

Tides of Time

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A Naruto fic. Yep, that's my speech, lol. Enjoy!

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1 - Sasuke's Girl

Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, and Kakashi sprawled out on the grass. The three chunin had been working hard all day on a slew of C-ranked missions. Kakashi had been supervising, and as such, wasn't tired in the least.

"Up for another, you guys?" he asked brightly. The groans he anticipated met his ears. **Some things will never change**, Kakashi thought with a mild grin hidden behind his mask.

"No way, Kakashi-sensei! We've done four missions already today! Give us a break!" Predictably, these words belong to Naruto. Being fourteen and a half didn't mean he had matured in every way. "Stuff it, loser," Sasuke told Naruto tonelessly. "You've been complaining all day. Enough is enough." Sasuke was taller and more muscular, but largely the same. Killing Itachi was his lifelong dream now, rather than his life's purpose. He had another purpose now. He glanced at that purpose now. Sakura, in her time as Lady Tsunade's apprentice, had quelled most of the complaints that she was talent-less as a ninja. The undeniable proof came in the form of her boyfriend, Sasuke. Sasuke wouldn't tolerate weakness. So the fact that he and Sakura were dating meant that she had outgrown her weakness. There was no doubt; the Sakura of today had blossomed into a talented kunoichi, with the potential to pass up Lady Tsunade someday, but that was years in the future.

The three had been promoted at the last chunin exams. They were the last three of the "rookie nine" to earn the rank, although the case could be made that all three were more or less honorary chunin before that. Of all the teams, they had tackled the toughest missions, usually with success.

"Sensei, I have a question," Sakura piped up after a few moment's rest. "How come we haven't learned any new techniques? I mean, haven't we honed the skills we already have pretty well?" Kakashi rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I've been thinking about that. I'm going to teach all of you a new jutsu, and very soon. Much like Ino, Choji, and Shikamaru can form the "Inoshikacho" combination, I've got three jutsus that will fit together nicely. But hang tight."

"Hey, you hear that?" Sasuke asked.

The four peered around a tree, watching their genin friend perform jutsu after jutsu. It was clear he was near exhaustion. After a few minutes, he dropped ninjutsu, and focused on taijutsu. He bounced all over the clearing at a regular speed, then opening the first gate of chakra. Kakashi and Sasuke activated their Sharingan, watching Ekyt leap high, in excess of ten feet, then bring the heel of his leg down on top of a tall log. It cracked down the middle. Ekyt landed crouched, then uncoiled with a side kick that broke the log in half before the crack in the top had reached it. He finally closed the Gate, took a brief second to wipe the sweat off his face. He pulled off his vest, leaving just his T-shirt, and dropped down to do squat-thrusts. (A free-squat with a pushup attached) Ekyt was doing them on a square platform made of stones. From their viewpoint, Team Kakashi could see his hands and forearms bleeding and bruised from his training.

Then, without warning, he leapt off, racing through the tree tops to parts unknown.

"See you later Sasuke! Later, Sakura!" Naruto zipped off toward Lady Tsunade's office, to see what his

schedule was for tomorrow.

Lady Tsunade's office had just been expanded. Their was increased need for ninja work lately, and sometimes she and Shizune had a hard time keeping it all straight. Somehow everything got straightened out.

The office had bay windows on two sides, usually open so Tsunade could enjoy the mild Konoha weather. In front of one window was Tsunade's desk, a massive desk crafted by a local carpenter from the finest wood available. On the desk were scrolls, sometimes numbering over 100. With Academy enrollment down, the existing Shinobi had to double or even triple up on their assignments. Some genin were given C and even B ranked missions, sometimes without the supervision of a jonin.

"For the last time, no! I can't do that, in good conscience! A genin traveling on his own! And even the work you suggested! What are you thinking?" Tsunade's voice echoed in the hall. It was loud and firm, but not mean. In fact, she held an interested tone.

Naruto, being a curious creature, couldn't help but eavesdrop.

"I understand. I just...I don't want to be here for the chunin exams!"

Naruto's eyes widened. That was Ekyt's voice, and it was strained with emotion.

"You have no idea just how frustrating it is...I'll never know if I have talent or not unless I seek it out myself. There's no jonin to go around, and no genin for me to be in a team with, it's been that way since I got here..."

Naruto opened the door just enough to peek inside. He saw Ekyt standing in front of Lady Tsunade. Tsunade was sitting behind her desk, leaning forward with her hands in the Tiger hand sign in front of her.

"I know it's frustrating, but you've got to understand something. You've become a pillar of this village. The people like you, they've forgiven you for being samurai, and they even trust you to watch their children."

Ekyt nodded, apparently emotional, despite his expression remaining stoic.

"It means a lot. I don't mean to leave permanently. That's not going to happen, and I understand why, and your position. If I may speak freely..." Ekyt looked up hopefully at Tsunade.

"Of course!"

Ekyt nodded his thanks, then continued. "We both know I won't be a chunin as long as Ebisu has any say. Even if everyone else has forgiven me, he hasn't. I have zero confidence, and even I admit that I should be a chunin by now." Ekyt gave a deep sigh, finally letting emotion trickle into his voice.

"You don't know...I'm trapped. I've got nowhere to go. Almost everything I've learned, I've had to learn on my own. The nights spent studying, all the exercising, jutsu after jutsu, until I pass out every night...all that training...it's getting hard to find a reason to keep going."

Tsunade appeared shocked at those words. Before she could speak, Ekyt continued.

"No encouragement, no notice of my skills...D ranked missions..." Ekyt's head snapped up, determination replacing his sadness. "I KNOW I'm capable of more than picking up garbage and weeding gardens! But I have no way to realize that potential...or even to know for sure if it exists! Maybe I'm disillusioning myself..." As quickly as it had come, Ekyt's momentum was gone.

Tsunade spoke slowly, staring Ekyt in the eyes, even getting up and putting a hand under his chin.

"I don't want to deny you, but I don't have a choice. This village losing you would be a blow. I'd never forgive myself if you died because I okayed this."

Ekyt gave her a silent bow. He leapt out of the window, onto the roof, then jumped over to the next one, and kept going until he was in the distance.

“Come on in, Naruto.” Tsuande beckoned Naruto in. Naruto had completely forgotten that he had been spying. He still wanted to know what was going on.

“What’s up with him, Granny Tsunade?” Naruto asked. Naruto had a deep concern for his friends, despite most of the village thinking him a demon.

“Oh, I had to deny him a passport,” Tsunade said off-the-cuff.

“Huh? The pervy samurai wants to travel or something?”

Tsunade nodded, massaging her temples. She reached for a set of four scrolls.

“Here you go, these are for you and your team. You’ve got an A-ranked mission tomorrow. There are a number of rogues that are interesting in our protection. Or so they say. You and your team need to gauge their intentions, and offer them protection from their respective Village’s until they can be brought before me. Ask your sensei for the specifics.”

Things had changed in the Leaf Village. Two and a half years ago, Temari had left the Sand Village, disgusted with her blood-thirsty brothers. A few months later, Neji Hyuga left the village to train on his own, leaving Neji and Tenten without a partner. Temari had come to the Leaf Village, tired of the rogue life. She was inserted into Guy’s team. For some reason, she clicked perfectly with Lee and Tenten. Temari and Tenten had buried the hatchet, and Lee was welcoming to most anyone. All three had been promoted to Chunin within three months of Temari’s arrival.

Lee’s hard work had paid off. Somehow, he had managed to create a jutsu using what little chakra he could muster at any given time. He couldn’t maintain it long, but the “Journey of Success” jutsu had saved him and his team a number of times. The jutsu was simply chakra forming at Lee’s hands and feet. The twist was that if his strike landed within a foot of the opponent, even if he was aiming for them and he missed, the strike still did damage. Neji, Lee’s rival, had inspired the jutsu.

Tenten’s work with weapons had reached jonin level. Now she began to hone her empty-hand taijutsu skills. She had modest success at various kicks and punches. She didn’t have the chakra control Sakura did, or the insane training Lee had, so she wasn’t as successful as they were, but any improvement was welcome in her eyes. Her jutsu work was much better. She invented a jutsu of her own. It was a combination of her weapons expertise and the Shadow Clone jutsu. If she threw one kunai, she could focus her chakra in it and multiply it, throwing up to ten at a time in this way.

The team of Ino, Shikamaru, and Choji had finally overcome their initial dislike of each other. They were nearly inseparable. Even the standoffish Shikamaru didn’t seem bothered by the constant company. The three had improved vastly, their teamwork being their strongest point. Shikamaru had invented ways to make his Shadow Possession Jutsu more viable in combat. He could “Sew” shadow together. By tethering an enemy’s shadow to a tree’s shadow, he could attack himself without fear of retaliation. He had learned the Nara clan’s specialty, a jutsu in which he could make his shadow form a hand, which then could choke his opponent, killing or incapacitating as Shikamaru saw fit.

Ino had followed Sakura’s example, becoming a sturdy medic-nin. She had learned the “Mind Destruction” technique, and had even devised a way to make her body less vulnerable when she used her “Mind-Body Transfer Technique”. By leaving some chakra in her body, it created a “shield”, so anything she did to her “host” body wouldn’t hurt her normal body.

Choji was the surprise of the group. Thanks to Shikamaru’s unwavering faith in him, he had trained harder and improved. His main accomplishment wasn’t a jutsu for a technique, but rather a pill. Basing his research on the standard-issue rations pill, Choji had created a “Temporary Chakra” pill. Inside a capsule, he stored small amounts of his own chakra, which mixed with the ingredients in the ration pills, which doubled the amount of chakra he put in. When ingested, the user received a boost in chakra long

enough to sustain them until their own chakra was replenished. The only catch was incredible fatigue, and potential poisoning if you took more than one pill per day. The body's chakra network needed time to mend itself when that much chakra was expended.

Kiba Inuzuka, Hinata Hyuga, and Shino Aburame had become an elite tracking squad. Kiba was the most boisterous, so he generally led missions if Kurenai wasn't present. He and Akamaru had both grown in size. Kiba, despite his brashness, knew he was weak without Akamaru, so he began to work on his taijutsu and ninjutsu skills. If something happened to Akamaru, Kiba wanted to be able to, at the very least, avenge his best friend's death. His taijutsu had become fierce. He had learned to extend his "claws" without using a jutsu, instead only needing to focus chakra on them, and that was a minimal amount of chakra.

Hinata was still the shy, sweet girl that everyone knew. But since Neji left, she had rapidly become stronger. So much so that she was finally allowed to learn the Hyuga clan's "Rotation Jutsu", and she even developed her "Protection of the 8 Trigrams" jutsu, which surrounded her and her teammates with chakra. She could use that chakra to attack, throwing "chakra kunai" at enemies to keep them at a distance. No matter how much she improved though, she still hadn't talked to Naruto about her feelings. Shino's expertise with bugs had grown exponentially. He could create multiple Bug Clones, and had learned to attract more to him. During their tracking missions, he and his team had traveled. They had encountered foreign insects; Shino had taken them into his body, adapted to them, and learned to use them in various ways. One Sunagakure insect, for example, excreted a powerful "Sun block", strong enough to defend against fire attacks. With Hinata's medical expertise, and Shino's ability to extract this excrement from his insects, the salve was now standard-issue to ANBU agents.

The jonin of the village had grown in number, as well as ability. Iruka Umino had finally been promoted to Tokubetsu Jonin, and named head of the Academy. His teaching was well accepted among the students, and he had become a pillar of Konoha's society.

Hayate Gekko, Anko Mitarashi, and Ibikki Morino were additions to Tsunade's council. All three had been invaluable to Konoha the last few years, training students at a rapid pace, yet making sure they were quality warriors, rather than the dime-store imitations some lands turned out. They worked with Iruka and his students, so you knew the quality was there.

Ebisu still worked as a private tutor, but most focused on Konohamaru's team. He didn't have much luck, although it was debatable who the bigger problem was; him, or Konohamaru. Konohamaru was admittedly a handful. But Ebisu tended to be biased against anyone who had a friendship with Naruto Uzumaki, so it could also be pointed out that he might have been giving a less than-stellar-effort in teaching Konohamaru. His claims of "Training twenty candidates for hokage" had been proven false. Not to mention the well-liked Ekyt Kaguya had proved that he was nowhere near as skilled as he claimed.

Sakura hummed merrily as she brushed her hair. Carefully, so as not to mess up her handiwork, she tied her hitai-ate in place.

"There! I can't wait to see what Sasuke has planned for tonight! (content sigh) He's been so good to me since I got stronger! I can't believe we're finally...boyfriend and girlfriend! CHA!"

Sasuke glared at his expression in the mirror. **Damn you, Naruto...Now I've got another reason to**

live...I guess I should be thanking you. It's thanks to you Sakura and I are together. When I kill my brother, then marry her, my life will be perfect...

Ekyt rested on the rooftop of his favorite haunt. Being 19, he could drink a limited amount of sake. Time to invoke that right. He swung down into the bar/restaurant and took up a spot at the far end of the bar. He wasn't in the mood to socialize.

"What'cha want tonight kiddo?" the bartender asked. She was a friend of Ekyt's. She had also, not so subtly, been trying to hook up Ekyt and her daughter. Ekyt had no interest in the girl, nothing against her. He was just too depressed. **Probably the same reason I never got the guts up to talk to Sakura or Temari. Oh well, they're happy with their boyfriends, that's all that matters.**

"Cup of your best sake...and what's the special tonight?" Ekyt asked, falsely chipper.

"Grilled salmon, fresh vegetables, red miso soup, and rice pudding."

"Sounds good to me. I'll take one. Thanks." Ekyt leaned forward, closing his eyes, then massaging them. He rested his chin in his hands, a thoughtful expression behind his mask. He contemplated his problem, finding no solution other than to ignore it or break the law. Since Ekyt wasn't a criminal, ignore it was the only option. He would simply pretend the chunin exams weren't happening. Not like he had anyone to go watch anyway.

His plate of food and cup of sake were set in front of him. The salmon looked delicious. Ekyt grabbed his chopsticks and dug in. **Damn that Ebisu!** he thought viciously, not for the first time. He hiccupped slightly as he drank too fast. That's when he saw Sasuke and Sakura enter out of the corner of his eye. A small pang of jealousy ate at him, which came bundled with a feeling of shame.

I'm happy for my friends. Period. He thought forcefully, finishing his first cup of sake, immediately asking for another.

Naruto stared down the tree. He focused his chakra, building it up and balling it up in his right fist.

"Rasengan!" he shouted, driving the rapidly spinning ball of chakra home onto a knothole in the tree. The tree cracked in half.

"Yeah, I did it! Believe it!"

"Very good Naruto. You've come really far from where you were. I'm proud of you. It looks like you don't need me anymore." Jiraiya nodded his approval at Naruto's techniques while he spoke.

"Thanks Pervy Sage! Thanks for all the help! Hey, let's keep in touch, get ramen sometime!"

"When you're old enough, I'll take you to Makeout Paradise. It's a make-out bar based on hit series of books, you know!"

Naruto grinned mischievously. "Aw, c'mon pervy sage, I could handle THAT! Sexy Jutsu!" Naruto became the naked girl again, blowing a kiss at Jiraiya.

Jiraiya laughed, staring despite the sheer number of times he had seen this jutsu done. "Still a perfect ten!" he commented with gusto.

Sakura and Sasuke picked their table, ordered their food, and ate. Conversation was still a little forced between them, but it was getting better. Sakura had outgrown being the rabid fan girl that had initially turned Sasuke off. That didn't mean she had any idea how to handle the volatile Uchiha boy, however.

"Hey, isn't that Ekyt?" Sakura pointed him out.

"Yeah," Sasuke agreed. "Hey, that jutsu of yours? The chakra scalpel. How does that work?"

"Oh, you focus your chakra in a limited amount to your hands. Kind of like a real scalpel, but with

chakra, you can make incisions with less blood and less chance of scarring.”

“What about in combat?” Sasuke wanted to know. His questions were short and clipped, Sakura noticed.

CHA! But at least he’s talking! And to me!

“In combat, you can cut muscles, tendons, arteries, all without your opponent knowing.” Sakura explained.

“So it’s useful in close.” Sasuke stated rather than questioned.

“Right,” Sakura replied with a vigorous nod.

Ekyt finished his third cup and ordered his forth.

“Obviously, kid, you’ve got money. Give it to me...if you value your life...”

Ekyt saw a kunai pressed against his neck, held their by a robber.

“If I valued life, I wouldn’t be drinking by myself on a Friday night, would I?” Ekyt replied.

“You little smartass! Skip the commentary and give it to me!”

“You want it?” Ekyt asked. POOF! A log?

“Then you’ll get it!” Ekyt said from behind the robber. The robber turned and swung at Ekyt, who blocked with his own kunai. He used his forearm to trap the robber’s kunai, then torqued his body to send it clattering away. Ignoring the cut on his forearm, Ekyt put his own kunai away and gave the robber a hard shove. The robber apparently took offense, because as he and Ekyt grappled, he used brute force to throw the genin backward.

“Whoa, look out!” Sasuke and Sakura hit the deck as Ekyt went flying through the window next to them. Sasuke got to his feet, ready to attack, but stopped at the site of the bloodied Ekyt leaping back through the window, tackling the robber, then delivering a hard punch that knocked the thief over the bar. The robber leapt back up and tackled Ekyt around the waist, while Ekyt grabbed him in a front headlock. They both sailed backward, out the door, spilling onto the cobblestone street outside. Ekyt landed on the bottom, which gave the thief the chance to take a shot at Ekyt. The punch glanced off Ekyt’s cheek. Ekyt took exception to this and rolled backward, then swung his leg around with a kick to the chin that knocked the robber goofy. Ekyt dove back on, driving his fist into the thief’s stomach repeatedly, before finally KO-ing him with knee to the groin.

“Sorry about that,” Ekyt told Sasuke and Sakura.

“That wasn’t your fault, don’t be sorry!” Sakura exclaimed. Next to her, Sasuke nodded silently, clearly unhappy about their date being interrupted.

“Well, I should have just cracked him, instead of playing around. Oh well. I’d better go. See you around.” Ekyt gave a vague wave over his shoulder, lost in his own thoughts again.

Tsunade looked up wearily as Ekyt walked in.

“Holy Crap! What the hell happened to you?!” Tsunade exclaimed upon seeing Ekyt’s condition.

“Robber. The gate guards have him. He tried to jump me in the bar.”

“What were you doing in a bar?” Tsunade wondered. **The kid is straight as an arrow! What’s he doing in a bar?**

“...Drinking...I’m a little on the depressed side, and I thought some sake might help me calm myself

down a little. It did, until that idiot jumped me...”

Tsunade sighed heavily. “Alright. The guards will be giving me the report, so you’re all set.”

Ekyt opened his mouth as though to say something, but apparently thought better of it. He shook his head, bowed silently, then slouched out of the room, not at all the norm for him.

2 - The Predominant Emotion

“Are we there yet?” Naruto whined, tugging at Kakashi’s sleeve.

“Not yet. Naruto, just relax, we’ll get there.” Kakashi’s assurance was falling on deaf ears. Naruto was still fidgety. Behind him, Sasuke and Sakura were talking quietly, clearly happy. Well, Sakura was anyway. Sasuke was his usual, unreadable self.

Naruto looked over at Sasuke. Something about him sent up a warning flag. There was something unsettling about Sasuke’s demeanor, even more so than usual. Naruto could always sense some kind of hostility, but there was usually a bit of friendliness in the mix. Today, there was deep thought and anger etched on Sasuke’s face.

After the mission, Sasuke left quickly, not even saying goodbye to Sakura.

“Hey, I’ve gotta go to! I’m, uh, meeting Iruka-sensei at Ichiraku! Believe it!” Naruto ran off, taking a round-about path to follow Sasuke, trying to remain unseen.

Ekyt picked a rooftop and sat up there all day, reading scrolls. He noticed his hand had turned red a few times, but thought nothing of it. **Probably just training too hard or something...** But the more he looked at it, the more he noticed something. When his emotions flared up, so did the color. Finally, to find out what would happen, he let himself be filled with hatred. He was shocked.

The Blue Blame chakra had turned red.

“Anger has become my predominant emotion...and my chakra changed with it. Strange...I’ve never read about someone’s chakra changing color. I’ll have to ask Lady Tsunade about it.”

As Ekyt was pondering this, Naruto plopped down next to him, his usually cheerful demeanor replaced by one of concern. He looked around for a moment, then spoke to Ekyt in a low whisper.

“Ekyt, I think he’s leaving. Sasuke. I heard him making plans to join Orochimaru.”

Ekyt narrowed his eyes, but didn’t remove them from the scroll. He didn’t want anyone who happened to be watching to think that there was anything going on.

“Did he say when he was leaving?” Ekyt replied in an equally low whisper.

“Tonight. At midnight.”

“That’s when the guards change...giving him a window of opportunity...it makes sense. But what can I do?” Ekyt asked, knowing full well he couldn’t battle Sasuke; the Uchiha boy was stronger than him, no matter how hard Ekyt had worked.

Naruto, however, had a plan. “Listen, I’ve got an idea. That chakra of yours is just about the only thing that can match that seal of Sasuke’s. So here’s what we do...”

Sasuke pulled his backpack up higher on his shoulders, shifting it’s weight to a more comfortable position. After a final sweep of the room, to make sure he wasn’t leaving anything behind, Sasuke walked out the door for the last time.

Sasuke walked along the road, in the dead of night, his Sharingan acting like night vision. It was thanks to his bloodline trait that he saw someone standing nonchalantly near the gate of the village. The person

had either a cigarette or a toothpick jutting from their mouth.

“ ‘Evening Sasuke.’ ” Ekyt said evenly.

Sasuke didn't even attempt to hide his real motives. He knew there was no point. Ekyt might have been weaker than him in terms of jutsu, but the kid was astute.

“Move aside.”

“I'm not letting you leave. You'll break Sakura's heart! Think about this!”

Sasuke gave Ekyt a hard shove. Ekyt shook it off and stepped back in front of the gate to the city.

“Forget it. You're going to have to kill me if you want to leave.” Sasuke activated his cursed seal.

The two wasted no time:

“Chidori!” The sound of one thousand birds chirping pierced the quiet night air.

“Transparent Hand Chakra: Red Flame Activation!” Ekyt countered. He put his right hand to his chest, feeling the anger he felt so often lately surging through him.

Ekyt ran straight at Sasuke, the red flame dancing in his hand as he ran. He leapt over the approaching Sasuke and jammed his hand down onto Sasuke's neck, using a sealing jutsu to close Sasuke's curse mark.

Sasuke spun around, Chidori still in his hand. He jammed it into Ekyt's stomach, suspending the boy in mid air. Blue energy crackled around both of them. Sasuke focused his chakra particularly hard, sending Ekyt flying. The genin hit a building and slid down it, barely conscious.

Ekyt fell to the ground, the chakra receding from his hand. He lay face-down on the cobblestone street after hitting the building, not moving for a few long moments. Finally, he raised his head and spoke

“Now...Naruto.”

Sasuke was exhausted from the battle with Ekyt. Naruto and 100 clones jumped on and beat him into unconsciousness. Ekyt gave a look of...longing, that was it- at Team 7. The three had each other, not to mention their sensei. Ekyt knew this would happen. He was alone again. He pulled himself to his feet, holding the wound in his stomach closed. There were tears in his, but they weren't caused by the physical pain...

I'll never trust anyone like that...never again...

Tsunade looked at Sasuke's wounds first.

“He'll live. At least that mark is sealed. Sakura, would you see to him? I've got another patient...”

Sakura nodded and started to mix up various pain relievers and stress busters. Her delicate hands flew all over the medicinal herbs, gathering them, cutting them, crushing them, all in the blink of an eye. She mixed them all together, then dumped all of it into an amber-colored liquid.

“Is he gonna be alright?” Naruto asked. He waited for a the hit that would accompany the question. **Sakura's so in love with him. Even though I did the right thing, she's gonna hit me for hurting 'her' Sasuke...**

“He'll be alright...thank you, Naruto. You really saved him from making a stupid mistake.”

She gave Naruto a hug, who couldn't even hide his surprise. She then tended to Sasuke, who was just starting to stir.

In another room, Ekyt was resisting treatment.

“I'll be fine.” He insisted, squirming away from Shizune and Tsunade. The Chidori hadn't hit home with anything close to full power. That didn't mean that having a hole in his stomach wasn't painful. But not painful enough to warrant drugs. Ekyt wasn't the type to let himself get drugged up needlessly.

Tsunade was going to force him into treatment, but Ekyt was already up. To Tsunade's shock, Ekyt

walked over to Shizune.

“Shizune-Sensei, will you teach me the healing arts? If I’m going to be...alone...then I need to know how to patch myself up.”

Shizune had never been asked like that, and it took her a moment to recover.

“Sure, I’d be glad to. We’ll start tomorrow, okay?”

Ekyt nodded his consent, then walked out, rather than his normal exit of jumping across rooftops.

“Pardon me, Master Sarutobi?”

Sarutobi (formerly 3rd Hokage) looked up from his painting.

“Ekyt, this IS a surprise. What can I do for you?”

He and Ekyt were standing on Sarutobi’s deck. It overlooked what seemed to be a well-kept jungle. A pond stretched 100 yards across, with beautiful, lush green land on either side. Trees grew tall and proud, and the place was alive with wildlife. Two herring were fishing, standing on one leg in an odd position. It was this tranquil scene that Master Sarutobi was painting. He moved his brush expertly. Ekyt had tried painting, and even drawing for that matter, and understood it’s difficulty. You had to hold the brush firmly, yet not so tight that you would be “strangling the snake”. If you did, you would have blots of ink or paint all over, taking away from the quality. If you held the brush too loose, as though “afraid of the snake”, your lines would be soft and inconsistent.

Sarutobi put down his brush, turning toward the genin next to him. The bandages around the stomach confirmed the news Sarutobi had been told.

“You’re here because of your fight with Sasuke...” Sarutobi stated/questioned.

“Partially, Master Sarutobi. I...” Ekyt started to talk, but was over come with emotion. He leaned against the railing, his stoicism failing him for the first time.

“I’ll never measure up! I have no ability, I’ve been a genin for four years! I’m doing mindless crap work that others less than half my age are already finished with! I want to leave the village, but Lady Tsunade is forbidding me to! It’s because I’m weak! No matter how hard I train, no matter how many scrolls I read, no matter how many jutsus I know...I’ll never make the grade...All I am is an extra body, one that is functional enough to perform mindless tasks! I don’t want to be kept around because I’m a “nice guy”!”

Ekyt actually let himself cry. Four years of contained emotions, all relieved in one burst.

“What will it take, Master? I’ve got nothing, nobody! Everyone tells me “You’ve got talent” or “You’ve got potential”. Do they really mean it, or do they just want someone to do their crap work? Am I just being jerked around? What will it take for me to get real abilities? Lee can do it through hard work alone, and without chakra...I’ve got both, and where is it getting me?”

Ekyt’s fists were clenched. He looked ready to give up on everything.

It wasn’t the first time Sarutobi had seen something like this.

“There is more to your pain than that. Unrequited love, frustration with your position...it’s no secret to me that you hold these emotions inside you. Their raw power is enough to tear ANY man apart, but you contain it. If your potential is properly channeled, you will surpass many...I, for one, put your skills on par with Sasuke even now In the future, you will surpass many, those even more powerful than Sasuke.” Ekyt’s eyes widened in surprise, although you could hardly tell from the puffiness from his emotional outburst.

“But Master...he defeated me...”

Sarutobi took a long puff of his pipe, inhaling the rich tobacco’s scent, breathing in heavily, then exhaling a wreath of smoke.

“Sasuke is the polar opposite of you. Whereas he cares for no one and lives for nothing except

vengeance, you care a great deal and live for this Village. It's your caring that you are mistaking for weakness."

Sarutobi looked at the tranquil scene in front of them, a hand on Ekyt's shoulder.

"Never stop caring. Gaara and Sasuke are powerful, no doubt, but it's your emotions that will someday give you the power to surpass them."

"But Master, aren't my emotions tearing me apart? I mean, look at me. What kind of warrior breaks down and sobs because he's alone?" Ekyt felt tears welling up again, hating his emotions, cursing their existence.

"What was it you told me once? A samurai quote? Ah... "The Sword fits the hand." Metaphorically, your sword is a painful one to wield. But it's one that I wish more would possess freely. You, Naruto, Lee, and Sakura are going to be the strongest someday. Mark my words, hold onto these emotions, even enjoy them when you can."

"Master...emotions aside, I want to be stronger. You're right. There's so much I care about, that I'd die to protect...What can I do? Training, anything?"

Sarutobi beckoned for Ekyt to follow him. "Come with me."

Sasuke woke up violently. He thrashed around, the pale blue covers of the hospital bed being twisted in the process. A tray of food clattered to the floor, sending carrots and peas, along with various medications, flying. Sakura ducked as a bowl of fruit nearly hit her. It smacked against the far wall, marring its pale green surface.

"It's okay, it's okay," Sakura assured him calmly. She gently pushed him back down in bed. Sasuke, for his part, flopped down, closed his eyes, and spoke:

"I'm going to kill him..." Sasuke muttered, too weak to speak very loud. He was bruised all over, although no serious damage had been done.

Sakura held his hand. "I know Sasuke, you'll kill your brother..."

"He'll die, but I'm going to kill Ekyt for sealing my curse mark. It was my only chance against Itachi...now it's gone..."

"Sasuke, that's not true! You're powerful! More powerful than almost anyone in the village! And he HAD to stop you, or Orochimaru would have gotten you! You couldn't kill Itachi if Orochimaru had taken over your body!"

Sasuke opened one eye. "The power I could have gotten could have made all the difference. If I don't kill Ekyt, then I'm going to kill Naruto, for going along with Ekyt's plan. Either way, one of them is going to pay...pay for costing me my dream..." Sasuke laid his head back down, clenching one fist in anger. Sakura didn't share this point of view, but knew better than to argue. She simply put a tray of food in front of him and encouraged him to eat. **Sasuke...please don't do it. Don't make me choose between what I know is right and what my boyfriend wants...**

Naruto and Sakura wandered around the village separately, occasionally bumping in to each other. They both had time off from missions, since their team mate was injured, and Kakashi was off on missions of his own. Naruto was taking a break from training, and Sakura needed a rest each day after her work with lady Tsunade.

"How's Sasuke doing?" Naruto asked as they bumped into each other once more.

"He's doing better, but he's worrying me...he wants to kill Ekyt for sealing his curse mark."

"I asked him to. There was no choice. I couldn't let Sasuke leave..." Naruto was clearly upset over the whole issue. He bit his fingers nervously. Sakura, in a rare moment, patted him on the head.

“You did the right thing, you know. And...it’s hard to say this, but I’m glad you didn’t tell me, I would have tried to stop Sasuke myself. And Ekyt might have survived it, but that Chidori would have killed me...”

Naruto looked at the ground, apparently at a loss for words.

“And how’s Ekyt doing?” he asked, trying to make conversation.

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Refusing treatment, training with Shizune...pretty much everything Lady Tsunade warned him not to do. I mean, he shouldn’t be able to move! Even Sasuke hasn’t gotten out of bed!”

Naruto had heard enough. “Listen Sakura! Sasuke might be your life-long crush, but don’t you think he would have given more consideration to your feelings? When I asked Ekyt to do this, the first words out of his mouth were talking himself down. “I could never beat Sasuke,” or whatever he said! But you know what? He DID. He might have been torn almost in half, but at least he gave it a shot! You kissing Sasuke’s @\$@ isn’t doing a damn thing! Be honest with him, and yourself Sakura: Do you REALLY want a boyfriend that wants to kill everyone? If there’s one thing I know, it’s that YOU aren’t a killer! Believe it!”

Sarutobi led Ekyt to the stone obelisk that served as a memorial to the ninja who had lost their lives fighting the nine-tailed fox.

“All these names...I knew every single one...not a day goes by when I don’t think of them...They gave everything for this village...Something I have no doubt you yourself would do...”

“I’ll never be numbered among them...they’re heroes...I’m a barely glorified grunt that Lady Tsunade feels bad for.”

Sarutobi shook his head again. “You may very well be numbered here someday. I hope that no names will be added, this village has seen so much death already...Which is why I’ve talked with Lady Tsunade, through my summon, Enma. She’s found you a traveling partner. It’s only a short trip, but she feels that you and Sasuke both need time to cool off, or you’ll be killing each other.”

Ekyt didn’t bother to contain his excitement. “Good! I know Sasuke wants to kill me, and I know just as well what little pride I have would never let me back down.”

“Well, you will have two weeks, and you will be traveling with Master Jiraiya. Before you leave, I want to wish you luck, and to tell you this: I’ve predicted you will become among the strongest of us. You, Naruto, Sakura, and Lee, you will someday be the pride of this village...”

As Sakura sat at Sasuke’s bedside, Naruto’s words running through her head. She must have smoothed her pink hair a hundred times out of nervousness. Somehow, she knew Naruto was right. No matter how much she thought of him as an annoying little brother, Naruto showed flashes of brilliance at times, and now was one of those times.

3 - See My Reflection Change...

Naruto was “helping” Ekyt pack up his stuff. It was only a two-week get-away, but you had to be prepared for anything.

“Oh, and keep your wallet away from the pervy sage, you’ll be broke in no time, believe it!” Naruto groaned at the memory.

Ekyt gave the mandatory chuckle, despite feeling no humor. “I’ll keep that in mind. I wonder what he’ll teach me...Ah well, right now, the vacation is just as important.”

“Yeah, I guess we all need one. Listen, just watch your back. Sasuke is seriously pissed at you...” Ekyt shrugged. “I knew he would be. But I did what I had to do. If death had been the price, I would have paid it.”

After a few goodbyes, Ekyt left with Master Jiraiya for a two-week respite. Jiraiya had assured Ekyt that he could teach him some skills that would come in handy, and Ekyt assured Jiraiya that he would pay for some of Jiraiya’s ‘entertainment’ habits.

Sasuke sat up in bed, testing his strength. He cursed upon finding it still hadn’t returned. He rolled over on his side, away from the window. He was vaguely surprised to find that Sakura wasn’t at his bedside. Not that he really cared. Things were odd between them now. Sasuke’s thoughts turned to the fight of two days ago.

My Chidori, even weakened, should have killed him. But he’s up and traveling...when he sealed my curse mark, I felt my power drain. Damn him, and Naruto too. I...maybe they’re right. If Orochimaru had taken my body, it would have been him in control...No! I could fight off Orochimaru and take HIS body. I’m going to make Naruto and Ekyt regret this...

Before he left, Sakura asked to speak with Ekyt. Confusion hidden under his mask, Ekyt obliged. **This has gotta be about me fighting Sasuke...I did what I had to do, and I’m not changing my mind.** Ekyt was half right. Sakura DID want to talk about the fight. But, to his surprise, she thanked him. “I knew Sasuke was out of line. You and Naruto are really great friends. It really means a lot, you know. Naruto told me what you said to Sasuke...” (Note: the words were “I’m not letting you leave. You’ll break Sakura’s heart! Think about this!”) “So, I just wanted to say thanks...” Ekyt stared stupidly for a moment, before his face reddened. He was sure Sakura had seen the look of surprise on his face. Moments later, that was proven by Sakura’s question. “Hey, you look like you thought I was going to kill you or something!” the pink-haired kunoichi exclaimed, laughing. “Well, I DID kind of KO your boyfriend. I figured you’d want to kill me for that.” Sakura giggled. “You’re a sweet guy, to think of my feelings. Anyway, I know you’re leaving, so I won’t drag this out. Just...thanks for stopping Sasuke...” Sakura’s green eyes held a plethora of emotions. “No problem. I hope he’s feeling better, I know that sealing jutsu I used tends to take a lot out of you. I hope, by the time I get back, he’ll be calm enough not to kill me...Anyway, I’d better go. See you later...”

Rock Lee was training hard. No surprise there. He was counting off his kicks as he did them. Guy wanted a word with him.

“Lee...” Guy began.

“41, 42, 43...”

“Lee...” Guy’s eyebrow started to twitch.

“44, 45, 46...”

Guy lost his composure. “LEE!” he shouted, before rearing back and tagging the young chunin in the face with a solid right hand.

Lee leapt up from the ground, striking a saluting position.

“Yes Guy-sensei!” he practically shouted.

“Lee, you special kid...I’m so proud! Today, you’re leading your first mission!”

Both Lee and Guy were emotional. Immediately, both had tears streaming down their faces.

“I am ready, Guy-sensei! What is my mission? I will complete it successfully and make you proud!” Lee struck his “Good guy” pose, teeth gleaming, thumb up.

“That’s it! Ah, the springtime of youth! Your mission: Take your team to a rendezvous point, just outside Ootogakure. You’re going to meet someone there. Take him back to the Leaf Village, directly to Lady Tsunade. This...(Guy paused, the moment overwhelming him)is an A-ranked mission! I know you can do it! You and Temari and Tenten! (Sob) You’ll make me proud Lee!”

Lee was crying as well. “I will Guy-sensei! Thank you for this splendid opportunity! I will prove that I CAN become an excellent Shinobi, even if I have only taijutsu as a weapon!”

Shikamaru laid on his back, staring at the clouds. The sky was a vibrant blue, and the clouds big, white and puffy. **Must be nice...to move around freely. No pain, no death...oh well, it’s what’s expected of me, I guess. I hope this mission is easy. Hard stuff is such a drag...**

Shikamaru was soon joined by Ino and Choji. Choji was much the same, but the big surprise was Ino. Once Sakura was taken, and everyone found out how violent Temari was, she became the big catch in the village. She still held traces of her old demeanor, giving backhanded compliments without any thought. But, by and large, it seemed that by healing her relationship with Sakura, Ino was ready to embrace life seriously. She had put on weight to make herself an average size. That small change made her skills increase as well. She hadn’t known it, but her borderline anorexic state had been inhibiting her chakra. Now, she not only looked and acted better, but had become stronger. Even Shikamaru tolerated her.

“So (chomp) what’s our mission again?” Choji asked around a mouthful of chips.

“Weren’t you listening?” Ino sneered. “We’re teaching at the academy today. Teamwork. So, time to warm up the InoShikaCho trio combo!”

Shikamaru was technically supposed to lead, but found it less troublesome to let Ino have her way. He found that he didn’t actually hate her, like he thought he would.

Maybe I’ve just gotten used to her...

“Alright Akamaru, ready?”

“WOOF!” came the reply. Apparently, Kiba could speak dog, because he smiled widely, with a wolf-like grin.

“Alright! How about you, Hinata? Are you ready?”

Hinata looked ready to pass out, but timidly nodded in the affirmative.

Shino, in a rare moment, spoke up. "We need to be prepared for resistance. He might have left peacefully, but Neji won't come back peacefully."

Kiba nodded his agreement.

Kurenai's team had been lounging near an apple tree all day. Shino was studying the various insects eating the perfectly-ripened apples, even coaxing a few into his body for study and use later. Kiba, meanwhile, was playing with Akamaru, throwing smaller apples for him to catch. Akamaru ate a few here and there, but mostly treated the delicious red fruit as if it were a ball. He rolled around, chewing the apples up, then spitting them toward Kiba, before pouncing on his owner playfully.

The only one who wasn't relaxing was Hinata. She was training. Now that she was 15, she decided she was going to talk to Naruto about how she felt. Somehow, training helped her get her courage up to do just that. Apples were falling off the tree, and Hinata was trying to hit them before they hit the ground.

"Alright. Shino, you attack with bug clones, Akamaru and I will provide a distraction. Hinata, you're the only one who can face Neji without killing him. He might not resist at all, but no matter what, don't drop your guards, any of you."

"What's going to happen with Neji if we DO catch him?" Shino asked. That was a good point.

"I'm not sure. You know, I think I have our mission wrong. I think we're just supposed to check up on Neji, to make sure he's not with Orochimaru or something. Either way, let's go with that. Bringing him back is borderline suicide..."

Ekyt followed Jiraiya into the crowded bar, his face thirty shades of red.

"Master Jiraiya, are you SURE I have to actually be in...here?"

Jiraiya looked at Ekyt as though he had farted in church. "Of course! This is my main haunt! Besides, you said you'd pay for my entertainment."

"To a point. To a point I'll pay for your entertainment. Whatever you say, Master Jiraiya."

Ekyt shook his head. As low as he had been, he felt he had lost his last real defining trait: his character. He had allowed himself to walk into a make-out bar.

(BEWARE: THIS MIGHT CONTAIN SOME DOUBLE ENTENDRES)

The bar didn't look or feel innocent.

"Master Jiraiyaaaaa!!!" Three of the, er, "waitresses" sang out upon seeing Jiraiya. Immediately, red sprang up on Jiraiya's face.

"Ladies, hello! I brought a friend tonight! Girls, this is Ekyt Kaguya! Ekyt Kaguya, this is Atsui (A friendly looking [TOO friendly looking] red head waved and blew a kiss), Mune (A tall blonde woman that was clearly designed to attract attention gave Ekyt the once-over look and then an inviting eyebrow raise), and Mujitsu (A raven-haired woman who seemed...rather lopsided [I really hope everyone saw through that horrible joke] ran her hands through her hair invitingly)."

Ekyt felt more awkward than usual. You were obviously supposed to stare at these somewhat less than-appropriately-clothed women. He had never been to one of these make-out bars, but some things were just common sense. Like the fact that you were supposed to do more than stare, for the right price. 'Look but don't touch' clearly wasn't the policy in this place.

"It's nice to meet all of you," Ekyt said with a forced smile as the women were obviously trying to get his attention. He could FEEL himself blushing.

“He looks kinda young, Jiraiya...and really innocent...isn't that YOUR specialty Atsui?” Mujitsu stated in a voice that couldn't be considered innocent.

“Mmm...yeah, the young one is mine...I think you'll find I'm not so innocent. But I AM sweet...”

Ekyt put up a hand. “Hold it. I'm only paying for his (nods at Jiraiya) entertainment. I'm not here for...what your selling.” **I've got to be the only guy in the world to say no to these girls...but I've got more respect for REAL women than that. Jiraiya is welcome to his prostitutes, I'd rather take REAL love...provided I ever find it...**

As Jiraiya enjoyed himself, Ekyt slunk to a bar next door. He had never drank so frequently. He still knew when to quit, so he let himself have sake. He found the thought of finding real love depressing, because he thought it had no chance in hell of ever happening.

What girl is going to love a milk-drinking dork who's stuck as a genin? Tenten had her eye on Neji, and besides, she scares the hell out of me. Temari...scares the hell out of me, even though she kind of flirts with me...but that's just her personality. Sakura seems like the only genuine one...but how can I compare with Sasuke Uchiha?

Ekyt put the glass down, nodding in the affirmative when asked if he wanted a refill.

About two hours later, Jiraiya half-stumbled out of the bar.

“Come back soon!” The women called.

“You bet!” Jiraiya responded heartily. He waved, then walked over to Ekyt, who had just drained his fifth cup of sake.

“Good man, paying that bill. Alright, training...Hmmm...you don't have enough chakra for the Rasengan, and you can already perform summoning jutsus...ah, I've got it! Alright, you're already good with genjutsu, so we need to build your ninjutsu repertoire. You've got a dragon theme going, so this jutsu should lend itself to your style nicely. You can already summon fire. Now, I want you to try to hold the fire in your hand, like you do with that extra chakra...”

After some explaining, Ekyt had learned TWO new jutsus.

Fire Style: Dragon's Circle- A flame held in the palm of the hand or on top of the foot. A forest fire condensed to the size of a softball that has incredible concentrated power. (Similar to Rasengan)

Red Flame: Voluntary Pain Acceptance- When his “emotional chakra” is active, this jutsu can be accessed. It allows Ekyt to absorb up to half the pain a person would feel. As long as he can maintain contact with the person (ie, holding an arm, or even a sleeve), Ekyt can absorb half the pain they would be feeling, and in some cases, even sustain the injury meant for them.

Meanwhile, Things between Sakura and Sasuke had grown awkward. The discussion had began so innocently.

