn't pass out (as she did when he first met her), but firm enough that she was forced to sit back down. Which she did. Grumbling the whole time.

"How do you know I'm not trying to do both?" he said.

Then, before Nozomi could say or do anything, he leaned in and kissed her on the lips. This action earned him her claws digging into his arm, before she kissed back, surprising them both.

A few seconds later, Naruto pulled away, grinning like an idiot.

"Wh-what kind of cheap trick was that?!" Nozomi demanded angrily, her face bright red.

"It wasn't a trick." Naruto insisted. "I really *do* care about you. You're special to me."

Nozomi had to look away as he said this. She suddenly felt tongue tied. She couldn't say anything!

'What's wrong with me?! Why is my heart pounding so hard?!

"Nozomi, what I'm trying to say is that I love you. Really I do. I swear I'm not just saying it like that Suoh guy did."

Nozomi, who had been listening in stunned silence until now snapped out of her speechlessness. "Wait! How did you find out about him?"

Naruto smirked. "This isn't the first time I followed you here and heard you talking to yourself. You came here last week, and you were upset. You kept ranting about that Suoh guy, cursing him under your breath, but just loud enough for me to hear."

"I was?" Nozomi sweatdropped. "I guess I talk to myself more than I thought..." she sighed.

"Well, anyways, I'm not just saying things like *he* did." Naruto said again. "I really do love and care about you...I don't care *how* long it takes me to make you believe that! I won't give up, not ever!"

Nozomi blushed, staring at him in shocked silence. "S-so...uh...what's yours? I mean, your reason for not liking Valentine's Day."

"Oh, that?" Naruto grinned. "Well," he winked at her, "I could never get anyone to be my Valentine."

Nozomi sweatdropped. "*That* was your reason?"

Naruto nodded. "Yep! But it looks like that's not a problem anymore, since you kissed me back!" He smiled. "So...you'll be mine? My Valentine *and* my girlfriend?"

Nozomi's face went scarlet red at his question. "I NEVER said I'd be **either**!" she protested.

"Maybe *you* didn't but your kiss *did*." Naruto smirked.

"Darn it, don't you even go there, you idiot!"

"If I'm such an idiot then why'd you kiss me?" Naruto teased.

"Like I care to know! Leave me alone!" Nozomi growled, starting to move away.

"I think you're forgetting something important." Naruto smirked, motioning to her tail, which he still held in his hands.

Nozomi facepalmed. "Paws off, ramen-breath!" she snarled, jerking her tail out of his grasp.

"Ramen-breath?" Naruto repeated, laughing a little. "If you say so, kitty cat."

"Don't call me kitty cat!" Nozomi growled, annoyed.

"Well don't call *me* ramen-breath." Naruto said evenly. "Why can't I call you that though? After all, you *are* my kitty now, aren't you?"

Nozomi's eyes doubled in size at this. "Who said anything about me being yours? You're wrong!" she shouted, getting to her feet.

Then, before Naruto could react, she jumped down from the roof (landing on her feet thanks to the cat demon in her), and took off running. "I don't belong to *anyone!*" she shouted over her shoulder. "Not now, not *ever!!*"

Naruto just watched, laughing. "Running away? Well, you can run, Nozo-hime, but you can't *hide!*"

He got to his feet, preparing himself for a long chase. "Shadow clone jutsu!"

4 - RRF OOC NXN KXH {Oneshot}

Really Random, Funny, OOC NarutoxNozomi KibaxHinata One Shot

'How the heck did I get myself into this mess?!' Nozomi screamed in her mind.

She sighed, glancing around the small, air tight room she was in. There was barely anything in here, except for a couch, barely big enough for two, and a small, wooden table. Not even a window.

She groaned. *'I can't believe I'm stuck in here...could things GET any worse?'* A drop of sweat rolled down her head as she locked eyes with the blue eyed blond who was sitting on the couch. *'That's right, I'm locked in here with HIM. Naruto!'*

"You know," Naruto said suddenly, "that game probably won't end anytime soon. You should sit down and save your energy."

Nozomi growled and muttered an unintelligible remark under her breath as she sat down next to him, blushing as their waists touched, thanks to the smallness of the couch.

'Damn that Sakura, darn that stupid mutt, Kiba! This is all their fault!' she grumbled silently, heaving a sigh as she thought back to the events that had taken place only a little while ago..

FLASH

"Sakura, are you sure about this?" Nozomi frowned as the pink haired kunoichi half led half dragged her along.

"Sure I'm sure!" Sakura replied with a grin, "It's going to be fun! So c'mon!" she urged.

Nozomi sighed as she was dragged into a room, being greeted by the faces of Kiba, Hinata and Naruto.

"Sooo, anybody wanna tell me what we're all here for?" she mumbled.

"You mean you don't know?" Naruto teased.

Nozomi rolled her eyes. "If I did, do you really think I'd be asking? Now tell me!"

Naruto smirked and made a face at her. "Sorry, no can do."

"Why the heck not?" Nozomi demanded, annoyed.

"Because-" Naruto began, only to be cut off by Sakura.

"He doesn't know either." she said.

"Oh." Nozomi giggled, smirking at the now embarrassed looking Naruto.

"What are YOU laughing at?" he said, glancing away. "Anyways, Sakura! Tell us why we're here!"

"I was wondering the same thing." Kiba said.

"M-me too." Hinata added softly.

"Arf, arf!" Akamaru added from his place inside of Kiba's jacket.

Nozomi caught a glimpse of him and growled softly under her breath. '*Stupid mutt...*'

As if sensing her thoughts, the brown and white dog glanced at her, uttering a low growl from deep within his throat.

Nozomi rolled her eyes and shook her head, sighing. "Stupid mutt."

"What did you just say?!"

Nozomi sweatdropped as she suddenly found herself face to face with an angry Kiba. "You got a problem with my dog?!"

"Well, we didn't get off to the best start if you remember!" Nozomi flung, reminding him of how they'd behaved when they first met.

"Guys, guys, break it up!" Sakura yelled, standing in between them.

Nozomi and Kiba glared darkly at each other as they backed away.

"Stupid mutt."

"Baka neko."

"Anyways," Sakura continued, "I brought you all here to play a game!"

Nozomi snorted. "What is it, charades?" she said, motioning to the way Sakura moved her hands when she spoke.

"No!" Sakura glared lightly at Nozomi before smiling again. "We're gonna play Truth or Dare!"

Nozomi facepalmed. "..I think I prefer the charades idea." she grumbled.

"What's the matter?" Nozomi's head shot up and she saw Kiba smirking at her. "Ya too afraid to take on a dare or two? What a fraidy cat!"

"Ohhh! You're ON, dog boy!" Nozomi yelled, angry at being called a fraidy cat. "I'll play the dumb

game...but in the end, it's YOU who'll run away with your tail between your legs!"

Kiba just smirked. "Whatever you say, baka neko."

"Ughh..." Sakura sighed, putting a hand on her forehead. They were giving her a headache. She shifted her gaze to Naruto and Hinata. "So, you two ok with that game?" she asked.

Hinata hesitated before nodding her head shyly.

"..Truth or Dare's a dumb game." Naruto grumbled. "I don't want to play that."

"C'mon, Naruto, just give it a try!" Sakura urged, sweatdropping. "Even Nozomi's giving it a chance!"

'Can't you see I'm trying to help you hook up with her?!' her inner self screamed angrily.

"Please, Naruto. Just give it a chance. You won't be disappointed, I promise." she said in a sugary sweet voice, trying to convince him.

"Fine. If you say so." Naruto sighed.

"Great!" Sakura clapped her hands enthusiastically. "Before we get started there's a few things I need to explain. For one thing, you're all under a special jutsu that forces you to tell the truth...so no trying to lie...Nozomi."

Nozomi sweatdropped as everyone turned to her, smug smirks on their faces. "What? Why's everyone looking at *me*?! I'm not gonna try lying!"

"Good," Sakura smirked, "because you were under the jutsu's effect the minute you entered this room! Also, anybody who doesn't do their dare is Jiraiya's personal research assistant for two weeks! Which means you have to do ANYTHING he says!" she grinned evilly. "Just to give you incentive not to try chickening out."

She paused. "So, now that the rules have all been laid down, let's start! I'll go first." She glanced around the group and her gaze landed on Kiba. "All right...Kiba. Truth or dare?"

Kiba glanced down at Akamaru and the little dog whimpered softly. "Truth." he answered.

"Ok." Sakura paused for a moment, thinking of a question. "Kiba. I've heard rumors that you have a crush on somebody on your squad. Is that true?"

Kiba's face flushed, and he nodded slightly. "Mm hmm." Was all he said.

Everyone was quiet. They all knew who that was. Hinata's face turned pink as she noticed everybody looking at her, and she glanced away, unable to bear all the attention.

Suddenly, the silence was broken as Naruto jumped up. "So that means you like Hinata, Kiba?!"

Kiba blushed faintly. "Who *e*lse would it be?" he muttered.

"Well," Naruto scratched his head, "I don't know. You could like Kurenai-sensei, or even Shi-"

"Naruto, shut up and sit down!" Sakura interrupted loudly, facepalming at what her teammate had just implied, probably without meaning to.

Naruto frowned, seeing the annoyed look on her face and plopped down next to Nozomi, much to the cat girl's annoyance.

"Ok, Nozomi. Your turn." Sakura said, trying to clear what she was sure was in everyone's mind, thanks to Naruto's stupidity.

Nozomi nodded as she scooted to the side, putting some space between her and Naruto.

"Ok...uhh...Hinata. Truth or dare?"

"U-um...d-dare. Please." Hinata answered, hoping the dare would require her to leave the room. She needed a few minutes to calm down so she could stop blushing.

Nozomi grinned at this. She knew the perfect dare. It would embarrass not only Hinata, but Kiba too, which she wanted since he'd had the nerve to call her a fraidy cat. The cat girl smirked. "Hinata, I dare you to kiss Kiba."

"Wh-what?!" Hinata's face went pale.

"You heard me...kiss Kiba." Nozomi repeated, enjoying the shocked expressions on both Kiba and Hinata's faces.

There was a long, awkward silence as Hinata slowly (*very slowly*) leaned in and kissed Kiba's cheek gently. Then she quickly pulled away, face a light shade of pink. "O..Ok...wh-who's next?" she managed to say after a minute.

"Ah, ah, ahhh!" Nozomi smirked. "On the **lips!**"

This got her just the reactions she'd hoped for. Hinata blushed crimson. Also, Kiba glared at her darkly, also blushing now. "Darn you, baka neko!"

"Ohhh, c'mon, dog-boy, you *know* you're thrilled!" Nozomi teased with a huge smirk on her face.

"N-Nozomi, you're not s..serious, are you?" Hinata stammered, still blushing like mad.

Nozomi's smirk just got bigger. "Either do it or you're the Pervy Sage's 'research' assistant for 2 weeks...your choice!"

There was another long pause. "I-I...o..ok..." The blush on Hinata's face darkened as she leaned in and pressed her lips lightly against Kiba's, causing the boy's face to go scarlet. Then she pulled away, unable to look anywhere but at the ground.

After a few minutes, Sakura spoke up. "Um...ok...So...who wants to go next?"

"I'll go." Kiba said, glaring at Nozomi, who was still snickering softly. "All right, Nozomi, you baka. Truth or dare?"

Nozomi sweatdropped as she saw the look in his eyes. He would be bound to try and humiliate her if she said "dare". *'I won't fall into that trap.'* "Truth." she said with a small grin.

"Fine then." Kiba paused. "Ok, Nozomi. I heard that you spend *all* your time with Naruto, here. Is that true?"

"Well he DOES stalk me." Nozomi grumbled, glaring at the blond haired boy who sat beside her, somehow having ended up right next to her, despite her attempts at keeping a distance between them.

"Yes or no?" Kiba pressed.

Nozomi rolled her eyes. "Yes...your point?"

'If that's the best you can do, Kiba, you should just surrender!'

"Heh, just pointing out the obvious.." Kiba snickered. "You like Naruto!"

"I do *not!*" Nozomi hissed, baring her fangs at the brown haired boy.

"Hmmm...you can't lie...so maybe you don't like him...but then that must mean you *love* him!" Kiba smirked as the cat girl's face turned a light shade of red.

"Shut up, mutt!"

"Your turn, Hinata." Sakura said, trying to ignore the two and their argument.

"Ok." Hinata glanced around the room. "U..um...N-Nozomi. Truth or dare?"

This snapped Nozomi out of her angry stare down with Kiba and she sweatdropped. *'Me again?'*

"Uhh...Dare." she said, deciding this to be the safer choice since Hinata wasn't all that crazy when it came to dares.

"A dare?" Hinata repeated. "Ok, let me think."

'I really want to get that girl back for what she did!' she thought secretly, blushing faintly at the memory of her kiss with Kiba. *'I have to get her back for that!'*

"Hey, Hinata, how about *this* for a dare?" Sakura leaned forward, a smirk on her face as she began to whisper in Hinata's ear.

"H-Hey! No helping her! That's cheating!" Nozomi protested, gulping. Sakura knew how she really felt about Naruto, and -Nozomi sweatdropped- most likely she'd take advantage of the situation, since she'd asked Hinata for a dare.

Sakura stopped whispering and pulled back, sticking her tongue out at the cat girl. "I never said you weren't allowed to share ideas...silly kitty!"

"Don't call me kitty!" Nozomi snapped angrily.

Sakura just grinned and went back to whispering in Hinata's ear.

Nozomi sweatdropped and groaned inwardly as Hinata nodded, then turned to face her, a small, sneaky looking grin on her face. "N-Nozomi, I dare you to k..kiss Naruto-"

"Is that all?!" Nozomi snickered and leaned over to her side, pecking the blond ninja's cheek quickly. "Ok, all done!"

Hinata shook her head slowly. "I wasn't finished." she paused. "I dare you to kiss h-him while he holds you...and y-you have to stay that way for five more turns."

Upon hearing the full dare, Nozomi's face went red. "Whaaat?!" She scowled at Sakura, and the girl grinned back innocently. Darn that girl. She knew she had Nozomi trapped, and what was worse, she was *enjoying* it!

"So? Ya gonna do it?" Kiba pressed the flustered girl. "Or would you rather serve as a research assistant to the 'Pervy' Sage as you told Hinata earlier?"

Nozomi blushed. "No way am I gonna help that creep!"

"Then pucker up." Kiba snickered.

"How about you *shut* up?!" Nozomi growled, blushing.

"G...go on, Nozomi." Even Hinata was smirking to a point. There was nothing better than getting revenge on someone who'd embarrassed you, which is just what she was doing.

Nozomi groaned and rolled her eyes. "All right, already!" she grumbled, shrieking as Naruto grabbed her and held her in his lap. '*Why me?!*' she thought, wishing she could die then and there.

"C'mon, Nozomi! You know what you have to do now!" Sakura urged, an amused look on her face. She clenched her fists with anticipation. '*Stall any longer and I'll FORCE you into him! CHA!*'

Nozomi sighed, gulping. '*How do I get myself **into** these things?'* She wondered. Reluctantly, she closed her eyes to avoid seeing the look on his face, tilted her head back and pressed her mouth against his, heart pounding rapidly, face blazing red. Then, after a couple seconds she pulled back- more like tried, and failed.

'Eh?' Nozomi nearly jumped out of her skin as Naruto kissed her back, deepening the kiss and henceforth, not allowing her to move.

'Stupid Naruto! Kissing me back wasn't in the dare! Dummy...ramen-breath...seriously...ramen breath...Mmm....Ah, I mean, STOP IT, NARUTO!'

Finally she was freed as Naruto pulled away, gasping for air.

"Wow...that was a longer kiss than I expected it to be...coming from Nozomi." Sakura commented, eyes slightly larger in surprise.

"I told you...she's in love with him." Kiba smirked.

"Darn you, stupid dog, you're gonna pay if you don't take that back!" Nozomi yelled, blushing madly.

"But it's true, isn't it?" Kiba snickered.

"That's it, you're going down!" Nozomi growled, starting to get up.

"Ah, ah, ahhh! You're supposed to stay with Naruto for at least five more turns...remember?" Sakura smirked.

"...Darn, you're right." Nozomi sighed, leaning back against Naruto reluctantly.

"Of course...after a kiss like *that*, I doubt he'll be willing to let go of you anytime soon!" Sakura giggled, making Nozomi's face go even redder.

"OK! My turn now!" Naruto said loudly, breaking the silence, and making Nozomi's ears go flat against her head. "Ow.."

"Sorry." Naruto smiled sheepishly. "So, truth or dare, Nozo?"

Nozomi stared at him in shock. *'You're kidding me...AGAIN?! Haven't I suffered enough?! For the love of Kami, I think this must be a set up just to get ME embarrassed!'* She hesitated before answering.

"Truth..."

Naruto grinned at her and she gulped. What was he planning?

"So, Nozo-chan. What were you thinking just now..when I kissed you back?"

'That explains why the kiss was that long.' Sakura thought, smirking at Nozomi.

Nozomi's face colored even more. "Um...Ramen breath..." she mumbled.

This caused everyone around her to nearly fall over laughing. Everyone except Naruto, that is.

"Heh?" Naruto blinked in confusion. "Why were you thinking *that*?"

"Because...you eat so much of it...and...well...when two people kiss they...AH! Never mind, I'm not saying anything more!" Nozomi snapped, blushing harder.

"No, tell me! I don't get it!" Naruto pleaded, but Nozomi just shook her head.

"Naruto, you can be such a clueless idiot sometimes!" Sakura said in between giggles. "Anyways...it's my turn again." She glanced at Nozomi, and the cat girl bristled.

"Nu uh! Look, three turns in a row is *more* than enough torture for now! Pick a new victim!" she growled.

Sakura sighed. "Oh fine, crybaby." She looked at Kiba. "Truth or dare?"

"Dare." Kiba answered, smirking at Nozomi. The cat girl looked like she wanted to die, being stuck with Naruto, the very source of her embarrassment.

"Ok...I dare you to spend 60 seconds in Heaven with Hinata."

"What?" Kiba sweatdropped and blushed faintly. "Did I hear what I think I just heard?"

Sakura laughed. "I don't know...60 seconds in Heaven sounds like something different to everyone!"

"Forget it." Kiba muttered, blushing as he grabbed the hand of a very embarrassed looking Hinata and walked out into the hall, closing the two of them in a closet.

Nozomi looked at Sakura, a smirk on her face. "Geez, Sakura...that was a little much, don't you think?" she snickered. "Poor Hinata..."

"Well it was the only way I could think of to get Kiba to leave." Sakura replied.

Nozomi stared in shock at the girl. "...you were trying to make him leave? Why?"

"Well, it's easier for you to calm down if you're not being teased, right?" Sakura asked.

Nozomi nodded, feeling touched. "Yes, it really is...Sakura...tha--"

"Also, this is the perfect chance for YOU to to have your *own* romantic moment!" Sakura added quickly, giggling, and causing Nozomi to groan.

"How is THAT not teasing?!" she demanded.

"I'm not trying to tease." Sakura said. "I just thought it'd be good to give you two a few seconds alone...that way, Nozomi, you could be real with Naruto and know nobody's watching or listening in." Then, before Nozomi could answer, she added, "I'm going to go listen outside the door. Play nice, you two!"

Nozomi sweatdropped as the pink haired girl got up and ran off, leaving her and her "captor" alone.

"...Look, I'm not gonna kiss you again or anything, so don't go getting all excited." she muttered as she locked stares with the boy who still held tightly to her.

"Nah, I know." he replied, still grinning. "I'm just happy to be with my kitty right now."

"I told you before. I'm *nobody's* kitty!" Nozomi protested, blushing. "I don't belong to *anyone*."

"Oh, c'mon, you know that's not true. Nozo-hime." Naruto said, his grin widening at the last part.

"Naruto! I told you not to call me that!" Nozomi growled, still blushing.

"But..you're my treasure." Naruto said with a little pouty face.

'I KNEW I shouldn't have told him that story that time...' the cat girl thought, sweatdropping.

She sighed. "Naruto...Listen, and listen good." she took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm not your treasure, not your princess, not your kitty, and most *definitely* not your girlfriend!"

"Ohh, that's what you say now, but you *will* be!" Naruto said with a smirk.

"No, I *won't!*" Nozomi insisted. "I'll never give in to you, Naruto! Never!"

"Well right now I'd say you're powerless against me." Naruto answered, that same smirk still on his face.
"While I've got you, you can't do anything."

"So what? I already told you I'm not kissing you or anything like that!"

"Who said anything about *kissing*?" Naruto said in a challenging tone of voice as he began to stroke one of Nozomi's cat ears with his thumb; then the other with his index finger.

A drop of sweat trickled down Nozomi's face as a soft purr escaped her, and she blushed furiously. Stupid Naruto! She couldn't STAND having him know her weakness. Ever since he had found out that she enjoyed being petted, Naruto had always taken advantage of it! "Naruto, please stop..." she moaned as she unintentionally closed her eyes, tail twitching contentedly.

"You can't leave, hahaha!" Naruto laughed, now scratching her ears.

"Naruto..!" Nozomi groaned. "...You're gonna put me to sleep..." she sweatdropped as she heard herself purr yet again.

Just then, she glanced up and she nearly jumped out of her skin. "Naruto! Stop, they're back!"

The cat girl gulped. From the look on Kiba's face, she had a feeling he seen the whole thing. That, and from the way he was laughing.

"So you're telling me that if I wanna get you to shut it, all I need to do is pet you? What a weakling!" The boy laughed and Akamaru barked his agreement, seeming to give a doggish smirk in Nozomi's direction.

"YOU shut it!" Nozomi snapped, forcing Naruto to remove his hand from her ears. "Don't forget it's MY turn, mutt!"

Kiba folded his arms, grinning cockily. "I'm prepared...Do your worst, cat!"

Nozomi merely smirked. "Truth or dare...Hinata?"

This surprised the girl, who had expected Nozomi to ask Kiba, and she glanced up timidly. "What? Um...uhh...truth."

Nozomi smirked. "Ok...so..." she changed her tone to a sweet, angelic sugar coated one as she spoke, "What exactly *happened* just now in that closet, hmmm?"

Kiba stared at Nozomi, unable to believe that she'd go so low as to force those details out of Hinata.

Hinata's face turned pink at this and she glanced away. "W..we...k-kissed..an-and Kiba-kun asked me to...be his gi..girlfriend." she replied, unable to face anybody in the group.

"Aww! How sweet!" Nozomi snickered and glanced at Kiba, who's jaw had now dropped. "I told you I'd get you, didn't I?"

The cat girl stuck her tongue out at him. "Well, it's your turn, Kiba, but you seem too speechless...so we'll pass you this ti-"

"No, I'll go!" Kiba cut in. He glared at Nozomi, a glint of determination in his eyes. "Truth or dare?"

"Eh, dare." Nozomi said, deciding that she was in as bad a situation right now as was possible.

"Dare? Really?" Kiba said, suddenly bursting into laughter. "Geez, I thought you would have played it safe by saying truth after that stunt you just pulled with Hinata!"

He smirked at the confused look on Nozomi's face. "I hate to break it to you, baka neko, but the fun's over. I just beat you at your own game!"

Nozomi sweatdropped. "What do you mean, you beat me?"

"Because," Kiba's smirk widened, "I dare you, Nozomi to spend the rest of the game locked in a room with Naruto. Alone." he stopped, waiting for her reaction.

All the color drained from Nozomi's face as she heard this. "Yo...you're kidding me! Hahaha...good joke, ya really had me going there, hehe..."

"It's no joke, I'm serious." Kiba replied, enjoying the fear in the cat girl's eyes.

"No way! You can't be!" Nozomi wailed, waving her arms out in front of her in protest.

"Sorry, but I win." Kiba laughed.

In a panic, Nozomi turned her stare on Sakura, her eyes pleading for help. "Sakura...?"

"Sorry, Nozomi," the pink haired kunoichi laughed, "but a dare is a dare, you know!"

"You've *gotta* be kidding me!" Nozomi insisted, jumping away from Naruto. She no longer cared if she was disobeying the rules of Hinata's dare. She HAD to get out of here, and now!

The cat girl didn't get far, though, as Sakura reached out and grabbed her tail, jerking her backward.
"Sorry, kitty. This is no joke!"

Nozomi winced at the sudden jerk to her tail and glared daggers at the grinning girl. "Sakura, you idiot! I don't care *what* the consequences are- I'm NOT doing that dare!"

"But...Nozomi...it's o..only with Naruto." Hinata said softly. "You..well..it could be someone you...hate."

Nozomi's face flushed to a light shade of red. "But I do-" she sweatdropped as she found herself unable to say she hated Naruto. "I mean-I DO h-ha-h--GAH! Why can't I say it?!"

"Because," Saura grinned mischievously, "you *don't* hate Naruto...and that jutsu is still in effect, so you can't lie. Remember?"

Nozomi facepalmed at this. "...Stupid jutsu." she grumbled quietly.

Sakura giggled. "Anyways, let's go, you two."

"No! Never!" Nozomi scrambled to her feet and was about to run...when another sharp tug on her tail stopped her dead in her tracks.

'...If I pull anymore, the pain in my back will knock me out!' Nozomi realized, wide eyed. *'Darn it, I'm trapped!'*

"...You win." she growled.

"Let's go, then!" Sakura grinned, leading the way. Of course she didn't let go of Nozomi's tail because she knew her; if freed, Nozomi would try to escape despite the fact that she'd surrendered. Kiba and Hinata followed behind with Naruto.

After a few minutes, Sakura came to a door, and she stopped, opening it and forcing Nozomi into the room.

Kiba then turned to Naruto and grinned slyly. "Ok, Naruto. It took me under a minute to get a girlfriend." Hinata blushed faintly, looking away as he said this. "You've got until the end of this game...you think that's enough time for *you* to get *Nozomi*?"

Before Naruto could answer, the brown haired boy slapped him hard on the back, causing him to

stumble forward and trip. Blue eyes widened as he lost his balance, knocking Nozomi -as well as himself- onto the ground as he fell on top of her.

The cat girl's face turned scarlet, her golden-yellow eyes as wide as saucers as she struggled to get him off her. "Somebody get this kid OFF of me!" she shrieked.

"Play nice." Kiba gave a smirk.

"See you later, lovebirds!" Sakura chimed in with a giggle.

Not wanting to be left out, Hinata added in her soft voice, "Ha-have fun, you two...!"

"You morons!" Nozomi screamed in embarrassment as the door closed, and the click of a lock was heard.

"Naruto, get *off* of me, you creep!" she yelled, kicking her legs into his stomach, sending the boy flying onto a couch - the only piece of furniture in the room aside from a small, wooden table.

Nozomi quickly got to her feet. She did a few hand signs and attempted the escape jutsu she'd always used in these types of situations, and screamed in frustration as nothing happened.

"RATS! They must have used a jutsu that disabled teleportation!"

FLASH

"Stupid Sakura...Stupid Kiba...Stupid Hinata." Nozomi grumbled under her breath as she sat waist to waist with Naruto on the small couch, waiting impatiently to be released. "They were all out to get me from the very beginning!"

"Nozomi, you need to *relax*."

"Eh?" Nozomi jerked forward as Naruto began to lightly scratch one of her ears. "What are you doing?!" she demanded shrilly.

"I'm trying to make you calm down." Naruto said. He pulled her back against him and grabbed her tail, stroking it gently.

"Nyaaa?!" Nozomi shrieked, face going red. She quickly covered her mouth, sweatdropping. If there was one thing she hated, it was saying that word, or ANY word that made her seem related to an actual cat!

"Naruto, cut it out!" she screeched as his finger brushed against the base of her tail. "I'm gonna KILL you!" she warned, face crimson red.

Naruto snickered. "Sorry, sorry. It was an accident!"

Nozomi eyed him wearily. "I'm not so sure...after all, the Pervy Sage has been training you some recently, right?...You...have you been reading his books or something?"

This question caused Naruto to stare at her in wide eyed shock. "WHAT? No way! I wouldn't be caught *dead* with those books!" he all but screamed.

'*This from someone with a move called Sexy no Jutsu...*' Nozomi thought, sweatdropping. She scowled at him, blushing as his fingers touched the base of her tail yet again, sending tingles up her spine and causing her to shiver. "If you swear it was an accident, stop acting like such a pervert!"

"Sorry!" Naruto said, beginning to sound annoyed. "It's not MY fault we have to sit so close!"

"Maybe not, but you could still keep your hands to yourself, you know!" Nozomi snapped.

"Fine. How's *this*?" Naruto let go of her tail, sliding an arm around her shoulders, dangling his other arm off the edge of the couch.

Nozomi flinched. That wasn't quite what she'd meant! "That's...ok...I guess." she mumbled, yawning. Darn, she was getting sleepy. She turned and glared lightly at the boy next to her. "Naruto...you idiot...you made me sleepy."

Naruto glanced up at the clock on the wall, then back at her. "Well, it's 10:30. You should go ahead and get some sleep. I'll wake you when Sakura comes back."

His offer was met with a slight shake of the girl's head. "Don't worry, Naruto. I can handle it. I don't usually get to sleep until early morning."

There was a short pause as Naruto thought this over. "Oh! So *that's* why you're always so cranky!" he shouted.

Nozomi glared at him, ears going flat. "I am *not* cranky! Keep it down, would you?!"

"Yes you are." Naruto insisted. "Just listen to yourself! You're sleep deprived! You need rest!"

"Well, I'm NOT tired...so just forget it." Nozomi grumbled.

"I can fix that!" Naruto grinned. He repositioned his arm so it was now on the back of the couch, and he began gently stroking both her ears.

"Naruto, STOP it!" Nozomi growled. "I-I-I'll BITE you!"

"Nozo-hime...SLEEP." Naruto urged, rubbing her ear even softer.

Nozomi sweatdropped, yawning. He wasn't going to take no for an answer..and what was worse, his petting her ears was beginning to make her extremely drowsy! She sighed as her eyes began to close, and a small smirk formed on her face.

"Naruto...that idiot...always being so persistent...but I guess..the way he fights for his way and never quits...I guess that's one of the reasons I love him so much...Of course, not that I'd ever tell *him* any of

that...I'd get...laughed...at..."

Nozomi's head slowly drooped, now leaning against a wide eyed Naruto, who was just staring at her open mouthed. Did she know she'd just said all that out loud? Probably not. It had sounded almost like she was sleep talking.

A devilish grin appeared on Naruto's face. Nozomi would never be able to deny her feelings again...this room had a hidden camera in it! If she tried lying, or even said she hated his guts like she often did, he'd just play the video for her and see what she said then!

Zzz...purr...zz...purr.

Naruto smiled down at the sleeping cat girl who leaned against his middle, and he put his arm on her gently, yawning. Maybe a nap was a good idea.

His eyes slowly closed as he leaned back into the couch. "Night, Nozomi...you silly kitty." He leaned his head back and was out.

A few minutes later, Sakura opened the door and poked her head into the room. "Ok, we're do-" she broke off as she took in the sight of the two sleeping Genin. "Never mind."

She closed the door and turned to Kiba and Hinata, who were eying her curiously. "They fell asleep...we'll just get them in the morning."

Kiba snickered as he glanced at the door. "I guess you could say 'Mission accomplished', huh?"

Sakura nodded with a small grin. "I guess so...I didn't think that she'd EVER give in to him...that dare of yours didn't give her a choice, though. It was clever of you."

Kiba snickered. "I actually wasn't thinking of the mission when I dared her...I was thinking of revenge."

Sakura laughed softly. "Well either way, things worked out. Kakashi-sensei will be glad...and the fifth Hokage, too. Remember? They said they didn't care what means we used, just to get Naruto and Nozomi together."

Hinata nodded. "It was...because them not getting along was...h..h...making your missions go wrong, right?"

Sakura nodded. "Hopefully after tonight things will get beter and they'll cooperate with each other more."

"Well, we-we'll just have to see." Hinata grinned.

"This was a great night." Sakura grinned. "We got those two together, and you even got yourself a boyfriend! Aren't you glad you agreed to help? That was great acting like you didn't know what the game was in the beginning, by the way."

Hinata nodded, blushing.

"Thanks!" Kiba smirked.

"Anyways, we should go home now." Sakura said quietly.

"Sweet dreams, you two." Kiba snickered softly as Sakura locked the door back. Then they turned and left.

As they walked, Sakura glanced back over her shoulder, a smug smirk on her face. *'Mission accomplished...I got them together, AND proved I'm the more clever of us girls! ALRIGHT!'*

5 - Thinking of You {FILLER} NEW!!

Ok, I've been having writer's block lately...hence the lack of new NaruNozo Files xD;

But I was talking with my good buddy Fireangel on deviantArt...and she suggested why not do some fillers? You know, for things that take place between my stories :3 I liked the suggestion, and she even suggested certain ideas...well I got bored a half hour ago, so I went and wrote this little filler ficlet out :3

Tis short but sweet, and was fun to write xD

~Thinking Of You~

'Great...it's raining...AGAIN...' Nozomi heaved a deep sigh as she glanced outside her bedroom window, only to find that it was pouring rain out. Giving a disgusted groan, the brunette turned her stare away from the window, and glanced at her clock, moaning at what she saw.

"No way...it's 6 o'clock, and it's still so dark, and rainy and-- AHH! What am I even doing awake so early anyways?! I'm going back to sleep!"

The cat girl groaned as the rain picked up pace, seeming to fall harder and faster than before, and she burrowed deep under her covers, curling up in a tight ball with her knees tucked under her chin. Her ears were flat against her head, eyes shut tight as she fought to drown out the irritating racket.

After a few minutes of failed attempts to ignore the pouring rain, she shot straight up. "ARGH! SHUT UP!" the genin screamed, flailing her arms, though she knew very well her words would have no effect on the rain. The cat girl sighed heavily and slumped back down onto her bed, pulling the covers up to her face, and rolled onto her stomach, resting her head against her arms.

"Ugh...it had to rain..today of all days..." The brunette grumbled under her breath. "Not that I care, even if today IS my 14th birthday...it's nothing to celebrate." she frowned. "But still...It's ironic that on the one day I should be happy..it would be pouring when I woke up..not fair.."

Nozomi groaned again as the rain only seemed to get louder, thanks to her sensitive hearing, and rolled onto her back, pulling her pillow over her face in an attempt to cover her ears and muffle the noise. This seemed to work...that is, it worked until she realized she needed air. The cat girl gasped deeply, pushing the pillow off her face. *'Note to self: Never face the pillow you're under...it may try to suffocate you!'*

Several minutes passed, and Nozomi still lay wide awake, much to her displeasure. Why couldn't she get back to sleep? Usually whenever it rained, she was out like a light the instant she laid down! *'Is it because of what today is?'* She wondered. Then it hit her, and the cat girl growled loudly. For she now knew what was keeping her awake, but instead of feeling relieved, she felt more annoyed than she had before!

"It's that stupid blond's fault! HE'S the reason I'm still wide awake like this!" She growled softly, irritation flickering in her sleepy looking golden-yellow eyes. "How does he do this to me, even when he's not here?!" she demanded, not expecting an answer and not receiving one.

"Ugghh! Naruto, this is your fault for always stalking me! It's because of you I can't go back to sleep!" The brunette heaved yet another sigh.

Naruto (or Ramen Breath as she liked to call him) had always barged in on her on rainy days such as these, his excuse being that she needed to wake up, and when it was raining only he knew the way to do it. He had pulled that trick countless times, always in the middle of a rainstorm- which was exactly why she couldn't sleep now.

She expected him to jump her as he always did...but...he was gone, away for training with the toad sage, Master Jiraiya, for who knew how long. He wouldn't be coming after her on this particular rainy day.

She could remember the day he'd left all too clearly..

FLASH

"N...Nozo-chan....?"

Nozomi whirled around hastily just in time to be grabbed and squeezed tightly in a big hug. "Kyaal! Ramen breath!! Let go of me!" she demanded, trying not to turn pink.

"Aww...but I don't wanna.." The boy in the orange jumpsuit pouted, but released his grip on the cat girl. "I'm sorry," he apologized, watching as the brunette lunged forward slightly, nearly tripping on her tail in her haste to get away from him, and he smiled sadly. "Hey, Nozo-chan....you don't have to worry about me chasing you today....I'm not gonna be here for that..."

"You're not?" Nozomi blinked and glanced back at him, unable to hide her surprise. "W..why?" she asked, mentally slapping herself for sounding sad as she just had.

"Because," Naruto said, feeling encouraged, having heard the sad tone in her voice that she'd tried so desperately to hide. "I'm going away to train with the Pervy Sage.."

"Oh.." Nozomi blinked. "So how long will you be gone?...A week, a month or two..?"

"Hehe...I don't really know, to be honest," Naruto grinned toothily at the girl, "but don't worry...I'll be back soon enough, I promise!"

"Ehhh....why would I worry?" Nozomi rolled her eyes.

"Because, you sounded sad about me leaving." Naruto said smugly at her, looking rather confident.

"Well, I am NOT sad!" The cat girl growled, moving farther away from him. "In fact, I can't WAIT for you to go, I'm excited to have the peace! So there you have it," she finished, "I could care less how long

you'll be gone...now goodbye!" The brunette gave a wave, but before she could walk away, Naruto had reached out, grabbing her hand, and pulled her into another hug- one that she couldn't escape.

"Goodbye, Nozo-hime..."

FLASH

Nozomi frowned at the memory that had just played out in her mind and sunk deeper under her covers, falling silent for several minutes. "It's a good thing I haven't told anybody here my birthday," she smiled widely to herself a moment later, "cause that means I can sleep in!" The cat girl yawned loudly and stretched her arms out, closing her eyes drowsily.

'I wonder what he's up to right now...' She wondered silently. *'I kinda wish I DID know when he was coming back...I miss him...in a way..'* The brunette jumped, blushing slightly as she realized what she had said, and she whacked herself on the head lightly. *'No, you could care less, cause you HATE him, remember?!...'* She frowned. *'You only wish to know when he'll return, so you can avoid him once again! That's all!'*

'I don't miss him...I DON'T...no way! He's so stupid, why would I?!' Nozomi heaved a soft sigh, yawning loudly now. Whatever was going on with her, it was making her sleepy thinking about it. Maybe now she'd finally be able to get some sleep.

With another determined sounding yawn, the cat girl rolled over on her side, curled up and soon fell fast asleep, only one thought lingering in her ever so weary mind; One that she would deny even when she was on her deathbed, and in her grave.

'Well....I guess....I DO miss him...a little...ok...a lot..'

6 - Get Serious {Oneshot}

Here is the start of the stories that take place in Naruto Shippuden! Anything you read that's posted below this story will take place in that version of Naruto...just a note to help so nobody's confused XD

Get Serious

"Geez, what a day!" Sighed Nozomi as she left the training field, rubbing her arms while groaning. "Sensei overdid it in training, today...he never said he was gonna use the Sharingan, either! Man, what a workout!"

A sigh of relief escaped the cat girl's lips as she spotted a bench nearby, and she made her way over to it, wincing as she felt her knee pop when she sat down. "Ugh, seriously, Sensei! Tone it down a little!" She groaned, leaning back against the bench and throwing her head back.

"Hmmm..." It felt so nice to finally be able to relax! Nozomi smiled slightly as her eyes closed. "Maybe I'll...just...close my eyes for a few minutes..."

As she sat there, dozing off, she suddenly heard light footsteps coming her way, and she became aware of a girl's voice calling out to her. "Hey, Nozomi!"

"Nn...huh?" Reluctantly, Nozomi opened her eyes to greet her visitor. "Oh, it's you...hi, Sakura."

Said kunoichi giggled as Nozomi gave a halfhearted wave, her eyelids drooping. "Tough day of training?" she guessed.

Nozomi yawned and nodded her head slightly. "Uh huh...I'm completely worn out!"

Sakura chuckled softly. "I can see that." she said, taking a seat beside the cat girl and, in doing so, crushing all hopes Nozomi had of taking a nap. The cat girl closed her eyes and heaved a deep sigh. "What is it, Sakura? What do you want?"

Sakura gave an innocent smile. "Nothing. I just want to sit here, if that's ok. You're not the *only* one with a tough master. Lady Tsunade is hard to keep up with!"

"Oh really?" Nozomi glanced at her through half opened eyes. "I had heard it was going well, that you were super strong from it...did something go wrong?"

"Oh, no, I am strong!" Sakura replied. "I just wish I could take a rest sometimes, you know?"

"I see.." Nozomi closed her eyes again. "Hmmm.."

A long silence followed, and Nozomi silently prayed Sakura would get up and leave. It had gotten so quiet, she was beginning to wonder if she *had* left. Then the pink haired girl cleared her throat, instantly proving the cat girl wrong.

"You know...He's been asking about you."

"Eh?" Nozomi mumbled, unfocused since she'd been about to fall asleep again. "Who?" she yawned loudly.

"Don't play dumb, Nozomi." Sakura sighed. "You know I'm talking about Naruto. He's been wondering where you've been at."

Nozomi's eyes flew open at this and she swallowed hard. "Naruto? You mean, he's back in Konoha?"

The truth was, Nozomi had known he was back. She'd come very close to running into him the day after he'd returned. She had been on her way to Ichiraku's ramen shop when she'd heard voices. One of them had been faintly familiar, but slightly different; the other Nozomi had recognized as belonging to Jiraiya; and they were coming her way.

Thankfully, Nozomi had been quick enough to take cover in a tree before she could be spotted. As she had stayed hidden, she'd seen Naruto walk by the tree, then stop and turn. He had kept his gaze fixed on the tree for a long minute or two, almost as if he was staring at her before turning and walking away.

Nozomi sighed inwardly. Naruto had really grown handsome over the years.

'It'd be a lie to say that just seeing him doesn't make me blush a little.'

Sakura smirked slightly at the girl. "Well, who *else* calls you 'Nozo-chan' or 'Nozo-hime'? Of COURSE I'm talking about Naruto! Don't tell me you didn't know he was back - it's been two weeks since he returned!" she sighed and frowned at the now nervous looking cat girl. "Admit it, Nozomi. You're *avoiding* him."

A drop of sweat trickled down the back of Nozomi's head and she gulped. "A-am n-not!" she protested.

"So why the stuttering then?" Sakura questioned, not believing her.

Nozomi said nothing as she heaved a sigh, leaning forward and glancing down at her toes.

"Why are you doing this?" Sakura said softly. "You know you have feelings for the guy...why avoid him?"

A few minutes of silence went by. "Is this still because of him looking like that one guy, Suoh..?" Sakura asked unsurely.

This time, Nozomi shook her head in answer.

"Then why are you hiding like this?" Sakura pressed.

Nozomi made no attempt to answer, and after a few minutes, Sakura gave up. She sighed, getting to her feet and placed a hand on Nozomi's shoulder. "Just remember, you can't hide forever. He *will* find you, sooner or later."

As she said this, Sakura noticed Nozomi's shoulders go tense, and she sighed. Nozomi may have grown, but that -and a couple other things- was the only thing about her that had changed. She was still the same stubborn cat girl who refused to accept that she cared deeply about her friend, Naruto.

Sakura shook her head in frustration. Why was Nozomi so gosh darn stubborn?! *'Oh well, it doesn't matter. Once Naruto finds her, it'll take more than just stubbornness for her to keep **him** away!'*

Shrugging her shoulders in defeat, Sakura took a step back. "Anyways, I gotta get going. See ya later...and remember what I said!" With a final wave, Sakura turned and walked off.

Nozomi raised her head, watching the pink haired kunoichi, and she made a face at her. "What a fool!" The cat girl snickered, leaning back against the bench, eyes shut with her mouth twisted into a cat like grin. "Yeah right, Naruto's gonna find me...ha! I'll bet he's already given up searching!"

"How much are you willing to bet?"

Nozomi's eyes flew open as she heard a boy's voice, and she sat up quickly, locking eyes with none other than Naruto Uzumaki! Her eyes widened slightly as her hands flew to her mouth to stifle her cry of surprise.

A toothy grin appeared on Naruto's face. "Long time no see, huh, Nozo-chan?" He grinned even wider, examining her so intently, so thoroughly, Nozomi felt her face heat up.

"Wh-what're you looking at?!" she demanded with a scowl, trying to hide the embarrassment she felt.

"Nothing, nothing, you've just really grown over the years!" Naruto chuckled.

"Um, so have you." Nozomi replied, trying not to read into his comment.

"Yeah, but you've *really* grown into quite a woman!" Naruto exclaimed, staring at her in awe, his face taking on a faint reddish color.

Nozomi blushed furiously and folded her arms across her chest, giving Naruto a dirty look. "Geez, that time with the Pervy Sage has turned YOU into a pervert, you know? Stop staring at me like that!" she snapped.

"S-Sorry!" I...uhh..." Naruto stammered, annoyed to have been caught "peeking" by her. "I...you just became so beautiful I can't help staring!"

Nozomi's blush darkened slightly at his words, but she rolled her eyes. "Yeah...fiiine...Whatever!" she paused, giving herself a chance to calm down so her face could return to normal. "So, uh...why are you here? I would think you'd be at Ichiraku's right now." she added hastily.

"Actually, I was on my way there when I saw you and thought I'd say hello." Naruto smiled.

Nozomi groaned inwardly. "Ok, well...hello." she gave a small wave.

"There, now was that so hard?" Naruto folded his arms and sighed. "I don't see why you couldn't just do that last time. Just a simple 'Welcome home, Naruto!', and maybe a hug, too."

Nozomi smirked. "What am I, your *wife*?"

A long, awkward silence fell over the two as Nozomi glanced away, face heating up once again. When would she ever learn that blurting out the first thought that came to mind wasn't always the greatest idea?

"So...uhh.." Nozomi mumbled. She nervously got to her feet, preparing to leave...only to be pushed back onto the bench by Naruto. She rubbed her forehead where he'd pushed her and scowled up at the boy.

"Hey, what gives?! What the heck did you do that for?!"

"Well," Naruto answered, "You looked like you were about to leave, and I'm not done with you, yet."

Nozomi just groaned in reply.

"You gonna answer me now?" Naruto asked after a minute or two went by.

Nozomi gave the blond a skeptical look. "What do you mean? Answer what?"

"Why," Naruto began, "did you hide the last time you saw me?"

Nozomi gave a nervous laugh. "Wh-what do you mean? This is the first time I've seen you since you returned!" She scooted down to the other side of the bench, trying to put a little space between her and Naruto. This tactic failed, as he sat down beside her, assuming that she'd made a space for him to sit.

"No it's not." he argued. "You've seen me before now...the day after I got here I was walking with the Pervy Sage and you saw us...but that time you hid in a tree that time. Why was that?"

Nozomi's eyes widened, a drop of sweat trickling down her face. "You mean you...you s...you saw me?!" she sputtered in shock.

"Of course I did!" Naruto said, now laughing. "You thought I *didn't*? Ha! Why do you think I turned and stared at that tree then? It's because I heard you!"

Nozomi blushed faintly. "Ah...whatever...A-anyways, I'd better be..." her voice trailed off as she stood up.

"Going?" Naruto finished, grabbing her long, fuzzy tail and giving a firm yank, forcing her to sit once more. "I don't think so. We're not done yet, kitty." he added, gently tapping the silver bell that hung around Nozomi's neck. "I see you're still wearing that, after all these years." he smiled at her.

"Um, yeah." Nozomi mumbled, wishing he'd let go of her arm. "N-Naruto, whatever it is you wanted to

say, could you please say it? I have to be-

"Going." Naruto finished for her again. "I know, Nozo-chan. You always have somewhere to be...though call me crazy, but it seems like that's only when *I* come around. Otherwise, you have all the time in the world for anything."

Nozomi sweatdropped, giving a toothy, sheepish little grin. "Y-yeah, you're crazy, all right...heh.." she muttered, knowing darn well she was lying. She *did* use that excuse whenever he came around, even though she usually didn't have anywhere to go.

Naruto frowned at her. "If you say so.." He leaned back, stretching his arms and sighed contentedly. "So...Nozo-chan, didja miss me?"

Nozomi thought about this before nodding. "Yeah...you're a much better training partner than Kakashi-sensei...he's such a tough trainer!"

Naruto chuckled. "Was that the *only* reason you missed me?" he asked, discretely putting one of his arms around her.

Nozomi shrugged her shoulders. "Can't think of any other reasons, sorry."

Naruto gritted his teeth. "Think harder. Think *really* hard!" he urged.

Nozomi sweatdropped and shook her head. "Nope, sorry...nothing." she insisted, having a feeling she knew what he was driving at.

"Think harder, Nozo-*hime!*" Naruto hinted, now resting his arm fully on Nozomi's shoulders.

Nozomi blushed. Crap. That WAS what he'd meant! "S-sorry, still nothing, hehe!" She looked away as she lied, unable to meet his gaze.

Naruto stared at her in disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

Nozomi shook her head. "Nope, I'm dead serious." She jerked her tail away from him and got to her feet quickly. "An-anyways, it's getting later and later every second! Soon it'll be dark! I'm gonna head home...enjoy your ramen, bai!"

"Nozo-chan, wait a second!" Naruto protested, but she was already walking away.

He growled under his breath and got to his feet. "Ok...I'll skip Ichiraku's. THIS time!" He sighed and hurried after the retreating cat girl. "Darn it, I said wait! Nozomi!"

Nozomi froze as Naruto, having caught up to her, reached out and grabbed her wrist, turning her to face him. "Wh-what?" she stammered nervously.

Naruto just stood in front of her, staring at her solemnly. "I just thought that in 3 years, you'd have changed by now. I had hoped you wouldn't run away anymore." He paused long enough to sigh. "Why?"

