

Summary: *As Sakura grows older, she starts developing instincts and desires that seem a bit out of place for a trainee ninja and daughter of merchants. That, and a strange burning strength flowing under her skin...*

Dragon of the Spring Ch. 1

"Better a large forehead than a tiny brain."

Ino didn't bother holding back her laugh. She'd already been heading over to intervene when she saw that nasty brat Ami and her two friends laying into the quiet pink-haired girl. Yes, the girl did have a larger forehead than normal (not to mention an unusual hair color) but that was hardly any reason to act like complete jerks on the very first week of the Academy! And now, Ino was very glad she had. Anyone who could deliver a zinger like that even when surrounded was someone Ino wanted to know better.

Ami and her two friends immediately bristled like angry cats. "What did you just say, big-head?!"

"Why, are you deaf as well? Or does your tiny brain mean you can't understand human speech?" Even as she continued to rile them up in the same deadpan tone, the pink-haired girl was clenching her fists and squaring her stance, clearly unafraid of the three-to-one odds.

Smirking, Ino stepped into the group's bubble. "Well, well. Starting trouble already, Ami? I wonder, though, if you'll be so brave against someone who's not alone."

Ami hissed on seeing her. "This isn't your business, Ino!"

"I'm making it my business. What are you going to do about it?"

Ino did not consider herself a combat prodigy. She was however the daughter of the head of a major clan, and Ami knew it. Being pretty and popular and confident and all-round amazing didn't hurt either. Facing the girl who was already on her way to being their class' queen bee, Ami and her minions beat a hasty retreat.

The pink-haired girl observed them go, before facing Ino. "I could have handled them."

Ino's flippant comeback died in her throat. Something about the girl told her that she meant every word. Unconsciously taking a more formal stance, Ino said, "I'm sure you could have, but isn't this faster? Besides, now you won't get into trouble for fighting."

"I suppose." The girl started to relax, then blinked and hurriedly bent into a bow. "Oh my goodness, where are my manners?! I am Sakura Haruno! It is a pleasure to meet you! Thank you for helping me!"

And that was Ino's introduction to her best (and oddest) friend in the whole world.

Ino quickly realized that in her natural state, Sakura was a sweet shy girl who wouldn't hurt a fly. But when something riled her up? It was almost like a Transformation technique the way Sakura turned into a cold confident personality with an aura of suppressed violence.

Being the heiress to a clan of mental manipulators, Ino was aware of multiple personalities and other mental aberrations. This wasn't that. Sakura never had any memory problems or lost track of what she was doing. It was as if she developed the attitude of someone with overwhelming force at their disposal. Which should have looked absurd on a small pink-haired girl, but somehow didn't. Ino's father was the head of Torture and Interrogation, she knew better than most the importance of body language. Angry Sakura simply had an instinctive understanding of how to project intimidation.

Where the daughter of civilian merchants could have picked up such an instinct was a mystery that puzzled Ino no end. But that didn't mean she couldn't learn from it. Or that she couldn't teach Sakura how to project that confidence consciously, instead of only when she was angry. As a result, by the age of eight, the duo had cemented their positions as the untouchable queens of their academy year. It helped that Sakura had an intellect and work ethic that let her ace the theoretical work.

It was also in the third year in the academy that Ino first started to realize that her friend may have the strength to back up her attitude. It was in this year that they started full contact sparring.

Now, Ino knew Sakura was stronger than she looked. She never slacked off in training, and she could keep up with the major clan children in physical exercises. Still, Ino was slightly worried when, in a twist of fate, Sakura got put up against Ami in her very first spar.

Over the last two years, Ami had continued to take verbal potshots at Sakura whenever she could get away with it, but seemed unwilling to start a physical confrontation in front of Ino. Now, though, she was being given official permission to thrash Sakura, and she leaped on the chance with both feet.

Initially, Ami had the edge. Sakura's taijutsu might be textbook, but Ami was bigger, stronger, and had a lot more experience brawling. In the first few exchanges, Ami managed to land some solid hits that staggered Sakura. Then the tide turned.

In front of Ino's eyes, Sakura seemed to start moving faster and with more confidence. Slowly, with an air of inevitability, Sakura at first equaled, then started to overwhelm the bigger girl. The end, when it came, was swift. Ami threw a punch at Sakura's torso. Sakura took the hit and ignored it entirely, instead driving forward with a right cross that flattened her opponent.

Ino cheered and hugged her friend, then pulled back in surprise. "Sakura, you're burning up! Are you sick?"

"What? No! I feel great! It's probably from the sparring. You know I run hot."

Ino nodded. She did know that Sakura's body always seemed warmer than a normal person. It's why Ino loved cuddling with her in cold weather. Mentally shrugging, Ino dismissed the elevated body temperature as unimportant. After all, it was already going back to normal.

As the years went by, though, Ino did notice something. If the teachers didn't stop the spar early, as long as the fight lasted long enough... Sakura *always* won.