“Sasuke, we need to talk. And I'm going to be honest with you...” Sakura looked apprehensive, but determined.

MORE TO COME!

4 - Ninjas Into Dreams

Ekyt's made the hand signs one more time. The sweat was already pouring down his face from the effort this jutsu required. Jiraiya had told him that it would take a week to get down. Ekyt made a bet with him that he would get the jutsu done in two days.

Damn, that was a wager worthy of Lady Tsunade! I must have had a little more sake than I thought. Oh well, here goes!

"Fire Release: Dragon's Circle!" Ekyt called. First, he forced the condensed fire into his hand. He slashed at the tree in front of him. A dead limb, charred from the fire, fell at his feet. Moving the fire to the top of his foot, Ekyt threw a roundhouse kick, searing another limb. Finally, the hardest part, focusing the fire onto the bottom of his foot; he had yet to do it right. He drew back and threw- an ordinary side kick. The flame had gone out.

"That was very good. Even if you don't win the bet, coming this far in a week's time is very good. You've got another week to learn it, so take it easy," Jiraiya told Ekyt.

"I can't take it easy, I'll fall behind!"

Jiraiya never understood WHY Ekyt worked so hard. He asked now, already wording a letter to Sarutobi in his mind.

"Why do you train like this? I mean, I know you have that guy to beat (Chakaro, Ekyt's student that turned on him), but I get the feeling there's more than that..."

"I'm...alone, Master Jiraiya. It wouldn't be so bad if I was actually skilled. I mean, Lady Tsunade, and even Naruto, they're alone, but they're so powerful it doesn't matter. I'm worried about not doing anything with my life. And...a distant part of me...is worried about being alone..."

Jiraiya sucked in his breath, then sat down. "Listen, you'll realize your potential some day. I've talked with Master Sarutobi, he told me of what you said to him, and he's right. But I'm going to take his prediction one further: Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto will someday earn the title of the 3 legendary ninja, the same as Tsunade, Orochimaru, and myself. You see how all three of us are different, the same as those three. But think about this: For each legendary ninja, there is the ones under them, the ones they would have been nothing without."

Ekyt shook his head, not entirely believing his ears. "Are you telling me I'm just a...a stepping stone to greatness for those three? One of those people they meet along the way and wind up crushing under their sandals?! If I'm a stepping stone, they'd better step hard!"

Jiraiya grabbed Ekyt's vest and forced him to sit down. "Is that your dream? To be a legend?"

Ekyt shook his head. "No. But I don't want to be a footnote in history, either. I want to be remembered for something. As someone anyone could come to with nearly any problem."

"You want to be Hokage?" Jiraiya questioned grimly.

"No. I want to be on the council. I want to be a teacher, a proctor, a warrior...I want...I want to be anything and everything I can be. Obviously that won't happen. I won't even be a footnote, I'll die nameless as I am now..."

"What about your question about love?" Jiraiya asked as Ekyt turned to walk away.

"I...never mind, Master Jiraiya, it's nothing...nothing at all..."

“Sasuke...this hard for me to say...but I don’t think you should be upset with Naruto, or Ekyt either. They stopped you from making the biggest mistake you possibly could. Doesn’t your own life mean anything to you? Don’t you want to actually live for yourself, instead of living for your brother?”

Sasuke bolted upright and grabbed Sakura around the neck. “NEVER say that again...Never. I will kill my brother. One way or the other. If Naruto and Ekyt get in my way...or Kakashi, or you...I’ll go through all of you.”

Sakura felt tears welling up. **No! He just threatened you! You know what you have to do, now do it!**

“Sasuke, if that’s how you feel, go about your quest...go it alone. I’m not going to support a needless murder! I don’t care what we’ve had in the past, or what kind of future we could have had! If you’re going to live to kill, that’s not something I want to be a part of!”

Neji activated his Byakugan as soon as the intruders were within 200 meters of him. His vision allowed him to see who was coming. He wasn’t thrilled, but he wasn’t threatened either.

Kiba approached Neji first.

“Long time no see, Neji! How’s the training going?” Kiba asked in a friendly manner. Akamaru leapt up onto his thick mane of brown hair and barked a hello.

“My training is well, as the fates have always been with me. It is...good to see you, and Shino. Lady Hinata...” Neji spoke the last name with hatred etched in every syllable.

Hinata looked as though she would pass out; she was pale as a ghost. But the years had leant her courage.

“Cousin Neji.” The strength of her voice surprised everyone, her self included. When she continued speaking, it was clear that this shy, timid girl had learned of her own abilities, and was ready to use them. “It’s good to see you, cousin,” she said, considerably warmer. In what was a major shock, she walked up to Neji, stared him right in the eye...

Then she hugged him.

“Neji, it’s time for us to bury the hatchet. Our family can’t afford to be at odds. The fates don’t speak only to you. Our village is deteriorating...and you’d be welcomed back with open arms, if you were to return...”

Neji looked shocked.

“Please give me time to consider my options...I’ll have my answer within twenty-four hours...”

Temari shivered. This guy was bad news, THAT much was evident. Or, apparently evident.

“Kimimaro Kaguya, right?” Temari asked, trying to keep the usual bit of “swagger” in her voice.

“Yes.” The white-haired guy replied. He was an imposing figure. His face held a neutral expression, and his voice held a neutral tone. It was somehow unnerving to see someone show no emotion whatsoever.

“We’re here to...escort you to the Leaf Village.” Temari’s voice wavered. Lee, sensing that, stepped forward to give her some relief.

“We are here to assist you in your travel to the Leaf Village. Whenever you are ready, we will go.” Lee, the polar opposite of Kimimaro, brought the slightest grin to Kimimaro’s face.

“My cousin has spoke of you...not to mention our battle...”

“Cousin? Who’s your cousin?” Tenten couldn’t help but blurt her question out.

Kimimaro’s face remained impassive. “Ekyt Kaguya.”

Lee, who had known about this, was shocked to see Tenten’s face.

"I thought...it was just a name he adopted...I never knew you two were related..." any respect Tenten had for Ekyt was destroyed.

"Well, let us get going then. It will be dark soon, and if we hurry, we may reach the Leaf Village by tomorrow morning."

At the end of two weeks, Ekyt had changed. Jiraiya, sadly, had known it would happen. The young man was convinced: There was almost no good in the world. Ekyt studied even more obsessively, learning jutsu and jutsu, trying to perfect them. He hardly spoke at all anymore; no more than politeness required. His anger was so thick you could sense it, if his perpetually balled fists didn't already lend you to that conclusion. But the anger soon failed, replaced by a depression...or maybe resignation. It was time to return to the village all too soon. Before they left, Jiraiya pulled Ekyt into a bar for a last round of Sake. "Listen, I never finished earlier. Kid, I said those three would become 3 sannin. I think that you'll play a part in getting them there. But, somehow, I can't see you just fading into the background." Jiraiya took up his earth-toned porcelain cup and emptied its contents.

"What do you mean?" Ekyt wanted to know.

"I mean that you have just as much a chance to become legendary as they do. But you're following a different path, and you've been going it alone. I hope that changes, because you DO have talent, and it would be a shame to waste it."

Neji approached Hinata first.

"You have grown in strength. Perhaps even the fates are wrong, Lady Hinata. I will return to the Leaf Village with you."

Ekyt arrived first, ready to speak with Lady Tsunade. He recounted his conversations, his frustrations, and his beliefs. To his surprise, Tsunade smiled. "Some of those may be over sooner than you think. Kimimaro entered next. Ekyt walked over and bowed. Kimimaro returned it.

"Good to see you again, Kimimaro."

What happened in the next few minutes was such a flurry that it's best described like this:

Temari was removed from Guy's team.

Neji was given his old spot back.

Ekyt, Kimimaro, and Temari were named as a team "But only for missions where it's necessary, as all of you have preferred to work solo, or with one partner."

In the strangest twist of all, which also was a kick square to Ekyt's nuts (at the time, although he quickly rescinded that belief), was Temari's reaction to Kimimaro. It seemed puppy love was running amok, and Temari had been infected.

Ekyt had admitted an attraction to Temari in the midst of a training session with Lee. They were the same age, both unfairly stuck as genin, and both genuinely cared for other people, and they had emotions. But, somehow, Ekyt had always come off as a "little brother" to Temari. So he had cast the

emotions aside. Besides, Temari was too abrasive for him. It hadn't taken long to realize that he might have been more infatuated with her looks than with her personality. Ekyt wasn't the type to pick someone based solely on looks.

Elsewhere, Naruto was trying to console Sakura.

"You made the right move, you know you did. It's gonna be hard, but you're right, and you know it. Just pretend he's me, and you'll have no problem telling him off! Believe it!" Naruto threw in the joke, bringing a smile to the somber Sakura's face for the first time in the two weeks since she had broken up with Sasuke.

You never forget your first love...Why did Sasuke have to be like that? Why couldn't he have seen the light, and just been...No. He was NEVER my boyfriend. He never cared for me, never even kissed me. I didn't mean anything to him. I was just...there. I'll never trust anyone like that again...no, I'll be more careful.

Sakura walked to her favorite place, a park in Konohagakure with a dirt sidewalk, which was dotted along the sides with cherry trees. Their light pink hues matched her hair, and they somehow made her feel at ease.

(sigh)I always dreamed of kissing Sasuke here...the cherry blossoms are so romantic...Ever since I was little, I've heard the stories about romance coming under the cherry blossoms. This is where my Mom and Dad met, twenty years ago. My Mom always told me that true love can come from anywhere, but a pretty girl sitting among the cherry blossoms never hurt. (giggle) Mom must have been a flirt when she was younger. Dad was always the tower of strength...and the one to spoil me. I had always hoped I'd meet a boy who would put me on a pedestal like that. Well, Lee did, but that was just creepy...

Naruto ran into Ekyt, who looked downright miserable.

"Listen, forget YOUR problems for a minute. Sakura's got REAL trouble. While you were gone, she broke up with Sasuke because of us. I've already talked to her..."

Ekyt finished his thought for him. "...I should talk to her. Any idea where she went?" Ekyt asked, trying to perk up his demeanor. The last thing a depressed Sakura needed was to see more depression.

Naruto screwed up his face in thought. "Oh yeah, the cherry blossoms! Hey, that reminds me, congrats on getting a team!"

Ekyt grinned. "Thanks Naruto, I-"

His voice trailed off as Naruto had suddenly become twelve naked girls, all hanging on Ekyt, posing, and blowing kisses.

"Ekyttttt-kuuuunnnnnnnnn..." they cooed as one.

Ekyt never stood a chance. He had all the moral fiber in the world, but a Ninja Harem jutsu out of nowhere had done more powerful ninjas than Ekyt in. The powerful nosebleed that accompanied this jutsu send Ekyt sailing, launching him at least 20 meters.

"So, you're Kimimaro? I guess since we're on a team, we should know each other a little. I'm Temari, formerly of the Sand Village."

Kimimaro's face showed the slightest of almost cocky grins. "Kimimaro Kaguya. Sound Village."

"So, what brings you here?" Temari questioned.

"My cousin, Ekyt, told me about the medic-nins here. (speaking matter-of-factly) I'm dying, and

apparently this Tsunade person could cure me.”

Temari slid a little closer to Kimimaro as they walked around the town. She was just showing him around, although she felt like it was more than that. She stopped dead when she heard that he was dying.

“I’m really sorry! I’m sure Tsunade can cure you, she’s handy with that medic stuff...”

Temari couldn’t believe it. **I left the Sand Village because my brothers were monsters...now I think I’m in love with one!**

Ekyt found Sakura among the tree blossoms. She appeared to be asleep. In reality, she was, but what was going on in her mind was much worse.

Sakura could sense Orochimaru’s connection with Sasuke when it reached a certain point, and it launched her subconscious into grotesque nightmares.

DREAM

Sakura was tied up, bound at the wrist and ankles. Before her, Sasuke was pacing, muttering to himself.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Sasuke!” Sakura howled, struggling fruitlessly against the ropes.

“Shut up! You rotten little dog! I should kill you...I should rip your heart out...but that’s too fast...you deserve to die slow...painfully...” Sasuke spoke more darkly than usual. He drew a kunai from its holster on his thigh and put it to Sakura’s face. He started to draw it down slowly, agonizingly. But Sakura didn’t feel any pain...

“Voluntary Pain Acceptance Jutsu!”

Sakura heard a familiar voice call. She saw Ekyt grabbing onto Sasuke’s kunai hand, then using his other hand to touch Sakura’s cheek. She watched in amazement as a cut opened on Ekyt’s face, blood spurting out of it, dripping down onto his hand.

Seconds later, a Rasengan hit Sasuke full in the stomach.

Sasuke got up and shook the blow off. Knowing what would happen, he threw kunai at the still-tied up Sakura. Ekyt dove in the way, his back taking the kunai. His face in front of Sakura’s, what she could see of it morphed into a mask of pain. She saw blood seep through his mask, and she knew it came from his mouth. It was a sign of internal injuries, and possibly death. Sakura screamed and struggled to break free...

END DREAM

Ekyt panicked. He had seen this before. Sakura’s mouth was opening and closing in silent screams of anguish. Immediately, shrugged off his vest to put around her shoulders. Then, gently, he put a hand on her shoulder.

“Sakura...it’s just a dream. This isn’t real. You’ve got wake up.”

Sakura heard Ekyt’s voice. For some reason, it held a tone of softness, of trust. She listened, and forced herself to wake up.

In the real world, Sakura leapt up, breathing heavily. A sheen of cold sweat dampened her lustrous pink hair. Her body was shaking, partially from the cold, partially from the sheer terror of the dream. "It's alright. Just a dream. It's okay," A calm voice assured her.

Sakura, without knowing why, leapt up and grabbed Ekyt around the waist. She sobbed into his shoulder.

"It was awful! Ekyt, this has happened before! Something's wrong with Sasuke! It's one of THOSE dreams...and..." Sakura broke down, hot, wet tears streaming down her smooth face. She hadn't let go of Ekyt, who had put aside his own "fear" of kunoichi and was doing his best to comfort her.

"Sakura, you've got to tell Tsunade, or Kakashi. There's no telling what's going to happen, so-"
"CHIDORI!"

Ekyt whipped around to see Sasuke running toward him, his hand crackling with blue energy. Normally, Ekyt would have just dodged away, but with Sakura still in a trance, he couldn't move.

"Fire Release: Dragon's Circle!" Ekyt shouted. He built up the flame he needed in his hand, but held his position.

Then he heard the third cry:

"RASENGAN!"

Sakura breathed out, near tears again.

If those three jutsus collide...Oh no...

5 - Sasuke's Ultimatum

Eyes wide, Ekyt called back his jutsu. The explosion of those three jutsus would be devastating. Instead, he opted for a defensive jutsu:

“Dragon’s Encampment Wall!”

A wall of roaring red flames sprang up in front of Ekyt. He positioned himself in front of Sakura. He couldn’t be harmed by the flames; she could.

Naruto stopped short of Sasuke, but kept his Rasengan at the ready. Sasuke, for his part, plowed right through into the wall of fire. His hand managed to hit Ekyt’s stomach, but only barely cut him, as the wall of fire held.

Panting with the effort, Sasuke stepped back, cursing.

“You...sealed my only chance of fulfilling my life’s goal...” Sasuke drew a kunai knife and flipped it to a reverse grip. His dark eyes brimmed with hatred and desperation.

A wind swept through the field. Ekyt ended his jutsu, as did Naruto. Both sensed Sasuke’s desperation, so neither dropped their guard. They exchanged glances, both ready to stop Sasuke, if he tried to attack. But Sasuke dropped his own guard, the wind tossing his hair.

“When you take away someone’s reason for living, you’ve taken away their life. So I’m going to give you a choice, Ekyt. And you’d better decide quick. Either unseal my curse mark...”

Sasuke held his kunai up, staring at the blade glinting in the sun. He brought his tongue to the kunai, licking it, making a small cut along his tongue. He pressed the tongue to the roof of his mouth, sucking on the cut he had just created. Then he finished his thought; a thought which chilled everyone to the core:

“Either unseal my curse mark...or I’ll commit seppuku. And my death will be on YOUR head...you’ve got one day to decide. Take council with whoever you want. But if you haven’t answered by midnight, it’ll be too late...”

“Hey, that went great! Nice work Choji, and you too Shikamaru!” Ino was walking happily with her comrades. All of them were on their way to meet their Jonin instructor, Asuma Sarutobi.

“What’s with you, Ino? You’re usually telling me that I’m a fatass, or telling Shikamaru he’s lazy and worthless. Now you’re singing our praises?” Choji couldn’t help but question this; seeing Ino so happy was...weird.

Ino suddenly realized how conspicuous her actions were. “Me? Not being nice? Ha ha, I’ve always loved your sense of humor, Choji! Ha ha ha!” Ino continued to laugh nervously, stretching her arms behind her head.

Shikamaru glanced over, eyes half-lidded. “Choji’s right. Normally you’re...critical...what’s up?”

Ino struck a mocking pose, one hand on a hip, the other playfully flicking Shikamaru in the forehead.

“What, can’t a girl be happy without her friends making a federal case?” she taunted, sticking her tongue out at the two stunned boys. “C’mon, let’s hurry up! No point in keeping Asuma-sensei waiting!”

Shikamaru and Choji exchanged confused glances, though neither was complaining that Ino wasn’t being her normally over-critical self.

Neji admitted to himself that he was concerned with how he would be welcomed to the village, after being gone for so long. He needn't have worried. If there were three accepting people in the Village, it was Might Guy, Rock Lee, and Tenten.

Neji pulled his headband tighter, adjusting the straps to cover his curse mark. Hinata's attempts at reconciling were fresh in his mind. He wasn't sure how to react. The fates, it seemed, were silent when it came to this matter.

Do I accept? What does it mean, for me to be welcomed back to the family? Does it tarnish my honor? And WHY are the fates silent on this matter, it is one of great importance...perhaps it is my test, the true test of my will...I need more time to think...for now, I'll enjoy being welcomed back.

Lee and Guy jumped around like little kids, leaping all around Neji, chanting that they had him back, and asking him how things were, and a million other questions in rapid-fire succession. Tenten smiled in her own somewhat reserved way. Strangely, she was blushing.

"Welcome back, Neji. It's good to have you back on the team." Tenten kissed Neji on the cheek. THAT gesture was open to interpretation.

Is that a kiss meaning "welcome back," or does it mean something else? Neji wondered. Tenten's blushing had stopped, and she just looked at peace.

"I can't wait to train with you again, my skills were getting dull," Tenten added with a warm smile.

Ekyt was floored. This was an impossible decision.

"Sasuke...think about this. Do you really want to beat your brother with borrowed power?" Ekyt began gently. Sasuke, however, cut him off sharply.

"Until midnight. If you haven't answered, you'll have my dead body to deal with. My Sharingan can see a lot, and it can read your guilt. So make your choice. At midnight, I'll be waiting for you at the village gates. Bring Naruto and Sakura, and anyone else you feel necessary. Because NOTHING will save you when I unleash my power...Or, nothing will save you from drowning in your own guilt when you refuse to unseal my mark. So, go, hold council with anyone and everyone, this isn't a secret affair...I want EVERYONE to know..."

Naruto looked over at Ekyt. Sakura, too, glanced at him. Ekyt straightened his back, and nodded once, firmly.

"I'll have my answer by midnight."

Kimimaro laid down on the operating table. Temari was at his side. When Kimimaro questioned it, Temari shrugged.

"We're team mates," was her only reply. **Maybe we'll be more...have you ever felt love, Kimimaro? Would you recognize it if it happened to you? I haven't felt a lot of love in my life, I've always been a servant to my father, or my brothers.**

"You'll be fine. Just don't panic," Temari told Kimimaro in her own, inimitable way.

"Panic doesn't apply to me," Kimimaro dryly informed her. "It's not a state of mind I understand..."

Temari smiled at that. Quickly, she forced her smile to its normal, cocky state. "Likewise. Still, just get well, kid."

Temari went out to sit in the waiting room, just outside Lady Tsunade's office. The room was mostly wood, something like pine, with a few uncomfortable wooden chairs and benches dotting it. The room was immaculate; apparently it was maintained by Lady Tsunade's aid, Shizune. It was Shizune who had added the various paintings and pieces of art, to give it a more homey atmosphere. The centerpiece

of the room was undoubtedly the enormous bay windows that were directly opposite the Operating Room's doors.

Temari went over to gaze out the window. After sparing another thought for Kimimaro, and then one for her other teammate, Ekyt, she contemplated how things were back "home." "Home" meaning Sunagakure, the Sand Village. It had prospered since Gaara had become the Kazekage. But it had become even more of a military-dictatorship than the other Village's.

Temari had left because of her brother's ruthless actions. As a result, she was an S-ranked criminal in the Sand Village. With Gaara ruling the land (He was beloved by the people), and Kankuro heading up their version of ANBU, Temari's life wasn't safe, despite the fact she was incredibly skilled. She had never been attached to the place, preferring peace over war. It was that very thought that had led her to the somewhat more tranquil Leaf Village.

She had always had something of an interest in the boys of the Leaf Village. Shikamaru and her had a lot in common, leading to brief thoughts of romance. Temari would never forget, however, it had been Ekyt that had led her to leave the Sand Village. With a broken leg, he had come to her defense against Kankuro's wrath. It had earned him both the ire of his Village and the respect of the Third Hokage at the time.

Tsunade looked up from the scroll she was currently pondering.

"Kid, if this is about the chunin exams..." she warned Ekyt. However, when she saw Naruto and Sakura on either side of him, she knew that the chunin exams weren't the discussion du jour. "What's wrong?" she asked immediately.

Ekyt explained quickly. "...And either I unseal his curse mark, or he kills himself. We all know what unsealing it means...but is it worth the price of letting him die?"

Tsunade folded her hands in front of her. "That's not the question, Ekyt. The question is this: Can you live with Sasuke's death?"

The genin was clearly caught off guard with the question. Tsunade got up and put a hand on his shoulder, standing in front of him.

"Death is a part of life. Ekyt...only you can choose...but if you choose to leave the mark sealed, you have to understand: Sasuke died by HIS hand, not yours. You can't let this guilt eat you alive. Consider this: If you unseal the mark you may be condemning hundreds to death. By leaving it sealed, your hands remain unbloodied, and your conscious would be clear. It's a choice only you can make...as awful as it is."

Sarutobi set down a cup of tea in front of Jiraiya. They had met in Sarutobi's living room. Wall scrolls and weapons covered the wooden walls, while rice paper doors covered the entrance and exit to the room. It was a room that held many memories, and it was full of nods to tradition; the way life once was if Konoha.

"So you told them of the prediction?" Sarutobi questioned gravely.

"Nope. Only the one not directly involved. The Kaguya kid. I think I said the wrong thing, but the kid is so hard to read..." Jiraiya took a long gulp of the tea, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve.

Sarutobi nodded. "I find the young man pleasant enough, and certainly worthy of trust. The other three...they will be hitting their pinnacles soon. They will maintain those pinnacles for a long time, even as they age, they will be powerful. But I have reason to believe that they will have help, if not an addition to their number."

"Ekyt?" Jiraiya asked in surprise. "He's good, but hardly legendary."

“Not his sword, his mind. His emotions. While Ninja, and Samurai for that matter, are trained to be emotionless, he has used those emotions to become more powerful. While not as powerful as the three at first glance, he has many qualities that will make him a match for them someday. But I fear his path, next to Naruto’s, will be the hardest. He may be legendary, he may not. But he WILL become a pillar of this village someday. However, should he attain legendary status, and should the three remain comrades...their strength will become unrivaled for generations to come.” Sarutobi spoke peacefully, despite how much importance his words carried.

Jiraiya choked on a gulp of tea. “Three? But there’s four of them! What’s going to happen?! Is it Naruto? Will the Demon Fox break free of the seal?”

Sarutobi shook his head. “No. I mean...three of them will become legendary. Which three...I cannot say. But I feel certain that at least one will follow Orochimaru’s path...and one will attain death...that is all I can say, it’s a mystery to me as well, Jiraiya.”

At that point, Sarutobi heard his gong ring. With a small groan, he stood up and opened the door. Ekyt, Naruto, and Sakura piled in. Ekyt immediately knelt before the two masters, while Naruto and Sakura remained standing.

“Master Sarutobi...Master Jiraiya...I have a question for you, and I...need guidance.”

The two Masters sat in stunned silence as Ekyt told them of what had happened. Jiraiya remained silent, deferring to Master Sarutobi’s opinion.

“Ekyt...It will not be easy, but you must decide on your own. If Sasuke chooses the road to the west, you MUST NOT allow yourself to succumb to the false blame that I know you are prone to. If I could trust anyone to make this decision honorably, it’s you. Consider all things, then decide. And act on that decision firmly. Leave no room for question when you make your decision.”

Tsunade went to work on Kimimaro. His disease was caused from a defect in his kekkai-genkai. It was easily cured, although Kimimaro would have to receive treatment for the rest of his life.

“You’re all done Kimimaro. And, while I’m at it...” Tsunade rummaged in her robe for moment, before extracting a Leaf Village hitai-ate. “Welcome to the Leaf Village.”

Kimimaro took the headband silently, contemplating it, then tying it around his waist.

Tsunade and Shizune both looked uneasy. Tsunade’s thoughts were disturbed, and with good reason. **God, this guy looks like a ghost! But if he’s really on our side, I won’t say no to having that Kekkaigenkai in our ranks...and it cures ONE of my problems. No, wait, it doesn’t! Damn it! Temari is already a chunin, and Kimimaro is, too. That still leaves Ekyt out in the cold, despite having a team. Unless...Ah! Loophole! I always was good at getting out of tight spots. I can finally give the kid some good news.**

“So what are you going to do?” Naruto asked Ekyt. He, Ekyt, and Sakura had taken up a place in Ichiraku.

“I can only see one thing...but it’s a hard decision...here!” Ekyt called, holding his sake cup up. He had begun to blush, but if any night ever called for an additional cup of sake, it was this night.

Sakura remained silent, but at 11:45 pm, she reached for Ekyt’s hand.

“I know you’ll make the right choice...and you don’t have to protect my feelings...” Sakura said quietly, trying to keep the tears out of her eyes. “Sasuke...is a threat to everyone, even himself...so...do what you

have to.”

Ekyt had never had a girl hold his hand before. It was so smooth and warm, and comforting. He blushed harder, hoping that the sake would cover for him.

It was time to go. He drained his cup, got up, and walked toward the Village gates. On the way, he wrote out a scroll, then pricked his thumb with a kunai. He wiped the blood across a scroll.

“Summoning Jutsu!” he called, jamming his hand and scroll onto the ground. A loud POP was heard, before a Chinese Water Dragon appeared on Ekyt’s shoulder. Ekyt wrote out a scroll and handed it to the dragon, who- swallowed it?

“It’s for Shizune-Sensei, okay Umisu?” Ekyt gave the dragon a couple strokes. The dragon gave it’s owner a wink, then disappeared with another POP.

Sasuke waited by the gates. He had silenced his thoughts, which had been driving him slowly insane. Instead, he flicked the kunai stained with his own blood from a reverse grip to a standard grip, then back again. At 11:59, he saw Ekyt walk up, with Naruto and Sakura in tow.

“Well? What have you decided?” Sasuke asked, holding the kunai at the ready.

Ekyt, who had been working on this since he had made his decision, told Sasuke of his decision.

“Go ahead. Kill yourself. If I unseal that mark, I’ll have signed the death warrant for more than one person. I’d rather live with one person’s death on my conscience than the deaths of hundreds. So, go ahead.”

Sasuke glared back, not happy about this surprise. **He-he’s heartless...I’ll call his bluff...**

Sasuke drew the kunai across his neck, drawing blood.

“That poor clone will never be the same. Either do it or quit wasting my time.” Ekyt said impassively, as the clone disappeared.

Sasuke landed in front of him, enraged. “You heartless bastard! You’d let me kill myself?”

Ekyt nodded. “If it meant saving other lives...yes. And don’t sound so surprised, you already knew I’d do the honorable thing.”

Without warning, Sasuke reared back and threw the kunai at Ekyt. It struck Ekyt in the chest. Blood immediately began to spurt out, not only from his chest, but from his mouth.

“Smart,” he choked out, “Killing the only one who could have unsealed your mark...”

Sakura leapt down next to Ekyt, already activating her chakra scalpel. Seconds later, Shizune appeared. The two began to work on the boy as rapidly as possible.

Naruto leapt at Sasuke, striking him across the face with a well-placed right fist.

“I knew this would happen Naruto...we’re going to fight this out. If you win, I’ll stay in the village...if you lose, you and your friends let me leave.”

Naruto growled his response: “Deal! I’m going to win; believe it!”

6 - Medical Clearance

Naruto tugged his headband tighter.

“I’ve waited a long time for this Sasuke...” Naruto said out loud. In his mind, he elaborated. **I’ve wanted to know for a long time...are we equal, finally? You were always naturally talented, while I’ve had to work for everything! You might have lost everyone, but I’ve never HAD anyone to lose! No encouragement, no praise, nobody, until Iruka-sensei came along...This time, it’s for real Sasuke! I’m going to stop you from leaving, no matter what! Believe it!**

Sasuke let his headband drop to the ground; he felt like he had no need for it anymore.

“Naruto, we’re finally going to have our fight. Since the chunin exams, I thought you’d be a good test of my skills...now I’m going to find out.” Sasuke spoke evenly, while his thoughts were deeper, warranting more emotion. **I need to know...am I more powerful? If I can’t defeat Naruto, I’ll have no chance against my brother! But if I win...I’m that much closer to Itachi. Naruto...maybe we’ve bonded, but if getting to my brother means killing you, here and now, make no mistake: I’ll do it!**

The two were at the village gates. This area was open, and would serve their battle well. Aside from some small litter in the cobblestone street, and the two medic-nin keeping an eye on Ekyt, the area was clear; dark and silent. A perfect place to battle this out. Naruto was dead set against losing to anyone, especially when the stakes were this high. Sasuke didn’t like to lose either, and the stakes were double as high in his eyes. His life’s dream was on the line in his eyes. A dream he would do anything to fulfill.

Shizune put a hand to Ekyt’s neck. She breathed a sigh of relief, at first.

“His pulse is stable...but who knows how long it’ll stay that way...that blade might have pierced his heart...” Shizune was fighting back tears even now; the boy’s chances seemed so slim!

Sakura merely focused harder. “We’ve got to cut the shirt off of him, I need to see where the wound is. There’s a chance that we can use the old methods (bandages, etc) to stop the bleeding, at least. But...I can’t do it. M-my hand...no, I have to!”

Shizune felt the girl’s pain. She remained silent, but thought to herself **If he dies...she’ll be just like Lady Tsunade was...maybe she’s not losing a lover or a little brother, but she’s definitely losing a close friend! The blood...there’s so much...but enough to mean the heart was pierced?**

“Tonton, go tell Lady Tsunade about what’s happened...and have her notify the boy’s next of kin...er, I mean, team. His team. Just in case...”

Tonton gave a sad “oink,” then ran off to do Shizune’s bidding.

Tsunade heard the sounds of protesting from the guards outside. Particularly that of Genma, who cursed the same way every time this happened:

“You damn pig! If you weren’t the Hokage’s pet, I’d turn you into sausage patties!”

Tsunade smirked. **Sounds like Tonton managed to crush his foot again...ha ha ha, when will he learn to move? I mean, it’s not like Tonton moves silently, she’s a pig!**

Tonton scrambled into the office and began to “speak”. This “speaking” consisted of emotional oinks in varying pitches and ranges of sound. After years with Tonton, Shizune and Tsunade could understand

the pig's dialect. After a few squeals, Tsunade leapt to her feet.

"Lead the way! Hurry!" Tsunade urged Tonton.

"Oink!"

Sasuke and Naruto walked slowly toward each other.

"This is it!" They shouted as one, before dropping the slow pace and tearing toward each other at full speed.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto cried. Ten copies of Naruto popped up. They leapt high, all of them aiming a fist or a leg at Sasuke.

Sasuke spun around, kicking the nearest Naruto in the stomach. Another one, from the opposite direction, came sailing in, leg extended. Sasuke kicked the leg out of the way, then slammed his fist home. POOF! Another clone! A third clone managed to hit Sasuke in the side of the head, but Sasuke had rolled with the blow, softening it. He rolled to his feet, landing in a cluster of three Narutos. As he was getting to his feet, he used the same motion to take two out with sweep kicks. The third leapt over it and managed to land a punch to Sasuke's forehead. Sasuke staggered back a couple steps, but as the Naruto came in to follow-up, Sasuke's kick to the stomach halted his progress. THIS Naruto fell to the ground, clearly in pain.

"Hah! Gotcha!" Sasuke crowed, getting ready to finish him.

"Not quite! AHHHH!" Another Naruto sailed down from a tree nearby. As Sasuke turned his attention to THAT one, a second Naruto aimed low and from behind. Sasuke blocked the strike to his head as he leapt over the sweep. He snaked his arm around the "high" Naruto's and threw him into the "low" Naruto. They both disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Ino leapt merrily into Asuma's home.

"Asuma-sensei, mission accomplished!" she sang, throwing in a little pose.

Asuma took a long drag off his cigarette, exhaling after a pause. "What got into you, Ino? You're acting all...civil."

Ino shrugged. "What, a girl can't be happy for no reason?" she questioned, mockingly upset.

Shikamaru tossed out a dry "Sure, a GIRL can. But we're asking about YOU..."

Ino turned around, fire in her eyes.

"WHAT was that, *Shikamaru*?" She half-shouted, a fist raised.

"Nothing, nothing! Geez, how troublesome..." **Man, I'm going to wind up like Dad, attached to some girl's apron strings. What a drag...**

Sakura activated her chakra scalpel. Sweat and tears, mixed with some blood that had arched off Ekyt's body onto her, stung her eyes. She wiped the menagerie away and returned to focusing on stopping her hand from shaking. She undid Ekyt's vest, so she could get at his T-shirt. Blood that had clotted made the shirt too difficult to pull off, so she used her chakra scalpel to cut it open.

"Oh...Oh my..." Shizune recoiled slightly, tears in her eyes. She had seen it all, but this was bad.

Sakura sobbed suddenly, seeing just what damage had been done.

"Shizune...please, tell me it's not true! Please!" Sakura grabbed on to Shizune's robe pleadingly.

Shizune could only shake her head.

“This is bad...worse than if it HAD hit his heart...”

The blade had stopped 3 inches from Ekyt’s heart. A painful, but non-lethal injury. Until you got down to what was hit in the process.

Tsunade chose that moment to appear. Her first instinct was to stop the fight. Then she saw Ekyt on the ground.

“Move!” Tsunade pushed past Shizune and Sakura. “Oh no...Shizune, top drawer, red bottle.”

“But Lady Tsunade, that’s...that means...” Shizune sputtered.

Tsunade lowered her head. “All we can do now...is make him comfortable...I’m sorry...”

Sakura refused to believe it. “But it missed his heart!”

Tsunade lowered her head, looking at Ekyt’s battered body. “Yes, but it hit something worse: the kunai severed his tenketsu. Not too bad, but it hit his chakra coils. They’ve already sustained one hit, I don’t know if he’ll SURVIVE another surgery...”

“You’ve got to give him the option!” Sakura shouted suddenly. “You can’t just assume he’ll take death over a changed life! He’s not like that! He wouldn’t take Sasuke’s life, and I know he wouldn’t take his own!”

Sakura looked at Tsunade pleadingly.

“Please...at least try...I’ve never lost a patient, and I don’t want to start now...”

Tsunade nodded. “Sakura...I’ll give him a chance at life...but understand, his own decisions might very well kill him...and you might as well understand this now as well: You WILL lose a patient some day. No matter how good you are, no matter who taught you, no matter if you have the best equipment or nothing but your own chakra and a rusty kunai...someone WILL die. And it won’t be your fault...”

I’ve got to get Sakura and Shizune away from here, at least for now...The kid will be waking up soon, and the last thing he needs is those two soft-touches influencing him.

“You two, go get his team. Kimimaro Kaguya and Temari. They need to be know. Have them wait in the infirmary.”

Sasuke finally had enough of the Shadow Clone jutsu. He began to weave his hands together.

“Fire style: Fireball jutsu!” Sasuke spewed forth a fire ball, clearing the area of Naruto clones. Only one Naruto remained, and he was charred. Smiling, Sasuke activated his Sharingan.

“CHIDORI!”

Naruto got to his feet, but found himself frozen to the spot. **That’s it, my chakra’s gone. And here comes Sasuke! That Chidori is going to rip right through me! C’mon fox, where’s your chakra when I need it?**

Ekyt suddenly nipped up, landing on his feet. His mind and body not quite connected yet, he looked at Naruto and Sasuke. He HEARD Tsunade, but his mind was sectioned off. Hearing meant nothing at this point. His subconscious mind opened the First Gate of Chakra. He pulled away from Tsunade’s grasp and tore toward Sasuke.

Sasuke’s Chidori required “tunnel vision”, which meant he was focused only on Naruto. The sound of birds chirping deafened him, so he never heard Ekyt. He only saw him, and then it was too late.

“Hoof!” Ekyt breathed out hard as he sailed into Sasuke. His speech was slurred, but “Konoha Hurricane!” was heard.

His kick struck Sasuke’s arm, knocking the Chidori, and Sasuke’s momentum, away from Naruto. The Chidori attack struck a tree. Sasuke’s arm was stuck inside.

Tsunade grabbed Ekyt, grimacing as blood arched away from his chest even as he stopped running. She gave him a hard hit on the head, knocking him completely unconscious.

Naruto used a Shadow Clone Jutsu. Only one Naruto appeared. The real Naruto held out his hand, while the clone began to contain chakra in his hand. Soon, a blue, swirling ball of pure power, with the destructive force of a hurricane, sat in Naruto’s fist.

“Sorry Sasuke! RASENGAN!” Naruto jammed the attack into Sasuke’s stomach. The Uchiha boy’s eyes rolled up into his head, as he was finally defeated.

Neji turned away from his family.

“Only Hinata has approached me with true remorse and understanding. All of you would only continue to treat me as a lesser, rather than an equal, or a better.”

To her surprise, and to Kiba and Shino’s worry, which was followed by immense relief, Neji put an arm around Hinata’s shoulders.

“I will embrace Lady Hinata as family. But no one else. Hinata, thank you. Thank you for showing me the TRUE theory of family. Even the fates had remained silent on this matter. But now, even without their aid, I know I have made the right decision. And I will stand by it.”

Temari leapt up when Tsunade entered, carrying the unconscious Ekyt. Kimimaro narrowed his eyes, but made no other indication that he saw anything.

Tsunade laid Ekyt down on a table, then used her chakra to revive him. Quickly, she ordered Sakura to restrain him. With her chakra control, she pinned his arms at his sides easily.

Tsunade spoke grimly. “You have a choice...that kunai missed your heart, but it struck your chakra coils, and severed many tenketsu along the way. I could do another surgery, but your chakra might not be the same. You’ll have maybe 25% of your chakra in the WORST case. There’s a slim chance you’ll get it all back, but it’s not likely, to be blunt. If you DO NOT have the surgery, you won’t have access to any chakra. If I do the surgery, and it fails...you’ll never have a measure of chakra again. It’s not an easy choice, and I want you to take your time, and think about it. You’re at a very emotional impasse right now, you can’t make this decision hastily.”

Ekyt finally stopped struggling against Sakura; he went entirely limp.

“I see...so there’s no quality of life...no hope...I might as well be dead.”

Tsunade lowered her head again. “IF I do the surgery, and it succeeds, you’ll have your chakra back, in some capacity at least.”

Temari and Kimimaro were both speechless. Ekyt stood up slowly, and walked over to the window, staring out at the star-filled sky.

“So it’s really come to this? I had my chance...with Master Jiraiya...I could have stayed away from the village. Now...I might never know...just how strong I am.” Ekyt pulled his headband straight, ripped his ruined shirt off the rest of the way, then pulled his vest back on. One blood-splattered hand made a fist. “DAMMIT!” Ekyt shouted. His fist shattered the pane of glass in front of him. It clattered to the ground in shards. In one shard, Ekyt saw his reflection.

“I’ve made my choice: Do the surgery. If it fails, I’m no worse of than I am now.”

Sakura looked at Ekyt, offering a kind smile. Then she left; Naruto and Sasuke needed some medical attention. It would take the combined skills of Tsunade and Shizune for the surgery, which left Sakura and a new medic-nin to handle Naruto and Sasuke.

As she opened the door, Sakura groaned.

“Hi Billboard Brow! Guess we’re working together on this one!”

Sakura and Ino were supposed to work together? In a medical facility, no less? And Sasuke was involved. Maybe she was too emotionally drained, or maybe she was still angry with Sasuke, but Sakura just shrugged.

“Okay Ino-pig. Sasuke’s all yours. I’ll handle Naruto.”

“No way, I want Sas- huh? Did you just say...” Ino couldn’t believe it.

“That’s right. YOU handle Sasuke...”

Guy cleared his throat loudly before his team.

“Everyone, I’ve got an announcement, so listen up! Lee, stand up...(Guy started to cry) You special kid! (Sob!) You’re...you’re gonna be a jonin!”

7 - Under the Knife

Tsunade cleared the room; a matter of such importance needed Ekyt's sole attention. Once everyone was gone, Tsunade put a blank scroll in front of Ekyt. Shizune, the more openly caring of the two, sat down where she could watch and offer advice.

Ekyt looked at the scroll, then up at Tsunade. Hoping for an answer. His throat was full of knots, there was no way he could speak coherently.

"It's...a last will and testament. I need to know who your next of kin is, who you leave your stuff too...I'm not going to lie, this surgery could go wrong. So you need to make sure everything is in order."

Taking up a brush, Ekyt began to write. His hand was shaking so much he knocked over the ink well, and actually cursed, something he NEVER did in front of females if he could help it. He decided that this was an exception to his own rules of etiquette.

As the ink spilled out, in Ekyt's mind, it became his own blood. From the Chidori attacks...he could SEE himself, impaled on a ball of blue energy meant to kill. It was worse in his eyes- that ball of energy was owned by someone he had called "friend" and "comrade".

Stifling a sigh, Ekyt wrote a couple of names down, then handed the scroll, mostly blank, to Shizune.

Shizune read the scroll, then shot a glance at Ekyt so fast her neck cramped.

In a low, solemn tone, Ekyt read the contents of the scroll:

"Leave it all to the Leaf Village. There's no executor of my will, so it goes to the Fifth Hokage. I want my parents informed of my death, only after signing a consent form that says they won't hold the Leaf Village responsible."

Tsunade and Shizune exchanged glances.

"Are you sure? I mean..." Shizune began, clearly unsure of what to say.

Ekyt pulled off his mask and actually gave them a grim smile.

"The Leaf Village has done so much for me...this surgery isn't about my well-being, I lived without chakra before. It's about me being able to serve the Leaf Village better."

Ekyt stood up and looked placidly at the mountain where the Hokage's faces had been carved.

"Is that your dream?" Shizune asked gently. "To be Hokage?"

Ekyt smiled again, but shook his head. "No. That's Naruto's dream, I'd never take it from him. I was just thinking that I hope I accomplish more before I die. Something to really be remembered by. But, it's a pipe dream until this surgery is done."

Shizune put a hand on his shoulder. "After hearing that, I don't have any doubt you'll be remembered..." **Tsunade and I will certainly never forget...**

"Shizune-sensei, may I see my records before the surgery?" Ekyt asked suddenly.

"Huh? Oh, sure, hold on!"

Neji's decision was not well received among the Hyuga council. A heated discussion took place. By the end of it, a decision was reached.

Hiashi Hyuga stood up. As the matriarch of the Main branch of the family, his actions and words were accepted without question as a general rule. That "general rule" didn't apply to his latest decision:

“Neji is a talented boy. I’ve never forgiven myself for suppressing him, and I, like him, have always picked fate as a scapegoat. That will change on the following premise: I, Hiashi Hyuga, will dismantle the age-old “Houses” and unite the Hyuga clan under one name, if Neji Hyuga can defeat me in combat.”