Nozomi, tell me why I'm not good enough! What did I do wrong?!"

Nozomi tried to act oblivious as to what he was referring to. "Naruto? What do you mean? Why are you acting this way so suddenly?"

"Why are *you* acting the way *you're* acting?" Naruto demanded, shifting the conversation back to her. "Why do you blush around me one minute, then just treat me like I'm an annoying teammate you want to get away from?!"

Nozomi flinched, her ears going back slightly.

"You know how I feel!" The blond ninja added loudly. "I thought by now you would have accepted that you feel the same way! What's going on with you, Nozo-chan?!"

"Naruto.." Nozomi lowered her head. "Listen. That was back when we were 12. Puppy love is a common thing when you're young...things have changed now."

"You can call it that if you want," Naruto said, "but that's not what it was...because puppy love is a term for two people who think they're in love but then quickly get over it."

"Exactly, that's what I me-" Nozomi began, but Naruto wasn't finished.

"It wasn't puppy love as all because I never got over you! You were *always* on my mind, Nozomi! I couldn't wait to come home and see you again...of course I wanted to see everyone else, too, but I was really excited to see *you* again!"

Naruto stared at the now red faced cat girl. "You can call it whatever you want to, but I really did -and still do- care about you a lot. I.." he paused, moving a little closer to her. "I love you, Nozomi."

The blush on Nozomi's face darkened, and she began to back away from the boy ever so slightly. "I, umm..I need to...err.."

"Nozomi, you don't have to actually say it. Just tell me." Naruto took a step forward. "Do you return my feelings?"

Nozomi gulped nervously as she realized he still had her hand, with no intention of letting her go anytime soon. Darn him! The cat girl's face heated up even more as he repeated his question, and she glanced down at the ground, uttering a soft "Maybe."

Then she forced her hand out of the boy's and turned away, starting to walk. "Now I gotta run. I'm late for, uh, training!" she lied, hoping he'd be fooled.

"Hold on a minute." Naruto said quickly. "You're already done for today! Kakashi-sensei told me when I saw him earlier!"

Nozomi gulped again, quickening her pace to a run.

"That was all a lie...so you could get away from me!"

Nozomi skidded to a halt as she suddenly found herself staring into the angry, electric blue eyes that were Naruto's. He had somehow managed to cut her off!

Before she could say or do anything, Naruto grabbed her, holding onto her waist as he pulled her toward him, closing the gap between them. His other hand, he used to push her head towards his slowly.

"Naruto!- Stop!-" Nozomi shrieked, eyes widening as she felt him place his hand on the small of her back, just above her tail, and push firmly, forcing her into his muscular chest.

The cat girl blushed darkly and pushed her arms against his chest, trying desperately to break free from his strong grip. "Why are you doing this?!"

"Why?" Naruto repeated, "Because, I'm sick of this! You're always running around giving me all sorts of hints that you may like me, then turning tail and running away when I try to get near you!"

Nozomi listened, gulping and still fighting desperately, but to no avail.

"See? You're still resisting me!" Naruto frowned. "Why can't I ever fall in love with a girl who *doesn't* play hard to get?" he rolled his eyes, sighing, and turned his gaze back to Nozomi. She was staring at him in shock, eyes wide, lips slightly parted.

Those lips...Naruto growled, gritting his teeth. She just loved to tease him! Well, that was going to stop, here and now. Her lips would be his, no longer able to taunt and tease him, or hurl insults at him. They would be his; he'd make sure of it!

"Naruto, pl-please, let me go." Nozomi whimpered timidly as she noticed the look on his face. The way he was staring at her with such intensity in his eyes. What on earth was he thinking? "Naruto?" she said again, trying to squirm free once more.

This little bit of movement snapped Naruto out of his thoughts and he spoke. "Nozomi, this is the end of your charade. It's time for you to stop playing games, and get serious!"

"I-I-but..Naruto!-" Nozomi stammered in protest, but the look he gave her was enough to shut her up as he said "Nozomi...Quit messing with me."

Before Nozomi knew what was happening, Naruto gently tilted her chin upwards. Then, seemingly faster than the speed of light itself, he lunged forward, swiftly catching the bewildered girl's lips with his. In response, the girl's eyes bulged, and she fought desperately to get away, pounding her fists against her captor's chest.

After what seemed like several minutes, Naruto broke the kiss and let go of Nozomi. This resulted in Nozomi falling backward, having still been pushing away, and she landed hard on her tail bone. The cat girl winced, rubbing her sore spot and glanced up, locking eyes with a very unhappy looking Naruto. She frowned.

"What's wrong?" she asked, confused. Usually, after he kissed her, Naruto would be staring at her with a big, goofy grin plastered on his face.

Said ninja let out a deep sigh. "That's what I want to ask you. What's the problem? Why are you holding back? When we were 12, you'd at least kiss back, but just now you didn't even do *that*." He cast a sad, confused frown down at her. "Why are you so cold? I *know* you still have feelings for me. Why the resistance, Nozomi? Is it..another guy...?"

Nozomi stared at Naruto in surprise. "No." she said flatly.

Naruto looked unconvinced. "Are you sure? Cause if there *is* someone else, it would explain a lot-"

"Naruto-"

"-Like the way you're acting-"

"Naruto-"

"-and why you won't kiss me-"

"Naruto, shut up and listen to me!" Nozomi shouted, frustrated as she got to her feet. She lunged forward and stunned Naruto with a quick, somewhat timid kiss.

'That's more like it!' the astonished boy thought, wrapping his arms around Nozomi and deepening the kiss. He frowned and stopped their embrace as the girl's body tensed up, once again fighting to be released. "There you go, messing with me again. What's holding you back?"

Nozomi sighed, her ears flattening against her head. There was a reason, but she'd kept it hidden all these years, always hiding behind lame excuses she'd make up on the spot. "You wouldn't like....I can't talk about it.."

Naruto stared at her, a glint of determination in his eyes. "Aha! So there IS a reason!" he exclaimed, and Nozomi backed away a little, sweatdropping. "All right, talk, Nozomi!" Naruto reached out and grabbed both the girl's wrists, preventing her from fleeing. "Tell me what the heck's going on!"

Nozomi heaved a soft sigh, realizing any effort to escape would be futile. "You'll hate it if I *do* tell you.."

Naruto frowned impatiently. "Just tell me!" he demanded.

Nozomi gave him a serious look. "Only if you promise not to interfere afterward."

"Interfere with what?" Naruto said confusedly. "What are you talking about, Nozo-chan?"

"Promise me!" Nozomi said firmly.

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, whatever! Just tell me already!"

"It's a very long story, so please don't interrupt." Nozomi sighed and took a deep breath. "It's been a long standing tradition where I come from, the Kubota clan, that whenever a Kubota is born with a demon in them, the child is not allowed to live past the age of 15, 16 at most."

She held up a hand to silence Naruto, who looked about to interrupt, and he reluctantly remained silent.

"The reason for this tradition," Nozomi continued, "is that the older and stronger that child gets, the faster their power increases. The inner demon's power, however, increases twice as fast as its host's. The people of the Kubota clan thought this to be a blessing. Just adding one demon Kubota to a squad enabled the clan to win many, many wars with other shinobi. So, to put it lightly, Kubota members who possessed an inner demon were very popular."

Nozomi paused, giving Naruto a few minutes to let this sink in before she continued. "Several years ago a boy, Makoto was born. He too possessed an inner demon. This made the clan very happy, and Makoto was loved by all. By the time he was 15, he had been involved in many wars, believed to be Kubota's greatest weapon. He had friends, a lover, and everybody knew and respected him immensely. Then came that day," Nozomi hung her head, "The day that the clan's views of us demon Kubota's was changed drastically."

"Well, go on." Naruto urged, deeply involved in the story now.

Nozomi nodded, frowning. This was the worst part of the story. She remembered when her father had first told her the story, after she'd asked why people didn't seem to like her. She remembered how horrified she'd been hearing this.

With a heavy sigh, Nozomi continued with her tale. "Makoto and his squad were headed out to aid allies in another war. They had just gotten to the village gates when it happened. Makoto's inner demon possessed him, and he began to kill. He killed his squad, killed his lover...he was so horrifyingly powerful, he would've wiped out the entire Kubota clan, if not for the jutsu the Head of the clan had developed; it was a complex extraction jutsu that split Makoto apart from his demon. Because of this, the clan was saved, but both Makoto and the demon died instantly."

Naruto stared in shocked silence at the grim looking cat girl. "Afterwards, it was decided that Kubota's with inner demons were to be put to death by the time they reached 16 years, the age believed to be the time where the host is unable to control his or her demon. From that day forward, all demon Kubota's were sent to as many violent wars as possible, in hopes of them not returning, and those born with demons in them were viewed as a curse."

Now that her story was done, Nozomi sighed deeply. Naruto stared at her in shock. "So wait, you're telling me that up until now, everyone like you has been killed?!" He paused. "Wa...wait! 16 years..Nozomi, you're not thinking YOU have to die, are you?!"

Nozomi nodded grimly. "If war failed to kill the demon's host, the extraction jutsu was performed." She glanced away. "That's why, Naruto. I can't let myself be with you for that reason alone. All those things I said in the past were lies to hide the truth...I'm sorry I did it...I just...didn't want you to get too close to me. Otherwise you'd be hurt when it came time for *my* death." She hung her head. "Now you know the full truth. I'm sorry."

She began to move back, only to be jerked forward as Naruto tightened his grip on her wrists. "Naruto, that hurts!" She glared up at him- and immediately regretted it.

His blue eyes blazed with what Nozomi guessed to be rage, and his jaw was clenched tightly, lips pulled back to show his tightly gritted teeth.

"Nozomi..that's a stupid reason to push people away! There are other ways to handle your problem without dying! You can change your destiny!" His expression softened a little as he saw how scared his harsh scowl seemed to make her.

"Besides that, Nozomi, you failed to keep me from getting too close because, like I already told you before..." he paused, tears beginning to form in the corner of his eyes. "...I love you."

Naruto gave a tug on Nozomi's wrists, causing her to stumble forward, and he released her hands, wrapping his arms tightly around the girl's middle.

"Naruto!-" Nozomi tried to pull away, but it was no use. He had her trapped. "I already told you! I can't get into a relationship- I'm going to die soon!-"

"Nozomi, don't say that!" Naruto shouted, making her jump, fur spiking up. He lowered his head, resting his forehead against her shoulder. "Please, Nozo-chan, listen! Don't throw away your life!"

"Naruto, I already told you, there's no other way!" Nozomi protested, blushing at his actions.

"Let me train you!" Naruto raised his head off her shoulder and gazed down at her, a serious look on his face. "Yeah, some special one on one training! I could try teaching you a way to control the demon's chakra. That would make it harder for it to be able to possess you. It's worth a shot, right?"

Nozomi frowned and shook her head slightly. "No, Naruto. I could end up seriously hurting you!...Or even...killing you.." she whimpered.

"That's a chance I'm willing to take. Besides, I have Kyuubi in me, remember? Possessed or not you'll have a difficult time beating *me!*"

Nozomi was about to say something when he spoke yet again, his voice softer. More sober sounding.

"Nozomi, please...I already lost Sasuke...I can't stand the thought of losing anymore important people!"

The cat girl felt her face heat up again, and guessed she as blushing fiercely again. This always happened, it seemed. She'd just barely calm herself down from whatever had happened, and then he'd say or do something to make her blush all over again!

"Nozomi, just give me a chance." Naruto whined. He stared at her with moist, sad looking blue eyes. "I promise I'll help you find another way to stop your demon from taking over...so just, stop running away from me! Be mine and let me help you!"

Nozomi glanced down at the zipper on his jacket, avoiding his gaze. "Naruto..I.." The blush on her face deepened as it always seemed to when he was around. Darn him! "I..don't have much experience in a relationship..or with others. I have only ever been with Suoh...and you know how that ended..." he voice trailed off.

Naruto grinned. "Just relax, Nozomi. I'll help you with that, too, if you'll stop running from me." he leaned in and kissed her cheek softly. "Please, Nozo-chan. It's been 3 years. Time to change. Saying yes would be a good start."

Nozomi just stared at the boy, uncertainty flickering in her golden yellow eyes.

"..Nozomi. Have I ever given you reason *not* to trust me?" Naruto gave the girl an encouraging smile, frowning when she relaxed against him and began to sob, shoulders heaving violently. "No, you haven't. You've always been kind to me, even though I didn't deserve it. Even when I insulted you, you never left my side."

Now she tilted her head upward, meeting his gaze. Her's was a look of fearfulness and nervousness, but also determination.

"Naruto, I..love you, too. When you were gone I told myself I'd force my feelings away and forget you..but I couldn't. So when you came back, I-I hid. I couldn't face you. Please forgive me!" she paused, sobbing. "I don't deserve it, but i-if you'll still have me, I would be happy to be yours..."

"It's ok, don't cry anymore, Nozomi." Naruto said, rubbing her back and lightly stroking her tail. He couldn't help but snicker under his breath as the cat girl purred loudly, closing her eyes contentedly.

'You definitely haven't changed a bit.' he smiled. "Don't worry about a thing, Nozo-chan. I'll take care of you from now on."

"Please, Naruto..help me learn to control my inner demon...I don't want to die." the cat girl whimpered, her voice muffled by Naruto's jacket.

"I will, Nozomi. I promise I won't *let* you die. You're my girl, and I'm going to protect you no matter what the cost!"

Gradually, the heaving of Nozomi's shoulders stopped, and she closed her eyes, still looking troubled. Naruto loosed his grip on her and placed his hand on her head, tracing his fingers lightly over one of her ears in hopes of soothing her even a little bit.

He stared down at her solemnly. *'All these years of lying and hiding the truth..I'll bet you feels better now that it's over. Still, I had no idea she was in such a rough situation. It really explains a lot.'*

Naruto blinked as he felt her breathing become steady, and it didn't take him long to figure out she'd fallen asleep, exhausted from the tedious day's events. Still, Nozomi was the only person Naruto knew who could fall asleep standing while leaning against someone else. He glanced up at the sky, surprised to find that it was dark, dotted with thousands of tiny, twinkling little stars. Time had sure flown by quickly! He made a few attempts to wakes the girl, all of them in vain.

Finally, Naruto placed one arm under her knees and wrapped the other around her back, picking her up bridal style. This seemed to do the trick, as Nozomi's eyes fluttered and she shot up.

"Naruto? Kyaaaaa! Put me down!" she shrieked, noticing the way he was holding her. The cat girl blushed awkwardly as she saw him smiling at her. "Wh-what?"

"C'mon, Nozo-chan." Naruto was still smiling as he spoke, "Let's get you to bed...you've had a rough day." Still beaming, he started walking.

Nozomi sweatdropped. "Um, Naruto, you're going the wrong way." she said timidly.

Naruto chuckled at this. "No I'm not, silly." he turned a corner. "I know exactly where I'm going!"

Nozomi frowned at him unsurely. "But Naruto, this isn't anywhere near where I live!"

"Oh, I know." Naruto replied, getting a skeptical look from the girl. "I'm not taking you to your house. You're staying with me tonight, so I can keep an eye on you."

Nozomi's eyes bulged, her face heating up rapidly. She knew it. She had to be blushing again.
"Whaaaaaat?!"

"Calm down, Nozo-chan." Naruto chuckled. "I don't bite."

Nozomi tried to fight, but she was still too sore from training with Kakashi, so she didn't have her full strength. "Ugh, fine!" she groaned, throwing her hands up in defeat. "I'm warning you, though...you try anything and I'll beat you up so badly that you'll need the power of Kyuubi to recover!"

Naruto blushed and looked at her in surprise before laughing a little. "Nozomi, what kind of person do you think I am? I wouldn't do anything to you!"

Nozomi scowled at him. "I'm just saying...after all, you never know WHAT you might have picked up from being with the Pervy Sage for 3 years!"

"Relax, you can trust me!" Naruto gave his most innocent, convincing smile.

Nozomi sighed and glanced away. "Ok..." she lowered her head, an uncomfortable look on her face. This was so embarrassing!

Naruto smiled and kept walking, chuckling when her purr told him she was asleep again.

Soon he arrived home and he opened the door, being careful not to drop the sleeping cat girl. He made his way to his room and laid her on the bed, taking her sandals off and placing them on the floor next to her. Then, after a second thought, he removed her jacket and skirt, in case she had any concealed weapons in them. He didn't want her to hurt herself in her sleep.

He folded the clothing up and placed it with her shoes. Then he glanced down at her, sweatdropping as

he noticed that the only thing she had on was her net top and knee length net shorts. Seeing this made the boy blush, and he quickly covered her with the blankets on the bed. Then he changed into his pajamas and got in the bed as well, pulling the covers up to his neck, shivering. When had it gotten so cold?

'I hope Nozomi's warm enough.' he thought, worriedly. How warm could a simple top and shorts made of netting be?

He froze, his face turning a light shade of red as suddenly Nozomi rolled over and snuggled up against him, laying her head on his shoulder.

The boy's blush deepened slightly as he heard her purr, and he sighed, resting his arm on her shoulder. Oh well. At least he knew that when she woke up and demanded what was going on, he'd be able to say she had started it.

Naruto smiled at the sleeping girl, no longer cold; not with her warm body against his. Still blushing, Naruto kissed her forehead lightly.

"Good night, Nozo-chan."

Almost as if she'd heard him, Nozomi smiled in her sleep. "...Night..." she mumbled.

Naruto stared at her for a minute, trying to decide if her answering him had been a coincidence or not. He sighed, shrugging his shoulder. "Nah...who cares?" he smiled, allowing himself one last glimpse of the cat girl. Then he closed his eyes and leaned into his pillow, instantly asleep.

7 - A Light in the Darkness {Oneshot}

A Light in the Darkness

Naruto groaned and opened an eye as a knock sounded on his door. Who could be calling on him at...Wait, what time was it anyways?

The blond haired boy glanced at his clock. 7:45! "Come back at 9!" he called, putting his pillow over his head.

These last four weeks had been nonstop one-on-one training with Nozomi Kubota, his fellow teammate, and as of four weeks ago, his girlfriend. She was just as powerful as she was attractive (at least in his opinion), and keeping her power restrained had proven itself to be a difficult task.

Naruto sighed in annoyance as the knocking on his door became louder, more frantic sounding, and he threw the pillow off his face. "Ok, I'm coming! Man.."

He rolled onto his stomach- falling face first onto the floor. The boy winced and put a hand to his head as he made his way to the door to see who his visitor was. "What is it?" He opened the door.

"Naruto! You finally answered."

Naruto blinked, looking surprised. "Shizune? What is it? Is Grandma Tsunade in trouble?" he paused, blue eyes lighting up as a new idea came to him. "Oh! Did you come here to make me the next Hokage?" The boy grinned proudly.

"See? I *told* you guys I would get you to acknowledge me! Now that'll finally happen since I'm Hokage!" Naruto's grin widened slightly. "Oh man, I gotta get dressed! The Hokage doesn't go around greeting visitors in his pajamas! Hold on a second!"

"Naruto!-" Shizune frowned as the door closed in her face, and she gave a frustrated sigh. "I *told* Lady Tsunade it was too early to wake Naruto!" She sighed again, putting a hand on her head.

A few minutes later, the door opened again to reveal Naruto in his orange and black jumpsuit, headband tied securely on his forehead. A wide grin was plastered on his face. "Ok! I'm ready to be Hokage now! Let's go!"

"Um, Naruto, wait a minute." Shizune spoke up.

The spiky haired ninja looked impatiently at her. "What is it?"

"Well, um..." A drop of sweat rolled down the back of the woman's head, "I didn't come to tell you *that*...I have a message for you from Lady Tsunade. She wants you to come to her office immediately."

"Then I'm *not* Hokage?" Naruto deflated.

Shizune gave an apologetic smile as she shook her head in response.

"Aw, maaan!" Naruto let his shoulders slump as he fell silent for a minute. "Well then," a determined smirk formed on his face a moment later, "I'll just have to become even stronger than Grandma Tsunade! I will, you'll see! Believe it!" The boy raised a fist in the air, knuckles clenched tightly. "All right, then it's off to training!"

"Naruto?" Shizune interrupted.

Said ninja frowned at her. "What is it now, Shizune? Can't you see I'm gonna go train?"

"Well, yes...but..." Shizune sweatdropped. "Before you do anything you need to go see Lady Tsunade, remember?"

"Oh...yeah." Naruto's eyes widened in realization and he grumbled under his breath. "Argh! Fine, I'll go, but she better make it quick! I wanna get some training in before it's time to meet Nozomi."

Shizune chuckled softly under her breath. "Ok then, if you're ready, please come with me."

Naruto nodded and allowed the black haired woman to lead him to Tsunade's office where she did all her work. *'This better be good, old hag, for you to interrupt my training!'* he thought impatiently.

As if sensing the boy's impatience, Shizune quickened her pace, and they were soon in the long hall, standing outside the door to Tsunade's office. She stepped forward and gave a light knock on the door. "Lady Tsunade, I've brought Naruto as you requested."

"Grandma Tsunade, what's the deal with waking me up this early?!" Naruto demanded, barging in before Tsunade could answer Shizune. He glanced around the room, not surprised to find it cluttered with stacks of paperwork; Tsunade wasn't known for getting her work done promptly.

Naruto looked up just in time to see Tsunade put the lid on a bottle and hastily shove it in a drawer. Then she turned to him, a serious look on her face. "Naruto. I'm glad you could make it. Now, about the reas-

"Grandma Tsunade, could ya tell me why I'm here?! I gotta go train!" Naruto interrupted.

Tsunade sweatdropped, sighing softly in annoyance as she nodded. "Recently, I had a visitor from the Kubota clan. Apparently, this person who will remain anonymous, knows we have Nozomi here, and warned me of her upcoming fate as a 'Kubota demon'."

Upon hearing this, Naruto forgot all about his training, and a surprised look appeared on his face. "Who was it?" he demanded.

Tsunade sighed, face palming. "I told you, Naruto, that's classified information. However, our visitor did leave me a very interesting document, and I thought you might like to have a look at it.

"Ok.." Naruto gave a slight nod. "Let me see then."

Tsunade rummaged through the clutter on her desk, grabbing a small, neatly rolled up scroll, and she handed it to Naruto.

Curiosity overcoming him now, Naruto unrolled the scroll, his eyes scanning the writing on it. "Wha? These look like instructions for some jutsu!"

"They are. For an alternate jutsu to the extraction jutsu Nozomi told you about."

"You know about that?!" Naruto sputtered in surprise.

Tsunade merely nodded her head. "Naruto, please, I'm the Hokage...not a lot goes on here without me finding out about it one way or another. Anyways.." she paused before speaking again.

"Those instructions were written several years ago by a man named Hiroko Kubota. He didn't agree with the orders to kill the "demon Kubota's", despite what the leader said. He rebelled, vowing he would create a powerful jutsu to control the demons rather than kill them."

"So this is that jutsu..?" Naruto stared down at the scroll he was still holding and frowned. "Why are they still killing the demons if they had this?"

"Because. They lack the chakra required to perform it." Tsunade explained. "If it is carried out successfully, the jutsu is supposed to give the user a permanent control over the demon's -and the host's- chakra, but in exchange, it requires a large amount of chakra to perform it."

Naruto's face fell at this. "So then...Hiroko...what happened?"

"He was killed." Tsunade said after a short pause, her face grim. "After completing his jutsu, Hiroko confronted a Kubota demon. He couldn't summon the required amount of chakra to use it, so the jutsu failed, and he was killed by the demon."

"Wow, poor guy...he was only trying to do something good for his fellow clan members!" Naruto sighed softly, wondering if Nozomi had ever heard this story. Most likely not, since she believed nobody in her clan had ever cared whether a Kubota with an inner demon was killed or not.

"After Hiroko's death," Tsunade went on, "the instructions for his jutsu were locked away, and haven't been seen since until now when our visitor brought them to me." The pale blonde haired woman folded her arms, looking at Naruto seriously. "Naruto, I know you're training Nozomi. I want you to hold on to those instructions."

"Huh?? B-but- why?" The spiky haired boy questioned, confused. "Grandma Tsunade, Nozomi is doing really good, she's getting stronger! She'll be able to keep her demon in check!"

"Naruto.." Tsunade leaned back in her chair and heaved a soft sigh. "I understand that you have faith in her...but you have to face the possibilities...there's a very good chance that Nozomi could lose all control to her demon and get stuck under its possession." she paused. "If that happens, Naruto, I want you to

use that jutsu...You of all people shouldn't have any trouble gathering enough chakra to execute the move. Remember, if she *does* become possessed by the demon in her, that jutsu could be the only way to save her life."

Naruto looked at the older woman then glanced down at the scroll, skimming it for directions. "It says for the jutsu to have any effect, I need to be within at least 10 feet of her..." he sighed, rolling up the document and placing it in his pocket before nodding to Tsunade. "Ok, Grandma Tsunade...I'll hold onto the scroll and if Nozo-chan gets in trouble I'll use the jutsu." He gave a nod, his blue eyes serious. Then he turned and walked out of the office, leaving Tsunade and Shizune to watch in silent surprise.

"He didn't even let me finish." Tsunade chuckled slightly. "Oh well, I guess he'll just find out the rest if he ends up using the jutsu."

She glanced up to see Shizune glaring down at her lightly. "What?"

Her assistant didn't say anything as she held her hand out.

"What is it, Shizune?" Tsunade asked sweatdropping.

"Hand it over." Shizune said firmly.

"What?" Tsunade repeated herself.

Shizune's dark eyes narrowed as she replied, "The sake. Hand it over. Now."

Tsunade's eyes widened slightly upon hearing this and she opened the drawer, grabbing her beloved bottle of sake and clutching it protectively. "No!"

"Lady Tsunade, please. Give me the sake." Shizune repeated, her voice sounding slightly firmer than before.

"No! I need it to help me get my work done!" Tsunade protested.

"Lady Tsunade, you won't get *anything* accomplished if you're *drunk*." Shizune reasoned. Then, before the 5th Hokage could react, her assistant reached out and snatched the bottle from her hands.

"My-my sake!!" Tsunade cried. "Give that back, Shizune!"

"I'll just hold onto this until you finish all that paperwork." Shizune gave a small grin, ignoring Tsunade's demand.

"No! Shizune!" Calling was in vain, as Shizune had already left. Probably to go and lock up that bottle with all the other ones she had confiscated from her.

Tsunade sighed and slumped in her seat, a displeased frown on her face, a slight crease forming on her forehead. "Darn that Shizune, always taking away my fun like that!" she whined, glancing at the huge stacks of paperwork that sat on the desk before her. Oh well, might as well get started...Tsunade sighed,

taking a paper from the stack, and began reading its contents. This was going to be a *long* day.

"That was crazy." Naruto shook his head as he walked through the village. "A chakra controlling jutsu, and Grandma Tsunade wants me to use it on Nozo-chan? I don't know if I like that idea, but" -Naruto's fists clenched tightly at his sides- "if it'll save her life, I'll definitely try!"

The boy stopped walking as a loud rumble erupted from his stomach and he groaned. "So...hungry...time to meet Nozo-chan." he sighed. "Oh well, I'll get training in some other time I guess. I'm too hungry for that now anyways!"

A smile on his face, Naruto started off at a fast paced trot heading toward his favorite place in Konoha; Ichiraku's Ramen Shop. When he finally got there, Naruto peeked in and his heart did a little flip as his gaze stopped on the girl sitting at the counter. The one wearing all green and black, with the fuzzy black cat ears and tail.

'*She's early.*' Naruto thought, grinning as he had a seat in the stool next to her. "Hey, Nozo-chan!"

The cat girl didn't answer, not even bothering to look at him. "Nozo-chan!" Naruto gave a tug on the girl's arm and she finally turned to him, a smirk on her face. "Gotcha!" "Eh?" Naruto frowned as she suddenly poofed away. A clone? Naruto scratched his head in confusion. Where was the real Nozomi? What the heck was going on?

He got his answer a moment later as he was suddenly jumped from behind. The spiky haired boy screamed in surprise as he lost his balance and fell off the stool face first, taking his surprised attacker with him. Naruto groaned and rubbed his forehead. This was the second time he'd fallen like this today!

"Naruto!...Are you ok?! I'm really sorry!"

Naruto frowned as his attacker got off his back and grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet. He stared at her in surprise. "Nozomi! It was you!"

The cat girl glanced down, blushing faintly. "Sorry...I just wanted to get you back for all the times you've snuck up on and scared me this week...I never meant to make you fall...are you hurt? Maybe we should have Sakura take a look at you--ahh I'll go get her, just stay here!-" Nozomi started to leave but was forced to stop as Naruto grabbed her tail and pulled her back gently.

"Nozo-chan, I'm fine. I only fell on my face. Don't worry about it so much, ok?"

Nozomi blushed faintly and jerked her tail out of his hands, backing away from him ever so slightly. "Wh-whatever...Like I care anyways!" She glanced away as she took a seat at the counter, smiling at the old man who stood, waiting for them to order.

"Two ramens, please. One chicken, and one.." Nozomi turned to glance briefly at Naruto, who'd taken the stool next to her. "Naruto, what do you want?"

Naruto stared at her, surprised at the suddenness in her mood change, and he squinted his eyes shut tight, appearing to be deep in thought.

"Naruto-kun?" Nozomi tried again, going as far as to add a suffix if it would get his attention.

"Naruto-kun?" A small smile spread on the boy's face. "Heh, you should call me that more often. Will you, Nozo-chan? It'd feel more like we're going out that way."

"Umm....I..err.guess so." Nozomi replied in surprise.

Naruto smiled, eyes still shut. Nozomi was grateful for this, because she felt she must be blushing. "Anyways! Naruto, answer the question!" she stammered.

The blond haired boy's eyes opened and he grinned at her. "You mean Naruto-*kun*." he corrected her with a wink, snickering as she turned a light shade of red and looked away. "Chicken sounds good to me, too." he finally said.

Nozomi nodded, and turned back to the man behind the counter. "Ok, make both orders of ramen chicken then, please." She reached into one of the pockets on her jacket and pulled out a small blue pouch, dumping out its contents.

"Nozo-chan, I can afford it!" Naruto insisted.

To his surprise, the cat girl looked up from the counter and gave him a small, innocent little cat-like grin. "Naruto-"

"Naruto-*kun*, Nozo-chan."

"Naruto-kun, then...please." Nozomi paused. "All you've been doing for the past four weeks is train me, and you never complain..."

"It's not like I have a reason to," Naruto interrupted grinning, "I get to be with you!"

Nozomi, knowing she was going to blush again, quickly looked back down at the money on the counter, avoiding his gaze. "What I'm trying to say is...at least let me do *something* to repay you!" Before Naruto could say anything else, she paid the man and he walked off to make their ramen.

After cramming the blue pouch back into her pocket, Nozomi turned to face him once again. "Seriously though, Naruto...Naruto-kun...I wish I could do more to thank you...this hardly seems enough." she trailed off fretfully.

"Hey that's not true, free ramen is a great treat!" Naruto said cheerily, smiling as their orders were placed before of them. They broke the chopsticks, and dug hungrily into the steaming bowls of ramen.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Then Naruto turned and looked at Nozomi as a sudden thought struck him. "Hey, Nozo-chan, if you really want to, there *is* another way you could repay me for helping you."

"Hmmm?" Nozomi turned to him, slurping a long stream of hot noodles as she listened, golden eyes shining with interest.

"Well," Naruto stopped eating long enough to answer, "We could go on a date."

Nozomi gasped sharply and the sudden inhalation caused her to swallow the rest of her noodles without chewing, making the cat girl go into a coughing fit. "A---date?!" she sputtered, still trying to breathe normal again.

Naruto watched her, a grin playing on his lips. "Yes, a date. Think about it like this: You want to thank me, and we've been working really hard. It's a perfect time to take a rest, and while we're at it, go on a date." He gave her an innocent little smile.

"You know, we haven't gone on one date since you agreed to be with me. Its just been nonstop training. I'd really like it if for one day you treated me like your boyfriend instead of your sparring partner."

Naruto paused, his eyes becoming serious as he saw the glimmer of reluctance in Nozomi's eyes. "Don't forget, we're going out, now. It wouldn't hurt to act like a couple and do other things together."

Nozomi fell silent and glanced down at her ramen, over her coughing fit. "Isn't me calling you 'Naruto-kun' enough for now?" she questioned as she started to get to her feet, reluctance in her eyes again.

Naruto watched her, frowning. "Nozo-chan, stop being so reluctant. You TOLD me you'd stop fighting me if we could find a way to control your demon, and we're working on that. So stop holding back. No more hiding." He reached out and grabbed the cat girl's arm, forcing her to sit again and turned her so she was looking at him. "Don't make me do something drastic to force those feelings to surface again, Nozo-hime."

The blood rushed to Nozomi's face as she realized Naruto had leaned in so close, their noses were almost touching, their lips just inches apart. "Naruto-kun, please..." she all but whispered in protest and she gave his chest a gentle shove, pushing him away.

Naruto sighed and sat back on his stool, staring into her eyes firmly, his eyes giving a desperate plea. "C'mon, Nozo-chan...it's just one date. Please."

In an attempt to ignore him, Nozomi grabbed her chopsticks again, and snatched up another bunch of ramen, shoving it in her mouth, taking her time eating it.

"Nozo-chan." Naruto sighed as he watched her. "You said you wanted to thank me properly for my help. This will be more than enough. Just one day for us to act like a couple...then tomorrow it'll be back to training. OK?"

Nozomi swallowed hard and looked at him uncertainly. "Do you...promise?"

Naruto's responding grin was wide and full of sincerity. "I do." he said softly.

Nozomi blushed as she forced herself to nod her head. "O..ok, just for today. We'll go on a d-" She sweatdropped, finding it difficult to form the word. The cat girl closed her eyes and took a deep breath before trying again. "We'll go on a date after this." she finally managed to say, giving the blond haired boy next to her a shy, awkward smile.

"Promise?" Naruto pressed.

Nozomi sighed and slumped her shoulders. "Sure, why not? Yeah, I promise..."

Naruto grinned at her. "It's a date then!" he said cheerily as he watched her eat. Every now and then, Nozomi would peek at him from the corner of her eye, only to lock gazes with him and hastily avert her gaze back to her food, blushing wildly. Naruto couldn't help but smile again. The way she got so flustered by his watching at her was so cute!

Nozomi forced herself to ignore him and quickly gulped down the rest of her ramen, sighing in contentment. "Mmm..that was good...Naruto-kun, you should eat yours before it gets cold and my money is wasted." she mumbled, still unable to look at him.

To her surprise, Naruto just gave a small chuckle. "I've *been* finished! I was just waiting for you to be done."

"What?!" Nozomi looked at Naruto's ramen bowl in disbelief. It was empty. When had he finished eating? She was almost positive he'd only taken a few bites before he'd started into her about the whole "date" thing, and...wait. Nozomi's eyes widened and she gasped inwardly. Crap, they were both done now!

'That means it's time for the d-da-date!' her mind screamed frantically.

The cat girl gulped silently as Naruto, almost like he'd heard her thoughts, gave her a wide grin and grabbed her hand. "Ok, are ya ready, Nozo-chan?" Without waiting for an answer, Naruto stood, pulling Nozomi up with him, and led her out of the ramen shop. Once outside, he released her hand and looked at her. "So, I was thinking we could just go walking, unless there's something else you'd like to do."

"No, a walk sounds, um, great!" Nozomi replied, trying to sound enthusiastic. This was hard for her, though, because she hadn't agreed to go on a date with Naruto because she wanted to, he had guilted her into it. She'd actually been hoping to talk him out of it over another round of ramen, but he'd dragged her out before she could say anything!

"So let's go then." Naruto reached out to put his arm around the cat girl and she quickly moved away, wanting as little physical contact with him as possible.

"Nozo-chan, don't do that." Naruto pouted. "You *promised* me a date, you know!"

Nozomi hesitated before holding out her hand for him to hold, blushing faintly. Ok, holding hands wouldn't be TOO bad. She hoped.

Naruto took hold of her hand, frowning slightly. Suddenly, without any warning, he gave a yank on her

hand, pulling her into him. He released her hand and wrapped his arm around her waist, keeping her securely pressed against his side as they walked.

Nozomi felt her face heat up and she glanced up at him shyly, uncertainty in her eyes. "Naruto-kun...isn't this a little too..um..close for comfort?" she asked quietly. All the while her ears were pressed back against her head, her tail twitching nervously from side to side.

Naruto just smiled down at her. "Nah, I think it's just fine!" He tightened his grip on her slightly in case she tried to escape. She did. The cat girl's fur spiked up as she unsuccessfully tried to jerk away, eyes wide with embarrassment.

Naruto scowled at her. "Nozomi, PLEASE." he said firmly, using her full name to make his point.

The tone of his voice (not to mention being called Nozomi instead of "Nozo-chan") made Nozomi stop, and she relaxed against him slightly. "...Ok..." she replied in a low voice, sighing softly in defeat.

Her mistake had been *promising* him a date! If she hadn't done that, she might have been able to get away from him easier. But no...since she'd promised him a date, this outing had to be different than normal. They had to act like a couple. The cat girl flinched at the word "couple".

She'd been Naruto's girlfriend for four weeks, now, but they'd never done anything except hang out and (occasionally) hold hands. Walking with his hand on her waist pressing her against him was *definitely* out of her comfort zone! She sighed as she tried again, unsuccessfully to pull away, and rested her head against the boy. Somehow, she'd have to make the best of this situation. She'd have to adjust. The cat girl lowered her head and sighed softly again. "Naruto-kun...I'm sorry for being like this..."

Naruto stopped walking and stared down at her, his eyes serious, almost angry looking. "Just tell me one thing, Nozomi. Why are you doing it?"

Nozomi flinched involuntarily at her real name. She couldn't help it. He only used her full name when he was upset, or he wanted her to be serious. "W-well, um..." Nozomi stammered, struggling to come up with an excuse, "I-umm..I'm just not in a real romance-y mood right now...heheh." she sweatdropped, sighing inwardly.

'The real reason, Naruto, is because I think we need to break up. I'm afraid if we stay this close I'll hurt you. I can't keep this monster in me contained too much longer; you'd be better off if you forgot about me and just kicked me out of Konoha...'

Naruto eyed her seriously, still frowning. "If you aren't in the mood to act like you're actually my girlfriend, why'd you promise me a date?"

Nozomi frowned and pulled away from him. "I'm sorry, Naruto-kun...I don't know what's with me...ahh..you know what, let's just try this some other time." She had just started to walk away when Naruto's hand clamped down on her shoulder, preventing her movement, and he turned the surprised cat girl toward him, catching her lips with his, in a firm, I'm-not-letting-you-leave-me kind of kiss.

Nozomi's eyes grew to nearly the size of saucers as she fought to get away from him, and at long last

she succeeded. "Naruto-kun, what are you doing?! I already told you I'm not in the mood to be acting so romantic!" she glared at him, blushing hard as she pushed his hand off of her shoulder and backed away from him.

'I don't want you to get hurt! Can't you see it's better if you just stay away from me?'

The expression on Naruto's face was pure determination as he stepped forward and put both hands on her shoulders. "I know you said that," he grinned slightly, "but Nozo-chan, you promised me a date...and like it or not, I'm going to make you show your feelings for me!" He gave a jerk on Nozomi's shoulders, pulling her face first into his chest.

The cat girl blushed, wishing she wasn't so easily embarrassed all the time. Standing here, pressed into him like this, she could feel her heart thumping in her chest like mad. "Y-you-that doesn't have any effect on me! I am not in the mood for romance!" she lied, ducking her head down to hide her face. One good look at her eyes, and the red tint on her face and he'd see right through her lie.

Naruto grinned, chuckling and shaking his head. "It won't help to lie, Nozo-chan, I can feel your heartbeat. It's going really fast, you know. That, and.." Naruto placed a hand under Nozomi's chin and tilted her head backward so she faced him, "You're also blushing really hard." he informed the cat girl with a grin.

Nozomi grimaced, unhappy to be caught in her lie and she tried to pull away from the boy- only to discover he had both arms wrapped tightly around her waist again. She was trapped.

Naruto smirked as the blushing cat girl fought to pry his hands off her. "You know, this date thing can be easy or hard! I'm not letting you get away from me...Nozomi I think there's something else going on here. What's the REAL reason you're trying to escape me?"

Nozomi heaved a long, heavy sigh and glanced sideways, away from him. "It's because...I don't think us being together is a good idea anymore..I'm sorry."

"What?! Why not?!" Naruto demanded, looking hurt.

"Because," Nozomi smiled sadly, "tomorrow is my 16th birthday...I feel weaker these days...and with tomorrow being what it is, I just...can't be sure about my inner demon staying contained.." The cat girl gave a shaky, relieved sigh as Naruto let go of her waist, and she backed away from him. "I'm glad you understand...so, then, I'll be go-"

She turned to leave, but Naruto grabbed her arm, stopping her, and forced her to face him, giving her a serious look. "Yeah, I understand that you're too scared to be with me because you still think your demon will possess you." he sighed. "Nozo-chan, just relax and stop worrying about it. Remember, you aren't alone in this anymore." he smiled warmly. "I'm with you, now. We're gonna overcome this together."

Nozomi tried not to pay attention to the warmth in his electric blue eyes as she glanced up at him. "Naruto-kun..." her golden eyes were troubled, sad, "it's not just me worrying too much...you see, my demon spoke to me recently. It said "I can feel your grip on my power weakening, Nozomi...it won't be

long now, until I take complete control." The cat girl hung her head. "It's true, in spite of all this training, I feel so weak...I won't be able to hold my own against this thing much longer."

Nozomi sighed again. "That why I don't think us being together id a good idea, anymore. I am so sorry, Naruto-kun." She sounded like she was crying, judging from the many pauses she took, and how low her voice had become.

Naruto reached out and grabbed the cat girl's wrists as she backed further away from him, head lowered. "Nozomi, *stop!*" he shouted as she started fighting to get free.

Nozomi froze at his tone and she glanced up at him, revealing a very wet, tear streaked face. "Naruto-kun...just let it go. You can't save me."

"I don't care how hopeless you think it is! I'm gonna save you no matter what!- I *won't* let go!" Naruto growled, eyes blazing.

"Naruto-kun! You *can't* save me!" Nozomi cried, trying to pull away again. "All I'll ever be is a monster...Just give up!"

"Give up?!" Naruto's eyes filled with anger, and he tightened his grip on the girl's wrists. "Do you think you're the only one who's viewed as a monster?!" His voice trembled as he spoke, his blazing blue eyes burning into her bright, golden eyes.

"I was like you! People just labeled me as the ninetailed fox kid and avoided eye contact with me. Even when I entered the Academy they thought I was a big joke, and nobody acknowledged me. But..."

There was a pause as Naruto's face became clouded, his mind undoubtedly revisiting these memories. "I never gave up, and in the end I finally found friends who accepted me! Even when I lost control, I kept trying!" he sighed. "Even then, I'm still a monster like you...and Grandma Tsunade's concerned with protecting me from the Akutsuki..*because* I'm a monster. We're the same, you know? The only difference is you gave up before you could make any valuable friends." His eyes softened. "That's why I'm going to be not just your boyfriend, but also the friend who doesn't let you quit...if you don't give up, good things will happen, I promise!"

Nozomi inhaled sharply as Naruto jerked her wrists and, knocked off balance, she stumbled forward into him again. "Why do you try so hard, Naruto-kun? There are better people than me out there..better girls you could be with right now." she reasoned with him.

"Nozomi...!" Naruto ran a hand through her hair, lightly stroking her cat ears as he encountered them. "I knew it the minute I met you, when you mouthed off to me and I knocked you out...when I learned about the life you had, and despite all that you trusted me...you were made to be mine."

He smiled at the bewildered look the cat girl was giving him. "That's why I kept trying, even when you brushed me off and pushed me away. I believed you were meant for me." The boy's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's also why I can't let you give up..you're too important of a person for me to lose you!"

Nozomi listened quietly, blushing hard. *'Why couldn't I have just been normal?'*

"I'm really...that important to you?" she asked in a small voice.

"You're kidding me, right?" Naruto looked at her like she was crazy. "You should know the answer!
You're the most-"

"Ok then...I'm sorry."

Before Naruto could figure out what Nozomi meant, the cat girl lifted her head and pressed her lips against his in a gentle kiss, in which he was quick to respond, his arms sliding around her waist, resting against her tail. Nozomi wrapped her arms around his neck, running one hand through his spiky yellow hair. A few seconds later, they pulled apart, both of them panting hard.

"So, what do you think?" Naruto asked softly, breathlessly.

Nozomi gave a weak smile of her own. "I think you'd be much better off with a normal girl." she smirked.
"Because I'm gonna be more trouble for you to handle than I'm worth!"

Naruto's grin widened as he realized what she was saying, and he snickered. "I'm sure I can find a way
to deal with you."

"Oh, I dun-" Nozomi was cut off as she was pulled into another kiss, this one longer than the last. When
at last they broke the kiss, the two teenagers just stared, smiling at the other.

"I...love you, Naruto-kun." Nozomi wrapped her arms around the blond haired boy's middle in a hug. "I
don't deserve you, but somehow I have you, even after pushing you away so many times...I just don't
get how, or why.."

Naruto chuckled. "It's called fate. I told you, you were meant to be mine...I could never leave you no
matter how much you tried to make me."

Nozomi blushed faintly as she felt his chin resting on her head, and from the way things sounded, she
knew he was inhaling deeply, enjoying the lavender scent of her hair.

"W-well, I'm yours for as long as my demon will allow me to be." the cat girl said softly.

"Nozo-chan." Naruto leaned his head back so he could look in her eyes. "Don't worry so much about
your demon. I have a plan if it DOES try taking over..." he paused as the girl's words sunk in fully.
"Does..that mean you'd even...you know...*marry* me?"

At his words, Nozomi blushed, pulling away a little. "Well, I don't know about *that!* We just barely started
dating, you know."

"Maybe," Naruto pulled her in again, trapping her once more in his "iron" grip, "but we've known each
other since we were kids, you know? So it's not rushing as much as you're trying to make it sound."

"Ahhh! Naruto-kun we're too young to be talking about these kinds of things!" Nozomi's voice softened.

"The point is, I'm yours for now...for as long as you want me."

"Oh." Naruto blinked. "So if I said I wanted you forever, would you marry me then?"

Nozomi face palmed, blushing hard now. "I don't know, *maybe!* You know, you can't propose to me NOW, though!"

"Why not?" Naruto frowned. "Why can't I make sure no guy can take you away from me by asking you right now?"

The blush on Nozomi's face darkened and she she looked away. "Naruto-kun, no guy is going to steal me..and..well, because...uhh...you know!" She paused. "Because! You can't propose without a ring! Ahahaahaaa..." she laughed nervously.

"Oh. Naruto blinked. "So if I ask with a ring you'll say yes?" he gave a hopeful smile.

"If you ask with a ring, I'll give you an actual *answer.*" Nozomi replied, praying feverishly that he wouldn't come after her with an engagement ring anytime soon. That'd be all she needed to die of embarrassment!

"Well then, ok. I'll look for a ring soon!" Naruto said enthusiastically, making the girl groan inwardly.

"Great.." she said with fake enthusiasm.

"So, anyways, let's get back to our date now." Naruto smiled. "Just one more thing..please don't fight me." As he spoke, Naruto gently tilted her head up to his. They were just about to kiss when a voice spoke from behind them.

"You two need to get a room!"

"Nyaaa?!" Nozomi jerked away from Naruto and they both turned quickly, their bewildered stares landing on none other than...

"Pervy Sage?!" Naruto shrieked, eyes bulging.

"What are *you* doing here?!" Nozomi demanded, feeling the heat rise to her face. Of all the people who could see her about to kiss Naruto, it just HAD to be that old pervert!

"I was just on my way to get some ramen when I overheard you two talking." Jiraiya smirked. "Seriously, you guys are one hot couple! In fact..." He gave a grin. "Your commitment to each other is exactly what I'm looking for for my next book!" The sage's face turned to a creepy, perverted grin.

"Shy and uncertain of the future, whether you two should stay together, then finally, after a long talk about it all, a promise to each other is made, (even with discussion of marriage) and the whole thing is sealed with a hot, steamy kiss! Perfect! So...will you help me with my, heheh...research?" Jiraiya looked at them hopefully, the perverted grin never leaving his face.

Nozomi and Naruto just stared at him, eyes wide, jaws dropped, blushing furiously. He'd *heard* all that?!
He'd seen everything?!

"C'mon, help me out?" Jiraiya tried again. He winked at Nozomi. "I only really need *you*, to be honest. I KNOW how Naruto is."

Nozomi gasped sharply and the fur on her ears and tail spiked up as he moved closer, placing his hands on her chest in a "stroking" manner. The cat girl shrieked and slapped him on the face, leaving a bright red hand print. "Leave me alone, you PERVERT!" she snarled.

"Hey, take it easy." Jiraiya winced. "You should be better about this, I mean c'mon, Naruto's not getting ups-" The toad sage didn't get to finish his sentence as Naruto suddenly tackled him to the ground, an angry look on his face.

"Don't touch Nozo-chan! She's *my* girl! Ya HEAR me, Pervy Sage?!" he snarled angrily. "If you EVER touch her again, I'll beat you to such a bloody pulp that not even *Grandma Tsunade* will be able to cure you! Understand?!"

The beaten sennin gave a weak nod.

"Good." Naruto let him up and grabbed Nozomi's hand. "C'mon, Nozo-chan, let's get out of here!"

Nozomi stumbled, nearly falling as he began walking at a fast pace. Somehow she regained her balance and walked silently alongside the blond.

'Naruto, you're such a great guy...and you fought for me...my dignity..I really hope I don't lose control to my demon...because if not, I think I would love to marry you one day.'

"Are you ok, Nozo-chan?" Naruto turned to look at her worriedly. "He didn't...hurt you, did he?"

"No, more like he humiliated me...but I'm ok." Nozomi smiled, "Thank you, Naruto-kun."

"Hey...I'll always fight for you, Nozo-chan." Naruto smiled at her widely. "ESPECIALLY if it's that Pervy Sage...I don't want him laying a finger on you- you're MINE!"

Nozomi blushed, allowing herself to lean against Naruto's shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her, smiling.

'Naruto-kun...' she gazed up at him, smiling warmly, shyly as she realized he was looking down at her. *'Thank you...for believing in me...and never giving up on me...I hope one day I can believe in myself as much as you do.'*

She closed her eyes happily and put an arm around him, sighing happily. *'Naruto-kun...Thank you so much.'*

"Aw, rats!" Nozomi jumped up, nearly falling out of bed as her alarm clock went off for what must have been the tenth time. She flipped the off button and went to work untangling herself from the bedsheets, which were wrapped tightly around her, ensnaring her from her thighs down. "Let me go, darn you!" The cat girl hissed, thrashing wildly- just wild enough that she toppled face first off the bed. "Ow!" Nozomi rubbed her nose gingerly. "My poor nose!"

After another 5 minutes of failed attempts, Nozomi ended up just slashing the sheets off with her claws. "Mou! There's *another* set of sheets I'll have to replace now!" she grumbled in annoyance.

The cat girl glanced at the clock and screamed in frustration. It was 12:30! "Oh my g-- I'm late- by almost two *hours!*" she wailed.

Nozomi scrambled to her feet and hurriedly through her green and black jacket and skirt over her netted top and knee length netted shorts, all the while cursing herself under her breath.

Why had she stayed up so late? If she would've just forced herself to sleep instead of worrying about her demon taking over, she wouldn't have slept in so late!

"Rats! This really sucks!" Nozomi sighed, putting on her silver bell and running a brush through her long brown hair. "I hope he's not too mad!" She quickly slipped on her black sandals. *'Forgive me, Naruto. I'm late, I know!'*

The cat girl hurriedly opened the door and ran out, crashing into someone and knocking them down, falling on top of them. "What the?!" Nozomi's face turned scarlet as she found herself staring into the surprised, bright blue eyes of Naruto Uzumaki!

"Kyaaa! Naruto! What are *you* doing here?!" she all but shrieked as she scrambled to her feet.

Naruto got up as well, smiling at her while blushing faintly. "So, where's the fire?"

Nozomi blushed awkwardly. "There's no fire ." she mumbled. "Sorry...I was in a hurry because I slept in, and I wasn't expecting anyone to be outside the door...heh..."

Naruto merely chuckled. "I figured you might still be sleeping, that's why I came to get you...but it looks like you got me instead! Hehe!"

Nozomi blushed harder and looked away, rolling her eyes. "I *said* I was sorry!"

"I know." Naruto snickered. "I'm only teasing."

"Eh..whatever." Nozomi covered her mouth as she yawned loudly.

"Hey, you look tired." Naruto pointed out, observant as always when it came to the cat girl.

Nozomi gave a sheepish grin. "I kinda am..." she admitted.

"What time did you go to sleep?" Naruto asked. "1? 2? 3?" He was used to Nozomi's late night routine,

and so it never surprised him to hear she'd been up past 1 AM.

Nozomi grimaced, knowing that even Naruto wouldn't be able to condone her behavior if he knew exactly how late she'd stayed up, and all over worry that her demon might possess her today. So, rather than tell him what time she'd gone to bed, she lied. "Uh...I think I finally dozed off somewhere between 4 and 5..."

Naruto stared at her for a minute before answering. "What?! Ok, Nozo-chan, I know that because of the feline in you, you can't get to sleep early, but 4 or 5 in the morning?! That's *way* too late, even for *you*! You keep up that behavior and I'll stay at your place tonight and make sure you get to sleep *early*! Remember, I KNOW how to make you drowsy!"

"Ah! Calm down, Naruto!" Nozomi held her hands out in front of her in protest, sweatdropping. "Seriously...it's nothing a little cat nap can't fix...so don't worry so much!"

'Good thing I didn't tell him I was actually up until 6:30...'

Naruto sighed and nodded his head in defeat. "Fine, ok...just don't fall asleep during training, or I'll have to carry you home!"

Nozomi blushed faintly and shook her head. "Not gonna happen, you won't get that luxury today! Cause I'm not *that* tired- I CAN walk."

As soon as these words left her mouth, Nozomi felt the ground beginning to move- or was that her swaying? She didn't have time to answer as she suddenly pitched forward into black oblivion...

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When she opened her eyes, Nozomi was surprised to find herself in a pitch black room, standing in front of a set of large, silver iron bars. She'd been here before. This was her subconscious mind, where her inner demon was trapped behind the bars that were made of her will.

As if it knew she was thinking this, the demon peered out at Nozomi from behind the bars, blood red and yellow eyes anxious, excited.

"Kubota." the beast said in a tone above that of a whisper, its voice smooth and deep sounding.

"Bakaneko." Nozomi answered coolly, putting her hands on her hips.

"Kubota...it's almost time." The cat demon spoke in the same tone as before, ignoring what Nozomi had called it. "I've nearly broken through the bars of your will...they're weak in comparison to *my* will. It won't be long now before I'm outside and *you're* the one trapped behind these annoying bars forever!"

"No, that's not gonna happen! I'm getting stronger! I *won't* let you out! *I'm* staying in control!" Nozomi growled angrily.

The cat demon just laughed evilly, its huge tail swishing from side to side. "You poor, naive fool! So long

as your will remains this weak, it won't matter HOW strong you get *physically*! Even now that you have a boyfriend and others who need you, it seems your will to survive is the same as before..."

There was a pause. "My will grows stronger with the day as my desire to get out of here gets stronger and stronger! So, let me ask you...after that comparison, who do YOU think will win?" The demon laughed at Nozomi's bewildered expression. "Hehehe...it will be very soon..."

"No! I won't allow you to have the control!" Nozomi shouted angrily. Her voice was drowned out as the cat demon charged up a ball of explosive energy, and sent it at the iron bars. The resulting sound was louder than a hundred paper bombs.

The cat demon's eyes narrowed into slits, a smirk forming on its face as one of the iron bars broke in two. "I must say, I feel a little sorry for your boyfriend. He fights for you to survive, because he cares about you...you SAY you care about him but yet you won't fight any harder than THIS for him." The feline motioned to the broken bar.

"You don't know what you're saying!" Nozomi protested. "I DO love him, I WILL keep fighting for him!"

"Oh, really?" The demon fired another blast of explosive energy, breaking down another iron bar of Nozomi's will.

"If you care for him so much, then why isn't your will any stronger than this?"

Another blast obliterated yet another bar. "I must say, for someone who loves her boyfriend and wants to stay in control so she can be with him, you're making this very easy."

Nozomi's eyes widened in horror as the beast easily destroyed two more iron bars, and she sank to her knees, trembling.

"I thought...I was stronger. That I was going to try harder for Naruto, so I could stay with him!...Why is my will crumbling so easily? Why is this happening?!"

The demon laughed cruelly, enjoying listening to its distressed host's thoughts. "That's right, Kubota...you're not as dedicated to him as you thought...because...you don't really want to be with him...what you want is to unleash me, and become a killer. You want to hurt everyone for treating you so horribly."

"Nooo!" Nozomi clutched her head in agony as painful memories from her past washed over her like a tidal wave, and she shook her head, trying to send them away. "I've moved on! I don't wanna hurt people, I want to be a good person! I don't want to be a monster...!"

"Oh, but my dear, you already *are* a monster.." the demon chuckled. "You were born one, and you can't change it. A monster can try, but it will never belong...never be fully accepted. All a monster is good for is to kill."

"No! I am NOT a monster, I've been accepted by the people in Konoha!" Despite Nozomi's desperate attempts to down out her demon, the memories were still playing fresh in her mind, and tears streamed

rapidly down her face.

"That's right, Kubota." The cat demon laughed viciously as it watched from behind the remaining bars of Nozomi's will. "Suffer through the memories, the pain, sadness of being rejected...the loneliness...down in your sorrow, knowing that nobody cares!"

"The people here in Konoha don't care, it's all an act so that you won't hurt them! Even Naruto Uzumaki, who claims that he loves you is only using you for his own purposes...he doesn't care about your feelings...*Nobody* does!"

The pain from hearing this was too great, and Nozomi collapsed face first onto the ground, surrounded by the pitch blackness even worse now. She shut her eyes tight, almost as if she thought she'd be able to hide from the pain she was feeling.

'That's it...nobody cares...it's all been a huge joke...and I fell for it? What a fool...nothing but a lie...'

"Nozomi! Nozomi!"

Nozomi opened an eye halfway as Naruto's voice invaded her mind.

"Nozomi, wake up!"

The cat girl heaved a soft sigh as she hears Naruto's voice in her head again, and she got reluctantly to her feet, wishing that she could just stay here, hidden in the darkness, away from all the lies. Forever.

Hearing her thoughts, the demon put a paw through the bars and wrapped it around Nozomi, pulling her against the bar prison. "There, there, Kubota."

The cat demon gave her a menacing smile. "I promise, I'll trade places with you just as soon as I knock down the rest of these bars of your will...then you can hide here in the darkness, forever. You'll never have to listen to another lie again."

Nozomi sniffled, raising a hand to her eyes, wiping away the tears, and she glanced at the demon, nodding in what looked like silent agreement.

"Excellent." The huge beast behind the bars grinned. "Now run along before he calls you again."

--

"Nozomi? Nozomi! Oh, thank Kami!"

Nozomi opened her eyes, squinting as they adjusted to the lighting outside; so different an atmosphere that that of the dark, musty room she'd been in moments before. She glanced up into the relieved looking face of Naruto, and she frowned. What if the demon was telling the truth, and Naruto really was just using her? Could it really all be a lie that she'd actually allowed herself to believe?

'I wouldn't be surprised...my whole life has been full of lies and hurt.' she thought, beginning to believe

Kumoraku's words.

"Are you ok?" Naruto asked. "You really scared me, fainting like that...you're lucky I was able to catch you. What happened, anyways?"

Nozomi looked away, realizing, now that he'd mentioned it, that he was crouched down, holding her, resting her head on his arm.

"Nozo-chan?" The blond boy pressed.

"I'm...fine." Nozomi answered, her voice sounding unintentionally cold. The cat girl did a double take, reminding herself that she wasn't supposed to act angry, just tired. "...guess I was more tired than I thought, hehe.." she added quickly in a weakened voice.

"If you say so...please, be more careful!" Naruto replied worriedly, holding her against his chest in a protective hug.

Instinctively, Nozomi's arms shot out, pushing him away from her as she quickly got to her feet.

"Hey, what was that for?" Naruto frowned in confusion as he, too, got to his feet. "Don't tell me you're playing hard get...we did that yesterday, remember?" he smiled teasingly.

Nozomi flinched at this. He'd talked her out of breaking up with him and leaving, telling her he would do anything to save her; that he had a plan...He'd even gone as far as to tell her she couldn't leave him, because she was fated to be his forever. The cat girl bit her lip hard. He'd sounded so convincing...and she'd fallen for it. She'd fallen for the whole, darn, stinkin' act!

Nozomi gave the blond a wry smirk. "True, but you also said today wouldn't be a date-- it's back to training, remember?"

Naruto nodded, sighing quietly. "I know, but I was just thinking...wouldn't you rather relax on your birthday? You know...take it easy and just be together another day?"

Nozomi's mind flashed back to the chat with Kumoraku, the broken bars, and she shook her head as if trying to clear the images from her mind. "No!" she shouted desperately.

Naruto stared at her in bewildered silence, taken by surprise by her sudden outburst.

The cat girl sweatdropped. "Uh, I mean...no...thanks, but it doesn't matter what day it is- I've got to keep training." she said, still trying to ignore the images playing in her mind.

"...Nozo-chan, is something wrong?" Naruto asked suddenly.

"Wha?" Nozomi gulped. "Wh-why would you think that? Nothing's wrong!"

"Well, you look really scared, suddenly," Naruto pointed out, "and your tail's twitching like crazy..it only does that when you're nervous about something, you know. Is there something you aren't telling me?"

"Whatnoofcoursenot!" Nozomu blurted out, forgetting to breathe in her panic as she grabbed onto her tail, forcing it to stop twitching so much. Trust Naruto to observe her enough to know what made her tail act up...Once again he was just too observant when it came to her! He probably knew more about her physically than her own parents had!

"You know I don't believe that." Naruto stared at her seriously. "It's not even just your tail, it's also the way you're acting, forgetting to breathe even! Nobody would believe you're ok! Now tell me what's going on!"

Nozomi shook her head. "Naruto, it's nothing, really!" she insisted, sweatdropping as her tail squirmed free from her hand and resumed its violent twitching pattern.

Naruto took one look at her, then at her tail again and frowned. "Either you tell me or...I'll let the Pervy Sage use you for his 'research'!"

Nozomi's eyes bulged and her face turned red. "You wouldn't DARE! You're bluffing!" she growled. Nervousness flickered in her eyes.

Naruto snickered under his breath before giving her a serious look. "Do you really want to find out if I am or not? What if it's not a bluff?"

Nozomi gulped, sweatdropping as she realized she couldn't afford to take a chance with Naruto's threat. "FINE!" She heaved a deep sigh and began her story, telling him everything that had happened between her and Kumoraku, including what had been said about him. When she had finished, Naruto was staring at her in disbelief.

"It sounds like I might *have* to use it..." he mumbled, thinking of the scroll Tsunade had given him the day before, which he had in his pocket.

"Eh, what?" Nozomi frowned.

"I mean," A drop of sweat ran down the back of Naruto's head, "Don't you *dare* give in to that demon, Nozo-chan! Don't listen to what she says, *especially* not the things about ME. I care about you more than anyone in this village, you know that!"

Before Nozomi could have a chance to react, the boy stepped forward and pulled her into a hug, pinning her arms to her sides. "I meant it when I said I loved you...and that you were made to be mine...I wouldn't lie to you about *that!*" Naruto paused. "I'm *not* like that Suoh guy from your clan...I CARE what happens to you." There was another pause as he sighed inwardly. "You believe me, don't you?" he asked in a softer voice.

Nozomi nodded her head, feeling stupid for ever believing what her inner demon had said. "Uh huh..." she mumbled weakly, no longer fighting to unpin her arms.

A few minutes went by and the cat girl sighed. "Well, let's get to the training field. We're already late enough thanks to me sleeping in, and my fainting didn't help at all either."

Naruto laughed and released the girl from his embrace, walking beside her, grinning.

Nozomi couldn't help but smile back a little.

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Nozomi grinned as they arrived at the woodsy field they usually trained in. It was like a grassy meadow, almost, but with practically its own built in forest, there were so many trees and bushes. A perfect place for two shinobi to train.

Nozomi glanced at the blond next to her. "So, what are the rules today, Naruto?" she asked.

Naruto just grinned. "I thought today we could just fight with whatever we want; jutsu, ninjutsu, taijutsu, anything we feel like. No rules today, except that we can't kill each other."

Nozomi snickered. "Of course...that's a good rule to follow. So let's get started!"

"OK...here I come then!" Naruto warned.

Nozomi laughed and quickly jumped away, quickly putting at least 15 feet between the two of them. "Alright, bring it on!" She struck a taunting pose.

Naruto didn't say anything as he charged toward the cat girl at break neck speed. His feet thudded heavily against the ground as he ran, ramming himself head first into Nozomi, only to stagger back in surprise as she suddenly turned into a log. "A substitution jutsu, huh? Very clever!" Naruto smirked. "Not clever enough to beat *me*, though! Multi shadow clone jutsu!"

Instantly, the entire field was covered in clones of the blond haired boy, and they all took off in opposite directions to seek out Nozomi.

"Hehe...good luck finding me up here." Nozomi murmured softly as she watched the clones from up in a tree.

"Oh, I don't think I'll need luck."

"Hmmm, really?" Nozomi turned and ducked, narrowly avoiding the fist Naruto swung at her. "Nice try." Nozomi winked and then socked him in the stomach, smirking as there was a loud "poof!" sound, and her disappeared in a cloud of smoke. "Clone. Just as I thought."

The cat girl's ears twitched as she heard a loud yell, and she jumped hastily out of the tree and backed away, into the clearing, watching as two Naruto's, having lunged for her from opposite directions, collided head first and poofed away. "Hehe, Naruto-kun, you need more practice!" Nozomi snickered.

"I'm good enough to beat *you*, Nozo-chan!"

"What?" Nozomi glanced around in surprise as she suddenly found herself surrounded by several

Naruto clones. The cat girl sweatdropped, mentally slapping herself for letting herself be fooled by the first three clones. Of *course*, the first one had been a decoy to find out where she was hiding, and the other two had been a diversion to force her out of hiding. Into the open field where hundreds of clones could easily spot and surround her.

The brunette sighed and placed a hand on her head, annoyed with herself for falling for such an obvious trap. *'Oh well,'* she decided, *'I guess it's time to kick some shadow clone butt!'*

Nozomi crouched down into a cat like pose, legs stretched far apart, balancing herself with only her tail and her right arm as she grabbed a kunai in her left hand. Granted, she wasn't great with her left hand, being a "right-y", but still. As she glanced at the tight circle of clones that had her trapped, the cat girl held the pointed weapon out menacingly. "Well, what are you waiting for? Come and get me already! Or are you scared I'll *bite* you?"

The ground vibrated violently under Nozomi's feet, almost like a small earthquake as the clones charged toward Nozomi, throwing wild punches.

Nozomi just barely managed to avoid the attacks, ducking to the ground in a pose that could only be described as her doing push ups. Then, moving with lightning fast speed, she brought her legs in and spun in a tight circle, kicking any clone that got too close to her, making it vanish.

She winced as one of the clones grabbed her tail, and was forced to stop her cycle of intense spinning as she fought to free it. This was one thing she hated about being part CAT demon. Having such a long tail gave her such a weakness; just grabbing it and pulling hard enough practically paralyzed her. Then there were also her ears, and the fact that the feline in her enjoyed being petted so much, that if someone stroked her ears or tail long enough she would fall asleep. Nozomi had always vowed never to let anyone -especially not her enemies- find this out...but somehow *Naruto* had when they were younger...and he always used it to his advantage. ALWAYS.

"I *said* let go!" she demanded, taking her kunai and stabbing the clone with it, sending him poofing away and freeing her tail.

"Hey, Nozo-chaaaan! Over here!"

"Nyaa?!" The cat girl glanced up and jumped away, high into the air just as one of the clones attempted to body slam her.

"Hah! Is that the best you've got?" Nozomi did some quick, complicated hand signs. "Say your prayers, boys!" Her face turned serious. "Ice Twister: Two Hit Strike!" The cat girl grinned with satisfaction as a huge twister made of ice shards appeared, causing the rest of the clones to poof away, and she knelt down, panting hard. That jutsu consumed a lot of her chakra, and she usually couldn't move much afterward. However, thanks to all the training and experience she'd gotten, Nozomi was no longer completely rendered immobile, and could move a little, even in spite of the massive chakra her jutsu consumed, as long as she had at least 5 seconds to catch her breath afterward. "Hah, you'll have to do a **lot** better than *that*, Naruto-kun!"

"I'm just getting started!"

"What the?!-" Nozomi glanced up to see Naruto, hurtling toward her, a spiral of intense blue chakra in his hand.

'Why didn't I sense him coming before?! Was I really THAT distracted by all those clones?!' Nozomi frowned, watching the boy. 'Darn it, he KNOWS it's difficult for me to move after using the Ice twister, so he put me in a situation that forced me to use it!...Looks like the fight's over, now.'

"Rasengan!"

Nozomi squeezed her eyes shut tight as the giant sphere of chakra hit her, and the impact of the blow sent her flying backward into a tree. She hit the tree with such force, it snapped and fell to the ground, taking Nozomi with it.

The cat girl's eyes fluttered, then rolled back on her head, her body resting limply against the fallen tree.

Naruto sweatdropped when she didn't move, and he hurried over to her. "Nozo-chan? Are you alright?! Nozomi!"

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"It's time, finally!" Feline eyes grew large with excitement as a final blast of power was fired, and the final iron bar that represented Nozomi's will broke in two. ***"Kubota! You won't contain me any longer!"***

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"Nozomi! Nozomi, can you hear me?...I guess I'll have to then..."

Nozomi's eyes flew open as she felt a pair of warm lips on hers, and her body stiffened. "Naruto-kun...!" she moaned, her words muffled as she fought to break away from him.

"Wha?" Naruto pulled away, and his face broke into a wide grin as he saw the girl glowering at him. "Nozo-chan, you're awake! I'm so glad.."

"Yeah, sure, I'm fine." Nozomi sighed, getting up and brushing herself off. She scowled at the blond boy in front of her, folding her arms across her chest. "Mou, Naruto-kun! I lose conscious for five minutes, and try to make out with me?! Honestly, you should've known it's not ok!...Or at least you should've known not to try until I was awake and could defend myself!"

"What?! Hey!" A light tint of red spread across Naruto's face. "I was *not* making out with you! I was TRYING to give you CPR! I swear!"

Nozomi rolled her eyes, heaving a sigh. "Well it sure didn't seem like that to ME...whatever."

"I told you, I was trying to give you CPR! At least, that's what it was *supposed* to be!" A few minutes went by and Naruto's face relaxed into a smile as he grabbed the cat girl's waist and drew her close to him.

"This, however, is *not* CPR!"

Before Nozomi could try to pull away or protest, the boy had claimed her lips with his in a deep kiss. The cat girl felt her face heat up as she kissed him back just as passionately, deepening the kiss. She was just sliding her arms around his neck when a sharp pain in her head caused her to break the kiss, and she staggered backward, falling onto the ground.

Naruto stared down at the girl in surprise before taking her hand and helping her up. "Are you ok?" he asked worriedly.

Nozomi winced and rested her head in the palm of her hand. "I'm fine...I just had this sharp pain come into my head from nowhere!" she answered softly, her voice weak.

Naruto frowned guiltily. "Oh, yeah...sorry about that, Nozo-chan...you hit that tree with your head pretty hard." he sighed. "Let's go and see Sakura and make sure you're ok...alright?"

Normally, Nozomi would have argued against getting help, but right now she felt so weak..so tired,, so...ughh. The cat girl nodded and followed behind Naruto. However, another sharp pain, this one worse than the last, caused her to stop walking, and she put both hands on her head, screaming loudly.

"Nozo-chan! What's wrong?!" Naruto spun quickly to face the cat girl, his eyes filled with guilt and worry. What if his attack had caused brain damage?! He'd never be able to forgive himself!

'I've got to stop getting so excited during our training sessions together!' he thought, slapping himself mentally. *'I just can't help myself, she's so good, and she doesn't hold back...It makes me want to go all out too...'*

"Nozomi!"

Nozomi didn't answer. She couldn't. It felt like she was being strangled, it was getting so hard to breathe!

'Kubota...it's time.'

Nozomi inhaled sharply in surprise, choking as she heard the deep velvety voice speak in her head.

'Kumoraku?! This is YOUR doing?!' her mind demanded angrily.

The voice spoke again, laughing. ***'Indeed it is, Kubota...I've broken down all the bars of your will...so you can no longer keep me in check...I'm coming out, now.'***

'No! NOOOOOOOO!'

"Nozo-chan!" Naruto watched in shock as the cat girl staggered backward, away from him and dropped to her hands and knees, head hanging weakly.

"Naruto...get...away...from...here...!" she said weakly before crying out in pain again and collapsing onto the ground.

"Nozomi!" Naruto hurried over to her. "What is it?! Does your head hurt that bad? I'm sorry! Here, if it helps, I'll carry you to Sakura- you don't have to walk!" Naruto was just crouching down to pick her up when a small chuckle was heard.

"Ufufufu..."

"Nozomi?" Naruto stared at the brunette in confusion, backing away a little. Something felt wrong. Very wrong. He watched as the cat girl got swiftly to her feet, head lowered. "...Naruto-kun."

Naruto blinked and did a double take. That was NOT Nozomi's voice! Not the Nozomi *he* knew! The boy's eyes grew slightly larger, and he backed away slightly. "You," he spoke aloud, staring at the girl's face, which was covered in shadows, "You're Nozomi's inner demon."

At this, "Nozomi" lifted her head, smirking evilly at the now stunned looking boy. Her eyes, once a golden yellow were now blood red, with only a small sliver of yellow in them. Her fangs, once small and pointed were now razor sharp, and jagged, extending down to her lower jaw.

Her ears, usually kept pressed back now stood straight up, revealing the points, almost sharp in appearance. Her tail was twice as bushy, the Hidden Leaf headband having come untied and fallen off, and to top it off, her short, claw-like fingernails were now 6 inch long razor blade sharp claws, as were her toenails.

"You...what ARE you?!" Naruto demanded, staring in stunned speechlessness at the drastic change in Nozomi's appearance.

The demon possessed Nozomi gave a wide grin, exposing her large fangs as she answered, her voice deep and velvety.

"Just call me Kumoraku..."

Kumoraku." Naruto repeated solemnly, his eyes hard. "Sorry to tell you, but I'm not going to let you keep Nozo-chan's body...I'm going to stop you no matter what it takes!"

"Try all you want, but you won't be able to defeat me!" Kumoraku sneered, smirking. Her eyes lit up. "Thank you for the reminder, though!"

"Reminder of WHAT?" Naruto demanded, watching the demon warily.

Kumoraku didn't answer. Just then, quick as a bullet, one of her arms shot out, and there was a sickening cracking sound as she thrust her hand through the right side of Naruto's chest.

Naruto's eyes widened, and he screamed in agony as the demon's long claws pierced through his back, then pulled away, leaving a huge, gaping hole in his chest. "Wh--why--?" he sputtered, collapsing onto his knees, scowling up at the demon possessed Nozomi as he struggled with the pain in his chest.

Kumoraku scowled back. "That was a clever maneuver, moving just before I could get your heart..." she

paused. "Why'd I do it? Because, you told me -no, that Kubota brat- that she had your heart for life...Now I'm taking it!" The girl licked the blood that covered her hand, a sinister grin on her face. "Oh well, I'll just try again! I can only miss so many times, you know!"

The demon grinned at the angry disbelief she saw in Naruto's face. "Ah, you're still hoping to rescue that miserable little Kubota wretch? Well then, I'll just have to give you proof she no longer has hope of returning." Without another word, Kumoraku ripped the silver bell from her neck, and closed her hand around it and squeezing tightly. A moment later, she opened her hand again to reveal a very smashed, caved in looking bell. "She's not coming back...so there's no use hanging on to something YOU gave her." Giving an evil laugh, Kumoraku flung the now destroyed bell over her shoulder, onto the ground.

Naruto just watched, eyes full of rage. That bell was special. He'd given it to Nozomi when they were younger, back when they were more or less friends...Nozomi had always worn it, even after he went away for a few years...and now, all the memories in it...Kumoraku had just smashed them up and thrown them away like they were *nothing!* "You...monster...!" Naruto's eyes bulged as it got harder and harder to breathe, and he began to feel as though someone had their hand locked around his throat, strangling him. 'No!' the boy thought desperately, *'I CAN'T die-- not yet! I still have to become Hokage, and--...I have to stop Nozomi--I mean, Kumoraku!...It's getting hard to breathe...Kyuubi, please, HELP!'*

There was a brief pause then another deeper voice answered. *'Honestly, can't you ever win ONE fight without my help? Of course not...fine. I'll lend you my powers, but you'd better be grateful!'*

"What's this?" Kumoraku took a step back as a thick, bubbling red chakra surrounded Naruto, and the wound in his chest was healed, closing up completely.

"Ahh...Kyuubi, was it? I see you took pity and spared the kid's life." Kumoraku sneered. "How very noble of you to do so." she smirked evilly as suddenly she found herself face to face with Naruto, and she took notice of his crimson eyes and enlarged fangs.

"Don't think THAT will be enough to save you, though!" Kumoraku shot a blast of chakra shaped almost like a blade at Naruto, and he jumped away.

The fox possessed Naruto landed a few feet away, balanced on all fours. He barely had a chance to catch his breath before Kumoraku, also on all fours lunged at him, and he leapt away, just barely dodging her razor sharp claws. As he dodged, the fox's chakra barrier around him lashed out, striking Kumoraku on the back of the head, and the force of the blow plowed her into the ground.

'Here's my chance!' Naruto crouched 8 feet away from the fallen "Nozomi", and did some quick hand signs. However, before he could summon up the chakra to use the jutsu, Kumoraku jumped to her feet and tore away, now standing at least 20 feet away from him.

'Darn it! I need her to stay put!' Naruto thought frustratedly. *'If I could just keep her distracted for a while...maybe my clones could do it...I'll need a lot of them, though...oh well, it's worth a shot!'*

Naruto put his fingers together in the proper sign and closed his eyes in concentration. "Multi shadow clone jutsu!" Instantly the field was once again, covered in Naruto clones as it had been earlier during training. Naruto pointed a finger at Kumoraku, who was eying all the clones, an eyebrow raised in

amusement. "Attack!"

The minute these words left his mouth, all the clones took off running toward Kumoraku at an intense, almost impossible to acquire speed. Naruto waited a minute while they all attacked Kumoraku, watching for the opportune moment to move in and retry the jutsu that Tsunade had given him.

"You think clones can help you?!" Kumoraku gave an amused chuckle as she lashed out, sending 5 clones poofing away. "Not even a THOUSAND clones can stop me!" The demon grinned evilly as she did the hand signs required for the Ice Twister.

Naruto, deciding this was his chance to act, slowly made his way toward the possessed Nozomi. He made sure he was within 10 feet of her, before quickly launching into his own series of hand signs. *'I sure hope this works!'* he thought, sighing inwardly with relief as he finally finished performing all the signs. "Oni Shoukin jutsu!" he bellowed loudly, smirking as Kumoraku suddenly turned and glared at him.

Just then, the chakra Naruto had used for the jutsu began to surround him, and his hands became engulfed with a blinding, yellow-ish white light, nearly blinding both him and the demon. The blond haired boy looked in amazement at his hands. *'So THAT'S why the jutsu needs so much chakra to work!'* he realized, *'It creates this "light chakra" from MY chakra..and that must be what I use to defeat the demon!'*

Just then, the blinding light surrounded Kumoraku, and she was surprised to find that she couldn't pass through it. It had her trapped. "What IS this stuff?!" the demon demanded, annoyed.

'What was the next step?' Naruto tried to remember. *'Oh yeah! Combine the "light chakra" with your chakra and attack!'*

"I'll do this my way!" Naruto summoned a couple clones and they began working to form a huge spiral of blue-ish (though against the "light chakra" it appeared green-ish) chakra ball. Then, sending the clones away, Naruto tore across the field, quickly closing the distance between them. "Rasengan!" Naruto pounded the spinning ball of chakra into Kumoraku's chest, and she was sent flying backwards. Then, before she could get to her feet, Naruto was in front of her, smirking.

"Game over, Kumoraku, I win!" He reached out, hands still enshrouded with "light chakra", and picked the girl up off the ground, lifting her by the cuff of her jacket.

Kumoraku just glared at the boy. "You may have won for now, but I WILL be back! It may be powerful, but your so called 'permanent' jutsu only works if you stay within 10 feet of my host at all times, even overnight." she smirked cruelly. "That is something you can't very well do, you know..."

Naruto blushed faintly at the demon's words, but he kept his hold on her. "I don't care WHAT I have to do! You're *never* coming out again!" He paused. *'What was that last thing I was supposed to do?... Oh yeah!'*

"You better say your prayers, Kumoraku!" Suddenly, with speed that not even the cat demon could avoid, Naruto balled up a fist and socked her squarely in the ribs! The boy winced, hearing a cracking sound, and he prayed Nozomi wouldn't hurt too much later on.

Kumoraku flinched, but smirked still. "You think breaking my ribs will stop me?!"

Naruto winced at the confirmed damage. *'Ahh...sorry, Nozo-chan!'*

"You're gonna have to do better than that!"- No sooner had she said this, then her eyes began to flicker back and forth between blood red and golden yellow.

Naruto dropped her to the ground, on her knees, covering his ears as she let out a bloodcurdling scream. "No! You wretch, you're NOT going to contain me again! I won't allow it! What...NO!" Then, without any warning, the demon collapsed, unconscious.

'There, it's finished.' said Kyuubi in Naruto's mind. *'You're lucky the 4th saw fit to have me sealed in you...or you'd be long dead by now.'*

Naruto heaved a shaky sigh as his eyes faded from crimson back to blue, and the chakra shield around him dissipated. *'Nozo-chan...please be ok...'* he thought as he collapsed next to the girl, exhausted.

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"How DARE he!!"

Nozomi grinned smugly at Kumoraku's thoughts, glad for once that they could commune through their minds if they chose to. The enraged demon's thoughts were hilarious! She was indescribably furious, once again locked up behind the bars of her will, which had been reconstructed and were re-enforced by a blazing shield of chakra that varied in color from blue to red.

"Well, Bakaneko, what happened?" Nozomi asked with mock surprise. "I thought you were never gonna give control back to me again!...At least, that's what you SAID."

"Shut up, you wretch!" The beast lunged at Nozomi, but the chakra supported bars sent her flying backward. Kumoraku glowered at the cat girl as she snickered softly.

"What's the matter? Is your will not strong enough against mine anymore?"

"Don't make me laugh!" Kumoraku snarled. "Alone, your will is pathetic! I can bust through it in 30 minutes." The cat demon's eyes filled with unmistakable hatred. "It's that boyfriend of yours. Naruto! He used a jutsu that gives him control over both of our chakra...I can't do a thing as long as he's at least 10 feet near you at all times.."

Nozomi's eyes widened, and she felt her face heat up slightly. "He...he did that? ..But why? I told him to get away...it was too dangerous..."

Kumoraku growled in disgust under her breath as she said, "Apparently YOU were more important to him than his own safety." she scowled at the cat girl as she saw her eyes beginning to shine, her face red. "Ok, those thoughts of yours dealing with him...I don't want to hear them anymore! Get out of here! NOW!"

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"....Naruto..?" Nozomi's eyes slowly opened and she glanced around. The cat girl winced as she tried to sit up, a sharp pain shot through her ribs, and she was forced to remain sprawled in the grass.

"Naruto..." The brunette turned, ignoring the pain this caused her, as she saw the blond haired boy unconscious, just a few inches away from her. His was was bruised, covered in dirt, and his clothes torn, stained with blood around his chest.

The sight of this filled the cat girl's eyes with tears as she tried to imagine what a rough battle had taken place, and how much he must have endangered his life to save hers. "Naruto-kun..." she tried to sit up again, only to have the same pain shoot through her ribs, and she gave up, inching a little closer to him instead.

"Naruto-kun, thank you. Knowing you...you must have put up quite a fight...cause never giving up no matter what...and not going back on your promise...that's your ninja way, right?"

Nozomi smiled, blushing slightly as she turned to face his, and lightly kissed him on the cheek. Then, exhaustion overpowering her, the cat girl slipped into unconsciousness again, welcoming the hazy, black oblivion that beckoned to her...

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When Nozomi opened her eyes again, she was surprised to find she was not in the training field, but in fact, in the hospital, laying in a bed with bandages binding her from her chest down to her ribs. She glanced around the room and was only slightly surprised to see Naruto in the bed adjacent to hers. Of course, he'd want to be with her, knowing him and his persistent ways. What DID surprise her was that the 5th Hokage was also in the room, and she was talking to the blond haired boy in a low, hard to understand voice.

Nozomi flinched, trying not to yelp at the pain this caused her ribs, as she gazed at Naruto. He was wrapped in bandages from his shoulder down to his chest, and there was also a bandage on the right side of his face. The cat girl groaned at the pain she felt, unable to resist wondering what Naruto had had to do to her in order to stop her demon.

"You're awake."

Nozomi glanced up, startled, as she realized Tsunade was hovering over her. When had she stopped talking with Naruto? "Oh...5th Hokage..." she mumbled, not in the mood to call Tsunade any of the rude names she usually would.

Tsunade raised an eyebrow, then motioned to Naruto, who was sitting up in his bed, listening intently. "I'm sure you're aware of it, but Naruto saved your life. He used the Oni Shoukin jutsu, which enabled him to control both you and your demon's chakra."

Nozomi nodded, remembering the chat she'd had with her inner demon earlier. "It gives him permanent control as long as he stays at least 10 feet close to me, right?"

"How did *you* know that?" Tsunade demanded.

Nozomi gave a toothy grin. "My demon, Kumoraku wasn't too happy about being locked up again." she explained.

"I see." Tsunade paused. "Well then, since you already know about the 10 feet rule, you'll understand why I'm ordering you to stay that close to Naruto at all times, then."

Nozomi sweatdropped. "Uh, you know, I CAN hold out against Kumoraku for a half hour...so..heh...uhh.."

"I don't care!" Tsunade snapped. "I don't want to take any chances of you losing control *again* and causing trouble in the village!" she sighed. "You stay near Naruto at all times, no exceptions. That's a direct order from the Hokage!"

Nozomi gulped quietly. "But..uh.....with all do respect, that's impossible...cause...I don't exactly live close by him...heh..."

Tsunade sighed again, looking as if she was beginning to get a headache. "Well then, I guess that just can't be helped..."

"So you won't make me stick with him at all times?" Nozomi heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, g-"

"So, you'll just have to move in with him."

"Or that works too-" Nozomi's eyes bulged as she realized what had just been said, and her face turned a light shade of red. "Wait--WHAAAAAT?!"

Tsunade put a hand on her head, rubbing her temples in annoyance. Ok, now she *definitely* had a headache. "It shouldn't be a problem for you...he IS your boyfriend, right?"

Nozomi nodded, blushing hard now. "B-but--, 5th Hokage, that would be so awkw-"

"Then you'll move into his place...unless-" As she spoke, the blonde haired woman produced a small scroll from her pocket- "you're still considering the alternative." This said, she handed the scroll to the cat girl.

Nozomi froze as her eyes scanned the writing on it. "...The extraction jutsu." she said, suddenly feeling weak; sick to her stomach.

"Grandma Tsunade! You never said anything about the visitor bringing THAT, too!" Naruto shouted, nearly falling out of bed from shock.

Nozomi frowned at his words. "Visitor...?" she questioned, looking seriously at the Hokage, curiosity in her golden eyes.

Not in the mood to answer, Tsunade held up a hand for both the ninja to stop. Then she looked seriously at Nozomi. "You can either obey my orders and move in with Naruto, or use the jutsu." she said grimly. "As much as I'd prefer you don't, I can't stop you if death is really your heart's desire. Just don't expect anyone from the Leaf to assist in the execution of you DO use the jutsu." she looked away, locking eyes with a stunned, hurt looking Naruto. "Sorry, Naruto...but it's her decision to make. Not yours."

Nozomi frowned as she felt Naruto's gaze on her, and she glanced up -immediately wishing she hadn't. His face, usually lit up and enthusiastic was solemn, his eyes damp, clouded with what could only be described as fear; fear of her possibly choosing death over him. Nozomi's lips parted as she gave a small smile to him, trying to cheer him up.

If not for what all had taken place weeks ago, she might very well have chosen death over him...but that was before Naruto had told her what all she truly meant to him. She wasn't just some girl he toyed with and teased by bringing romantic, embarrassing thoughts to her head when he felt like it. He really cared...he WASN'T Suoh, who had failed to see the good in her. He really cared for her. Nozomi sighed inwardly. Besides all that...

'These last four weeks have been some of the hardest, happiest times of my life..' she thought, smiling, 'I think I've really grown so attached to Naruto-kun, so used to being around him...I don't want to leave him. I don't think I could go through with it, after all he's done, and all we've been through. No...I won't leave him.' The cat girl gave a soft sigh before looking up at Tsunade, who was impatiently awaiting her decision.

"..Ok. I, um...I'm gonna stay..with Naruto-kun..." she held out the scroll. "So you can have this back."

Tsunade smirked. "Good. I'll just have this locked away, then. WE have no use for it, and without the directions...hopefully the Kubota clan will be forced to find a new way to deal with any future demon infested children." she paused, turning and walking to the door. "Anyways, once you've recovered enough, you are to move your things to Naruto's place immediately." Without saying another word, or even giving the two patients a chance to respond, the 5th Hokage left the room quickly.

"She sure seemed to be in a hurry." Naruto said observantly.

Nozomi chuckled, wincing at how much that hurt her ribs. "Well duh! We were keeping her from her sake!"

Naruto couldn't help but snicker. "Hopefully she gets to it before Shizune finds it!"

Nozomi laughed, nodding. Then the room fell silent.

"You can call it silly if you want, "Naruto said after a moment, "but I was actually kinda scared you might decide to use the extraction jutsu....." he paused, getting up and taking a seat on Nozomi's bed, grinning down at her. "I'm glad you didn't."

Nozomi frowned slightly. "I could kinda tell you were, cause your eyes were so dark." she dropped her voice to just above a whisper. "Naruto-kun...I'll never leave...unless you make me."

"Do you *promise*, Nozo-chan?" Naruto asked, holding out his pinky finger for her to swear on.

Nozomi resisted the urge to slap her forehead and she sighed inwardly, letting a small chuckle escape her. Naruto may be older, but he was still so childish at times! She nodded and hooked pinkies with him, careful not to scratch him with her claw. "I promise. Pinky swear." she said softly. "I'm yours for as long as you'll let me be."

Naruto snickered after a short pause. "Well then, I guess you're gonna HAVE to marry me then!" he smirked.

Nozomi groaned, blushing faintly and smacking herself mentally for having said anything to trigger this reaction. "Naruto-kun, PLEASE! I only just barely turned 16 today! Don't bug me with talk about marriage!"

"Oh, that's right....fine." Naruto agreed, grudgingly. "But only because it's your birthday today."

Nozomi sighed in relief, silently praying he wouldn't bring the subject up again tomorrow.

"Oh, that reminds me." Naruto pulled out a small box and handed it to the cat girl. "Here, for you."

"Nya?" Curious, Nozomi opened it and peered inside, blinking in surprise at the familiar silver bell on a silver chain that rested inside. "My...bell...?" she said aloud, looking slightly confused.

Naruto gave her a wry grin. "Sorta. You see, Kumoraku kinda destroyed your old one earlier...so here's a new one."

Nozomi just stared at the boy, frowning. "Thank you...but it's not quite the s-"

"Please wear it, Nozo-chan!" Naruto interrupted her. "I have to keep a bell on you, so the other guys know you belong to me!"

Nozomi blushed at his words. "You sound like you're talking about your pet." she pointed out, then sighed softly. "How is a *bell* going to tell them I'm yours, though?"

"Look *very* closely at it!" Naruto urged, a sly grin on his face.

"Hmmm? Well, ok.." Nozomi did as she was told, and her face got even redder. Carefully engraved into the bell in bold letters were the words: "Property of Naruto Uzumaki. Don't touch!"

"I see..." The cat girl put the bell down on the bed, still blushing, but unable to hold back the laughter that was bubbling up in the back of her throat. "Y-yeah, that should do the trick, I guess!" she managed to say amidst her laughter.

Naruto's grin widened now. "So, you want some help putting it on?"

Nozomi's blush darkened at the thought of running around in a bell that might as well be a collar and license now, as the only thing missing was Naruto's address. After a moment's hesitation, she nodded

slightly. "Ah, sure...why not?"

Naruto carefully helped her sit up, being gentle so as not to cause her too much pain. Then he positioned the silver chained bell around her delicate neck, sliding the clasp into place. "There. All set. Do you wanna lay back down now?" he asked. "I'm sure sitting up like this must really hurt...with your broken ribs...heh, sorry about that..."

Nozomi gave a weak shake of her head. "Ah, no..I'll only fall asleep again if I lay back down...and I don't want that."

"Nozo-chan, you already said you were up late last night," Naruto said, suddenly serious. "...and to top it off, Kumoraku gave your body a serious workout, today. Between those two, you should be exhausted! Which is why I'm going to insist that you rest some more."

"No! I don't want to!" Nozomi protested, but Naruto, stubbornly persistent as always, was already pushing her back against the bed, and was stroking her cat ears gently.

Nozomi growled under her breath, mentally cursing im for knowing her weakness, as well as *herself* for having such a weakness.

Naruto smiled as her shoulders relaxed, and she fell back against the pillow willingly, her eyes beginning to flutter. "That's right, kitty," he snickered quietly, "Sleep, and we'll talk some more when you're a little more rested." he said softly, still lightly stroking her soft, velvety ears.

Nozomi opened her mouth to threaten him, to bluff that if he didn't stop she'd use the extraction jutsu...but nothing came out except for a small purr, which caused her to blush faintly. Darn that Naruto, he'd made her too drowsy to speak! Sleep was already beginning to overtake her. He'd won the argument, and he most likely knew it.

'Oh well, I'll have plenty of chances to get him back later.' the cat girl thought as her eyes began to close. *'Since I'll be living in the same place as him...I'll have lots of chances to..get...him...good...Zzz..'*

Naruto smiled as the cat girl's eyes shut completely, and she began to purr, out cold from the look of it.

"Sweet dreams, Nozo-chan."

Naruto stopped stroking her ears and crawled into his bed, deciding it best for him to get some rest too while the opportunity presented itself. After all, he knew that when Nozomi woke up, there'd be no sleeping, because she was very likely to be yelling at him for putting her to sleep. Naruto sighed as he closed his eyes, one last thought running through his weary mind. *'I'm so glad it all worked out...maybe you can't hear me, but...thank you, Hiroko.'*

Now the black oblivion overtook him, and he fell into a deep sleep. In spite of this, there was a smile on his face that echoed his happy thanks as he slept, dreaming of the days that were to come. Nozomi would move in with him, and he would be responsible to keep her demon restrained, save for 30 minutes each day that she'd use for personal alone time...but still. It was safe to say that if Nozomi had still been playing hard to get with him, she would've had to stop now. Running wouldn't be an option

anymore...unless she wanted to have a very angry Hokage on her tail.

The grin on Naruto's face widened even more, almost as if he was dreaming of all this. Yes, the next few days would be very interesting, indeed.

8 - A Bond That Can't Be Broken {Oneshot}

A Bond That Can't Be Broken

Nozomi took a deep breath and exhaled softly, smiling to herself as she glanced out the window. Today was finally here. The day of her release from the hospital had arrived at last, and to say the very least, Nozomi was ecstatic.

It had been a week since she'd been brought here by her boyfriend, Naruto (who had also needed medical attention). Thank goodness for her quick healing abilities. If not for them, the doctors would have kept her for at *least* one more week, and Nozomi was already sick and tired of the hospital; of the constant checking up on her by the doctors at inconvenient hours; of never being allowed to get up and walk around; not to mention the horrid gunk they called food here. It was unbearable!

However, Nozomi probably would have gotten along just fine if not for the frequent visits from fellow teammate Sakura Haruno, and cell 7 leader, Kakashi Hatake. Their last visit had been so embarrassing. Somehow, they had found out about the strict orders Nozomi had been given from Lady Tsunade to move into Naruto's apartment immediately once they were released.

Needless to say, the discussion that day had been rather awkward, consisting of Kakashi congratulating Naruto on "getting the girl" (while undoubtedly envying him for being given living with a beautiful girl as a mission), and Sakura giving Nozomi pointers on how to deal with Naruto, should he decide to behave mischievously.

Nozomi heaved a small sigh and frowned slightly, lowering her head. For this reason, she had mixed feelings about today. Sure, she was being freed from the doctors and hospital scenery, but...the minute she walked out the door, she would lose her true freedom; her right to live independently and alone. Because of those stupid orders from Lady Tsunade, the cat girl would be made to pack and move in with Naruto this very day. As if that weren't bad enough, she would have to make sure to stay in a 10 foot radius of the boy at *all* times, save for the 30 minutes of alone time she was allowed each day.

On top of all that, this will be my first time being in Naruto-kun's apartment! The cat girl gulped and cast a glance at the boy who lay asleep on one of the beds behind her, *'I don't know what to expect...Ahhh! I'm so nervous!'*

Nozomi sighed inwardly as she watched the spiky haired boy sleep. His expression was one of pure contentment; his eyelids heavy with sleep; his lips parted slightly in an "o" shape as he breathed deeply, heavily. He didn't seem worried at all. In fact, he seemed rather peaceful about the whole situation.

'Mou...I wonder...if I were to lay with him, would some of his peaceful, carefree attitude rub off on me? Even for just a minute?' Nozomi glanced down shyly at the sleeping blond as she approached his bed. *'...It would be so easy...'* The cat girl slowly took a seat on the bed beside him, her face flushed ever so slightly. *'I could always lay down for a minute and leave before he notices.'* The brunette's eyes widened at this idea, her cheeks coloring faintly as she covered her face, shaking her head wildly. *'NO WAY! It's*

too risky...too embarrassing! I mean, what if someone sees me?!...Or worse...' The cat girl's eyes grew even wider with horror as a new thought struck her. *'What is...he wakes up and sees me there before I can move?!...NO...definitely not...!'*

"Morning, Nozo-chan."

Nozomi jumped in surprise as two muscular, tanned arms snaked around her waist in a hug from behind. "N-Naruto-kun!- You're awake?!" The brunette stammered, relieved that her back faced him and he couldn't see how red her face had gotten.