The Cadet members were thrilled, Neji was going to be their savior!

“It is just as the fates predicted!”

“The boy must be prepared!”

Hiashi held up a hand. “It is indeed time for Neji to recognize this. This match will be settled with two proctors, one from the Main house, one from the Cadet house. After the match is finished, the results will be recorded, but they will not be announced to the village, save for the Fifth Hokage, out of respect for her position. Our family has been divided too long, and with the Leaf Village at it’s weakest, it is no longer feasible to keep petty issues at the forefront. Should Neji lose this match, the matter will be dropped as long as I am the head of the Main house.”

Hiashi, an imposing man, and a talented ninja, looked over the council once. He did not look for, or need, approval. He gave a curt nod to his messenger, who set off to find Neji.

Naruto winced as something stung an open cut along his face.

“Hold still!” Sakura admonished him as Naruto tried to pull away.

“Sorry...” Naruto grumbled. He fidgeted a little bit more on the cold steel table. “How is...how’s Sasuke?” he asked quickly.

Sakura shrugged. “Who knows? Ino is taking care of him. I’m so glad you stopped him.”

Naruto couldn’t contain his shock. **Sakura was okay with this? And SHE broke up with Sasuke, after chasing him for so long? WHAT IS GOING ON?**

Sakura dipped a washcloth in an oil she had made and told Naruto to wipe any personal areas that had gotten cut.

“Hey, wait, what about Ekyt?! No one ever said what happened to him!” Naruto whined loudly.

Sakura turned around and put a hand gently on Naruto’s shoulder. “It’s not looking good. When he opened the first gate of chakra with his tenketsu and chakra coils severed, he did himself a lot of harm. He might not survive the operation... No one has told HIM that, we’re sworn to secrecy by Lady Tsunade.”

Naruto saw that Sakura had tears in her eyes. He felt his own eyes welling up in spite of himself.

“So...so he might have killed himself, saving me from Sasuke?” Naruto stammered, looking at the floor. Sakura couldn’t answer at first. “He wanted to, you know. He fought off Lady Tsunade...she had to let him go help. And don’t blame yourself...”

Naruto was lost in his own thoughts. **Will being Hokage someday mean having to have my friends die for me? Why didn’t he just let Sasuke hit me, maybe that other chakra would have saved me...If I’m Hokage, I’m going to fight my own battles, and not let anyone else die needlessly! Ekyt, you’d better survive! When I’m Hokage, you’re going to be my right-hand man, believe it!**

Lee’s eyes widened and brimmed with tears.

“M-me! A jonin! Guy-sensei, is it true?! IS IT?!” Lee already jumped into Guy-sensei’s arms.

“Yes, Lee, it’s all true!” Guy sobbed. “I’m so proud of you, you special kid! A jonin! I always knew you had it in you, Lee! From the moment I met you, I knew you were gonna be great!”

“Congratulations, Lee!” Tenten hugged him. Tenten was really the heart and soul of Guy’s team. Lee was too emotional, and Neji not enough. Tenten was the balance.

Neji walked toward Lee menacingly. But Neji broke out into a somewhat-less conceited than usual smile.

“Perhaps now that you will be jonin...you will be able to defeat me...”

Lee’s gaze hardened to a friendly look of competition. “I will! Do not drop your guard, Neji!”

Ekyt looked through his records. He smirked at the findings.

“I have no sensei...no specialty...50 D ranks...10 C ranks... 9 B ranks...5 A ranks...interesting. Alright.” Ekyt slammed the book closed and walked to the surgery room.

“Whenever you’re ready, cut away.” Ekyt told Tsunade.

Tsunade seemed to be nervous. **This...this is just as complicated as the surgery I did on Lee...but at least Lee KNEW he might die...I haven’t had the heart to tell this one...huh?**

Tsunade felt a hand on hers. She looked down, finding Ekyt’s hand linked in hers.

“Relax, Lady Tsunade. It’s alright.”

Tsunade nodded. “Thanks kid, you’re right.”

“Sake’s on me afterward,” Ekyt replied.

“Now THAT’S motivation!”

Sasuke glared out the window as Ino tended his wounds.

“How are you feeling, Sasuke?” Ino questioned perkily.

“None of your business,” Sasuke snarled back.

Ino shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

“Hurry up, I’ve got work to do,” Sasuke shot back.

Ino threw down the washcloth.

“Alright, I’ve had it with you! Sasuke, you realize that everyone went out of their way to be nice to you? To make sure you were okay? Over the years, I’ve learned what Sakura’s just learned: There’s no changing an asshole like you! You’re not a dick because of what happened to you, it’s just your nature. You’ve had everything given to you! Skills, understanding...and all you’ve done is turn your back to the village! Heal your own damn wounds!”

Ino stormed off, stunning the Uchiha boy. **Is THIS what I’ve become? Do I care is the bigger question...**

Temari and Kimimaro were waiting outside.

“So you’re healed now, huh boneman?” Temari questioned Kimimaro.

“I am. I’m no longer dying.” Kimimaro was finally speaking to people in the village. He scared the hell out of most people.

Temari, however, was strangely attracted to Kimimaro. **He’s everything my brothers are, which I hate...but he’s not naturally violent, just naturally skilled...like me, false modesty aside...Kinda cute, too...**

“I hope my cousin will make it.” Kimimaro stated after a few minutes of silence.

“Huh? Make it? His life isn’t in danger...” Temari’s voice trailed off upon the dawning realization that Ekyt’s life DID hang in the balance...

Temari lowered her eyes, but smirked. “The kid won’t die. If there’s anything I’m sure of, it’s that he won’t let go of life until his mission is done, and he’s not there yet. He’ll be back on his feet in no time!”

Kimimaro looked over at Temari, a look of curiosity on his face. “Your optimism is unfounded, but you seem so steadfast in your belief. Why?”

Temari shrugged. "I guess I just have a soft spot for the underdog."

Tsunade made the last cut.

"Release!" she called, ending the genjutsu she had put on Ekyt.

Immediately, Ekyt stirred and sat up. He put a hand up, then the other. Then he weaved them together, making hand signs. Soon, there were three Ekyt's.

"Good as new!" he declared. "Thank you so much, Lady Tsunade! And you too, Shizune!" Ekyt bowed to the two of them.

"You said you were buying the drinks. C'mon, let's get on with that part then," Tsunade said dismissively. Shizune hugged Ekyt.

"I'm glad to see you're back to normal. How's your chakra feel?"

"Great!" Ekyt replied.

Timidly, Sakura came into the room. Upon seeing Ekyt was awake and alive, she ran over and hugged him.

"I'm glad you're alright...thanks for stopping those two from making a huge mistake!"

Ekyt, being Ekyt, completely froze up at Sakura's touch. He finally remembered he was supposed to hug back.

"I was glad to do it."

After some merriment, and the sake had been flowing, Ekyt hardly had anything to drink or eat. He wasn't a steadfast drinker, but even he had a social side with the sauce. He slunk to the end of the bar, huddled over a cup of sake and a scroll. He took a gulp, then replaced the cup, indicating he wanted more.

It isn't fair. Those two (Kimimaro and Temari) think I don't know about how they feel about each other...that makes me the third wheel, again! Sasuke is out to kill me now, which means I can't drop my guard. To top it all off, I don't have a sensei, a girl, or any hope for the future! That was a line of ** I fed Tsunade to make her feel better, so she didn't kill me when I was under the knife. I mean the part about the village and all...**

Nothing in life is so bad it can't get worse. As Ekyt was pondering this, Ebisu strolled in.

"Well, still a genin, I see. There IS justice," the Tokubetsu jonin taunted.

Ekyt, while not even buzzed, was just too pissed to care. "My foot will be IN your @\$\$ if you don't leave me alone," he warned.

Ebisu slapped Ekyt across the face.

"You won't touch me, you little smartass!"

Two seconds later, Ekyt's stool went clatter to the floor as he tackled the Tokubetsu jonin and started to brawl with him. (Not the ideal thing to do after surgery).

"Lady Tsunade, shouldn't you tell him the good news?" Shizune prompted a red-faced Tsunade.

"Whass tha? Good newsth? (hic) Oh yeah, yeah, why don' you gohead and tell himm (hic)," Tsunade drained another of the small porcelain cups. "More, here!" she slurred.

Shizune went over to tell Ekyt, only to see him and Ebisu trading punches.

"Lady Tsunade!" she shouted.

Tsunade slammed her heal against the ground, forcing the two ninja to leap apart.

“Alright, that’s enough! Ekyt, you’re taking the chunin exams. You have a team that’s ineligible, but your team doesn’t need to participate. Your sensei is Hayate Gekko. Congratulations.” Tsunade told Ekyt in a happy (albeit somewhat drunk) voice.

Ebisu protested. “He isn’t worthy, Lady Tsunade! He has no respect, he is angry, and he refuses to conform!”

“Ebisu, you have been provoking this kid for years. If you have a problem, I have no problem reffing a bout between you two- AFTER the chunin exams. If I find out you’ve injured him in an unprovoked attack, you will be sparring ME. Understood?”

Neji and Tenten were sitting with Guy, waiting for Lee to finish training, when a messenger appeared, kneeling at Neji’s side. Neji took the note with a nod of thanks. The look of surprise in his eyes brought a curious grin to Tenten’s face. She read the contents of the note and couldn’t help but smile.

Neji,

The time has arrived. The fates have informed me

That it is no longer advisable to keep the family divided.

It is YOUR fate to unite them. To do so, you must defeat me.

Our match will take place in two days time, so be prepared.

I know your father would have been proud, Neji. But bear

In mind, you must defeat me to unite the family.

Good luck to you. I know you’ll make your father proud.

Hiashi Hyuga

Sakura curled up in bed, exhausted from the day’s work. She quickly pulled on her red pajama top and bottoms. The weather was warm, despite this being the Leaf Village’s “winter” season. The pajamas left just an inch or two of skin exposed on her stomach. Sakura didn’t like being bundled up at night, it just got too hot. She walked over to her bed and just started to lay down when something caught her eye. It was a picture of her team. From her bed, Sakura studied it for a moment.

Look at Kakashi-sensei, he hasn’t changed a bit! And Naruto, heh heh, I remember, I beat the crap out of him for ruining the first picture we took. And Sasuke...you’re an asshole! Suddenly furious, Sakura crawled under her thick red comforter and curled up.

DREAM

Sakura giggled and blushed. She wrung out the washcloth in her hands and let it drip over the old stone basin for a moment. Then she applied it to a nasty cut on the back of a shirtless boy.

“You’re almost done, okay? That cut is going to heal just fine!”

Sakura didn’t place the voice that answered with a “Good to know.” The answer could have belonged to anyone.

It was strange, tending to a wound in what appeared to be a lake. A waterfall roared overhead, masking most of the sounds. But the rush of the water was comforting to Sakura, so she closed her eyes and listened.

“Isn’t this a great place?” Sakura said, wrapping her arms around the upper body of the shirtless boy she had been patching up. The boy responded by hugging her. Sakura buried her face in his

mildly-muscular chest, which was still wet from the water. She felt safe and comfortable, and expressed that with a content sigh. Suddenly, he turned, letting a gasp of pain escape his throat.

Sakura whipped around, seeing a figure she couldn't quite make out holding a set of kunai. The boy behind her got up, kunai sticking out of his bare flesh, every little movement cutting more skin.

END DREAM

Sakura flung herself up, the covers going sailing. She held a kunai at the ready, but lowered it upon realizing it was a dream. The dream had unnerved her, though.

Who was the boy? I KNOW that I know who that was...but why was I hugging him? Unless...oh my God...It must be him...I'm in love with...Naruto?!

8 - Konoha's "Dragon Boy"

Sakura finished getting dressed for the day, taking up a playful pose and wink while seeing how she looked in the mirror. She leapt back with a shriek as she saw Naruto's Sexy Jutsu as her reflection. It took her a minute to calm down. Even when she was thinking clearly again, her body still shook a little bit.

That dream I had...maybe it meant nothing. I mean, I just broke up with Sasuke, dreaming about a hot guy hugging me is perfectly normal, right? Sure, the ending was a little violent, but it doesn't have to mean anything. Me, in love, with Naruto? Some things just aren't possible...Come on! Damn it, I KNOW my subconscious is playing tricks on me! Naruto is the complete opposite of Sasuke! Therefore, that makes him desirable at the moment, but in the future, no way! This is just a "rebound thing, it HAS to be!" Sakura's thoughts were borderline desperate at the end. She didn't WANT to be in love with Naruto. But what if it was true?

Ekyt let go of Ebisu's collar in surprise.

"What? Seriously? I'm in? Without a team?" Ekyt stammered, guessing that he sounded incredibly stupid about now.

Tsunade roller her eyes. "And they wonder why I haven't gotten married...men are either perverts or dumbasses...Yes, you're in. You HAVE a team, they just happen to be ineligible, through no fault of your own." Tsunade shrugged and gave her hair a push aside. "Certainly YOU won't argue it, right?"

Ekyt shook his head. "No, of course not, it just kind of caught me offguard..."

Lee came barreling into the bar, his girlfriend, Linda, in tow.

"I am a jonin!" Lee cried loudly. Beside him, Linda kissed him on the cheek. Then her gaze fell on Ekyt.

"Come on, Lee, let's go celebrate somewhere more clean..." Linda glared at Ekyt. Ekyt was ready with a snappy comeback.

"So, Linda, do you ever plan on doing anything besides insulting me and being his arm piece? (No offense, Lee, Ekyt muttered) I mean, I know you like to be easy...oh, damn, I mean, I know you like it easy, and I'm SURE you work hard for your money..."

At the insinuation of being called a prostitute, Linda shouted her reply.

"You little, filthy bastard! How DARE you accuse me of that! You had your eyes on me yourself once!"

"Yeah, then I opened them," Ekyt replied dryly.

"ENOUGH! Linda, Ekyt, cut it out. You are both mature genin, can't you bury the hatchet?"

"In his pointed head, Lady Tsunade!" Linda replied, sticking her tongue out at Ekyt.

"Linda...for once, forget about insulting me," Ekyt began, pointing at Lee, "He just got a huge honor. Instead of crapping on MY honor, shouldn't you be extolling his?"

Lee had tears running down his eyes. "Thank you...it is all thanks to Guy-sensei, and to you! I could not have done it without a sparring partner!"

To Ekyt's chagrin, Lee hugged him, tears streaming down his eyes. He had seen these strange scenes between Lee and Guy, and really didn't think he wanted any part of it. This confirmed that thought. As happy as he was for Lee, Ekyt really didn't like being hugged like this.

Linda, of course, couldn't pass this up.

“Hey, Ekyt, don’t steal my boyfriend! Get your own!” she said with a nasty smirk.

Lee let go of Ekyt, mercifully. Also mercifully for Linda, Ekyt was immediately restrained by the newly-arrived Naruto and Sakura.

“Ekyt does not have an interest in me that way!”

“You got THAT right!” Ekyt agreed.

“Otherwise, he would not be called the ‘pervy samurai!’ for his habit of spying on bathing women!” Lee finished, hitting his “nice guy” pose.

“Damn rig-” Ekyt (insert sweatdrop) here. “THAT WAS AN ACCIDENT! I AM NOT A PERVERT!”

Naruto couldn’t pass up the bait. “Ninja Centerfold Jutsu!”

The ten naked girls that created Ekyt’s nosebleed both saved and destroyed Ekyt’s reputation. So, he was a pervert, but not “interested” in Lee.

Sakura giggled at the outcome. Ekyt had landed across three bar stools, a bowl of ramen across his face. Tsunade woke him up, where he was then forced to pay for the bloodstains that had come from his nasal appendage.

But Sakura’s glee quickly faded. **But Naruto...am I really...seriously interested in him that way? Ah, this is gonna drive me nuts!**

Kiba, Hinata, and Shino waited patiently for Kurenai to show up and give them a mission. They’d been run ragged with the string of C and B ranks. This mission, they were told, was A-ranked, in addition to being weird. They were taking turns comparing ideas as they sat under a large oak tree, relaxing comfortably in the shade it created.

“Weird? That could mean ANYTHING around here! Hope it’s at least a challenge!” Kiba’s commentary was full of assurance.

“Weird is open to interpretation.” This, coming from Shino, was ironic, because he was definitely weird in his own way.

“I-I hope it’s not an emergency,” came quiet little Hinata’s voice.

After a few more minutes, Kurenai landed in front of them.

“Good, you’re all here. Our mission is...strange, and it’s star is Akamaru. Apparently, there’s a spy in the village, working for the Village Hidden in the Mist. He was almost caught, but managed to escape and switch disguises. His attacker, however, managed to grab this.” Kurenai held up a shred of fabric.

“So what do we have to do?” Kiba asked cockily, scratching Akamaru on the head.

“Well, to use Lady Tsunade’s...delicate phrase, we need Akamaru to “piss on the spy” once we find him or her. We know he or she is in the village and”

“He.” Kiba spoke after taking a whiff of the fabric. “Definitely a ‘he’.”

Akamaru took a sniff at the fabric, recoiled in disgust, then barked and started to run.

“Hey, Akamaru’s got the scent! C’mon!”

“So, you’re finally getting to take the chunin exams? That’s great!” Naruto exclaimed.

“Good for you! It’s about time! You should have been a chunin before most of us!” Sakura added.

Ekyt thanked her and Naruto, but remained troubled, it seemed. Finally, he voiced his concern.

“Do you mind if I showed you what Master Jiraiya taught me? I haven’t quite got it yet, and since it’s similar to Rasengan in a way (Naruto), and needs really good chakra control (Sakura), maybe you can tell me where I’m going wrong...”

"Sure, okay!" Naruto was interested in this new technique.

"Alright, whenever you're ready!" Sakura said cheerfully, glad that Ekyt was actually talking about what was wrong.

After Ino had stormed out of the hospital, she had decided to seek out Asuma-sensei. Predictably, he was at home, playing 'Go' with Shikamaru and smoking like a chimney. He invited her in and offered her tea. She took it with a nod of thanks.

Shikamaru glanced over at her. "You're looking happy about something, Ino. Not that I care or anything, but I guess I should ask why..." **Troublesome woman...**

"I told Sasuke off. I told him what a bastard he was...well, ha ha, okay, I didn't use THAT term. But I told him he was being a dick, and he was that way because it was his nature, not because of what happened to him."

Asuma had returned and set tea in front of each of them. "Now, something's on your mind, Ino. I've never seen you this happy, aside from when you've one-upped Sakura or lost another pound."

Ino's eye quivered dangerously, but she laughed it off. "Well, I'm just wondering, sensei, when will I be getting an assignment? I mean, I've enjoyed my time doing nothing, but I want some work.

Shikamaru's got a job at the academy, and Choji's figured out some super pill-making deal. I'm just wondering where I'll be assigned to."

Asuma sat back, lighting up. "Is that all? Well, that's largely up to you, Ino. You've got to figure out what your strength is and play to it." Asuma exhaled.

Ino reached forward and grabbed a cigarette for herself. Asuma didn't protest, most likely due to how surprised he was.

"That's just it, sensei. I don't HAVE a strength. I don't have the personality for medical jutsu, and my best skill is worthless in combat without my teammates. I don't know what to with myself." Ino took a long drag off the cigarette. She HATED it, but at least it was something to do.

"If you don't have a strength, Ino, you create one."

These were words that Ino would take to heart in the coming days as she searched for her niche.

Ekyt picked out a tree. Rapidly he made handsigns:

"Fire Release: Dragon's Circle!" he called. Fire sprang up in his hand. It was the size of a softball, but had the destructive power of a forest fire.

Ekyt ran toward the tree, leapt up high, and thrust his hand down. A branch fell to the ground, charred. Ekyt landed on it, stomping out the flame, then leapt again. The fire rolled down his body to the top of his foot. Ekyt kicked a second limb, this one too fell to the ground. Finally, Ekyt tried to transfer the fire to the bottom of his foot. It was a difficult place to focus chakra too, and this jutsu was no different. Ekyt felt the fire, so he began to uncoil for his sidekick. Then, the flame died down. Ekyt kicked the tree, knocking the branch off, but it didn't burst into flames as the others had.

Ekyt looked at the branch, but shrugged it off. "Crap, I was hoping I would get it that time. Naruto, could you and a clone help me with one other jutsu? Sakura, if you wouldn't mind, this might...injure me..."

Both nodded their agreement, despite their apprehension that Ekyt seemed certain this would end up with him in pain.

"Alright, first I've got to access that chakra...okay...Emotional Chakra: Activation!" he called. Pain immediately sprang up in his face. This chakra went against the body's system, causing the user tremendous pain. It was an inadvertent discovery of Ekyt's, and apparently a kekkaigenkai, as no Sharingan had been able to duplicate it.

"Okay! Naruto, have your clone kick the tree!"

"It's too thick! It'll never break!" Naruto protested.

"That's the point! Trust me!" Ekyt said around the pain.

"Okay, if you say so! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

The Naruto clone reared back and kicked the tree. Just before his foot made contact, Ekyt grabbed the clone's arm and called the jutsu:

"Voluntary Pain Acceptance Jutsu!"

As the clone's foot smashed against the tree, Naruto and Sakura waited for the clone to disappear. But, unlike every other time it had sustained injury, it didn't. The reason was quickly found. Ekyt was holding his own foot. Beneath his black gi pants, a red patch of blood was growing in size.

Sakura took her cue and knelt down next to Ekyt's leg. Naruto ended the clone jutsu.

"It's a protection jutsu. I can take away up to half the pain a person would feel in an attack, and I would sustain their injury instead," Ekyt explained.

"Why would you WANT to?" Naruto asked in surprise.

Ekyt looked up, an old pain etched in his eyes. "Someone once told me...if something is important enough to you, you FIND the strength to defend it, no matter what. If accepting pain is what the village needs to survive, I'll take it. My emotional chakra can heal my wounds, but I'm not quite that far along with my medical jutsu yet."

Tsunade smiled at Shizune.

"That's one wrong righted. I can't wait 'till the kid is a chunin! I've got a mission I'm saving especially for him."

Shizune seemed thrilled herself. "Oh, really? What mission is that, Lady Tsunade?"

"A new member for Team Kakashi."

Shizune's face became a mask of worry.

"Oh. Oh...you mean..."

"That's right. Him. Ekyt can work with anyone, he'll get the kid in shape in no time."

"It's not that one I'm worried about. It's how Naruto and Sakura will take to having him on their team. I mean, he doesn't really have people skills...or any knowledge of them, for that matter..."

Tsunade waved a hand dismissively. "You worry too much Shizune. It'll work out, trust me."

Shizune smiled and nodded. **Trust you? Lady Tsunade is completely drunk right now...I'll trust her when she's sober...**

"For now, I'm debating whether or not to tell Kakashi first, give him a crack at the guy. I think it would prove more...entertaining...to let Ekyt try his hand. Besides, he's got to learn sometime...Shizune, I want you to send a message to all the senseis. Their teams are to be made available, one member at a time, to help train Ekyt. And the sensei's too, I want to see how he handles sparring a jonin."

"He's sparred me, and let me say, he's-" Ebisu began, but was cut off.

"Let ME say that I don't know how YOU got to be Tokubetsu jonin. I've heard the stories, Ebisu. If a genin with a broken leg almost beat you, I have to wonder: is jonin the best spot for you?"

Tsunade wasn't going to demote him. But he was such an irritating prick that the thought of scaring him was a happy one for her.

"I can help you there."

Ekyt, Sakura, and Naruto leapt to attention at the voice. They had heard it more often than they liked. Every time this voice intersected with their lives, there were major problems.

"You again?!" Naruto snarled, balling his hands into fists.

“What do you want THIS time?!” Sakura growled, taking up a guard.

Ekyt stood up, stepping to the front. He looked their intruder up and down, nodded to himself, then spoke:

“Kabuto? Well, it’s been a while,” Ekyt said pleasantly.

“It has. Since the chunin exams where I destroyed your chakra coils. I see they’re fixed.” Kabuto paused, then indicated the tree limbs Ekyt had destroyed. “That was an impressive little display. And I couldn’t help overhearing your complaint about your medical jutsu skills. I can help.” Kabuto adjusted his glasses, smiling in that strange, unnerving way of his.

“And why should I trust you?” Ekyt asked back, equally polite.

Kabuto smirked knowingly. “You have the most talented medic-nin, aside from Tsunade, on your side. Her skills are on par with my own, and you know just how powerful I am, false modesty aside. She’ll tell you this is a real jutsu. I’ll even use it on myself to prove it.” Kabuto pricked his palm with a kunai.

“Autonomous Cell Regeneration!” Kabuto’s hand began to heal before the three Leaf Villager’s eyes.

“It...it’s a real jutsu...” Sakura stammered in wonder. “It’s very complex...”

Kabuto smiled. “Well, my time here is up. I have to be getting back to Orochimaru and telling him that the “Dragon Boy” is progressing.”

“ ‘Dragon Boy?’ ” Ekyt called. Kabuto’s fading voice answered:

“You’re getting quite the reputation...and a name to go with it...”

Temari fixed her hair just so. She had ALWAYS cared about how she looked, that was part of a kunoichi’s job. To charm boys into doing their bidding. In her case, Temari, beneath her rough personality, was still a girl. She cared about her looks, and enjoyed the attention boys bestowed upon her. Now, for the first time, she had her eyes set on a boy that she DIDN’T plan on using.

Kimimaro walked around the village, trying to read how people were receiving him. Odd stares, quick glances, avoidance...**Not very well...It will take time, I suppose. I can’t say I understand them, or their thought process. My cousin could explain...Temari could as well...she seems so steadfast in her beliefs...she’s the more confident of my teammates, although slightly less approachable. Is that due to her past? Or is my cousin’s mystery tricking me into thinking she’s easier to approach...or is there another option? She has been welcoming to me, more so than any others, male or female...**

Neji walked into the warehouse chosen as the battle site.

“Hello Neji,” came the stern voice of Hiashi Hyuga.

Neji nodded to him. “Hiashi.”

“We have both used fate as a scapegoat long enough for our family problems. Neji, I wish you good luck against me. It is my hope that, one way or the other, things will be changed...for the better.” Hiashi took up the Gentle Palm stance.

“We will find out. This battle was fate in and of itself. It’s outcome is dependent solely on us, fate has removed it’s hand for the time being.” Neji took a more aggressive stance.

In unison, the Main house proctor and the Branch house proctor, both respected Jonin, shouted “Begin!”

Ekyt just stood there, staring after Kabuto. Naruto finally tapped him on the shoulder.

“Come on, you’ve got training to do, remember! How about I jump in with your team, and maybe get Bushy Brows, and we’ll get you to chunin in no time! Believe it!” Naruto ran off.

“I’ll catch up!” Sakura called to Naruto’s retreating form. She turned to Ekyt. “Ekyt, I have a problem and...well, you’re really the only one I can talk to about it...”

THAT shook Ekyt out of his trance. **Only I can help...what is she...unless...**

“I- I had this dream. And it started off...well, um...romantically. I was healing someone, in a pool, or a spring. It had a waterfall and everything...It was a guy, and he didn’t have a shirt on. And, he hugged me, and I...Well, I think it was...”

Ekyt felt his jaw drop. He had never been more thankful that he wore a mask.

She can’t be...saying what I think...I’d never be that lucky...

“I think I dreamt about Naruto!” she finally exclaimed.

If Ekyt’s jaw wasn’t at the floor before, it was now. He snapped it shut, shoved aside his disappointment (He had revealed to Lee in the middle of a sparring match that he had something of a crush on Sakura), and tried to support his friend.

“This can’t be easy for you...Sakura, you’ve already done everything you need to do...personality and looks, I mean...but you’ve got to tell him about this. At least clear the air. Naruto might not say it, but he can sense just as well as anyone, and he knows something’s up with you. And it’s going to eat at him, and you, until you’ve both been honest.”

Sakura sat down on a rock. The wind tossed her hair, making her even more pretty than usual in Ekyt’s eyes. Ekyt knelt down; those jutsus were tiring.

“I- I should wait. I feel like I might just be grasping at straws because I broke up with Sasuke...Naruto, or whoever it is, deserves better than to get me on a rebound.” Sakura looked over at Ekyt with a smile on her face. She ruffled his hitai-ate.

“You’re a good friend. If you don’t mind my asking...do YOU have someone you’re interested in?”

C’mon, you can tell me!” Sakura said playfully, clearly relieved at having vented her problem.

Ekyt turned his head, acting like he had a crick in his neck. “I don’t know, really.” Ekyt closed his eyes, grinning under his mask. “Maybe I’ll get lucky someday.”

S*...and people wonder WHY I’m a miserable bastard. Maybe it ahs something to do with the fact that my love life is non-existant? But still... ‘Dragon Boy’...I guess I DO have a theme going...Dragon’s Ember Jutsu...Dragon’s Encampment Wall...Fire Release: Dragon’s Circle...Dragon’s Path...and a few others...oh well, down to business, everything else aside: time for the chunin exams. I’ve got two weeks to be ready. I’m getting that green vest, and I’m proving Ebisu and Linda wrong! This is personal!**

It was then Ekyt realized something awful: Linda was going to be in the chunin exams too. Just what he needed. She was the worst opponent possible. Ekyt didn’t hit women, for starters. But this was also a girl who had helped train him in taijutsu...granted, he knew more styles than her, but she had been the master in a dojo they had once run side by side...and she brought back some very unpleasant memories about a one-way love...but that was for another time.

“No matter what, no matter who...the vest is mine!”

9 - Burning Out the Dead Wood

Ekyt, after listening to Sakura, had to sit down. It was too unbelievable. He had been told by one girl that she wished “You were more like my boyfriend”. **So, if I’m so desirable...Ah, this thought process never gets me anywhere! I’ve got to get back to training!**

“You are getting better at this, Ekyt.” Lee said, grunting as Ekyt threw a hard elbow at the target Lee was holding. They both stopped for a moment, sweat pouring down their brows.

They were sparring at the bottom of Lone Pine hill, in an area shaded by Japanese Maple trees. The area was well maintained by a friend of Gai’s, so Lee was free to train there at any time. He and Ekyt had sought the place out after the two of them had destroyed an entire dojo during a “friendly sparring match.” The owner was not part of the match, and therefore was not amused by impressive displays of taijutsu.

“Thanks Lee, but your girlfriend knows the same style I do...and you know how she tends to...bring out the worst in me...” Ekyt couldn’t keep the apprehension out of his voice. He hadn’t seen Linda in a long time, and hadn’t talked to her in an even longer time. Where once they had been the best of friends (though never quite attaining “couple” status), they were now bitter enemies. Ekyt would have been content to be left alone, but Linda kept trying to cripple him. She claimed that it was to save him from getting killed. It was a sort of backhanded caring, but not one that Ekyt cared to nurture. It was a wonder Lee was still his friend, after some of the awful insults he and Linda had exchanged.

“Linda...she is a difficult girl to handle at times. But her love for taijutsu has brought her and I together. You have become very good, very fast, a success Linda has not seen as a kunoichi. From what you and her have said, she was the more naturally skilled at your other arts.” Lee’s voice held a tone of questioning.

“That’s right. That’s why Master Sukuto chose her to run the school after he died.” Ekyt nodded in agreement, sparing a quick smile for the old man.

“I know you are not at fault, because it is not in your nature to disrespect women. (aside from being the “pervy samurai”, I mean).” Lee couldn’t resist adding the ‘pervy samurai’ part.

Ekyt shook his head, but didn’t continue the banter. “I wonder how Sakura’s doing?” Ekyt quickly explained what had happened. Lee shook his head, then clapped his friend on the shoulder.

“You were right to listen to her. However, if there was EVER a time to admit a certain attraction (do not deny it!), THAT was it...If she is really in love with Naruto, we will know soon.”

“You know, I think I’d date if kunoichi didn’t simultaneously scare the hell out of me and garner my attention. I mean, they’re the ultimate hybrid. Impossible to understand girl, charmer, and deadly warrior. If I said the wrong thing, I’d have a kunai in me before I could even retract my statement!” Lee was surprisingly sage for someone so high-strung.

“Ekyt...if there is truly something between you two, it will manifest itself. You yourself will know love when you see it. You know that you are hungry for the acceptance of a kunoichi, as I was before Linda. But, for now, I think that you should focus on impressing the exam proctors, rather than a certain female.”

Sakura couldn’t help but wonder about how she felt about Naruto. It was driving her insane. As she was

making a difficult healing solution, she added too much of one ingredient, prompting Lady Tsunade to take cover under her desk as it blew up. Even the newly-charred Sakura didn't seem to notice. She absently swept the remains of the bowl and ingredients she had been using into a garbage can. She then bowed and excused herself to get cleaned up.

Tsunade and Shizune exchanged glances.

"How long has she been like this?" Shizune questioned, clearly worried.

"Two days, at least. I guess she's just brooding about breaking up with Sasuke. She's deep in thought about *something*." Tsunade went back to her books and scrolls. Shizune stood in an uncomfortable silence for a few moments, then spoke up, carefully, so as not to anger Lady Tsunade.

"Shouldn't you talk to her, Lady Tsunade? She IS your apprentice and all...and you'll be angry if she blows up your office..." Shizune hoped the last part would drive her point home. The office was newly re-done to Tsunade's liking, and Shizune KNEW it would annoy her if it was blown to smithereens by a careless mistake.

Tsunade rubbed the bridge of her nose and sighed. "Shizune, I can't offer her any advice. You know how well my love life went...my love, your uncle...(sigh)I wouldn't know what to say to her. This might be one of those things she has to sort out on her own. Or, at least, find someone who CAN help her..."

Shizune couldn't argue those points. She decided, however, when Sakura came back, she would talk to her. **Someone has to be there for her. Lady Tsunade wasn't the best choice...so I'll have to do it. Not that I have much of an idea of what to say, either...But I've got to try. She's at the age where, if something goes wrong, she might never heal completely...look what it did to Lady Tsunade. She had to be near Sakura's age when her brother was killed...It affected her for all those years, and losing her lover...she hasn't loved another man since...**

Neji and Hiashi were close to evenly matched, with advantages both ways. Hiashi was the family matriarch and enjoyed incredible power, all of which favored his style. Neji had trained by himself and disregarded the family jutsus, so he was an unknown commodity. Hiashi spent the first few attacks trying to get a feel for Neji's style. Neji had predicted this and showed Hiashi nothing he had never seen before.

In unison, they shouted the same jutsu: "Eight Trigrams, Sixty-Four Palms!"

It became a battle of speed, each trying to block the other's tenketsu before the other could do the same. Neji, the younger of the two, had more raw speed. But Hiashi was the more experienced, and could get more mileage in his attacks out of doing less and moving less. He wasn't incredibly old, either, meaning that he and Neji, while not evenly matched, neither would they be carbon copies of each other. The sounds of palms smacking against flesh echoed throughout the warehouse. Neither played defense, they both aimed to win as quickly as possible. With the amount of chakra both had, they could battle for a long time at a stalemate. Without speaking, they decided to end the fight quickly.

Suddenly, Hiashi used his rotation jutsu. Neji, in surprise, didn't stop his palm attack in time. When he hit the 'cocoon' of chakra, he was thrown backward. He hit the steel wall of the warehouse hard back-first, then slid down, blood coming from his mouth.

He predicted what I would do...I'm not ready to admit defeat just yet! He hasn't seen the benefits of training alone for those months...I think the time has come to reveal my new jutsu...

Sasuke wondered why he hadn't been thinking clearly. The pain from the curse mark? Or did the sealing have an effect on him? He didn't know WHAT it was, but now Sasuke's head was more clear. At that moment, he got a visitor.

“How ya feeling...loser?” Naruto asked with a smirk, plopping down in a chair near Sasuke’s bed, adjusting it to face his friend.

“Better...” Sasuke managed. He was surprised to see Naruto, especially after he had tried to kill him.

Did he...really forgive me? I would NEVER have forgiven myself... Sasuke thought back to the Chidori attack. Had he consciously decided to kill Naruto, or was it just the heat of the battle?

“Good. I mean, you’re holding us up, ya know?! If you don’t get out of the hospital soon, they’re gonna stick a replacement on our team until you do.”

“Uh? (sound of surprise) A replacement? Who?” Sasuke sat upright, then put a hand to his head. He had sat up too fast and upset his equilibrium in the process.

“I don’t know...I really don’t WANT to know either. Just get well soon, alright?” Naruto got up and started to leave.

“Hey, loser...”

Naruto turned around.

Sasuke laid down, facing away from Naruto. “Why did you come? I tried to kill you...You had the chance to finish me. You didn’t put everything you had into that Rasengan...Why?”

Naruto sat down again. “I came because...well, I guess, when I’m with you, it’s almost like I have a brother...and why I didn’t kill you...Hey, Sakura would kill ME if I did! Besides, I just wanted to stop you from leaving the Village. That would include breaking all your bones, but not killing you.”

Sasuke was surprised. **A brother? That’s how he thinks of me? I always thought he hated me...maybe he used to. Naruto...I hate to admit it, but you’ve taught me something. Hopefully, we’ll get our rematch soon. For now, being on the same team...that suits me just fine...**

“C’mon Shikamaru, it’s called taking one for the team!” Choji urged.

“I SAID no, Choji.”

Choji’s mouth spread into a mischievous grin. “C’mon Shikamaru. Maybe she’s ‘troublesome’, but you care about Ino...”

“She’s on my team, I HAVE to care,” Shikamaru replied. “And besides that, she doesn’t like me, and she hasn’t listened to me yet. Why would she start now?”

Choji burst into laughter; he couldn’t help it! “Because you’re going to be dating her, instead of talking to her like a team mate!”

Shikamaru shot Choji a glance with his eyes half-lidded.

“You’re as troublesome as she is. You know that, don’t you?” Shikamaru intoned.

“Aw, c’mon, you don’t want to see Ino smoking any more than I do. Face it, you’re the only realistic option. She won’t go out with me because I’m a fatass. I won’t go out with her because she’s a dog.”

“She doesn’t like me because I’m lazy. I don’t like her because she reminds me of my mother.”

Choji winced. “Okay, you got me there. We’ve got to find someone to take her out, and get her to kick that habit. Asuma-sensei smoking is one thing, Ino doing it is another. It’s not like she’s ugly, anyway, SOMEONE will go out with her.”

“Yeah. Someone. Not me. We have to find someone who doesn’t know her very well. Although, even I’ll admit, she’s less troublesome than she was a couple years ago. And better looking, now that she’s not borderline anorexic,” Shikamaru added.

At that point, the two stopped talking. Sasuke had walked up to them.

“Hey, you seen Ino? I need to thank her for talking some sense into me...”

Choji grinned. Shikamaru nodded, understanding Choji’s plan.

“Sure, come with us...in fact, Ino could stand to talk to you, too...”

Ekyt and Naruto were called to Tsunade's office. They took turns speculating what it could be. Ekyt had a feeling that the news wouldn't be good, at least in his case. **It sucks that I'm usually right when I think about this...**

They arrived, bowed to the guards, then walked in. Tsunade got straight to the point with Ekyt.

"Ekyt, I don't want you sparring with Lee. At least not as often." Tsunade got right to the point.

"Alright." Ekyt clearly didn't understand what was going on, but he didn't question it. Tsunade knew all too well the kid WANTED to know why, but he wasn't talking. She had to offer the answers.

"He needs to spar with other jonin, to hone his skills. If you've never beaten him, chances are he's not taking much away from his matches with you. I'm sure there's some genin around the village you could spar with..." Tsunade said with a shrug.

"Yeah, but I'd be beating up on kids ten years younger than me," Ekyt pointed out with a grin. Inside, he wasn't grinning, but no point in heaping more pressure on Lady Tsunade.

"Good point. If push comes to shove, I'll find someone," Tsunade offered. **This kid is hard to read...I THINK he's pissed, but I'm not sure...**

Beside her, Sakura looked at Ekyt, giving a small nod and smile of reassurance. But Ekyt didn't have the usual fighting spirit, not for this. Instead, in a falsely chipper voice, he told a complete lie:

"Oh, don't worry about that. I've got some ideas on what to do, let me see how those work out first. I don't want to have to trouble you anymore than I already have."

Ekyt gave a bow, then leapt out of the windows, timing himself. It took him seconds to reach the desired rooftop. There, as he had done so many times before, he took out his scroll and studied its contents. **Without Lee as my sparring partner, my chances of doing well in the chunin exams without a team is slim to none! Even WITH my kekkaigenkai, it's still a stretch. I'd better master those new jutsus, or I'm really screwed! Damn it, perfect timing Tsunade! Of course, Linda's going to be there, and I'm going to be alone...She'll be training with Lee, but she can get away with it, since they're dating...S***! I'm last genin anywhere NEAR my age group...**

Temari and Kimimaro landed next to him on the roof.

"If you're done moping, kid, we're short on time. You've got training to do, and you've got us to help you. Or did you forget about us?" Temari ruffled his hitai-ate, smiling in that charming-but-it-annoys-the-hell-out-of-you way of hers.

Beside her, Kimimaro reached back and pulled a bone out of his shoulder. It was similar to the one he had used on Lee, but blunted, so he wouldn't kill Ekyt by mistake. Kimimaro hadn't really sparred before, he was just naturally talented.

"We never had our match...now would be an appropriate time." Kimimaro flipped the bone to a reverse grip.

"Yeah, we heard what Tsunade said. Nothing worth doing is ever easy, kid," Temari spoke to Ekyt like that, even though she was older by a month, tops.

Tsunade looked at Ekyt go for a minute, KNOWING for sure that he was pissed. **Damn...miscalculated. I could have waited until AFTER the chunin exams to spring that one on him. I hope his team steps up and fills the gap. Hey...I wonder...if he and Kimimaro are related...does he have...Wait, are they blood related? If they are, Ekyt might have the same kekkaigenkai! But it would have manifested itself by now...IF Ekyt knew about it...Time for some tests, just to satisfy my own curiosity. Hey, I'm the Hokage, I can do that.**

"Naruto...Master Jiraiya has been in contact. The Akatsuki are on the move again, and chances are

they'll be targeting you sooner rather than later. Iruka has agreed to escort you at night, and you'll be with your team, plus an additional member, the rest of the time. Before you tell me what you think; I KNOW you can handle this by yourself. I didn't make these decisions, I just have to enforce them." Naruto had opened his mouth to protest, but snapped it shut almost as quickly.

"A new member? Who is it gonna be? I mean, he'd better not hold me back, believe it!"

Sakura blushed as she realized Naruto was in the room. **Oh no! I'm not ready to talk to him yet!**

"Sakura? Could I talk to you for a minute?" Shizune had poked her head in the door and beckoned Sakura out to the hallway.

Sakura had never been happier to hear Shizune-sensei's voice in her life!

"Coming sensei! See you later, Naruto!" Sakura bolted from the room, her face bright red. She breathed a sigh of relief in the hallway.

"Is there- is there anything bothering you, Sakura? You seem distracted lately, and, well, Lady Tsunade and I want to make sure you're alright. Is there anything I can help with?"

Sakura looked at the ceiling for a minute. "Well, I, um...after I broke up with Sasuke..."

Sakura broke down and told Shizune everything, even her conversation with Ekyt. Shizune knew, right there, what was going on. Sakura didn't WANT to be in love with Naruto, at least not yet. But she hadn't sorted through her feelings yet, so whether the love was there or not was a question mark. Shizune comforted her. "It's alright, Sakura. This is normal. And, you know, once word gets out, I don't think you'll lack for suitors. I can think of at least five boys that have an interest in you...right now, though, take your time and sort through your feelings. Don't rush into anything."

Kurenai, Shino, Kiba, Hinata, and Akamaru ran through the streets. Akamaru ran in front of a stranger, barked once, then lifted his leg.

"What the hell? You crazy mutt!" The man aimed a swift kick at Akamaru.

"YOU BASTARD!" Kiba tore after the man, his claw-like nails at the ready. He tackled the nameless spy and threw him to the ground, landing punch after punch. Shino pulled him off and restrained him.