"Yep!" Naruto grinned widely. "So.." he said, innocence lingering in his voice, "did you see anything interesting outside?"

Nozomi shook her head in response. "Not really...but the sun keeps going behind the clouds...I think it's gonna rain-" The cat girl broke off in mid sentence as Naruto's words sunk in fully, gasping in realization. "Whaaa? Wait, you were *watching* me?! I thought you were asleep!"

Naruto's grin widened ever so slightly at this. "I've been awake this whole time, Nozo-chan." he informed her innocently.

"Why didn't you say something, then?!" Nozomi demanded, turning to look him in the eye.

Naruto let out a snicker as he saw how red her face was. "Because, I was watching you. I wanted to see what you were up to."

"Stalker!!" Nozomi shrieked, eyes growing wide.

Naruto just snickered again, smirking now as he eyes her intently.

"What?!" Nozomi demanded, not enjoying being in the spotlight. "What are you looking at me like that for?!"

No sooner had she said this, then she suddenly remembered how badly she was blushing, and the kunouichi clamped a hand over her mouth, blushing harder. *'Is THAT why he's been smirking at me this whole time?!'*

"No reason, really, you're just really very *red* right now." Naruto said with a chuckle, confirming the dismayed cat girl's suspicions. He gave her a mischievous grin. "So...what were you thinking about just before I decided to 'wake up'?"

Nozomi blushed deeper, recalling her earlier thoughts about how his peacefulness might rub off on her if she laid with him, and she shook her head. "It's nothing, Naruto-kun." she stammered, a nervous little grin on her face.

"It doesn't look like it's nothing, Nozo-chan." Naruto said, a hint of laughter in his voice as he watched the girl's blush deepen. "So, can I hear what you're thinking?"

"Naruto-kun, it was n-"

"I want to know regardless of what you say." The blond interrupted.

Nozomi sighed and let her shoulders sag in defeat. There were no point in trying to argue...he knew all her weaknesses and would use every one of them against her if she refused again. "Well...I was...thinking...about...you..." she muttered awkwardly.

"What about me?" The boy pressed, his blue eyes bright with such intense curiosity, Nozomi could feel them burning through to her very soul.

"Just..about how...peaceful you are about this whole thing with Kumoraku being under your control...and...me moving in..." she said quickly, avoiding his stare, praying what she had said would be enough to suffice.

Naruto chuckled, a small grin on his face. "That's because I'm happy. I get to be with you." he paused. "What else?"

A drop of sweat ran down the back of Nozomi's head. Of *course* it wasn't enough. Naruto had to have the full story. This was a fact she had always known, yet tried to fight against. The cat girl swallowed hard before answering, "Nothing...Naruto-kun, that's all I was thinking about."

Said boy just stared at her with his eyebrows raised, his face fixed into an "I-don't-believe-you" expression.

"Honest!" Nozomi said, her eyes pleading with his for him to let her win just this once.

Of course, the boy didn't get the message she was trying to send as he spoke, eyes narrowing, "C'mon, Nozo-chan! You had to be thinking something else to be blushing as crazily as you are! Now spill!"

"Naruto-kun...there *is* nothing else!" Nozomi lied desperately.

"If you don't tell me, I'll pet you until you're in such a deep sleep that you have to stay another night in the hospital." Naruto threatened playfully, but his eyes were serious.

Nozomi gulped. His knowledge of her hatred of hospitals had her trapped. "Alright, alright already, fine!!"

Naruto grinned, pleased with himself. Of course Nozomi hated hospitals since she'd been forced to stay in one when she was 12 for a month. This was due to all the injuries (internal and external) she had, and she had resented him for it for some time, Naruto being the one who found her and brought her there. Ever since then she'd refused to be put in a hospital, no matter how bad the injury...up until last week, when she'd been unconscious and had no say over it.

Nozomi gulped quietly. "I was wondering if some of that calmness would rub off on me if I laid down with you." The cat girl quickly turned away as her face went dark crimson. "Th-there, I said it, so no petting!" she added hastily.

"Alright...I promise..." Naruto fell silent for a moment, his face turning a light shade of red. "If you want, I could go back to sleep..heh." he said with a wink.

"Naruto-kun...!" Nozomi felt her face burn with embarrassment and she sweatdropped. "Naruto-kun...let go, please." she said softly, working to remove his arms from her waist. To the brunette's surprise, his grip on her only tightened. "Naruto-kun! What are you doing?! Let go!"

"Not a chance." Naruto grinned devilishly. "I'm about to test your theory. Here, kitty, kitty!"

"Naruto-- Nyaaaaaaaaa!!" Nozomi shrieked in surprise as he suddenly lifted her up and laid her down on the bed beside him. Once he let go, the cat girl quickly sat up again..only to pushed back down. "Naruto-kun!- Let me up already!" The cat girl wailed, crying out in frustration as she felt his arms on her waist again.

The spiky haired boy just shook his head, his body trembling with laughter. "Nope! *You* suggested this, now you've got me curious so we're testing it!"

Nozomi groaned, knowing it would be useless to fight Naruto...especially now that he had control over her chakra. "Naruto-kun, what the heck are you doing?!" She shrieked, fur spiking up as the boy laid his head on her chest.

"Shhh! I'm listening to your heart." The blond boy replied with a smile. "It's beating really fast. Is this making you uncomfortable?"

Nozomi gave a soft "Un!", grateful that the way he was positioned prevented him from seeing how red her face was again.

"Calm down, Nozo-chan...Relax and think happy thoughts." Naruto closed his eyes, still smiling as he listened to the thump-thump of her heart.

'How the heck am I supposed to do that with your face in my chest?!' Nozomi screamed silently, her face still blazing red. The cat girl blinked as she felt a tingle go through her spine. "Nyaa?" She purred involuntarily and moaned. "Naruto-kun!!"

"Hehehe, you like that?" Naruto smiled even more as he kept a hold on her long, fuzzy tail, stroking it lightly.

Nozomi wanted to scream, to bash head in, rake her claws across his tanned face until he was covered in blood; anything to punish him for going back on his word and petting her. However, angry as she felt, the cat girl couldn't bring herself to even lift a finger. She was feeling strangely at peace, like she had not a care in the world. She felt calm and serene. It was like the feeling that washed over her before she fell into a deep sleep, only this time, she wasn't tired at all. Just relaxed.

"That's right...relax.." Naruto grinned as the thumping pattern of her heart returned to normal, and she purred again loudly in contentment.

"O...k...Naruto-kun...you can stop petting me...I'm caaalm." The cat girl slurred, still purring.

Naruto snickered and let go of her tail.

"You know, I think my theory was right. I feel really calm right now..." Nozomi closed her eyes and grinned widely.

The blond next to her heaved a happy sigh and nuzzled against the part of her chest where her heart was with his cheek. "Stay calm, Nozo-chan..." he urged as her heartbeat picked up speed ever so slightly.

Nozomi took a deep breath and sighed softly, her eyes still closed with a goofy smile plastered on her face. Naruto mimicked her action, heaving a deep sigh, a wide, goofy grin on his face as his eyes slowly closed.

A few minutes went by and Nozomi frowned as the peace she'd felt slipped away. Oh well...she had told herself she'd be happy to feel peaceful even if only for a *minute*...

'Why did I have to be so specific?' The brunette wondered, goldish yellow eyes rolling upward in annoyance as she sighed inwardly. Oh well...She reached out a clawed hand and ran it through Naruto's spiked, yellow hair. "So, let's get up now, ok?" she said softly.

The boy didn't respond.

"Um...we'd better get up now before someone sees us like this, right?" She tried again.

Naruto made no move to let the girl up as his grin faded and he narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Nozo-chan. If it's alright for you to move in with me, then this is fine too. We don't have to move."

Nozomi sweatdropped as she searched for another excuse; anything that would make him get off her so she could get up. "Well...ok...it's just that it's getting kinda hard to breathe..."

"Hm..." Naruto murmured, deep in thought from the sound of his voice. He smiled a moment later. "Ok then!"

Before Nozomi knew what was happening, she'd been listed again and placed laying on the right side of the bed, now with her head on Naruto's muscular chest. "What the heck, Naruto-kun?!" She stammered, a light tint of red once again coloring her cheeks.

"It's your turn to listen...now relax." Naruto said softly, patting the brunette's back lightly.

Nozomi sighed softly, the blush still visible on her face as she timidly answered, "Ok..." The cat girl closed her eyes as she listened to the beat of Naruto's heart. It was loud, and each steady, rhythmic made her ear twitched against the boy's chest involuntarily.

"Hehe! Hey, that tickles!" Naruto said in protest, giggling at the fuzzy black cat ear that kept flicking lightly against the bottom of his exposed neck.

"Huh...sorry, Naruto-kun." Nozomi raised her head and slowly began to sit up, heaving a soft sigh. "Well, I dunno about *you*, but *I'm* fed up with this place...I'm ready to go home." A small smile formed on the cat girl's face as she got to her feet.

"It'll be nice to be rid of the hospital beds," Naruto agreed, "I've missed MY bed."

Nozomi giggled at this. "Oh, that reminds me." She turned and glanced at the boy over her shoulder. "Where am I going to sleep as your place?" The girl sweatdropped as she blond boy's face turned to a light tint of red, the corners of his mouth pulling up in what looked like a grin. "N...Naruto-kun? What is it...?" The girl frowned as she started to back away. Something about that smile on his face made her worry, and she did NOT want to find out why.

Suddenly, the blond sat up straight and grabbed her arm, pulling her close to him. "There's a few place you can sleep," his voice sounded strained, "but I'll let you choose." With just as much speed as before, Naruto laid back on the bed, pulling the bewildered cat girl down on top of him. "You can sleep there." he said, receiving a stunned "Nyaaa?!?" from the red faced cat girl.

"Nozo-chan, I'm teasing!" Naruto snickered. He patted the bed on both sides of him. "You can sleep here or here."

Nozomi glared at him, still blushing hard from his "joke". "You pervert!" she screeched.

Naruto gave the cat girl a funny look. "Why does *that* make me a pervert? I already said I was kidding the first time!"

"Because," Nozomi growled, still blushing furiously, "you want me to sleep in the same bed as you!"

Now Naruto's face turned sheepish as he blushed awkwardly, a drop of sweat tricking down his head. "Actually, there's not really any choice...I don't have anywhere else for you *to* sleep." he paused briefly.

"I'm sorry if I scared you with my teasing...but you don't have to worry; I won't do anything to hurt you...promise."

"...I'll sleep on the floor!" Nozomi sputtered loudly as she pushed herself up off his chest and scrambled to her feet.

"No, Nozo-chan, you will not!" The spiky haired boy sat up again just as quickly as before and grabbed one of Nozomi's small wrists, pulling her back toward him.

"Naruto-kun, I-I'll sleep on the floor...! I don't mind it.." The cat girl whimpered softly, fear in her eyes.

"No, you will *not*, you'll sleep on the bed." Naruto objected. "I'm sorry, Nozo-chan, but it gets too cold down there...and there's really not a whole lot of room on the floor, either."

"But-but-but!-" Nozomi sputtered.

"No buts, Nozo-chan." Naruto said firmly. His face softened as he saw the fear in her eyes. "Hey...you know I would never hurt you..calm down. We'll work this out, I promise." Naruto pulled the girl into a hug,

backing up slightly -just enough that he hit the bed and lost his balance, pulling them both onto the bed again.

Nozomi's face exploded into a widespread blush as she found herself in the same, embarrassing predicament as she's been in before when Naruto had made had cruel joke. The cat girl instantly fought to get off Naruto's chest, screaming in frustration when his arms snaked themselves around her waist again, keeping her trapped.

"Nozo-chan, would you please calm down?" Naruto sighed as the girl thrashed wildly under his arms.
"Nothing bad is going to happen to you...just relax!"

Nozomi glared at him, her eyes wild, face red with embarrassment and rage. "How can you expect me to be calm when you're holding me down like this?!"

Naruto sighed softly. His head was beginning to hurt from her screaming. If he let it to go on any longer, his brain might explode!

"Naruto-kun, are you listening to me?!" Nozomi demanded heatedly. "Do you KNOW how *wrong* this looks?!"

"Nozomi, shut up." Naruto said in annoyance, quickly capturing her lips with his before she could yell again.

Nozomi's eyes widened at this and she fought him, pounding her chest with her fists, digging her claws into his thick shoulder blades; anything to make him let her go. Gradually, however, she calmed down and gave up fighting, instead focusing her energy on kissing him back now.

The two only stopped every now and then for a brief in take of air; they were so deeply locked in their embrace they completely forgot about the hospital room; about the world around them. That is...until the door slammed and they heard a loud, fan girl-ish squeal.

"What the?!-" Nozomi and Naruto exchanged wide eyed glances as they quickly pulled apart and glanced around the room, their gazes landing on a spazzing, sparkly eyed Sakura and a smirking, red faced Kakashi.

*'Oh no...PLEASE don't tell me they **saw** that!'* Nozomi thought in horror.

"Oh my gosh...you two were making out!!!" Sakura exclaimed excitedly, and Nozomi facepalmed. Of *course* Sakura had seen them...*and* Kakashi! That was just the kind of luck she seemed to have...

"Sorry if we...ahem..interrupted something..." Kakashi said, raising his eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

Nozomi gritted her teeth, resisting the urge to sock him in the jaw as she struggled to answer. "Umm..you actually didn't interrupt a thing- Not a thing!...See...I-er-tripped, and, um...Naruto-kun tried to catch me, but--uh..he...fell, and..." The cat girl trailed off sweatdropping as Sakura's smirk only widened.

"So, what was it like?" The pink haired kunoichi asked suddenly.

Nozomi gulped quietly. "What was *what* like?" She asked, trying to sound innocent.

Sakura's eyes narrowed at the brunette's words and she groaned. "Nozomiii! You know exactly what I mean!"

"I...do...?" Nozomi frowned, still keeping her act up.

"Nozomi! C'mon, tell me!" Sakura pressed. "What was it like to make out?!"

Nozomi's face turned beet red at this question, and she scowled at Sakura. "None of your business! Get out! NOW!!"

"Nozomi!-"

Before Sakura could finish, the angered cat girl grabbed both her and Kakashi's arms and shoved them out of the room, slamming the door in their faces.

"Gee...embarrassed or something?" Naruto asked, unable to resist teasing the girl as he noticed how spiked up her ears and tail were.

This resulted in her turning immediately and giving him a dark glare. "Shut up, Naruto-kun!"

Naruto couldn't help but cringe a little, not having expected that kind of a reaction from her. "...Ok..."

Nozomi glared at him a little longer before giving a frustrated growl and turning away, crossing her arms across her chest in annoyance. "Stupid...idiotic...pinky..!" she grumbled, "It was none of her business!.....Though it *was* kinda nice...why did she have to interru-" The cat girl turned in surprise as Naruto snickered, and she sweatdropped, seeing the sly little smile on the boy's face. "What?!"

"You liked it...?" he said softly, "Making out, I mean.....Wanna go again?"

Nozomi's brows knitted together as she glowered at him, her face now red as was humanly possible. "Shut up!!" she yelled again.

"Aww, c'mon, Nozo-chan, don't be that way." Naruto whined as he approached the cat girl from behind and wrapped his arms around her slender form, drawing her closer.

"Ahh! Let me go!!" Nozomi protested, trying to pull away. She wanted to stay mad at him, and she KNEW that wouldn't happen if he held her like this; she'd eventually give up and cool down...and that was NOT what she wanted!

"Aww...but why?" Naruto whined again, tightening his grip on her slightly. "We *are* alone again, you know."

Nozomi sweatdropped. He was trying to hint at something there, wasn't he? "B-because!- !!" The cat girl

turned and scowled at him over her shoulder as an idea came to her. "Because ! I hate these stupid hospital clothes! I'm changing into *my* clothes!" A drop of sweat rolled down her cheek as she saw the look on Naruto's face, and she hastily added, "In the bathroom! Pervert!"

"Hey, I'm not a pervert.." Naruto heaved a low sigh. "Fine, go...I agree, I don't like these clothes either. They're not as comfortable as my jumpsuit!" He reluctantly let go of the cat girl and she jerked away, grabbing the green and black folded up garments that were her everyday clothes, and starting into the small bathroom.

"So, how about we continue our little 'session' after we get out of these ridiculous clothes?" Naruto suggested, grabbing the orange and black folded up jumpsuit that was next to his bed and beginning to take off his shirt.

Nozomi turned, and seeing his fleshy exposed chest, she blushed yet again and stuck her tongue out at him. Then she slammed the bathroom door shut louder than was necessary, grumbling under her breath about why she should and shouldn't resume the "session" with Naruto, all the while trying not to say too much about how amazing his muscular chest had looked..

"You know, I can hear you arguing with yourself about accepting my offer!" Naruto said loudly, snickering as he pulled on his pants and jacket. "Oh, and thanks. I'm glad you like my body, hehe."

The only response the boy got was a loud, surprised shriek, and a loud bang on the door. "Don't listen to what I'm saying, eavesdropper!"

"Well this room isn't very big, and you're not talking very quietly if you don't want me to hear you."

The cat girl shrieked again, and Naruto couldn't help but smirk in amusement.

"Hooraaay! Free at last!" Nozomi cheered, jumping up and pumping her fist into the air. "Haha! Finally, no more hospital clothes or annoying doctors! Yeeees!"

Naruto couldn't help but snicker at the girl's behavior. He'd never seen such a display of enthusiasm from her, and while it looked good on her, it was odd for one of her personality. "Excited much?" he couldn't resist asking, a slight teasing tone in his voice.

Nozomi's grin faded as she made a face at the boy. "I know, I'm out of character...right? Well *sorry*, but I can't help feeling giddy. Those doctors were driving me nuts!!...As well as those everyday visits from Kakashi-sensei and Sakura..."

Naruto laughed and put a finger over her mouth before she could continue. "I know, Nozomi, I know. I was only teasing." he grinned. "I'm excited too, you know.."

Nozomi sighed softly and pushed Naruto's finger away from her face. "It'll be nice to get back to my normal life." she said, smiling.

"Hey, it won't be *all* the same, Nozo-hime." Naruto smirked as he grabbed the girl and pulled her into his side. "You're gonna be living with me now."

Nozomi's face flushed to a light shade of pink and she pulled away from him. "I know *that*, you don't have to remind me!" she groaned.

Naruto gave the cat girl one of his trademark grins, teeth and all. "Aww, don't sound so unhappy about it, Nozo-chan! At least you don't have to *die*!" he paused, smirking deviously. "Besides, I bet you won't mind it at all after the wedding!"

Nozomi had been prepared to make a remark, but his words caught her off guard. "What the?!- Who ever said anything about a *wedding*!?" she demanded shrilly.

The blond haired boy put his hands behind his head and gave another big, innocent looking grin. "Nozomi...we're gonna be living together. It'll happen eventually. So, why not sooner than later?" His grin widened slightly as he winked.

Nozomi could feel the heat rising to her cheeks, and she quickly threw her hands over her face to hide the blush that was slowly but surely creeping into her cheeks.

"Nozo-chan? What do you say?" Naruto urged.

"Naruto-kun, I *don't* want to talk about this!" The cat girl growled.

Naruto couldn't help snickering. "Cause you *know* I'm right." he said, smirking.

The blush on Nozomi's face darkened at this, and she turned so her back faced him. "Shut up!!" she yelled.

Naruto sighed softly and gave a shake of his head. "Nozomi...you're way too stubborn, you know that? It's going to happen sooner or later! Just say yes!"

"I'm NOT getting married, Naruto-kun!" The brunette growled.

Hearing this, the spiky haired boy sighed and shook his head once more. "Fine..." he muttered. Then, in a quieter voice, he added, "I'll just try again later."

Nozomi took a deep breath to calm herself and turned to face the blond once she felt the heat in her face go away. "So...what now...?"

"Well, I guess we should go and get-" Naruto was then by the sound of both their stomachs growling loudly.

"Lunch?" Nozomi finished for him with a hopeful look. The longer it took them to get to her place and get her stuff packed, the longer her move into Naruto's apartment would be delayed, which she didn't mind in the least!

A grin spread across Naruto's face and he nodded his head in agreement, "Ok, how about ramen?" he suggested.

"Ichiraku?" Nozomi asked hopefully, her mouth watering involuntarily. After a week of nothing but that so called hospital food, she'd be content if she wasn't allowed to eat anything but ramen for the next 10 years of her life; ANYTHING if it meant never having to endure another meal in the hospital again!

Naruto chuckled and nodded again. "Of course, Ichiraku!" he grinned. "I've missed that place, and with us being frequent customers, I'll bet Teuchi and Ayame have missed *us*!"

Nozomi giggled at this. "Ah, yes, we can't have Ayame missing her beloved Naruto-kun anymore now, right?"

"Hey, what're you getting at?" Naruto asked, a perplexed look on his face.

The cat girl smirked at him in amusement. "I'm just pointing out a very obvious fact; Ayame thinks you're cute! Why else would she be so nice to you, hmmm?"

"Because, she's nice to everyone. Besides that, Ayame is older than me, Nozo-chan."

Nozomi snickered. "So? Age doesn't matter when it comes to crushes, Naruto-kun!"

"Well, even if she *does* like me, I'm already taken." Naruto smirked, gently drawing her closer to him. "My heart belongs to you, and you alone...you're my treasure, Nozo-hime."

Nozomi's face colored again and she looked away, avoiding his searching gaze. "Well then, that's enough talking, already! I'm starved, let's get going!"

Naruto grinned at the girl and nodded, gently taking her hand in his as they walked.

Nozomi blushed and made sure to keep her gaze straight ahead, knowing that if she were to lock stares with him now, her face would burst into flames, it was so hot.

Naruto glanced at her secretly out of the corner of his eye, and seeing the bright red blush that had spread across her face, he couldn't keep himself from grinning.

"Ahhh! It's better than I remembered!" Nozomi gushed, taking a huge bite of steaming hot ramen and sighing with pleasure. "I missed this stuff so much...didn't you, Naruto-kun?"

A quick sideways glance told the girl that Naruto's mouth was too full for talking, and she snickered softly. "Mou, you might want to actually *chew* some of that, you know!" The cat girl teased as she watched the blond shove yet another bite of the noodles into his mouth.

"Like *you're* one to talk!" Naruto muttered once he'd swallowed his mouthful, a smirk on his his face as he eyed the huge pile of noodles the brunette had on her chopsticks.

Nozomi didn't answer; she just made a face at the boy and showed the piled noodles into her mouth, eyes closing in pleasure (accidentally purring) as the flavor invaded her mouth.

"Enjoying the ramen, kitty?" Naruto teased.

Nozomi made another face and punched him lightly in the arm. "I can't help purring, I guess...this is SOOOO much better than the stuff they shoved down our throats in the hospital!" She explained after swallowing her own mouthful of ramen.

Naruto chuckled and patted her on the head lightly. "I know, Nozo-chan, I know...I'm only giving you a hard time."

"Neh...!" Nozomi stuck her tongue out at him and went back to eating.

It wasn't long before Naruto finished, and having nothing else to do, he watched as the cat girl devoured the scrumptious ramen, bit by bit.

"Heya, Nozo-chan?" he asked after a few minutes.

Nozomi glanced up from her bowl and stared at him, curiosity in her eyes. "Hmmm?"

"Well...um..." Naruto scratched the back of his head, a small, sheepish grin on his face. "D'ya think maybe I could have a little bit of that?...I'm still hungry."

Nozomi scowled at the boy, looking annoyed. "This is mine, get another bowl! Besides, this is chicken, not miso with chashu...MY favorite."

Naruto frowned at the girl. "C'mon, Nozo-chan, pleeeaaase?! I don't care what the flavor is...and I'm kinda out of money since you made me pay for yours...so..."

"Hold it *right* there, buddy!" Nozomi interrupted, a vein popping up on her forehead. "I did not 'make' you buy my ramen, YOU *insisted* on it! So don't go trying to guilt me about how your being broke is MY fault, cause it's NOT!"

A drop of sweat slid down the back of Naruto's head and he laughed sheepishly, swallowing hard. "Oh, yeah...hehe..."

Nozomi rolled her eyes at him and resumed eating; there wasn't a whole lot left, just a few more bites. If she could just finish before Naruto thought of another reason as to why she should let him have her ramen, he'd HAVE to shut up *then*, right? She desperately hoped so.

"C'mon, Nozomi...PLEASE?!" Naruto persisted, now giving the puppy dog eyes.

Nozomi ignored him and tried to focus on eating. This worked just fine until she realized that he had knelt down behind her and now had his arms wrapped tightly around her waist. "Naruto-kun, what the **heck** are you doing?!" she demanded in a shrill voice.

The spiky haired boy snickered mischievously. "Well, I'm doing two things...one, I'm making sure people know what's *mine*, and also..." The blond smirked, "I'm reminding you that you're a woman...MY woman; and being a woman, you have to monitor how much of what you take in...you know, watch your figure."

Nozomi's face went red and she grumbled in annoyance under her breath, folding her arms across her chest. "D'ohhh...! FINE!" The cat girl growled as she shoved the remains of her ramen over to his seat.

"Yay!!" Naruto cheered. He gave her waist one last squeeze (which nearly made her jump out of her skin) and got up, giving her a quick peck on the cheek. "Thanks, Nozo-hime! You're awesome!" The boy flashed a wide grin then slid into his seat, wolfing down the last bit of the meal as Nozomi sighed, groaning.

A few minutes later he was finished, and he grinned at the girl. "Well...you're done, and I'm done, so let's go get your stuff!"

"Umm, Naruto-kun, we can wait awhile for that, ehe..." Nozomi mumbled, not ready to be forced to move yet.

"Ah ah ahh!" Naruto grabbed the cat girl's wrist as she began to move away and smirked at her. "We've stalled long enough. It's time to do this. Now c'mon."

Nozomi glared lightly at the boy as he pulled her to her feet and half led-half dragged her outside and started for her home, still clutching her hand gently as they walked.

For awhile, neither of the two teens spoke, just content to walk in silence. Nozomi became aware that Naruto was drawing her closer, and now putting her arm around her shoulder, but she said nothing, not in the mood for an argument. Besides, she reasoned with herself, he was her boyfriend, and she WAS moving in with him...she'd have to at least TRY to tolerate his touchy feely-ness a little.

"Heh, I think you're right."

"Huh?" Nozomi turned her head so she faced Naruto, a confused look on her face. "What are you talking about, Naruto-kun? Right about what?"

"The weather." The boy replied, pointing up at the sky, which was covered in grey clouds, "I think you were right when you said it might rain."

"Oh...yeah, it definitely *looks* like it's gonna pour *now*!" Nozomi agreed, shivering involuntarily.

This earned her a concerned frown from Naruto. "Are you cold?"

The brunette gave a sheepish smile, her cat ears flattening against her head. "Um, just a little..."

"Well then, here."

Nozomi watched, blushing as Naruto removed his orange and black jacket and put it around her

shoulders, guiding her arms through the sleeves (which were just a bit too long on her). "B-but, Naruto-kun! I can't use this!" The cat girl stammered. "*You* need it!"

The spiky haired boy gave her a firm look. "You can, and you *will*, Nozomi. I'm not gonna let you freeze. Besides that," His eyes softened, a smile playing on his lips, "I'll be just fine as long as you keep your arm around me."

The blush on Nozomi's face darkened slight, and she gave a small nod. "Oh...kay, then..."

Naruto grinned widely and put his arm around her shoulder. After a slight hesitation, the cat girl wrapped her arm around his middle, still blushing as they resumed walking.

*'Naruto-kun...He's such a good guy...considerate, too. I really **don't** deserve him...'*

"Heya, Nozo-chan?"

"Huh..what?" Nozomi snapped out of her thoughts and glanced up at the blond curiously. "What is it, Naruto-kun?"

"Um, do you mind waiting here for a minute? There's something I have to take care of real quick."

Nozomi blinked, then nodded and let go of him. "Go ahead, I'll wait here."

"Thanks, Nozo-hime!" Naruto flashed a wide, toothy grin. "I'll be back in 10 minutes, 15 tops!" This said, the boy turned and darted off.

Nozomi smirked and shook her head. *'Nature must have called.'* The cat girl leaned up against a building and closed her eyes, humming a soft tune to herself while she waited.

True to his word, Naruto returned 15 minutes later, a pleased grin on his face. "Ok, I'm back!" he said enthusiastically, draping his arm around her again as they picked up walking.

Nozomi sighed softly and leaned her head against his should contentedly, allowing a soft purr to escape her. Naruto just grinned and tried not to laugh.

"Well, here we are..." Nozomi reached into the right pocket on her jacket and pulled out a small key, which she used to unlock the door. "C'mon on." she said, opening the door and entering.

Naruto nodded and followed her, taking his shoes off and putting them with hers in the box by the door. He glanced around the room, which he assumed must be her living room. There was a small yet comfortable looking couch on the north wall with a small coffee table in front of it, and a television set in front of that.

On the east wall was a medium sized window with a set of navy blue curtains draped over it.

There were three doors, one on the north wall to the right of the couch, and the other two on the far west walls. Naruto couldn't help secretly wondering where they all led to.

As if sensing his curiosity, Nozomi motioned to the doors on the west wall. "Kitchen and bathroom-laundry room."

"Oh, ok." Naruto pointed to the door by the couch. "What about that one?"

"My room." Nozomi said and grimaced. "I guess that's as good a place as any to get started."

"Well then let's get s-" Naruto's voice was drowned out by a loud clap of thunder outside that was followed by the unmistakable sound of pouring rain. "Wow...I guess we got here just in time, eh, Nozomi?"

The boy frowned as he saw that Nozomi was no longer standing at his side, but curled up in one corner of the couch, trembling as she hid under a large, red blanket that seemed to have appeared from out of nowhere.

"Nozo-chan?" Naruto slowly made his way over to the girl and took a seat on the couch beside her. "You ok?"

After a slight pause, the brunette peeked out from under the cover and smiled sheepishly at him. "Uh, sorry Naruto-kun...that just scared me."

"Well, are you sure you're ok?" Naruto asked, concerned.

"Y-yeah, I'm alright. I just-" Nozomi broke off as another clap of thunder sounded, and she screamed, lunging forward and hugging the blond's chest, trembling. "I *hate* thunder!"

Naruto just stared at the girl, shocked at the suddenness of her action. Nozomi was afraid of thunder? This was strange to him, because half the time she didn't seem to be afraid of anything- save for certain bugs, her nightmares, and at times, him. Not sure what to do, the boy wrapped an arm around the girl's back in a protective, hopefully reassuring embrace.

A few minutes later, Nozomi pulled away and gave him a sheepish grin. "Thanks, Naruto-kun. I'm really sorry you had to see that. Me being afraid, I mean..." she sweatdropped. "I just really don't like the sound of thunder...it's loud and it scares me...kind of silly, I know, but I can't help it." The cat girl turned away in embarrassment.

"Don't be embarrassed." Naruto leaned forward and hugged her from behind. "Everybody's scared of something...and if thunder scares you, that's ok. I won't make fun of you. I'll protect you from it."

"Th..thanks, Naruto-kun..." Touched, Nozomi turned and pecked him on the cheek- only to flush bright red as the boy turned his head and caught her lips with his in a longing kiss, which ended up lasting longer than expected as he refused to let her go.

Finally, Nozomi managed to get free and she quickly jerked away. "Sorry, Naruto-kun, this is not the time

for that. There's still things that need to get done."

The cat girl closed her eyes, avoiding his pouty expression as she slid out of his jacket and handed it to him. "Thank you for letting me use it...it was very warm." she smiled.

Naruto returned her smile with one of his own as he accepted the jacket and put it on. "Don't mention it. I'm just happy I was able to help you!"

Nozomi felt her face heat up as he leaned in to kiss her again, and she quickly moved back, hopping up from the couch. Naruto frowned up at her, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Why do you keep doing that?" he asked, looking annoyed. "Don't tell me you're still trying to run away, Nozo-hime!"

"That's not it!" Nozomi tried not to turn any redder as she answered, "I'm not running away...but whenever we kiss, you end up kissing me senseless...and-and...I already told you, there's work to be done still! I have to go and pack!"

"Ohhh...ok." Naruto grinned slyly to himself. She hadn't said no, more like just postponed it. "So...then after you're done it'll be ok if I kiss you senseless?"

Nozomi opened her mouth to say no, absolutely not, that it was out of the question, but to her surprise, she answered, "Only if it's still raining by then." No sooner had these words passed through her lips, then Nozomi clapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide, blushing furiously. "Umm...thanks again for the jacket!" she called as she turned and ran into her room, slamming the door behind her.

Naruto just snickered to himself as he remained sitting while he waited, amused by how easily embarrassed she was.

"Rain, rain, go away, come again another day..." Nozomi grumbled as she stared out the living room window, having finished packing, watching the seemingly never ending shower of rain drops come down.

Naruto watched her from his spot on the couch. "Nozo-chan, you might as well sit down for awhile. I don't think it's going to stop anytime soon."

Nozomi sighed and reluctantly had a seat on the couch beside him. Naruto grinned; this was just what he wanted. He moved a little closer and slid an arm around her shoulders. The girl just yawned quietly.

"Tired?" Naruto asked with a frown.

Nozomi nodded slightly, her eyes closing. "Uh huh...sorry, Naruto-kun...but it's the rain. Listening to it always puts me to sleep.."

For some reason, a devilish grin spread across Naruto's face. "If that's the reason, then I'll distract you!"

"Nyeeh? Woah!!" Nozomi's eyes flew open in surprise as the blond pulled her into his lap and lifted her

chin upward. "Naruto-kun, what are you do-" She didn't get to finish as Naruto's lips brushed against hers.

He stopped just long enough to give a sneaky smile. "I'm distracting you...cause like you said, I usually kiss you senseless, and that's just what you need to be to ignore the rain!" His grin turned into a smirk. "Besides, you *did* say we'd do this after you finished packing if it was still raining..it sure doesn't sound like it's gonna let up anytime soon."

Almost as if the weather was on Naruto's side, the rain came down even harder. Nozomi, hearing the increased intensity of the rain, gulped and heaved a small sigh. "Oh, all right...fine!" she agreed grudgingly.

'Curse me and my big mouth!!'

"Yosh!" The blond haired boy cheered loudly, making Nozomi's face flush a light shade of pink. "Ok then, here I come!"

Despite the fact that Nozomi was prepared for him, the suddenness of his mouth on hers still took her by surprise. Why she was unsure. Perhaps it was because she could feel the urgency, the need he had for her love as he kept a forceful hold on her lips. Or maybe it was because his kisses were so gentle, yet still so firm at the same time...much like the wind; soft one minute, and forceful, firm the next. Yes, like the wind. This was how Naruto's kisses felt to her.

Whatever it was that surprised her, Nozomi didn't worry about it much as she deepened the kiss and let out a small moan of pleasure, running her hands through Naruto's spiky hair and twisting strands around her fingers.

The cat girl's face turned a fiery red as Naruto's hands made their way onto her rear, pushing her as if hoping to bring her closer than she already was. Then his fingers were at the base of her tail, stroking the long, furry appendage again and again.

Nozomi broke the kiss and stared deep into the boy's electric blue eyes, feeling like she was under hypnosis. It should be illegal to feel so wonderful. "Naruto-kun.." she purred softly, kissing him again.

Naruto didn't answer as he took one of his hands off her tail and lightly rubbed one of the girl's cat ears. Not long after, her responses to his kisses began to be less frequent, and slowly her arms slid limply from Naruto's spiked hair and onto his tanned muscular shoulders. It wasn't until her head began to lower that Naruto realized the cat girl was asleep, and he slouched a little in the couch, leaning back so she could rest her head on his chest. "Sweet dreams, Nozo-hime..sleep well." Naruto leaned forward just long enough to kiss the brunette's forehead, then he leaned back again and closed his eyes, listening to the harsh pitter patter of the rain until he, too fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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"Here we are!" Naruto opened the door to his apartment and stepped inside with a happy sigh. "Home sweet home!" He glanced back at the cat girl behind him. "Well? C'mon in and make yourself at home." he said smiling.

Nozomi stepped inside and glanced around, her eyes widening in shock. His place was nothing like she'd imagined it might be. There were clothes strewn everywhere, from the floor to the bed, and even on some of the furniture, and the kitchen sink, table and also the floor was cluttered, practically buried with empty instant ramen cups.

The cat girl looked at Naruto in disbelief. "Honestly, Naruto-kun...Do you not know what the word *housekeeping* means?!"

Naruto laughed sheepishly as he glanced away, avoiding the brunette's gaze. "Uhh...yeah. I've jst been kinda busy, lately...hehe.."

Nozomi sweatdropped. "What could have kept you so busy that you couldn't even take care of your own apartment?!"

Now Naruto met her gaze, a teasing glint in his blue eyes. "Not much...just chasing down a very stubborn cat girl and talking her into being my girl, training her, sealing her demon and being held up in the hospital for a week."

Nozomi opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out except for a small "Oh." His words had caught her completely off guard, to be honest. The last thing she'd expected was to be the entire reason he'd abandoned his housework! The cat girl sweatdropped, unsure what to say or do now.

This was just as awkward as an hour earlier, when she'd woke up and found herself sprawled out on top of Naruto, her face buried in his chest, with his arms wrapped snugly around the small of her back. Getting up had been difficult, not to mention embarrassing, since she'd had to wake the boy- a very hard to accomplish mission indeed.

Naruto grinned as he took notice of the far away look in her eyes. He had her momentarily silenced, and stunned, judging from the look on her face. Since she didn't seem to be focusing on anything at the moment, Naruto decided to take this opportunity to examine her thoroughly.

She was tall, as well as thin and pale with long, slender arms and legs -legs that could deliver a good kick if provoked, Naruto remembered with a smirk-. Her eyes were a deep goldish yellow; a bright, vibrant tone that could put you in a trance if you stared too long. Her cheeks were fair, flushed a faint rosy pink, a sign that she was trying not to blush from whatever she was thinking about. Her lips...he loved her lips; so soft and smooth, yet hard and firm, a set of lips that required skill to handle. Her face was framed by long strands of wispy, medium brown hair, her bangs flipping out almost like wings and curling in towards the bottom; the rest of her hair falling in wavy strands down by her medium sized bust.

She had long, slender fingers, each tipped by a sharp, claw like fingernail, a very useful weapon she was blessed with thanks to having the demon Kumoraku within her.

Her black and green jacket and skirt hugged her figure in a way that was not only flattering, but attractive -green and black were *definitely* her colors-, and they went perfectly with the see through netted top and shorts she loved to wear underneath.

Then there was the fuzzy black cat ears that were on her head, and the long, black tail that extended

from her lower back. Naruto had always been amazed just at the sight of them, and even now he was always resisting the urge to touch them constantly.

The blond smiled as he finished his examination. She was always griping about how she wanted to look like a normal human, but...Naruto's smile widened. She was her, a beautiful, feminine young cat girl. It didn't matter if she looked different from other girls; she was absolutely perfect in his opinion.

At that moment, the brunette snapped back from her thoughts, and she blushed, seeing Naruto's stare on her. "Wh-what?!" she demanded, forcing a scowl onto her face despite how awkward she felt.

"Nothing." Naruto shrugged with a grin. "I'm just wondering how I got someone as hot as you for my girl."

"Because, you were persist-" Nozomi broke off abruptly as his words hit her fully, and she blushed again. "I'm not 'hot!'" she muttered in embarrassment, glancing around the bedroom part of the apartment hoping to distract herself from Naruto, who was now giving her a very detailed reason as to why she was, in fact, hot.

On the east side of the room was a bed with a yellow blanket that rested half on half off the mattress, and a big window just above the bed. A small nightstand next to the bed held an alarm clock and a picture frame. Nozomi's gaze stopped on the frame, and she walked forward and picked it up.

The photo was of a younger cell 7, she realized, smiling slightly as she examined it further. There was Kakashi (or as she liked to call him to his face, "old man Kakashi-baka") holding down two boys, while the pink haired Sakura stood giggling in the middle. Nozomi smirked to herself. One of the two boys was Naruto, without a doubt. However, the other boy she wasn't too sure about...

"That's Sasuke."

Nozomi jerked her gaze from the photo, surprised. When had she sat down on the bed, and when had Naruto joined her?

She paused for a minute. "Ohh...*that's* him? Hmm...he looks almost as irritated as *you* do in this picture."

"Well, I told you before, when we were younger...Sasuke and I were rivals. He was like a brother to me." The spiky haired boy glanced away, both his face and his shoulders tense and stiff.

Sensing his sadness, Nozomi replaced the picture on the nightstand and touched his arm lightly. "I'm sure you'll get his back someday, Naruto-kun...it doesn't matter how long it takes. If you keep at it, he's sure to come home." She paused. "...and...if you feel sad or want to talk...I'll be here for you."

The brunette's face colored faintly as Naruto grabbed her hand off his arm and pulled her into his chest, face first.

"Promise me." he said quietly.

Nozomi felt her cheeks warm up as his arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her closer.

"P-promise? Promise what?" she stammered, trying to pull out of his embrace.

"Just promise!" Naruto practically shouted, tightening his hold on her to prevent her from moving.

A drop of sweat rolled down the back of Nozomi's head, and she swallowed hard. "What is it that you want me to promise you, Naruto-kun?!"

There was a slight pause before the boy answered. "...I know that living with me is scary for you..but it could be fun. If you let it be. Just...no matter what happens, promise me." -Naruto pulled away from the girl just enough that she was forced to look him in the eye.- "Nozomi, promise not to leave me! Maybe *you* don't think so, but I NEED you! It would destroy me if you left, really!"

Before Nozomi could answer, the blond had pulled her back into him in a fierce hug. The blush on the cat girl's face darkened and she slowly wrapped her arms around the boy's middle, returning the hug. "...Is that what this is about?...Ok then." she smiled shyly. "I won't leave...I promise."

Naruto sighed in relief at her words, and he rested his head on the girl's shoulder. "Thank you.."

Nozomi wondered if her face was going to flare up in flames, her cheeks felt so hot! "Um...you're welcome. So, what brought this on, anyways?"

"Seeing that picture, and not wanting to lose anybody else who's important to me." Came the boy's solemn reply.

"Naruto-kun, I'm not going anywhere." Nozomi insisted, struggling to pull away as the boy's hug grew tighter. She coughed. "Though, I might be on my **deathbed** soon if you don't let go!"

Naruto blushed faintly and let go of the brunette, watching sheepishly as she jerked away, gasping for air. "Sorry..I guess I got a little carried away.."

"Ya *think*?" Nozomi rolled her eyes, relieved to have stopped blushing.

"Heh, sorry, Nozo-chan." The blush on Naruto's face darkened ever so slightly. "I can't help it when you're so soft and huggable!"

Nozomi groaned and as she jumped up from the bed, grabbed her bag and bolted into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. She had almost calmed down, but thanks to that last comment, the girl's face was now redder than a tomato.

Heaving a sigh, Nozomi opened her bag and rummaged through its contents, searching for her pajamas, deciding she might as well change now while she had the privacy. After a few seconds, she found what she was looking for; a long sleeved pink top and matching pajama pants.

Nozomi smirked to herself. Normally she was just sleep in her netting top and shorts, but she didn't feel comfortable doing that if she wasn't alone. It was times like now that she was grateful to have these pajamas. She'd gotten them awhile back when she'd been invited to a slumber party with Sakura, Ino, Hinata and Tenten. They weren't the most comfortable things to sleep in, as they were tight around the

waist and forced her tail to stay inside, but they were better than her see through netting. Especially in this case.

'Still, if I have to sleep in these things more often, I want to be comfortable..' Nozomi scowled at the pajama bottoms for a minute before taking one of her claws and ripping a hole in the back. Now her tail wouldn't be stuck down her pant leg at least...

The cat girl heaved a sigh as she stripped her clothes off, quickly pulling the top on. She was just pulling on the pants when she heard a loud bang, and she quickly spun around, pulling the pants up and forcing her tail out through the opening she'd made.

Instantly her face went red as she locked eyes with an equally red faced, wide eyed Naruto, who was rubbing his head, having smacked it on the door from the looks of things.

"NYAAA! Naruto-kun?! How long have you been standing there?!?"

"Uhh...long enough..ehe...I was just coming to see if you were ok after running off like that...sorry, I should've knocked..." Naruto mumbled awkwardly, still blushing bright red.

Nozomi's eyes widened in horror as she realized her fears were true; he *had* seen her changing!

Naruto glanced away and mumbled to himself, "Wow, Grandma Tsunade...thanks for ordering such a sexy woman to stay with me...!"

The fur on Nozomi's ears and tail spiked up as she heard this, and she glared at him, cheeks blazing red. "Gee, I can *really* tell who *your* sensei was when you say stupid things like THAT!"

Naruto glanced at the girl and blushed harder. "Sorry, Nozo-chan. I can't help it if I think you're sexy..hehe.." He gulped. "...Nozomi...?"

Nozomi glared daggers at the boy, blushing furiously. "You pervert!! I **hate** you!"

Naruto's blush vanished as he heard this, and he stared at the girl in stunned silence. Then, before he could react, the brunette stormed past him, screaming again and again how much she hated him.

"Woah, wait!" Naruto hurried over to her and grabbed her arm as she opened the front door. "Where are you going, Nozo-chan?!"

"Let GO of me, you creep!" Nozomi snarled, using her free hand to slap him hard across the face.

Naruto winced at the blow, but didn't release her arm, he just tightened his grip. "Nozo-chan, what are you doing?" he asked quietly.

"What does it *look* like I'm doing?! I'm leaving. Out of here. Taking off!!!"

Naruto's eyes widened and his face fell. "What? But...Nozomi...you-you *promised* you wouldn't leave me! Even if things got hard here...you PROMISED! How could you break a promise like that? Please,

don't do this, I *need* you!!"

Upon hearing this, Nozomi's eyes flashed with remembrance of the promise she'd made earlier. The cat girl lowered her head and cursed under her breath before slamming the door shut with more force than was necessary. Then she glanced at Naruto from the corner of her eye. "You can let go now."

The blond haired boy did so, hesitantly, and watched as Nozomi stormed over to the fridge, pulled out a carton of milk, poured herself a glass and chugged it. After repeating this process a few times, the cat girl heaved a sigh and glanced in his direction. "So...what all did you see?"

Naruto's face went red at this and he quickly clamped a hand over his mouth to keep himself from blurting out the truth; that he'd seen...well...all of her.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Nozomi glanced away, blushing as well. "I...see...you saw...everything...well..." she looked at him again, forcing a smirk onto her face. "...Oh well..just...uhh...try to remember to knock from now on...kay..?"

Naruto nodded, staring at her with a stunned look on his face. "Ok...you...you're already ok? I mean...I'm forgiven?"

Nozomi's smirk grew larger. "I didn't say THAT...if you want to be forgiven, you'll have to do something to earn it."

"What's that..?" Naruto asked, eying the cat girl warily.

Nozomi's smirk gave way to a wide, mischievous grin. "Well..."

"Ok, Nozo-chan, I'm done." Naruto panted, wiping beads of sweat off his face. "The clothes are picked up, the ramen cups are gone, the bed's made...everything you said to do is done. It's clean." The boy sighed and dropped to his knees in front of the cat girl, who was sitting at the table drinking another glass of milk. "Now will you forgive me?"

Nozomi glanced up from her milk, and after a quick scan of the place, she nodded her head. "You're forgiven." she said quietly.

"Good!" Naruto groaned, collapsing on his face in exhaustion.

Nozomi just snickered and drank the last of her milk, purring contentedly.

"So, what n-" Naruto sat up and, seeing the girl's face, he put a hand over his mouth, trying not to laugh.

"What is it?" The brunette frowned at the boy. "What's so funny?"

"Let's just say it's easy to tell what you were just drinking." the spiky haired boy snickered.

"What...?" Nozomi flushed as she realized she had a milk mustache, and she quickly wiped it away with the back of her hand. Then, when she thought he wasn't looking, the cat girl licked the milk off her hand quickly.

"Hehe, kitty kitty." Naruto teased, having seen the whole thing.

Nozomi growled, embarrassed to have been seen. "Shut up, ramen breath." she muttered in annoyance as she stood up from the chair and began to walk away.

Naruto smirked, amused. It had been years since he'd heard THAT name, and as much as it had annoyed him to be called that, he *had* enjoyed the arguments that followed after he used *his* name for *her*.

"Ok, whatever you say, kitty cat!" Naruto jumped to his feet and stepped in front of her.

"Ramen breath!!!...What are you doing...?" the cat girl stammered as he grabbed both her arms.

"Don't you remember, kitty cat?" Naruto chuckled. "This is the part where you get mad and fight me until I shut you up with a kiss!"

Nozomi swallowed hard. "A...kiss? N-Naruto-kun, that's not necessary, I'll stop."

A wide smirk formed on Naruto's face. "Hmmm, being nice *and* using the name I like you to use, huh?"
An evil glint appeared in his electric blue eyes. "Sorry, too late!"

"But-Naruto-kun! !!" Nozomi's eyes bulged as Naruto's warm lips pressed against hers, cutting her off.
"Naruto--stop...! It's too late to start up again...!" she growled, trying to pull away.

As if there was magic in her words, Naruto broke their embrace and glanced at the clock, eyes widening.
"1:30?! Time really flies! I guess you're right...it's definitely time for bed."

Nozomi just nodded, relieved as the boy let go of her arms, grabbed a pair of pajamas and went into the bathroom, emerging a few minutes later all changed, and climbed into bed.