"You kick at my dog again, and I SWEAR, I will rip your face off! Let GO, Shino!"

From behind, Kurenai used the back end of a kunai to knock the spy out.

"Mission accomplished. Let's get him to Lady Tsunade."

For the next two weeks, Kimimaro and Temari trained Ekyt. Ekyt was worried he wouldn't make it to the chunin exams. Kimimaro's Larch Dance had nearly torn his shoulder, and Temari's merciless wind attacks had cut Ekyt over 100 times. But eventually, he worked out strategies against their various attacks.

On the night before the chunin exams, Ekyt sought out advice from Iruka-sensei. They met in Ichiraku, where the young genin proceeded to not touch the ramen he had ordered simply out of habit. He drank a single cup of rice wine, then told Iruka his problem.

"You've had her in your class, sensei. Linda Mawashi. She...I can't fight her." Ekyt said suddenly.

Iruka slurped a noodle the rest of the way into his mouth.

"Why not? Do you still have feelings for her?" he asked, suspecting that was it.

"No, not at all. I hate her! But...we were friends once, and she's a girl...I mean, nothing against kunoichi, I know they're deadly skilled, and I'd have no problem taking one out if they were my enemy and trying to kill me. But...even though I despise her with every fiber of my being, I just can't...hit her. I'd be the biggest heel in the world if I did. Beating up a girl? And if she beats me, I look just as stupid. And, even

though she's a complete dog, I really don't want to humiliate her..." Ekyt stared down into his empty cup, a thoughtful look on his unmasked face.

Iruka could understand all this. But phrasing his reply wasn't as easy.

"It's going to happen...someday, you're going to have to face this girl. And, it might come to blows...in our world, it's acceptable. You might have to compromise your own ideals a little bit. I know that sounds wrong, but it might happen that way. It's kill or be killed, and I KNOW Linda...she won't hesitate to humiliate you. You need to respect her as an opponent...Does that make sense?"

Ekyt pondered the words, wondering if there was a 'meaning within a meaning' here. He couldn't find one if there was. But the meaning was clear.

"It does, sensei. Thank you. Hopefully, next time we talk, I won't have to add the sensei," Ekyt replied, grinning.

Iruka shrugged. "You might...My jonin appointment is two days after your chunin exams."

Ekyt congratulated Iruka. Before he could protest, Ekyt had paid for the food. That was the way it was with him; everything was on the 'Dragon Boy'.

10 - Things Change and Chunin Chaos

Ibikki Morino was an imposing figure, even before you got to his living. Ibikki was, by trade, a torture specialist. What made him even MORE scary was the fact he didn't use physical torture. He worked on your mind, made you crack without ever laying a finger on you. He was highly respected, and not just among the ANBU force he was head of. He was respected (and feared) by just about everyone in the Leaf Village, and even among criminals.

"I am Ibikki Morino, the written exam's proctor. Listen up, I'm about to tell you the rules, and I'm not going to repeat myself. First rule: The exam has ten questions. Nine are on the sheet you have in front of you. The tenth question will be given in a half-hour. You start this exam with ten points. Every question you get wrong, you lose a point. If you're caught cheating, you AND your team will be removed from the exam and barred from further participation in this series of chunin exams, no matter what your grades are."

One hand went up in the air. It belonged to a new candidate.

"Hey, that's not fair! Why does the whole team get tossed if one person screws up?!" came the whined query.

Ibikki smiled; not a comforting gesture in the least. "Teamwork is essential if you want to succeed as a Shinobi, or even live the life of one. Your team is like your family. If one person screws up, everyone suffers. So keep that in mind."

Ekyt raised his hand. Ibikki nodded to him.

"Define 'cheating'." Ekyt requested.

Heads turned toward him. One kid's thought summed up everyone's feelings. **Huh? How the hell is 'cheating' open to interpretation?**

Ibikki grinned and strode toward the genin. "Ah, yes. The 'Dragon Boy'. Thinking of cheating yourself? Have to protect your legacy over your integrity?"

Ekyt stared back, emotionless. He had heard horror stories about Ibikki. But he wasn't going to back down. He couldn't show weakness. But the guy was scary as all get out. One way or another, Ekyt kept his composure and stoicism and rephrased his question.

"No. I'd just like to know what you consider 'cheating'. Are we talking the standard 'don't look at someone else's paper', or do you mean 'don't use your Sharingan?'"

THAT turned some heads. Ekyt had tied a black headband around one eye. There was nothing wrong with the eye. It was all part of an illusion he had planned. It had worked at his final exams at the academy, why not now? Fake Sharingan, people freeze up, think he's an Uchiha, and he gets a quick shot in.

Ibikki straightened up, grinning inwardly at the question, but scowling outwardly. "Cheating is using any ability not naturally given to you. So, Sharingan would be acceptable. Looking at another's paper would not be. Taking another person's paper, conversing with someone...all cheating. Get the picture?"

Ekyt nodded. "I do. Thank you."

Sasuke finished up talking with Ino.

"You were right. I guess I should thank you for pointing out what a jerk I was being, and..." Sasuke stopped, seeing Ino take another cigarette.

"Yeah? Well, SOMEONE had to tell you," Ino said as she exhaled a puff of smoke.

“Ino...you shouldn't smoke, you know?”

“Why not?” Ino asked defensively.

“It kills you, for starters...not to mention that you doing it is...” Sasuke kind of choked on the words, not believing he was saying this, even though Shikamaru and Choji had asked him to, and the words weren't really his own.

“Is what?” Ino shot back, getting ticked at Sasuke being so quiet.

“It's a turnoff. You don't NEED to smoke to get attention. Not you, anyway.” Sasuke said the words as quickly and harshly as he could. It seemed to be food for thought for Ino, who held the cigarette away for a minute.

“Why are you even talking to me? Shouldn't you be wanting to chew my head off for calling you a dick?” Ino wanted to know. She flicked the cigarette aside. Sasuke stepped on it; the last thing the weakened Leaf Village needed was a fire.

“Maybe I feel bad about what I did...” Sasuke murmured. **Or maybe Shikamaru and Choji put me up to this...How did they get me to agree to this? I must be feeling more guilty than I thought...**

Sakura happened to walk by at this point, saw Ino and Sasuke together, and just felt her heart drop. It would have been one thing if Sasuke was just being an @\$@ and dumping her, but dating her rival...that hurt. Sakura hadn't cried in a while, but this brought tears to her eyes. She rounded a corner, out of site, and cried silently, until the tears stopped flowing and become only gasps. This time, she felt alone. Everyone would just tell her she needed to be stronger. The one guy she could have counted on to put things in perspective was probably getting ready to fight for his life in the chunin exams. Sakura was so busy dwelling on this she didn't hear Naruto coming. Until he spoke, she was unaware of his presence.

“Hey, Sakura! Grandma Tsunade wants to see you and- hey, you're crying!” Naruto was leaning close, brow furrowed in concentration.

“No duh, genius!” Sakura said around a snuffle.

“Hey, alright already, relax! Hey, how about some ramen, that always cheers ME up! C'mon, I'll buy!” Sakura nodded and walked with Naruto, before even realizing it. When they had reached Ichiraku, they both placed orders, and that's when it hit Sakura.

I-is this a d-date? It can't be! But look at Naruto...he's being nice, and actually civil...

“Hey Sakura? You remember the last time I tried to get you to eat with me?” Naruto asked, sporting a big grin.

It took her a moment, but Sakura remembered.

“Yeah! (giggle) I was such a dog to you. I'm really sorry about that...”

Naruto grinned again and stretched his arms behind his head. “I remember you asking ‘Why should I eat with you?’ and I said ‘we're on the same team, we should get to know each other.’ Boy, that sure changed, didn't it? A lot of stuff has changed around here, but it's not the stuff I expected.” Naruto's face smoothed into an unusually thoughtful look. He inhaled his ramen (THAT hadn't changed), then pointed out a couple things.

“I mean, like Grandma Tsunade replacing the old man, Sarutobi. And Temari running off from the Sand Village. And that bone dude, Kimimaro or whatever, showing up. It's like nothing's set in stone anymore.” **I'd better not mention Sasuke. THAT was the biggest surprise! Sakura breaking up with him? I can't believe it! And what's with her being nice to me, and blushing all the time? I can't figure girls out (-_-')**

Sakura, who was eating more slowly, nodded her agreement. “Yeah, it's weird. Especially how Lady

Tsunade took Me on, and Master Jiraiya took you on, and Orochimaru wants Sasuke. It's funny how much our team has grown! I mean, you and Sasuke are equally talented now, and I've got a specialty." Naruto polished off his second bowl. "I hate to say, but Ekyt is weird, too."

Sakura frowned. "Huh? In what way?"

Naruto scratched his head. "Well, he didn't have a team, or a sensei until now. He's a samurai, and...well, I mean, he should be past genin by now. If even I'm a chunin, he should be, too."

Sakura could feel herself blushing again. Hastily, she changed the subject. "Hey, did you hear? Iruka-sensei is going to be a jonin!"

The half-hour went by quickly. Ekyt was done with the test in twenty minutes, then spent the last ten checking his answers. It had been difficult, but he didn't see any reason to have to cheat, although he suspected his insane studying had been a great help to him. He wrote as confidently as he could, trying to give off an air of complete self-assuredness. He sat ramrod-straight in the seat, and move his pencil in dark, intense strokes, as if he knew the answers off the top of his head without a moment's thought. He heard mutters about him, and grinned behind his mask. Perfect, just what he had wanted.

Ibikki again stepped to the front of the class. "Alright, time's up. We've removed ten teams, leaving twenty more. That number could shrink, depending on the tenth question. Now, listen up, there are rules that come with the tenth question. First rule: You are not allowed to ask questions about this question. Second rule: You don't have to answer this question. You can simply skip it..."

"Why would we do that?" someone shouted. Someone always asked.

It made Ibikki's day whenever they did.

"If you answer this question incorrectly, you fail, and you are barred from taking the chunin exams...ever again. No matter what your other score was, you will be disqualified. However, if you choose not to answer the question, you will fail the test, but you and your team can take the exams again. It's all about how confident you feel...so think about that."

Ekyt didn't need to think about it. **I'm already stuck as a genin, and if I fail this time, Ebisu can forbid me from taking them again. So, I'm not going anywhere.**

"If you want to back out, do it now. Anyone? Better save yourself, and your team..." Ibikki scanned the classroom menacingly, daring someone to give up.

"Well. To those of you remaining, there's only one thing left to do...congratulations. You passed the first part of the chunin exams." Ibikki gave everyone in the classroom a proud smirk, which was the warmest gesture you were likely to get from him.

More than one jaw hit the floor.

"B-but you never even ASKED the tenth question! How can we have passed before that?" Sputtered one confused genin.

"The tenth question was a test of your courage...you were given an impossible choice...a choice where failure wasn't an option. On a mission, you don't stop just because the odds seem insurmountable. You plow forward with the mission. As for endangering your team...understand that you will have to. As chunin, you will start leading missions. Your team might have to be put in danger, and you might be the one putting them there. Learn to live with it. Hone your skills, and"

CRASH!

Ibikki shook his head. **Hyperactive, as always. She's early...again...** Ibikki looked at the ruined window from behind the banner that had flew in with the person.

Tsunade stood before the bandit, glaring at him.

“So you’ve been spying on the village. Who do you work for?” She asked forcefully.

“I’ll never talk! Not even to you, Legendary Loser!” the spy declared. Then he saw Tsunade’s face. He recoiled in horror, REALLY wishing he wasn’t tied to the chair at this point. Hell, the look on the “loser’s” aid’s face was enough to warn him he was in for pain for his show of bravado.

“ ‘Legendary Loser’, am I? You’d better start talking, or you’ll find I become less interested in the information you hold, and more interested in delivering your corpse back to your homeland. Now start talking, before your luck runs out.” Tsunade thrust a finger in the man’s face, leaving no room for questions from him.

“I’m from the Village Hidden in the Mist! My name is Kiruku, of the Akakomadori family! I was just trying to get information about you!” he cried out, trying to inch away from Tsunade.

“About me? Why?” Tsunade’s tone was calmer now, more interested rather than hostile.

“Y-you owe the Akakomadori family money! I-I’m the collector! I don’t know any secrets about your village, I’m just trying to spare my family! Please, you HAVE to believe me! If I don’t come back with the money, they’ll kill my family! It’s always the Akakomadori family, just because we don’t fit in! Hardly anyone drinks in the Mist Village!”

Tsunade stopped. “Wait...Aka...I know that brand! It’s my favorite!”

Shizune approached her cautiously. “L-Lady Tsunade? Please, think about-”

Tsunade already whipped toward the man.

“How about a deal? I’ll send a team of my ninja over to protect your family. In exchange, you bring your trade here. There’s no place to drink or gamble around here, and I guarantee my business alone would pay off the debt I owe you. Do we have a deal?”

The man nodded. “Yes, that sounds wonderful! Thank you, Lady Tsunade!”

Tsunade shrugged. “I have to look out for everyone. I’ll summon a team and we’ll get you to safety.”

11 - Four-Way Free-For-All!

Before the stunned crowd of genin was a woman. A few guys stared lustily, because at first glance, fishnet seemed to be all she was wearing, aside from an open trench coat. That 'fishnet' was actually armor, and it was opaque (to the disappointment of a few of the boys). A few (Ekyt among them) leapt to their feet, kunai at the ready. When she spoke, they were even more on their guard. Some had dove under their desks, as she was intimidating, to put it mildly. Despite not being very tall or muscular, she was imposing in her own way.

"Finishing that attack is a great way to ensure your own death...just a heads up." she warned, seeming to bask in the fear that was evident in the room. She continued after another nasty grin. "Alright maggots, listen up! I'm Anko Mitarashi, your next proctor. And..." Anko paused, scanning the crowd of genin for a few moments. She narrowed her eyes, counting to herself. She shook her head, then shrugged.

"Well, there are a lot of you. I guess Ibikki's getting soft. Trust me, more than half of you will be gone by the time I'm done with you! And...Yes?" Anko pointed, stopping her tirade once more.

Ekyt had raised his hand. "Do you have any proof that you are who you say?" He spoke evenly rather than accusatory. He hadn't lowered his kunai. He was older and more experienced than most of the genin in the room, and he took her and anyone else as a threat until they proved themselves otherwise. Especially with an entrance through the window like that, most people used the door.

A hushed silence fell over the classroom. They couldn't believe someone had even dared to say something, let alone question this lady's authority. Despite this, most wanted to ask the question themselves. But they contented themselves by waiting for an answer. A couple even took cover, thinking that they would be in huge trouble if this new person didn't take kindly to the questioning. They wanted to question the guy doing the asking, for that matter. The Konoha Shinobi knew him, and they were fine with him, even respected him on some level. But the others wondered why he didn't have a team, and why he had a nickname like 'Dragon Boy'. They had heard rumors, but each sounded as preposterous as the next.

Anko smiled, but not a warm smile. She began to speak in a cocky, unnerving tone. Ekyt was even more on his guard after hearing her speak. "So, this one has guts...There's always one who does...Hiya!" Anko threw a kunai at Ekyt. Without moving, save for using his own kunai, Ekyt knocked the kunai into the floor, where it stuck. He didn't take his eyes off the 'proctor' just yet. He held his position, save for stepping forward to the point where if a kunai was thrown, he was the only one who would get hit with it. Anko nodded sagely, then grinned in her own inimitable way.

"Alright. Here's my proof." Anko tossed a badge to Ekyt. He let it land on the floor, to see if it would explode or something first. Then, cautiously, he picked it up and examined it. Holding on to it, Ekyt reached down to the floor and picked up the kunai he had deflected. He wiped it off, then approached Anko.

"Sorry for the trouble," Ekyt drawled, hoping he sounded bored. He bowed, offering an apology, and handing Anko back her kunai and badge.

"Good move on your part. You can't trust anyone, take them at face value. I'm glad to see someone took action. Alright, enough rest maggots! Time for your next exam: The Forest of Death!"

Sakura and Naruto finished their ramen, stomachs satisfied with the quality nourishment.

"Feeling better?" Naruto asked, patting his stomach happily.

Sakura was surprised to find that she was. She had been sitting in Ichiraku with Naruto for an hour, talking about how the Village was changing, and she hadn't thought of Sasuke once!

"I do feel better. Thanks, Naruto. But when did YOU get common sense?" Sakura joked, ruffling his hair.

Naruto shrugged. "I learned a lot with Master Jiraiya. Not just jutsus...how to treat people...and just what it means to be strong. I wasn't far off the mark before, but now I know I'm on the right path to my dream!"

"To be Hokage," Sakura recited, grinning to herself.

"You'd better believe it! Someday, everyone will look up to me! They'll have to respect me!" Naruto was getting wound up again, but unlike his old self, he calmed down.

"So Sakura-chan, what are YOUR plans?" Naruto asked with a big grin.

Sakura blushed. **Oh man! MY plans? What does he mean?! Give him the standard response! You don't know how you feel yet! Calm down calm down calm down!**

But Sakura's voice ignored her common sense. "I'm in lo- what the hell?"

Sakura cut herself off. Ino and Sasuke had just walked in, cozied up to each other. They looked up and saw Sakura and Naruto...

"HUH? YOU'RE WITH HIM/HER?" Four shouts echoed inside the tiny ramen bar. Four accusatory fingers were pointed at four different people. The tension was so high, and the people so dangerous, you could SENSE that there was going to be a catastrophe unless these people were stopped.

Ibikki swept through the classroom, collecting the papers. He stopped at the one belonging to the boy who had spoke up. He grinned at the paper, remembering it's owner.

All correct, and he didn't even look up from his own paper. People were supposed to fail this exam, no genin should have known the answers. They were supposed to be forced to cheat. It was a test of information gathering. He'd have to study day and night to pull off a passing grade, let alone a perfect score...probably what he did, for that matter. Looks like he'll be another one to watch. Of course, I had a feeling ever since Lady Tsunade 'suggested' I have a little talk with Ebisu about the young man...looks like that was a good move. It'll be interesting to see how he handles the rest of the chunin exams.

Ibikki wondered briefly if the boy was cut out for ANBU. **Torture, maybe. I've heard his genjutsu is like experiencing hell itself. But he doesn't have the willingness to kill, I can already tell. Like the old Samurai phrase 'His heart is not stone, but neither is it soft as a woman's.' Either way...I think I'll keep an eye on the 'Dragon Boy' here.**

Anko stood before a vast forest, teeming with wildlife. Soon, it would be teeming with chunin-hopeful as well. Said chunin hopeful were listening with rapt attention as Anko explained to them just what the exam entailed, the rules, and what would lead to disqualification.

"The object of your mission is to obtain information. Each group has been given a scroll. It's either marked 'Heaven' or 'Earth'. You have one scroll. You need one of each to move on to the next phase of the chunin exams. You can only be disqualified one way: Looking at the scrolls before you reach the tower checkpoint. Do NOT open the scrolls, accidentally or otherwise. If one teammate is seriously injured, or killed, you will be forced to withdraw due to injury. You can take the scrolls by stealing from other teams. And, yes, this means that half the teams will be eliminated at the end, since you need to two scrolls. That will leave four teams. Any questions?"

Anko seemed to be speaking to Ekyt particularly. Not wanting to disappoint, he raised his hand. She nodded towards him.

“One question...” Ekyt smirked inwardly; this was all part of his plan. “...How often do you have deaths in there?” There wasn’t a quiver in Ekyt’s voice.

Anko grinned mischievously at the question. “More often than Lady Tsunade would like. I’d say at least three people on average. Usually the cocky ones.”

THAT sent shivers through the crowd. No one quite knew what to think about that, aside from one emotion: FEAR!

Tsunade pondered the bandit in front of her.

“Alright. I’m going to send a specialized team with you. Most of my teams are on cases right now, but I’ve got just the three in mind...” Lady Tsunade called for Genma Shirani to collect her team.

Kiruku Akakomadori bowed as low as he could. “Thank you so much, Lady Tsunade! It is so relieving to know my family will be safe, and my business will prosper! Thank you so much!” Kiruku bowed multiple times, his head nearly touching the floor. “Alright, alright, easy! Ah, here’s my team!”

Kiruku recoiled in fear. Akamaru growled threateningly, baring his teeth. Kiba patted him on the head. “It’s alright Akamaru, he’s a friend now. Take it easy, alright?” Kiba turned to the bandit. “Sorry about before. But don’t EVER kick my dog again. I’m Kiba Inakuka, I’ll be leading the mission back to your Village. This is Hinata Hyuuga (Hinata ducked shyly behind Shino’s shoulder, but offered a shy smile and a ‘hello’), and Shino Aburame.”

Shino stepped away from the window, a beetle in his hand. “I know your people are fond of poisons. It’s best if we take precautions to ensure that we don’t get poisoned ourselves. This beetle secretes a key ingredient in an antidote to your Village’s native poison. Hinata, if you can prepare the solution, we can leave within the hour.”

Hinata nodded, digging up her courage. “Right!”

Kiruku bowed to them as well. “Thank you all so much. Please...just bring my family back safe.”

“It would help if you supplied a description.” Shino spoke tonelessly, already looking at the beetle specimen he had in his hand.

“My wife is a brunette, blue eyes. My daughter looks just like her, but her hair is shorter. My son has hair like mine, but long and pulled into a ponytail. They’re both five years old.” Kiruku’s voice began to crack with emotion at the thought of his family. He loved them so much! It would kill him if something happened to them.

Tsunade nodded for the team to come closer. “This is going to be a B-ranked mission. It’s likely you’ll be attacked by chunin or higher level ninjas. So, keep your guard’s up, and good luck.”

Tsunade watched them go, then called Kiba back.

“Congratulations, Kiba. After this mission, you’ll have fulfilled all my requirements to become jonin.”

Ekyt sprinted into the forest and immediately leapt up into the relative cover of the trees. The leaves would hide him from unaware genin, which might give him an opening. He knew ahead of time everyone would be after him. He was one person; there were three to every other team. So he had to be on his game. Ekyt didn’t want to stay still too long; that would make things worse. It would give his enemies

time to set up traps, and dodging them would take energy he couldn't afford to waste. So he leapt to the next tree, then the next, watching below him for an opening. After an hour, he spotted a team of genin from the Hidden Sand Village. They were ducking behind a set of bushes, stalking a Leaf Village team. Ekyt leapt down, using a Shadow Clone Jutsu on the way down.

"Hey, what was that?" The three Sand genin turned around, seeing three of the same person staring at them.

"I'm interested in your scroll," the clones said pleasantly.

"No WAY!" shouted one genin. He began to weave his hands together, but sensed something from behind him. A fourth clone?

"I'm the real deal," said the one behind them. He was already holding their earth scroll.

"Nice trick, but we're not done with you yet! Sand Encampment Wall!" called the kunoichi of the group. "Dragon's Encampment Wall!" Ekyt countered. The sand hardened into a solid barrier, which gave Ekyt a couple precious seconds to head towards the tower. Granted, he had over four days left to finish the exam, but every vulture possible would be waiting for him on the way to the tower, and he wanted a head start. The less resistance he had now, the more energy he'd have for the next part of the chunin exams. That's when Ekyt saw his next problem. Just what he had feared. There were at least three teams (nine total people) forming a wall in front of the tower. The three Sand genin leapt behind him, making a full circle.

"You've got two scrolls, freak. Hand 'em over, and maybe you're remains won't be a feast for the vultures!" one chunin-hopeful, this one from the Mist Village, held his hand out for the scrolls. Ekyt looked around, not seeing an escape. **I've come too far...if they want these scrolls, they're going to have to take them, even over my dead body!** Ekyt shrugged and replied "Hm. It seems the twelve of YOU are the vultures here. Picking on the odd man out...if you want the scrolls (Ekyt held them up), come get them!"

Immediately, Ekyt was swamped. He had to shorten the odds quickly. His sword would be useless in this close. Then it hit him. Ekyt leapt up, making hand signs. "Demonic Illusion: hell Viewing Technique!" he called. Immediately, four people were paralyzed with fear. They couldn't move or scream. Four went to check on their teammates, and Ekyt landed next to them. He threw kicks and punches in rapid-fire succession. That took care of eight people.

Five kunai struck Ekyt in the upper right leg, then an uppercut sent him sailing into the air. Finally, a foot slammed into his chest, which propelled him into the ground at an awful speed. He pulled himself up out of the crater, wiping the blood out of his mouth. There were still four people left. Checking that he still had the scrolls, Ekyt used two jutsus, quickly forming a plan.

"Water Clone Jutsu! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Two more Ekyt's popped up, next to the real one. All three used the body flicker jutsu at the same time, switching spots so fast it was impossible to tell which one was the original Ekyt.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu! Clone Instigation!" all three called. The four genin leapt aside as tongues of flames shot at them. That created the opening Ekyt wanted. All three of him ran toward the tower. One of the Ekyt's stopped and used a jutsu."

"Water Encampment wall!" SPLASH! The water clone Ekyt became a wall of water.

"Dragon's Encampment Wall!" FWOOM! The shadow clone Ekyt became a wall of fire.

That left the REAL Ekyt the time he needed to dive into the tower, scrolls safely in hand. He had passed the second exam. But what happened when you opened up the scrolls? Were you supposed to wait until the time limit was up, or did you look as soon as you got into the Tower of Death? As Ekyt was

pondering this, there was a POOF! An instructor landed in front of him.

Shikamaru scratched his shoulder. "Congratulations. You passed the second phase of the chunin exams."

"Thanks, Shikamaru. What am I supposed to do now?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "You're already safe, you can go home and rest until Lady Tsunade calls everyone who passed back for the third test. Or, whatever you want to do. Nice job, by the way. This exam is a drag..."

Ekyt dragged himself into Ichiraku, tired and sore. **Of course there are no medic-nin's at the hospital today, damn new year's party. That tipsy wench...oh well, I've got to eat and- what the hell is going on?!**

Ekyt leapt between the four as they all tried to punch at each other. He blocked the shots with his forearms.

"What the hell is going on here?!" He shouted, pushing Naruto and Sasuke apart, then stepping back in between Ino and Sakura.

Lee and Linda came sprinting in next. Without speaking, they helped Ekyt break up the fight. Afterward, Lee pulled Ekyt aside.

"I wanted to let you know that all of us are going to be there for you tomorrow. You helped me reach jonin level, and I am improving every day, and it is thanks to you and Gai-sensei!" Lee didn't hug Ekyt this time, mercifully.

Ekyt nodded solemnly. "Lee, I just need to know one thing: If it comes down to Linda and I fighting...will you and I still be friends, no matter what the outcome. I don't want to fight her, you already know that. But I have a feeling it's going to happen."

Lee returned Ekyt's nod. "We will still be friends. You and I have fought, and we are still friends now. As long as you do not try to take Linda from me, there is no problem!" Lee struck his 'nice guy' pose, then ran back to the fight to separate Naruto and Sasuke once more.

NEXT ISSUE: THE FINAL PHASE OF THE CHUNIN EXAMS BEGIN!

12 - The Tides Take a Turn

Lady Tsunade sighed.

“God, I hate doing this formal S****” she muttered to Shizune. Tsunade shook her head, knocking her bangs out of her eyes with a hand absently. She was pulling her pouting routine, the one that usually got Shizune to cave in and give her what she wanted.

“Oh, it’s not so bad, Lady Tsunade! Besides, don’t you want to see how our two Leaf Genin do? Ekyt is at the top of his game, reaching the tower in record time. And the time you’ve put in, helping Linda, has made her into quite the fighter!” Shizune exclaimed. She enjoyed the formal events. Despite her beauty (a beauty that belied her years) she enjoyed a good fight, and could mix it up with most anyone. She had herself armed, just in case things got out of hand.

Tsunade looked over at Shizune sharply. “Don’t tell Ekyt I worked with her. I want him at the top of his game, not worrying about what Linda can do. I want him focused on himself. As it is, I had to get Ibikki to talk to Ebisu to even OPEN the loophole that got Ekyt in the exams.”

Shizune nodded, saying she understood. “Is that the REAL reason you told him he couldn’t spar with Lee anymore? Because you and I both know that they BOTH benefited from those sparring matches. But you wanted to give Lee an out to work with his girlfriend, right?”

Tsunade nodded. “I had to do something. The girl would have died without all this help. Ekyt finally found his niche, in the Shinobi world. He was willing to do anything, and needed no one. This girl had the ability, but she didn’t have the drive. With her two students gone, she only had Lee to rely on. She needed the extra push, a little shove, to get her motivated. And, well, our village needs medic-nin, and it’s not like Ekyt doesn’t have a chance to win...”

Shizune’s eyes widened. “You...you’re placing the odds AGAINST Ekyt?”

Tsunade grinned. “Well, may-be...Not the odds, just 5000ryo on Linda to win...” Tsunade looked down at the floor, where she would be giving her speech momentarily.

Shizune shook her head. “You get him here, then you bet against him?”

Tsunade shrugged. “Hey, I always take the long shot, you know that, Shizune. Now stop trying to judge me, already, and get these punks lined up. How many matches do we have?”

Shizune shrugged. “Ibikki and Anko are still scowering the forest for stragglers, a few haven’t checked in yet.”

Ibikki grimly hoisted the Sand genin on his shoulders.

“What happened?” he barked, annoyed that he had to fish out the weak ones.

“Genjutsu...I’ve never felt anything like it...Horrible...my own death...it was like being IN hell...” The Sand genin’s voice trailed off. He and his two comrades were all speaking in short, clipped sentences, and they seemed to be in pain, although there were no external injuries evident.

Ibikki shook the kid, hoping to jar one more answer out of him. “Who did it? Who used the genjutsu?”

The Sand genin groaned, but answered right away. “That kid...by himself...dragon...”

Ibikki had his answer. **I DID say he would be one to watch. The way these three are out of it, that genjutsu must have been hell to get through...**

Anko propped a third Mist ninja against a tree.

“Alright, what happened?” she barked. The Mist genin were too much in pain to even be scared. “She used...a chakra attack...cut every tendon and ligament until we couldn’t move. So fast...in seconds, she had our scroll.” The boy passed out from the pain. Anko tried to bring him about by slapping him, but he was out like a light.

Tsunade and Shizune heard the tell-tale POPS of arrival. Ibikki and Anko were kneeling respectfully. “Found the remaining six...all out of it, no way they can compete. Three are under mental duress, and three have every muscle cut.”

Tsunade frowned. “ ‘Cut’ ” she questioned, eyebrows raised.

“With a chakra scalpel attack. They said it was done in seconds...” even Anko seemed impressed.

Tsunade nodded. “Guess her training took. Ibikki, you said “mental duress”?”

Ibikki nodded gravely, grinning. “Yeah. Genjutsu. I’m sure you can already guess who caused it.”

Tsunade could. “Alright. Time to announce the matches.”

But there was a hitch. There were four remaining chunin hopefuls, two from the Leaf, one from the Mist, and one from the Clouds. But the Cloud Shinobi and the Mist Shinobi refused to fight.

“No way! Not with those two!” they pointed at Ekyt and Linda. “Not gonna happen, I’d rather walk out of here under my own power! I’ll try again next time!”

Tsunade cleared her throat.

“I declare the third phase of the chunin exams open. Since only two participants remain, we will have the fight today, along with a ceremony for any who attained the rank of chunin. The rules are simple: The match is over when one of the candidates either dies, concedes defeat, or is, in the opinion of our proctor, unable to continue due to injury. Though we discourage killing, it has happened in the past, and may happen today. I ask all of you to be respectful to both combatants. That said, let us begin the third phase of the chunin exams!”

Ekyt stepped onto the North side of the floor. Linda was on the South side. Shikamaru was the exam proctor.

“Alright, approach,” he called out, bored. “Bow to me, bow to each other. Back up...HAJIME!” (Begin!) Linda leapt in with a flying side kick. Ekyt knocked it aside with his forearm and started throw a punch, but felt something was wrong. His tricep felt...wobbly. He gave Linda a heel push kick, sending her across the floor, but not harming her. He leapt backward, his right arm hanging limply at his side. Linda couldn’t resist giving a speech to her former comrade.

“Like that? It’s called the Chakra Scalpel! I just cut your tricep. You might as well know...I’ve been trained by the best. Lady Tsunade and Lee. You’ve trained alone. Ekyt, I’ve sworn to save you from yourself, even if it meant ruining your body. This is my chance to save you from getting killed by crippling you!”

Ekyt shot a look at Tsunade and Lee, but said nothing to them. “Chakra Scalpel!” he called. His left hand hummed with blue energy.

“Oh, you’re going to face me like that, trying to pull off some heroic stunt?” Linda taunted.

Calmly, Ekyt put his left hand to his right tricep. “No. I’m healing myself. In case you didn’t notice, the Chakra Scalpel is also a healing jutsu.”

Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke, Ino, Lee, Kakashi, Guy, and Asuma stood together, watching the fight. No one gave Lee a dirty look, that's not what Ekyt would have wanted in this case. But the tension WAS high. They had all been rooting for Ekyt, thinking he would have had an easy victory. But that wasn't going to be the case.

"She's so fast! Lee, did you teach her that?" Sakura gaped at Linda, who was clearly enjoying her newfound talent. **That undeserving dog! I can't believe Lady Tsunade taught her anything! She must have put a bet on the match for Ekyt to lose!**

"I did. I thought that she would need the help. She is my girlfriend. I hope Ekyt-san will not be angry..." Lee was focusing on the match, strangely silent, likely due to the fact that one participant was his girlfriend, and the other was one of his closest friends.

Naruto, who hated Linda, wasn't shy about voicing his opinion. "Come on, take it to her already! She's insulting you! Just knock her out! Come on, you can do it, believe it!"

Linda began to weave her hands together.

"Chakra Kunai!" she shouted. She threw a series of glowing kunai, each with her chakra attached. As she thought, Ekyt leapt aside. Linda moved her hands to the side; the kunai were attached with strings of chakra! This time, they struck Ekyt in the side. His ribs groaned under the strain. Linda's attack wasn't done yet. She yanked her hands toward her, then thrust them forward again, pulling the kunai out, then sinking them back in to Ekyt's side.

Shikamaru looked at Ekyt. "Do you want to quit?"

Ekyt shook his head and tried to focus on his breathing. He needed to think of a way out of this.

Think...okay, this attack has range, and you need to end the pain before black out. You've got to get these things out of you and go on the offensive...That's it!

"Chakra Hardening!" he called as soon as he felt Linda yank the knives back. This time, they glanced off a blue shield at his side.

"Huh?" Linda tried to attack again, but her kunai succeeded only in attacking a log. Ekyt had used the Body Replacement Jutsu. But where had he gone?

Ekyt was hanging from the rafters. He weaved his hands together. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!"

Flames shot at Linda from three sides, backing her into a wall. Ekyt's clones handled that, all he had to do was use his genjutsu, and the match was over. As he began to weave his hands together, a series of ten kunai struck his legs. His legs gave out; that was bad news. They had been holding Ekyt to the rafters. Now he was free-falling nearly 100 feet to the floor. No way he could land on his feet. **Linda didn't throw those kunai...the direction was all wrong, and she couldn't throw that hard, it would have to be a full grown man...** Ekyt looked over towards the direction the kunai had come from. He saw a smug Ebisu smiling at him, twirling a kunai around his finger. Ekyt cursed, and tried to think of a way to get out of this.

Linda solved that problem. She got a running start, leapt, and shouted "Dynamic Entry!" she kicked the helpless Ekyt full in the stomach. That slowed his downward descent, but sent him sailing into the concrete wall at the other end.

By this point, Ekyt couldn't even stand up. Determined, he dragged himself across the floor, starting to make hand signs.

Shikamaru stopped him. "It's over. I can't let you continue like this."

Ekyt looked up, his eyes clearly saying "Let it go!". Shikamaru raised his arm in Linda's direction.

"Winner: Linda Mawashi."

Kiba and Akamaru sniffed the trail. "This is the right way!" Kiba called to Hinata and Shino. "Ruff!" Akamaru agreed. He and Kiba took off down the trail to the Village. Shino and Hinata followed, but lagged behind slightly. If Kiba was ambushed, they could bail him out. If all of them were caught, they were in trouble. The Mist Village produced quality ninja, and the three wound up having to fight the entire village, there would be major trouble, not to mention an international crisis. The Akakomadori family was waiting for them.

"Come inside, quickly!" the mother told them, ushering the three Leaf Village Chunin inside a small house.

After brief introductions, Kiba got to the point. "We need to leave at nightfall. Your husband is alive and well, and being protected by the Leaf Shinobi, under our Hokage's orders. He wants to move all of you to the Leaf Village. Trust me, you'll like it. Your business will boom, the Leaf Village has quite a few partiers."

Lee leapt down and celebrated with Linda. Ekyt was too disgusted to bother trying to get up and congratulate her. He couldn't; someone else had won the battle for her. He knew who it was, too. After he fought the medic-nin off, Ekyt pulled himself to a standing position.

"Hidden Shadow Snake Hand," he spat. The four snakes that burst from his wrist grabbed a railing and helped Ekyt prop himself up. That was when he heard Lady Tsunade cheering that she had won the bet. He remembered Linda saying that Tsunade had trained her. Ekyt put two and two together. He didn't come up with four. He came up with "I'm really pissed".

Ekyt whipped toward Lady Tsunade.

"You turned your back on me...over a bet." He glared for a moment longer, then dragged himself away before Tsunade could say anything. Shizune looked at Tsunade.

"That was horrible. I don't know how you could do that, Lady Tsunade. But I won't judge, it's not my business." Shizune walked away as well.

Naruto, Sakura, Asuma, and Kakashi walked over to him. Ekyt refused to let them help him up.

"I'm salvaging what's left of my pride," he said bitterly.

"Let me take a look, okay. You can trust me, Ekyt." Sakura got down on her knees and pulled out the kunai from Ekyt's battered legs. She used her Chakra Scalpel to pull out the spare metal, then used the "Autonomous Cell Regeneration" jutsu to help Ekyt's leg heal.

"Thanks," Ekyt told her, making sure his eyes said 'thanks', because he KNEW his tone of voice didn't.

"You got screwed man, believe it! But they might still make you a chunin!" Naruto glared at Ebusu.

"Either way, that was low on Ebusu's part."

"Ebusu..." Ekyt repeated the name. He got to his feet.

"Hey, where are you? Kakashi-sensei, we have to stop him!"

Kakashi and Asuma exchanged glances. "Ebusu is a jonin, Sakura, I'm sure he can handle himself if Ekyt hits him."

Kakashi's voice indicated that that he was hoping Ekyt would hit Ebusu. Everyone knew that Ekyt could dismantle him. It was also clear that the jonin KNEW Ekyt had gotten a raw deal, and that they wouldn't step in until absolutely necessary.

Ekyt stormed over to Ebisu. The smug jonin opened his mouth, when Ekyt cracked him in the face with a hard right hand.

“YOU SON OF A dog! YOU THINK IT’S RIGHT TO JUMP ME FROM BEHIND! I’M GOING TO DO WHAT I SHOULD HAVE DONE A LONG TIME AGO!” Ekyt picked Ebisu up by his lapels and held him close. Ebisu was shaking with fear. Ekyt threw him out to the middle of the floor.

“I SHOULD HAVE KICKED YOUR @\$ RIGHT AWAY! YOU’VE GOT NO GOOD REASON TO HATE ME, BUT NOW YOU’VE GIVEN ME ALL THE REASON IN THE WORLD TO HATE **YOU!**”

Ekyt zipped out onto the floor. He kicked Ebisu in the face with his heel. Ebisu leapt up to his feet, but Ekyt used the Body Flicker Jutsu to land right in front of him. His hands became blurs as he threw punches into Ebisu’s midsection, then gave him an uppercut, followed by a heel kick that lifted Ebisu off the ground. Ekyt leapt up after him and hooked his neck and leg.

“Backward Konoha Snap Dragon!” Ekyt yelled, throwing himself and Ebisu backward. Ebisu hit the ground hard enough to crack the hard cement. Ekyt picked him up again and threw him against the wall.

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!” He shouted. Ebisu was frozen from fear. While he tried to fight off the powerful genjutsu, Ekyt made a series of handsigns that was unfamiliar to all but two people.

“Fire Release: Dragon’s Circle!” Ekyt called. He bolted forward, his right hand tagging Ebisu in the face. The hand had been holding a ball of condensed fire. The fire now appeared on Ekyt’s right foot, on top of his foot. He kicked Ebisu with a roundhouse. Then, for the first time, the fire grew on Ekyt’s foot and attached itself to the bottom of his foot. With a shout of effort, he gave Ebisu a side-kick in the stomach. Ebisu was now a charred mess. He slid down to the floor.

Ekyt picked him up, once he heard the jonin coming from behind. Holding him so close Ebisu’s nose was against his mask, Ekyt snarled “NOW you’ve got a reason to hate me.” He dropped Ebisu, and turned to the jonin. To his surprise, they didn’t lay a hand on him.

Kakashi stepped forward. “Come with us. You can meet with the others later, but right now, we need to talk with you. You’re not in any trouble. Just come with us.”

13 - The System on Trial!

Kakashi and the other jonin escorted Ekyt to Lady Tsunade's office. She was sitting at her desk, scrolls pushed to the side, leaving the desk bare. In front of her was a familiar figure, and not one Ekyt liked seeing. It was Linda. But, now she was wearing a green chunin vest. The jonin winced collectively; they could only guess what Ekyt's reaction was.

Ekyt didn't say a word. He kept walking, just like they had told him. Linda smirked at Ekyt, trying to taunt him, but Ekyt said nothing. He glared straight ahead. Lady Tsunade didn't seem to know where to start, so Ekyt prompted her.

"You had your jonin escort me here. I assume there's a reason, Lady Tsunade? If not, I'd like to get back to my schedule." Ekyt said all of this respectfully, but you could not just hear the anger, but FEEL it in every tone. His hazel eyes didn't waver, save for an occasional blink.

The jonin stiffened, and Kakashi put a hand on Ekyt's shoulder. Tsunade stood up to look Ekyt in the eyes. She exhaled hard, knowing that yelling at the boy would make things worse. A LOT worse.

"I'm sorry, you didn't make chunin." Tsunade hesitated, as if unsure how to continue.

"What a surprise. With Ebisu on the council, and 5000ryo against me. I'm shocked. How is Ebisu (Ekyt refused to add the '-sensei')? In pain, I hope?" Ekyt found he meant every word, and he felt that he couldn't say them harshly enough.

Tsunade rubbed her temples. "I deserve this, I know I do. I shouldn't have let my gambling effect the exams. But they didn't. I trained Linda so she wouldn't die out there and-"

"It's nice to know I was afforded the same luxury! So, where the hell was MY 'special training' when I was ready to test, three years ago? I've had to learn almost everything myself, with no gratification. It's getting harder and harder to give a damn. I'd ask you to give me a match against Ebisu for interfering, but there's no point in that, since I already mopped the floor with him. His credibility is destroyed. And it's great to know people get made 'chunin' when they have SOMEONE ELSE win the match for them! That's a GREAT show of ability!" Ekyt snarled, shooting a glance at a shocked Linda. He paused to get his breath, then continued. "Is there anything else you need to tell me before I leave to go about my business?"

Tsunade stood up, pointing firmly. "Yes. Your punishment for attacking a sensei is"

"HE ATTACKED ME! WHAT DID HE GET? NOTHING, RIGHT? IS THIS THE WAY YOUR SYSTEM WORKS?" Ekyt pounded his fist on the desk, shouting at the top of his lungs. Kakashi grabbed him and restrained him, telling him to 'take it easy' and 'stay calm'.

"Take it easy. Relax, hear her out," Kakashi urged.

Tsunade spoke quickly, so Ekyt wouldn't interrupt again. "Your punishment is serving with Linda on a C-ranked mission to retrieve a scroll from the Land of Herbs."

Ekyt stood up straight for a moment, then put his hands on Tsunade's desk, and leaned forward. "No chance. I'm not doing it. I refuse to work for that dog. You're setting me up for abuse, and I'm not fool enough to go along with it," he growled.

"You don't have a choice. You have to, or I have to give you something worse." Tsunade was starting to look almost as old as she REALLY was. "Please, don't make this more difficult...You KNOW I wanted you to make chunin...Oh...you're going to hate this, and I'm sorry...your team is, as of now, disbanded. I'm sorry."

Ekyt glared at her, while Linda snickered. Sakura had entered the room with Naruto and saw the stare

down.

Ekyt looked back at Kakashi, then shocked everyone in the room. He shrugged off his vest and hitai-ate. He stuffed the head covering into a pocket of his vest, which he slung over his shoulder.

“There isn’t a damn thing you can do to me anymore. This is one warrior you don’t have to kick around anymore. If I don’t have a team to let down, and all I’m going to catch is S***, then I’ll just be sure the door doesn’t hit me in the @\$@ on the way out.”

The jonin blocked the door, but Ekyt looked up at them. The mutual respect was there. Before Tsunade ordered them to do otherwise, the jonin stepped aside. Kakashi patted Ekyt on the head as he walked by.

Naruto and Sakura couldn’t believe it. Ekyt vaguely greeted them as he stormed by. He continued down the hallway, ripped open the door to the stairs outside, and stomped down them.

“Is-is he serious?” Sakura couldn’t believe they had just seen one of the most dedicated Shinobi they had ever seen walk out on the Hokage.

“I think so...” Naruto gaped after Ekyt, who kept walking.

Sakura chanced a glance at Naruto. **He’s grown so much...he’s always been concerned for his friends. But he’s got a little common sense now. I guess that makes him a little more...attractive.** Sakura couldn’t believe she had just had that thought.

Neji made hand signs as fast as he could, ready to attack. Hiashi looked worried. **I know how powerful Neji is...I need to stop this jutsu now!**

Hiashi darted forward, palm outstretched. Neji was ready.

“Eight Trigrams Palm Rotation!” He called. He began his rotation jutsu, but began to throw palm strikes in the middle of the attack! Hiashi was stunned. Neji finally caught Hiashi under the chin with his 64th strike, sending the Hyuuga family patriarch flying.

Hiashi hit the steel side of the warehouse hard, his body sore. But he nodded his head. Very good Neji. But you’ve used your chakra...and this match is over...”

Neji spun around. Hiashi was behind him (The clone that Neji had just destroyed disappeared). With one last attack, Neji’s tenketsu were blocked. He was defeated.

The Hyuuga family would stay separated.

Kiba, Shino, Hinata, and Akamaru snuck the Akakomadori family out of the Mist Village, with no trouble. They reached the Leaf Village by traveling non-stop. There was less chance that the Mist Ninja would attack them once they reached the Leaf Village.

Their orders from Lady Tsunade told them to take the Akakomadori family to a large, two-story building. The bottom part was already made into a restaurant/bar, while the top part was furnished as a home.

The Akakomadori’s couldn’t thank Kiba and his team enough. They immediately handed him a bottle of their finest sake for Lady Tsunade, as a gift.

Kiba marched into the Hokage’s office.

“Mission Accomplished!” he declared. He set the sake down in front of Tsunade.

“Are they open yet?” Tsunade leapt to her feet.

“Yeah, I think so, but” Kiba was cut off by Tsunade leaving the room as fast as she could.

“O-Kay. Shizune-sensei, what was that about?” Kiba wanted to know.

Shizune had looked troubled from the start. “Well, Ekyt Kaguya just quit after not making chunin. I’ll explain the whole thing. Don’t be mad at Ekyt, it was Tsunade who was out of line...”

Ekyt stormed back to his apartment. He threw aside his vests and black shirts and gi pants. He thought for a moment, then tossed his mask aside as well. He pulled on a pair of white gi pants, then added a white T-shirt. After a moment’s thought, he grabbed an old white headband with the symbol and kanji for ‘dragon’ on it. He tied it around his upper left arm. Finally, he put on his tabi shoes, bandaged his wrists, then replaced his mask. He had really wanted to get rid of all ties to his Ninja life, but for some reason, he wanted to keep his face covered, except to those he knew relatively well.

Not working for the Leaf Village didn’t mean Ekyt wasn’t a citizen. It also didn’t mean that he wouldn’t train. Because he did- that was ALL he did. Sometimes Sakura or Naruto, or one of the jonin would find him passed out in front of a scroll. Or they would find him lying on the ground in the woods, a tree stained with blood from his fists, forearms, and feet hitting it and breaking, then hardening, the skin. When he wasn’t training or studying, Ekyt sat and stared. At nothing, at nobody. He stayed in his apartment, only leaving when he needed to. Sakura and Naruto stopped by. Even Lee stopped by, but he made the mistake of mentioning the chunin exams. Ekyt understood his reasoning for being happy his girlfriend won, but this new-found rage of Ekyt’s didn’t need to hear it.

Naruto, Sakura, and Lee went to see Sarutobi.

“...and he’s finally had enough. Tsunade betting against him, Ebisu taunting him, not being made a chunin. Master Sarutobi, what can we do?” Sakura pleaded. The village was weak enough. They didn’t need to lose another Shinobi. Besides that, if word got out that the ‘dragon had lost his flame’, there would be major trouble.

Sarutobi asked them to sit, while he went to speak with the jonin. If he wasn’t back within the hour, he told them, they should leave.

Ekyt was walking home from training. It was nearly 6 am; he had been training for twelve straight hours. His body was wide awake, and it told him he was thirsty. Ekyt made a sharp turn into the new Akakomadori bar and immediately ordered sake and the house special. That was grilled salmon, season with fresh herbs, and ramen on the side. Ekyt thanked the server, a woman in her mid thirties, and ate as fast as he could while remaining polite. He didn’t want anyone to bother him. He had avoided contact (save for visitors) with others he didn’t want to see for a week now, and he wanted to keep that streak alive. Apparently, that wasn’t going to happen.

“Alright, give us all your money, and we won’t wreck you’re pretty new building!” a masked bandit declared. His two men fanned out to the sides of him. Ekyt ignored them and kept eating and drinking. He finished his meal, then stood up. He didn’t carry kunai anymore, and he didn’t have his sword with him. The bandits had knives and spears. Ekyt pulled his shirt off and wrapped it around his left arm so he could block their blades without getting cut too badly.

“What is this? Ha, look at this! We’ve got us a fighter, boys! Get him first, I’ll handle the owner!” the leader shouted, he leapt over the counter, but felt something give his robe a sharp tug. He crashed to the bar hard, his head bouncing off a tap, putting him out of action for the moment.

Ekyt let go of the man's robe and turned to the other two bandits. One rushed him. Ordinarily, Ekyt would have used a clone jutsu, but he was too tired from his training. Today was 'chakra focus' day, and he had pushed himself to the limit. His stamina, however, was intact, and he knew it would remain so until his chakra returned.

The bandit slashed down with an axe. Ekyt stepped aside as the axe buried itself into the thick wood of the bar. While the bandit tried to tug it free, Ekyt elbowed the bandit's triceps, causing the whole arm to go numb. He kicked the handle of the axe, shattering it. The handle was long enough to be a weapon, so Ekyt grabbed it and threw it at the other bandit, who was too shocked to move. The wood bounced off his chest with a 'thunk.' Ekyt had followed it in and connected with a left uppercut, sending the would-be thief spilling into the street. The leader grabbed Ekyt from behind, in a full nelson.

"Good fight, little man! But I've got you know. And I'm gonna break your neck for all the trouble you've cause me..."

Ekyt, non-plussed by the threat, threw his head backward into the robber's nose, then kicked his leg upward into his groin. The last conscious thug hesitated, then tried to rush Ekyt. Ekyt didn't particularly care how bad these people were hurt at this point. He grabbed a wooden chair and threw it at the robber as he was in mid-air, a flying side-kick on tap. The chair halted his progress and sent him spilling to the ground. He lay motionless, then tried to run for it. Ekyt tripped him and grabbed him in a figure-four wrist lock. He snapped the wrist, then tossed the screaming man on top of the other two. Two chunin patrolling the streets came and took the bad guys away.

Aki Akakomadori stared at the boy who had just cleared her shop of the bandits. There was minimal damage, and they hadn't gotten away with any cash. She saw the boy sit back down to his meal. He finished his fish and sake, then put enough ryo on the counter to cover his bill, plus a tip.

"No, that's on the house!" Aki exclaimed. The boy looked at the money, then shrugged.

"It's a tip, then," he spoke in a hoarse whisper.

Aki bowed to him. "Thank you very much. You've saved my shop. Might I ask your name?"

Ekyt hesitated. "Please keep it under your hat. My name is Ekyt Kaguya."

Aki bowed again. "Thank you so much. The Akakomadori family owes you a debt."

"You owe me nothing. Good luck with your business," Ekyt offered.

"Are you a ninja?" Aki asked. Her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

The boy hesitated again, then nodded. "I used to be. Now, I'm a citizen...who has training," he added with a laugh.

"I-I would consider it an honor if you would agree to protect my business!" Aki blurted out. She had never been attacked in the Mist Village, only threatened. If this was how things were done here, well, she had a husband and two kids, not to mention an elderly mother, who needed protection. None of them were skilled Shinobi. Having one protecting them would give her peace of mind, and possibly even save her business.

Ekyt, for some reason, agreed. "I'd like that. Thank you."

Neji cursed.

"It was not fate...it was my own inabilities...fate can't always side with one person. I just wish fate had chosen to ignore a less important matter..."

Hiashi approached Neji, but Neji bowed and left the warehouse. The Cadet Branch's proctor's head fell in shame. He contained his anger and left as well.

The Main Branch's proctor congratulated Hiashi on the win, and immediately began preparing a

celebration.

Decided he needed some new 'work' clothes, Ekyt went to the specialty shop and placed some orders. The clerk practically had dollar signs in his eyes. Ekyt saw this coming and thought, for once, maybe mentioning his reputation might be a good thing.

"Can you put the Kaguya crest on the back of the kekko gi? Oh, and the black sash- could I have 'Dragon' put on that, in gold kanji? And I'll take the dragon pendant, too."

"That doubles as a knife, sold to Shinobi only," the owner said gruffly. Ekyt hid his irritation.

"Really now? I'm sure it's legal for a private citizen to own those...with the right abilities, of course."

Ekyt used a Shadow Clone Jutsu.

The owner raised an eyebrow, then studied the boy placing the order. He gasped in surprise.

"You're the Dragon Boy!" he shouted, pointing.

"Yup. I hope my training is enough for me to get that pendant off you. The Dragon ring, too, if you don't mind..."

NEXT ISSUE: NARUTO, SAKURA, AND SARUTOBI TRY TO TALK SOME SENSE INTO EKYT! THE MISSIONS CONTINUE FOR EVERYONE ELSE. BUT WITH NEJI DISTRACTED, INO'S MIND ELSEWHERE, AND TSUNADE STARTING TO FEEL THE PRESSURE OF BEING HOKAGE, ANYTHING CAN (AND WILL) HAPPEN!

14 - A Valiant Effort

Naruto was going to be the first, they decided, to talk with Ekyt.

“This is a C-ranked mission,” Tsunade announced to Team 7. “This will give you a chance to break in your new member...”

Naruto groaned. “Grandma, come on! That kid is stubborn, believe it! If he attacks, will you make this a B-rank?”

Tsunade sighed in frustration. “Yes. If he hits you, it’s a B-ranked mission. But DO NOT do anything to get that kind of reaction out of him. I know how you are Naruto, and I expect you to behave. This is a volatile situation, DO NOT make it worse! We need him back in our ranks, not free-lancing.

Understood?” Tsunade’s eyes looked at Team Kakashi. The new member wouldn’t be arriving until later, and he would most likely annoy Team Kakashi. But, such was life.

Ekyt finished his training. He closed up both scrolls and massaged his eyes. Six hours of reading. But he couldn’t put the scrolls down, partly because they were so interesting, and partly because it was ‘scroll day’, where he went through any new scrolls he could find and jotted notes down in his ever-expanding white scroll, ‘ShoBu’. It was a day off for his body and chakra to regroup. The old Ekyt wouldn’t have understood the importance of re-reading the scrolls, taking the insane amount of notes, and relaxing. The third part was what annoyed him. A day off felt like a day wasted, but it was necessary if he wanted to keep his body functioning.

Now he was at the Akakomadori family’s bar and restaurant. People drank at all times of the day. So far today, Ekyt had tossed one person out, because he made some nasty, perverted comments to Aki, who took offense. So, Ekyt was basically a bouncer. Enough belligerent people came in to keep his skills sharp, so Ekyt shrugged it off. Besides, he was making better money while thumbing his nose at ‘the system’ at the same time.

The bar and restaurant was set up like Ichiraku, except ten times bigger, and there was an old, wooden staircase behind the bar. There were stools at the bar, but also plenty of tables. Ekyt had paid for the chair he had used to stop the robbery the other night, though Aki maintained that he didn’t need to. Ekyt insisted. Aki thanked him, and then asked for his help moving a couch upstairs. When Ekyt asked why, just as making conversation, Aki gave a heavy sigh and a tear-jerking explanation.

“Before we left the Mist Village, we were in the adoption process of taking in a boy. He’s fifteen years old, and he’s got all sorts of medical problems. He’s blind in one eye, and sometimes he just can’t be with other people. He sits by himself, reading, or drawing. Sometimes he just breathes so hard and eats so little that I worry. He’s coming here to live. We’re hoping the cleaner air in Konoha will help him get well, but we’re at wits end. My husband is starting to yell at the boy, and I know it’s not what he needs...” Aki broke into controlled tears, her fists clenched. She dropped the end of the couch she had been carrying and sat on it. “...He needs love, and my husband can’t give it. We have two kids of our own, and my elderly mother, who thinks the boy just needs discipline. I don’t know what to do with him!” Ekyt, in surprise, thought back. This kid sounded like...himself. **Anxiety...the ‘alone’**

part...eating...breathing...it all sounds like me. Before he could stop himself, Ekyt piped up.

“Do you mind if I meet him?” Ekyt blurted out. **What? Are you nuts? You know what happened last time! Chakaro, remember him? Think, moron!** Ekyt mentally chastised himself, but got this in response:

Do you remember when you were abandoned by all but your parents? How about when Tsunade turned her back on you? You can understand this kid- it's a chance to make a difference for someone who still has a real chance at being something, someone. Having a normal life, something that's only of the vaguest hope for you.

Aki looked up at her bouncer. "Sure. I'd like for you to. He'll be working here, when he can. I wish I knew how to help him..."

Kakashi looked at Naruto, eye half-lidded. "Okay Naruto, do you remember the plan?" he asked slowly. "Yes, for the last time Kakashi-sensei! I go in there, hand him this note from Tsunade ordering a bottle of Sake, and I try to talk him into coming back. Do you think I'm stupid or something?"

Sakura opened her mouth, but stopped and shook her head. "That would have been too easy."

"What was that?!" Naruto shouted.

"Be quiet! Now, go do your mission!" Kakashi gave Naruto a shove into the restaurant/bar. "And stick to the plan!" Kakashi added. **He'll do something stupid, that knucklehead...but he has a way about him, of getting people to believe in themselves, and him. Ekyt knows him, though, and he'll be on the defensive...I'd hate to do it to Sakura, but if push comes to shove...she'll have to be what kunoichi originally were...**

Lee bounded into Tsunade's office, ready to go. Guy was already waiting. Neji and Tenten strolled in. Neji looked out of it, but Tsunade thought his skills and instincts would be enough to protect him.

"I'm giving all of you a mission, with one of our newest chunin. You'll be joining Linda in retrieving a scroll from the Land of Herbs. The scroll contains complex healing medicines which will certainly benefit the Leaf Village. Guy, I know you're the ranking member, but I'd like Lee to lead the mission."

Guy, tears streaming down his face, whipped towards Lee.

"Your first mission! Lee, I'm so proud! (sob) You special kid!" Guy hugged him.

"Thank you Guy-sensei! I will make you proud!" Lee replied, crying as well.

Tsunade and Tenten shook their heads.

"How the hell did Lee find a girlfriend, acting like that?" Tenten said in amazement.

Kiba admired his new symbol of rank. He hadn't worn the vest he got when he was a chunin, but now that he was a jonin, the time felt right.

"Alright, Akamaru! This is great! I can't wait for an A-ranked mission! We'll tear through it!"

"Ruff! Ruff!" Akamaru agreed.

"C-congratulations, Kiba," Hinata murmured shyly, blushing.

"Good for you, Kiba. It seems you've become the Queen Bee of our group." Shino spoke without breaking his stare at a species of ant that was crawling around near his feet.

"WHAT?!" Kiba snarled. "Hey, just because I'm single- oh, wait, sorry Shino, now I get it. If that had come from anyone but you..."

Kurenai laughed good-naturedly. **It's amazing how much they've grown. They're vital parts of Konoha now, and sharp kids. I hope my children will be like them one day. Provided I ever have children, I hope they're a mix of these three personalities. Kiba's loyalty, Shino's quiet intuitiveness, and Hinata's honesty. I feel like they're all my children. But I've really bonded with Hinata. I hope she cracks her shell soon and is honest with Naruto...**

As soon as he walked in the door, Ekyt was on the defensive.

“Welcome to the Akakomadori restaurant/bar Naruto. How can we help you today?” Ekyt asked jovially. **As if I didn't know...**

Naruto stretched his arms behind his head and appeared lacidascal. “Yeah, I got an order from Granny Tsunade. She wants a bottle of the best stuff. I've got a warrant allowing me to carry it, even though I'm kinda underage.”

Ekyt looked over the warrant. “Sure thing. Let me talk with the owner, to find the best stuff. Please, wait here, I won't be long.”

As soon as Ekyt left, Naruto keyed up his mic.

“You guys won't believe this. And there's no way I'm going to pass this mission, he's already on to me. He's getting the sake now, but he doesn't even look like himself. He's dressed like a civilian. I can't even see a weapon on him!”

Through his mic, he heard Kakashi's voice. “He's armed, somewhere, don't worry about that. But if he's already on the defensive, pull out. That will throw him off-guard, for plan 'S'.”

At that point, Ekyt returned, a bottle in hand.

“Here you are, Naruto. Say hi to everyone for me...well, not the Hokage or Ebisu. Anyway, no charge.”

“Thanks. Nice clothes, by the way! Catch ya later!” Naruto ran out of the shop. Outside, he met Kakashi and Sakura.

“Alright, we need a new plan. Sakura, do you remember what kunoichi were originally used for?”

Kakashi asked kindly. Naruto even remembered THIS fact.

“Sure, sensei. They were supposed to seduce (realizes where this is going)...the...enemy...” Sakura looked from Kakashi to Naruto, then back. Her eyes widened, and she backed up.

“No way. You can't want me to do that. I mean, I like Ekyt, he's a great kid, but, I mean, I, um...”

“Sakura...you wouldn't want the mission to fail...would you?” Kakashi asked slyly.

“Well, no, but still...” Sakura sputtered.

“Aw, it's just Ekyt, he's no threat to you, right? C'mon Sakura, you can do it!” Naruto gave her a thumbs up and grin.

Sakura's heart beat faster and she blushed. **Could I really be in love with Naruto? He's asking me to seduce another boy? Even if it IS Ekyt, who I can trust...My feelings just feel so complicated right now...But I'm on a mission, and failure isn't an option! Here we go!**

“I'll do it!”

Ekyt heard the sound of a flap being lifted. He didn't turn around right away. The person moved lightly, a child or a female. He heard the whisper of fabric, but it wasn't that of a gi. He heard the clip-clop of high-heels or boots. But that was all he could sense. So he turned around. Immediately, his face turned beet red under his mask. He could feel himself start to sweat, despite himself. **Damnit, stop that!** he commanded his body, to no avail.

“Hi Sakura,” he managed to say.

“Hi Ekyt-kun...” she replied, smiling charmingly.

“What can I get you?” Ekyt asked, trying to do his job.

“Mmm...I don't know, what do you suggest? Ah, these are killing me!” Sakura put her leg up on the bar,

which would have given Ekyt a view of what was under her skirt, not to mention her leg.. She waited for Ekyt's reaction, but it never came. He had turned around to get her a menu! When he turned back around, he had his head behind it!

"Well, the house special is rice, chicken ramen, along with wasabi peas, and grilled salmon. That's my personal favorite," he said. As he put the menu down, Sakura's leg cramped up and she had to put it back on the floor.

"That sounds really good. Oh, I meant to tell you, one of the table legs is broken out there." Sakura pointed.

Ekyt walked around the counter and bent down to fix it. Sakura position herself right behind, so that his face would be inches away from her when he got up.

A spider fell on Sakura's shoulder, just as Ekyt was ducking under the table to fix it. Sakura saw the spider.

"KYAAH!" she screamed, knocking it off her shoulder.

The shout startled Ekyt, who cracked his head on the underside of the table. "Ow! Sakura, are you alright?"

Sakura immediately assumed a scared-little-girl pose.

"It was soooo big, Ekyt-kun, and it just caught me by surprise!" Sakura gulped, then put her hands around Ekyt's waist and snuggled up to him. She pressed against his body slightly, and she saw his ears redden.

CHA! Finally!

Ekyt felt his face redden even more. **Why is she doing this? Does she know how I feel about her?**

Wait-what's that near her ear. Damn, I'll hate myself, but if I'm right...

Ekyt put his arms around Sakura. "Well, it's gone now. There are some other...specials (**Oh man, I hate myself for this!**)...maybe could interest you in one?"

Ekyt moved his head toward her ear, whispering. Then, he grabbed what he saw.

Sakura couldn't believe it. **He-he's coming on to me? But it's so unlike him! What do I do?!**

"Got it!" Ekyt declared. In his hand was the microphone Sakura had hidden. He let go of her and stormed outside.

Kakashi and Naruto were listening in, and they couldn't believe Ekyt was saying that stuff! Until he appeared behind them.

"A little hitch in your scheme," Ekyt said calmly, holding up Sakura's headset.

"How did Sakura hitting on you not work?!" Naruto demanded.

Ekyt smiled, a little forlornly, under his mask. "Because she's out of my league. She has someone else in her sites. And she'll get him. If you want an explanation, I'll tell you: I'm not coming back. I was wronged. Without my team, I can't go any farther. If I had made chunin, there wouldn't be a problem. But now, I'd be a genin forever. And I can't learn any more as a genin. D-ranks can't teach me anything else. I've found a job, and as long as Tsunade and Ebisu are the administration, I won't be promoted. Tsunade turned her back on me, and Ebisu is an asshole. I almost hope I crippled that prick." Ekyt threw the headset on the ground.

"Nice try. But I'm not coming back. I'd only get screwed again..."

"We have to convince him otherwise...but how?" Kakashi was thinking out loud. Sakura and Naruto were blank, too.

NEXT ISSUE: INOXASUKE, and KIMIMAROXTEMARI Updates! Plus, Team 7 meets their new member, and Ekyt meets the sickly adopted son of the Akakomadori family! Don't miss it!

15 - A Village Divided

Katsuyori looked out the window, trying to control his breathing. It wasn't working, it never did. But he didn't want to freak out, not just yet. He flinched at his 'father's' touch, even the simple gesture of ruffling the boy's hair was enough to put him on edge. Without interest, he looked back out the window.

So this is Konoha, huh? What does it matter where I am...I'm still the freak. 'You'll make friends here, honey', 'you'll like Konoha, sweetheart', it's all pointless. They might be my family now, but they mean nothing to me. I feel bad, Aki...I mean, 'mom' really tries...but 'dad' doesn't want me...I don't want myself. I'm broken. And no one knows what's wrong, even the best medic-nin's in the Mist village couldn't figure it out. Well, I'm here now, might as well pretend I give a damn...

Katsuyori saw his reflection again. One eye was black, one was gray. His right eye was the gray one, the 'special' one. Never in Katsuyori's life did 'special' mean 'good'. It always meant 'different'. Or 'freak', as the others called him. His eye was sightless, had been since birth. No one looked him in the eyes twice. If they DID look him in the eyes at all, it was a brief, abbreviated glance, then they looked away as quickly as they could. The rest of his appearance was normal. He wore a black shirt, decorated with red spirals. The collar fit around his neck perfectly, neither baggy nor choking him. His pants were the puffy "Bushī" (Son of a samurai) styled pants. Another reason they called him a freak. Katsuyori tossed his black hair out of his eyes, resolving to trim them. He always handled it himself. His bangs were too long, and they covered his good eye. He let the other side grow, to cover his gray eye. (NOTE: Can anyone name the manga that Katsuyori's eye condition is based on?)

Now it was time to find the bar and restaurant his new family owned. He thanked the carriage driver and dropped money into the man's outstretched palm. The man had been nice enough, so Katsuyori had tipped him a little more than he would have. It was his money, he could do with it what he wanted. Being a kind boy at heart, Katsuyori liked to brighten other people's days, even though his life never seemed to brighten itself.

After a few minutes of searching, Katsuyori found the bar/restaurant. Inside, he saw his 'mother', Aki, talking with a guy that Katsuyori pegged as 'different'. That did NOT mean, however, that he got his hopes up to 'make a new friend' out of the guy. Closing his bad eye, he read the kanji on the boy's headband: 'Dragon'. **Dragon, huh? I wonder what the deal is with that?**

Ekyt heard the sound of someone coming in. They weren't trying to disguise their footsteps or movements, so he didn't react as if it were a threat. Aki smiled.

"Katsuyori, welcome home!" she said enthusiastically, opening her arms for a hug. The boy looked dispassionately at the gesture, but stepped into the embrace, so as not to hurt her feelings.

Aki tried not to cry at the boy's hesitation. **He's more open with me than anyone else. That's not**

saying much, but still...a hug is a hard gesture for him...Katsuyori... Aki let go and stood up, putting a hand on the shoulder of the boy next to her.

“This is Ekyt Kaguya, Katsuyori. He works here, and he has something interesting to tell you. Why don’t the two of you take off for a little while, have a chat? I’m sure nothing will happen in an hour’s time.”

Katsuyori saw the ‘Dragon’ kid nod. He had the boy pegged as close to his own age, although when he spoke, he sounded a little older. More haggard, jaded maybe. Like he was tired after a battle, maybe even one fought in his mind. Katsuyori was a good judge of character and the traits that went with that character.

“Katsuyori, is it? Please, come with me,” Ekyt spoke as friendly as he could, although he guess his hoarse whisper didn’t help his case.

Katsuyori followed the older boy silently, as the guy explained the town.

“It’s a nice place. But I won’t give you a speech, you probably don’t want one of those. I’m sure you’ve heard it all,” Ekyt said dismissively. He could sense Katsuyori warming to him a little bit. He continued once they had reached Lone Pine Hill.

“Katsuyori, let me ask you something, if you don’t mind. Do you ever feel...different? Like you don’t belong. Something’s wrong, but you just can’t figure out what?” Ekyt spoke calmly and quietly, as if he knew something, and understood.

To his surprise, Katsuyori found he had no problem opening up to this guy. **He’s not a threat. Somehow, I can just tell. He’s not asking to be an @\$\$, not like everyone else. He knows something...**

Aloud, Katsuyori replied with “Yeah. All the time. I mean, not just my eye. I breathe weird, and my heart races. Sometimes I can’t eat...or sleep, even.”

Ekyt nodded. “You know, you sound a lot like me. Even the eye part. A couple years ago, I took a shuriken in the eye...for my team, before we disbanded. The girl who I saved hates my guts now, but that’s alright. I was blind in that eye for a couple years, before I got it fixed. But I can tell, that’s not what’s bothering you. And I can tell you what is, and I can understand it. You’ve got anxiety problems, Katsuyori. I know...I’ve got them, too.”

Katsuyori narrowed his eyes. “What? You have them? How can you even be talking to me then?” **He’s lying! He can’t have anxiety problems, or whatever he said! How could he be here, talking to me?!**

Ekyt smiled under his mask. “You’re talking back. You don’t judge me a threat, the same way I don’t judge you a threat.”

Katsuyori admitted he had a point. “Yeah. But, it’s still bothering me. Isn’t it bothering you?”

“Sure. Almost all the time. But, there are ways to lessen this anxiety. And I think I can help you. If you

want the help, I mean. I'm not here to force anything down your throat. Only to offer my support. We're not so different. Maybe even less than you think. If I can ask...your name. Where did it come from?"

Katsuyori looked away. "A samurai. My father was a samurai. I was named after his Lord's son. We were the same age. He died in battle. I only survived because my mother ran with me. It was a ninja that killed him..."

Ekyt nodded. "You should know, I AM a Ninja...but the interesting part...I'm a samurai, too. And the Lord you speak of, I've heard of him, and his son. I have never served a clan...but, that's enough about me, I'm sure you're"

Katsuyori suddenly leaned forward. He was bowing.

"Teach me. To be a samurai. My 'parents', they don't trust anyone. If they trust you, so do I. Please, teach me. I want to follow Bushido, the way my REAL father did...I owe him that. He died, protecting me. Someday, I'll fight my way to his grave and pay his respect. Those bastards beheaded him...they took his sword. It should belong to me! Please, teach me Bushido!"

Ekyt was surprised that the young man was so fervent. "I will, Katsuyori. But, understand, it will be difficult. Not the content, not for the son of a Bushi, but the people...they stopped giving me looks because I became a ninja, and I earned my place. I don't know how they'll treat you..."

Katsuyori bowed lower. "I don't care. I'm already a freak to them. I will NEVER become a ninja. I will never adopt their ways. I might live amongst them, and maybe even accept some, but I can never be one. My father wouldn't have wanted it, and I don't want it either!"

Ekyt offered Katsuyori a hand up. "You don't have to beg, Katsuyori. We're equals. I'll teach you what I know. But, right now, we'd better get back. Aki'll be worried sick about you."

Katsuyori shrugged. "She worries all the time. But you've got a job, so if you have to get back...I'd rather explore."

Ekyt nodded. He pulled out a small scroll and wrote on it rapidly. Then, he pricked his thumbs open, whipped out two scrolls, and (in the coolest display Katsuyori had ever seen), bashed his palms onto the ground.

"Twin Summoning Jutsu!" he called. POOF! POOF!

Oh Ekyt's shoulder was his Chinese Water Dragon, Umisu. He closed one beady eye in a wink of greeting to his summoner, then leapt over to Katsuyori's shoulder. At Ekyt's feet was his dog, Holly, a Keeshonden with an attitude.

"Kid, what do you want? And who's the new guy?" Holly drawled, sniffing around Katsuyori's legs.

"That's Katsuyori," Ekyt said absently. "Now, Holly, I need you to stay with Katsuyori. Take him to 'that' store, with this scroll. Give it to the owner, he'll understand. Stay with Katsuyori. If there's a problem, Umisu, you come find me."

There were no problems. Katsuyori took to his training like a duck to water, until fate stepped in the way. Tsunade had looked up Katsuyori upon finding out Ekyt was training him, and saw that he had no family. That meant that he wasn't a citizen. That meant Katsuyori was in the crosshairs.

Ekyt decked one of the chunin sent by Tsunade. The man had grabbed Katsuyori and tried to take him away. Ekyt, of course, protested, first with his voice, then with his fists.

"I SAID he stays here. If you touch him again, you'll never walk again..."

"I have my orders! Please, don't make this difficult. The adoption process was never completed, he has to go back to the Mist Village!" The chunin, someone Ekyt didn't know, and therefore didn't trust, yelled.

"They'll kill him!" Ekyt protested.

"That's not our concern!" the chunin replied.

"Letting someone else die...and sending them there...that's not a concern to you?! Screw you, you're not touching the kid. If you do, I'll snap you in half." Ekyt didn't like this, and had a feeling he was going to have to make good on his word. Sure enough, the chunin pulled out a knife. Ryouko followed suit with his dagger, noting that it was two on one.

"Katsuyori...not all Shinobi are pricks, like these two. Hang tight back there. If you've never seen a Shinobi fight, you're in for a treat, it's a real site the first time you see one!" Ekyt took out what looked like a cigarette. The truth was that it was a chakra enhancer. It acted like a ration pill. Ekyt never COULD swallow pills, so Lady Tsunade had developed these for his (and Asuma's) use.

"Two on one...let's fix that. Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Ekyt produced a clone, wielding a dagger.

"Don't make this hard, Ekyt. We're just following orders, okay? Just let the kid go. If we have to kill you, we will! Huh?"

Ekyt and his clone were standing behind the two chunin, daggers at their necks. "Game over. Here, give this to Lady Fifth, so she understands you at least tried. Even if you couldn't get the job done." Ekyt stuffed a small scroll into each of the shocked chunin's hands.

"Now get the hell out of here before I make you regret it." Ekyt still held the daggers at the backs of their necks, until they used the body flicker jutsu to disappear, presumably to see Lady Tsunade.

"Aren't you going to get in trouble?" Katsuyori wanted to know. He also wanted to know how Ekyt had made two of himself just come out of nowhere like that.

"Probably. But I'm ALWAYS in trouble with the administration. Now, as I recall, we were heading back to the bar. I need a cup of rice brew after that." Ekyt grinned, extinguishing his chakra cigarette, putting it back in his tool pouch for use later.

Katsuyori was rapidly warming to his new friend. **He's alright...for a ninja. For a samurai...he reminds me of my father. If only he had backed down, he wouldn't have been murdered...**

When they got back to the Akakomadori bar, Ekyt found Tsunade and Team 7 waiting for him.

"Oh shoot," he muttered, sticking the chakra cigarette back in his mouth. "Katsuyori, this time, they'll try to take me down. If they do, you can fight, or you can run. But I wouldn't go back to your family. Take my dog and my dragon and hide somewhere. In fact, go with my team. Holly can find them."

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"Ekyt, what were you thinking, attacking my two chunin?" Tsunade asked in exasperation.

"I was thinking they could go to hell for carrying out a stupid order like that," Ekyt snarled. Behind him, Katsuyori was wide-eyed.

"Ekyt, you can't fight it. She's right," Yamato produced an arrest warrant. Ekyt pressed his chakra cigarette to it and let it burn.

"Don't do this, Ekyt-kun, is it really worth it?!" Sakura tried to talk some sense into him.

"It is. Letting an innocent boy die is not something I'll ever let happen on my watch."

"Damn it, be reasonable! We've got orders to kill you!" Naruto shouted. Everyone froze. Ekyt narrowed his eyes, and deepened his stance.

"Katsuyori, go! Hurry!" Ekyt urged. "I'll handle this." Katsuyori took off running, Holly leading the way.

"If you've got orders to kill me, then go ahead and try. If I've saved the boy's life, I've done my job. But, my request- Kakashi-sensei, you be the one to kill me. I've never sparred you, and never faced your Sharingan..."

Sasuke and Ino were suddenly behind Ekyt. Unceremoniously, Sasuke stabbed Ryouko in the back, evading his vitals, but dropping him. Before he could be grabbed, Ekyt rolled to his feet, but coughed up blood.

"Backstabber...perfect moniker for you," Ekyt muttered to Sasuke, holding his wound closed. Things looked grim. But they got worse. Temari and Kimimaro showed up, holding Katsuyori.

"Sorry Ekyt. We had no choice," Temari said apologetically. Ekyt let his head drop.

"So, this is how it ends, huh? Fine. If I have to go out fighting to protect him, I will." Ekyt exhaled some smoke; it was actually impure energy that the chakra cigarette removed from his body; same as a ration pill.

"I'm sorry it's come to this, Ekyt. But, we all have to do what we believe is right." Kakashi reached for his headband, the Sharingan revealed. Ekyt would have been lying if he said he wasn't worried. But instantly, Kakashi was behind him, a kunai at Ekyt's neck.

"Damn it. I wasn't good enough...I...couldn't help. Put the kunai away, Kakashi-sensei. You took my will to fight. And that was all I had left...sending a boy to his death...you should be ashamed, all of you."

Then Ekyt saw Aki's pleading face. He lowered his gaze once more. Stepping away from everyone, Ekyt raised a kunai.

"I'm not going to attack..." Ekyt flipped the kunai to a reverse grip. Before anyone could stop him, he stabbed himself in the stomach.

"OH MY GOD!" Sakura shouted, rushing forward. But when she tried to stop the bleeding, her hands didn't have blood on them. They had ink on them.

"Damn you, Sai! How could you help him?!" Tsunade shouted. She had spotted Sai, Ekyt, and Katsuyori sitting on a rooftop across the street.

"Ekyt-kun is right. Life is a precious thing," Sai responded. Then he, Ekyt, and Katsuyori (being carried by Ekyt) leapt off.

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"Damn it! I'll get them! Go after them!" Tsunade ordered. But Team Kakashi didn't move.

"Grandma Tsunade...take me off this mission..." Naruto began. It was the first time Naruto was going to give up. His morals came first. It's a shame that not everyone thinks that way.

16 - A Desperate Manuever

“Damn it! Yamato, Sakura, you two I can order! Go! With you two, I don’t have to worry about having corpses on my hands.” **I’m so sorry I made that bet...I need Ekyt back. But I can’t apologize, it would make me look weak as a Hokage. I’ve got to catch him. He’s doing the right thing, and I know it...that’s what makes this so hard.**

“Right!” Sakura and Yamato chased after Sai, Katsuyori, and Ekyt.

“How could you, Grandma?! First you bet AGAINST him, THEN you try to punish him, and you don’t even TOUCH the closet perv that caused this whole mess! I wish Old Man Third had never died! He was a great Hokage, he NEVER would have let this spiral out of control like you!” Naruto had swung an accusatory finger at Tsunade, and was shouting.

“Sasuke, Ino, go- What?!” Temari and Kimimaro squared off with Sasuke and Ino.

“You know what, Naruto? You’ve got a big mouth, but you made a good point. Ekyt never told us all this. Probably to protect the Hokage. Well, thanks for the heads up. You, the brooder and the anorexic blonde- you try to leave, you go through both of us!” Temari declared.

“Shizune! Time to get involved!” Tsunade shouted to her aid. But Shizune shook her head.

“No! You’re wrong! Hunting down three innocent boys is wrong! I’ll have no part of this, Lady Tsunade!” Shizune stepped to Naruto’s side. “Naruto’s right! He’s never done ANYTHING to hurt the Leaf Village! You’re driving away your most loyal Shinobi! This has to end!”

Kakashi was silent on the matter. But which way he was going to go on this was debatable. His comrades, his village, or his morals? One would be compromised, no matter what choice he made.

--

“Thanks for the help, Sai.”

Ekyt, Sai, and Katsuyori were hidden in, of all places, the Forest of Death. They had hunkered down under a giant tree root that was raised up. (As seen in the Chunin Exams in Naruto, where Sakura protects Naruto and Sasuke)

“I’m curious, though...” Ekyt muttered, cooking food as rapidly as he could, not wanting a fire to attract attention.

“Oh? About what?” Sai wondered. Katsuyori smiled; if HE was weird, then these two were something beyond weird.

“About why you’d help Katsuyori and I, to be honest. I’m thankful, and I trust you, but what made you

decide?" Ekyt wanted to know, handing out the fish he had caught.

"It's simple. Look at this file," Sai's smile seemed genuine. Ekyt took the file Sai was holding out to him, and noticed that it was about ANBU. It had Sai and Ekyt listed as squad mates, just before Ekyt's unceremonious fight with Tsunade.

"Squadmates, huh? It's a shame that never happened. It would have been "Bunbu Itchi"," Ekyt smirked.

"Huh? Wait, I know what that means! 'Pen and Sword in accord'! Why would that apply to the two of you?" Katsuyori wanted to know.

"Oh, that's right, it's a samurai term, of course you'd know. See, I do sword work, and Sai fights with his pen and brushes." Ekyt explains. It was a lousy explanation to someone who hadn't seen Sai's jutsu before.

"How do you fight with a pen?!" Katsuyori couldn't help but ask.

"Like this." Sai made a fast drawing. "Great Beast Animation Jutsu!" The lion he had drawn had sprang off the page and to life. It sat next to Katsuyori, whose eyes were about to pop out of his head from shock. **So this is how Ninja's fight? It reminds me of the Mist Village...I should tell Ekyt...**

"Hey, Ekyt...You should know...Sorry I didn't say right away...but..." Katsuyori held up a Mist Village Hitai-ate!

"You're a Mist Ninja?!" Ekyt exclaimed.

"Yeah...I'm a genin. But I don't know much...after my father got killed, I quit school. That's why the Mist tormented my family."

Ekyt and Sai were silent. Gradually, Ekyt began to understand.

"If you're a Mist Ninja...that's why they're hunting you, to return you...I get it. Well, there's only one thing to do..."

Katsuyori gulped. But he needn't have worried.

"Katsuyori, ninjutsu can assist your sword work. As I recall, the Seven Ninja swordsmen came from the Mist. I hate to say this...but to survive, you may HAVE to use any jutsu you know. I know you swore not too...because of your father...but I think he'd rather you were alive and well, and trying to carry on his name, than dead with all the morals in the world. It's not your time to die for your beliefs. Sounds funny coming from me, but sometimes, you've got to bend your morals."

"Ekyt-kun!" Sai pointed with two fingers. Ekyt looked and listened, but didn't hear anything.

"Sai, your mice, can you send them out there? If we know who we're facing..."

At that moment, Wood shot up from the ground. Sai grabbed Katsuyori and leapt up and away.

“Yamato...Sai, please, take Katsuyori and go! This is my fight...don't let them take Katsuyori, he'll be killed!” Ryouko pulled his mask down enough to get the chakra cigarette in, taking up a defensive guard.

“I will, Ekyt-kun!” Sai and Katsuyori took off into the distance.

--

Yamato's wood tried to snare Ekyt's ankle. Ekyt cut the wood with a chakra scalpel. He knew the odds were against him; Yamato was a jonin of the highest caliber. Talented or not, Ekyt was in trouble. He resigned himself to the fact that he may lose the fight, and tried to buy time.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu! Dragon's Ember Jutsu!” Ekyt shouted, taking out the wood as quick as it came. There was no point in stealth anymore; Yamato had probably already reported where Ekyt was. The smoke wouldn't matter now.

Yamato showed himself, and landed in front of Ekyt.

“I'm very sorry it's come to this, Ekyt. But we have no choice. That boy is a missing-nin from Kirigakure. We have to return him.” Yamato looked genuinely sorry.

“He's gone. If you want him, you'll have to take me down. One thing, Yamato-sensei, and just be honest- how many others are with you?” Ekyt asked quietly.

“Just one. If it makes you feel better, all of Team Kakashi quit the mission, except myself...and Sakura...we both answer to Lady Tsunade directly, we don't have a choice.

“You're only doing your duty; the same as I'm doing mine. I don't answer to the Hidden Leaf anymore; I wish I did. But I can't, Yamato-sensei. After being betrayed like that...all I can do is try to make things right for myself. And I'm going to start by protecting that boy. He's done nothing wrong. It's not his fault. Just like it wasn't my fault, losing that match...Should I be so bitter, Yamato-sensei?” Ekyt mused.

Yamato looked down. “You deserve better, I won't deny it. But you can't fight the system like this. You've got to get back on the horse that threw you off...You can't leave your life behind...Even if I would have done the same thing. Tsunade-sama realized she made a mistake, but she can't apologize, it would make her look weak. Or so she believes.”

“She would look HUMAN, just like the rest of us! HYAH!” Ekyt cut a vine that was snaking around his leg. “Looks like our conversation is over, then.”

“It is...but, at least, talk to Sakura...”

“Until she gets here, we fight. You didn't come to talk me down, or you wouldn't be trying so hard with this damn wood!” Ekyt snapped another attack in half.

“Wood Prison Jutsu!” Yamato shouted. Wood sprang up all around Ekyt.

“Dragon’s Immortal Circle!” Ekyt burst through the wood with his fire attack, and aimed for Yamato. Yamato used a “Wood Pillar” jutsu to create a blockade of wood. Ekyt dodged around the pillars, but the fire in his hand had gone out. Instead, he opted for a genjutsu. After so much practice, he could use his specialty, the Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique, without handsigns.