Naruto heaved a sigh and narrowed his eyes in annoyance as he saw the girl crouch down on her hands and knees before laying fully on the floor, her back facing him. "Nozomi, what do you think you're doing?"

Nozomi glanced sheepishly over her shoulder at the boy. "Going to bed...what does it look like?"

"Nozo-chan, we already talked about this earlier. Now get into bed." Naruto muttered, "I already told you, it's too cold for you to sleep down there."

"I'm just fine here, thanks." Nozomi insisted, grimacing as a chill ran through her spine. It really *was* cold down here...but she wasn't about to tell HIM that!

"Nozo-chan, I see you shivering...now get up here." Naruto ordered, beginning to lose his patience. Why

did she have to be so stubborn?!

Nozomi just shook her head defiantly and laid it back against the floor. "I'll be alright down here, thank you...now go to sleep."

Naruto heaved an exasperated sigh. "Whatever you say..." He frowned as he quietly got out of bed and crouched down behind the shivering cat girl. '*Why does she tell me she's fine when she's not?*' Sighing inwardly, Naruto reached out and scooped Nozomi gently but firmly into his arms and stood up.

In response, the brunette's eyes flew open, and she screamed. "Uwaaaaaaaah! Naruto-kun, put me down!!"she shrieked, a faint blush rising to her cheeks.

"Ok, if you insist." Naruto quickly turned and laid her on the bed with a chuckle.

"Hey! I said I'd be fine sleeping on the floor!: the cat girl insisted, sitting up quickly.

"Well, I told you earlier that it's too cold down there." Naruto said calmly, putting one hand on her chest and forcing her back down. "You're sleeping up here, and that's that."

Nozomi glowered at the boy as he pulled the covers up over her, and she sighed, shutting her eyes in defeat. "You'd *better* not try anything!" she growled, flashing her sharp, pointed fangs.

Naruto nodded with a laugh. "Of course not, Nozo-chan, I won't!"

"Good!" Nozomi watched as the boy turned out the lights then crawled into bed, making himself comfortable.

A chill ran down the cat girl's spine as their shoulders touched, and she rolled onto her side so she faced the window instead of him. Then, heaving a sigh, she closed her eyes even though she already knew she'd have a difficult time getting any sleep.

"Hee...heehee...!"

"Wha? Naruto-kun?" Nozomi turned a little and her eyes went wide as she saw Naruto holding onto her tail, which had twitched its way onto his chest, and was tickling his neck. "Naruto-kun!" The cat girl's face heated up a little as he reached out and stroked it, starting at the base and tracing her fingers along the tip, holding onto it until it twitched its way out of his grasp.

The blond looked up, then, and laughed, seeing the look on her face. "Don't be mad at ME, kitty, *you're* the one who put you tail on me!" He giggled as he stroked her tail again, this time slower, smirking as the cat girl turned red and shuddered at his touch.

"Naruto-kun! Stop!-" Nozomi ordered, her back going tense and stiff.

"Nozo-chan, just go to sleep." Naruto murmured, frowning as the brunette moved to the edge of the bed in her desperation.

Nozomi tensed up again as his hand brushed the base of her tail again, and she fought to pull it away. "I *can't* fall asleep like this!" she grumbled. "I'll never get any sleep up here...I'm too restless!"

"I can help with that." Naruto grinned, running his fingers over her tail in a pattern of deliberately long strokes.

The cat girl gritted her teeth, not wanting him to see how wonderful that felt. '*Darn, Kumoraku, stop making me so sensitive to his touch!*'

'If I have to suffer being locked up, YOU will suffer too!' Kumoraku's velvety voice sneered.

'Hey! It's not MY fault you have to be locked up! Naruto-kun is containing you, not ME!'

'Maybe so, but you aren't running away or doing anything to stop him, so in a way you ARE to blame...so you'll suffer for it.'

'Man, I really hate you, Kumoraku-bakaneko!'

'And I YOU, Kubota brat.'

Whether it was the doing of her inner demon, or a mere lack of sleep, Nozomi was having a hard time staying alert. The agonizingly wonderful stroking didn't stop, and soon she was unable to stop the purrs that came from deep within her throat.

"Stupid...cat...demon...!" The cat girl growled in annoyance as it got harder and harder to see, and her eyelids drooped.

"See? I told you I'd get you drowsy!" Naruto smirked as the brunette untensed, resting fully into the mattress now. "Are you finally ready for bed, kitty?"

Nozomi opened her mouth to say no, but instead all that came out was a loud yawn, followed by a soft purr.

"I'll take that as a yes." Naruto's smirk widened as he wrapped his arms around the girl's waist, gently pulling her against him in a warm hug from behind.

"Na-Naruto-kun!!" Nozomi's eyes grew to the size of saucers, a deep blush creeping onto her face. "*This* qualifies as trying something!" she hissed. "Let go of me!"

Naruto's grin faded, and an innocent frown appeared on his face. "Nozo-chan, I'm just *hugging* you. There's nothing wrong with that, and you *know* it."

"Just let me go!" Nozomi shrieked, blushing harder as his hold on her tightened, rather than loosened. "Let! Go! Of! Me!" she ordered, kicking backward, her boney heel connecting directly with one of his kneecaps.

Naruto winced at the blow and bit his lip to keep from crying out. "Calm down, Nozo-chan, I'm only

hugging you!!"

"My WAIST." Nozomi corrected him, blushing even harder. "I'm not comfortable with this, Naruto-kun! I don't want to be embraced on a bed like this until after I'm married!"

The blond haired boy paused before answering. "So...if we got married, you'd let me be as affectionate as I wanted to you without putting up a fight?"

"Err, I guess...yeah..." Nozomi said hesitantly, "but...umm...I don't want to marry you, Naruto-kun..."

"WHAT?!" Naruto sweatdropped as the girl's ears went flat, and he lowered his tone. "B-but why not?! Did I do something wrong?" His blue eyes were wide with worry.

"No, I'm just..." Nozomi paused. "Well, I just don't want to marry-"

"What?! Why not?! How can we make this situation work if you don't marry me?!"

"...I don't need a guy to make me feel complete. I guess you could say it's from growing up alone for so many years...I don't really *need anyone* to get along in life..."

Naruto seemed to think about this. "Well, Nozo-chan...I'M a guy, and you *do* need me to help you along in life. My chakra is the only thing that keeps you in control, hehe!" The blond smirked. "I don't think you'll *ever* be alone again."

A drop of sweat ran down the back of Nozomi's head at this statement. "Why not?!" she demanded.

"Because," Naruto replied, "Grandma Tsunade ordered you to stay with me. Heck, she even made you move in with me!" At this, Naruto's smirk gave way to a full blown toothy grin. "I don't know, Nozo-chan..it sounds like she's planning on you being with me for the rest of your life. Meaning *marrying me!*"

He snickered at the look on the girl's face. "I think you were forcefully engaged to me the minute I used the Oni Shoukin jutsu on you...'Cause now you can't leave me no matter WHAT! Even if you fell for another guy, I'd still have to stick to ya like glue to keep Kumoraku contained!" The boy snickered again.

"Just face it, Nozo-chan...you're *stuck* with me. You might as well just marry me since we're already pretty much fated to be together until one of us dies...our bonds can't be severed!"

Nozomi quickly raised her hands to her face to hide the dark blush that was spreading across her face again. "Well, I could always run away..." she muttered to herself. The cat girl inhaled sharply as Naruto tightened his grip on her waist, burying his face in her hair and nuzzling her neck.

"Not gonna happen, Nozo-chan. I won't ever leave you...and even if you DID escape, I'd hunt you down and bring you back, like it or not." Naruto chuckled as the girl's shoulders tensed up. "That right, I heard you."

Nozomi swallowed hard and heaved a sigh. "Ugh...fine...*whatever*." she grumbled, yawning. Naruto's stroking earlier was taking its toll on her, having made her very drowsy. A quick glance at the clock told

her it was nearly 3 a.m. "Naruto-kun..you did it. I'm very tired now, so let's go to sleep."

Right on cue, the brunette yawned loudly and put a hand over her mouth. "So, then...good night, Naruto-k-WAAAH!" Nozomi screamed in shock as the blond suddenly flipped her so she faced him.
"Naruto-kun?!"

Naruto stared at her, the corners of his mouth twitching upward as he noticed how tired she was.
"Nozomi, *will* you marry me?" he said after a brief pause.

Beads of sweat ran down Nozomi's face, and she shut her eyes tight in frustration. Of all times, why did he choose NOW to pop the question?! "Naruto-kun, go to sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning.." the cat girl mumbled as she turned onto her other side again, trying to fall asleep.

Naruto surprised her yet again by repeating his earlier action, turning her to face him again. "Answer me, Nozo-chan! Will you marry me? It's not that hard of a question.."

Nozomi sighed exasperatedly and rolled her eyes upward. "Can't this wait until morning?" she whined.

The spiky haired boy glanced quickly at the clock and chuckled. "It IS morning, the sun just hasn't come up yet!" He snickered at the annoyed look the cat girl threw him. "Just say yes already! You know I'll just keep asking if you tell me no again."

Nozomi groaned and muttered something that was unintelligible under her breath.

"C'mon, Nozo-chan...PLEASE!" Naruto begged in an almost whiny tone.

Nozomi groaned again, and after a few minutes of silence, she opened her eyes and looked at him, a scowl visible on her face. "If I say yes, Naruto-kun, will you *promise* to shut the heck up and let me sleep?"

Naruto nodded quickly in response. "Sure."

"Then.....ohhhhhh FINE!" Nozomi muttered. "I'll marry you...Now let me go to sleep!" The cat girl closed her eyes, only for them to fly open in surprise a moment later as the blond grabbed her hand and put something heavy on her finger, muttering something about a non removal...jutsu?

Confused, Nozomi brought her hand to her face and she gasped sharply. On her ring finger was a small, silver ring with a decent sized diamond on it. "A-a-an engagement ring?!" she sputtered, coloring slightly.

Naruto nodded, looking smug. "Mm hmmm! I remembered you saying the proposal wasn't really official without that, so I went and got it earlier today. Do you like it?"

Nozomi hesitated before nodding slightly, her cheeks pink now. "Yes...it's very pretty.."

Naruto grinned. "I'm glad you think so..cause you won't be able to get it off until our wedding day when it's replaced with the real thing, hehe!"

"Oh, okay..." Nozomi's eyes widened. "Wait!- WHAT?" The cat girl tried to remove the ring from her finger and frowned as it didn't budge. "What the heck is wrong?!" she demanded. "Why won't it come off?!"

"Well, I kinda used a jutsu that won't let you remove it till we're married." Naruto replied sheepishly, swallowing hard as he saw the look on the girl's face; she looked about ready to explode! *'Looks like I'm going to have to calm her down again...'* he thought, sighing as Nozomi began to scream.

"What the?!-- Naruto-kun! That's just wrong! How low can you go?! I should seriously get up and leave NOW, promise or no pro-" Nozomi broke off as she felt the boy's fingers tracing down her long, fuzzy tail again. "Nyaaa?! Naruto-kun, STOP that and *answer* me! How could you do this to me?!"

"It's the only way to deal with your fickle behavior." Naruto said, moving his hands to her ears now and stroking them gently, making little circle patterns in the fur with his thumb. "Now go to sleep. You said you were tired. We'll talk about this later."

Nozomi glared angrily at the boy, her face a faint shade of red as her eyes slowly closed.
"Naruto-kun...you diot...I'm going to...kill you...for this...!"

Naruto merely grinned, hiding the slight nervousness he felt as he continued stroking her ears. He sighed with relief as the girl's breathing grew heavy, mixed in with the purr she only did when she was asleep.

'I'd better get to sleep too,' The blond thought as he watched the cat girl sleep, *'After all, if she's going to try killing me later, I'll need energy to fight her off!'* A devious smirk formed on his face. *'This is a time where it pays to be able to control her chakra...she won't be able to hurt me TOO bad, hehe!'*

Naruto leaned back into his pillow and sighed, yawning loudly. "Night, Nozo-hime."

The only answer he got was a loud purr, and he closed his eyes, a pleased little grin on his face as he slowly slipped into unconsciousness.

Nozomi was going to be his wife. Granted, he'd had to trick her into saying yes, but still...she'd agreed, and he'd hold her to that. Sure, she'd be upset with him for awhile, but she'd get over it in time, and they'd begin to plan their big day together. That special time when they would intertwine their fates together for life. Just when you thought a bond couldn't get any stronger, it would; binding them together for life.

9 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PROLOGUE}

"What the? How did I get here?" Nozomi frowned as she glanced around at her surroundings. She was back in her old village, and all around her people were running in a panic. "Run, take cover!" Shouted a panicked citizen, "There's a demon in the village!"

Nozomi hung her head and sighed softly. Of course they had to be talking about her. *'Well I'll be more than happy to leave...I don't even know what I'm DOING here anyways!'* With a confused shrug of her shoulders, the cat girl turned and headed for the village gates. She stopped and turned, however as she heard a loud, angry growl from behind her.

"I'll **kill** you!"

Nozomi gasped, her golden-yellow eyes wide at the familiarity in the voice. "Naruto-kun?!" She scanned the crowd and soon spotted him.

The blond was surrounded by a thick, bubbling red chakra that was shaped like a fox, his canines twice their normal size, red eyes wild and dilated, filled with fury.

Nozomi watched in shock as the demon possessed boy charged forward, slashing wildly at a shadowy figure with his claws. The cat girl blinked and did a double take as she eyed the shadow. Who was that, and why was Naruto fighting him? Her eyes went wide as Naruto spoke again, his voice deeper, more menacing, Kyuubi having taken over.

"I told you, she's MINE! Keep your cruddy paws off my girl!"

"Naruto-kun!!" Unable to control herself, now overcome with worry and confusion, Nozomi raced forward as fast as she could, calling out. "What are you doing?!"

"Nozo-chan!" The demon possessed boy growled enthusiastically. He stopped attacking the shadow and lunged for the brunette, scooping her into a fierce hug, his sharp claws piercing through her delicate skin.

"Naruto-kun, what are you doing here?" Nozomi hugged the boy back, wincing at the feeling of his claws in her back, "Who is that and why are you trying to kill him?"

"He said he was gonna take you away!" The blond growled, throwing a murderous glare over his shoulder at the shadowed figure, who was drawing nearer. He growled and clenched his teeth tightly, a warning to whoever it was that was shrouded in shadows.

"Don't be silly, Naruto-kun...nobody is gonna take me awa-" Nozomi broke off, staring in surprise as Naruto's eyes rolled upward, and he fell limply against her, his demonic aura fading, and reverted back to his normal form. "Naruto-kun?!" Nozomi sputtered, confused as he failed to answer or even straighten up to look at her. "Naruto-kun!!"

"Don't worry, he's dead. I took care of it with Essence no Jutsu."

"What?!" Nozomi looked up in surprise as she suddenly found herself face to face with the shadowy figure Naruto had been fighting only moments before. "You KILLED him?!?"

The shadow nodded. "Sorry, but he was a danger to us all. A demon. It had to be done."

Nozomi looked down in disbelief at the dead boy in her arms, and her eyes filled with tears that quickly spilled over down her cheeks. "This can't be happening...how could you DO this?!" The cat girl glared up at the shadow, tears still streaming down her face. "I'm a demon too, KILL ME TOO!"

"I could never kill *you*."

"Why NOT?! Nozomi demanded, still crying. "If you're going to kill my lover, you might as well kill me too!" The brunette paused as the figure came closer, and she was able to make out his features somewhat better. "Just who *are* you?!"

"Because, you belong with me...not that scum...and I think you know *exactly* who I am, Nozo-neko-chan..."

Nozomi opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out except for a startled gasp as the shadows on the figure's face seemed to vanish suddenly, and she found herself staring into his cold, cloudy grey eyes..

"Nozomi! Nozomi!!"

Nozomi's eyes flew open as two firm hands shook her shoulder, and she sat up quickly, breathing hard, eyes wild.

"Nozomi...it's ok." The boy shaking her stopped and heaved a relieved sigh. "You were just having a dream."

Dream? Nozomi glanced around at her surroundings, eyes still wide. She was in bed, in the apartment that she and her boyfriend (not to mention fiance, but Nozomi preferred not to think about that), Naruto shared. It was still dark; the clock read about 5:20. The cat girl heaved a shaky sigh and put a hand to her heart, closing her eyes in relief.

"Nozomi, are you ok?"

Nozomi turned to see who had spoken, and her eyes filled with tears as she locked gazes with a wide eyed, concerned looking Naruto. Seeing him, her mind flashed back to the scene where she'd been holding his lifeless body, and the tears in her eyes slowly rolled down her face.

"Nozo-chan, what is it?" Naruto demanded, concern in his eyes as the girl began to cry.

Nozomi just stared at him, still crying silently. It had been a dream. A horrible dream. That was all. A relieved look crossed the cat girl's features, and she threw her arms around the surprised blond, burying her face in his chest as she sobbed quietly.

"Nozomi...?" Naruto just stared at her for a minute before his eyes softened, and he wrapped his arms around the trembling girl comfortingly. "Nozo-chan...you were crying and screaming...are you ok?"

"Y-you were dead...in my arms.." The cat girl sputtered, surprised at the tone of her voice. When had she gone from someone who could talk about anything without any emotion, to someone who put so much emotion behind her words? "I was so scared..."

"It's ok." Naruto's voice shook with emotion as he held her close to him. "I'm here, I'm alive...the nightmare is over now...so please...don't cry Nozo-hime..."

"I can't help it, I was so scared...it seemed so real!" Nozomi wailed, again surprised at how fragile, how *emotional* she sounded. "I-I don't want to go back to sleep..."

"Shh...it's ok. I'm here, calm down." Naruto urged, pulling the girl down with him as he laid back on the bed again, his arm still around her as she kept her face buried in his chest.

"N-Naruto-kun, I can't go back to sleep, I already told you that!" The cat girl shrieked as she sat up quickly.

Naruto yawned and put an arm lightly on her back, pushing her back down. "You don't have to...I just want you to stay with me."

Nozomi nodded, still trembling and heaved a sigh as she leaned back into him, curled up at his side, now resting her head on his arm, one hand clutching firmly to the material of his pajama top.

"Nozo-chan...what else happened in your dream?" Naruto asked curiously, lightly trailing his fingers across her tail.

Nozomi shut her eyes tight to block out the images that had reappeared in her mind, and she cried out. "No!!"

"Talking about it might help you calm down a little.." the blond encouraged.

"...Well I was in my old village, and the citizens were screaming and running, saying a demon was there." Nozomi began after a pause.

Naruto nodded, frowning slightly. Everyone in the Kubota clan had always treated Nozomi like she was nothing but a monster, sent to ruin their lives; hence the reason she'd run away. "Go on..." The spiky haired boy stroked her tail lightly again.

Nozomi blushed faintly as she found herself purring softly. How did Naruto always manage to calm her down to the point where she purred like this?

"Well, I was about to leave when I saw you, possessed by Kyuubi, fighting a shadowed figure...I called you and you ran and hugged me so painfully you could've killed me." The cat girl winced at the memory of Naruto's claws in her back. It was hard to believe she'd only dreamed of being in such pain; it'd felt so real!

"When I asked you what you were doing, you said someone was trying to take me away from you, but before you could explain what you meant, that shadow used the extraction jutsu on you, and you..."
Nozomi broke off, unable to finish as tears welled up in her eyes again.

"That does sound like an awful dream...I'm sorry you had it.." Naruto stopped stroking the girl's tail and hugged her waist loosely. A thoughtful look appeared on his face. "Hmmm...I wonder who -or what- that shadow was supposed to be..."

"I don't know...but I saw his eyes, I've seen them before, I'm positive...and he called me "Nozo-neko-chan"...that's what Suoh-kun used to call me when I still lived with the Kubota clan.."

Naruto's jaw clenched tightly at this name. Suoh Maekawa. *'That's the guy that hurt Nozo-chan so badly...I don't know him personally, but I hate him for what he did to her...He should consider himself lucky we've never met- I'd make him PAY!'*

"It's alright, Nozo-chan." the blond said softly, yawning again. "It was only a dream, and that will never happen...even if I DID meet that person from your dream I'd WIN! I promise."

Nozomi nodded with a grin, but then her grin faded as he yawned, and she sighed, feeling guilty.
"Naruto-kun, if you're tired you can go back to sleep...I'll be ok."

"Are you sure?" Naruto asked, holding back another yawn. "I don't want to leave you awake by yourself if you're scared."

The brunette nodded, though the last thing she wanted was to be awake alone. "I'll be fine." She sat up and turned to him, kissing him lightly on the lips. "Now go back to sleep, Naruto-kun."

Naruto's eyes widened and his face colored slightly at her embrace, but he nodded. "Ok...goodnight, Nozo-hime. I'll see you in a few hours." The boy paused as he saw her shudder slightly. "In the meantime..." he grabbed her arm and pulled her back down gently, bringing her to lay back against him once more. "You can stay there if it helps calm you."

"...Thank you." Nozomi blushed slightly.

"Anything for you, you're my kitty." Naruto grinned and closed his eyes, letting his head sink back into his pillow.

A few minutes later, Nozomi realized he was, indeed asleep, as the petting of her tail had stopped. She sighed, frowning and nuzzled into him, her face buried in his side as she listened to his deep, even breathing.

'Why did I have that dream?...And why was Suoh-kun trying to make me go with him?' The cat girl groaned softly. 'Why did I even dream about him? I'm over that guy, right?...I mean, I'm not exactly thrilled about HOW the engagement happened...but I'm getting married to Naruto-kun...so why would I dream about Suoh-kun NOW?...I don't know...but I'm getting a bad feeling, for some reason...'

10 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PART 1}

Nozomi rubbed her eyes and yawned. *'I hardly got ANY sleep.'* she frowned as she entered the Hokage Tower and started down the hall, heading for Tsunade's office. *'Oh well...at least Naruto-kun seemed to have energy...'* The cat girl smiled a little at this. Bright eyed and bushy tailed. That was the only way to describe the way her blond haired companion had been, what with the enthusiastic "MORNING" he'd bellowed in greeting (not to mention the tackle hug she'd received upon getting out of bed).

That, and -Nozomi smirked evilly- it would be the perfect way to describe him once she put her new jutsu to effect. Too scared to go back to sleep right away, for fear that her nightmare would return, the girl had stayed up perfecting the technique. It would be her ultimate revenge on Naruto (who had tricked her into agreeing to marry him, and wearing a ring that wouldn't come off until the wedding day). *'Now I just need to figure out when the best time is to use it on him.'* The brunette thought to herself. She snapped out of her thoughts as she found herself standing outside the door to the very office she'd been seeking out and sighed inwardly. *'Oh well, that's not important now...I'll figure it out later.'* she decided as she knocked loudly on the door. "Hello...Tsunade-sama?"

A brief pause followed before she heard a loud, annoyed sounding "Yes?"

'Uh oh..I must've caught her drinking...again...Oops..' A drop of sweat rolled down the back of Nozomi's head as she answered, "Um...it's Nozomi. Can I come in?"

"...Yeah...come in." The still annoyed sounding female's voice grumbled after a moment's pause.

Nozomi opened the door and walked in somewhat timidly. "Sorry for intruding on you like this, Tsunade-sama." she apologized, grimacing at the name. She *never* used such polite terms! Normally she didn't even use Tsunade's name, just called her an old hag...cause that's what she was. However, when there was something you wanted -and indeed Nozomi wanted something from Tsunade-, the best way to get it was by being polite; no matter how little respect you held for the person.

Tsunade rolled her eyes, not a stranger to the cat girl's sugar coated tactics. "Just skip the phony flattery, Nozomi, and tell me what it is that you want...save us some pain."

"Wow, you're sharp for a woman your age," Nozomi muttered, smiling sheepishly, "Nothing gets by you."

"What IS it, Nozomi?" Tsunade demanded, looking even less pleased at having her age mentioned. Nozomi paused briefly, taking a deep breath. "It's about the jutsu Naruto-kun used on me...well I heard that somebody delivered both those scrolls to you....and I was wondering if you could tell me what that person looked like."

"Sorry, but that information is classified." Tsunade said in a bored tone. "Now if that's it, you can le-"

"Just answer me this...if it was a boy...did he look like Naruto-kun at all?" Nozomi interrupted quickly, too determined to give up.

Tsunade had been about to tell her to get out, but the cat girl's words had caught her off guard. "It's possible that he looked like Naruto...what's it to you?"

"Well if he did, I think I know who your visitor was," Nozomi began, "and I want to pay him a visit myself, to see if he's had a change of heart...it isn't like him to want to save me, cause...you see, if I'm correct, your visitor was the guy from my past that treated me the worst, Suoh Maekawa."

"So, that's what this is about, then." Tsunade smirked, finally understanding.

"Yes..." Nozomi nodded and bowed as politely as she could. "I would like your permission to go back and see him for a few days."

"Well," Tsunade began, "I don't see why not..." she paused. "This isn't really an actual mission either, so Sakura and Sai don't really need to go unless you want them to."

"Oh no, thanks." Nozomi heaved a sigh of relief. Sakura had always annoyed her with her overly optimistic, never say die attitude, and her insane hard to understand need to interfere in the cat girl's love life.

Sai...Nozomi rolled her eyes at the thought of cell 7's newest member. He annoyed the heck out of her! Whether it was his fake smiles, the lack of emotions, or perverted remarks about Naruto that annoyed her, she wasn't sure. There was just something about Sai in general that bugged her.

"Thank you, Tsunade-sama, I'll leave immediately." Nozomi bowed again and turned to leave. "I'll be gone no more than 5, 6 days tops."

"Nozomi, I do have one request of you." Tsunade spoke up, stopping the girl in her tracks.

"Yes?" The cat girl glanced over her shoulder curiously.

"Actually take Naruto with you, don't make him track you."

Nozomi's face went pale hearing this, and one of her cat ears twitched nervously. "Take Naruto-kun?"

"Yes." Tsunade folded her arms across her chest. "There are three reasons. Obviously you can't keep your demon contained that long alone...and besides that, Naruto would realize you were gone and come after you so why not take him along and save yourself the effort of running like a coward?"

Nozomi growled quietly and tried to ignore that "coward" remark. "The third reason is...?" She sweatdropped as the older woman leaned forward and smirked at her. "What?!"

"Nozomi, you're leaving for about a week...to go and see the guy you used to like. Do you *honestly* think Naruto won't get jealous when he finds out, and come to check up on you?"

"Well, I was gonna explain the situation to him before I left..." Nozomi mumbled, frowning. "He'll understand."

"Of course he will understand...every detail. Because the only way you're going is if he goes with you."
Tsunade smirked. "Just behave, and don't do anything stupid that would make him call off the engagement."

'Engagement?!' Nozomi wanted to scream. *'How does SHE know about THAT?!'*

"Now then, you'd best get going and pack."

Nozomi nodded hastily. "Y-yes, ma'am! I'll leave immediately once I'm packed."

The cat girl shrieked shrilly as she felt Tsunade's hand clamp onto her her tail roughly. "Naruto, too." the older woman said firmly.

"B-but, I can handle mys-" Nozomi broke off and shrieked again, louder as Tsunade squeezed her tail tighter than before.

"Nozomi, that is NOT a suggestion. I'm telling you to take him with you. That's an ORDER from the 5th Hokage! You got it?!"

Nozomi winced at her tail being crushed in the older woman's hand, and nodded reluctantly.
"....Understood."

The blonde haired woman gave a sly smile and let go of the cat girl's tail. "Very good...now out with you! I'm a very busy woman, you know!"

"Yeah, I know!" Nozomi rubbed her tail, whimpering softly before glaring at Tsunade and heading for the door. "Enjoy getting drunk on sake, old hag." Then, before the angered Hokage could say or do anything, the brunette walked out, slamming the door shut with more force than was needed, grumbling under her breath. She had no idea that in the next day or so, she'd be thankful to have Naruto along...

"So, tell me again what's going on?" Naruto said as he watched Nozomi pack, already having finished himself.

Nozomi gave an exasperated sigh and looked up from her packing. "Oy, Naruto-kun, you can be so slow, I swear...!" The brunette paused. "I already told you. We're going back to my visit my clan for a few days or so."

"I know, you already told me that," Naruto replied, scratching the back of his head in confusion, "but I don't understand *why* we're going...I thought you hated those people!"

Nozomi rolled her eyes. "I do...but there's obviously at least one person there who doesn't hate ME, if he brought the clan's jutsus to the old hag..."

Naruto just stared at the girl. "Well, ok...but how are you gonna find-" The blond's eyes widened

suddenly and he pointed at Nozomi accusingly. "Hey, wait! You know who it is, don't you?!"

A drop of sweat slid down the brunette's head as she held up her hands in protest. "Well, not really...I just...more like I have a hunch...no need to get so worked up, Naruto-kun...geez...ehe..."

"Nozo-chan, who do you think it is?"

Nozomi didn't say anything as she looked away. If her hunch was correct, Naruto wouldn't be happy about who it was, and he might even try to prevent her from going to meet him!

"Nozo-chan, tell me!" Naruto whined.

Nozomi still said nothing as she quickly went back to her packing, avoiding his eyes.

"Nozo-chan, why won't you *tell* me?!" The blond groaned, seeing that he wasn't going to get any answers. He'd have to guess. Naruto frowned as he racked his brains for an idea. "It's not that...Suoh-what's-his-face guy, is it?"

Nozomi froze. *'Man, he's a good guesser!'* she thought, eyes wide. *'I can't tell him he's right though...he'd go through the roof if he thought my past crush/abuser had actually done something to rescue me!...What's worse...he'd wanna know WHY, and I don't even know the answer to that!...I need a distraction...but what?'* It was then that her gaze landed on the two bathing suits next to her, and a devious smirk appeared on the cat girl's face. *'I know what to do...'*

"Hey, Naruto-kun...which of these do you think would look better on me?" She asked, picking the swimsuits up (one yellow, one green), and held them to her body in a flirty manner. *'PLEASE let this distract him!'* The brunette thought desperately, blushing fiercely.

"What?" Naruto's face turned a light shade of red at the question, and he swallowed hard, taking a step back. "Um...well...I...don't know....you can decide, heh..." he stammered.

Nozomi smirked, pleased her distraction was working. "Well...I could try them on and you could tell me which one you like best." she offered, stepping closer, an innocent cat like grin on her face.

"What?!" Naruto took several steps back and blushed harder, looking away. "Um, I mean you...err...you should be able to decide that for yourself, shouldn't you?"

"But," Nozomi pressed, allowing a hint of sadness into her eyes, "I want you to help me choose..."

Naruto didn't say anything as he quickly turned his back to her to hide the nosebleed that was coming on.

After a minute or two, Nozomi gave up, smirking secretly to herself as she spoke sadly. "Oh...I get it...you don't mind having me close to you at night, but you're too embarrassed to see me in a swimsuit...I'm sorry...I'll get somebody else's help." She turned and began to walk back over to her bag to resume packing, pleased her distraction had worked. "....Maybe old man Kakashi-baka or the Toad Sage could help me figure it out..."

The cat girl snickered softly to herself. Perfect, now Naruto would be so stunned he wouldn't say another word, and she wouldn't have to deal with him for awhile.

Naruto's eyes bulged at this. Kakashi? Jiraiya?! She was going to model...for THEM?! 'No WAY! If she's gonna be seen in those by ANYBODY it's gonna be ME!'

"No, Nozo-chan." The blond stepped forward and pulled Nozomi into a hug (much to her surprise, not to mention dismay). "You have it all wrong...I'm not embarrassed about seeing you in your swimsuit...you just surprised me...that wasn't what I was expecting you to say...I actually can't wait to se--err..." The boy broke off and blushed, seeing how red the cat girl's face had gotten at that last comment. "I-I-I mean...the green one. I think it would look good on you...so...uhh.." Naruto sweatdropped slightly.

"What's all this got to do with visiting your clan, anyways?"

"Th-there's a beach nearby." Nozomi explained, discretely pulling out of his arms. "I thought if we can wrap this up quickly, maybe we could spend some time there together...since we won't be expected back for at least 6 days. So make sure to pack your swimming trunks." She winked at the boy.

Naruto just nodded, blushing faintly. Something about the tone she'd used when she'd said that made him feel...awkward. "Uh...ok." He reached into his storage containers under the bed and pulled out a pair of shorts, which he hastily shoved into his bag. "Well then, if you're ready, let's get going."

"Right." Nozomi nodded, pleased that he seemed to have forgotten their original discussion and crammed the swim suit into her backpack. Then she threw the straps over her shoulder and grinned at him. "Ready."

Naruto nodded and held the door to the apartment open for her, locking it behind him once she'd walked out. The two walked until they reached the village gates. Then Naruto stopped and looked at the girl beside him. "You'll have to lead the way now, Nozo-chan, 'cause I don't know which way it is from here."

Nozomi nodded and took a step forward. "Alright then, follow me." The cat girl jumped and glanced back in confusion as Naruto grabbed her hand, intertwining his fingers with hers. "Naruto-kun?"

The blond hair boy grinned and squeezed her hand slightly. "What is it, Nozo-chan?"

"Why're you holding my hand like that?" Nozomi asked quietly.

"Oh, that?" Naruto grinned looking somewhat mischievous. "I just want to make sure that that Suoh-what's-his-name jerk knows you're taken." The boy smiled and gave a slight tug on her hand, drawing her closer. "I don't want that guy trying to steal you away from me...you're *my* fiancée."

Nozomi blushed and looked away. "...Naruto-kun, this is *Suoh* we're talking about; a guy who nearly killed me when we were ten...If he didn't like me that way then, I doubt he will NOW. You don't have to be so protective."

Naruto nodded, but he made no move to let go of her hand

"Umm...Naruto-kun...?" Nozomi stammered, her blush deepening.

"What?" Naruto followed her gaze down to their hands and he frowned. "Geez, Nozomi...is it really that big of a crime for guy to want to hold his girlfriend's hand?"

Nozomi glanced away as a drop of sweat trickled down her cheek. Ok...Maybe she WAS overreacting a little. "No...I..guess not. Sorry."

Naruto smiled and lifted their hands together to kiss hers lightly. "It's ok, Nozo-hime."

Nozomi smiled back before sighing softly. *'Why DO I freak over the slightest touch from him? I know I'm still unhappy with him for tricking me into getting engaged the way he did..but still...I shouldn't freak out from one touch.'* The cat girl was so lost in thought, she failed to see the concerned look Naruto was giving her, nor did she notice that he'd let go of her hand and was putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Nozo-chan...you know I'm here if you need to talk." The blond said quietly. "Right?"

"Mmmhmm." Nozomi nodded, only vaguely hearing him, still lost in thought.

"Hey, Nozo-chan!"

Nozomi blinked, snapping out of her thoughts for the moment and turned to look at the boy beside her. "Yes?"

"You know," Naruto grinned, glad to finally have her attention, "you look really cute when you're lost in thought like that."

"Kyaa! Naruto-kun!!" Nozomi looked away as her face turned a faint shade of red. "That's not true, baka.."

Naruto's grin widened at this. "Oh yes it is...you look VERY cute!"

"Naruto-kun, drop it!" Nozomi whimpered, unable to face him. She **hated** it when he said things like that, because she ALWAYS blushed! The cat girl lowered her head in an effort to hide her face like she always did as they walked.

Naruto, guessing she must be blushing pretty badly couldn't help but snicker quietly under his breath.

"Heh, well what do you know, it hasn't changed a bit." Nozomi smirked as she glanced around her old hometown. Her village. There was the alley where she'd so often been chased and cornered by all the village children, and beaten mercilessly. Not far ahead was the marketplace where she had often stolen fish and ramen cups- the only substances that had kept her alive, since the owners of the place refused to sell to a "Kubota demon".

"So, this is where you grew up, huh?" Naruto said as he scanned the village.

Nozomi nodded. "Yeah...I know it's not that glamorous...you don't have to pretend to think so."

Naruto blinked. "I'm not pretending anything...I was just asking to say...something." he frowned. "It's been too quiet, you hardly said anything the rest of the trip here..."

"Oh..." Nozomi laughed sheepishly. She'd been lost in thought most of the trip here, so it HAD been a quiet walk. '*Poor Naruto-kun...he's not used to such silence...*' she thought, laughing quietly. Naruto wasn't one who was made for quiet, he usually needed some kind of conversation going, being the loud mouth he was.

The cat girl glanced up at the sky and frowned, seeing it was already late. It would be dark within the next hour. "Hey, Naruto-kun, let's camp out in the forest for now and we'll go searching tomorrow, ok?" she suggested. "It's already pretty late...I forgot that the journey here was at least a day's walk..heh."

"Hmmm...ok. Let's go then." Naruto grinned. "Let's go find a place then."

Nozomi nodded and they quietly left the village, unnoticed by anyone.

"Hmmm, this seems pretty good." Nozomi grinned as she glanced around the spot they'd chosen. It was small and circular, surrounded by a thick cluster of trees that made the clearing all the harder to find unless you knew what to look for.

Naruto walked over and sat down against one of the tree trunks, heaving a soft little sigh. "C'mon, Nozo-chan...sit down." he urged grinning at the cat girl.

Nozomi nodded, placing her backpack on the grass and sat down beside Naruto, which seemed not enough for him and he pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms loosely around her waist.

"Naruto-kun!" The cat girl blushed and frantically tried to pull out of his grip. "Let me go, baka!"

"Why should I?" Naruto grinned and hugged her tightly, resting his head on her shoulder, eyes closed in contentment. "You can't lie and tell me you're not comfortable like this, Nozo-chan...well you could try but you're purring so I wouldn't believe you."

The blush on Nozomi's face darkened and she sweatdropped. '*Purring?? When did I start purring?!*'

"Uhh...well...I guess I'm comfortable...but..." The cat girl trailed off, looking for an excuse to be able to split them apart. Then she had it! "Oh! We need to eat dinner! So you'll have to let me down, hehe."

Naruto stared at her reluctantly. "Aww do we have to eat right now? I wanna stay like this!" He hugged her tighter, nuzzling her neck with his nose. He stayed like that, to the cat girl's dismay, for about 5 minutes (it felt like an hour to her) before he leaned back and let go, groaning as his stomach growled.

"Alright, fine...let's eat!"

Nozomi nodded with a grin and quickly got up, relieved to be freed from his arms and lap. "Phew..." she sighed.

"Hey," Naruto said with a teasing grin, "You should at least try to get used to being in my lap and all that."

"...And just WHY is that?" Nozomi demanded with a red face.

"Just cause," Naruto grinned with his teeth, "Once we're married I'm not letting you go!"

".....Oh....." Nozomi's blush darkened. "Um...you'll have to at some point...once you become Hokage."

"Oh, I'm sure I can find a way to hold on to you and get my work done...don't forget who it is you're talking to." Naruto smirked.

A drop of sweat ran down the back of the cat girl's head. As much as she hated to admit it, Naruto had a point there. He had a reputation as the number one unpredictable ninja for being able to succeed at whatever he put his mind to, usually in quite unlikely ways. Usually anyone who underestimated him had it rubbed in their face in the end. Luck just always seemed to be on Naruto's side for some reason, and this time would most likely not be any exception.

"Yeah, right...whatever you say, Naruto-kun." Nozomi turned away and began rummaging through her backpack.

"Well, I could always just make it an order that you stay in my office with me while I work." Naruto smirked mischievously. "You might have to, you know, since you have that 10 foot radius rule with me. Hehehe!"

Nozomi groaned. Why did he always have to be right? "Ughh...whatever!" The cat girl growled and went back to digging through her backpack. A few minutes later she found what she was looking for and grinned triumphantly as she held up two plastic cups of pre-made ramen for Naruto to see. "Dinner time!"

Naruto's mouth watered, seeing the noodle cups, and he grinned. "Don't mind if I do!" he said, reaching out for one of the cups.

Nozomi smirked and held it out of his reach. "Ah, ah, ahhhhhhhhhh!"

"Aww, c'mon, Nozo-chan, that's not fair! Why can't I have one?" Naruto whined. "You don't need two all to yourself, do you?!"

Nozomi didn't speak; her smirk just widened.

"Nozomiii!!"

The cat girl snickered. "First of all, what do you say?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" Naruto looked caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

Nozomi just continued to stare at him smugly. "C'mon, Naruto-kun...I know you didn't remember to pack any food, I watched everything you put in your bag...If I hadn't made these we wouldn't have anything for dinner...now what do you say to me for remembering?"

"Ohh..." Naruto gave a sheepish little grin. "Uhh...thanks, Nozo-chan...you're a life saver."

There was a pause as the boy's stomach growled loudly, and Nozomi giggled. "Ok, fine...I guess you can have this now." The cat girl snickered and handed him one of the ramen cups.

"Yaaaay!! Thanks, Nozo-chan!" Naruto grinned as he tore the lid off and dug in. "Hey! These containers keep the ramen hot?" he asked, surprised at the steam that flew up into the air.

Nozomi nodded. "They're specially made to keep the heat in." she said with a smile. "I didn't think we'd want cold noodles so I packed the ramen in them."

"You're the best Nozo-chan!" Naruto grinned, surprising the girl as he put down his ramen container just long enough to hug her warmly.

Nozomi heaved a soft sigh and hugged him back lightly. *'I guess it's true what they say- the way to a man's heart IS through his stomach!'* She thought with a laugh. "It's no problem, Naruto-kun...now eat before it gets cold, please, or all my hard work will have been in vain!"

She didn't have to tell Naruto twice. The boy dug into the ramen, slurping noodles like crazy, and didn't stop until his container was completely empty. Nozomi just stared at him in shock, ignoring her half finish ramen container. "I'll never understand how you're able to finish so fast!"

"Haha, that's just because I love ramen so much!" the blond grinned. "Besides, you eat pretty quick too when you want to!"

Nozomi snickered. "Maybe, but not half as fast as YOU!" she gave a small sigh and went back to eating her noodles, allowing a pleased purr to escape her as the sweet flavor of the noodles invaded her mouth.

"Does kitty like her ramen?" Naruto asked in a teasing voice. Nozomi nearly whacked him over the head for that one, but she managed to hold herself back. *'Later.'* she promised herself, *'Later you can get him with your new jutsu...but not now...just grin and bear it!'*

"..Yes, I do." she said, forcing a grin onto her face.

Naruto looked surprised by her reaction, having expected her to lash out or hit him for calling her "kitty", but didn't say anything, thankful not to have a lump on his head from her fist.

Nozomi continued eating, ignoring him. A few minutes later, it came to her attention that he was watching her intently, a look of longing on his face, and she sighed. "Close your eyes, Naruto-kun."

"Huh? Ok..." Naruto closed his eyes as he'd been told, and pursed his lips. *'Is she actually gonna kiss me? Did she figure out that's what I was thinking about just now?...And she's not mad?!*'

Nozomi sighed and rolled her eyes. "Open wide, Naruto-kun."

The blond nearly had a heart attack at this. *'TONGUE now?! Who are you and what have you done with Nozo-chan?!*' He hesitated before opening his mouth.

Heaving another sigh, Nozomi took her chopsticks, scooped up a good amount of ramen noodles and crammed them into the boy's mouth. In response, he inhaled sharply, choking. *'Ramen?! Awww...I thought.....geez, I should've known better, I guess...this is Nozomi...she wouldn't kiss me like THAT...or even kiss me of her own free will...'*

"Happy now?" Nozomi muttered, folding her arms across her chest and smirking slightly. She'd never seen him look so surprised! Obviously ramen hadn't been what he'd expected...What HAD he expected then?! The cat girl blushed. *'I'll bet I know...'*

"Uhh...thanks, Nozo-chan." Naruto said once he'd swallowed the noodles, smiling sheepishly. *'Man, why couldn't she have kissed me?? Oh well...I'll get her to before this trip's over..'*

Nozomi smiled back, feeling awkward. "No problem..." When she was finished eating, the cat girl grabbed both containers, put the lids back on them and crammed them into her bag again. Then she looked at Naruto with a small smile. "Well...we should get to sleep...morning comes quickly, and we're gonna be busy tomorrow...let's turn in for the night."

The blond boy nodded his head in agreement and reached into his back pack, pulling out a rolled up sleeping bag. Nozomi did the same and laid hers close by the small campfire they'd built. Then she crawled in and zipped it up to her chin. "Mmm...it's cold outside but not in here." she commented, heaving a contented sigh.

"Yeah, it is." Naruto agreed from his sleeping bag next to hers. He grinned and looked up at the sky where the stars were already starting to dot the sky.

"It's kind of funny." Nozomi remarked softly.

"Hmmm?" Naruto turned so he was on his side, facing the brunette. "What is?"

"I remember laying in my bed when I was little, watching the stars by myself...I remember in particular that whenever I would see a shooting star, I would wish to be as free as that star itself...that was always what I would think about. Being free and starting over, with people who knew nothing about me or my demon...starting in a place where I wouldn't be hated right off the bat."

The girl turned now and allowed herself to face Naruto, exposing the tears in her eyes. "I remember wishing I could just have one friend, even if they were afraid of me, just so I wouldn't be alone..."

"Hey.." Naruto smiled and gently reached his hand out, wiping the tears from her face. "You don't have

to think about those things anymore...you're not alone, I'm here with you, and I'll never leave you."

"I know..." Nozomi said softly, trying to stop crying.

"Shhh..just don't think about it...I'm here with you now." Naruto leaned in slowly, kissing her lightly on the lips, then pulled back just as slowly. *'Darn it...she still didn't kiss me back!'* he thought with a frown. *'Oh well...I'll get her to kiss me by the end of this trip! I'm not gonna give up!'*

Nozomi looked at him, blushing, despite the tears that were still rolling down her face. "You idiot.."

"What?!" Naruto looked at the girl in shock. "What'd I do?!"

The cat girl sniffled and gave a small smirk. "I'm not crying because of the memories..." she paused. "I'm crying because I'm happy...I'm no longer alone...that's something I never thought I'd be able to say." she sighed happily. "I much prefer watching the stars with you than alone like I did when I was a kid...thanks for not leaving me, even when my temper was awful."

Naruto just stared at the girl for a minute, surprise written all over his face. "Nozo-chan..." his eyes softened. "I could never leave you, no matter how mean you've been in the past...you're my treasure, Nozo-hime.....my kitty." With a grin, he reached out and tapped the tip of one of the brunette's cat ear's, making it twitch ever so slightly.

The cat girl giggled. "Thanks, Naruto-kun..." she yawned. "I guess it's time for sleep now, huh?"

The blond next to her nodded, also yawning. "Yeah...let's turn in for now....Good night, Nozo-hime...I'll see you in the morning."

Nozomi's face turned a light shade of red as she answered, "Night, Naruto-kou."

'Prince Naruto?!' The blond thought, stunned.

Nozomi giggled slightly at the bewildered look on the his face before closing her eyes and inhaling deeply. A few minutes later she was fast asleep, her even breathing mixed in with the purr she did whenever she was in a deep sleep.

Naruto lay wide awake staring at the starry sky. *'I agree with you, Nozo-chan...it's much nicer to watch the stars with someone at your side...you're not the only one who wished on a shooting star when you were little...hehe, who'd have thought after all these years our dream would come true?'* The blond grinned to himself and closed his eyes to get some much needed sleep.

Not even 10 minutes later, he too was fast asleep, breathing deeply, his facial expression one that can only be described as purely content.

Suddenly, Nozomi sat up straight a hand on her heart, eyes wild. Only when she saw that she was in the forest, with Naruto asleep at her side did she allow herself to breathe. *'It was...a dream...again...yes, another horrible dream...'*

The brunette heaved a sigh and unzipped her sleeping bag so she could sit up. *'What should I do?...Should I wake Naruto-kun?....No...he's sleeping too peacefully...I could never disturb him without feeling guilty...'*

She sighed and absentmindedly ran her hand through the boy's hair in a soothing, massaging kind of behavior. The blond smiled in his sleep, which made her wonder if he was fully asleep yet, but she didn't bother to ask.

This dream had been almost as horrible as the one she'd had the night before. Like the last dream, she'd been wandering in her old village, trying to figure out how she'd gotten there.

Then suddenly the scenery had changed, and she'd found herself at the beach. She hadn't been the only one there. Naruto, as well as the grey eyed shadow figure from her last dream had been there, too. As soon as they'd seen her, the shadowy figure ran up to Nozomi, and kissed her square on the mouth, taking her breath away. This had enraged Naruto, calling forth Kyuubi, and he had challenged the shadow to a fight- winner take all.

Next thing Nozomi knew, she was watching one of the fiercest fights she'd ever seen, each of the contestants putting up their best fight, Naruto calling up his demon chakra, the shadow attacking with an ice jutsu. Then, suddenly the shadow uttered a phrase and was gone, vanished. As Nozomi had stood there, trying to figure out where he'd gone, the figure had reappeared behind Naruto, and delivered quite a beating; good enough to knock him unconscious anyway!

What had happened next was the worst part, as suddenly unable to move, almost like she was changed down, Nozomi had been forced to watch as weights were tied onto Naruto's body, and he was hurled deep into the ocean. "There, that should get rid of the competition." the shadow had muttered.

Then came the part Nozomi really had been frightened by. The shadow had teleported, appearing right behind her, and grabbed her shoulders, turning her to face him. "You're so much better off with me, Nozo-neko-chan...I could actually make you happy...oh well...I'll see you tomorrow." Then, just like that, he had vanished again, after allowing her one more look into his dark, cloudy grey eyes.

Nozomi shuddered, still remembering how his icy hands had felt on her skin. What did it all mean?