“Release!” Yamato said aloud, just in time to block Ekyt’s dynamic entry. Ekyt had to scurry away, as the wood began to chase him. He ran up a tree, then bounded off, tossing exploding tags on the wood as he went down. He hit the ground, and saw Sakura.

“Remote Detonation Jutsu!” Ekyt detonated the tags, ruining the wood.

Right after Sakura came Kakashi. But Kakashi had his headband raised. Ekyt swore to himself.

shoot, this isn’t good! I can’t match Kakashi with that Sharingan!

But Kakashi faced Yamato. “I can’t let my comrades die, Yamato. Ekyt is one of them, and he’s right. Your opponent is me!”

Ekyt couldn’t believe it. “Kakashi-sensei...thank you. I owe you...”

“Never mind. Just handle the other enemy!” Kakashi called, his Sharingan eye raised.

--

“Sakura...” Ekyt didn’t want to face her. But it didn’t look like there was a choice in the matter.

“Ekyt-kun...come here.” Sakura opened her arms, showing she wasn’t going to attack. Cautiously, Ekyt approached her.

“You’re right, about this whole thing, you know. I’m sorry you’re going through this...” Sakura opened her arms and embraced Ekyt. Ekyt blushed, and was just opening his mouth to finally say the dreaded three words- I love you. But that wasn’t to come to pass today.

“Forgive me...” Sakura whispered. She jammed her chakra-laced hand into Ekyt’s stomach, in a strike that rendered the target unconscious. But Sakura had seen the look of sadness in Ekyt’s eyes before he slumped onto her shoulder. She pushed it aside and put his unconscious body onto her shoulder.

“Captain Yamato!” Sakura shouted. Yamato and Kakashi, who had just clashed kunai, looked at her.

“Good job, Sakura. Kakashi-sempai, our fight is over. My problem ended the second he was apprehended. I hope you understand.”

“I do. Go on. You’ve got your prisoner. I’ll head back in a little bit...Let that be a lesson, Ekyt. You can’t always trust your friends not to betray you, or leave you...” Kakashi headed toward the memorial stone.

17 - Out of the Ordinary

“Excellent, Sakura! Apprehending an A-ranked criminal!” Tsunade stamped a scroll with her seal, and dropped it on her desk.

“C-criminal? Ekyt-kun?!” Sakura suddenly felt as though a sharp knife had lodged itself in her abdomen.

“Yes. He disobeyed my orders, fought my subordinates, and could have caused an international crisis. His apprehension means that the boy we’re after can’t be far behind.” Tsunade cupped her chin in her hands. Shizune left her side, to comfort Sakura.

“You’re wrong. I’m sorry I ever did what you said! Count me out from now on! I want nothing to do with you! How do I know you won’t turn on me next?!” Sakura wailed, tears in her eyes.

“Sakura, enough.”

Ekyt was tied up in the corner. He had gotten to his feet, but a thick coil of chain had been wrapped around his arms, and he had been blindfolded.

“You did what you had to do. Don’t sever such an important tie. I’ve accomplished my mission. Even if we aren’t comrades anymore...we’re still friends. And take my word as a friend- don’t just leave things like that.” Ekyt tried to smile. “Of course, we’re only friends if you WANT to be.”

“Listen to him, Sakura. He knows first-hand,” Tsunade supplied.

“And you, Lady Fifth...how many people are you going to drive away, before you’re ready to admit you made a mistake? Being human doesn’t make you weak. Legends have erred before...” Ekyt kept his voice calm, and that was what threw Tsunade off. He continued while she sputtered.

“Well, whatever my sentence is, I’ll live with it. Or, die with it. Tell me- am I facing execution?”

“What?! No, jail time, but not execution!” Tsunade couldn’t believe he asked that.

“Then I’m facing execution, because if you lock me up, I’ll kill myself. But, why wait? You could just as easily kill me...or order it. You’d better decide quickly...” Ekyt felt with his hands for the window frame. Once he found it, he sat on it. If he had been bound with rope, he could have escaped. But chain? All but impossible without help. The blindfold, though, Ekyt could get rid of. If he did that, then he could run for it.

“Don’t jump!” Sakura protested. Ekyt caught his blindfold on the window frame, prying it off.

“Oh, I’m jumping!” Ekyt leapt down to the ground below, and hit it running full speed.

“Damn that kid! Uh...I wish he was back, pulling escapes against Orochimaru, instead of me!” Tsunade

declared. "Hayate! Go get him, please."

Hayate looked Tsunade in the eyes. "(koff) I can't. I knew him before you. He's like (koff) my little brother."

This time, Tsunade just sighed. She got up herself and ran from the room.

Ekyt...I'm sorry! I never knew how much hell you could cause! And I want you back on my side! If Tsunade could just say that out loud her problems would be solved.

--

Sai and Katsuyori were hidden in a strange sewer-like system.

"Where are we, Sai-san?" Katsuyori asked.

"I used to live here. My brother and I. But no one comes here anymore, and my brother is dead." Sai smiled, but it was the fake one. Katsuyori knew it was fake, but he had also picked up that Sai was a different type of person.

"Thank you for saving me. I hope Ekyt is okay..." Katsuyori wondered if he had inadvertently sent his best friend to his death.

"Ekyt-kun will be fine. He's seen tougher than this. Although, his emotions may be a problem..."

--

Ekyt ran down the street, finally ducking into Ichiraku.

"Ekyt? What the hell is going on? Tsunade was here, looking for you, and she's as upset as I've ever seen her!" Teuchi told Ekyt.

"Teuchi, there's no time. Can you hide me, or find a locksmith? I need to get out of these damn chains! They've sentenced an innocent boy to death, and I can't Tsunade get him!"

Teuchi's daughter, Ayame, was one of the kindest (And nicest looking) girls in the village. She immediately sympathized with Ekyt.

"Come on, back here! Hurry! Daddy, I'll go find the locksmith! Ekyt, you stay hidden, okay?"

"Thank you, Ayame. It really means a lot." Ekyt bowed his thanks, and ducked into the back store room. Teuchi followed him.

"Here, hide up there!" Teuchi slid a panel on the ceiling back; normally, it was used to fix the venting system, but right now it was the ideal hiding spot. Ekyt jumped up and slithered his way inside. Teuchi replaced the panel, leaving Ekyt in the dark, but safe, for the moment.

--

Ayame returned with the locksmith.

"Remember, you can't tell ANYONE about this," Ayame reminded him.

"Don't worry, Ayame, I won't say a word." The locksmith promised. Ayame helped Ekyt down from the ceiling. The locksmith looked at the lock, measured it, then took up a chisel.

"This oughta do it..." BANG! The lock clattered to the floor.

"Thank you! Here you are!" Ekyt handed over WAY more Ryo than was necessary, but it was part bribe.

"You didn't see me, right?" Ekyt asked the man, who counted the money.

"Hell, you don't exist for this kind of bread!"

"Glad to hear it," Ekyt said with a smirk. Next, he bowed to Ayame. "Thank you so much. You and your father have done so much for me. I left a 'thanks' near the flour. Please thank your father for me, I've got to go!"

"Good luck, Ekyt-san!" Ayame kissed Ekyt on the cheek. He blushed, but then ducked out the back door. Ayame smiled after him.

(giggle) That boy...Now he's playing 'criminal'. Well, I guess he IS one now. Wonder if he can pull off the roguish grin that makes those bad boys so attractive?

--

Ekyt ran down the street, ducking behind trees and trash cans whenever someone he didn't know or trust walked by. Much to his dismay, Ekyt felt a kunai around his neck. Then snakes wound around him, binding his arms to the side.

"Well, our little fugitive! You know, I REALLY hate lawbreakers..." Anko made a small cut on Ekyt's cheek with her kunai. She lapped up the blood, her tongue grazing Ekyt's cheek, like she was some vampire.

"Anko-sensei, believe me, I do, too. But I hate sending people to their deaths even more. If you turn me in, a little boy may pay the price with his life."

Anko dragged Ekyt into the shadows of a building, out of the public eye.

"So, it's life or death for that kid, huh? No one told me. Well, I can't fault you for trying to protect him. You got that cut shaving, understand?" Anko held Ekyt in place.

"Right. Shaving," Ekyt repeated. "What else do you want?" Ekyt resigned himself to the fact he was

going to owe Anko something.

“You and me, once your name is cleared. All I can eat dumplings, your treat.”

“It’s a deal,” Ekyt said hurriedly. Anko let go.

“Alright, for that price, I didn’t see you just now. You’d better watch it, a lot of the jonin are on alert for you. You’d better be alive for me to cash in on my payment...” **Damn, I’m such a soft touch! It’s a wonder I’m single!**

--

“Don’t move!”

“This just isn’t my day!” Ekyt sighed, putting his hands up. God only knew what weapon Tenten had to the back of his neck right now.

“You found him very quickly, Neji!” came Lee’s voice.

“My Byakugan is a sure thing. There is no room for error when dealing with a class-A criminal.” Neji’s smug voice greeted Ekyt’s ears next.

“On your knees, Ekyt! I can’t believe you’d do something like this!” Tenten ordered/exclaimed.

“I did it to save a boy’s life. The boy from the Mist village...he’s set to be deported, and then executed. I couldn’t let that happen. Do what you need to me...” Ekyt gave up.

“Turn around!” Tenten ordered. “We’re not heartless, you know. I figured you had a reason. I’ve heard of the boy...the poor family is hysterical...” Tenten lowered her weapon regretfully.

“Just hurry up and go.” Tenten looked to the side. Lee turned away. Neji hesitated, but turned his back as well.

“Thank you...You saved a life today. Maybe two. Because I’ll slit my own throat if I’m put in a jail cell...” Ekyt took off at a run. That was when he felt something on his leg. A slug?

Damn...Tsunade will be coming...I’ve got to ditch this slimy tattle-tale! Ekyt looked around, seeing the dumpling shop. He ran toward it, opening the back door. A big bag of salt...perfect.

Now I’m stealing...I’m screwed either way. I’d rather save the kid...gotta do this...and become everything I despise... Ekyt tore open the bag of salt with his teeth, as all his weapons had been taken. Ekyt grabbed the slug and stuffed it into the pile of salt on the floor. It started to shrivel, and hopefully, Tsunade’s ‘radar’ shriveled with it.

--

Hiding in the sewer, Ekyt pondered what to do. **Can’t go to the kid...I might be leading Tsunade right**

to them, if that damn slug put a scent on me...I need a change of clothes...a disguise...and a transformation. But fresh clothes first, to lose that slug's scent.

Ekyt snuck into the last place anyone would look- Naruto's apartment. On his way up, he wondered who to transform into. Then it hit him.

Those chains...they must have sapped my chakra! Leave it to the Queen of slugs and elixirs to do that...can't believe I didn't notice until now...

Ekyt slipped in the window. He found Naruto sitting on his bed, staring at him.

"Naruto? Oh, damn!" Ekyt made to leap out the window, but found Shadow Clones blocking him.

"Ekyt, relax! I'm not going to turn you in. I quit the mission, believe it! Why are you here?"

"Naruto, this is going to sound strange, and make me a real criminal, but I was going to steal a set of your clothes. We're almost the same height...Tsunade bugged me before I left, and that stupid slug left a scent on my old clothes."

Naruto rummaged around in his drawers, finding a clean pair of orange pants, a black shirt, and an orange and black jacket. Finally, he tossed a pair of sandals to Ekyt.

"I've got an idea! Transform into me, and I'll transform into the Pervy Sage!" Naruto declared. "It's foolproof, 'tabeyo!"

Ekyt nodded. "Transform!" Ekyt became Naruto.

"Don't forget to talk like Master Jiraiya. And I'll talk like you. Thanks again, Naruto! I owe you, big time!"

--

Ekyt/Naruto walked outside. To his surprise, he saw Sakura outside the door.

"Hey, Sakura-chan!" Ekyt remembered he LOOKED like Naruto. For a moment, he almost told Sakura who he really was, but something held him back. He couldn't trust her anymore.

"Naruto...I...I need to tell you something. I did something really bad. I tricked Ekyt, and captured him. I didn't know what he was doing. Now I don't think I can trust Lady Tsunade anymore, and I know Ekyt will probably never forgive me..." Sakura looked as sad as Ekyt had ever seen.

"Hey, it's not that bad! Ekyt'll know you didn't mean it, Believe it!" Ekyt/Naruto had a hard time playing Naruto's part. But at least it gave him a chance to boost Sakura's spirits.

Sakura smiled. "I envy you, Naruto. You've always got such optimism. I guess that's why I need to tell you...I think I really like you..."

This, of course, hit Ekyt like a kunai in the heart. **So, she's in love with Naruto. Naruto's still in there...what would Naruto do in a situation like this, to step out for a second? I know!**

"Sakura-chan...I...ohhh...oh, man, my stomach, it feels like it's gonna burst, 'tebayo! I'll be right back! Don't go anywhere!" Ekyt/Naruto ran into 'his' apartment

--Inside

"Naruto, you've got to go out there, as you! Here, I'LL be Master Jiraiya. Sakura's got to talk to you!" Ekyt couldn't say why, obviously, but he could have sworn Sakura was going to kiss him. If she was going to kiss him, he wanted her to KNOW who she was kissing.

"Okay! Here, um, the Pervy Sage dropped this, he heh, if you're going to play his part, you've gotta do it right!"

Naruto handed Ekyt a spyglass. Ekyt stared at it in exasperation, but didn't see an alternative. He would have to find Sai and Katsuyori as the 'Pervy Sage'.

--Outside

"Hehe, sorry. Bad milk or something," Naruto said sheepishly. "Now, where were we?"

Sakura looked away. "I said I really liked you, Naruto. After all the time we've spent together...I was hoping you still liked me..."

"Are you kidding?! You're only the hottest kunoichi around, dattebayo!" Naruto replied with his typical enthusiasm.

" (blush) Thanks, Naruto! Do you want to...to go eat together? At Ichiraku?"

"Hell yeah! Oh...wait...I think I'm broke... -_-'" But to Naruto's surprise, he found money in his pocket. **Thanks, pervy samurai!** Naruto knew full well that Ekyt had dropped the money in his pocket.

--

Ekyt walked down the street, making sure to take long looks at pretty women. He felt like an @\$@ doing in, but if he was going to play the 'Pervy Sage', he had to do it right. His chakra hadn't returned enough to perform another jutsu yet. There was to be a flaw in his plan, anyway, as it turned out.

"YOU!"

Ekyt couldn't believe this. NO ONE could have THIS much bad luck in such a short time. But it was happening.

"DAMN IT, JIRAIYA! I TOLD YOU TO CUT OUT THE PEEPING!" Tsunade came toward Ekyt, her fist cocked back.

"It's not 'peeping'! It's research!" Ekyt/Jiraiya responded quickly, then spoke TOO fast, before he could think. In that respect, it was something worthy of Jiraiya. "You reconsidered being in the starring role in my next book, Tsunade? You've still got the looks! He he he! I just need an eyeful, and I can write all night long!"

Tsunade's eyes turned white. Inside, Ekyt winced. BAM! A punch rocketed him away. Just because he LOOKED like Jiraiya, didn't mean that his real body didn't feel pain.

"Damn Perv! Wait...something's wrong...Release!" Tsunade had figured it out. It had been Ekyt there the whole time. Now that she saw him, there would be hell to pay.

"So...that's how you hid so long..." Tsunade mused.

Ekyt nodded. **I'm not ratting out everyone who helped me...if she wants to think I posed as Jiraiya for this long, let her think that.**

"Do you intend to arrest me?" Ekyt asked, resigned.

"I do. Do YOU intend to resist?" Tsunade replied.

"I do," Ekyt shot back.

"You fool! You can't beat a legend! Just give up, I don't want to have to hurt you!" Tsunade found she meant it, too.

"You're going to have to hurt me. I'm not giving up. And it was clever of you to neutralize my chakra with those chains, AND plant that tattle-tale slug on me. I've had a horrible time avoiding you for this long."

"Why are you wearing Naruto's clothes?" Tsunade demanded. Ekyt forgot he had been wearing them. Figuring he had already pissed away his morals, Ekyt looked Tsunade right in the eye and lied.

"I stole them. I broke into Naruto's apartment and stole the clothes, so I could lose the scent your slug left on me." Ekyt hated this; he was now everything he hated, and everything he fought against.

"Well, if you're not going to settle this peacefully, I have no choice but to use force!" Tsunade darted forward, smashing the ground. Ekyt leapt up and away just in time, as Tsunade's fist sent earth flying everywhere. Ekyt landed, and Tsunade began to throw punches. Ekyt parried punch after punch, moving backward. Out of the bottom of his eyes, Ekyt saw Tsunade's footwork change. Sure enough, as Ekyt kept moving backward, Tsunade side-kicked forward. All Ekyt could do was hit the dirt, then watch in amazement as Tsunade cut straight through a tree.

"If you're waiting for me to fight back, you're going to be waiting a long time! I've done enough wrong, hitting the Hokage is a charge I don't need," Ekyt told Tsunade, as she continued her attacks.

"Then you're going to lose! Doesn't that matter to you?!" Tsunade fired back.

“Sure it does. But, the more you’re mixing it up with me, the less you’re focusing on catching your REAL target. I’m sure you’ve figured out by now that I’m just wasting time for his getaway.”

“Why do you care so much? He’s just some kid! Death is part of the Shinobi life; I know better than anyone! I’ll give you credit for having a huge set, standing up to me. But if you keep getting in my way, I will remove that ‘set’. Get my drift?” Tsunade was really trying to stay calm. Removing Ekyt’s ‘manhood’ might soothe her anger, but ultimately accomplish nothing.

“I care because it’s the right thing to do. Lady Tsunade, if you send him to the Mist village, he dies. He’s like...me. He doesn’t fit in, but he tries his best to live his life. I’ve won over most of the village; he has almost no one in his corner. I can’t let you send him to his death. And I won’t. Even if it means fighting you...it’s the right thing to do, and that’s what the Leaf Village has always stood for!”

Tsunade darted forward and hit Ekyt in the face, sending him into a building, cracking the foundation. The building began to wobble, and then it fell. Ekyt had nowhere to go...

--

Sakura and Naruto, on their first date, saw the whole thing. They nodded to each other, and ran to help Ekyt.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Naruto’s clones broke away at the stone with the Rasengan. Sakura reared back and punched as hard as she could. They chipped away, but didn’t find Ekyt.

“You can stop...I made it away...” Ekyt told them both. Suddenly, he staggered slightly.

“From...behind? Poison...” Ekyt murmured, sinking to one knee. Tsunade held one last Senbon between her fingers.

“What the hell? Lady Hokage, have you lost it?!” Sakura knelt down next to Ekyt, pulled the senbon out, and began to use a healing jutsu. The poison was soon out of his body. It hadn’t done much damage. That’s when Naruto fell down, too. Senbon covered his back.

“Sakura...did any...hit you?”

Sakura was in tears now. Next to her, Ekyt pushed up, without saying a word.

“NOW you’ve pissed me off. Hurting a true friend...something isn’t right here...and I think I know what it is...and there’s only one way to find out...” Ekyt dashed straight at Tsunade.

“Striking Shadow Snakes!” Ekyt shouted. The snakes didn’t hit their target; Tsunade moved her neck away. But that was what Ekyt had planned on.

“Release!”

Slowly, Tsunade began to melt away. In her place...Orochimaru.

“Sakura...take Naruto and get out of here. Evacuate the village, and try to find Lady Tsunade.”

“What are you going to do?” Sakura asked in a hushed tone.

“I’m going to fight him.”

18 - Passing of Time

Orochimaru was at it again. Trying to take over the Leaf Village. Sarutobi watched sadly from a distance. He was in position to do anything. And Ekyt wasn't a pushover, either...

Regardless...the boy can't hope to match Orochimaru's level at such an age! His only ambition was to defend the Leaf...Perhaps there IS something I can do... Sarutobi took out ink, brush, and a fresh scroll. He wrote as quickly as he could, knowing his time was limited. Ekyt wouldn't last long.

--

"What do you have against the Hidden Leaf, Orochimaru? Hasn't your vendetta against us expired?!" Ekyt took up a low guard position. Orochimaru seemed amused at his opposition. The wind that always accompanied the arrival of such a vast chakra whooshed through, moving Orochimaru's oily black hair in front of his pale white face.

"To learn every jutsu in the world, and to strike down my enemies! THAT is my goal, it's no vendetta. But the Hidden Leaf is my most frequent opposition, I'd be foolish to let you go on living, interfering with my means, wouldn't I?" Orochimaru seemed to find his own words funny, because he began to chuckle.

"What's so damn funny to you, Orochimaru?" Ekyt snarled, narrowing his eyes, trying to formulate a plan. But Orochimaru was intimidating, and Ekyt was coming up empty. Stall for time was all he was getting in response to his thinking.

"I was just wondering...what are YOUR goals? Have you ambitions of your own?" Orochimaru questioned.

"No...I live in service to those who have accepted me. What path my life takes...why does it matter to you? You plan on killing me, don't you?!"

"Perhaps...Or perhaps I have another idea for you..." Orochimaru licked his lips. From there, he opened his mouth, and out came a snake. The snake opened it, and the beautiful blade, the Kusanagi, dropped into Orochimaru's hands.

"You could very easily wield this sword, Ekyt. The Grass Long Sword, or Kusanagi. I know more about you than you know...I also know you're unhappy here, no matter how much you profess your undying love for the Leaf..." Orochimaru licked his lips again.

"And what do you know about me?" Ekyt shot back, admitting to himself that this guy was scary as hell.

"I know your heritage...Kaguya...and I know something even YOU don't..." Orochimaru took up the Kusanagi, holding it in one hand to his side. The dangerous blade glinted in the sun.

“And what is that?”

Orochimaru’s smirk widened. “Inside you lays a dormant, but powerful kekkaigenkai. That of the Kaguya Clan. The rare ability to grow bones at will, and to use them as tools, or weapons...the same kekkaigenkai your...late...cousin Kimimaro possesses.”

Ekyt’s eyes widened involuntarily. “He...he died? The disease...the one even Lady Tsunade couldn’t cure...it claimed his life...after all this time...he finally died...”

“But you can make his death into a new life for yourself! I’ve long desired to possess that kekkaigenkai. And once you and I make a little deal, my power will be yours...” Orochimaru’s neck began to extend. Ekyt hadn’t moved.

Dead? And power? Like he did to Sasuke...Kimimaro...if you had just come, we could have cured you...

“Accept my cursed seal!” Orochimaru declared as his mouth clamped down of Ekyt’s neck. POOF! Substitution Jutsu!

“Striking Shadow Snakes!” Ekyt called. From the roof a nearby building, four snakes burst from Ekyt’s wrist, and snared Orochimaru around the waist.

“Now...Dance of the Sickle Moon!” Ekyt and two clones all drew their swords- then they moved! Impossibly fast, in an intricate pattern that no one could follow, all cutting and slicing. Ekyt himself leapt from the roof and drove his sword home, across Orochimaru’s neck. Ekyt found his sword stuck in a log. He gave it a fruitless tug, but it stayed firmly entrenched in it’s wooden prison.

“Now that was an impressive display for such a young boy!” Orochimaru laughed from behind Ekyt. Ekyt felt Orochimaru’s tongue winding it’s way around him. Seeing that it was a fruitless struggle, Ekyt stabbed again and again with a kunai. But Orochimaru’s tongue was like steel.

“That won’t do you any good. And since you wouldn’t accept my gift...I’ll just have to KILL the kekkaigenkai, if I can’t have it!”

“If anyone will destroy my clan’s legacy, I will do it by my own hand!” Ekyt growled, forcing two fingers into a half-tiger handsign. BOOM! An exploding tag detonated, burning Orochimaru’s tongue. In the split-second before the wave of heat and cinder hit him, Ekyt put his hands in front of his eyes.

--

Sarutobi finished his writing. He tied the scroll shut, wrote a name on the tag attached, and stowed the scroll in his sleeve. Sighing, Sarutobi removed his civilian robes, and donned his combat gear. It still fit, even though age had changed Sarutobi. Putting away his pipe, Sarutobi looked to the sky. He bowed his head, then charged out the door.

--

“An exploding tag? At such a close range it was likely to have killed you, you fool!” Orochimaru sucked his tongue back into his mouth.

“I don’t fear death, as you do, Orochimaru. My purpose is less selfish, and I’ve already fulfilled it if I’ve detained you so long!” Ekyt was burned slightly, but otherwise unharmed.

“FEAR death? I REVERE death! Often, I am it’s bringer! I’ve killed more Shinobi than you’ve ever seen! How does that make you feel?” Orochimaru was getting worked up. Ekyt noticed that, and while it was borderline suicidal, he knew hitting Orochimaru where it hurt- his ego- was just what needed to be done.

“I feel pity. For you, Orochimaru. You’ll never understand the real meaning of living is protecting, not killing. It’s GIVING your life, NOT taking away another’s life. I pity you because you’ve never been human enough to understand!” Ekyt moved toward Orochimaru, a Shadow Clone Jutsu accompanying him, but Orochimaru held up a hand.

“I’ll give you credit, I underestimated you. But you forget...I don’t travel alone, Dragon Boy!”

Ekyt had to leap backward as Kabuto sliced into the earth with a dangerously-glowing hand. Ekyt grimaced; Orochimaru was bad enough. But Kabuto, too? He looked like a nice, honest kid. That was seconds before you fell to the ground, dead from some jutsu meant to save lives, not end them. Kabuto had been compared to Kakashi more than once, and was by no means an easy one to defeat, let alone coupled with Orochimaru.

“Idiot disciple, he is not alone either!”

“Master Sarutobi!” Ekyt’s mouth dropped open. The old man had donned his combat gear.

“Ekyt, I heard what you said to Orochimaru. I never doubted you heard what I said, and this proves that you paid attention. Someday, you’ll be the pride of the Hidden Leaf... After this battle, go to my home. Leave Orochimaru to me! Focus on your opponent, Kabuto!”

--

“So, old man, you’ve decided to tempt fate against me again?! You old fool, Sarutobi-sensei! You couldn’t defeat me three years ago, and you’ve aged even more!” Orochimaru crowed.

“I won’t be fooling around this time, Orochimaru! I am no longer the Hokage of this village. I AM, however, this boy’s teacher! Ekyt is my last student, and while he does not possess your unique abilities, he’s a good soul, and a hard worker, and everything you are not! I am proud to call him ‘student’, even if it was an informal title! Now, my foolish apprentice, I will finish what I began three years ago!”

As Sarutobi ran forward with a grace defying his age, he made the forbidden set of handsigns, his face set in a grim determination. This time, he wouldn’t battle Orochimaru. He would end it, and right away.

“Reaper Death Seal!”

Orochimaru started to move, but found his arms trapped to his sides. **What?!** Orochimaru looked behind him. The Shadow Clone Ekyt had made was clinging to his arms. Silently, the clone stabbed Orochimaru in the leg with a kunai.

“Ahhh!” Sarutobi grabbed Orochimaru, as Ekyt’s Shadow Clone disappeared, courtesy of Ekyt’s own kunai. If his shadow clone held on, Ekyt’s soul would be sucked out, too. It was too late for Ekyt to stop Sarutobi, so he was going to help him.

“You feeble old man! Let go of me! Let go! I’ll kill you!” Orochimaru shouted. Moving two fingers, his Kusanagi moved, then soared through the air toward Sarutobi’s back.

“Striking Shadow Snakes!” Ekyt called desperately. The four snakes wrapped themselves around the Kusanagi and held it still. Ekyt let go of the snakes, which fell to the ground, binding the sword.

“Orochimaru, we will fight for eternity inside the stomach of the death god! This time, you entire soul comes with me!”

Shinigami, the death god, drew his sword. Sarutobi gave a mighty tug, and Orochimaru’s soul came out. Shinigami cut the two souls, and swallowed both.

“No! Damn you! Damn your idiot student! Sarutobi!” Orochimaru yelled and screamed, but his body fell to the ground, a seal appearing on his chest.

“The death of one...(cough)will prevent...the death of thousands...foolish disciple...” with that, the Third Hokage, Master Sarutobi, died, a smile on his face.

--

Clang! Tok!

Once more, Kabuto and Ekyt traded kunai swipes. Ekyt’s shoulder had been cut, but not severely. Kabuto’s hand had been hit, but healed instantly. Now, both combatants froze, their respective teachers dead. Was there a reason to continue fighting? By silent agreement, both broke away from the fight and dropped their guards to check their respective dead.

“Kabuto...” Ekyt couldn’t say anything. He had never had someone die right next to him in combat like that, let alone someone who had been so important to him. Kabuto tried to be himself, calm and collected, but it didn’t work for long. This was a shock to him, too.

Lord Orochimaru has been bested by an old man? Damn, he must have dropped his guard, even the Third Hokage shouldn’t have had a chance at Lord Orochimaru, not when you factor in the Third’s age, and Orochimaru’s overall knowledge. Sarutobi is supposed to know all the jutsu in the Hidden Leaf Village, but Lord Orochimaru knows jutsu from all over, and hasn’t aged in a long time...How could he have lost?

“So he managed to kill Lord Orochimaru? Well, that IS a surprise...Let’s put our differences aside for

now, Dragon Boy, and attend to our dead..." Kabuto suggested. He was strange that way- he could respect you, and be the most respectful 19 year old you knew. Then he would have you chopped into ribbons before you knew what hit you. But Ekyt was so numb at this point he didn't consider that.

"Yes..." Ekyt managed. He picked up Sarutobi's body, while Kabuto picked up Orochimaru's. They nodded to each other by way of saying goodbye (Kabuto and Ekyt have a mutual respect for each other's abilities), and leapt in different directions, each bearing the burden of a corpse.

--

The Leaf Village gathered around silently. On cue, a storm brewed over head. Ekyt was still holding the corpse, not believing that Master Sarutobi was really dead. Finally, Ekyt laid Sarutobi down gently. Tears mixed with the rain, as Ekyt's stoicism failed him.

Sakura appeared, and Lady Tsunade was right behind her.

"Dear God...what happened?" Tsunade breathed, seeing her sensei dead.

"He saved us...that's what happened..." Ekyt bowed his head, as did everyone else. It was a sad day for the Leaf Village. Losing a beloved leader, friend, and mentor, was never easy. For Ekyt, the added knowledge of his cousin's death hit him as well. It was a lot to take in. For the moment, even his criminal status was on the backburner. Tsunade hadn't said much about it. She and Ekyt had barely talked. Both were mourning the loss of their teacher. Even thirty plus years removed, they had both been blessed with having a genius for a teacher. A gentle man who deserved to live and die in his own time, rather than be ripped from reality the way he had.

The one thought Tsunade and Ekyt shared was the hope that Master Sarutobi, the Third Hokage, would rest in peace, with his final mission accomplished.

19 - The Desperate Escape: Ekyt's Rage Shows Through!

Ekyt walked to the casket, looked at it for a moment, then placed the white rose on it, as he had been told. He had taken his long black coat out of storage for the occasion. After a nod to Team Kakashi, Ekyt took his place, by himself, at the end of the line of Shinobi. It was there that he remembered Sarutobi's last order. Sarutobi had wanted Ekyt to go to his house...but why? Part of his will? Ekyt had never questioned the Third Hokage, and he was going to follow his last request, no matter what. His thoughts were interrupted by Lady Tsunade, who had put a hand on his shoulder.

"You should say something, since you were his student...at least, that's what his will says...go on..."

Ekyt gave her an unreadable look, but ventured up to the top of the platform, with an elder on either side of him. He didn't even feel any nerves as he tried to deliver his first eulogy. How could you sum up someone who had given as much as Master Sarutobi?

"Master Sarutobi gave us all a chance at life..." Ekyt began. There was no paper in front of him. He was speaking from the heart.

"If there's one thing I learned from him, it's just how precious life is. We take it for granted that we'll live another day, and that there won't be clouds, or rain, or death. But it's all unavoidable. Today is a dark day for our village in regards to losing Master Sarutobi, but the rays of light that shine through are reminders of what he taught us. Love for the Leaf, respect for life, and determination to defend all we hold dear...No matter what the cost..."

Everyone bowed their heads. Ekyt walked offstage, forcing himself not to shed a tear. Taking a kunai in the back would have been easier, and less painful.

--

Ekyt, tailed by Tsunade, and ten ANBU agents, walked to Sarutobi's home. Seeing the scroll sitting on the desk, along with a mix of other scrolls, Ekyt walked over. One scroll was addressed to him, and the second was a Last Will and Testament that entitled Ekyt to certain things, including all the scrolls on the desk.

"See that these are not taken from him...upon his incarceration." Tsunade ordered.

Ekyt froze up. He was still being arrested. This moment would stay with him for a long time. It hurt, being a 'criminal' in the eyes of someone he respected. Even if he couldn't bring himself to LIKE Tsunade, he respected her. But, how could she be so heartless? Hadn't Ekyt just help save the village?

"Right. Ekyt Kaguya, you are under arrest for the following: Evasion of arrest, two counts of treason, assaulting your superiors, bribing officers of the Hidden Leaf, and recklessly endangering your life, and the lives of others."

Ekyt didn't say a word as he was restrained with chain. When he was securely tied up, and ANBU

started to escort him away, he paused. The agent tugged on the chain. Ekyt tugged back by throwing his weight, knocking the ANBU agent into a wall.

“Just a moment...I’ve got one more thing to say...” Ekyt turned to face Tsunade. The ANBU agents raised their swords, in case of an attack.

“You have just pissed on everything the Third Hokage taught us, just so you can flex your muscles over some mindless hatred for me. I wish it had been I who had used that jutsu sometimes...my love for the Leaf Village...is all that keeps me anchored here...And you...you turned my friends against me, and now you’re taking away my freedom, even as I battled alongside Master Sarutobi, to buy ANBU time to FIND you. You have nothing left to take, except my life...”

“Why would you say that, in your position?!” an ANBU agent wanted to know. Ekyt didn’t recognize the voice. At this point, even if it WAS a friend, Ekyt would have just as soon punched the guy as looked at him.

“Because you have me down for two counts of treason...I wanted to earn the second one, which was bullshoo, until now. Let’s go, you were in such a damn rush to take me away before, weren’t you? Or did I just surprise you by being honest?” Ekyt nudged the agent nearest to him with his shoulder, then walked out the door on his own power, leaving Tsunade to think about what he had just said.

--

Kabuto met the shadowy figure in the appointed place. Kabuto, of course, knew who it was, and why he was here. He wasn’t FOND of that fact, but he knew it.

“Did you have trouble leaving...Sasuke-kun?” Kabuto asked kindly. He had to FORCE himself to be kind, though. Sasuke wasn’t his favorite person in the world.

“Stuff it, Kabuto. Where’s Orochimaru’s body?” Sasuke cut right to the chase.

“Such disrespect! It’s waiting for you in his chamber. It needs your cursed seal’s power to weaken the seal enough to allow Orochimaru to escape into his new host, who I’ve chosen according to his orders. We can begin whenever you’re ready...”

“I need to get back to my village, you dirt bastard blackmailer. You understand that your idiot master left me no choice? I’m glad Orochimaru died. And I hate to be the one to bring him back...but I have to do what I have to do. It’s always been that way for me. Just remember- I WILL get you for forcing me to do this someday...”

--

Ekyt refused food for two days straight. When a guard tried to physically insist that he eat, Ekyt had hit him hard enough knock him backwards out of the cell. The guard lay on the floor, missing a tooth that Ekyt had plucked out of his hand. Even with no one guarding the door, Ekyt just sat there, staring out the open door. Another guard shouted something at him, but Ekyt just ignored him, turning to face the other way. Each day, Hayate was trusted to bring Ekyt sake, for his heart. But no chakra cigarettes. Ekyt only

gave Hayate a low 'thank you' and a nod. He was allowed visitors, and even allowed to send his summons out, but he took advantage of neither option.

Even Team Kakashi visiting didn't warrant much of reaction. In fact, Ekyt was downright angry. He felt betrayed, and didn't know who to trust, now that Master Sarutobi was dead. After Naruto was nearly beheaded for trying TOO hard to get a reaction from Ekyt, Kakashi sat down across from Ekyt to talk with him. They muttered fast, in low tones, as if in another language. Kakashi apparently didn't get the answer he wanted, because he shook his head sadly, only patting Ekyt's head as he left. Sakura was too ashamed of her actions to say anything, so she left quietly with the others, chancing a backward glance at Ekyt.

Even darker days came one short day later. A guard demanded Ekyt surrender his mask.

"We can't have you hanging yourself with it," was the explanation. The guard was nice enough about it. But Ekyt looked up, darkness etched on his face.

"Then you'd better take my headband, too, because that will work just as well..." Ekyt's menacing reply gave the guard the hint that it was time to leave. He left empty-handed. Ekyt stared at the wall again, only vaguely noting he as alone again.

--

More days past, with Ekyt finally breaking a little bit and reading the scrolls Sarutobi left him. Days went faster with those, and Ekyt's white scroll soon expanded with notes. Then came the day that he formed his plan. Not to escape jail, but the Leaf Village. For how long, Ekyt didn't know. The idea came in the form of a scroll, this one telling a story about an ancient set of blades.

"The blind craftsmen agreed to forge the swords for the Shinobi of the Hidden...damn it, what's that word?" A smudge on the scroll hid the name of the Village from view. Undeterred, Ekyt read on. "The Shinobi, a medic, agreed to heal the craftsmen's eyes, in exchange for the blades. In the spirit of deceit, the Shinobi stole the blades and left the craftsman blinded. In retaliation, the blind swordsman cursed the swords, giving them a snake guardian, which judged the honesty of the sword's wielder..."

It was a prize Ekyt wanted. It was an excuse Ekyt needed. It was a purpose Ekyt craved. To find such an artifact would be incredible. It was a distraction Ekyt longed for. A welcome break from death.

--

Ekyt rolled the scroll up and put it away. He would study harder, under better light. Today, a week after he began his stay, Tsunade was to come and decide his fate. Ekyt refused to move, only staring at her from his sitting position on the floor. His bed lay untouched.

"It's been a week...how do you feel?" Tsunade asked, a quiet Shizune at her side. Tonton oinked worriedly while Shizune stroked her.

"Like I've been in jail for a week," Ekyt replied tartly, sarcasm oozing from every pore on his body.

"I see...well, I put you here to get an attitude adjustment from you. It seems it's working, maybe even too well...I'm moving you to house arrest..." Tsunade waited for a smile, a jump, ANYthing. Just some kind of reaction that told her she wasn't talking to a brick.

"Whatever. Sitting here, sitting home, no difference to me. Do I have a trial anytime soon? I'd love to tell my side of the story...pointless of course, since no one will listen..." Ekyt finally got up and walked to the door. He stood there, silently, waiting for Tsunade to move.

"Look, I brought a visitor for you!" Shizune broke the silence, pulling Sakura into view. Ekyt looked up coldly.

"Why did you bring a medic? I'm not injured." The sharpness of Ekyt's reply alone was enough to jar all who were present. "Am I free to go home? Or should I sit back down? Either way, I'm wasting time standing here, talking."

Tsunade stepped to the side and let her hand-picked ANBU guard take over. Ekyt walked away, the ANBU agent moving prompting him to move faster. Ekyt ignored him and continued to walk at his own pace.

"I've never seen him like that...Lady Tsunade, do you think something happened? I mean, even with Master Sarutobi's death..." Shizune was worried about the lack of emotion. Especially around Sakura, who Ekyt usually blushed around.

"More than any of us can understand, Shizune. Let's get back to work, we can talk there, no point in standing around an empty cell..."

--

Ekyt sat at his desk, looking at the scroll for clues. What village it came from, a signature, something!

"Hey. Hey, you, are you dead or what?"

Ekyt looked up briefly to glare at the ANBU agent. Ekyt had successfully ignored him all day, until now. He considered ignoring him again, but decided it would be better just to pacify him.

"Help yourself to any food or drink you want...just leave me alone, I'm busy." Normally, that would have sufficed. But today's guard was Yamato.

"Is your problem with me?" Yamato probed further. He had found Ekyt to be a great kid, and very professional. Something must have pissed him off pretty bad to warrant such a cold reaction.

"I have no problem, except you bothering me," Ekyt snapped at his former teammate/friend. He made sure to stare extra hard at his scroll, hoping to convey the message 'shut up' silently.

"If you feel like talking about what happened, I'll be happy to talk with you," Yamato offered.

"There's nothing to talk about. I did what I did, I'm not sorry, I never will be. As long as Katsuyori is

safe, my job is done.” Ekyt’s curt reply worried Yamato. But Yamato, in turn, worried Ekyt.

“Katsuyori...he was apprehended and returned to the Hidden Mist Village earlier today. Sai was found with him, and escorted to the Mist Village, to appease them. They threatened to attack and-”

“WHAT?!” Ekyt roared. He rolled up his scroll as fast as he could and ran for the door. Yamato blocked the way. Without hesitating, Ekyt punched Yamato and kept running. He pushed past villagers, and dodged Yamato’s wood attacks, until he hit the Hokage’s office. Genma and Hayate tried to corral him, but Ekyt, desperately, held a kunai to his own throat.

“I’ll do it. Don’t screw with me! I’ll slit my own throat, I’m not kidding! You can come, and protect the Hokage. I’m not here to hurt her. But don’t make me do anything we’ll ALL regret.”

--

BLAM!

Tsunade’s door flew open. An incensed Ekyt strode in, followed by the three jonin, all of whom who looked as though they were dealing with a ticking time bomb.

“What the hell is this?!” Tsunade demanded, standing up.

“You dog! You sent two innocent boys to their death! Do you realize that?! To their death! You miserable old slug!” Ekyt had never talked like this, not least of all to Tsunade.

“I’m here to tell you- I intended to save them- both of them. Right now,” Ekyt finished. He moved for the door.

“Oh, and if you send your flunkies after me, you’ll be finding my corpse!” he snarled over his shoulder. A jonin moved toward him; Ekyt moved the kunai closer to his neck.

“Don’t get yourself involved, Ekyt! You don’t need more trouble! I’m already one step away from-” Tsunade began, but was cut off by Ekyt.

“The hell with you!” Ekyt suddenly threw something to Sakura. While everyone watched it arch through the air, Ekyt jumped out the window, and from rooftop to rooftop.

“What is it, Sakura?”

“His headband...” Sakura uttered in shock. **Ekyt must be upset...he would never treat the headband like this...he must be desperate...I was wrong to help Lady Tsunade...** Sakura held the headband to her chest.

“Sakura, get your team and follow him. He’s bluffing, and he needs to be returned. He can’t go far without us finding him.”

“No! You’re wrong, Lady Tsunade! For once, I’m going to think for myself! I don’t know about my

team, but I DO know what I think! And I'm going to help Ekyt!"

Tsunade couldn't believe it. But she couldn't deal with Sakura right now, she had to get Kakashi and Naruto. Sasuke was missing, and his name was taboo.

"Yamato, take Kakashi and Naruto. Deliver this scroll to Ekyt. Read it to him if you have to, just make sure he gets it...please...I'm done hurting him...Sakura is the most trustworthy kunoichi I could ask for, and if even SHE dares to stand up to me...I'm wrong. You have your orders..."

--

"So, we have to catch up to him? It shouldn't be a problem!" Naruto was bouncing off the walls, ready to go on this mission. "I'm gonna drag him back!"

I said the same about Sasuke...Sasuke left by himself the first time, and I DID bring him back...did he leave the same way this time? And Ekyt...what about the rumors? Threatening to commit suicide?

"Kakashi-sensei, it might be best if I delivered the scroll. He won't hit me, no matter what I did to him before. And I want to apologize..." Sakura tugged at her gloves, pulling them straight, then, acting as she hadn't since her fight with Sasuke, smoothed her skirt. Somehow, she wanted to look good when they caught Ekyt.

"Alright. Yamato, did he give any other clues? Mist Village, which way was he heading?"

"Don't bother..." Ekyt landed in front of them. "You don't have to catch me. I want to explain something to you...something I haven't told anyone yet. I know I can trust you...all of you..." Ekyt bowed his head.

"Forgive me for how I acted...you see, I sealed my emotional chakra, and my emotions, inside a scroll for a few days. I wanted to think without my emotions getting in the way. I'm sorry if I hurt or offended anyone, but I couldn't let myself get distracted. You see, I've...I've been teaching Katsuyori the way of the sword. His father was a samurai, killed by ninja. The kid is blind in one eye, has a personality disorder, and doesn't trust anyone, except Sai and myself. If he's back in the Mist Village, he's probably dead, for a crime he didn't commit. And Tsunade sending Sai...it was my fault. I asked Sai to watch him while I bought time. I didn't count on Master Sarutobi's death...I've lost my cousin and teacher within days of each other...I don't want to lose my first student too, and my first ANBU partner. I can't let it go...I just can't. I'm not going to. I will do whatever it takes to save my comrades..."

Silence. Ekyt took that as an invitation to continue.

"After I save them, or lose them, I'm going on a mission of my own. Of healing. One of the scrolls Master Sarutobi left me told of two swords that have a guardian that ensures only an honest man can wield them. There's a long story to that, and I don't have time to tell it. For the record, my...rash actions...were caused by my emotions returning. It's very painful, and as only one emotion returns at a time, I had a limited range. I'm guessing it was 'anger' or 'desperation' that returned. I'm sorry about how cold I was to all of you."

“I’m going with you!” Naruto decided. Sakura nodded and stepped up next to Naruto. Kakashi and Yamato shrugged.

“Looks like you’re leading this mission. Let’s get going, before Lady Tsunade figures out what’s going on.” Kakashi seemed amused by all this in a way.

“If anything goes wrong, I take full responsibility...that includes Lady Tsunade.” That was all Ekyt had to say on the subject. Sakura suddenly remembered the scroll she was carrying. She took it out, playing with it’s ribbon nervously.

He’s GOT to hate me for what I did to him...Well, I’ve got to try, anyway, even if he DOES hate me now...

“Ekyt, can I talk to you for a minute? I’ve got this scroll for you, and I’ve got to ask you something...”

20 - Strengthened Resolve

Katsuyori and Sai were being marched across the Mist Village, hands tied behind their backs. Sai's face was impassive, and Katsuyori's was full of hate. The warrior in him was furious, but Katsuyori was still a kid. He feared death, and his heart hadn't yet turned to stone.

"Are we going to die, Sai-san?" Katsuyori asked quietly. The streets had been lined with people, some of whom threw rocks or fruit at the two. The Mist Shinobi gave both Leaf villagers looks of contempt.

"It's possible that we will..." Sai replied. Subtlety was not his strong suit. But he was so calm about it that Katsuyori calmed down.

"My father was a samurai..." Katsuyori began, trying his best to stay as stoic as Sai was, but he could hear his voice cracking with emotion. Sai turned his head to show he was listening.

"Every night, after we had trained together, he always told me something. He said 'Katsuyori-kun, if you do nothing else with your life, make yourself into a fine man. There are many paths to that goal, and each may be as good as the next. But only you can find that path...Accept guidance from those you trust, but never follow someone else's life. Become your own person. Strong and firm...loyalty, my son, will endear you to others...'"

Katsuyori looked to the side as a tomato bounced off his head. When he looked back at Sai, he was in tears. This surprised Sai; A tomato couldn't have hurt very much. After a moment's thought back to his reading, Sai realized that the wound was emotional, not physical. That led him to understanding why Katsuyori was crying. The situation had occurred in some of Sai's books.

"My father was killed by a Shinobi in a senseless battle! And my mother couldn't live without him, so she committed seppuku. I was alone, until I was adopted. I tried to fix my life, Sai. But all I did was become a liability, and cause you and Ekyt-san trouble..."

Sai looked away, but answered. "You understand bonds, Katsuyori. I envy you. I've never had those bonds."

--

"The talk will have to wait, Sakura..." Kakashi lifted his headband. "We have to make this look good...Sorry, Ekyt, but there was one thing you didn't factor in."

Ekyt jammed his chakra cigarette into his mouth and took up a guard position.

"What's that, Kakashi-sensei?" he growled, readying himself for a fight.

"That I won't let my comrades die. If we go to the Mist Village, we're outnumbered, and we may start a war...neither is good for the village..." SPLASH! Water clone?!

From behind, Ekyt felt Kakashi's kunai at his neck. He shifted his eyes to look at Kakashi, but could do nothing else.

"Don't you agree? I hate to do this, but I order you to return to the village..." Kakashi looked like he really didn't want to do this. He was torn, but he couldn't let anyone follow this foolish plan, it put everyone at risk.

Ekyt narrowed his eyes. Suddenly, HE had a kunai to Kakashi's back! A replacement jutsu!

"I can't let you stop me. You preach that you won't let your comrades die...Well, I've lived that so far, and I intend to do so. I'd walk through fire and back to save Katsuyori and Sai. They never turned their back on me, as so many others did. So if you aim to stop me...I guess we're going to fight...But before we do...Thank you for everything, Kakashi-sensei. I've always respected you. And this is a fight I'm sure I won't win...but dying at the hands of your Sharingan...it's respectable, at least."

Yamato, Sakura, and Naruto looked on silently. Ekyt lowered his kunai and then- took off! He kicked off the ground, making hand signs. Kakashi copied them.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" they called in unison. Both had to dodge the tongues of fire. Ekyt slid backward, and Kakashi zipped forward, making handsigns of his own. Ekyt threw two Shuriken, and used the last Jutsu that Master Sarutobi had taught him.

"Multi Shuriken Shadow Clones!" Ekyt's two shuriken became two thousand. Kakashi didn't have time to copy while he was making his own hand signs, so he finished his jutsu.

"Earth Style: Headhunter Jutsu!" Kakashi hid underground. Ekyt didn't know where he would pop, so he retreated to the safety of the tree tops, making hand signs as he went. When he landed on the tree, he found Kakashi waiting for him. A clone, or the real Kakashi, Ekyt didn't know. All he knew was that it was jump back down, or fight up here. Ekyt picked jump. As soon as he landed, a pair of hands snared his ankles. Ekyt struggled against them, trying to force himself away. Just as he broke free, the next jutsu he heard marked the end of the match.

"Earth Style: Fanged Pursuit Jutsu!"

Kakashi's Ninja Hounds came from every direction, all biting down on Ekyt. He winced with pain, but didn't try to get away. He had lost the fight fair and square. 'Kakashi of the Sharingan eye' could cross off another name in his BINGO book.

"Lightning Blade!" Kakashi called out. Chakra began to gather in his palm, until it was visible, and crackled like lightning. "You could still save your life and turn yourself in...I really don't want to do this, Ekyt. You're a great Shinobi, and a good friend."

"Do what you think is right, Kakashi-sensei. I'm going to do what I think is right, until the very end! Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!" Ekyt didn't need handsigns for that genjutsu anymore. But Kakashi batted it aside.

“You gave me quite a match for someone so young and inexperienced. Now, just give it up, please. I don’t want to have to kill you, but you’re not giving me a choice...”

Yamato spoke up next. “Kakashi-sensei is right. You can still avoid death. While you aren’t wrong in your thinking, you aren’t thinking big enough. There’s an entire village to consider.”

With dogs of all shapes and sizes hanging off him, Ekyt winced with pain, but managed to get out what was to be his last sentence.

“I...tried. To just let them go...it’s wrong. And if the Mist want to go to war with us over ONE-OF-OUR-OWN, shouldn’t we fight for our beliefs?! But I guess...you’d have to kill me anyway, since I’m apparently rogue. So just do it. I won’t hate you for doing your job.” Ekyt turned his head to the side. The chakra in Kakashi’s hand crackled and grew, until it was the size of a softball. Kakashi, already looking regretful, began his charge. Ekyt gave one last tug, but the dogs were holding him down. He couldn’t escape against their fangs, and his genjutsu wasn’t working.

“NO WAY!” Naruto skidded in the way, standing in front of Ekyt, defensively. Yamato made a move, but found Sakura in the way. Kakashi and Yamato both ended their jutsus, though Kakashi’s dogs still held Ekyt in place.

“I’M NOT GONNA LET YOU DO THIS, KAKASHI-SENSEI! I USED TO HATE SAI, BUT I STILL WOULD HAVE DONE ANYTHING TO HELP HIM! I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’D KILL EKYT OVER THIS! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!” Naruto shouted, glaring at Kakashi. Naruto’s body began to glow red; the demon fox had been awakened by Naruto’s strong feelings.

“You should both be ashamed! Orders or not, killing Ekyt is wrong! He hasn’t done anything wrong! You always tell us not to let our comrades die, and abandoning them makes you scum...” Sakura began, quieter than Naruto, but just as fiercely. “Ekyt, Sai, and Katsuyori are all comrades. Doesn’t your rule apply to them?” Sakura challenged.

“Either way, you let him go! You’re not getting any closer to him until you’ve gotten rid of me. BELIEVE IT!”

Ekyt was hit with a sudden rush of affection for his friends. At this point, even if he died, knowing that he had two people so willing to defend him that they’d risk death...it really meant a lot to him. He couldn’t do anything with these dogs on him, and he couldn’t let those four fight. They were team mates. If Ekyt fought Kakashi, they were only acquaintances. It was time to make one last, desperate maneuver to escape. With his body already bloodied, Ekyt only had to muster the strength to tap his thigh with his hand.

“Summoning Jutsu!”

With a small ‘POP!’, Ekyt’s diminutive water dragon, Umisu, appeared.

“Water Wall!” Ekyt told the dragon. It winked it’s understanding. Seconds later- SPLOOSH!

The dogs, now soaking wet, fled from the sudden rush of water. Pakkun, being smaller, was swept away by the tidal wave. Ekyt rushed back in front of Naruto and Sakura.

“Do it, sensei. Kill me, but leave them alone! You four are comrades, I’m an outsider looking in, WISHING I was part of your group! But I’m the outcast here, and I knew damn well what I was doing when I chose to help Katsuyori and Sai. Don’t attack Naruto and Sakura, they’re only doing what they think is right. Whether I agree or not is irrelevant...”

Kakashi slowly let the chakra die down in his hand. He sighed, and as he did, storm clouds drew overhead.

“You know what this means, don’t you?!” Kakashi thundered. Naruto and Sakura shrank down in fear. Ekyt stood up taller, so if Kakashi attacked, only he would be hit. But he needn’t have worried.

“It means...you’re free to go!” Kakashi gave a thumbs up. Ekyt hadn’t expected that.

“What?” he said stupidly, looking to Sakura and Naruto for some kind of understanding. They looked equally dumbfounded.

“If you’re going into enemy territory, you’ve got to be unshaken in the face of danger. I had my killing jutsu right near your face, and you protected your team instead...you remind me of a teammate I had, long ago...but, that’s a story for another day! Right now, you’ve got two people to save. Naruto, Sakura, follow his lead, and come back safely!” Kakashi gave a wave, and disappeared. Yamato stayed momentarily, but smiled and left himself.

“Can anyone tell me what the hell just happened?” Ekyt muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. **THAT was a test? He had that Raikiri so close I could have touched it with my nose!**

“I have no idea...but, c’mon, let’s go already! We’ve got to save them! Even if it IS Sai!” Naruto was ready to go!

“Hold on! Didn’t Kakashi-sensei JUST say Ekyt was in charge? And besides, I’ve got to talk to him before we go running off!” Sakura collared Naruto just as he jumped, yanking him back down to the ground with a ‘GAH!’ sound.

“Okay, okay, violent Kunoichi!” Naruto grumbled, massaging his neck and straightening his jacket.

--

“Ekyt...I...well...I want to apologize. You were right all along. And I’m sorry I deceived you like that...” Sakura shifted uncomfortably, not quite meeting Ekyt’s gaze.

“I see...well, I should apologize to you. I knew what you were going to do...” Ekyt paused and let the shock sink in with Sakura. “...Why would you hug me, I reasoned. I knew you and Yamato were on a mission to bring me back. I didn’t want either of you to look bad.”

Sakura gaped at Ekyt, who was looking up at the sky, trying to judge how much time until darkness fell.

“That’s really sweet of you!” Sakura opened her arms for a hug, giggling at Ekyt’s wary look.

“This one isn’t a trap. Just an apology.” Sakura stayed still. Ekyt stepped carefully into the embrace, as though afraid that he might break her. It was ironic that he was afraid of breaking a kunoichi that could, no doubt, crush him like the boulders she had ruined during her training.

Sakura let go, looking on questioningly as Ekyt tried to stifle his blushing.

“We should move, while we have time. It’s only a half-day journey to our destination, but I don’t want to get caught in the woods...or at least not the center. We need the time to find a good clearing, wood for a fire, fresh water...and the extra time will come in handy for any resistance we meet.”

“Right!” Naruto and Sakura said together. Ekyt leapt up into the branches, his two friends following. But as he leapt along the treetop pathway, Ekyt was hit by a sudden surge of emotions.

Little bastards...all my emotions are back...now I feel it...Lord Third’s death...it’s finally hit me...

Ekyt had to force himself to focus on the trees, otherwise he was going to be falling a long way down. Tears soon stained his eyes at the loss of a mentor. Ekyt still hadn’t finished going through all the stuff that Lord Third had left him. So many scrolls and jutsus. Ekyt treasured them all, but one thing in particular Ekyt cherished among the others. Lord Hokage’s combat gear, and his Hokage robes. The Third had been fond of saying Ekyt would make a great Hokage. Ekyt had never given it much thought. And he decided now he wouldn’t, unless Naruto either could not or would not take the title of Hokage.

I’ll spend some time alone tonight...think things out. I can’t afford to let my emotions screw up this mission.

21 - The Warrior Born Anew!

Ekyt, Naruto, and Sakura stopped for the night, just outside the Village Hidden in the Mist. True to its name, there was a lot of mist, the result of a warm spring night conflicting with a cold ocean.

“That mist is so thick...it reminds me of when we fought Zabuza and Haku...” Sakura intoned to Naruto, thinking back a couple years to their first real mission as genin, Kakashi-sensei’s survival exercise non-withstanding.

“Yeah! Man, those were the days, huh Sakura?” Naruto replied with his trademark enthusiasm.

Ekyt stood up, quietly excusing himself to take a walk. Sakura and Naruto watched him go, both a little worried and confused for their friend. It was no secret that Ekyt had dealt with so much lately. Between the Third Hokage dying, Sakura’s ‘betrayl’, and his prison sentence (falsely convicted), it seemed as if anything that COULD go wrong DID go wrong for the...genin? Did he have a rank anymore? His headband was in Tsunade’s office, where Sakura had left it after Ekyt made his first daring escape.

“Should we keep an eye on him or something?” Naruto asked Sakura.

“No...just give him a little time...” Sakura looked back to their campsite and began to clear it up so they could lay their bedding down. Naruto shot a worried glance over his shoulder at Ekyt, who had begun to scale a tree, obviously deep in thought.

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Ekyt curled up against the thick green leaves on a sturdy branch. His emotions had come back, and they hit him hard. He had curled himself into a ball, and tried not to shed any tears. But it was getting harder the more he thought.

The Third Hokage...I helped kill him. I know it’s what he wanted, and he would have died without accomplishing his goal without my help...but knowing I helped kill someone, someone important to me...it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. It’s so...helpless. That’s the word. It’s a helpless feeling. Knowing that you took away a world, but you can never give it back...I know this is the way of the Shinobi, and even the way of the Samurai, and I have to follow both...but still...

Ekyt shifted his gaze to what he could see of the stars above. They twinkled brightly against the black backdrop of the sky, winking merrily, unaware that the world below was froth with hell.

Lord 3rd...Master Sarutobi...The “Will of Fire” you always spoke of...I know it can’t burn in me alone! I wish I had just killed Orochimaru myself, so you could still be here...Lady Tsunade means well, but she doesn’t have your wisdom, or your attitude. There’s no one to stoke the Will of Fire...I won’t let the Will of Fire die, Master Sarutobi. The Leaf will get stronger, just as you said...I’m proud to be a part of the village, no matter what pain it’s caused me! I will always be grateful for what you taught me, and all of us. I used to think that I didn’t belong, that I was just a

transplant to the Leaf...but my Will of Fire is true, Master Sarutobi. I'll make what you taught me meaningful! And I'll protect the village, and everyone in it! ...

...Please forgive me...

Ekyt's enthusiasm left as quickly as it had come. He put his head down, and let a tear fall onto his vest.

I don't think I could handle another loss...Sai and Katsuyori...I would crack...if they died here, in this foreign land. How much can my mind take? Am I already going insane? I didn't blink when I was face to face with the Chidori. I don't know if that was bravery or insanity...or both. No, I'm not gonna lose it! And I'm not going to lose them! ANY of them! No more comrades will die under my watch! NOW I get it, Kakashi-sensei!

Ekyt's gloved hand balled up tightly, and for the first time in a long while, he smiled as if he had everything under control.

--

Ekyt ran back to the clearing, something falling into place in his mind. Sakura and Naruto looked relieved to see Ekyt at first, but at the placid look on his face, Sakura immediately checked him for poison.

"I don't know what you inhaled, but I'm going to get it out of you!"

Ekyt shook his head. "No, it's not that. I get it now! What Kakashi-sensei, and Master Sarutobi said! I finally understand! Protect your comrades, Will of Fire! I understand, finally! There's no time for me to be worrying about myself right now, THAT'S why I'm smiling! I've been self-centered, trying to solve my own problems this whole time. But, at least for now, I understand what they were saying all this time!"

Ekyt opened one of the scrolls the Third Hokage had left him. He pointed to one of the jutsu.

"Earth Style: Mud Wall? That's great, but you don't know that jutsu!" Naruto pointed out, not getting Ekyt's enthusiasm. Sakura was looking on wide-eyed, as if she had seen a phoenix die in ashes, only to be reborn in all its splendor, and then some.

"I can perform it...with help. And the same with the Fire Dragon Bombs, and the Multi-Shuriken Shadow Clones! But I need your help to do it...THAT is where I was going wrong...I made this a mission about my own self-healing...and that was an incredibly selfish thing to do. No matter how desperate I was to save Katsuyori, I was always desperate to save MYSELF, too. Maybe I can't do both, but I can't let both go. We can do this!"

Sakura and Naruto had never seen a fire lit under someone so fast, or so...well, potently.

What the hell hit him in that tree?! both Naruto and Sakura wondered. Ekyt's radical change...for some reason, they both sensed something happy, even wonderful, about it. As if the dark clouds hovering over him were gone, at least for a time.

“Naruto...look at him. What do you see?” Sakura intoned, looking at Ekyt sideways. She had a smile on her face and in her voice.

“Hmm? I dunno, a weird-@\$ kid with a sudden stroke of brilliance?” Naruto wasn’t following. And, to be fair, Sakura hadn’t picked it up right away either. But now there was a sharp contrast in her mind from where Ekyt WAS and where he had moved to, in terms of state of mind.

She faced Naruto. “I see the Third Hokage. Do you remember, when he fought Orochimaru the first time, even though his life was in danger, he was smiling? He never once thought of his own well-being. I think that’s what hit Ekyt. At the funeral...until a few minutes ago, his emotions hadn’t come back, and he was thinking like a puppet, no real mind of his own. But now, after letting himself shed those tears...He gets it. Something you and I don’t understand yet ourselves, at least not in the same way.”

“Now that you mention it...it’s like he lost all his emotional baggage or something...” Naruto was looking closely at Ekyt, but not seeing him with a white beard and a Hokage hat.

“He hasn’t LOST it...but he’s moved it aside. I think maybe, just maybe, he sees himself in Katsuyori, and even Sai. Katsuyori isn’t from here, neither is Ekyt. Katsuyori has medical issues, and so does Ekyt. Both of them use a sword, and they even think alike...”

Naruto scrunched up his face, thinking hard. “But what about Sai?”

Sakura’s grin grew. “Sai is exactly what Ekyt always wanted, or thought, he would be...emotionless, stoic...”

“Gay?” Naruto added. WHAP!

“NO, YOU IDIOT! EKYT ISN’T GAY!” Sakura snarled, bashing Naruto on the head.

“How do you know?!” Naruto shot back. “Have YOU slept with him or something?!”

You think Naruto would know better. But Sakura didn’t hit him this time. She blushed, but kind of smiled.

“No...but he told me once that he, for want of a better word, feared kunoichi. They were the unknown. He told me that he could never remember to think of them both as girls and warriors, only one or the other. But then he said... ‘I hope I find one someday.’ I don’t know who he meant, but he sure sounded like he had someone in mind...”

Naruto couldn’t believe it. **She calls ME dense! It’s so freakin’ obvious that Ekyt has a major-league crush on her! How can SHE not see it?!**

“Right, sorry. So, he sees Sai as kind of a wanna-be version of himself?” Naruto added, continuing the discussion.

“Sort of. You know about Ekyt’s second chakra, the one that hurts him to use? The emotions, and how he can remove them? Look at Sai. Nothing gets to him. He doesn’t get angry, he thinks. In other words, if he didn’t TRY to have emotions, he’d be a great warrior. THAT is what Ekyt sees. A potential in Sai

that he wishes he himself had. Kind of like you and Gaara.”

NOW Naruto made the connection. “Oh! Like Gaara is the Kazekage, and I want to be Hokage! I get it! That’s cool and all, but how does this help him?”

“It gives him a focus. He doesn’t see himself right now. It’s like he only exists to save the lives of others, without having his own life. It’s not QUITE healthy, but neither is beating yourself up on a daily basis. So he’s progressed, to something better- like a new warrior.”

--

“Ready to go? We’re going to get them back!” Ekyt was already awake, and looked as ready as anyone had ever seen him.

Sakura and Naruto both woke up pretty quickly, and ready to go themselves. The potential for their own deaths was high, but something had occurred to both of them. Naruto couldn’t quite word it, but Sakura could, albeit it had been something she had heard from Lee once.

When you fight with Ekyt-san, it is as if you cannot lose! No harm will come to you! You feel so certain, but you do not know why... Sakura remembered Lee describing fighting alongside Ekyt one day.

“That’s the Will of Fire...”

--

Sai and Katsuyori were both forced to kneel down, while an official from the Mist Village read their charges. Both of them were free of emotions, and ready to accept death.

“Do the prisoners have any last requests?” the official-sounding governor questioned.

“I want to paint a picture...” Sai remarked, smiling widely (and fakely).

“Denied. You, boy?”

Katsuyori looked up. His request was bold. “I want to die by my father’s sword! Kideroyi Amakatsu! His head was severed, and his sword taken! That is my only wish...and the only way for you to kill me AND take my dignity! Should you execute me, I will die with the honor that my father died with!”

The governor’s official struggled with words, but managed “Request granted. Bring Amakatsu’s sword!”

“HOLD IT!” a voice boomed.

“Who dares interrupt this execution?!” the official snarled.

“Ekyt Kaguya- check your BINGO books! If I’m not there, add me! I’m the one who’s going to ruin the

day for you! Take THAT to the bank!"

"EXECUTE THE BOY! DO IT NOW!"

Suddenly, the ground cracked, courtesy of Sakura. Ten Naruto Shadow Clones molded the earth, and Ekyt reared back and used his Dragon's Ember Jutsu, and hardened the earth!

"Earth Style: Brick Wall!" The sword slashed into the thick clay, where a Naruto shadow clone retrieved it. Another grabbed the sheath from the stunned executioner and threw both to Ekyt, who sealed them inside a scroll. By the time anyone realized what had happened, and that the wall was just a diversion, Sai and Katsuyori were safe, courtesy of Naruto and Sakura.

Ekyt called his next Jutsu: "Multi Shuriken Shadow Bombs!"

The Naruto clones transformed into shuriken, while Sakura readied her exploding tags. Naruto threw the shuriken and Sakura threw the tags, and the two mixed. Still up in the air, they started to fly towards the earth. THAT was dangerous enough, a hundred shuriken and exploding tags, but Ekyt had to add his own personal touch with his Fire Style: Dragon's Encampment Wall. The Mist Shinobi ran for cover just as the volatile mix of three jutsus collided, and exploded in a fantastic way that also devastated several nearby buildings.

Ekyt tossed his scroll to Naruto. "Go, get out of here! I've got one more delay tactic, start running!" Ekyt shouted back to the others, biting his thumbs and reaching for two scrolls.

"Dual Summoning Jutsu!" Ekyt yelled. As the smoke cleared, Naruto finally saw what Sakura meant. **That's old man Third's monkey! And...that water dragon? What's he going to do with Umisu?!**

"Transform: Adamantine Yoi!" Ekyt called to Enma. As Enma transformed, he smiled.

The Will of Fire lives on, Sarutobi...Perhaps you were right about this one...a special boy...

"Umisu, Water Style: Water Wall!" The water wall briefly shielded Ekyt from counter-attacks, but few came, so stunned was the Mist Village. Too few guards for the surprise strike force. What began as a routine execution had turned into a rout for the Mist Village.

The water wall seemed to explode in every direction, creating a body of water that covered the execution area, as though contained by invisible walls. Ekyt was standing on that water, the Yoi cradled in his arm as he made handsigns.

"Water Style: Moving River Current!" The water began to shift, directing the Mist Shinobi away from Ekyt. A few who had hid under water and tried to jump Ekyt were surprised to find they were dealing with a water clone. The real Ekyt was standing behind the four. THWACK!!! The Adamantine Yoi send them sailing. On that note, Ekyt decided it was time to start moving. But he had one more message left:

"Stay out of the Hidden Leaf's Business, and never touch our Shinobi again, or there will be hell to pay!"

--

Naruto, Sai, Sakura, and Katsuyori waited anxiously for Ekyt to return. But they had to smile- Ekyt, for some reason, came flying in out of the trees. Seconds later, they say why: He had four Mist Shinobi following him- but not by choice! Enma had extended a hand out of his staff form and grabbed the Shinobi, smacking them into trees as Ekyt bounded among the tree tops.

Naruto summed up the situation best:

“That’s something I’d expect from me!”

22 - Finding Your Place!

Lady Tsunade WANTED to smile. She wanted to laugh. Her position forbade it, of course, but still...

That kid is something else. WHERE he got the idea to do what he did is beyond me. Then he sends a message to boot! Just when I think I've seen all his tricks, he goes and pulls a jail break!

"Ekyt, what the hell were you thinking?!" Tsunade finally asked, though without the usual hostility in her voice. The situation was just too damn funny.

Ekyt was sitting by the windowsill, relaxed, while his team was standing ramrod-straight in front of Tsunade. He stretched himself, and turned his head to Tsunade to give his answer, which was out of character for him.

"Beautiful day, isn't it? But, to answer your question..." Ekyt leapt up onto the windowsill, smiling widely. "...I don't know. It just popped into my head, and I went with it. Lemme guess- the Mist village has complained?"

Tsunade couldn't help it anymore; she had to laugh.

"Ekyt, you are among the biggest shoot disturbers I've ever had...but you get the job done." Tsunade stood up, standing at the window next to Ekyt. She clasped her hands behind her back, enjoying the breeze, and the break from her feud with Ekyt.

"Yes, the Mist has been in contact. You scarred the hell out of them, they still can't believe that wasn't orchestrated by the Leaf. Just what is it you did?"

Ekyt shrugged, smiling happily. "A little of this, a little of that, and some flash and sizzle to get my point across."

"And what IS that point?"

Ekyt grinned even wider. "Don't screw with my Leaf brothers and sisters, natch!" Ekyt jumped across the room and over to Katsuyori, his mask off and a wide smile on his face.

"That reminds me- (bites thumb) here we go!" Ekyt reached into his summoning scroll and extracted the sword of Kideyori Amakatsu, Katsuyori's father. The sword now belonged to Katsuyori, who now had one of his dreams fulfilled. Right then and there, Katsuyori decided to swear his sword to the Leaf.

And maybe I'll even learn some ninja tricks...I hope you can see me, father. I've found my place, and I'll make you proud of me yet! Wielding your sword, I cannot, and will not, fail!

"That's a first, Katsuyori," Ekyt said with a grin, ruffling the boy's hair.

“What’s that, sensei?”

Ekyt shrugged. “Well, you’ve smiled. You never did that before. Did Sai teach you?”

Katsuyori hadn’t thought of that. It had been an unconscious gesture, and had felt natural and relaxed. He couldn’t explain exactly where it had come from, and that was the strange part. Perhaps he had always imitated his sensei’s serious demeanor? With Ekyt sporting a grin himself, had Katsuyori just parroted the gesture?

No...It was genuine.

Katsuyori looked up, not sure what to think. But he felt a weight had been lifted...what was different? IT wasn’t getting the sword so much, it was losing something. Anxiety? That was it! It was absent! For the first time in years, Katsuyori didn’t feel the pangs of anxiety.

“Sensei! My anxiety! It’s gone! I mean, I feel it, but it’s not acting up like it usually does! Like there’s less of it!”

“That’s wonderful, Katsuyori!” Sakura exclaimed.

“Yeah! Your whacko sensei is nuts enough for both of you! Believe it!” Naruto couldn’t help but chiming it.

“I’ve never felt anxiety...What is it like?” Sai wanted to know. Everyone had clustered around Katsuyori, save for Ekyt. Ekyt was the one who answered.

“It’s a natural emotion, but augmented in the case of myself and Katsuyori. Fear, trepidation, coupled with a seemingly-endless adrenaline rush. It’s very...unpleasant. Worse, because few believe you when you say there’s a problem, and fewer know how to deal with it...or, rather...how to deal with WHO has it. Does that help?” Ekyt asked, his smile wavering slightly at reliving those feelings. He felt them enough naturally.

“What causes this pain?” Sai asked.

“Anything, everything. There’s no rhyme or reason to feel it, but you do. It’s how you deal with it that defines you. You can curl up in a corner and die, or you can go out fighting. It all depends on who you are.” Ekyt cocked his head, trying to remember something.

“Oh, that’s right! Thank you for taking care of Katsuyori the way you did. It meant a lot. He may not be my son, but he IS my student. And my friend. Maybe ‘Bunbu Itchi’ will happen yet! For now, I’m going to get out of here before Lady Tsunade decides to toss me in jail. I’ve got to tell Aki her son is safe anyway.”

Ekyt put two fingers up to his face, then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Tsunade and the others looked over. Sakura giggled, Naruto chuckled, and Tsunade shook her head.

“So he does it again? Tries to escape my clutches? Well, no matter. I’ve got no problem with him. The goofy bastard. The next time one of you sees him, kindly tell him that for me.”

--

Ekyt knocked on the door of the Akakamadori’s back room. Aki, tears staining her make-up, sniffled and stopped crying at the site of Ekyt.

“Ekyt? You’re back! Oh, thank God!” She snatched Ekyt up in a hug. Very quickly, she moved so her head was on Ekyt’s shoulder.

“Tell me! Is my little boy alright?!”

“Just fine. And I think he’s changed. But you’ll see,” Ekyt told Aki, whose tears had turned joyful. Ekyt wasn’t done.

“Listen, it’s very important now: Katsuyori, you, and your husband, you ALL need training. I can’t stress it enough. The Mist may come after Katsuyori, or even you. All of us in the Leaf will protect you, but you’ve got to trust us, and trust me when I say you need the training.”

Aki noticed that Ekyt’s shoulder had been cut. She didn’t say anything about it, but instead nodded.

“I will. We will. We’ll all train. What do you recommend?”

Ekyt thought for a moment. “Leave Katsuyori to me and my comrades, after he’s spent some time in the academy. As for you, I recommend learning medical ninjutsu. You can mix drinks, why not poisons? They don’t have to be lethal, but the protection they offer is important.”

Aki stood up, her tears drying, her face determined. “I’ll do whatever it takes to protect my family! I trust you, Ekyt. If you say I need this, then I need this. And I will give it everything I’ve got!”

Ekyt smiled again, nodding. “It might be best for you to move your trade to closer to the Hokage mansion, for protection. I know Lady Tsunade won’t mind. Especially opening up a new place for her to get her favorite brand of sake.”

--

Ekyt knew he would have to face Tsunade eventually. He also expected to have to run for it again. As it turned out, Tsunade, Katsuyori, Sai and Yamato found him first.

“I’m putting the four of you together. As Team Kakashi has reformed, Sai and Yamato are without a team. As are you, Ekyt. So, Yamato will be your sensei, while Sai and Katsuyori, once he graduates from the academy, will join you as Cell B.”

“Cell B?” Ekyt asked.

“ ‘B’ for ‘Backup’. You four will act almost exclusively as backup to the other teams, due to your varying points of strength. But if you’re going to be a team, you’ll have to face the chunin exams eventually, Ekyt. And you can’t face them without this. Sakura!”

Sakura stepped out from behind Tsunade, and held out a familiar object- Ekyt’s headband! He had forgotten he hadn’t been wearing it, it had been so long.

“Thank you. It’s nice to be back. Hopefully, it’ll stay that way this time!”

Just as Ekyt finished saying that, a parade of people marched up to him. His smile not wavering yet, Ekyt tilted his head.

“Now who could this be? Ah, the Mist Village! I’ve been expecting you!” Ekyt smirked. The leader was being carried around in a throne, covered with black cloth. Ekyt zipped forward and kicked the two attendants carrying the front, then splintered the throne, revealing the ‘champion of the mist’.

“I DID say to stay out of the Leaf Village’s business, didn’t I?” Ekyt asked. The Mist Villager stood up and pointed a sai at Ekyt. It gleamed dangerously in the sun.

“Ekyt Kaguya, you’ve interefered with the Mist for the first and last time! You’ll sign your contract with hell in your own blood!”

The man began to swipe with the Sai. Ekyt just dodged each time, until he stepped to the side and kicked, knocking one sai into the ground.

“I’d prefer we didn’t use weapons in a friendly contest,” Ekyt pointed out, knowing full well he was pissing this guy off and then some.

“YAGH!” The Mist villager rushed, drawing a hidden dirk and slashing Ekyt across the stomach.

“Bastard!” Katsuyori drew on the Mist Villager and diced him through the stomach with his sword. “What is your name?!” Katsuyori demanded. He aimed the tip of his sword at the stunned Shinobi. “I won’t ask again...WHAT IS YOUR NAME?!”

“My name is Watashi Bokuwa. What concern is it of yours?!”

Katsuyori kicked the man hard enough to draw blood.

“Someone with your family name killed my father! Tell me who it is! You know damn well. Kideyori Amakatsu was my father! TALK!”

“It was my brother! It was my brother! I swear, that’s all I know!” the man backpedaled, straight into Ekyt, who was holding his stomach closed.

“Did you come here for a match with me? If you did, then let’s get on with it. If not, kindly leave.”

“He’s mine, sensei!” Katsuyori snarled, his sword already drawn.

“No, Katsuyori, you’ll kill him. Me...I have more restraint. I’d only come CLOSE to killing him. That’s assuming he and his entourage aren’t out of town by the time I turn around...”

No one was there when Ekyt turned around.

--

“Teuchi, his next bowl is on me,” Ekyt nodded to Naruto, who has happily scarfing down his ramen. Ekyt pointed down the line. “And his, and his, and hers, and hers. And, hell, I don’t know who that guy is, but his too.”

Tsunade, Sakura, Naruto, Sai, Yamato, Katsuyori, and some guy Ekyt didn’t even know were all eating on Ekyt’s tab. Ekyt himself had just opted for a drink, his stomach really hurting too much to eat, even after Sakura had pieced it back together.

“Are you buttering me up to get good missions, Ekyt?” Tsunade joked.

“You bet! So, when do I start?” Ekyt shot back.

“Well, you’re a little rusty...so, you can start by cleaning my office tomorrow. Anything to add Sakura?” Tsunade was clearly going to have fun with this one. Little did Ekyt know she wasn’t kidding.

“Well, actually, I DO need some ingredients from Sunagakure. So do you, Lady Tsunade, we’re low on almost everything.”

Tsunade nodded. “Okay. Clean my office- D ranked. Ingredients- C ranked. Then, I want you to go with Asuma’s team to the Land of Trees, where you’ll assist them in investigating attacks made by an unknown arsonist. While you’re doing that, Yamato and Sai, you’ll be helping Katsuyori to get into Shinobi shape. I don’t want him in the academy for long. He’s got missions.”

Somehow, the Leaf Village felt like home again to Ekyt.

NEXT TIME: AFTER TWO MEANINGLESS CHORES, EKYT ACCOMPANIES ASUMA, SHIKAMARU, CHOJI, AND INO TO THE LAND OF TREES! BUT A DEADLY SURPRISE AWAITS THEM...

23 - An Old Injury

Katsuyori applied himself, finding Shinobi techniques to be fascinating. Maybe it was because he had seen fights between Shinobi so powerful that it just made him wonder how strong he himself was. Shinobi skills had saved his life and returned his father's sword to him, so they couldn't be all bad. Once he delved in, Katsuyori was hooked. Every word Iruka said, every comment someone made, every training exercise- nothing, save for sword work, had ever fascinated Katsuyori so much. He wasn't too far behind the class. In fact, he was ahead, because he already had a squad.

Katsuyori, Ekyt, Sai, and Yamato had formed a squad that performed back-up to other squads. That meant they wouldn't always be working together, but that didn't diminish the appeal of being part of such a crucial cell. At the same time, Katsuyori could study, putting his training into action without too much worry- Ninja fights were dangerous, but with three accomplished ninja safeguarding him, Katsuyori could only evolve.

"Attention everyone!"

Katsuyori heard Iruka start to talk. He had finished the exercise assigned to him long ago, he was ready for more. Iruka talking always meant something to do. Some scrap of information to process, some task to carry out. Katsuyori stood up straighter, hoping to get picked for whatever it was that Iruka-sensei had in mind.

Iruka surveyed the class, making sure they were paying attention. Once he was satisfied, he continued. (A couple kids were still talking, but there was always one or two who didn't stop)

"As you may have heard, the Fifth Hokage is coming to inspect the class. This is a historic day; an inspection from the Hokage happens only once in a blue moon. Now, I don't want anyone to get their hopes up, but there is always a slight chance of a promotion in rank, if the Hokage is impressed. (Chatter begins) HOWEVER..." Iruka held up a hand to suppress the sudden outbreak of talking.

"...However, any student who injures another in an idiotic attempt to show off will be punished- severely. You will all get a chance to show the Fifth Hokage what you can do, so don't push in line. As a medic-nin herself, the Hokage is not impressed by injuries."

A knock came at the door.

"Hey Iruka, are you ready in there?"

Iruka grinned. "Ready, Lady Fifth!"

Tsunade walked in, her presence commanding silence. Katsuyori was slightly more relaxed. Until Tsunade pointed at him.

"You! Come down here!" she demanded. Katsuyori stood up and walked down, wondering what the

fuss was about. He looked to Shizune, Tsunade's aid. Shizune smiled warmly, letting him know there wasn't any real danger. Katsuyori let himself relax a little more, though he kept his posture straight and his gaze unwavering. Tsunade was pretty scary up close, especially since she had nearly been the death of Katsuyori, however inadvertent.

Tsunade bent down to look him in the eyes.

"Blind in your right eye...since birth...but this cut...that will do." Tsunade raised a glowing hand and lightly touched Katsuyori's arm, healing the cut instantly. The kunoichi, most of whom aimed to be medic-nins, watched, trying not to 'ooh' and 'ahh' like fools. But this was amazing- a demonstration by the most celebrated medic-nin in their time! A few of the boys stood up, trying to get a look down Tsunade's robe. Shizune shook her, almost tolerantly.

Telling boys not to be perverts is like telling birds not to fly. If they get caught, Tsunade's punishment will be bad enough...I wish I could warn them without tipping her off...

Tsunade leaned close to Katsuyori's ear. "As of this moment, you're re-assigned to an emergency squad of genin. Yamato is still your sensei, but you'll have new teammates, at least one."

Katsuyori understood that this was a set-up to make sure they weren't overheard. So he responded just as carefully.

"And what about my first team?"

Tsunade whispered back: "Sai will be helping your team. Ekyt has another mission. You'll still get to work with him, don't worry. I know what he means to you. So you have to trust me, alright?"

Katsuyori nodded slightly. Tsunade patted him on the head and addressed the class.

"In the next classroom, I have a surprise waiting for all of you! Iruka, if you please, lead them in after a couple minutes."

--

Shizune was happy the kids were getting a chance like this, but still...this was unorthodox, even by Tsunade's standards.

"A surprise final exam? Lady Tsunade, isn't that kind of...mean?" Shizune asked. Tsunade kept laying out headbands.

"In real life, you don't get a warning that you're going to be attacked, you just are. Why should school be any different. These kids have got to learn that it's sink or swim. And you know how desperate we are for Shinobi...I could have just piled D-ranks on Ekyt, he would have handled ten a day, but I have bigger plans for him...There!"

The headbands gleamed brightly on the desk. Tsunade actually smiled a little at the prospect of a new generation of Shinobi. Things didn't always go smoothly, but today, just for today, the village didn't have any looming threats.

“Wonder if they have sake at the reception for the new genin?” Tsunade was clearly thinking aloud. Shizune made a mental note to make sure they DIDN'T have sake.

She needs to be on her guard, no matter how calm things seem...there's no time to get drunk and maybe even gamble away the village on some drunken impulsion!

--

“Oh, good, you're all here. This is how it's going to work today: Shikamaru, you're going with Choji and Ino. Yes, you're in charge again. The three of you head toward the center of Tanzaku town. Ekyt and I are going to take the long route. Any questions?” Asuma surveyed the group.

“Yeah...what the hell? Asuma, that makes no sense. Unless Tanzaku town is under attack, and me, Choji, and Ino are bait...”

Asuma laughed. “No, nothing like that! I DO want to give the impression that there are less of us, but actually, Ekyt and I are getting supplies. I figured you'd cop out if I gave you the harder mission, Shikamaru. Choji would eat everything, and Ino would cry about a broken nail. (Needless to say, this group is now worked up, save for Ekyt) I would make Ekyt go alone, but he couldn't carry enough for all of us. So, head out, and stay safe.”

-

“I think we're set...alright, let's get to the others. Heads up!” Asuma called, dropping the supplies and drawing his daggers. Ekyt followed suit, taking up a kunai, seeing the enemies Asuma was talking about. Mist.

“Hey, Ekyt, it's your head they're after, so watch your back!”

Ekyt looked at the ninja. Something wasn't right...too much chakra was being expended at a constant rate...

“Asuma-sensei, those are clones!”

Just as the words were leaving Ekyt's mouth, one of the real ones snaked up behind him and stabbed. Even Ekyt couldn't take this silently. He felt a sharp, piercing pain in his left eye. Then he felt nothing at all in the same spot. It was all too familiar. Ekyt had lost his site once when a Sand Shuriken thrown by an out-of-control Gaara struck his eye. It was repaired by Sakura and Tsunade. Having it happen again...

“Sensei...” Ekyt whispered, bleeding from his eye, the other one shedding tears that were out of control, either from rage or pain. “...THEY'RE MINE!”

Ekyt took off, his hand blazing with fire. Before the first Mist ninja could move, he was punched in the stomach so hard that Ekyt's fist almost came out the other side! Two more fists connected with his head, and then he was floating. Had he been killed?

No. Actually, Ekyt had thrown him into a tree, then taken off after his two friends.

“WHERE YA GOING?!” Ekyt shouted, throwing four kunai, each one hitting their mark: legs. If you couldn’t run...

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!”

The Mist Shinobi were tortured by their own thoughts and fears, until they could feel sanity slipping away. They were awakened only by physical pain. Ekyt hadn’t run out of knives, nor spots to put them in. He looked pretty insane, with his bad eye bleeding, and his good eye looking around wildly, as if he was less a Shinobi and more an out-of-control madman.

“Take THIS back to whoever sent you! And tell them...I’m coming for them!” Ekyt’s fist came down once more, this time claiming the eyes of his enemies. They took off, praying that their sensory appendages could be salvaged. Ekyt glared after them, putting pressure over his mangled eye. He sat down and ripped off the white collar around his shirt, using it to make a headband to cover his ruined eye with. The blood soaked it, so it looked like there was an eye on the outside of the cloth.

Asuma stared, stunned at what happened. When he came to his senses, he approached Ekyt, who was clearly hit by pain and grief.