Though she was still trembling with fear, the cat girl laid back down in her sleeping bag and closed her eyes to try and get some sleep. However, try as she may, though she tossed and turned, nothing could get her to sleep. She was still too worked up over her dream to be able to rest.

'Why am I having such awful dreams?!...I wish I knew...and what's worse...why does it feel like they're trying to tell me that something's going to happen?'

11 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PART 2}

"Nozomi? Nozomi!"

"Huh...nya?" Nozomi yawned and opened her eyes, staring drowsily into Naruto's eyes. "Naruto-kun?"
The cat girl yawned again and arched her back, stretching a little. "Is it morning already?"

"Yep!" Naruto smiled as he watched the girl. She was so cat-like, from the purr she often did, to the way she stretched on all fours when waking up...to...well...there was too many things to list. He frowned as he saw the look in her eyes. "Nozo-chan...you look really tired. Did you not get enough sleep?"

Nozomi just smiled and shook her head slowly. "No, I'm fine...I got plenty of sleep..." she put a hand over her mouth as she yawned loudly, and sweatdropped. "Eheh....soo anyways, let's get up and get going already, shall we?"

Naruto gave her a skeptical look but nodded after a moment, deciding she was fine. "Ok, let's pack and get going then." he grinned as he went to work rolling up his sleeping bag and cramming it into his bag.

Nozomi yawned loudly as she unzipped her sleeping bag and crawled out, proceeding to roll it up as well. Naruto had been right. She hadn't gotten enough sleep, thanks to that stupid nightmare she'd had. Of course she wasn't gonna tell HIM that she hadn't slept well, or else she'd have to tell him why she'd been awake so long, and she wasn't in the mood to discuss her latest dream. The cat girl smirked to herself.

Despite how scared she'd felt, she'd made use of her time before falling asleep, having tested her newest jutsu on Naruto. To her satisfaction, it had worked, and she had undone it quickly as the boy had begun to stir. A grin spread on Nozomi's face. *'Now that I know it works, all I have to do is find the right time to use it, and then....heheheheeee!!'*

Almost as if he sensed what she was thinking about, Naruto turned and looked at the cat girl.
"Nozo-chan? You ok?"

Nozomi jumped, snapping out of her thoughts, and gave a hasty nod. "Of course, I'm fine, hehehe!" she said quickly.

Naruto frowned but nodded his head in response. "If you say so...you still look tired to me...you sure you don't want to sleep a little longer?"

Nozomi quickly shook her head. "N-no thanks!...I may still be tired...but...come on, my sleeping bag's already been put away." She motioned to her bag where the rolled up sleeping bag had been crammed in. "How else would I sleep?"

A drop of sweat slid down the back of her head as a smirk appeared on Naruto's face, and she gulped, moving away. "Wh-what are you staring at me like that for?"

Naruto just stared at her, a smirk on his face. "You said you were still tired...it doesn't matter if you don't have a sleeping bag..." He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her with him as he leaned against a tree.

"Naruto-kun? What are you doing?!" Nozomi demanded, blushing as she found herself sitting against the boy, her back against his chest like a pillow. "Let me up!" she ordered, starting to sit up.

"Ah ah ahhh.." Naruto smiled, grabbing her arm and pulling her back down again, this time positioning his legs around her tightly so she couldn't get up. "You said you were still tired, and it's early still...take a nap."

"HERE?!" Nozomi shrieked, blushing wildly.

Her blond haired companion smiled and nodded, shrugging his shoulders. "Why not? I don't mind...I love having you close like this."

The blush on Nozomi's face darkened and she sweatdropped. "...Naruto-kun, I'm tired, but I can handle losing a little sleep...we need to get into town and get searching for...whoever it may be that brought those jutsu's to us. So c'mon, let me up." The cat girl started to sit up and shrieked as not only did Naruto's hold on her with his legs tighten, but his arms snaked themselves around her waist, pulling her back.

"Nozo-chan, we have 6 days. Take it easy and relax a little...or I'll FORCE you to relax." A mischievous grin appeared on the boy's face as he tapped one of the cat girl's ears. "You know I *can*, kitty."

Nozomi sweatdropped and swallowed hard, sighing. *'I could just say no again...but I kinda have a feeling by the sound of things that if I DID, he'd just pet me until I was fell asleep...man, why'd I end up with the persistent one?!'* The cat girl sighed again and rolled her eyes. "Ok, FINE...but only for a little while."

Naruto grinned and hugged her waist slightly tighter, resting his chin on her shoulder. "Giving in are we? That doesn't sound like the Nozo-hime I know." he teased.

Nozomi blushed at hearing his nickname for her, grateful he couldn't see her face. "For the time being. Only on this subject though, and just this once...because I know what you'll do if I say no."

"Ahhh...very wise," Naruto grinned, flashing his pearly white teeth at the girl. "but I'm still gonna pet your ears."

Nozomi's eyes widened and she groaned. "WHY?!" she demanded, turning her head to scowl at him.

"Because...they're so soft!" Naruto exclaimed with a grin, kissing her on the cheek. "Oh c'mon, you know you like it."

A light shade of red colored the cat girl's face and she looked away. "I don't like being treated like a cat...I'm a human for crying out loud!"

"No, you're a cat girl." Naruto pointed out with a smile. "A cat and a girl...cat girl." His smile widened and he gave her waist a squeeze. "MY cat girl. My cat, my girl. See?"

Nozomi's face flushed to a darker shade of red as she sweatdropped. "I guess...but why do you have to PET me?"

"Because, it's one of the ways I can show I care, and it calms you down too." Naruto grinned. "Besides that, I know you like it...you're just too embarrassed to admit it because you think that'll make you sound even more like a cat." The boy paused and laughed as Nozomi's shoulders tensed up. "Am I right?"

The brunette growled and muttered something he couldn't understand.

"Nozo-chan," Naruto began, "I know you're embarrassed of your cat like quirks...but I really like them...they're what make you YOU...please don't get upset and try to hide those parts of yourself from me." The boy paused. "I want to know everything about you...and I want to help you know all about me, too. Please...for me...try to be yourself."

Nozomi heaved a deep sigh and nodded. ".....I'll try....fine...just....don't laugh. Please. There's more cat like qualities to me than I've ever let you see...I swear...you laugh and I'll kick your butt!"

"Don't worry, Nozo-chan." Naruto smiled again. "I won't laugh. I promise...you can be yourself around me." He paused. "Afterall, if you can't be yourself with your fiance then who CAN you be yourself with?"

Nozomi went silent, her face now redder than a tomato. "Um....Night!" she said hastily, closing her eyes and trying to force herself to sleep. However, try as she might, the brunette just could not fall asleep. *'How cruel...I was plenty tired until he made that fiance comment, and now I can't get to sleep?! Not fair!'*

"Nozo-chan?" Naruto frowned at the display of abruptness she'd given and sighed. *'She's still mad about that?! It's been awhile...I thought maybe she'd have gotten used to the idea by now!'*

The blond haired boy sighed and started stroking her ears lightly, in a massaging manner. "Good night, Nozo-hime.."

Nozomi's eyes flew open in surprise at his petting her, and she opened her mouth to protest, but all that came out was a purr in response. The cat girl sighed and slumped against Naruto's middle, her cat instincts beginning to take over, sleep threatening to pull her into black unconsciousness at any moment. *'Oh well...he asked me to be myself...I guess that means I let him pet me, and let myself purr and all that...Gosh it's gonna be hard to remember that..'* Finally, oblivion came, and Nozomi welcomed the hazy unconsciousness with open arms...

Naruto smiled to himself as he heard the long, loud purrs coming from the girl, and stroked her ears a couple more times before leaning his head on her, soon falling asleep himself.

"Nyaaa...what a nice nap..." Nozomi yawned, a contented smile on her face. "I didn't have any nightmares, either...I wonder what time it is-" The cat girl's eyes widened as she saw that it was bright

out, most of the shadows under the tree vanished, a sign that it was at least afternoon, and she sweatdropped. *'Did I really just sleep for 4 hours?! That's crazy!!'*

Nozomi started to sit up, but was pulled back. "What the?!" Nozomi glanced down and groaned as she saw Naruto's muscular arms still wrapped tightly around her waist. "Umm...Naruto-kun...I'm awake...I had enough sleep, so you can let me up, heh..." The cat girl frowned as nobody answered. "Naruto-kun! Let me go!!"

"Mmm....ramen..."

"Nyaa?" Nozomi blinked and turned her head to look at the boy, only to groan in frustration as she found that he was asleep with his face buried in her hair. "Naruto-kun!!" Heaving an exasperated sigh, the brunette turned away and tried to think of a way to wake him up.

"Ramen...that's good...hmmm....zzz.....No....Nozomi's better.....zzzzz"

Hearing this, Nozomi's face turned a light shade of red, and her fur spiked up. "What are you TALKING about, Naruto-kun?!"

"...Zz....Yeah....much better....we'll.....restore.....Uzumaki.....Namikaze too.....with Nozomi.."

At this statement, Nozomi blushed furiously, resisting the urge to slap him. *'He's not dreaming THAT kind of thing IS he?! What a perv!!'*

"Naruto-kun, wake up already you baka!" Nozomi turned and raised her hand then slapped the boy across the face hard, stunning him. "WAKE UP!!"

"What the?!--" Naruto shot straight up, eyes wide, and touched his face where she had slapped him. "Ow! What was that for Nozo-chan?!"

"You wouldn't wake up." Nozomi said sourly, giving him a disapproving look.

Naruto frowned. "Couldn't you have found a little nicer way to wake me, *Nozo-hime?*" he whined.

"Nah...that way suited you, what with what YOU were dreaming about!" Nozomi growled. "Now let me up! It's already noon- we slept WAY too long!"

"You.....What'd you hear?! Wait, was I talking in my sleep?!" Naruto asked nervously, letting his hold on the girl go slack. *'If she heard that I'm SO dead!'*

Nozomi didn't answer as she hurried to her feet and scrambled away from him, grabbing her bag and walking away.

'I guess I should take that as a yes...' Naruto sighed. *'I don't know why she's so mad...It's not like I can control what I dream about!'*

"Hey, Nozo-chan wait up!" The spiky haired boy yelled, scrambling to his feet then grabbing his bag and

running after the cat girl.

"Here we are again..." Nozomi sighed as she glanced around. "It feels so...nostalgic here...even though I hated this place. Oh well, let's go."

"Ehh, Nozo-chan, how are we going to find who it was if we don't even have a clue?" Naruto asked, running to keep up beside her.

"Oh, that?" Nozomi sweatdropped a little and gave a sheepish, toothy grin. "I guess we'll just pray we get lucky, huh?"

"Yeah...I guess." Naruto shrugged and let the subject drop.

Nozomi heaved a sigh of relief, glad he was not going to question her any further. Truth be told, she really didn't have a clue what she was going to do, aside from walking around town until she found the person she'd dreamed about.

A shiver ran down the cat girl's spine at this thought. *'Suoh-kun...this will be the first time I've seen him in 4 years...I wonder what he's like now...'*

The cat girl jumped suddenly, forced to stop as something latched onto her tail. "Naruto-kun, let go of my tail." she said in a sour tone, still not too keen about being near him after what he'd said earlier in his sleep.

To her surprise, Naruto turned to her and held both hands up, a confused look on his face. "Hey, don't look at ME...I didn't do anything!"

"But..." Confusion flickered in the cat girl's golden yellow eyes. "If you didn't grab it then who...?"

Nozomi turned and glanced behind her, her eyes widening slightly in surprise as her stare locked on a little girl who looked no more than 5 years old. "Hello?"

The little girl grinned up at Nozomi, stilling hugging her tail. "Kitty!"

Nozomi just stared at the girl, blushing a little as her petting caused her to purr a little. The kid was cute, with shiny black eyes, a perfect smile (save for one missing tooth), and long, dark violet pigtailed that went down to just above her waist.

The cat girl sweatdropped a little. "Ummm...can I have my tail back, please?" she asked in a quiet voice, trying to sound nice.

The little girl just giggled and hugged her tail tighter. "Kitty cat!!"

Nozomi flinched at this and blushed slightly. Nobody had called her that since..well...Naruto. He had dubbed her that the same day she'd dubbed him "Ramen breath", though she didn't use the name much

unless he made her mad.

Naruto just watched them, a hand over his mouth, trying not to laugh. He knew what Nozomi must be thinking, about how he'd always called her the same name, and how he still did occasionally. *'I should call her that more often...she IS my kitty.'* he thought, a smirk on his face as he continued watching. This was quite an unexpected event; someone actually coming up to Nozomi and embracing her. He was sure she hadn't expected that from a member of the clan she'd grown up in.

"Umm...my name's Nozomi." Nozomi gave a shy smile, feeling awkward as she looked down at the little girl. "What's yours?"

The violet haired girl gave a big grin, once again displaying her missing tooth. "Aiko! Nice to meet you Nozomi-Kitty-san!"

Naruto, seeing the look on Nozomi's face at this name found he could no longer control himself, and he burst into a fit of laughter. "Aww, how cute...Nozomi-Kitty!...I gotta use that one!"

Nozomi balled her fists at her sides, resisting the urge to whack the boy over the head. *'Remember the jutsu...don't hit him now...you can get him later...but not now...don't scare the little girl..'*

"So, Aiko-" Nozomi began, only to be cut off as a loud, feminine scream sounded.

"AIKO!"

"..Huh?" Nozomi looked up and sweatdropped as she saw a very angry looking short violet haired woman hurry forward and grab Aiko's hand.

"Mommy?" Aiko glanced up into the woman's angry eyes and frowned. "What's wrong...?"

The woman's scowl lifted slightly, but she held firmly to Aiko's hand as she pulled her away from Nozomi. "Come with me, now. We need to talk."

Nozomi winced and tried not to scream in agony as Aiko was pulled away, still holding onto her tail. "Ow, ow, ow..."

"But...I wanna play with Nozomi-Kitty-san some more..." Aiko whined, looking sad.

"Nozomi...?" The woman glanced at the cat girl and fear replaced the anger that was in her eyes. "You!" She pulled harder on her daughter's hand now, forcing her to let go of Nozomi's tail. "Come on, we have to get away from her!"

"But why?" Aiko whined sadly. "She's a nice kitty.."

"That is NOT a kitty, Aiko...she's a MONSTER! Now c'mon, we have to get away before that-that--THING attacks us!"

Aiko just stared sadly at Nozomi as she was dragged away, tears filling her eyes. "Bai bai,

Nozomi-Kitty-san..."

Nozomi turned away, head lowered as she resumed walking. "C'mon, Naruto-kun. Let's go."

Naruto stared after her, a sad look on his face. "Nozo-chan...are you ok?"

"Naruto-kun, I'm fine. Don't expect that to be the only time somebody runs away in fear after seeing me." Nozomi's face was covered in shadows as she spoke. "I'm supposed to be dead by now...so of course people are gonna be afraid seeing me here..."

Naruto heaved a sad sigh, sensing the pain she was going through inside and also lowered his head as he walked beside her.

A moment later, they were forced to stop as yet again, Nozomi was snagged by the tail. The cat girl frowned and heaved a sigh. "Aiko-chan, you should be getting back to your mo-" By this point, she had turned to face her captor, and shock replaced the indifference she'd forced into her eyes. "YOU!"

12 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PART 3}

"Surprise, Nozo-neko-chan!"

"Nyaa! What are you DOING?!"

At this, Naruto spun around as well, and his eyes filled with anger as he saw the boy hugging Nozomi's waist tightly, snuggling her.

"Suoh-kun, is that you?!"

The boy smiled and nodded proudly. "The one and only!"

Nozomi pulled away and stared at him. His tannish blond hair was pointed and messy, flying out in all different directions; his eyes, grey and cloudy; his long, black tang top was loose and hung down to his waist. He wore a netted top, with the left sleeve cut off, and knee-length shorts that were almost the same color as his hair.

There were bandages the were wrapped from just below his elbows and wound around his fingers, just barely showing the tips, as well as a set of bandages on his right leg that went from below his knee to just above his ankle and he still wore the same type of shoes as before; black open toed sandals with a triangle cut in the center that covered half his shin.

"...Suoh-kun...it IS you." Nozomi mumbled, staring in awe at him. He really hadn't changed much in the past 4 years, except for his outfit, and a few other things.

Suoh gave a sly smile and nodded his head. "Who did you THINK it was, Nozo-neko-chan?...Oh, apparently Aiko-chan. Hehehe..so...." The boy's smile widened. "I'm glad you're back. Now we can start over, and make some newer better memories together!" A slight blush was on his face. "...Starting with this."

Before Nozomi could say or do anything, Suoh's arms snaked themselves tightly around her waist, pulling her into him, and his lips crushed against hers in a firm, demanding kiss.

In response, Nozomi's eyes flew open wide and she struggled to push him away, frustrated to find he had a good hold on her waist, trapping her. "Suoh-kun...stop...!" The cat girl protested, trying to pry his hands off of her.

Eyes full of confusion, Suoh released her waist and stopped kissing her. "What's wrong, Nozo-neko-chan? I know that's what you wanted years ago..."

"Well, yes, I did...but-" Nozomi stammered.

"Now she's with ME." Naruto growled, grabbing Nozomi and pulling her into his arms, scowling at Suoh

from over her shoulder.

"Well well, who do we have HERE?" Suoh smirked at the blond, trying to mask the surprise he felt.

"Naruto Uzumaki." The blond's eyes were full of resentment as he looked at Suoh. "I know who you are already..."

"I see...well, Naruto Uzumaki," Suoh said in a kind of mocking tone, "I'm not sure who you think you are, but you can't tell me who I can and can't be with so stand aside already!"

"I won't do any such thing!" Naruto growled, tightening his hold on Nozomi slightly and leaning into her. "Nozo-chan is and will remain MINE! So it's YOU who needs to stand aside, buddy!"

Now Suoh glared at Naruto. "I think Nozo-neko-chan can decide who it is she wants to be with, thank you, and if I'm not mistaken she came back to ME."

Nozomi's eyes bulged, and she pulled out of Naruto's protective embrace, approaching Suoh, staring at him in disbelief. "Umm...Suoh-kun?"

The dirty blond haired boy turned and gave a grin. "What is it, sweetheart?"

Nozomi pulled a face at the name and sweatdropped. "I..err..I'm not here to stay. I came to ask you a, uhm, a question.."

"Oh?" Suoh's face fell for a minute before he forced a smirk onto his face. "What might that question be?"

The cat girl gulped, and took a deep breath. "You seem to have been expecting me to return...and so I was wondering..." she paused for a split second. "...Was it you who delivered the Essence no Jutsu and Oni Shoukin Jutsu to Konoha?"

Surprise was visible on both Nozomi and Naruto's faces as the dirty blond haired boy nodded his head, a grin on his face. "It seems like the alternative to the extraction jutsu worked, too!" Suoh grinned widely. "I'm so glad."

"But...Suoh-kun...why the change of heart?" A frown appeared on Nozomi's face. "From what I remember you HATED me...what possessed you to make you suddenly want to save me from the Kubota demon's fate?"

At this, the grin on Suoh's face faded, and he sighed. "It's a long story..." He paused. "I'm..so sorry for everything I did to you, Nozo-neko-chan...I was such a self centered jerk when we were kids..." The boy looked down at his feet in shame as he spoke. "All I cared about was my image...and what my two friends (followers), Hizoku and Shouri thought of me...I thought you were cute but I never told them that because they were always scheming up ways to torment you, since you were the prime target of everybody..."

A small sigh escaped the dirty blond haired boy. "Then came the day that we overheard a couple of the

village girls, Hane and Mizu talking. They were going on and on about you and your not so secret crush on me. It was then that Hizoku and Shouri decided we should play a prank on you, and they kinda talked, or threatened me into the whole fake love confession thing...then they thought it would be hilarious to tie a bell onto you so we could all hear you coming and laugh and beat you up...I wish things had been different now, but back then I was too scared of them to say no, for fear of what they'd do to me...they had a reputation for being tough kids, and I'd been grateful they considered me cool enough to be their leader...so I had no choice but to put on the mask I did."

Suoh's shoulders sagged as he looked at Nozomi for the first time, his grey eyes sad, filled with regret. "Even so...that's no excuse for what I did to you, Nozomi...I'm sorry...I really DID like you for what it's worth...and...I still do..."

'Whaaat?!' Naruto stared the blond haired boy in disbelief. *'Don't tell me he thinks she's naive enough to BELIEVE that crap!!'*

"...Suoh-kun...you...you really...is that...really what happened...?" There was a look of uncertainty on Nozomi's face, but a small glint of hope was visible in her eyes.

'Apparently she IS that naive!' Naruto thought with an inward sigh, facepalming.

"Yes..." Suoh's voice was bitter, filled with regret. "I tried to forget about you, to move on...but I couldn't. Especially after you ran away...no matter what I did, I could never shake your face from my mind...the shocked look on your blushing face when I said I loved you, and the pained look of betrayal and disbelief when I did what I did after, and left..." The boy sighed. "Gradually, I came to realize the reason I saw you in my dreams so much...you see...it turned out..."

'Don't you say it,' Naruto's hands clenched tightly into fists at his sides, *'Don't you DARE tell her you love her...!'*

"...The truth is..." Suoh grabbed Nozomi's shoulders and pulled her close to him in a tight hug. "...Nozomi Kubota, I love you...please forgive me for my past mistakes...give me another chance- I **won't** let you down this time! I told Hizoku and Shouri off a long time ago...I'm a changed man."

Nozomi pulled away and stared at the blond, tears in her eyes. "Suoh-kun..th...thank you..." This said, the tears spilled down her cheeks like a waterfall.

'...Is she crying...for THAT guy?!' Naruto thought, disbelief mixed in with horror on his face.

"Nozo-neko-chan," Suoh smiled, a genuine smile, and pulled the brunette into another hug. "Please...give me a chance to be the lover you deserve...I promise I won't let you down..."

Nozomi's eyes widened slightly and she blushed. "Ah, but S-Suoh- I'm e-!"

"I want you, Nozomi Kubota...to be my girlfriend..I'll treat you right this time around, or you can sick your friend over there on me.."

Nozomi's eyes went even wider, her blush darkening as the boy leaned in and kissed her softly on the

lips.

'FRIEND, huh?!?' Naruto thought, growling under his breath, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets as Suoh kissed Nozomi...HIS kitty. "Umm, EXCUSE ME!" The spiky haired boy growled angrily as he stomped over, putting himself in between Suoh and Nozomi. "She's MY girl! Paws off!"

Suoh gave a smirk, hiding his surprise. "What's that, Whiskers? I don't see your *name* on her!"

"Oh yeah?!" Electric blue eyes wild with anger, Naruto undid the clasp around Nozomi's neck and removed the bell, thrusting it into Suoh's hands. "Read THAT!"

In response, Suoh raised an eyebrow at Naruto before reading the inscription that was engraved on the silver bell. "Property of Naruto Uzumaki..Don't touch!"

Nozomi blushed furiously as the boy handed the bell back to Naruto (who quickly put it back around her neck) and burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, holding his sides to keep himself from falling. "It's not funny..."

"Geez Nozomi, this guy made you wear a bell with writing on it...you must be like his pet! Ahahaha!" Suoh laughed a little longer then stopped as a thought struck him. "Though I don't see why he's freaking out...if all he sees you as is a pet..."

"Only a PET, huh?!" A vein popped on Naruto's forehead and he turned to Nozomi. "Nozo-chan...show him your hand so he'll shut up about this "pet" business..."

"My...hand...?" If possible, the blush on Nozomi's face deepened as she realized he meant her left hand. The one the engagement ring was stuck (literally, stuck) on, and she folded her arms tightly across her chest, hiding it as she shook her head, sweatdropping. "No, thanks..."

"C'mon, Nozo-chan...Please...!" Naruto begged. "If you don't show him he won't shut up!"

Nozomi sweatdropped again as she realized he was giving her the big, blue puppy eyes he was so good at, and she sighed, letting her shoulders sag in defeat. "Fine..." The cat girl looked away, blushing once again as she held out her left hand for Suoh to see the ring on her finger.

"What?!" Suoh's eyes bulged, looking as if they'd fall out of the sockets at any given moment as he gawked at the ring, then at the girl wearing the ring. "Nozomi, you-you--you're--"

"Engaged...to ME." Naruto crowed, giving a triumphant grin. "So I'll thank you to stop hitting on my fiancée now."

Disbelief was still plainly visible on the grey eyed boy's face as he took a few steps back. "Nozo-neko-chan...why didn't you tell me you were getting married?!"

"Well, it's because I.." Nozomi began to say how she really felt about the whole engagement, but the steely eyed look Naruto was giving her silenced her.

"How COULD she when all you've done is hug, and kiss her to death, and then talk when SHE tried to talk?!"

Suoh laughed sheepishly at the spiky haired boy's outburst. "Ohh...haha...right.." He sighed and looked down, a sad look on his face.

'Why do I feel ...guilty...?' Nozomi frowned to herself. '...Is it because he said he loves me...?...But...if I feel guilty.....No, I can't feel that way about him still, I can't!' The cat girl's eyes widened and a small tint of pink colored her face. 'I do NOT still have a crush on him...right?!....'

"Nozomi...?"

Nozomi blinked, momentarily pulled from her thoughts as she found herself face to face with Naruto. "...What is it, Naruto-kun...?"

"Nothing...you just spaced out." A concerned look was on the blond's face. "Are you ok?"

"Huh..? Yeah, I'm fine." Nozomi blinked and did a double take. "...Where's Suoh-kun...?" she asked, surprised as she realized the boy was no longer standing with them.

"Oh, that punk?" Naruto grinned and pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "He left...said he would stop bothering you and that he was sorry. Hehe.."

"Really..." Nozomi murmured, feeling a slight twinge of pain run through her. *'Why do I suddenly feel sad?...Isn't it Naruto-kun that I'm in love with...?...Yeah...so why do I feel let down hearing that Suoh-kun left...?...It doesn't make any sense at all!'*

"Hey Nozo-chan...I was thinking."

"Nya?" Nozomi looked up again as the blond snapped her from her thoughts once more. "What is it?"

"I thought...well you said if we got this cleared up fast we could just have some time together, right?...Some us time?"

The blush on Nozomi's face returned with vengeance now as she heard this and she nodded slightly. "Y-yeah...why...?"

"Well.." Now it was Naruto's turn to blush. "I thought maybe we could...go to the beach, like you suggested..if you want...ehe.."

"..Oh...So...you're asking if you can see me in that swimsuit now then, aren't you?" Nozomi teased, hoping to hide her own embarrassment by embarrassing HIM.

"Err...yeah..." Naruto sweatdropped, blushing and gave a cute grin. "So...can I...?"

Nozomi blushed harder to her dismay. She hadn't expected him to respond so...calmly. Almost casually, even. "Ehh...s-sure...I don't see why n-not..." The cat girl sweatdropped. Once again, he'd made her

blush when SHE had been trying to embarrass *him*! How embarrassing!

"Well then...show me the way to this beach?" Naruto held out his hand, still blushing, a shy little smile playing on his lips.

"...Ok..." Still blushing, Nozomi took the blond's hand and started walking, all the while keeping her eyes averted, for she knew full well that if she made eye contact with Naruto now, she would literally fly up in flames, she was so hot with embarrassment.

"Hey, Nozo-chan.."

"Hmmm?" Nozomi glanced at the boy from the corner of her eye.

"...You seem really quiet right now...I mean more than usual...are you ok? You sure nothing's bothering you..?"

"Oh, I'm sure!" Nozomi gave a small laugh. "Just fine...heh.."

"If you're sure..." Naruto glanced back at the cat girl's tail and frowned. It was twitching away at a furious pace- usually a sign she was lying. "You know you can talk to me about anything.."

"I know...but there's nothing TO talk about." Nozomi laughed nervously.

Naruto heaved a deep sigh. "Nozo-chan, don't try to lie...your tail is twitching like c--"

"Oh, look! We're here!" Nozomi cut him off hastily, pointing at the sandy beach in front of them. She gave a tug on his hand. "C'mon, c'mon, let's go already!"

Naruto heaved another sigh, seeing she wasn't open for discussion about whatever it was that was bothering her, and nodded, allowing her to drag him out onto the hot sand. "So...you gonna go change?" He gave a toothy grin as he took out a towel from one of their bags and laid it out on the ground, smoothing it out.

Nozomi's face turned red and she nodded. "Uhh, yeah, I am...I guess.." The cat girl grabbed her bag and dug out the green two piece swimsuit she'd packed the day before after her embarrassing attempt at distracting Naruto from questioning her about the trip. "W-well, I'll be going now.."

"Ok." Naruto turned and gave a flirty grin. "Hurry back, or I'll get lonely." He winked and snickered as the brunette's face came to resemble a tomato. "I can't wait to see how the swimsuit I picked looks...hehe."

That did it. Unable to stand there and listen anymore, Nozomi turned on her heel and hurried over to the dressing rooms. Men...Naruto...Foxes...She wasn't sure WHICH was worse!

'Oh well...I'll get him back yet...I still have my jutsu to look forward to...if I can only find the right time to use it...maybe I'll use it if he makes any perverted remarks about my body...yeah, that's what I'll do...hehehe..'

The cat girl chuckled evilly, over her embarrassment as she remembered her jutsu. Most likely she'd be using it soon, knowing Naruto...

13 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PART 4}

"Man...I hate life!" Nozomi whined as she pulled on her bathing suit. "Why'd I have to have a TAIL?! It makes life so complicated...especially when it comes to wearing a bathing suit!"

The cat girl groaned. "That's ANOTHER thing I've had to rip thanks to this cursed tail!" She sighed. "Why does life HATE me?!"

The brunette sighed and took a step back, glancing at herself in the mirror once more, as she had several minutes before. She wore a deep green two piece bathing suit.

The top, though it was small, fit snugly and was modest enough, even if it did show a little in places; the bottoms were a cross between normal bikini bottoms and mini shorts, and did little to cover her thighs. Despite all this, the cat girl felt satisfied, and she grabbed her bag, hastily covering up with her beach towel as she stepped outside of the changing rooms.

'Oh, god...if Naruto-kun makes ONE perverted comment on this swimsuit, I SWEAR I'm gonna use the jutsu on him!' She thought, sweatdropping as she walked back to the towel where Naruto waited. "I'm back..."

A blush colored her cheeks as the spiky haired boy turned, having changed into his swim trunks, and she struggled to keep her gaze off of his muscular chest.

In response, Naruto blushed as well, though he did NOT try to avoid staring at her, which made Nozomi all the more grateful to be covered up by her towel.

"So, um...are you ready to go swimming?" the blond asked a moment later, breaking the awkward silence that seemed to have fallen over them.

Nozomi hesitated before nodding her head slowly, the blush on her face deepening. "Y-yeah...let's go then..."

"Ok..." Naruto got up off the towel and held his hand out for the brunette to take. "Then leave your towel here with mine and let's go!"

'Oh...rats...' A drop of sweat rolled down Nozomi's face. "...Ok..." Slowly she removed the towel and placed it on the ground with Naruto's, not daring to meet the boy's gaze as she heard him inhale sharply.

".....Nozo-chan...." Naruto couldn't help blushing hard as the cat girl turned to him, and he took her in all at once. Her scent, her curves, her face, everything. She was absolutely stunning. Beautiful...No. Naruto shook his head to correct himself. Not beautiful- drop dead gorgeous!

Nozomi remained frozen, unable to look him in the eye for fear her blush would get even worse.

“Nozo-chan...” Naruto smiled despite his embarrassment. “You look beautiful. I'm glad I chose that swimsuit for you out of the two.”

Nozomi glanced at him, surprised. “....Really...?”

“Yes, really...Gorgeous..” Naruto's grin widened.

“But...I'm really not a lot to look at.” Nozomi protested, sweatdropping.

“Not a lot to look at?” Naruto stared at the cat girl so intently that she took a step back, intimidating by his penetrating gaze. “Nozomi...YOU might say that...but any guy would say you're hot, at least! ME...”

A mischievous smirk appeared on the blond's face, unnerving Nozomi even more, “I think you're *more* than just hot...I think you're downright **sexy!**”

“What?!...M-me...s-se--- NO WAY!” Nozomi blushed as hard as was possible and backed away from him even more.

“Yes...sexy...my cute little pussycat...I could just eat you up you're so adorable!” Naruto smirked.

“Where do you think YOU'RE going, cutie? We're not finished talking about this!”

Another drop of sweat rolled down the cat girl's head as she backed even further away.

“I'm..going...swimming....ehehehe...”

“Not YET, you aren't!” Naruto insisted as he lunged at her, catching the surprised cat girl in a hug as he pinned her to the ground on her back

“Kyaa! Naruto-kun, let me up!”

“Nope, not just as I finally got you where I wanted you.” Naruto grinned devilishly, and Nozomi gulped.

“Get UP!” The brunette wailed, struggling to push him off, with little success.

“Not yet,” Naruto grinned. “Hehe....I really could eat you..” A devious smirk was on his face now, “In fact, I think I will!”

“What?! Naruto-kun, what the heck are you talking about-- AHHHAHAHA!! STOP! That tickles!” The cat girl shrieked, laughing uncontrollably as Naruto leaned down, giving a throaty growl, and kissed all up her exposed neck, chuckling softly at her reaction.

“Naruto-kun, STOP it!” The brunette begged, tears in her eyes now from how hard she was laughing. A few minutes later, however, she inhaled sharply, no longer laughing as her eyes went wide.

“Naruto-kun, get your hand OFF of there!”

“Aww, but why?” Naruto grinned as he ran his hand up and down the base of her tail, “I'll be able to touch more than that soon enough...besides,” The blond snickered as a soft purr escaped the brunette,

“You seem to like it, kitty...”

“I do not—wait--what do you mean by touch MORE than that...?” Nozomi blushed darkly as she realized the hidden meaning behind his words, and she glared at him. “You pervert!! That does it, I’m using it! That’ll teach you!”

“Hey, wait! I’m not a pervert!” Naruto protested.

“Then why did you SAY that?!” Nozomi demanded.

“Well....” The embarrassed boy rubbed the back of his head awkwardly, “I was just stating the truth...you know when we’re married we’ll be-”

“I KNOW! That’s it I’ve had enough, you’re still a pervert whether you’ll admit it or not! I can tell who YOU trained under...what, did you read his books, too?!” Anger in her eyes, Nozomi launched into a series of handsigns, her brow furrowed as she focused intently on performing each sign just right.

“No way! Why would I read something as boring as tha--..Um...Nozo-chan, what are you doing...?” Naruto stared in confusion a drop of sweat rolling down the back of his head. “What are the handsigns for?”

An evil grin appeared on Nozomi’s face as she fought back the urge to pound his face in. “You should have behaved like a good little boy...” she said sinisterly.

“Nozomi?!” Naruto stumbled back, freeing the cat girl as he let let go of her. “What are you doing?!”

“Punishing you.” Nozomi glared at him as she slowly sat up, handsigns finished. “...Baku Mimi-o Jutsu!!”

“What the...?” Naruto sweatdropped. “...Baku what, now?” He snickered.

“Baku Mimi-o Jutsu.” Nozomi smirked as she got to her feet and extended a hand down to the boy to help him up. “C’mon, I’ll show you.”

Naruto hesitated briefly before taking her hand and letting her help him stand. “Um.....ok....?” The blond answered nervously as he allowed her to lead him. He frowned at a small ripping noise from behind him, but thought nothing of it a few moments later as Nozomi stopped and he saw they were in front of the ocean. “What now?”

Nozomi merely smirked as she pointed down at the water. “Take a look in the water and tell me what you see.”

“Ehh? Ok, if you say so, Nozo-chan..” Naruto shrugged his shoulders as he knelt down and glanced at his watery reflection. “...Nozomi, I don’t see anythi-” The boy broke off in mid sentence as a movement caught his attention, and he almost cried in shock as he saw that the movement had been one of two very twitchy orange and white tipped fox ears that were perched atop his head.

“EARS?!” A drop of sweat trickled down the boy’s head as realization hit him. “Wait...if I’ve got fox ears,

then that must mean...oh, no! NO!" In a state of panic, the blond jumped to his feet and spun around, glancing behind him, and groaned loudly as his stare landed on the bushy orange and white fox tail that was now twitching against his ankles relentlessly. THAT must have been the ripping sound he'd heard earlier!

Nozomi just watched, trying her hardest not to laugh at the boy's startled reaction.

"Waaah! Why me?!" The blond was screaming, tugging on his newly grown animal features in frustration, crying out in pain at the pain this caused him. "Nozo-chan, what did you DO to me?!" he cried, "...And how...and WHY?!"

Nozomi snickered under her breath as she responded, "Well, I used a jutsu that made you grow animal features....fox in your case...why did I do that?" The cat girl paused and gave a slight shrug. "Well for one thing, you were talking like a real pervert! I could tell you'd been the student of that Pervy Sage for a little too long.." she scowled, "and for your information, I specifically made this jutsu to be your punishment for that stunt you pulled with the engagement ring."

"What?! But! I thought you'd be over that by now!" Naruto groaned. "Man!"

"Don't be so down, Naruto-kun...there IS a way to get rid of the fox features." A devious grin appeared on Nozomi's face as she said this.

"There is?!" A hopeful look was on Naruto's face now. "What is it?!"

"Simple," the grin on Nozomi's face seemed to widen, "cancel the engagement so this ring can come off," she held out her left hand as she spoke, "and I'll cancel the jutsu."

"OK-Wait, WHAT?!" Naruto's eyes widened, and the grin that had just appeared on his face now vanished. "Why?!"

"Because, it's only fair." Nozomi answered, "If I have to deal with something I don't wanna deal with, then so do you....but if you set me free from mine, I'll free you from yours as well."

There was a pause before Naruto sighed heavily. "...You're sure there's no other way for me to get rid of these things?"

"Nope," Nozomi said smugly, "I control the jutsu with my desires...those fox features won't vanish until I want them to...that's how my jutsu works."

Naruto heaved another deep sigh and folded his arms, eyes closed. "...Fine..."

"Fine?" A smirk formed on Nozomi's face. "You mean you'll do it, then?"

The blond gave a stiff nod and grunted. "...I'll learn to deal with having animal features like you...'cause there's no way I'm giving up on you."

Nozomi's eyes bulged in shock, the fur on her ears and tail standing up, quite easily making her slightly

resemble a witch's cat after a Halloween flight. "WHAT?!"

"You heard me, kitty." Naruto snickered and reached out, smoothing her fur down as he spoke. "I'll just learn to adjust."

"But!! Naruto-kun!" Nozomi sweatdropped as her fur spiked up yet again, "Aren't you worried what people will think when they see you?! Wouldn't you rather look normal like everyone else?!"

"Eh, not really," Naruto gave a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, "Nobody really treats me normal anyways. Yeah, sure I have friends now, but even though they try to hide it, I know they're all afraid of me deep down...Afraid of Kyuubi coming out and taking control...It's not like having fox features will change the way they treat or view me THAT much...besides, I can handle animal features a lot easier than I could handle calling off the engagement. So there."

Nozomi didn't say anything. She just stared at the boy, wide eyed, her jaw dropped. This wasn't supposed to happen! He was supposed to be so devastated that he'd give up on the engagement to be able to return to normal...why did things always seem to backfire on her?!

"W-well then!- Have fun suffering!" The brunette stammered, "It won't be as easy as you think! TRUST me!"

"I know it won't be easy," Naruto grinned and winked at the cat girl, "but you're worth it! Besides, this can give me a little better understanding of you, and the things you go through." He smiled widely. "I think I'll adjust to these things soon enough, just fine."

Too stunned to think of a comeback, Nozomi just stared wordlessly at the blond haired boy, shock written all over her face.

After a few minutes of complete silence, Naruto grinned at her. "So...we gonna swim, or just stare at each other like this?"

"Ah, let's swim!" Nozomi sputtered, glad for the subject change.

"Ok," an evil grin appeared on Naruto's face suddenly.

"Umm, Naruto-kun? What are you looking at me like that fo-" Nozomi broke off and shrieked loudly in surprise as the boy suddenly lunged forward, catching her and throwing her over his shoulder as he charged into the ocean, splashing them both with icy water.

"Kyaaa! Naruto-kun, let me GO!" Nozomi screamed, pounding on the blond's back with balled up fists.

Naruto stopped, the water coming up to his waist, and nodded. "Well...Ok...if you insist.."

Before the brunette could prepare herself, he had let go of her, and she dropped face first into the cold, salty water. The cat girl quickly resurfaced, and glared at Naruto, who in response sweatdropped and gave a toothy smile, shrugging sheepishly. "What? You said to let go, so I did..."

Nozomi's only response was to spit a mouthful of the salty water in his face before turning tail and swimming away-- err, trying to, that is.

"Hey, where do you think you're going after a stunt like THAT?" Naruto demanded, a smirk playing on his lips as he lunged forward and grabbed the cat girl around the waist, pulling her into him in a hug from behind.

Nozomi shrieked and tried to get away, but to no avail as the blond only tightened his grip on her.

'C'mon, Nozomi, think! There has to be a way to make him let go, there just HAS to be!' The brunette thought desperately, ears flattening against her head in frustration. Then she had it! *'Yes, there IS a way..'* The cat girl grinned deviously as she felt around behind her in the water.

"Umm...Nozomi-chan? What are you doing now?" Naruto asked, sweatdropping as he felt the girl's fingers latch onto his tail (his tail; THERE was something he'd have to get used to saying in time...).

"Hmmm...just wondering..." Nozomi gave an innocent kitty grin. "...Are we ever gonna swim?"

"Of course, silly." Naruto smirked.

"So, shouldn't you be letting go of me now, then?"

"Why would I do that?" Naruto asked with a chuckle, hugging the girl slightly tighter, nuzzling her neck with his head.

"Because," Nozomi groaned, knowing she was blushing again, "you-you can't hold me and swim...not at the same time, anyways!"

"Wanna bet?" The smirk on Naruto's face widened and Nozomi frowned.

"Ugh! I was afraid you were gonna say that..." Nozomi sighed, "Oh well.." Then, without warning, she jerked her hand forward, yanking harshly on Naruto's newly grown tail in the process.

In response, the blond screamed loudly and jumped in surprise, and, in doing this, freed the cat girl's waist from his grasp.

"Haha, free at last!" Nozomi snickered as she started to walk away, going toward the part of the ocean where the water went from shallow to semi deep.

"Arrgh! Maybe," Naruto muttered, rubbing his lower back gently, "but you won't be for long...!m gonna get you for that one, kitty! You're toast!"

"You'll never take me alive!" Nozomi shrieked, diving underwater and swimming away at a high speed.

Naruto groaned, rubbing his back once again before taking off after her, swimming as fast as he was able to.

Every time he thought he was getting close to her, the cat girl would speed up, pulling far out of his reach again.

“Just give it up, Naruto-kun!” Nozomi snickered as she surfaced for air and glanced back at the boy briefly, “You're not used to swimming with a heavy, wet tail...or fur in general...either way, you'll NEVER catch me!!”

“Don't count me out just yet, kitty cat!” Naruto gritted his teeth as he pressed on (though, just as Nozomi had said, it was getting harder to stay afloat). The boy panted hard as he struggled on. It seemed like the further he went, the heavier his tail became, trying to drag him under...but -Naruto grinned to himself- if Nozomi could do it, then so could *he*!

A few minutes later, however, Naruto was forced to stop as he realized how deep the water was. They had gone WAY out, he couldn't even see the bottom anymore! They were almost so far out he couldn't even see the beach behind them anymore!

“Hey, Nozo-chan,” he called, “I think we better go back...it's really deep here...”

“Nya? What's that, Naruto-kun?” Nozomi stopped swimming and glanced back over her shoulder at the boy. “What'd you say? I can't hear you over here!”

“I said!-” Naruto had opened his mouth to repeat himself, but he broke off in mid sentence, eyes widening as he stared at Nozomi in what seemed to be fear.

The cat girl noticed, and frowned at him. “What is it? Why do you look like you've just seen a ghost?”

“Watch out, behind you!!” Naruto shouted loudly, but he was drowned out then by the 10 foot wave that had risen up just behind the girl.

“Huh?...What...?” Nozomi frowned and glanced back, eyes bulging as she took in the huge wave that was about to crash down on her. “Ohh...THAT'S what...Rats!!”

Try as she might, the cat girl couldn't get herself to move, frozen in fear, and she could only watch, eyes wide as saucers as the huge wall of water came crashing down on her with a mighty roar.

“Nozomi!” Naruto screamed, eyes wide in horror as the girl was shoved under the water from the impact of the wave, and failed to resurface after it had subsided. “NOZOMI!”

Nozomi could not answer, nor could she hear him. That wave had taken her by complete surprise, and she'd inhaled huge lungfuls of the salty sea water, which had caused her to run almost entirely out of air almost immediately once she'd been pushed under the water.

Struggling was futile, she found, as her body slowly stopped responding, and she gave one final gasp, now completely out of air. Slowly, the world began to fade from her view, and all she saw was black as she slipped into unconsciousness, no longer aware of the world around her as she drifted deeper and deeper into the dark, ocean water...

14 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PART 5}

'Ugh...what happened?...I'm so cold...how'd I get out of the water?'

“Nozomi!”

'Huh?...Someone's calling my name...Naruto-kun...?...I dunno...'

“Nozomi, wake up!”

'What the?!' Nozomi's eyes flew open in surprise as a warm pair of lips pressed against hers, breathing air into her. Her eyes widened and she froze as she realized something very important. *'That's not Naruto-kun...it's Suoh-kun! H-how did he FIND me?!'*

With as much force as she could muster, the cat girl raised her arms and gave the dirty blond haired boy's shoulders a good, firm shove.

This surprised him, and he pulled away, glancing down at the brunette. “Oh good, you're awake!”

Before Nozomi knew what was happening, she was in Suoh's arms, being squeezed in a tight, relieved hug.

“Nozo-neko-chan, I was so scared...when I saw you go under, and after I saved you you wouldn't respond, I thought...” Tears appeared in the blond's grey-ish eyes, and he hugged the cat girl tighter.

“Um...Suoh-kun...” Nozomi began to speak, only to break off in mid sentence as it got hard to breathe.

“Nozo-neko-chan?” Suoh frowned in concern. “What is it? What's the matter?”

“.....Choking.....NOT....breathing.....!!” The cat girl sputtered in a strained voice, choking violently.

“Oh....gotcha.” the grey eyed boy mumbled as he loosened his hold on her and began to pat her back, trying to ease her choking.

Slowly the brunette's breathing went back to normal, and she smiled a little. “Thanks...I needed that.” she paused. “So...um...how'd you know I was here, Suoh-kun?”

“Oh, simple.” Suoh grinned. “I'm the lifeguard of this beach...nothing goes on without me seeing it.” His grin widened. “Umm...Suoh-kun? Where's Naruto-kun?”

“Uhh...WHO?” Suoh frowned slightly.

“Naruto-kun,” Nozomi repeated, sighing, “You know...my husband-to-be?”

"Ohhh, you mean the whiskers guy!" The dirty blond haired boy blinked. "...He was here...?"

"Don't play stupid, Suoh-kun..." Nozomi rolled her eyes. "You know I have to be with him almost 24/7 to keep my demon from taking over...or at least you SHOULD know, if you're really the person who delivered the Oni Shoukin Jutsu to Konoha!"

"Well...I didn't actually READ the scroll it was on..." Suoh rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, eyes widening as Nozomi's words fully sunk in. "Wait—10 feet 24/7?!"

The cat girl sweatdropped. "Y-yeah....I can have 30 minutes alone each day, but other than that..." She trailed off and shrugged.

"So, if what you're saying is true...then you're more this guy's prisoner than you are his fiancée! He's FORCING you to marry him, isn't he?!"

"What?!" Nozomi stared at the blond, bewildered. "N-no--I--he--err..." the cat girl sweatdropped. She couldn't exactly tell him the events that had caused the engagement to happen, because that made it sound like he WAS forcing her! Unsure of what to say, Nozomi just stayed silent, looking down.

"Aha! So he IS forcing you!" Suoh tsk-tsked. "Poor girl..I'll tell you what..." The blond gave a small grin, his spiked hair flying up slightly because of the gentle breeze that had kicked up. "Let's run away together...We can figure out another way to deal with your demon..."

Nozomi opened her mouth to speak but was cut off as the boy spoke once again.

"Please, Nozomi- DON't let yourself be forced to marry somebody you don't love...Take your freedom!"

"Well..I..." Nozomi frowned, "Ok....." she paused. "Suoh-kun...I won't run away with you...I'm sorry."

"But--!- Why?!" Suoh's eyes narrowed. "Don't tell me you're afraid to run away...you did it once before..."

"No, I'm NOT afraid!" Nozomi insisted with a small growl. She frowned and heaved a sigh. "I just can't leave Naruto-kun...I won't."

"But! Why?! Nozo-neko-chan, I LOVE you!" Suoh cried desperately.

"Yeah I know but so does-" Nozomi began but was forced to stop talking as Suoh leaned in and caught her lips in a brief kiss.

"Don't you feel ANYTHING when we kiss?!"

Nozomi just scowled at the blond as she folded her arms, trying not to think about the fact that she had kissed him back for some unknown reason. "Yes...I DO feel something.....Guilt." The cat girl paused.

"I'm engaged to be married to Naruto-kun...I can't behave like this!" She sighed. "That's just the way things are, Suoh-kun...Maybe if I wasn't stuck with Naruto-kun for life we could be more than friends...but we CAN'T...I'm sorry.."

Nozomi stopped talking then, a wave of surprise and confusion washing over her. *'Woah...! Wh--why did I sound so...bitter saying that?! I'm happy, aren't I? I mean, sure I'm upset about being tricked the way I was...but that doesn't mean I would want to LEAVE Naruto-kun, does it?! No, NEVER!! What the heck is WRONG with me?'*

"Hmmm..." A small smirk appeared on Suoh's face as he saw the look of distress on Nozomi's, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're sad you can't be with ME. C'mon," The boy lowered his voice, speaking softer, "He....he doesn't have to know, Nozo-neko-chan....It could be our little secret."

"What?!" Nozomi stared at the dirty blond haired boy in shock. "Oh no you did NOT just suggest I cheat on my future husband!" The cat girl glared at him as he nodded, and she quickly moved away from him.

"C'mon, it's not like he's gonna find out.." Suoh winked, "Not if we're careful."

'Uhhh yeah right...I only get 30 minutes away from him everyday, and he's always waiting for me right outside the 10 foot radius so that he can surprise hug me after or whatever...he'd find out for sure.'

"No, Suoh, I will NOT cheat on Naruto-kun!" The brunette growled.

"Technically you already *are* cheating on him." The boy pointed out with a small smirk.

"Whaaa..How so?!" Nozomi demanded, eyes widening slightly.

"Well you seem unsure about who you'd rather be with," Suoh's smirk widened, "that AND you **did** just kiss me back a few minutes ago, if you remember!"

Nozomi grimaced, annoyed that he'd noticed her slip up. "S-so?!"

"Sooo engaged women shouldn't go around kissing guys that aren't their fiance." Suoh answered, still smirking.

"WHAT?! Bu-but !! You--YOU--WELL!" Nozomi stammered angrily. " *You* shouldn't go around kissing engaged women in the first place!"

'That's it, I have to get away from this guy!' Nozomi scrambled to her feet and glared at the boy. "Well, Suoh-kun, thanks for saving me...but I should really go find Naruto-kun now...he's probably worried sick!"

"...Ok, but don't think for a minute that this changes things."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Nozomi frowned.

Suoh smirked at her. "I mean I'm not giving up on you until you actually choose between your fiance and I..." The boy's smirk gave way to a cheery grin as he waved.. "So, catch ya later, Nozo-neko-chan!"

A drop of sweat slid down the back of Nozomi's head as she gave a half wave, then turned and ran off, desperate to get as far from the boy as she could. He could try all he wanted, but she was not going to

be his girl!...Her heart was already Naruto's! So...why did she have this knot in her stomach whenever she thought of the grinning dirty blond haired boy?

The cat girl sighed as she thought back to the first night she'd agreed to be Naruto's girlfriend. She warned him that she wasn't good at the whole relationship thing...Boy was she ever RIGHT!

'Naruto-kun deserves WAY better...' The cat girl hung her head. *'He deserves someone who doesn't behave the way I do...'* She smiled slightly. *'I have to get over this...I'm probably just confused because this is the first time I've seen Suoh-kun in so long...and his confession surprised me....But that doesn't mean I LOVE him....cause I already have the best guy there is..and right now, he's the only person I really want to see...'*

"Naruto! Naruto!"

Nozomi glanced around and let out a cry of delight as she spotted the blond, who was at the moment, fighting a crab off his tail. "Shoo! Get off! That's mine, not yours!" the boy was screaming, whacking the sea creature's hard red shell. He sighed with relief as the crab lost its grip and fell onto the sand, snapped its claws at him, then hurriedly skittered sideways into the ocean again. "Oww....stupid crab." the boy sighed and began to stroke his tail where the shelled creature had pinched it.

"Naruto-kun!"

At this, Naruto dropped his tail, forgetting his pain as he heard the voice. "N-Nozomi?" He looked up and relief crossed his features as he saw the cat girl, who now flung herself into his arms and wrapped her arms tightly around him in a big hug.

Nozomi smiled, heaving a deep sigh of contentment, and allowed a soft purr to escape her. HERE was the boy she loved, who she belonged to...the only person who'd ever understood her. *'I don't care what Suoh-kun says or thinks... **You're** the one I want to be with.'* The cat girl thought silently.

Naruto's eyes widened in surprise at this. Had Nozomi really just embraced him openly..of her own free will? He blinked and did a double take, please to find it hadn't been wishful thinking.

"Nozo-chan...I'm so glad you're safe..." Naruto smiled and wrapped his arms around her tightly, so scared by her near drowning that he didn't want to let go this time. "I was so worried about you..."

Nozomi heaved a happy sigh and allowed herself a peek at his face, eyes softening as she saw the big grin there, and the way his eyes were sparkling, reflecting the very happiness she herself was feeling.

"I missed you..." Naruto smiled wider, resting his head against the girl's shoulder, "How'd you get back to shore?"

"Well..." Nozomi sweatdropped a little as the unwanted image of her rescuer popped into her mind. "Suoh-kun rescued me...it turns out he's the life guard here...heh...if I'd known that we wouldn't have come to this beach..."

"Oh really..." Naruto frowned at the tone of her voice. Something had to have happened, or she wouldn't

have sounded so resentful just now. "...What'd he do?"

Nozomi frowned, knowing she wouldn't be able to get away with lying about this one. "...I'll tell you...but remember that no matter what I say...it's YOU I love...NOT him."

"Um...ok.: Naruto grinned as he led the girl back to their towels and they sat down on hers, both wrapping up together in his big towel.

"Well, first..." Nozomi sighed as she began her story, starting from when she'd woke up, and going all the way to where Suoh had accused her of cheating on Naruto. When the cat girl had finished, she was blushing in shame. "I...I'm sorry, Naruto-kun...I KNOW it's YOU I'm happy with...but he confuses me so much when he does those things..."

Nozomi sighed as the boy failed to answer. "Naruto-kun...I understand if you're mad at me...but can you at least say something?" She looked up at him and frowned.

Naruto's teeth were clenched tightly, his electric blue eyes blazing with what she guessed was rage.

"...I had a feeling you'd be mad at me.." Nozomi sighed. "Naruto-kun, I-"

"I'm not mad at you." Came Naruto's quiet reply, his voice strained.

Nozomi blinked and did a double take. "Wh-what?"

"It's that--SUOH! He makes me so MAD the way he's trying to steal you away from me! That, and!-"

Nozomi blushed as his tan arms suddenly wrapped around her waist, holding her close.

"You've been through *enough* crap, thanks to him!" The blond was saying, "and now just because he's able to see you again, he's playing with your emotions, and not respecting that you've moved on...he acts like he thinks he can do whatever he wants with you, then makes you feel guilty to top it off!"

"Naruto-kun?" Nozomi said softly, still blushing.

"I'm sorry...I know you forgive him, Nozo-chan...but..." Naruto tightened his grip on the girl, pulling her into his lap and growling protectively, "...If he ever tries anything again...I'll KILL him!"

"Naruto-kun..." Nozomi giggled and settled back, leaning into him. "Don't you think that's going a little too far?"

"Nope. Nothing's too far when it comes to keeping my girl safe!" Naruto retorted, hugging her protectively and resting his head on her shoulder.

"Oh, Naruto-kun...so overprotective..." Nozomi sighed as she forced his arms off of her and turned to face him, snickering at the sad look that had appeared on his face.

"But!- Nozo-chan, I!--"

"Shh..." Nozomi whispered as she leaned in and claimed the boy's lips with hers in a deep, passionate kiss. After almost a minute, the cat girl pulled away and grinned breathlessly. "...I wouldn't have you any other way...Naruto-kou." she panted softly.

Naruto just stared in surprise at the girl, blushing hard, but grinning widely.

"Err...that's what you wanted--err, expected- last night when I gave you the ramen, isn't it?" Nozomi blushed as well, but forced herself not to break eye contact. The last thing she wanted now was for him to think she was ashamed to have kissed him like that!

"Y...yeah..." Naruto grinned wider, still blushing hard. She'd kissed him, as well as teased the inside of his mouth a little... *'Who are you and what have you done with the real Nozomi?'* he wondered with a small smirk.

"Um...well, I don't know about you," Nozomi said a few minutes later, "but I'm starving...there's something about almost drowning that really works up an appetite." The cat girl giggled sheepishly as her stomach growled suddenly, apparently agreeing with her, and she got to her feet, holding out a hand to the blond and helping him up.

"Ok then." Naruto grinned. "Let's change real quick, then we can go see what kind of food there is to eat here."

Nozomi nodded eagerly. "In that case, I'll be right back." She quickly grabbed her bag and headed to the changing rooms again. Once there, she hurriedly got changed into her netting, skirt and jacket, and slipped on her black sandals, snapping the buckle into place. Then she picked up her bag again, after stowing her bathing suit in a special bag to keep her other things dry, and walked outside, a smile on her face.

'Somehow I feel more relieved, now that Naruto-kun knows what I've been dealing with, and how I've been feeling...It's like I'm at peace at last...He'll help me deal with Suoh's antics...I can relax for once..'

"Ok, Naruto-kun, I'm ba-" Nozomi broke off as she saw the sad look on Naruto's face and she sweatdropped. "Wh-what's the matter...?"

"...I don't see how you deal with your tail," Naruto heaved a sigh, "It's so uncomfortable!"

"What do you me-" Nozomi broke off and laughed, "Oh...you make a hole for your tail to go through, not keep it tucked in like that, silly!"

".....I do....?" Naruto blinked. "....I guess that would work..."

Nozomi snickered and looked away as the blond ripped a hole in his pants and pulled his tail through. "Better?" she asked when he'd finished.

"Well..." Naruto frowned, "I guess...but it feels a little...drafty..."

"Meh, you'll get used to it." Nozomi giggled. "Of course, if you don't wanna deal with drafts, you know how to make the tail and ears go away!"

At this, Naruto's eyes widened, and he shook his head stubbornly. "No, I can handle it, I just need to get adjusted!"

"If you say so." Nozomi smirked.

"I do...now, it looks like we're ready," Naruto smiled, "so let's get going...I'm starved!"

"Yeah, me too...ok, let's!" Nozomi agreed.

Naruto grinned as he gently took the cat girl's hand in his, lacing fingers with her, and they started up the path that would take them into town.

15 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PART 6}

"Was that ever good!" Naruto grinned as he leaned back in his seat and stretched, fox tailed twitching contentedly. "Ahhh, I'm full!"

"Hmmm, yeah." Nozomi nodded in agreement as she slurped the last of her ramen noodles up and leaned back against the booth she and Naruto were sitting in. "Though, it doesn't compare to Ichiraku's ramen, if you ask me."

"Well duh!" Naruto grinned. "That's cause NOBODY can get it like Teuchi-san does...hehe!"

Nozomi nodded absentmindedly as she looked up and gazed around the room, frowning in surprise as she found that everyone here, customer and employee alike, was watching her and Naruto with expressions that could only be described as fearful, hints of nervousness in their eyes.

'I knew people would be scared to see me but this is ridiculous!' The cat girl sighed quietly as she shot the people a warning glare, and they went back to what they were doing, *'I mean, come on! They're acting like Naruto-kun and I are aliens from outer space!'*

"Umm...is something wrong, Nozo-chan?" The blond across from her asked, noticing the glare on her face. "Whatcha lookin' at?"

"I'M not looking at anything..." Nozomi mumbled as she turned her attention back to her boyfriend, "It's everyone HERE...do you not feel their eyes on you?" She demanded, voice barely above a whisper.

"Ohh...so that's why it's so awkwardly quiet in here?" Naruto paused and lowered his voice. "Well then, you wanna leave now?" he asked softly as he glanced up and shot a glare at the woman working the counter, who was too busy watching him and Nozomi to listen completely to the customer who's order she was taking.

"Yeah...let's." Nozomi nodded in agreement, smiling slightly as the blond boy stood and extended his hand out to her. She accepted his hand, still smiling and blushed as the boy pulled her not only to her feet, but into his side, and wrapped his arm around her waist, keeping her there as they walked outside.

Once Naruto was sure the door had closed behind them, he let go of the cat girl and looked at her. "Geez, what was WRONG with those people?! They acted like they thought we were gonna eat them, or...something!...It made me mad!"

"It's because of me.." Nozomi gave a sad smile. "They all thought I was dead this whole time, so seeing me return is kind of a shock for them...and now that you have ears and a tail too, they're also scared of you..."

"Pfft! Well THAT'S stupid!" Naruto muttered, pressing his ears flat against his head in disgust and sighed. "So, what do you wanna do now?" He glared back at the doors behind them. "I am NOT going

back in there!"

"I wasn't going to suggest that." Nozomi giggled slightly. "Hmmm..umm, well...." The cat girl paused, trying to think of something for them to do. "I could show you where I used to live before I ran away."

"That sounds great!" Naruto grinned. "I was wondering about where you lived all this time...so let's go see then, Nozo-chan!"

"Ok...but it's not really anything special." Nozomi warned him, grabbing his hand and starting to walk, glancing around at everything and everyone they passed by.

Naruto just grinned wider and glanced around as well as he was led by the hand, feeling a little sad. This place seemed so harmless...as did the people...it was hard to believe it was the same place his kitten had grown up, beaten to the point of bleeding, hated, misunderstood...

"We're here." Nozomi said softly, stopping abruptly.

"Oh, great, !!" Naruto broke off as he glanced up, and his face fell. Sure, it was just a tiny little apartment....but....even here he could sense the sadness. The sorrow that came from the little house was almost overwhelming. From the looks of things, the place obviously hadn't been touched in years, probably not since the day Nozomi had run away.

"I know...it's a total dump," Nozomi said quietly, "but this is where I grew up....so...what now...?"

"Do you think we'd be allowed to go inside?" Naruto paused, flushing a little. "Just curious...I'd like to see the inside if you think that'd be allowed."

"Sure, go ahead." Nozomi gave a small wave of her hand. "The clan obviously doesn't care who goes in or out, since this place hasn't been touched in years."

"Ok then, so are you coming with me?"

Noozmi glanced at the door reluctantly before nodding. "...Yeah, I'm coming.." The cat girl heaved a sigh before walking up and gabbing the door knob, taking a quick step back as the door swung open with a loud creak.

"Ok, c'mon." Nozomi glanced over her shoulder at the blond before walking inside and flipping the light switch, not surprised to find that the little bit of light that still burned was faint, dim, making it hard to see.

"Well, here we are...sorry if it's hard to see everything..." The cat girl shrugged.

"Hey, I can see just fine." Naruto smiled. "Every good ninja knows how to adjust to all sorts of different situations, including ones with bad lighting."

"Ok then." Nozomi stepped further into the tiny house, as did Naruto. His heart sank as he glanced around at the sight before him. On one wall was a medium sized, moth eaten mattress; On the wall left of it was a small sink, a refrigerator, and a big, round faded blue rug on the floor. On the right wall there

was a door, which Naruto found led to the small, box shaped bathroom. It consisted of a small sink, a toilet, and a shower, and just like everything else inside the small apartment, everything in there was coated with a thick layer of dust, and there were spider webs everywhere.

Naruto backed out of the bathroom and glanced around the room, trying to imagine how things must have felt here for Nozomi. She must have shared the bed with her parents, seeing as that was the only piece of furniture in here suitable for sleeping on; the rug on the ground was quite possibly where the family had sat down for meals together.

How lonely, the boy thought with a pang of sadness, it must have been to have stayed here after your parents' death. To have slept in the same bed that used to be cramped because of there not being enough room for everyone, only for it to be big and empty on either side of you now; the warmth of the mattress gone and in its place, coldness, serving as a reminder of just how alone you were now.

How sad it also must have been to sit on that large, faded rug and eat meal after meal, day in, day out, alone, with only your memories of the family discussions that had taken place during dinner, yet another bitter reminder that you no longer had anyone else in the world to care for you.

The blond fought back tears as he imagined all this. No wonder Nozomi had been so willing to die; she had literally had NOTHING. In an attempt to keep his tears from falling, Naruto glanced down at the floor and was immediately surprised to find most of the floor was stained red.

At this moment, Nozomi glanced over, and seeing what he was looking at, she nodded, confirming his suspicions. "Yeah...that's my blood..." The cat girl closed her eyes, fighting back her own tears as memories, unwanted memories flooded her mind. "I tried to clean the floor every time I got blood on it after being beat, but it was just impossible to keep up with that AND keeping myself clean...So I kinda just...gave up after awhile..."

"So..." Naruto pointed over by the bathroom door where the stain was much darker, and larger and frowned. "What happened there to cause so much blood?"

"That..." Nozomi looked away and sighed, "That's from the day Suoh tied the bell on me and beat me until I was barely alive..." The cat girl lowered her head so that shadows covered her eyes. "I could barely get home, and just as I was headed for the bathroom to get cleaned up I collapsed there."

Naruto, hearing the sadness in the girl's voice walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, hugging her gently, hoping to comfort her, even if only a little.

The cat girl heaved a shaky sigh and let herself lean against his chest slightly, grateful for his company. *'I couldn't deal with these memories on my own...thanks for being here with me, Naruto-kun.'*

Naruto smiled a little, sensing the calmness that was slowly but surely washing over his "kitten", and rested his head on her shoulder, glancing around the room absently. During his second glance around the room, he noticed the cracked walls, as well as the torn curtains on the window above the bed...the picture frame laying face down on the mattress...Wait. Picture frame?

Slowly Naruto unwound his arms from around the cat girl's waist and approached the bed, carefully

picking up the rectangular frame and looking at it. There was a picture of three people inside, but the glass was coated with such a thick film of grime and dust, Naruto couldn't see much, even when he wiped some of the dust away.

"Here, let me help." Nozomi took the frame from Naruto then and threw it onto the ground, watching emotionlessly as the aged glass shattered into millions of pieces. "Hehe, watch your feet." She warned as she used her dig through the glass, carefully digging the photo out of the broken frame, and handing it to Naruto. "There you go."

"Uhhh thanks..." Naruto sweatdropped as he took the picture from the cat girl. He hadn't told her to break the frame!.....Oh well, at least he could see the photo clearly now. On the back of the photo there was writing, which read: "**Kazuki, Izumi and Nozomi Kubota.**" At another, closer look, Naruto saw more writing, scribbled in the same handwriting that said: "**Together forever, no matter what.**" The blond turned the photo over and looked at it, eyes softening at the image he saw.

The photo was of a young Nozomi and her parents. The cat girl was perched on the shoulders of her father, a man with twinkling, green eyes, and messy brown hair that was constantly in his eyes. The grinning woman next to him, Nozomi's mother, had warm brown eyes, and her curly, dark brown locks of hair were obviously being ruffled in a gentle breeze. The three of them all looked so happy in this picture, Naruto felt himself tear up a little as a pang of sadness shot through him.

'It's ironic...They promised to be here with her, and yet here we are years later...them dead, and Nozomi...on her own...' The boy thought, now fighting back the tears that threatened to fall. *'Now I REALLY don't want to leave her alone...'*

"Naruto-kun? What are you thinking about?"

Naruto glanced up from the photo and was immediately mesmerized, caught up in the cat girl's golden-yellow eyes. When had she moved so close to him like this?

"N-nothing really." Naruto sighed and handed her the photo. "Here....They look like they were really nice people.."

"Yeah, they were...really nice." Nozomi nodded as she stared at the picture. Naruto could've sworn he saw a glitter of tears in her eyes, but whatever had been there was gone in a quick flash of the girl's sleeve. Her jacket may have hidden her tears, however, it did NOT hide the sadness on her face.

Now overcome with a sudden need to protect her, to reassure her he was there, Naruto lunged forward and pulled the cat girl into his arms, hugging her tight. "Nozomi, I know what you're thinking about...and I promise, I'll never leave you," The boy swallowed hard, fighting back the lump in his throat, for if that gave way so would his tears, "I promise you...I'll stay with you forever!"

Not even her sleeve could hide her tears now, as they spilled from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks, and Nozomi returned Naruto's hug just as tight, sobbing softly.

"...Nozo-chan..." Naruto sighed inwardly and began to stroke the girl's cat ears lightly, in an effort to soothe her.

A few minutes later, the cat girl was calm no longer sobbing as she had been before. "Naruto-kun..." she murmured, her voice muffled by the blond's shoulder, which she had her face buried in.

"What is it?" Naruto asked, pleased to find he could understand her muffled voice thanks to the new, improved hearing his fox ears blessed him with.

"Please....don't promise me forever.....that's not a promise you can keep...things happen everyday...people die everyday...and the line of work you and I are in endangers our very existence...it's impossible to keep a promise involving forever.."

"Wha...what do you mean?" Naruto frowned.

"For crying out loud, Naruto-kun!" Nozomi pulled out of the boy's embrace and stared at him, exposing her wet, tear streaked face. "Aside from LIFE being dangerous and hazardous each day...look at the job we do. We're NINJA! Trained in the arts of ninjutsu, taijutsu, genjutsu, whatever...we're trained to fight, and to kill if we must! And we're sent out against other ninja with the same goal, who will gladly kill US to accomplish their mission!"

"Our lives are never guaranteed to last even a day, let alone a WEEK! We're shown grace when we return from a mission!" The cat girl lowered her head now, shadows casting over her eyes. "So Naruto-kun...please...don't promise me forever when you have no way of knowing what's gonna happen...I don't wanna get my hopes up....not again.."

"Nozomi.." Naruto stepped forward and pulled the cat girl into another hug. "What you said is true...but you forget...you and I aren't ordinary ninja. We have demons sealed inside of us! The demons make us stronger and harder to beat! Sure, we can be defeated still, but nowhere near as easily as a normal ninja! So I'll promise you my whole life- which to me IS forever...and even when we die, my soul won't leave yours...so please, calm down.."

"...Fine...I-I'll trust you." Nozomi looked up sheepishly. "S-sorry for going all...dark on you...it's this place. The memories are too much to bear."

"In that case, let's leave...I've seen more than enough of your old home." Naruto grinned, and Nozomi found it hard not to do the same. "Ok...let's leave." she agreed, taking his offered hand and leading them both out of the tiny little house she had once called home...

"Nozo-chan...you ok?" Naruto waved a hand in the cat girl's face, and she blinked, snapping back to reality.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking."

"Oh." Naruto paused. "So, whatcha thinkin' about?"

"Nothing important." Nozomi sighed and looked away, patting her jacket pocket as she walked. She'd

made sure to grab the one photo of her and her parents, since it was her only memory she had left of them, aside from the kunai that had been used to kill her father, but...that was another story..

"Hey, come on," Naruto reached out and gently turned her head so she was facing him. "If it wasn't anything important, you wouldn't be frowning like you are...now tell me what's going on in that head of yours."

"Ok, fine." Nozomi sighed. "I know we've only been here a little over a day...but...I'm fed up. I'm sick of this place...of the people...staring at me like I'm some monster bent on destroying all of human kind...everything..."

"Suoh?" Naruto asked softly, and the cat girl nodded in response.

"Especially him!" She paused. "So...I was thinking...more like wondering...we've found out all we came to find out....so...can we leave?...Just pack up and go home?" Nozomi stopped walking and stared deeply into the blond's blue eyes, making sure to put on her cutest kitty face. "Please?"

Naruto, in response gave a wide grin and nodded, unable to resist her cat like charm. "Sure we can...but if it's alright, can we sleep tonight, and leave first thing tomorrow?"

Nozomi nodded, looking up at the sky. It would be dark in a few minutes anyways. "Ok, let's go back to the clearing then, get a good night's sleep, then leave tomorrow."

"As you wish." Naruto smiled as he held out a hand to the brunette. "Let's get back then, kitty cat."

Nozomi smiled back and took the boy's hand, blushing faintly. "Ok."

Naruto's smile widened and he began to walk, soon arriving back at the clearing in the forest which they had dubbed their campsite.

The cat girl next to him took one look at the space and yawned softly. "Man...I'm suddenly so tired ~nyaa.."

"Heh, me too." Naruto replied, yawning as well.

Without another word, Nozomi opened her bag and dug out her sleeping bag. Naruto followed suit, digging his out and laying it on the ground beside hers. Then he removed his jacket and crawled into the sleeping bag. Nozomi crawled into hers beside him, only removing her jacket once she was under covers, to avoid "flashing" Naruto with a glimpse of something he wasn't allowed to see...yet.

The cat girl blushed at this and quickly pushed that thought away, laying her folded up jacket next to her.

"Good night, Nozo-chan." Came Naruto's voice in a soft tone that was quiet for him.

"Hmmm, good night, Naruto-kun." Nozomi smiled and closed her eyes, pulling the sleeping bag up to her chin. A few seconds later, a soft, warm pair of lips on her cheek caused the cat girl to open her eyes quickly, a blush spreading across her face as she saw Naruto, out of his sleeping bag, crouched over

her with his face only centimeters away from her own.

Naruto saw the blush on her surprised looking face and laughed softly. "What? You didn't think I'd go to sleep without a good night kiss, did you?"

Before Nozomi could answer, the blond closed the little space between them, catching her lips with his in a slow, lingering kiss that made her entire body tingle with both shock and excitement.

After a couple seconds, Naruto pulled away, grinning as he took notice of her now **crimson** face. "Sweet dreams, my princess...I'll see you in the morning." This said, the boy laid back down in his sleeping bag once more, closed his eyes, and was almost immediately fast asleep, snoring softly.

Nozomi heaved a shaky sigh, waiting for her heartbeat to return to normal speed, and burrowed deep into her sleeping bag, hugging her knees tightly to her chest. Whether it was Naruto's snoring, or how awkward she was feeling, Nozomi didn't know. However, she DID know one thing, and that was that she couldn't sleep.

'C'mon, Nozomi, just fall asleep already! You're gonna need energy for the trip back home!'

Nozomi sighed and shut her eyes tight, trying desperately to fall asleep. She was just starting to nod off when a hushed whisper and a nudge in her side jerked her wide awake again.

"Nozomi!" the whisper said, just before she was nudged again.

Realizing that whoever was there wasn't going to go away, the cat girl gave a defeated sigh before straightening up and peeking half her face out from under the sleeping bag. "What is it...?"

"Aww, you look sleepy...did I wake you, kitty?"

Nozomi gasped in shock as her stare landed on none other than Suoh, and she scowled. "What are *you* doing here?!" she demanded, sitting up straight and pointing an accusing finger at him.

Suoh was about to answer, but lost his train of thought as the sleeping bag slid off her to rest in her lap, and in the process, exposed her medium sized chest wrapped in nothing but her fish net top, which, unfortunately for her was see through. "Well, I, umm--" the boy stammered, blushing deeply, unable to raise his eyes from her bust now; a typical guy.

"What's your problem-" Nozomi started to growl, only to gasp in realization and astily grab her jacket, pulling it on quickly. "Quit staring, you stupid pervert!" she snarled, blushing furiously.

"If you don't want me looking, then don't SHOW me!" Suoh snickered.

"But--I--I didn't know that!--I mean!--You shouldn't have been!--" Nozomi sighed and folded her arms tightly across her chest, scowling at the boy. "Tell me why you're here!" she demanded, changing the subject.

"Oh, I think you should KNOW the answer to that." Suoh smirked.

A drop of sweat rolled down the back of Nozomi's head and she groaned. "You're not here to try and make me be your girlfriend again...are you...?" she asked, eying the dirty blond haired boy warily.

"Ding ding, we have a winner!" Suoh snickered. "Now for your prize, a lifetime of happiness with yours truly!" The boy grinned and winked, pointing a thumb toward himself.

"Suoh-kun..." Nozomi facepalmed at his cheesiness. "My answer is still no!!"

"Oh but you haven't heard my offer yet." Suoh said quickly.

Nozomi growled and rolled her eyes in annoyance. "Suoh-kun, I don't care what you say...I will NOT be your girlfriend!"

"You don't care..." Suoh paused, pretending to be sad. "...Even if it involves your fiance's life??"

"No, I do n-" Nozomi broke off as his words sunk in fully. "...What do you mean? What about Naruto-kun?"

Suoh smirked, pleased by her reaction. "I mean...you won't change your mind about being my girlfriend...even if it was the only way to save him from- oh I don't know, the extraction jutsu?"

Nozomi frowned, speechless. "...Essence no Jutsu...? Wha-what about it?!"

"Ok, I'll be blunt." Suoh sighed as he formed handsigns. "I KNOW how to perform Essence no Jutsu...and unless you agree to stay and be my girlfriend, I'll use it on Whiskers, here...get the picture now?"

Nozomi just stared at him, eyes wide in horror. "...B-b-but---what about--" she paused and smirked slightly as a thought hit her. "Sorry but you CAN'T kill Naruto-kun with that...he's got Kyuubi, the ninetailed fox demon sealed in him. No jutsu can kill HIM!"

"Ah, but you're wrong about that." Suoh sneered. "The Essence no Jutsu CAN kill Kyuubi."

"Oh really." Nozomi smirked challengingly at the boy now. "If that was the case, then why didn't the 4th Hokage use THAT on Kyuubi instead of sealing him in Naruto-kun like he did?"

"Because," Suoh grinned deviously, "he didn't know the jutsu!"

"I don't believe you." Nozomi frowned, crossing her arms again.

"It's true." Suoh snickered. "The Hokage and our clan had a disagreement about whether or not it was right to kill the 'Kubota demons'...However, the Hokage couldn't stop our clan from doing it, because he never learned HOW they were killing the demons. Because of this, the 4th was unable to kill the Kyuubi, which is the reason he had to seal it in another being's body."

".....I still don't believe you!" Nozomi growled, trying not to look convinced, even though his argument

made a lot of sense.

"Oh really....well then, I'll prove it to you right now!" Suoh smirked as he finished his hand signs, and he turned to Naruto, who was still sleeping peacefully, not disturbed in the slightest.

"...You can't kill Kyuubi!" Nozomi insisted stubbornly.

"Do you REALLY want to find out if I can or not?" Suoh turned to her challengingly.

"Y-you wouldn't!" Nozomi frowned.

"I WOULD!" Suoh smirked. "...Unless you leave this guy here, and become MY kitty."

"You CAN'T kill him!" Nozomi cried, beginning to panic now. "It's not possible!"

"...Can you afford to find out?" A devilish grin was on Suoh's face as he spoke.

Nozomi just stared at the boy, horror written all over her face as panic flooded her entire being. *'He wouldn't really....WOULD he?! I guess...he would...if it meant he'd get me...GAH! I don't WANT this!'*

The cat girl's eyes widened even more, if possible, as a new thought struck her, its force leaving her shocked as if she had been hit by a bolt of lightning. *'Wait...! Is this what my dreams have been trying to warn me about?!...It would make sense...ARGH! What am I supposed to do?!...I KNEW we shouldn't have waited till morning! We should have left TONIGHT! What do I do? What do I DO?!'*

"Tick tock, tick rock, Nozo-neko-chan," Suoh grinned deviously, motioning to Naruto, who still slept obliviously. "Lives are on the line here."

'He's right..I don't really believe Essence no Jutsu could kill Kyuubi...but that story makes sense..and I REALLY can't afford to have Suoh use it and find that he was right...that would kill ME to see him kill Naruto-kun!' The cat girl hung her head to hide the glistening tears that were quickly springing to her eyes and sighed. *'I guess...if there's no other choice...I...I have to do this...I WON'T let my nightmares come true....Naruto-kun will NOT die because of ME!'*

"Well?" Suoh pressed.

Slowly Nozomi raised her head, exposing the tears that had formed in her eyes. "....Fine." she uttered softly, sadly. "I'll...I'll be your girlfriend...just...PROMISE...not to do ANYTHING to Naruto-kun..."

A smirk was on Suoh's face as he nodded, looking all too pleased. "As you wish, my pretty kitty." he grinned and rubbed the cat girl's ears affectionately, though to her, his hands felt hard, firm...not the firm gentleness she'd known from Naruto...but firm and hard, cold, even...

'I can do this...' Nozomi heaved a heavy sigh. *'It's...not the first time I've felt this kind of pain in my heart..I'll get over it. I...I can...move on...and forget Naruto-kun...right...?'*

"...Pinky swear on it." Nozomi said quickly, holding out her pinky, which Suoh hooked his to quickly and

nodded.

"Pinky swear."

'No...I can't forget him...Naruto-kun has rubbed off on me so much...even his childish innocence of trusting a pinky swear...' The cat girl heaved another sigh as the tears in her eyes finally flowed down her cheeks, gushing like a waterfall. *'If I can't forget him...then I'll just go back to living numbly...and I'll dream of what could have been a happy ending, just as I did when I was young...forever hiding my tears from the world and their judging eyes...I can do this...I hope..'*

"Hehe, I knew you'd come around kitty." Suoh was grinning maliciously now. "So...first thing's first...you need to break up with ramen breath here...and here's how you'll do it...listen closely.." The boy smirked deviously as he lowered his voice, and whispered softly in one of Nozomi's cat ears, his rushed voice making it twitch.

The cat girl listened, nodding numbly, and feeling as cold as if she were left out in the chilling rain, and it was pelting her, going through to her very bones. She winced discretely and lowered her head, tears still falling rapidly as she felt her heart break in two, damaged beyond repair, all hope lost now..

16 - D.A.R.E (Don't Anger Red Eyes) {PART 7} FINAL

'Morning already...?' Nozomi sighed as bright sunlight forced her awake, and she hid underneath her covers in an attempt to shield her eyes from the sun's rays. The cat girl closed her eyes and covered her mouth as she yawned softly.

The morning that she'd anticipated had finally come, but now instead of being eager, she dreaded getting up; Because she was about to do the cruelest thing she had ever done...for the first time ever, she was going to break Naruto's heart. Not just by playing hard to get and throwing insults as she had when they were younger....she wished she could just do that and him take it as a hint to leave her...but no. What Nozomi was about to do was much worse. Much, much worse...Oh well....at least she was fortunate enough that Naruto, being the heavy sleeper he often was, hadn't heard a bit of the conversation that had taken place the previous night, as she'd laid there, trying to drift off to sleep.

'I'll never forgive myself for this...' Nozomi thought with a sinking feeling. *'...But if I don't...Naruto-kun might die...and it'd be my fault...I couldn't live with that....'* The cat girl frowned. *'I'd rather be miserable if it means he stays alive...'*

"Good morning, sunshiiiiiiiiine!" Came a loud, enthusiastic voice, just before Nozomi's body was burdened by the weight of something heavy.

'Naruto-kun...sweet, goofy Naruto-kun...what will I do without you to make me smile...?' The brunette thought sadly as she felt a sharp pain in her heart. She cleared her throat, trying to force back the sob that threatened to escape her. "O-ok, Naruto-kun...I'm awake...get off, will ya?"

"...Ok." The boy's voice sounded reluctant, but after a slight pause, the weight on Nozomi's back was lifted, and she took a deep breath. *'Ok, just play it cool. Go out there and put on the best act you can! You've done worse, this is NOTHING!'*

Nozomi reluctantly crawled out of her sleeping bag and gave a wave. "Morning." She said softly, faking a smile as she went to work rolling up her sleeping bag.

Almost immediately the cat girl was swooped into the loving embrace of a very happy to see her blondie.

"Nozo-chan!" the boy greeted, loud and enthusiastic, hugging her tightly, "How did my favorite kitty sleep?" He frowned, now noticing how droopy her eyelids were. "You look tired...are you ok?...Did you not get enough sleep again?" He grinned toothily. "Cause if that's the case, my lap is always available for you to nap in like yesterday, hehe!"

Nozomi did a double take, hoping in a way this would shake away her pain, and tried to pull away. "Naruto, it's NOTHING! I'm FINE!"

"Ok, ok..." Naruto frowned, looking a little taken aback. She hadn't yelled at him like that since before they'd started dating! "Aww...somebody's a grouchy kitten..." The blond grinned. "Here, let me cheer you up." He leaned in then, capturing the cat girl's cold lips in a warm kiss.

After a few seconds, however, the blond pulled away, frowning in confusion at her obvious refusal to return his embrace. "Nozo-chan, what's wrong?" A drop of sweat rolled down the back of his head as he saw the tears in her eyes, and worry flashed through his blue eyes. "Nozo-chan? What is it?...Why are you crying?"

Nozomi didn't answer, she just looked down at his jacket, unable to speak as the sobs she had fought back earlier succeeded in escaping her, drowning out any words that she might utter.

"C'mon, talk to me!" Naruto's frown deepened, concern written all over his face now.

"I'm...sorry..." Nozomi managed to choke, her golden eyes glazed over with tears as she slowly pushed the blond away, freeing herself from his arms, and took a few steps back.

"Wha--huh..?" Naruto looked at the brunette, more and more confused by her actions. "What was that for?...."

Nozomi didn't answer as she struggled to stop crying, dabbing at her eyes with her jacket sleeve.

"Tell me what's going on, Nozomi!" Naruto demanded, feeling helpless and a little bit angry. "You're freaking me out! What is it?! Are you...on that time..?" The blond blushed but forced himself to stare directly at the cat girl. "If that's what's making you emotional, tell me, cause you're scaring me!!"

Nozomi merely shook her head at his inquiry, too numb in pain and sadness to feel embarrassed.

"Then!--" Naruto lunged forward and grabbed the girl's shoulders. "TALK TO ME! Nozomi, tell me what's bothering you!!"

"I..." Nozomi heaved a sigh and hung her head, forcing herself to stop crying. *'If I'm gonna do this, I can't be crying...or he'll never believe me...'*

"I've decided to stay here." The cat girl raised her head to face Naruto now, and he was surprised to find that her tears had vanished. He frowned as her words sunk in.

"What...? Nozo-chan...you really want us to STAY in this place?"

".....Not us.....ME." Nozomi forced herself to say, feeling the tear on her heart begin.

"Wh-WHY?" Naruto's frown deepened, if possible. "You know that won't work...I can't leave and let you stay behind...I'd miss you too much!" He paused as another thought struck him. "...Besides, what about Kumoraku?! You have to be in a 10 foot radius of me to keep her sealed!"

"...I don't care..." Nozomi muttered. *'Here it goes...'*

"...Nozomi. What are you saying..?"

"Naruto-kun...what I'm saying is...whether the ring comes off or not...we're over...I no longer want to be

with you anymore...I'm sick of feeling like your prisoner, never free to do what I want for more than a half hour! I'm tired of having nothing but ramen, day in, day out, and I'm sick to death of having to get dressed in a tiny bathroom just because I can't trust you! You know what ELSE I hate?! Being forced to share a BED with you! Do you HONESTLY think it's ok to force me to sleep there while you cuddle me like I'm some stupid stuffed animal?! Well here's a newsflash for you! It's NOT ok!!"

Naruto just stared at the girl, his eyes wide with shock, pain visible on his face. "N...Nozo-chan...I...I thought...Why?...I thought...you loved me..! ...I get it. You're scared, now that things are so serious between us.....so you're trying to push me away.....I won't let you do it!"

'Stop, Naruto-kun...you're making this so HARD!'

"Don't you GET it, Naruto?!" Nozomi cried, desperation in her voice, as well as in her golden eyes, "I'm sick of it all...I can't DO it anymore....I'm fed up..."

"But Nozo-!!"

"I HATE you!"

Hearing these words, Naruto shut up, his ears pressing flat against his head, eyes filled with sadness, lip quivering. "N-no, you can't m-mean that...y-you're lying, N-Nozomi...."

"Naruto!" Nozomi gave an exasperated sigh, doing her best to appear as hateful as she could, to mask the pain she was feeling as her heart split into two equal halves. "I mean every BIT of it! I hate YOU, and I hate BEING with you!"

Naruto lowered his head now, heart breaking with every word. "N-Nozo-chan...I.....I thought...you were happy with me..."

"Well you thought wrong!" Nozomi's voice quivered slightly, and she raised her hand to her face, wiping away the newly formed tears from her eyes. "I want nothing to do with you, Naruto...NOTHING...and to prove it...!" The cat girl heaved a shaky sigh as she uttered the word "release", and Naruto's fox features vanished, his human ears returning now that they weren't being replaced by fox ears.

"There," Nozomi winced inwardly as she felt the remains of her heart shatter into little tiny pieces, much like a broken vase that has shattered into millions of pieces; beyond repairing. "Now you're free...my jutsu has been lifted from you....you have no excuse to follow me around anymore...So now...just do me a favor...and stay the heck away from me!"

Now dangerously close to tears, the cat girl turned and started to run, hoping to get out of reach before they fell down her face, but her hopes were dashed as Naruto lunged forward and grabbed her arm.

"Nozomi," his voice cracked as he choked through the sobs that were now coming from him, and at a second glance, you could see his eyes overflowing with tears that streamed steadily down his face. "please don't do this...don't leave me to be alone!"

'...That's really the last thing I want to do...I wish...I could stay....but I can't!'

"Naruto, let GO!" Nozomi cried, struggling to break away, but the boy's grip only tightened.

"No! I worked TOO hard to get you, for you to just abandon me now...Sorry, but I WON'T let you go Nozomi!" he said stubbornly, pulling her back against him, intending to trap her in a tight hug.

"...I'm sorry too..." Then, without any warning, Nozomi spun around, swinging her free hand at Naruto, and in doing so, she slapped him hard on the face, the impact of her hand on his cheek making a loud clap like noise. This slap stung Naruto worse than any other before, because it was filled with the cold bitterness that was Nozomi's rejection of him, and the pain stunned him, causing his grip on the girl's arm to loosen.

"...I'm sorry..." Nozomi hung her head as she pulled her arm free, and raised her hands to the back of her neck, messing with something from the look of it.

"...Nozomi...no...!" Naruto cried, now aware of what she was doing. He cried even harder as the cat girl reached out to him, the silver bell he had given her resting in her hand. "T-this can't be happening...!" He cried, suddenly feeling weak, voice trembling as he watched her place the bell in his hand and back away. "Nozomi, why?!"

"Because..." Nozomi took another step back, forcing hate into her eyes. "I already told you, Naruto....I HATE you! I'm through being tied to you like some stupid pet on a leash!"

"N...Nozomi...!" Naruto's lip quivered and he sobbed. "You can't mean that...!"

"...You'd better believe it." Nozomi mumbled, feeling sick to her stomach from the pain she felt now. For this was it. There was no going back. The damage was done. "This is it. Good bye, Naruto." Without another word, the cat girl turned and took off running, never looking back, for fear he'd see the tears that had begun to fall.

Naruto just stared, blue eyes watering over once more, and he cried harder than he ever had, his body shaking from how hard he was sobbing. "Nozomi...why...What did I DO?!...You...she...." The boy's shoulders heaved up and down uncontrollably as he struggled to form sentences that made sense, obviously failing miserably.

"Nozomi...why...?...Such...good times...wh..why...?" The blond babbled on, still crying hard as the memories he'd made with Nozomi flashed before his eyes, once after another, almost like a film, only they were playing in reverse, starting from their most recent memories here in her village, and going all the way back to the first night they became a couple. It had been a bit rocky in the beginning, but with time, the two of them had really found they were happy together.

Naruto sighed, a heavy sigh of sadness. It had been one of the first times he really felt like somebody cared about him...like he belonged, and had a purpose other than to be the ninetailed fox's human container. She...Nozomi, had given him a joy he hadn't felt in a long time. It wasn't the same kind of joy he'd felt when Sasuke had still been on squad 7...but it was still joy...and hope. Nozomi had been one of the only people who'd truly understood him, being a demon host herself, and she had made him feel like he could do anything if he truly wanted to. As long as he had her at his side. Leaving..she seemed to

have taken more than just her love from him...she had stripped him of his joy, and his peace...He couldn't go on...not without her. He had come to be far more dependent on Nozomi than he'd ever been on anybody else...now to lose her...she might just as well have ripped his heart out and thrust it far out of his reach.

The blond was silent now, his tears seeming to have dried up, as he slowly got to his feet, head lowered.

'I can't give up...there has to be some explanation for her leaving...and it's not because of my behavior...because...she told me yesterday, she wouldn't love me any other way than how I am!....No...something else is going on....and I have to find out....I can't give up, I just can't!' Naruto glanced up in the direction Nozomi had run, his eyes flashing red for a brief minute before he tore down the same path, running as fast as was humanly possible for him. *'I WON'T lose her!'*

"Nozomi! I'm sorry, but I'm NOT gonna give up on you!" The blond shouted loudly as he ran, despite the fact that he knew she wouldn't answer...

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"I feel like such a jerk..." Nozomi hung her head as she walked now, exhausted from running for as long as she had. "That's because I AM...a freaking heartless, emotionless jerk!" The cat girl sighed. Her tears had long ago dried up. Now all she felt was cold and dead, numb despite the gaping hole she felt in her heart.

One could hardly blame her, though...after betraying the one man she truly loved, all in order to SAVE this same person from potential death!

'I wish we had never come here,' Nozomi thought, sadness washing over her again like a huge tidal wave. *'Oh well...it doesn't matter now...not anymore...not now that I've ruined the only good thing I ever had...'*

She heaved a sigh and stopped walking, cat ears twitching back as a twig snapped. "Ok, not that I didn't already know you were there, but you may as well come out since you blew your cover...Suoh."

There was a pause before the boy emerged from behind a nearby tree, clapping his hands delightedly. "Amazing, Nozo-neko-chan...how DID you know I was there?"

"Sense of smell...heightened more than a normal ninja...demon sense." The brunette mumbled, heaving another sigh.

"Ah, of course." Suoh snickered. "Oh well, moving on...please, allow me to congratulate you on what you did out there...that was quite an extraordinary performance you put on!"

"Of course, you wouldn't miss out on a chance to see that..." Nozomi huffed, bitterness in her tone.

"Now, now, kitty, cheer up." Suoh smiled devillishly. "At least you can take pride in the fact that you are a GREAT actress! You even had ME believing you hated Whiskers! Seriously, such a believable performance!"

'Yes...my best lie ever...too bad it was at a time when I didn't want to lie...' The brunette thought miserably.

"Such a shame that it was ONLY an ACT...now Whiskers undoubtedly thinks you hate him," Suoh sneered.

The tears which Nozomi thought she had run out of welled back up into her eyes again as Suoh pulled her close, holding tightly to her as he crushed his lips against hers in a firm, demanding kiss.

'NO! I don't WANT to kiss him!' The cat girl thought, sobbing as her tears fell now, sliding rapidly down her face as she refused to return the boy's embrace. This frustrated him, and he pressed harder, all but bruising her fragile lips in his attempts to get a response. It worked, but not the way he expected, as she bit down hard on his tongue, and he pulled away, screaming in pain. Nozomi just kinda smirked, in spite of the tears that were running down her face.

"What the heck was THAT for Nozo-neko-chan?!" Suoh growled, looking angry.

"Come now, you must remember.." Nozomi sighed, "I agreed to go with you, yes...but NOT because I loved you...just to protect Naruto-kun..."

"W-well!" Suoh growled again, "You'd better change your attitude, and be a little more willing, if you want to keep him ALIVE!"

"U-understood..." Nozomi cringed, a little scared by his response.

Little did they know, that they were being watched by said Leaf ninja himself. The blond had followed Nozomi all morning, confused by the sobs and other noises he'd heard coming from her. He had hidden in the bushes when she stopped, curious as to what she would do next. Then, just as he'd been about to walk out and grab her, Suoh had come out from behind the tree, and he'd barely been able to contain his surprised growl.

It had been even harder to contain himself once the two had begun talking. It confused him, and he wanted to know what they meant, especially since he'd heard himself mentioned a few times. But he'd kept quiet...up until now. The last two things they had said had raised his curiosity level far too high and he could stay quiet no longer..

"WHAAAAAAAAAT?!"

Nozomi jumped back in shock as Naruto emerged from the bushes and ran in between them, glaring at Suoh, then giving her a very confused little frown, "What's going on here?" he demanded in a confused, yet firm tone.

"Whiskers...right on time." Suoh said, looking amused.

"What do you mean, right on time?" Nozomi frowned at him, now feeling confused herself. "You didn't plan for this to happen, did you?"

"Not really," Suoh snickered, "but I had a feeling he wouldn't just let you go that easily."

"Suoh!" Naruto growled, feeling ignored, "What did you mean by all you just said?! What did you say to make Nozomi have to dump me?!"

"I didn't say a thing, she just lost interest in you." Suoh smirked.

"LIAR!" Naruto shouted, grabbing the boy by the cuff of his shirt. "I heard EVERYTHING! Don't try to deny it, you SAID something, because you KNEW she wouldn't just up and leave me without good reason! Now tell the truth!"

"Alright, fine...but you asked for it." Suoh smirked wider. "Basically, while you're all depressed and confused about your kitty leaving you, she's depressed because she didn't WANT to, but it was the only way to save your life."

"Save my life...?" Naruto blinked, appearing puzzled as he let go of the boy's shirt. "...What do you mean, save my life?"

"Geez, you're dense." Suoh sighed. "Fine...I'll explain...but remember that there's nothing you can do about this."

Naruto glared angrily at the smirking blond, already knowing he wouldn't like the story, and nodded. "Go ahead...and see that you don't leave anything out!"

Still smirking smugly, Suoh nodded and explained. Everything. He didn't leave out one little detail. Just as Naruto had asked. "Like I said, there's not a thing you can do," the dirty blond haired boy snickered as he finished his explanation, "cause I can kill you easily."

"Why you...!" Naruto growled angrily, trembling wildly, uncontrollably, with rage.

"C'mon Suoh-kun..." Nozomi hung her head. She felt reluctant to leave, but she couldn't look at Naruto anymore...it hurt too much. "...Let's go..."

"Nozo-chan!" Naruto grabbed the girl's arm as she turned to leave, pulling her into him, and hugged her tightly, still trembling, now with sadness as he cried. "I knew it...I KNEW you wouldn't leave me, after all we've gone through together...! Not without a good reason, anyways..." He frowned as the cat girl's entire body went tense, a sign she was going to try to escape, and hugged her tighter.

"Nozomi...Please...don't do this...we can work this out a different way!...Please, Nozomi, I need you! You're my heart!"

Nozomi's eyes grew wide, tears falling from them once more as she heard his statement, and her shoulders heaved up and down as she used a trembling hand to try and push him away.

"Hey, paws off my girl, Whiskers!" Suoh growled, looking annoyed.

"YOUR girl?!" Naruto growled back, glaring at the blond.

"Yes...MY girl...**Kyuubi**." Suoh sneered as he grabbed the cat girl from Naruto's arms and locked her in his own embrace; a hug which, to Nozomi, felt cold and hard, just as the feeling of having him pet her ears had felt.

"N..Nozo-chan...?" Naruto looked desparately at the brunette and frowned as she looked up at him, only to bury her face in Suoh's shoulder, unable to look at him.

'GAH! Think!' Naruto growled in frustration. 'You can't lose Nozomi, not to THIS jerk! There HAS to be a way to stop this! Arrrghh! Think, Naruto, think! You can't give up here if you're gonna be Hokage! A true shinobi NEVER gives up!' Naruto's eyes widened then, and a determined grin appearing on his face.
'That's it!'

"Suoh!"

Immediately said boy looked up and smirked. "What is it, Whiskers?"

Naruto scowled at him. "I challenge you to a fight...It's the only way we're gonna find out who the right guy for Nozomi REALLY is!"

"What? A fight?" Suoh frowned and shook his head. "But, I already won...Sorry, no can do."

"Hehe," Naruto gave a devious smirk, "gee Suoh, I didn't know you were a CHICKEN!"

"I'm no chicken!" The boy holding Nozomi growled.

"Chicken!"

"Am not!"

"....Chicken."

"Am NOT!"

Naruto snickered loudly as he tucked his hands under his arms and made flapping motions, making loud clucking noises at Suoh. After a few minutes of this, Suoh had had enough, and he let go of Nozomi, throwing his hands in the air.

"Fine!" He snarled, "If it's a fight you want, then a fight you'll GET! Winner take ALL!"

"Let's go then, right here!" Naruto shouted anxiously.

Suoh nodded and thrust Nozomi onto a large, flat rock on the ground. "You can watch me win from here, babe." he said softly, kissing her cheek and winking. "Then after that we'll go out to lunch to celebrate,

and do a few OTHER things as well...hehe..."

"Hey, Suoh, are we gonna fight, or are you just gonna put Nozomi to sleep with your failed attempts at being romantic?" Naruto smirked.

'Ooh, nice one!' Nozomi hid a grin as she watched Suoh stomp away and take up a fighting stance.

"I'm ready whenever you are, Whiskers!"

"Then let's DO this already!" Naruto grinned determinedly and formed a hand sign. "Shadow clone jutsu!"

As he said this, several "Poof!" sounds were heard, and seven more Narutos appeared behind the blond.

"Shadow clones?" Suoh folded his arms and tsk-tsked. "Really, Whiskers, I expected more from you."

'Don't underestimate him and his clones!' Nozomi thought, praying that Naruto would win, and Suoh would honor his word and let her go with the leaf ninja.

"CHAAAARGE!!" Naruto commanded, dashing toward Suoh, followed closely by the 7 copies of himself.

A smug smirk appeared on Suoh's face as he did a few of his own hand signs now. "Keiuseru no Jutsu." he said quietly, and his body vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Hey!" Naruto and his clones skidded to a halt and glanced around anxiously. "Where'd he go?!"

'Hehe...nobody can compete with my disappearing jutsu!' The now invisible Suoh thought, laughing silently as he snuck up behind the real Naruto. *'You might as well call it quits and go home NOW, brat!'*

"Heads up, Whiskers! Aha, too late!"

"What the?!" Naruto cried out in shock as his legs were yanked out from under him, and he landed face first on the ground.

The invisible Suoh laughed and fell over backwards. "Haha, face it, you can't fight me if you can't even SEE me! You lose!"

"I'm not giving up THAT easily!" Naruto growled, getting to his feet and swinging his fist in the direction he thought his opponent's voice had come from.

"Ah, nice try, but wrong!"

"Damn it!" Naruto's eyes widened as he was grabbed by the arm, and spun around several times before being thrown head first into a tree. "Oww..." The boy groaned and did a double take, trying to make the spinning ramen bowls stop circling over his head, and sighed.

"Face it, loser!" Came Suoh's taunting voice. "You don't stand a fighting chance against me while my disappearing jutsu is in effect! Give up already!"

"I'm NOT giving up!" Naruto growled in response. "I'm gonna beat you to a bloody pulp!"

"Oh, really!" The voice belonging to Suoh taunted, sounding further away. "Then come on, prove it!"

"You get back here!" Naruto jumped to his feet and took off running, only to stop and scream in pain a moment later. "GAAAH! WEDGIE!!"

"Hehe, surprised?" Suoh's voice said, now behind the stunned blond. "Please, don't get your boxers in a knot over me....hehe, too late!"

"Owww!" Naruto whined as he tried to fix his pants discretely. "Suoh, that's fighting dirty!"

"We never set any rules for this fight, baby!"

Naruto groaned and glanced back at Nozomi, dismayed to find that she was in tears from trying not to laugh. "Oy, Nozo-chan, it's not funny!" He whined, shaking his fist at her childishly.

"Sorry, sorry!" Came the cat girl's snickered apology.

"Hey, you should really pay more attention, Whiskers!"

"Wha?" Naruto turned just in time to get socked square in the jaw, and sent crashing into a wall that was being painted by two workers. Said workers jumped back and screamed in surprise as the blond plowed head first into the wall.

"Ugh...owww...!" he groaned, rubbing the back of his head and wincing.

"If that's the best that you can do, this is gonna be a piece of cake!" Suoh's voice snickered loudly from nearby.

Naruto growled in annoyance as he struggled to think of a plan of attack. ANYTHING to hit his invisible opponent!

'Let's see...Wait...he's already knocked out all my clones?! GAH! If only I could SEE him, this would be sooo much easier!' Naruto clutched his head as it began to throb again, glancing down in annoyance.

Then suddenly, he had it as his eyes landed on one of the workers cans of paint. *'That's it!'*

"Multi shadow clone jutsu!"

Suoh smirked in amusement as several clones of Naruto appeared everywhere, and shook his head, laughing softly. "Whiskers, it doesn't matter how many clones you make- they can't beat me!"

"Hmmm...maybe not," Naruto and his many clones nodded, all of them giving a toothy grin, "but they'll keep you from finding the REAL me!"

"Is that a challenge?" the invisible Suoh frowned.

"Hmmm....maaaaaaaaaybe...!" All the Naruto's snickered.

"I'll make you eat those words...ALL of you!" Suoh growled viciously and socked one clone after another. "Take THIS..and THAT!" The invisible boy snarled as he socked one clone after another, and all the remaining Naruto's snickered.

"Nice try, but that WASN'T me!"

Suoh growled and punched another 10 clones, and the real Naruto, hidden amidst the middle of his clones sweatdropped, watching as one copy of himself after another vanished.

'He's fast! I'd better hurry!'

After making sure there were still enough clones to keep his opponent occupied, Naruto crept out of the crowd of his copies, and over to the wall he'd crashed into before, trying not to laugh at the two workers who were now standing there, their job forgotten as they watched with jaws dropped, the scene that was before them.

"Hey, sorry, but can I borrow some of this?" Without waiting for an answer, Naruto bent down and grabbed two of the four cans of paint and hurried away, ignoring the workers' protests.

'Ok, now I just gotta figure out where he is..'

It wasn't hard to guess this, as Suoh was yelling, and grunting loudly as he fought his way through the army of Naruto clones. As soon as Naruto was sure he was within hitting range, he swung one of the heavy paint cans, only wincing slightly when it made a sickening THUD! sound as it hit what he guessed was Suoh's head.

"Ow! What the heck?!" The startled invisible boy cried.

Naruto wasted no time now in prying both cans open. "Eat PAINT, jerk!"

Before Suoh knew what was happening, Naruto had thrust the two cans' contents at him, and he was covered in red paint, exposing his location. "What the?! Naruto, that's foul play, ruining my clothes like that!"

"Hehe, we never said we'd play fair, though, right?" Naruto grinned.

"Ugh...I guess not." Suoh slumped his shoulders, growling as his words from earlier came back to haunt him.

"Hey, Suoh..." Naruto suddenly said, a devilish grin appearing on his face. "I can SEE you!"

"What?! Aww, crap!" Suoh tried to jump back, but Naruto was too quick, slamming his balled up fist into

his face. The impact of the blow was so great, the dirty blond haired boy was sent into a tree, snapping it in half like it was a mere twig.

"Oh yeah, I'm back on top! Take THAT!" Naruto crowed, grinning goofily as he did a little dance.

"...He actually hit him." Nozomi stared for a minute in shock, before jumping up and cheering loudly unable to contain her excitement.

Naruto's grin widened, hearing the excitement in her voice, and he chuckled, watching as Suoh struggled to his feet, panting hard. "Nice defense you had there, Suoh, but now that I can see you, I'm gonna punch your lights out!" He paused, wincing slightly. "...You're going to PAY for that wedgie!"

Nozomi snickered quietly under her breath, hearing this. *'He's one to hold a grudge!'* She thought, laughing out loud in her mind.

"Oh really....you know I DO have more than one move, right?" Suoh smirked as he began a long series of handsigns. When he had finished, he gave a grin that made him look like the devil himself. "The jutsu I'm about to use is one that nobody has ever succeeded in using...but I can, after years of practice!"

'What jutsu is he talking about??' Nozomi frowned to herself as she tried to think what Suoh had meant, and her eyes widened as a thought hit her, *'Wait...not THAT jutsu! Anything but that!'*

Suoh glanced up, seeing Nozomi's worried face, and he laughed. "Yes, Nozomi, it is the same jutsu you're thinking of...hehe..." The boy smirked again and looked back at Naruto. "You ready, Whiskers? No? Ehh too bad!" The boy took a deep breath and snickered. "Kagirinai Koori Sutoraiku no Jutsu!"

As Suoh said this, the sky grew dark, and there was a great gust of icy wind as the entire area around them was transformed into a frozen wasteland.

"Naruto-kun, look out!" Nozomi cried, worry in her eyes, "That's a DANGEROUS jutsu, don't let your guard down!"

"Don't worry, I'm fine Nozo-chan, it's just an icy surface now." Naruto smiled back at the brunette, a careless look on his face.

Nozomi tried to smile back, but at that moment, she looked up and panic appeared on her face. "Naruto-kun, watch out!!"

"What? WOAH!" Naruto looked up and slid out of the way on the ice, just in time to avoid being hit by a huge, pointed stalagmite made of ice, slipping and falling face first on the icy ground in the process.

Suoh laughed and smirked widely at the now fallen boy. "Yeah, sure...you look REAL tough with your face in the ice!"

"You--SUOH!" Naruto growled angrily as he got unsteadily to his feet, slipping and sliding unsteadily. "You're DEAD!"

"Hehe, take your best shot!" Suoh grinned. "That is...if you can get close enough to attack me without falling!"

Naruto growled in annoyance and made a clone, and the two of them got to work forming the Rasengan in the palm of his hand.

"This is it, Suoh! Say goodbye!"

"Uhh yeah...ok." Suoh smirked and gave a half wave, watching as the blond practically skated across the ice, heading for him, Rasengan in hand.

'I'll let him get just a little closer..' the blond smirked, still watching.

When Naruto was 12 feet away, Suoh began a short series of handsigns, working rapidly through them.

"Rasengan!" Came Naruto's voice, as he thrust the spinning blue orb of concentrated energy forward.

"Kesshou nankan no jutsu!"

Just as the Rasengan was about to hit its mark, a firm wall of crystal clear ice appeared in front of Suoh, deflecting most of the ball of chakra (though some DID hit Suoh, leaving a burn), and sending it hurling back towards Naruto.

"Naruto-kun, get out of the way!" Nozomi cried, eyes full of worry as she watched Naruto, who was frozen in shock, and she jumped to her feet, running out in front of the blond.

"NOZOMI, out of the way!" Suoh screamed, eyes wide in horror as he watched the girl take the full blow of the rasengan in Naruto's place; the force of the blow sent her head first into Naruto, then both of them were sent flying a good 20 feet, snapping several trees in half like it was nothing.

"Ow...Nozo-chan...are you ok...?" Naruto groaned as he rubbed his head yet again, then looked down at the brunette who lay sprawled across him, her entire back burned from the direct contact it had had with his Rasengan. "Nozo-chan?" Naruto repeated himself, eyes filled with worry as they stared down at the unmoving form of his kitten. "Nozomi!"

"No, Nozomi!" Suoh cried, eyes filled with worry. He hadn't meant to get her...why couldn't she have just stayed back?!

When she still didn't respond, Naruto's concerned frown deepened, and he gave her a shake. "Nozomi!!!"

Still no answer from the girl.

"Darn that was stupid..why didn't she just stay away?? She KNEW that would happen! Why didn't she just stay put?!"

Naruto looked up and glared daggers at Suoh, hearing this comment, and he carefully lay Nozomi down in the grass before getting up and walking slowly towards Suoh. "Why? WHY?! I'll TELL you why!"

Suoh sweatdropped, hearing the angry tone in Naruto's voice. "Easy, Whiskers, chill..."

"No, YOU chill!" Naruto snarled as he grabbed the boy's shirt and lifted him off the ground. "If you had spent HALF the time I spent with Nozo-chan you'd KNOW that she would do anything to protect people she cares about, but NO! You assumed that she was still the cold hearted person YOU TURNED HER INTO before she ran away, so you thought she would just STAND BACK AND WATCH while I was hit with my own attack! Well she DIDN'T, and now thanks to your boneheaded move she's hurt or maybe even...."

The boy lowered his head as he realized the girl hadn't been breathing (she could have been unconscious, but he was too worried and thought of the worst scenario possible)... "She could even be...DEAD...and it's ALL your fault!"

"But I didn't mean to...I mean...she shouldn't have....I...!" Suoh stammered, eyes widening.

"I don't CARE!" Naruto growled as he blinked; His eyes, Suoh noticed, were red upon opening once more, and the three whisker marks on his cheeks were more pronounced. His mouth opened in an angry glare, sharp canines exposed in the process as he spoke darkly, "You're going to PAY for hurting her!"

"B--b-but!- I didn't MEAN-" Suoh was cut off as Naruto, now surrounded by a thick cloak of red bubbling chakra, lifted him over his head with sudden inhuman strength, and hurled him several feet away, not even flinching at the sound of his body crashing through and completely destroying the same wall their fight had damaged earlier (the workers had taken off running by now).

"Ung....Owwww!" The blond groaned as he got to his feet, rubbing his head.

"It...hurts...ugghh....WOAH!"

Suoh just barely managed to jump out of the way as Naruto lunged at him, narrowly evading the clawed hands that swiped at him. "Phew, that was cl-" He didn't have time to finish his sentence as suddenly the chakra surrounding Naruto's arm formed into a long, clawed arm, and reacted on its own, reaching out and grabbing him tightly around the neck.

"GAH!" Suoh squirmed and struggled, but to no avail as the boy's demon chakra held tight to him, strangling him worse with every cry he made, every feeble attempt of escape.

"Face it, Suoh...escape is futile...you're not going to get out of this alive..." Naruto scowled, "Not unless you SWEAR to leave Nozomi and I ALONE!"

"Never!" Suoh cried, choking as the hold on his neck tightened, and he struggled to breathe unsuccessfully.

"I wouldn't say anything but yes, if I was in your situation." Naruto growled. "Don't make me any angrier...I'll KILL you...I SWEAR I will...!"

"Yeah right..you couldn't kill me!" Suoh smirked, though it was getting very hard to breathe.

"Ohh...is that a CHALLENGE?!" Naruto snarled, hatred in his eyes as he stared at the boy. "Because I WILL!"

No sooner had he said this, then a strange feeling shot through Naruto. It was a mixture of emotions, sadness happiness, hatred, loneliness and forgiveness...He felt as if he were in a daze, unable to move as all these emotions washed over him like a tidal wave. It was as if he was drowning, sinking lower and lower under these feelings he was experiencing.

Naruto wasn't sure what to find more alarming. The fact that he was feeling such a rush of emotions now, or the fact that he was now feeling paralyzed, unable to move. Whatever the case, he found himself letting go of Suoh, and dropping onto the ground, immediately losing consciousness..

"Hehe." Suoh snickered evilly as he glanced down at the unconscious boy. "That worked like a charm...I knew it was a wise move, slipping that special poison into his ramen the other day...hehe it took its sweet time to take effect, but when it did....man, that was perfect!...Now, to dispose of him before Nozomi wakes up."

Suoh started to do a series of handsigns, but stopped frozen still as an icy voice rang out from behind him, its tone cold and bitter. "So...you were lying all this time..."

Suoh's eyes widened and he spun around quickly. "What???"

"...You...even after I did what you said...you were still going to break your promise and kill him...I never should have trusted you..."

"Uhh...Nozomi....I didn't know you were up!" Suoh sweatdropped, backing away slightly as he saw the look in her eyes; intent on killing. "Wh-when did you get up..?...Are you ok, are that attack hit you? Should you be up so soon?? Ehehe...."

"I'm fine." Nozomi muttered, anger in her voice as she eyed the boy, ears flattened against her head, tail lashing out behind her angrily. "So...you were gonna betray me and kill Naruto-kun all along, weren't you?"

"W-well...." Suoh was about to lie again, but the look in the cat girl's eyes made him think to do otherwise, and he cleared his throat nervously. "Uh--uhm....." He sighed. "Yes, Nozomi...I had to...I'm sorry, but I HAVE to eliminate the competition, don't you see?! Only I can be your lover, no one else!...So, if you'll excuse me..."

"Oh, yes of course..." Nozomi lowered her head, hiding her eyes from him for a few seconds, letting a heavy silence fall over them for a brief period of time. "But you'll have to excuse me, too..."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Suoh frowned.

"Hehe...I'm not going to let you kill him...not without a fight..." Now Nozomi raised her head again, and Suoh froze as his stare locked on a very familiar pair of red eyes, filled with hate, a vicious smile curved up in a sinister grin, exposing extremely familiar oversized fangs. A quick glance told Suoh that she was indeed in demon mode, as the claws on her hands and feet had grown several inches longer, making

them more jagged, more deadly.

"N-Nozomi..?" Suoh gulped. "Wh-what's going on?"

"I told you already," Nozomi smirked devilishly at the confused looking boy, "I'm not letting you kill Naruto-kun without a fight....you'll have to kill me before I let you lay one finger on him!"

Suoh just stared in shock. "W..but...Nozo-neko-chan...why...?...I LOVE YOU! I care about you, a lot!"

"NO You don't!" Nozomi growled, lunging forward and grabbing the blond, holding him up by his shirt. "If you TRULY cared about me, you'd have cared about my feelings, meaning how this made me feel!" She slapped him across the face. "If you REALLY cared like you said, you'd have let me be happy, whether it was with you or with someone else!"

Suoh winced as she slapped him yet again. "Bu..but...Nozo...I DO care about you...and your feelings..."

"NO YOU DON'T!" Nozomi screamed, eyes flashing with anger. "If you cared about my feelings, you NEVER! WOULD! HAVE! MADE! ME! DO! THIS!"

Suoh flinched as she slapped his face repeatedly, and groaned, knowing both his cheeks had to be nearly as red as tomatoes by now. "Owww! Stop with the slapping!" he whined. To his surprise, the slapping ceased. Had he said the magic word or something?

"...You don't want to be slapped....fine....we'll do this a differennt way...!" Nozomi snarled angrily as she thrust the boy to the ground roughly and jumped back a good 6 feet, landing on all fours, poised to strike.

"...Great...what now...?" Suoh groaned as he watched the cat girl. For some reason, just the sight of her like this was just....it screamed danger. Why, Suoh wasn't 100% certain, but it was, just the same.

He soon found out why, as the girl reached into her pocket and withdrew a kunai, holding it in her mouth and charging at him, running on all fours as she did so, tail thrashing wildly behind her, seeming to serve as a warning.

It took a few minutes for panic to register, as Suoh just stood there, watching in obvious disbelief as the brunette lunged at him, but finally it did, and he took off running, screaming and flailing his arms as he did so.

"GRR! Get back here and fight like a MAN!" Nozomi hissed through her teeth as she kept a hold on the kunai, still running after the dirty blond on all fours, slowly beginning to pick up speed.

'Dang it...she's gaining on me!...What now?!' Suoh panted hard as he ran, slowly running out of energy. True, he was a ninja, but the Kubota clan saw such little action, there had never been much need to work on agility; the prime focus had always been ninjutsu. Now he was wishing he'd worked more on speed. Sure, it was great to be so highly skilled in your jutsu, but that didn't mean SQUAT if you couldn't outrun your enemy long enough to stay alive!

"Uhhm...Nozomi!" The blond whimpered as he was grabbed by the leg, "Can't we just...you know...TALK about this?! Do we HAVE to FIGHT?"

"I already TRIED talking to you...YOU wouldn't LISTEN!" Nozomi snarled angrily. "No, we'll do this MY way!"

"Your way?" Suoh sweatdropped nervously as the demon girl lifted him and dropped him on his head roughly, and he winced. "OW...Wh-what's your way...?"

"THIS." Nozomi lunged at him, jabbing a kunai into his right shoulder, causing him to cry out in agony.

"Nozomi!!"

Nozomi didn't answer as she lunged forward yet again, digging her claws first into his stomach, then his other shoulder, and finally, his back, just below the beginning of his neck.

"Please stop, it hurts!" Suoh cried out in pain as he struggled to run away, finding this rather difficult since he couldn't use his arms to stand himself up, since the wounds in both his shoulders were so deep.

"No, no no, you aren't leaving..." Nozomi grinned evilly as she began a long stream of handsigns. When she had finished, she looked down at Suoh, and the killer's intent in her eyes was unmistakable.

'...Crap...I'm going to die...' Suoh frowned as this thought ran through his mind, repeating itself over and over again.

"Ice Twister: Two Hit Strike!"

"Wha??" Suoh was snapped out of his thoughts and brought back to earth as a huge twister made of incredibly sharp ice shards formed around him, and he was caught up, sent flying this way and that way inside it; all the while, the shards of ice were tearing at his skin, and shredding his clothing.

"Yes...suffer.....feel the pain....YOU WILL SUFFER!"

"Ow! Nozomi! PLEASE!" Suoh cried, screaming in pain as the shards ripped deeper and deeper in his skin, making the wounds she'd inflicted with her kunai and claws all the worse. "PLEASE STOP THIS, NOZOMI!"

"Not a chance, loser....you WILL suffer, just as I did, thanks to your cold hearted ways!"

"But, Nozomi! PLEASE!" Suoh cried, screaming again in agony as he was ripped at even more.

"SILENCE, you will DIE before the jutsu stops!!" Nozomi shouted, laughing evilly and focusing more chakra into the ice twister, making it larger and more deadly.

She frowned, confusion flashing through her eyes as she thought to herself. *'Wait...I...that's NOT what I opened my mouth to say...! I was...I was going to make him promise to leave me alone....why'd I say*

no?!....Why do I feel....dark?....It's like...my heart's being swallowed up in darkness....what's going ON?!

'I can answer that...' Came the deep, velvety voice of Kumoraku into Nozomi's head, **'You're being consumed with hatred...soon you'll be just as evil as me, and your rage will take over...causing you to kill the young man trapped in your ice twister...but that won't be the end of the murders...shortly after that, you'll kill your obnoxious boyfriend...then this entire village; Fully consumed by hate by then, you will go on to kill more and more, and slowly I will take control, since the blond nuisance won't be around to keep me contained any longer!...The beauty of it is, you won't be able to resist, your heart is already fully controlled by hatred...it won't be long...you'll be transformed into the monster everybody already views you as!'**

'Wh-what?! NO! That can't be true! I won't let it! I've still got love in my heart..it's not ALL darkness and hate!....because...I'm....' The cat girl frowned as she struggled to recall her purpose for attacking Suoh. Her eyes widened as her gaze landed on Naruto, who seemed to be coming to slowly, and she nodded. *'That's right! I'm fighting so I can be with Naruto-kun, so there!'*

'Prove it then....cancel the jutsu.'

'I can and I WILL!' Nozomi heaved a deep, frustrated sigh and turned her attention back to the blond caught up in her ice twister. *'I won't kill him...I'll prove Kumoraku wrong!'* Determination in her eyes now, Nozomi focused all her chakra on stopping the jutsu, frustrated as her every attempt to break the jutsu failed, and she growled with frustration.

'What can I say but...I told you so...you're a monster...even your chakra rages with hatred now...it won't respond to PURE commands...only evil ones, such as killing the boy!'

Nozomi grimaced as Kumoraku's voice sneered nastily in her head, and growled again. "No! I'm not a monster, I'm NOT!"

"...Nozo-chan...!"

"Nya?" Nozomi glanced up and was shocked to see Naruto on his feet, walking unsteadily toward her, concern all over his face. "N..Naruto-kun..?!"

"Nozo..chan..are you...ok..?...Your eyes...they're red...are you Kumoraku right now..?" Naruto frowned worriedly as he walked quickly and unsteadily over to her, arms spread out wide, intending to hug her.

"Naruto-kun, no!" Nozomi's eyes widened, and she jumped a few feet back, giving him an apologetic look. "I..you...can't get close right now....something's wrong with me...my chakra.....it's.....tainted....evil...Stay away, please!"

To her dismay, Naruto did just the opposite, speeding up and half lunging, half falling into her, wrapping his arms around her tightly, not letting go, even when she struggled to break away.

"Naruto-kun, please, !!" Nozomi stopped struggling, lowering her head and closing her eyes. *'What is this...?...I feel so calm..serene...peaceful...like when I'm at the beach in the sand, feeling the crisp breeze and enjoying the sun's rays....it's as if nothing has ever been wrong, and there was never any*

danger..' Slowly Nozomi let herself lean against the boy, hugging him back tightly and sighing softly, a smile on her face. *'You were wrong, Kumoraku....I don't feel hatred...my heart feels light, not heavy...and I feel warm and happy inside...'*

'It's not YOUR doing, wretch, it's that darn blondie of yours purifying your heart!' Kumoraku snapped back in response.

Nozomi ignored her as she smiled, slowly pulling away from Naruto's embrace, and looked back to Suoh once more, pleased to find the twister was coming to an end, the chakra used to keep it going purified, slowly running out. Sure enough, the minute Nozomi concentrated her chakra on canceling the jutsu, the twister vanished, and a very injured, blood covered Suoh fell ungracefully to the ground and just lay there in a heap.

"Now, then." Nozomi started walking toward the boy, and he panicked, feebly struggling to get away.

"St-stay away from me!" He screamed.

"S-Suoh...I was only going to-"

"I said stay away!" Suoh screamed again, his voice coming out unusually pitchy and feminine sounding.

Nozomi ignored the boy, taking a step closer, and extending a hand out to help him up. "Suoh, I'm so-

Suoh seemed to panic at this movement, and he scrambled to his feet, clutching his right shoulder that had been stabbed with the kunai and backing up quickly, looking extremely disoriented. "Nozomi, I understand! You and Naruto are both monsters, you deserve each other! So just stay away from me!"

"But, Suoh, I!-" Nozomi frowned and shook her head, breaking off. She had planned on telling Suoh that she'd spare his life now, but give him a warning that she WOULDN'T if he ever tried to come between her and Naruto again, but.....well, this worked too. She didn't appreciate being called a monster, but she could deal with it...because if Suoh was afraid of her, he wouldn't likely come near her ever again.

"Err, uhh...yeah....come near me again and I'll...kill...you." She said feebly, watching as the badly injured boy turned on his heel and fled the best he could, never looking back at her or Naruto.

"...Nozo-chan..."

"...Naruto-kun!" Nozomi turned then and ran, flinging herself into Naruto's open arms and hugging him tightly, then pressing her mouth against his in a firm kiss, which she broke after just a few seconds. She stared up at the dazed looking boy, eyes wide in fear. "Please, please forgive me Naruto-kun! I had to break up with you earlier, because Suoh was going to use the extraction jutsu on you if I didn't!..But that doesn't mean I WANT to split up! Please, don't cast me away, I love y-"

She was silenced as Naruto tilted her chin upward and caught her lips with his in a long, lingering kiss, one which he didn't break until both of them were in desperate need of air. "Nozomi, I....could never.....cast....you away....." Naruto panted heavily in between each syllable. He gazed lovingly into the speechless cat girl's golden yellow eyes and smiled tenderly at her. "I...love you.....too much....to

let...you go..."

This said, Naruto hugged the brunette tightly. "Oh...by the way...that poison didn't work on me when I was under Kyuubi's power...I was only acting..." he whispered. "I just couldn't resist watching what you were doing to punish him....you faced your own demon down, and I'm proud of you."

Naruto frowned as he felt the girl's knees buckle, and she slumped against him, only staying upright by the hold he had on her. "...Nozomi?" After a quick examination, the blond's suspicions were confirmed; Nozomi had fainted. Most likely due to the show she had put on while in her demon mode, as well as the enormous amount of chakra she had put into that one ice twister she had trapped Suoh in.

Heaving a soft sigh, Naruto leaned down slightly and scooped the brunette into his arms bridal style, and began to walk. "Poor kitty...you're exhausted..." he smiled down at the slender cat girl in his arms. Even when unconscious, she managed to look so peaceful. "Let's go home, Nozo-hime."

The cat girl gave a soft purr, despite being unconscious, her silent agreement, and Naruto's smile widened all the more as he headed away from the village...

"Uhh..." Nozomi groaned and opened her eyes, wincing at the pain she felt all in her entire body.

'What did I DO to be hurting like this?!' Then suddenly all the day's events came flooding back to her. The fight between Naruto and Suoh....the showdown between her and Suoh...the battle for her will to remain "pure", rather than a monster...everything. The last thing she remembered was Naruto hugging her and telling her he loved her.

'...Wait...where am I now?' Nozomi glanced around her, and was surprised to find that she was laying in bed, in the apartment she and Naruto shared, the room dark and quiet as the moon shone in through the window, giving only the slightest highlight to things in the room.

Wait. If she was here in the apartment...where was Naruto? The brunette glanced around, and was surprised to find he was not in the room. Where was he?!

"N-Naruto?" Nozomi sat up in bed, feeling a bit of panic wash over her. "Naruto-kun!"

"Woah, hey, take it easy!"

Nozomi's eyes grew wide, and she sighed with relief as Naruto hurried out of the shadows and over to her, lit up in the bit of moonlight he stood in as he sat down on the bed and stared at her, blue eyes wide with concern.

"Nozo-chan...are you ok?" he asked, voice soft with concern, but also dripping with acid toward anyone who may have tried to harm her while he'd been out of the room.

"Y-yeah....I'm ok....I was just...scared when I couldn't find you..after everything that happened today." Nozomi gave a sheepish little smile before leaning forward and wrapping her arms around the boy's

shoulders tightly in a quick hug, and purred softly.

"Hey, hey, don't worry, I'm not ever gonna leave you, Nozo-chan...not for as long as I live." he smiled and stroked one of the brunette's long, fuzzy black cat ears. "I promise."

"..I'm so glad." Nozomi smiled broadly and allowed her purring to become louder as the petting of her ear soothed her more and more.

"Kitty sleepy?" Naruto asked with a small, teasing snicker. To his surprise, the cat girl nodded. "Well then, you should go to sleep then, you've had a rough day." The blond smiled.

Nozomi paused before giving another sheepish grin. "Err....well..."

"What is it?" Naruto blinked at the girl.

"Uhm....will you...come to bed too?...I mean....err..." Nozomi sweatdropped and blushed, unable to phrase her question without it sounding bad.

Naruto laughed. "Of course, silly! I was just coming to join you when you woke up!"

"Oh..." Nozomi blushed harder now, taking note of his blueish pajamas, and nodded. "S-so you were...hehe."

Naruto just grinned as he crawled into the bed beside her, and made himself comfortable under the covers before settling back against the pillow and yawning. "Good night, Nozomi." The blond blushed slightly as he felt the cat girl snuggle up against him, hugging him warmly.

"Good night, Naruto-kun."

Naruto smiled and wrapped his arm around the girl, and closed his eyes....but then they flew open again a moment later. Something felt...weird. Itchy, in a way. The blond used his free hand to feel his head, and nearly cried out in shock as he felt twitchy fox ears! Ears that replaced his human ears, as they had before.

'Oh...no...!' In a fit of slight panic, Naruto threw the covers off of himself and groaned quietly, his fears confirmed as his hand brushed against a soft, fluffy orange and white tail...HIS soft, fluffy orange and white tail!

"Nozomiiii!" he groaned. "Why the fox features again?!"

"You know the rules," the tired cat girl gave a sleepy eyed grin, "If I'm gonna marry you, you gotta have those...otherwise you have to call off the engagement."

"Oh..." Naruto paused as these words sunk in. "OHHHHHHH!" His eyes grew wide with excitement. "You mean, you-me-we're--?!"

"Yes." Nozomi laughed despite how annoyed she felt at having her sleep disturbed again. "Now please,

go to sleep.."

"Ah, ok!" Naruto grinned and kissed her on the cheek. "Good night, Nozo-hime...you know...you really are my heart....you make me feel I can do anything...I'm so glad to have you back!" The blond grinned his trademark fox grin then closed his eyes and was soon fast asleep, snoring softly.

Nozomi just stared at the boy, a grin playing on her lips. What a goof ball...calling HER his heart...it barely made any sense...The cat girl's grin widened. But it sure was sweet...just like he himself was...She was so grateful to be with him again...

"Good night, my sweet Naruto-kou." Nozomi beamed at the boy, who was grinning in his sleep, undoubtedly at a dream, and closed her eyes, finally being overcome by sleep, and drifted in deep, nightmare less oblivion.

17 - I Dare You

WARNING: Do NOT read if you dislike perverted, suggestive things....I wrote this...because...I had the idea and it wouldn't leave me alone...besides that, I needed to make a fact about Nozomi known, and this was the only way to do it! So NO flaming or anything...You have NO idea how awkward I felt writing this! >//<

I Dare You

Nozomi sighed. Naruto had been rambling on and on for what seemed like forever...and he kept repeating himself! When would it ever end?!

"Ok, Nozomi!" The blond, who had been sitting cross legged in the grass jumped up now, a finger pointed upward, a triumphant grin on his face. "I got it!"

'Oh, boy...if he says a spotlight dance again I'm gonna have to HURT him!' The cat girl thought, frowning slightly. "Go on.."

Naruto nodded, his eyes sparkling. "So, I was thinking, maybe after the ceremony we could have a special spotlight dance for just us two...and then, maybe.."

Nozomi groaned and slapped her forehead, sweatdropping. "Ahh! Naruto-kun, not that I don't love you, but shut up already!"

"Huh?" The spiky haired boy broke off in mid sentence and stared at her, looking deflated, his bubble burst. "...But I was just getting to the best part..."

"That's just it though," Nozomi sighed and laughed a little in spite of her frustration, "I already know what you're gonna say..."

"You do...?" Naruto blinked, appearing confused. "But...how?"

"Because," Nozomi took a deep breath before answering, "You're so excited about this that you don't even release...you've repeated your ideas at least 5 times...maybe more...I have your ideas all memorized!"

"You...do...?...I HAVE?" The blond haired boy gave an apologetic grin, flattening his large, orange and white fox ears sheepishly. "Sorry, Nozo-chan.."

"Nah...it's ok." Nozomi blurted out, unable to resist the eyes he was giving her. She did a double take and smirked slightly. "Anyways, let's do what we came to do, ok?"

"Yeah, ok." Naruto smiled.

"Ok, come at me."

Nozomi glanced across the training field at Naruto and nodded, unable to stop herself from returning his infectious smile. Then as quick as a flash, her face turned serious, and she nodded, taking a fighting stance and then charging at the blond.

"Ok, whenever you're ready!" Naruto called out, taking more steps back at the same time.

"Right!" Nozomi formed a handsign as she ran now, focusing intently on her move. "Shadow clone jutsu!!"

Naruto smiled, watching, but his smile soon faded, and he held up a hand. "Ok, Nozo-chan...stop!"

"Again?! WOA--!" Nozomi stopped running, but the toe of her sandal hit the ground wrong, causing her to trip, and she fell ungracefully to the ground onto her face.

"Oy, Nozo-chan!" Naruto frowned and hurried over to the fallen brunette, who had recovered from her fall, and was now sitting with her hands on her knees, a downcast look on her face. "Are you ok..?"

The cat girl gave a slight nod in his direction before sighing heavily, hanging her head, a look of discouragement on her face. "...I'm never going to get this..I give up.."

"Oh no you don't!" Naruto sat down beside her and slung an arm around her shoulders, pulling her slightly so she leaned into him a little. "You'll get the hang of the Shadow clones...I just know it! But you gotta keep trying to succeed! No giving up!"

Nozomi was silent for a moment or two before nodding her head, a small smile beginning to cross her features. "Yeah....uhm...ok..." she sighed softly. "I'll..I'll keep trying my best."

"Good, that's my kitty." Naruto smiled warmly, causing the cat girl to blush slightly. "Now, wanna get back to training?"

Nozomi was about to nod, but her body apparently had other ideas, as her stomach let out a deep rumble. The cat girl cringed and blushed a little. "I think...my best is saying it's hungry." she said, blushing sheepishly as her stomach emitted another growl.

Naruto couldn't help but laugh at the sound. "Ok then." he smiled, standing and offering the girl his hand, which she took, and he pulled her up to her feet. "Let's eat."

"Huh?...Eat what?" Nozomi glanced around. "Naruto-kun, I don't see anythi-" The cat girl broke off as her eyes landed on a picnic basket nearby, and she gasped in surprise. "A picnic? I had no idea!...Naruto-kun, how did you...?"

"I had a clone go back and grab it when you weren't looking." The blond beamed proudly. "Well, c'mon, let's go eat before you die of starvation!"

Nozomi nodded sheepishly and allowed him to lead her by the hand to the picnic basket, and she had a seat beside him on the blanket his clone had set out on the grass. "This is a nice little surprise, Naruto-kun." She smiled softly at the boy.

Said blond grinned over at her with his teeth. "Hey, you're my kitty...I like to spoil you every now and then, you know."

"Yeah, I know...thank you, Naruto-kun." Nozomi smiled even more.

"Hehe, you can thank me after we eat," Naruto responded, ears twitching almost giddily as he saw the confusion on his kitten's face, "You'll know what I mean after you try this." The boy rummaged through the basket for a minute, then produced a good sized foil wrapped sandwich, and handed it to Nozomi, who curiously sniffed it.

"What's in it?" she asked, curiosity in her eyes.

"Just take a bite..you'll see." Naruto urged her.

"Ok, ok." The cat girl unwrapped the sandwich, lifted it up to her mouth, and took a small, delicate bite, golden-yellow eyes widening almost immediately. "Tuna fish!" she exclaimed once she had swallowed, and stared at the blond. "You made tuna fish sandwiches for us?" A wide, cat like grin was on her face as she spoke, and it only widened as she got a nod from the boy.

"~Nyaa! Thanks so much, Naruto-kun! Hehe, it's tuna!" The brunette seemed to get lost in her own world as she took another larger bite of her sandwich and purred, eyes sparkling with delight.

Naruto couldn't help but watch, amusement flickering in his blue eyes as the cat girl beside him managed to devour her entire sandwich in under a minute. He chuckled at the sad look that had appeared on his kitten's face when she'd realized her sandwich was gone, and he smiled. "Well? Was it good?"

The brunette's head shot straight up, and she nodded vigorously. "Yes, it really was, SO good!" There was a brief pause. "But...now it's all gone...so fast.." she sighed, allowing a brief silence to fall over them as she watched Naruto eat. "So...that last time we trained today," she began, hesitantly, "I...I still only made 3 clones, huh..?"

The blond, who's mouth was stuffed with sandwich merely nodded his head. Nozomi sighed again. "I wish I knew why the most I can make is 3 at a time...it's really annoying, I wanna be able to make more than that!"

Naruto swallowed his mouthful and gave a small smile, sympathy in his blue eyes. "Hey, I already told you, you'll get the hang of it..I'm sure...we just gotta keep training, that's all!"

"Yeah..I guess so..." The brunette frowned, letting her shoulders sag a little as she fell silent again.

"Well, enough about that!" Naruto said loudly, determined not to let her feel any down-er than she already did. "You ready for your desert now, Nozo-chan?"

"Uhh...desert?" Nozomi glanced up at the blond curiously. "I have desert?"

"Yep, I packed it special for you!" Naruto smiled slightly. He paused. "Now, before I give it to you, I want you to PROMISE you'll eat it...promise?"

"Ok...promise." Nozomi said softly, feeling confused.

"Alright...just remember you promised...and know I chose this special for you.." Naruto grinned now. "It's the perfect pick me up after the hard day of training we had!"

"Uh, alright then." The cat girl nodded her head. "Let's have it then." she said.

Naruto nodded and dug through the basket again, producing a small bag, which he tossed to Nozomi, who caught it in her hands. She lifted it up, straining to read the writing on the package, as the sun was setting, making it hard to see in a way. At last, she was able to read it, and the brunette looked back at Naruto, who was beaming. She raised an eyebrow at him. "CATNIP, Naruto-kun?"

"Yep!" The blond nodded, still beaming. "I've heard cats love it, so I thought I'd get some for you!"

"...But Naruto-kun...honestly? I'm NOT a cat." Nozomi scowled at him. "I'm not eating catnip. Not happening!"

"Aww, c'mon, Nozo-chan!" Naruto's grin vanished, and he gave her a pouty look. "I just wanted to do something nice....besides, you PROMISED you'd eat it..." The blond paused. "Also, you are SORT of a cat...you're PART cat...so still!..."

Nozomi glanced from the package to him, then back at the package again and sighed heavily in defeat. "Ok, FINE...but nobody else finds out about this...ok??"

"My lips are sealed!" The spiky haired boy covered his mouth and nodded.

"Ok then...here goes...nothing..." Nozomi hesitated slightly before popping the bag open. Then she dug out a handful of the crunchy cat treats and plopped them into her mouth, chewed them, and swallowed, repeating this process until the bag was empty. She glanced at Naruto from the corner of her eye. "Ok...I ate it...it...wasn't BAD...I guess." she said hesitantly.

"I'm glad." Naruto smiled warmly, then glanced up at the sky. It was getting dark, and already being speckled with tiny white stars. "Let's get home now...ok?"

"Mm yeah...sounds good." Nozomi purred softly, standing up.

Once they had folded the blanket and picked up their trash, the two teens grabbed the basket and headed for the apartment they both called their home.

"Nozo-chan....do you...feel ok?" Naruto frowned at the brunette.

The minute they'd gotten home, she had kicked off her shoes, then pounced onto the couch, jumping up and down on it, giggling like a little girl.

"Nozomiiii! You alright??" Naruto tried again.

This time the cat girl looked at him, a curious look on her face. "Y'know...why do they even call it 'marriage'? It has nothing to do with female horses, ~nyaa!"

"Wait...what are you talking about?" The blond blinked in confusion and shook his head, walking over to her, arms open wide. "C'mon, Nozo-hime...stop that before you ruin our couch..."

"Hmmm, ok!" Nozomi grinned, and to Naruto's surprise she jumped into his arms, knocking them both onto the floor.

The boy's eyes widened, and he gave a sheepish chuckle as the girl purred, positioning herself so her body fit perfectly against his, curve for curve, and so on. Then she grinned down at him, apparently enjoying the fact that she had him pinned.

"Nozo-chan, what are you doing?!" The blond demanded, shivering as he felt one of her cool hands slide under his shirt and rest on his stomach. "Nozomi!"

The brunette grinned as she felt him shiver, and slid her hand further, up to his chest, where she began to circle one of his pecks with her index finger.

"N...No...zo...mi...?" Naruto blushed faintly and tried to push her hand away, shivering again.

The cat girl's grin widened as she saw the blush that was appearing on his face, and she lowered her head to whisper in one of his fuzzy fox ears, her voice low and excited. "Naru-kun...you want some?"

"Some...what...?" Naruto trailed off, trying to keep calm and hoping she wasn't implying what he thought she was implying.

"Ohhh, you know what I mean..." The brunette smirked and licked her lips before leaning in and whispering softly, "Sex."

Blue eyes went wide, and Naruto shook his head vigorously, trying to ignore the sudden tightness in his pants. "N-no thanks, Nozo-chan...I-I' already decided I would w-wait for that.." he said in a strained voice.

"Oh, really now?" The cat girl glanced down at his pants, then back at him and smirked. "I think your little buddy disagrees."

"Little...buddy...?" Naruto gulped as he realized she had seen his little...situation, and quickly squirmed out from under her. "No, Nozomi, what's WITH you?!"

"Aww, but Naru-kun," Nozomi reached out and grabbed his tail, stopping him from moving any further away. "We're getting married anyways..." The brunette gave him a seductive look. "I'm yours tonight if you can make me feel like a woman...so just take me already!"

The blond haired boy pulled his tail away and shook his head. "N-no, Nozomi! I will not do anything like that until we're married!"

"B-b-but...Naru-kun..." Nozomi pouted and stuck out her lower lip at him. "I want you..."

"Nozo-chan--"

"I'll take it anywhere you wanna give it!"

Naruto raised an eyebrow at her, a look of disbelief on his face. *'What has gotten INTO her?!'* He frowned. *'She wasn't like this earlier! In fact, she was fine right up until...'* His eyes widened in realization. *'The CATNIP! That HAS to be the cause for this!'*

"So, are you ready now?"

The blond was snapped out of his thoughts at her words, and he shook his head. "N-no, Nozo-chan! I refuse to do this to you!" He frowned. "Don't you see this is the catnip affecting you?! Snap out of it, this isn't what you want!"

"Well, whatever it is, I don't care," The cat girl smirked and lunged at him. "I want you...right now."

"Nozomi, I already said no!" Naruto jumped back, then, scrambling to his feet. "I don't want to do that to you- you're not yourself right now!"

"Exactly, you should take advantage of that!" Nozomi smirked, getting to her feet and walking toward him slowly.

"What?!" the blond backed further away, holding his arms out in front of him in protest. "N-n-no! Even if I wanted to do that, you'd KILL me when you went back to normal!"

"Aww...but you could just stop me by cutting off my chakra with the jutsu you have controlling me..." The cat girl grinned, looking excited. "C'mon, Naru-kun, I KNOW you want this like I do...you've got all the obvious signs present! Let's just do it already!"

"Nozo-chan, NO. I already said I won't do it, and I MEANT it!" Naruto growled, backing further away.

"Oh....fine then." Nozomi hung her head for a minute before looking back up at him, a devious grin on her face. "Guess that means I'm gonna have to force it out of you." she said in a sing song voice.

"Oh, no..." Naruto sweatdropped and backed up more. "...You WOULDN'T!"

"Ohhh WOULDN'T I?"

"No, Nozomi...back off!" Naruto took another step back- and fell over backwards onto the bed. "C-Crap!" He shouted, trying to scramble back still.

Too late. Nozomi took a flying leap and landed on his stomach, pinning him once more. "Now you won't escape, Naru-kun..."

"Y-you're crazy, Nozomi, don't do this!" The blond cried, struggling to push her away. "You will REGRET this later, so stop!"

"Why would I regret giving myself to the man I love?" The brunette smirked as she yanked the boy's jacket and shirt off, then admired his muscular chest, sighing with a smile on her face. "Beautiful..." She leaned down and rested her head on his chest, noticing how fast the blond's heart was pounding. "...You're excited..." She giggled. "I'll make it fast, so you can stop anticipating so much, you poor guy.."

"What?! No!" Naruto sweatdropped as she removed his pants. "I'm not excited, I'm scared to death! Just leave me be!"

"Aha, no no no..." The girl pinning him grinned. "Ok...let's get started." She reached back and pulled off her jacket, exposing her see through netting top, which she began to remove.

Naruto frowned, chewing on his lip, shutting his eyes to avoid seeing her, as he remembered her reaction to him the time he'd accidentally walked in on her changing. "Nozo-chan.."

"C'mon...don't....be.....so.....hard.....to.....get.....?" Nozomi froze then, the lustful look in her eyes vanishing, and being replaced by what could only be described as shock. "Wh..what the...?"

She then glanced down, noticing where she was and how she was positioned, and a dark blush spread across her face. "GAH!" The cat girl hopped down from the bed and grabbed her jacket off the floor, where she'd thrown it before, hurriedly pulling it on and covering herself back up.

Already knowing how Naruto looked, the brunette turned her back to him and stood up. "S-sorry...Naruto-kun...I...uh...didn't..mean--I--err--"

Naruto glanced at her, relief washing over him like a tidal wave, and he stood up, hurriedly redressing himself, then walked over to the cat girl and hugged her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. "It's ok, Nozo-chan...like I said before....that wasn't you...it was someone else..."

The brunette untensed her shoulders and turned to face him, a sheepish grin on her face. "Y-yeah...I love you...but....I don't want to do....that.."

"Not yet." Naruto smiled softly, leaning back and looking at her. "It's ok...I forgive you..."

Nozomi heaved a relieved sigh and leaned her head on the blond. "I'm so glad..."

"However," The boy spoke up, "I think after tonight, we'll both agree on one thing.."

The brunette glanced up at him and nodded, eyes serious, speaking almost at the exact moment that he did.

"No more catnip!"