“I’m terminating the mission, Ekyt...” Asuma said quietly.

“Like hell you are! I’m not done!” Ekyt snarled. “Don’t stop the mission on my account! I can keep going!” Ekyt seemed to control himself. He bowed his head, looking down and away from Asuma, angry that he had lost his control, no matter what the situation. Asuma was a friend, and he didn’t deserve that.

“Forgive me...sensei, please understand...I’ve never failed a mission before. I can’t now. Unless I die...failure is unacceptable to me!”

--

Katsuyori was handed his Leaf headband. He hadn’t been so proud of himself in a long time. Unlike getting his sword back, this was something he had accomplished of his own accord. No one had MADE him go to school. To pass so quickly, with flying colors, he guessed he had a right to be proud of himself.

But who are my teammates? No offense, but most everyone else here is brand new, and nowhere NEAR ready for missions!

Tsunade was interviewing the last two candidates now. The first one was a heavy boy who was deceptively quick in sparring. But he also got nervous easily, and messed up in front of Tsunade in a way that it was impossible to pass him.

The last candidate was a kunoichi, a pretty blonde girl named Kantai. Katsuyori blinked; he felt a new feeling. It wasn’t anxiety. While it WAS nerve-wracking, the feeling was...strangely pleasant. Watching the girl kick and punch without so much as a smile, until she received some praise, it was somehow

breathhtaking to the young man. He had always felt emotions more strongly than others, and he was blindsided by this one. He was NEVER surprised when it came to emotions, or se Katsuyori thought. Not least of all the one he thought he was feeling now.

Tsunade, Shizune, and Iruka were watching the match, but also Katsuyori. They needed to find a teammate that he would get along with, someone he could respect. Upon seeing the look on Katsuyori's face, it quickly became evident that there was respect there, all right, along with something else.

Watching her graceful body move as she demonstrated sparring techniques, Katsuyori was reminded of Ekyt when he was with Sakura. A look of respect and admiration on his face, along with the telltale red marks of blushing under his eyes, desperately trying not to smile. It was all so familiar to Katsuyori, and now he understood what Ekyt felt, but more so...HOW Ekyt felt, at least about Sakura. Emotions were complex, and certainly never as straightforward as they seemed. But still, THIS emotion was darn near impossible to translate properly, as Ekyt had demonstrated himself.

Nerves...blushing...is this love?

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WHILE KATSUYORI FEELS THE PAINS OF A FIRST LOVE, EKYT FEELS THE PAIN OF LOSING HIS EYE. KATSUYORI MUST LEARN TO DEAL WITH HIS EMOTIONS, WHILE EKYT'S NEW, HAPPY LIFESTYLE IS SENT TO A VIOLENT DEMISE. WITH DOUBT, REGRET, AND GUILT ON THEIR MINDS, THE TWO FRIENDS MUST ENDURE THESE NEW PAINS, AND GET AROUND THEM- THE VILLAGE IS UNDERSTAFFED, AND THEY HAVE TO HELP. BUT WITHOUT HIS EYE...DOES EKYT STAND A CHANCE OF GETTING SAKURA'S ATTENTION? AND WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO HIS NEWLY-REBORN SHINOBI CAREER?

24 - Showing your Hand

“Failure is unacceptable...I’ve already failed, I suppose I’m denying that...” Ekyt was starting to speak in riddles. Asuma, always to the point, asked Ekyt what he was talking about. It’s not like Ekyt was making sense at this point.

“Should I still be a genin? Should my team have been some thrown-together emergency unit? Should I have been arrested? No, no, no. I don’t mean to whine, sensei, but it’s been too long without any recognition.” Ekyt looked up at Asuma. He had sat down to tend to his eye, securing the collar of his shirt around it. The blood was still pouring from the wound, almost unnaturally so.

Asuma sighed. “So if you fail, you think all the work you’ve done will be for nothing? Is that it?”

Ekyt looked away. “Partially. That, and the usual stuff. I don’t belong. Think about this, all the friend’s I’ve made, jonin aside, are outsiders. Katsuyori, a samurai; Sai, an artist without a personality...And there’s me. And now...” Ekyt’s voice gathered in volume and emotion.

“I’m a freak! Look what those bastards did! I should have killed those three! I should have just eaten them alive! But I held back. Does a JONIN hold back? OF COURSE NOT! DAMN IT!” Ekyt cracked a tree with his fist, ignoring the bleeding cuts, and the stunned look on Asuma’s face.

I haven’t seen him like this before...I know Genma said he had lost it with Tsunade...but still, that might have been exaggerated. Seeing THIS first-hand...it’s unnerving. Excusable because of the situation, but still scary to see such a calm kid lose his cool so spectacularly.

“I always mess up! I can train until I die, and nothing! Not one-damn-thing! What does it take to impress that Hokage?!”

Asuma still couldn’t believe Ekyt was even moving. That was an eye that just got mutilated...and he’s worried about a rank? What kind of mentality does this kid have? It must be tough. Tsunade really should try to channel it positively, instead of pissing the kid off. No one gives him credit, so he can never quit. Normally, that’s really admirable, but his life is at stake. I’ve got to get him to go back to the Leaf. But how do I terminate this mission without anyone failing?

Ekyt was now pacing around the clearing, cursing under his breath, trying and failing to light a chakra cigarette, his depth perception gone for the time being. His remaining eye would adjust, he knew, but he was getting angry very fast. He finally succeeding in lighting the cigarette, then promptly jammed it into his mouth, glaring around the clearing, half-waiting for more Mist ninja.

“Ekyt, just got word from Tsunade. The mission is terminated for a new plan of attack. That arsonist has moved on. The Land of Trees withdrew their request for help.”

Asuma HAD just talked to Tsunade, and all this was true. The arsonist’s identity, however, wasn’t something Asuma was going to tell Ekyt. Bad enough he was a criminal, but he was also a Mist ninja. If

Ekyt knew THAT, there would be no stopping him.

Trees are out...Ekyt can't travel that way... Asuma was trying to figure out how to get home. Ekyt just kept muttering, Ino, Shikamaru, and Choji showed up. No one asked about Ekyt's eye, though Ino took a prolonged look. Shikamaru and Choji didn't dare say anything. They had never seen Ekyt look so...severe. Not even angry, but disturbed.

Tok Tok Tok!

Three more Shinobi joined them. They had landed on Ekyt's blind side, so Ekyt treated them as enemies. WHOOK! CRACK!

A blind side-kick bent one attacker over at the stomach. Ekyt spun, his hand cocked to punch. That punch rocketed off someone's nose. But the punch was also hard to land, so Ekyt decided to stick with kicks for now. They required less use of depth perception. Jutsus would be hard to aim, and Ekyt really didn't want to use any more chakra than necessary right now.

"What's the matter, you freaks? COME ON! You blinded me, you can't even beat a kid with one eye? Some warriors YOU are! I could have whipped the @\$@ of everyone in your village myself!" Ekyt taunted, laughing maniacally as he dodged attack after attack.

"Shut up, you little bastard! SHUT UP! We've got your eye! How about THAT?!" one yelled.

Crick.

Ekyt rushed him in a blind rage, shouting obscenities, making threats, and making good on some of those threats, all at the same time.

-

For a while, Asuma's team could only watch, stunned that Ekyt was fighting so well with such an injury. That in and of itself made Asuma wonder about Ekyt's injury. Now, as Ekyt finished the three Shinobi relatively easily, his suspicions were all but confirmed. Ekyt himself gave the last word as he was pulled off the three unconscious enemy Shinobi.

"Sorry about that act, Asuma-sensei..." Ekyt pulled the collar off his eye, revealing it to be fine. "But I noticed those guys tailing us, and I couldn't think of how to tip you off. Sorry for the act, but any other way would have let them get away..." Ekyt blinked, trying to get used to using two eyes again. The injury was fake, but he had really covered his eye.

Asuma couldn't hold that against Ekyt. Doing what you had to do, that was just fine when it saved lives.

"Geez, you certainly had that thought out. Were you EXPECTING to be attacked?" Shikamaru drawled. Ekyt actually nodded.

"The Mist Village is a little angry with me, it seems, for ruining their execution. Too bad for them, I wouldn't take it back if I could. I'm sorry for the act, but like I said, I didn't know WHEN they were going to attack. When they showed up, it was before I had a chance to tell you, and if I had spoken up

then, they would have run for it.”

“Oh, so you wanted prisoners? To stop this whole thing? Like, hostages?” Ino asked, trying to make sense of a confusing predicament.

“Yes. I’ve heard rumors that the Mist Village holds a number of our own as prisoners. So I wonder if they’ll be willing to make a trade. They’re a small village compared to the Leaf, they can’t afford to lose Shinobi.” Ekyt shrugged, as if saying ‘think what you want’, and started to light a new chakra cigarette.

“Does the Fifth Hokage know about this?” Asuma queried.

“No. It’s easier to obtain forgiveness than permission,” Ryouko replied. Asuma couldn’t argue that. In the same situation, he probably would have done the same thing as Ryouko. Asuma hadn’t earned a 35 million ryo price on his head by playing by the rules. And it wasn’t like Ryouko didn’t think about the village as he acted...

Asuma stroked his chin. “Alright. You take these clowns back to the village, and tell Lady Tsunade. Make sure you tell her that THEY attacked YOU, she’ll be more receptive once she knows you acted in self defense. The rest of us will move on to the Land of Trees. That’s well within wireless range of the Hidden Leaf, if we get in trouble, I’ll signal you. It’s actually better this way, that way, if this IS a trap, not everyone gets caught in it...”

Ekyt nodded his understanding. “You go on ahead. I’m thinking I should request some kind of escort. These three weren’t alone before, they might not be now...” Ekyt looked around, a nervous smile on his face. “I’d be surprised if they were, in fact. I took them on alone just to see their skills...and, frankly, I shouldn’t have been able to win that easily. I think these guys are some kind of warm up or something...”

“Maybe we should stay. I mean, no telling how many there are, right?” Choji muttered, looking around for support. Ekyt shook his head, though.

“No, you go on ahead. I’ll get backup from the village, they aren’t far. And it’s more likely more of their friends will show up if I’m alone, at least at first.” Ekyt rolled his shoulder, just relaxing apparently, like nothing was wrong.

Asuma didn’t want to leave, it really went against the grain to leave someone so young and inexperienced alone in a situation like this, but there wasn’t much choice. They were contracted to help the Land of Trees. Ekyt wasn’t, he was only supposed to aid them. And he WAS aiding them, if he got rid of the Mist Ninja tailing them.

“Alright, but don’t let yourself get in too deep,” Asuma warned.

“Understood. Have a safe trip,” Ekyt told them. Asuma and his team left. As soon as they got out of the way, Ekyt inhaled all he could of his chakra cigarette, then put his mask on. He only wore his mask in combat. Well, this was sure to be something CLOSE to combat...

--

Ekyt looked around, seeing eighteen Mist ninja of varying ranks surrounding him, glaring at him, and brandishing weapons. Asuma's team was long gone. Ekyt had to hold out until his backup arrived. He keyed his field mic, but didn't speak into it. He keyed it again, still not speaking. But that was the signal for the Leaf to send backup. This was too much...

"You want to get me that badly?" Ekyt asked aloud. The Mist ninja didn't answer. That struck Ekyt as odd. Curious, he threw a kunai at one of the Mist ninja. It went right through him. Clones! But how many were clones?! Even worse:

This must have been a trap! There's three right now that are real. At least, that I know about. There's probably a lot more real ones waiting...damn. If I cancel the call for help, I'm done for. If I don't, there's a chance that this is too big a trap, and we'll ALL die...well then, I've got to go down fighting...alone.

Ekyt keyed his field mic again, and this time barked into it: "Abort signal! Repeat, abort signal!"

Kunai came from seemingly every direction. Ekyt dodged and blocked as much as he could, but still got cut to ribbons. This wasn't good at all. If he could just FIND his attackers, Ekyt knew he stood a chance of winning. Right now, he was just getting worn out. Maybe it was time for a trap of his own. The next time the kunai started to rain down, Ekyt used a replacement jutsu. Then another. Then another. He was panting by the end, but had laid his trap.

"Remote Detonation Jutsu!"

The exploding tags Ekyt had planted on the logs detonated, sending splinters of wood all over. Ekyt narrowed his eyes, trying to look through the smoke. He was dismayed at what he saw.

"No way...damn, that didn't do anything..." Ekyt breathed, not believing that all that had just proven that the eighteen Shinobi he could see were just clones, unaffected by their environment or attacks. The number of clones hadn't changed, so unless the Mist Shinobi had bailed out quickly, they were never among the ones Ekyt had seen.

I don't even know where my attackers are hiding. This puts me at a bigger disadvantage than I thought...Got to think this one out, too...

Ekyt suddenly noted movement. He didn't attack right away. Better to let his attackers come to him...he DID have three hostages after all. But things changed very quickly. The clones disappeared.

"Are you okay, Ekyt-sensei?"

Katsuyori, his sword shoulder, joined by Yamato, and some girl Ekyt didn't know, had apparently taken care of the clones.

"I'm fine, thank you. Did you get my message to disregard the attack?" Ekyt was too shocked to be angry that his request had been ignored.

“We did, but we had to come. We captured the three that were attacking. Combined with the three you’ve got, quite a day’s work!” Kantai added, after introducing herself.

Ekyt dusted himself off. “Well, good thing you ignored me. I made a bad move, and they could have gotten me, but good. Alright then, let’s go back to the village.”

There was silence. Yamato and Katsuyori both wore uncomfortable looks. Ekyt didn’t like that. Something had to be up. But what did that mean for him?

25 - Bull's Eye

“What have they done?” Ekyt asked quietly, head bowed, fearing the worst. He had no reason to believe this was good news.

“Your team has been disbanded. Katsuyori, Sai, Kantai, and I are forming the new team, now that all of Team Kakashi is on the same page. Lady Tsunade says she has a bigger plan for you...” Yamato tried to give Ekyt a ray of hope, but that disappeared quickly. Even the stoic Ekyt couldn't hide the shades of disappointment on his face. He pulled the chakra cigarette out of his mouth, extinguished it, and pocketed its remains for later use.

“Alright then, Hokage knows best, I guess...I assume she's in charge for a reason...” Ekyt bit his thumb, absently making the Summoning Jutsu handsigns. Shuurai, his giant snake, waited, ready for Ekyt to put the prisoners in him. Ekyt shoved them in, not exactly being gentle. When they protested, a glare was enough to shut them up.

“I'll ride with them,” Ekyt said glumly. At least it would be quiet in there. If a fight broke out...all the better. Ekyt could use a little stress management...

-

My good mood came and left so quickly...this is really painful. For a brief while, I thought I understood everything. I guess I was about as wrong as anyone could be. Why should I be happy? Because I think I deserve to be? Well, maybe what the Fifth has planned will be worth my time. I hope. That's what I've got to think.

By the time Ekyt exited the snake, any trace of the 'happy' Ekyt that had made a brief appearance was long gone. In its place was the Ekyt of old. Mask in place, bags under eyes, not even the hint of a smile...and absolutely no hope to be found anywhere on him. His shoulders were slumped, and his eyes darted around, from target to target. Just like the old Ekyt.

“Sensei...are you okay?” Katsuyori asked carefully. Ekyt looked over and put a hand on Katsuyori's head.

“Don't call me 'sensei' anymore. That isn't my title. You and I are now comrades, fighting on the same level.” Ekyt removed his hand and stalked toward Tsunade's office, climbing the stairs instead of jumping through the window. A sure sign that something was wrong.

--

“Yes, Lady Fifth?” Ekyt said, without emotion.

“I'm glad you came!” Tsunade seemed genuinely happy to see Ekyt. That had the effect of making Ekyt mildly curious and mildly worried, but that was it.

“Really? I’m...happy for you,” Ekyt replied, trying not to sound as sarcastic as he wanted. That took a lot of effort on his part.

“See, Ekyt, we need someone to represent the Leaf in a new ceremony that takes place before the chunin exams. It’s a tournament of the top genin fighters from each nation. And I need you to tell me- Who is the top genin in our village?” Tsunade was dead serious, and Ekyt wondered just how stupid/cruel she was.

This is below the belt, Tsunade!

“My opinion, you mean? Well, to be honest...I really don’t have one,” Ekyt said earnestly. “I train by myself, so I don’t know. If you mean Katsuyori, it’s too soon for him...”

“Interesting that you wouldn’t mention yourself...” Tsunade mused.

“I have my pride, but not THAT much of it. That’s beyond pride, it’s ego, and too much of it. That kind of title is for others to give to who they feel deserves it.” Ekyt was wondering just why Tsunade has kicked him off his old team. And then she mentions the chunin exams?

Tsunade nodded. “That’s definitely you. Only you would have that much of a self-depreciating attitude. It makes you the perfect choice- I’ve already chosen my fighter, the top of the graduating class this year, Okkuu Kazuki. I want you to be his manager and attendant.”

Tsunade waited for the ‘thank you’, and the gush of praise. Instead, she found Ekyt shaking his head in apparent disbelief.

“You are something, Lady Fifth. Well, I’m not going to take the mission. And I have a very good reason for it. Among the other reasons that aren’t worth your time...” Ekyt twirled a scroll between his fingers. As he did, he absently reached out the window and tapped Shuurai on the head. Shuurai spat the prisoners into Tsunade’s office. Six in all...

“THERE’S my reason. Putting me with this kid is like putting a giant bulls eye on his back. And when he faces the Mist candidate, you know nothing good can come of that. And...” Ekyt hesitated. This wasn’t the best thing to say, but the question was driving him nuts. He HAD to know.

“Why would you rub the chunin exam in my face? Unless I’m taking it...”

Tsunade smiled widely. “I HAD to disband your team, they weren’t ready. YOU, however, are ready for the chunin exams. And I’ve finally found the loop hole that can get you in...of course, you’d be fighting alone...but I don’t think that’s a huge concern for you, is it?” Tsunade knew that this had caught Ekyt completely off guard, and a sardonic corner of her mind was glad to see the normally collected genin go temporarily numb with surprise was entertaining.

Ekyt’s demeanor suddenly did a 180, causing Tsunade to grin. “No, not at all!”

Tsunade smiled. “You know, I think you’ve had enough hard luck, Ekyt. You’ve drawn the short straw

a lot, and you've more than paid your dues. Now it's your time to shine. But I still want you to watch Okkuu- he may be a target just by being from the Hidden Leaf. I know I can trust you to take care of this."

"Of course, Lady Tsunade. And...maybe these six can offer us some kind of advantage?"

Ekyt indicated the prisoners on the floor next to him.

Tsunade blinked at them, wondering how they got there. Then she slowly smiled as she realized what Ekyt meant. It was unorthodox, but then again, so was Tsunade.

"I see what you're saying...I think these six will be immensely helpful to us. And we won't even need to torture them, provided they behave..."

The six prisoners shook with fear. They had heard of Tsunade's legendary gambling, but even more so of her legendary temper. They decided, without speaking, to keep quiet and not tick her off. Probably a smart move.

"Alright then. Ekyt, go and get 'em. I'm on your side for once- don't get used to it, though!"

Ekyt smirked. "I wouldn't dare, Lady Tsunade." Ekyt started to walk away, but Tsunade stopped him once more, a smirk playing on her face.

"You know...it's adorable you have a crush on my apprentice."

Ekyt spun on his heel, a rather fixed smile on his face. "Pardon me, Lady Tsunade?"

Tsunade rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, did you think I wouldn't figure it out? I was in love once, kid. The blushing, the awkwardness- It's a wonder Sakura hasn't noticed herself! But don't worry, your secret is safe with me. To be honest, I thought you would have told her by now! You're older than her, it shouldn't be too hard for you..."

"Easy for you to say, Lady Fifth. I'm nineteen, almost twenty, she just turned seventeen. I mean, the age gap isn't huge, but still...she could do better than me, and I know it. Besides, how would the village react to...well, me and her? I'm not a native here..."

Tsunade tapped Ekyt on the head playfully. "You know, I knew you were going to say that. Not to mention the legal matters regarding age, everything you said is true. But- this village has accepted you. I would call that native. And if you mean your past, hell, look at what we've got running around here! A former Sound agent that was formerly from the Rain, not to mention that he yanks bones out of his body. The Sand Kazekage's older sister! You're worried because you've had some samurai training? Please, get over it. You've charmed an entire village without any support from it's leadership. I think you're fine."

Ekyt had to stop and think. WAS it unreasonable that he was being so cautious? He'd lived in the Hidden Leaf for nearly four years now...and he and Sakura WERE close enough in age. Ekyt had thought of all this before, but somehow, coming from Lady Tsunade, it was different entirely. Ekyt shook his

head, already knowing he wouldn't act on what she'd said.

"Well," Tsunade said, "Either way, best of luck! I want a chunin coming back to this village, and I want my new star genin home in one piece. I leave it in your hands. Now go on, you should at least meet this genin before you leave."

Ekyt bowed, wordlessly thanking Tsunade, before rushing out the window, bounding across the rooftops. Tsunade smiled tolerantly, walking over to her window to look up at Hokage Mountain. The Third Hokage's face greeted her.

What are you thinking, Sarutobi-sensei? It's taken me this long, but I think I've warmed to your last student. It's time for him to have some success. Don't know how you did it, but you certainly helped mold a talented ninja out of a skinny, awkward kid...

It's thanks to your sacrifice that all of us are here. You and your bonehead student who wouldn't get out of Orochimaru's way. It's good you came when you did...it would have been Ekyt who died, because I know- he would have used the Fourth's jutsu if you hadn't.

Seems our village attracts knuckleheads. But those knuckleheads...might be in charge some day...

Tsunade thought of Naruto, and his declarations that he was going to be Hokage some day. Then the thought of Sakura's raw determination and will power that defined her as a brilliant medic-nin. Kakashi and his books, Sai and his comments, Yamato and his past...the list went on and on.

"Seems the Hidden Leaf is full of strange people...talented...but strange." **Guess I can't talk...after that whole gambling issue I had...still have...**

--

Ekyt took a walk around the village, killing time until class got out. That's when he spotted the academy, and the spotted Okkuu. Inwardly, Ekyt groaned and wondered if Tsunade hated him.

That kid is a little punk!

-

"You can't make me, sensei! I'm too good for this crap! D-rank nothing, I could have done those in the womb!"

Ekyt knew the jonin that was in charge of this squad. He was a nice guy and a good fighter, but he never put his foot down when he needed to. It was clear Okkuu was calling the shots. His teammates, a small, timid redhead and a big, lumbering boy with short black hair seemed to be afraid of him. Ekyt decided that now was a good time to introduce himself.

-

Okkuu looked at the genin striding over.

“What do you want, light-weight?” Okkuu sneered. Ekyt rolled his eyes.

“I’m your manager for this trip you’re taking, then I’m taking the chunin exams myself.”

Okkuu laughed. “YOU? Don’t make me laugh, you pathetic little punk!”

The jonin tugged on Ekyt’s sleeve. “Don’t make him mad, please!” Ekyt shook his head, already seeing enough of this crap for one day.

“Listen, you arrogant little punk. I really couldn’t care less how you talk to me, or even what you think of me. All I know is that your rotten attitude is screwing with the village and getting in the way of my mission. THAT is something I won’t tolerate.” Sometimes a stern lecture worked, though Ekyt didn’t think it would. And he was correct.

“You’re the same rank as me, you can’t tell me what to do! You’re a failure!” Okkuu sneered. He started to say something else, but was cut off in mid-sentence.

“Are you done grandstanding, kid?” Ekyt muttered dangerously. The other present gulped, but didn’t dare interfere.

“And if I’m not done?” Okkuu shot back. “What are you gonna do, you gutless coward? Hit me?”

Ekyt had thought about it, and REALLY wanted to punch this irritating little brat. But he held off.

“Listen, I’ve heard enough. You realize that you might be hot stuff here, where no one is going to kill you, but once you leave, that deals off? You DO realize that genin from other villages aren’t going to play nice? They don’t care if it’s a sparring match, if they can, they WILL take you out. So check your ego at the door, or your @\$@ will be on someone’s wall as a trophy.”

Okkuu seemed a little shocked by that, but recovered quickly. “You don’t think I know that? Man, you’re dumb!”

Ekyt shook his head. “When you’ve proven yourself in combat, THEN you can talk to me. Until then, you’ve won a few sparring matches, big deal. You’re gonna find out quickly that you’re nothing special.”

Okkuu gaped at Ekyt as he watched him walk away, apparently not bothered by the brash attitude that Okkuu was so good at projecting. This struck home with Okkuu.

Ekyt, huh? Well then, I give you guts for standing up to me. But you’re full of hot air until you’ve proven yourself to me!

--

Tsunade shook her head in disbelief. Sakura and Shizune were both trying really hard to contain their laughter. It wasn’t every day Ekyt let loose with that kind of word in front of a lady. Still, his word of

choice made sense to Sakura and Shizune, who had both dealt with Okkuu before.

“Say that again?” Tsunade asked Ekyt.

“That kid is, pardon my French, a little prick! If he’s representing the Leaf, then our honor as a village is gone!”

Tsunade stood up, face to face with Ekyt. “What are you suggesting I do, then?”

“Well, it’s your call, but I suggest this: Let me enter that tournament.”

Tsunade shrugged. “The only reason I DIDN’T enter you in that thing is so you’d be rested for the chunin exams.”

“This is more important, this is the village. And besides, I’m not going to write myself off of the chunin exams because I had a few scraps before it started. Trust me, if that kid goes out on that floor without another Leaf in the tournament, he’s going to be someone’s big kill. I don’t care how good he is, his overactive mouth gland makes him a target, and, even worse, it puts a bulls eye right on the Leaf Village.” Ekyt leaned forward on the desk, his eyes looking darkly at Tsunade.

“Let me fight. If I’m not there, that little jerk’s life is forfeit. As for the chunin exams, I’m going to take them, no matter what. If I pass, great. If I fail, there’s a next time with this loophole you found. Either way, I’m sure this is the right course of action. I’d rather the bullseye was on me personally, than on everyone with a Leaf headband.”

Tsunade nodded again, this time slowly. “Alright, you’ve convinced me. BUT- I want you back here, in one piece, as a chunin.”

Ekyt bowed. “Understood.”

Tsunade nodded to Sakura, who took a bottle off of a small shelf behind Tsunade’s desk.

“Ryouko, take these with you. It’s a generic poison antidote. Those Mist-nin like to use poison, so this is a useful thing to have,” Sakura explained while handing Ryouko the pills.

“Thank you, Sakura.”

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As Ekyt geared up to leave, he looked at what the Third Hokage had given him. Most was too precious for Ekyt to take with him, but the chainmail arm guards would definitely be a help.

So this is what it’s going to come down to...two tournaments, if this village follows the same pattern for the exams as the Leaf does. I’d better be on my guard. That insipid little punk, Okkuu, is definitely going to bite of more than he can chew. And Tsunade made it clear it’s my job to bail him out, or else. Fair enough. If I can’t become a chunin this time, I won’t come back to the Hidden Leaf at all!

26 - The Warzone of the Mind

“You don’t impress me, you know.”

Ekyt rolled his eyes, but continued his training. He needed to be in top form, and even in shape to kill...that was Tsunade’s order, and it was in the best interest of the village. If it came to it, Ekyt would bloody his hands for the first time.

“You listening, jerk? I SAID you’re no big deal?”

“Fire Style: Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” Ekyt called, ignoring the pest behind him. He watched his fire shoot towards a dead tree about fifty yards away. It went up in flames, prompting Ekyt to quickly use a Water Clone Jutsu to extinguish the flame. After this, he finally turned to Okkuu, who had been plaguing him for quite some time.

“I really couldn’t care less what you think of me, as I already informed you,” Ekyt told Okkuu dully, looking at the scorched tree to determine where his flame had hit. Just above his target point, a knot in the wood. Close, and more accurate than he’d need to be against almost anyone. But not good enough.

Okkuu kicked the ground in frustration. “What the hell is wrong with you? I’m insulting you, telling you that you suck, and you’re just training away?! Are you slow or something?”

“No. Patient.”

Okkuu lost any sense of self control. “YOU THINK YOU’RE BETTER THAN ME?! THEN HOW COME YOU AREN’T A JONIN, HUH? YOU JUST SOME LOSER WHO COULDN’T CUT IT!”

Ekyt STILL didn’t react strongly. “Think what you want. I guess we’ll find out at that tournament, won’t we?”

Okkuu gave a big sigh. “So you entered. What, to teach me a lesson or something? I’m too old for that?”

“I’m not your sensei, it’s not my job to teach you a lesson. My job is to make sure you leave that tournament alive. Personal feelings don’t matter. If you’re so insistent, I’ll tell you what I think of you, but you won’t like it.”

“Bring it on, you think I can’t handle a little insult?!” Okkuu shot back, tapping Ekyt on the shoulder. Ekyt grabbed his hand and turned around to face him.

“I think you’re an obnoxious little brat with a mouth so big you could whisper in your own ear. I think that, even if you ARE any good, your bragging is going to make you look like an idiot. And I think that you’re so full of yourself, that when you get knocked on your @\$@ for the first time, you’re going to cry your eyes out. You’re a self-righteous prima-donna who has no idea what’s good for the Village.”

Ekyt decided he needed a rest, and guessed Okkuu could use one to get his wits back. The saddest part was that Ekyt had just told the complete truth.

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(I made a mistake in chapter 18. Kimimaro is not dead, he is actually alive in the Hidden Leaf. Three story lines got crossed, and that's what happened. I'm going to fix that right now. Sorry for the confusion)

"Hey boneman, what's Orochimaru like?" Temari nudged Kimimaro, getting his attention.

"Orochimaru is a savior...until the time comes to pay back what you 'owe' him. My sheltered life led me to believe that he was all that was good...but now, I see that good is something else entirely..." Kimimaro rattled off. Temari shook her head at his reply.

"That's not what I meant. I mean, how does he treat his followers?"

"Lower than dirt. Scum of the earth. That's what they are, and that's what he treats them like. Some are killed for failure, others are tortured, or experimented on. Only a select few receive his grace...I'm ashamed I'm one of them..." Kimimaro looked at the cursed seal on his chest, wishing he didn't have it. Now that he had been let outside of a cage, and given freedom, he saw many things. Some bad, some good, but enough to form his own opinion of the world, and not rely on someone else as his eyes and ears.

"So get rid of it," Temari said simply, adjusting the fan on her back. The damn thing got cumbersome at times.

"No one has ever removed a cursed seal. I would die if it was removed."

Temari thought for a moment, remembering a fight between Ekyt and Sasuke one time. Sasuke was going to leave the village, and Ekyt used some weird jutsu. That jutsu nearly cost him his life because it left him open to Sasuke's attack, but after that, Sasuke curse mark faded, then turned blue, with a seal around it.

"What about your cousin, Kimimaro? Ekyt. He sealed a curse mark before, with some weird jutsu that only he can perform, for some reason."

Kimimaro had considered that. But he had held off for two reasons. The first reason was that, for some reason, Kimimaro had some desire to have Ekyt's life. The second reason was that, with this curse mark, he could better serve his new village. But now that he had met Temari, and learned that his curse mark had helped cause the disease that nearly took his life, he was ready to give it more thought. Mostly for Temari's sake. Kimimaro hadn't figured out 'affection' just yet, but it was a strangely pleasant sensation.

"My cousin...I've considered going to him...but with my freedom came pride..."

Temari laughed. "That's an easy fix. Just let me talk to him. I guarantee that he'd help even if I didn't ask, but I've got a special factor to add to the equation..."

Kimimaro's eyes widened slightly. **What kind of advantage does she have?**

"What sort of special factor?" Kimimaro asked aloud.

"I'm female, and I know things," Temari informed Kimimaro. "That's really your cousin's weakness-females. Just watch, he's coming this way..."

-

Ekyt walked down the street, dodging people without looking up from his scroll. It was a wonder he hadn't walked into anyone yet. He was lost to the world right now, reading about a different time, with different attacks.

"Fascinating..." he breathed, trying to remember every last word on the scroll.

"Hey, kid!" Temari called out. Ekyt kept walking, not paying any attention. Temari was slightly irritated.

"Hey, you!" she said, tapping his shoulder. Ekyt rolled shoulder, apparently thinking there was a fly on it or something, while he kept walking. Temari, not being an overly patient person outside of combat, lost her cool. Walking up behind Ekyt, she suddenly jammed her fan upwards- in between Ekyt's legs. Not hard enough to do damage, but it certainly got his attention.

"Who the hell did that?!" Ekyt snarled, whipping around as he could. Temari held her hand open, and Ekyt spun into it. SLAP!

"Ow! Temari? What was that for?" Ekyt asked, rubbing his face while getting to his feet.

"How dare you ignore me? We used to have a special thing, kid!"

Ekyt raised an eyebrow. "When was this? And, you know, you're only two monthes older than me..."

Temari grabbed Ekyt's shirt and yanked him close. "Listen, you saved me on a broken leg. THANK YOU! Now, come over here and help me fix my boyfriend!"

Ekyt had to shake his head. **Shikamaru? Nah. But, who besides Shikamaru, and me, the attention-starved loser, would put up with this kind of abuse? Oh, right, Kimimaro. Geez, only in the village for a month and he lands a beautiful (Slightly psychotic) girl? I wonder if THAT'S part of the bloodline? I'm sure I didn't inherit that part -_-;**

"Okay, work your magic, kid!"

Ekyt nodded and got to work. To prove her point to Kimimaro about Ekyt's weakness being his semi-fear of kunoichi, Temari decided to mess with Ekyt a little. Temari thought for a second.

“Hey, I’ve got a sister that wants you. Then again, that would break Sakura’s heart, after what she told me in the hot spring...”

“You’re lying, Temari. And that’s just mean to pick on me for being single!” Ekyt shot back, getting that Temari was messing with him. He was entitled to say something back, right? After all, only Lee and Tsunade really knew of Ekyt’s feelings for Sakura. Temari joked like this a lot, and always paired Ekyt with a different kunoichi. (Temari’s favorite pairs are EkytXTsunade, EkytXAnk, and EkytXTenten)

“Just remember who set you up with Kimimaro...” Ekyt joked. Temari smiled and nodded.

“Okay, that should do it. Five Elements Sealing Jutsu!” Ekyt called, jamming his to Kimimaro’s chest. The collective energy of the emotional chakra and the power of Kimimaro’s curse mark sent Ekyt tumbling away. He regained his footing to see Kimimaro’s curse mark fade, then turn blue. Mission accomplished.

“Nice job, kid!” Temari ruffled Ekyt’s hair, knowing full well he hated that. “Thanks. You know, I’ve got to ask: You still scared of kunocihi?”

“Yes.”

“Then how come you talk to me without a problem?” This had been bothering Temari for a while now. She used to make Ekyt blush with her attention, and when it stopped, Temari couldn’t help but feel a little worried that she was less attractive or something. She HAD changed to longer, less revealing robe over the past couple years.

Ekyt thought for a second about what she meant. “Oh, that. Well, you’re not a threat anymore. You’re taken,” Ekyt responded. “I may be affection-starved, but I NEVER put my eyes on someone else’s girl. Not least of all my cousin’s girl.”

Temari breathed a sigh of relief, despite herself.

“Well, pardon me, I’ve got a little punk that needs my attention. Lady Tsunade isn’t Hokage for nothing, I guess. But still, saying ‘you get to go to the chunin exams, but you have to babysit’ is still pretty mean. Especially this kid...”

Temari, a jonin who had spent time at the academy helping Iruka teach, could appreciate that. She wanted her own team, and knew that if this kid rattled even the ever-stoic Ekyt, he couldn’t be good news. Temari softened a little, and asked what the kid’s problem was.

“Who knows?” Ekyt replied. “Just a little brat with a big chip on his shoulder. But, I think that chip will shrink when he gets his first butt-kicking.”

--

Okkuu was stunned. No one had ever talked to him like that before. Immediately upon Ekyt’s return, he tried to regain his swagger.

“Yeah, wanna hear what I think of you?”

Ekyt used a Shadow Clone Jutsu out of boredom. “Go ahead. But just remember, I really don’t care what you think. Until you learn what’s good for the village, you’re not worthy to be called a ‘Leaf’ Shinobi.”

Again, Okkuu was surprised, but he had a nasty retort waiting for Ekyt.

“You know, I think you’re thinking your some martyr, or someone special. You’re not. You’re just a nineteen year old genin who tries to act like a sensei. I think YOU are the punk, and that you aren’t fit to clean my sandals! What do you think of that?!” Okkuu shouted, poking Ekyt in the chest. Ekyt’s response only made him madder.

“I think you’re LOOKING for reasons to hate me, based on knowing me for an hour. You’re certainly entitled to your opinion. And I’m entitled not to care. And, I’d like to recommend you start working on your training more, and working on my patience less.”

Thwomp, thwomp, thwomp, thowmp.

Ekyt spun around on his heel, a kunai in his hand. The kunai was blocked by another weapon.

“Very good, Ekyt-kun!” Sai, holding a short sword, withdrew his attack. With him were Katsuyori, Kantai, and Yamato.

“Oh, look, it’s the little samurai peasant!” Okkuu sneered at Katsuyori. Ekyt waited for Katsuyori to draw on Okkuu, but was surprised to find him bowing down to the younger boy. (Not a literal bow, just not reacting) Ekyt’s temper finally showed through when Okkuu tried to grab Katsuyori. He reached over, grabbed Okkuu, and tossed him to the far end of the empty field.

“DO NOT make the mistake of picking on him again, you nasty little punk! I don’t mind you trying your crap on ME, but if you think for one second I’m gonna let you screw with him (points to Katsuyori), then you’re dead wrong!”

Okkuu, pleased to FINALLY get a reaction out of Ekyt, reared back and threw senbon at Katsuyori, who was too shocked to move. Ekyt’s arm flashed up and blocked all of the senbon. With a bleeding arm and eyes so mean that if looks could have killed Okkuu would have been dead three times, Ekyt snarled his last warning.

“Why don’t you try that on ME, you little jerk? Katsuyori’s too honorable to rip you into shreds, but you’re finally pushing my buttons, and you’re gonna start paying REAL QUICK.”

Okkuu laughed, knowing Ekyt wouldn’t move. “Yeah, yeah, you TALK a good game! But if your little friend is too scared to fight his own battles, then he DESERVES to die!”

Ekyt looked over to Katsuyori. Ekyt narrowed his eyes, seeing something in Katsuyori’s eyes. He hadn’t seen this type of look in his old apprentice before, and it worried him...

Katsuyori's mind was a war zone now.

27 - Samurai Pride: The Naming Ceremony!

"I've killed him. What of the family?" A dark voice muttered.

"Kill them all. They couldn't stand up to us, they deserve to die!" came the reply, the voice obscured by a cloth cover over his mouth.

The sounds of swords and screams echoed in Katsuyori's mind. He saw his father being cut to pieces, and other people, family members, some he knew, some he didn't, were mowed down, until the kunai in the Shinobi's hands grew blunt. Then it came to be Katsuyori's turn.

"I don't want to die!" Katsuyori shouted, covering his head with his hands. He was only a little boy, why did he have to die? What had he done wrong? Who had he ever hurt? Crouching in his hakama, his sword long gone, Katsuyori started to cry.

"Hmph. You aren't WORTH killing!"

After the Shinobi told him that, Katsuyori wished that he HAD been worthy of an honorable death, as his father had always talked about. Now, it was too late.

Katsuyori was seven at the time. His mind was gripped with fear and panic, and he felt himself retreat from the world...

"TAKE IT BACK, BASTARD!" Katsuyori shouted out of nowhere. He drew his sword and rushed Okkuu, who was too stunned to move. Ekyt and Yamato kicked off, with Yamato grabbing Okkuu, and Ekyt halting Katsuyori's arching blade.

"Calm down, Katsuyori, don't listen to him. Relax, relax..." Ekyt took a step back. Katsuyori glared at Okkuu, but took his frustration out on the tree next to him. SLASH! The tree fell to the ground, cut at the base by Katsuyori's skillfully wielded sword. Okkuu gulped; Yamato pulled Okkuu farther away; Ekyt put a hand on Katsuyori's shoulder.

"C'mon, time for a walk," Ekyt said quietly. Whenever Katsuyori had gotten horribly frustrated while training with him, Ekyt would drag him away from practice for a while, until Katsuyori calmed down.

--

By the stillness of the river, a red-faced Katsuyori told Ekyt about his greatest nightmare. That nightmare that had been a reality.

"They killed everyone...everyone...then said I wasn't worth killing...that's when my anxiety started...I should have died defending my family!" Katsuyori wailed, striking a tree with his fist. He felt Ekyt's hand

on his shoulder.

“So that’s why...” Ekyt whispered, “...that’s why you were so worried...anyone would be. You were young, Katsuyori. You know...”

Ekyt took a tree branch and made a series of marks.

“...Let’s say that we are born at this end of the branch, and die at this end. Beginning and end are not so important. It’s all this in between that measures what a man is. You were at the beginning of your life. Fear is permissible, you know. It’s okay to be scared. You were seven, no one is capable of facing death upright at such an age!”

Katsuyori looked away. “That’s not why I feel so bad...not anymore. It’s because...” Katsuyori shook his head, apparently ashamed of his words. But he found the strength to finish them:

“...It’s because it makes me like Sasuke.”

Ekyt had to admit that he hadn’t seen that one coming. Granted, Sasuke had come to his senses over the years, but Ekyt could still understand the shame.

“Katsuyori, you’re nothing like Sasuke. Sasuke has to work hard to be perfect, you and I, we have to work hard to be good. Sasuke took everything for granted over the years, something you haven’t done. Only one incident can compare you to Sasuke...but there’s one more, major difference- You have chosen a path in life not filled with hate. You’ve found love for the Leaf Village. In fact, I would compare you to someone else entirely, someone I think could help you very much...”

Ekyt wrote a scroll out to Tsunade, sending it off with his Water Dragon, Umisu.

“Ekyt, there’s one other thing...I can’t...you know...come of age.”

For a second, Ekyt thought **Oh no, not the ‘sex’ talk!**. But Katsuyori guess what Ekyt was thinking.

“No, no, not that! I mean...my name. I still have the name of a child. Now that I’ve become strong with the sword, I need an adult’s name! But I have no lord or father to do that for me...”

NOW Ekyt understood. It was a samurai custom. Well, this one was remedied easily enough, Ekyt just needed one more scroll...

--

“Only in this village, Shizune. Only in the Leaf...” Tsunade muttered, trying to look official and proper. “Damn that kid, HOW did he charm me into this?!”

Shizune, happily wearing the dressy kimono for the occasion, was a little pink in the face.

“Could it be the sake he sent, M’lady?” Shizune broke into alcohol-fueled giggles. It was too funny to see Tsunade’s hair in a topknot, with a black kimono that sported orange flowers. At her request

(Though she didn't tell Tsunade), Sai was drawing the scene, while a photographer was snapping pictures. Shizune had to remember this day. The day Tsunade played the part of a samurai's lord for a kid she had sent to his doom just a few weeks ago.

"Huh, I guess that's it. And Ekyt...damn, he's good at making me make an @\$\$ of myself. What's this whole thing about, again?"

Shizune read the scroll Ekyt had sent aloud. "It's a naming ceremony...where a boy becomes a man, and receives a sword...a warrior coming of age..."

Tsunade shrugged. "Huh. Well, I had 'becoming a man defined as a few different things, and I'm sure the kid hasn't-"

"Lady Tsunade!" Shizune admonished, but soon broke down giggling.

--

"I didn't mean you had to do all this!" Katsuyori peered out at the small crowd. He didn't have to worry about being jeered, from the first look of things. Then he took a second look- Okkuu had come!

"I wanted to. Shinobi took away your heritage, now they're going to give it back. And if you're worried about Okkuu...don't be. I'll be next to you, and if he mouth's off, we'll just show him what samurai can do!"

His fears evaporated, Katsuyori walked out, Ekyt next to him. Both were dressed in their full samurai formal wear. Katsuyori followed Ekyt's lead, bowing when he did, then staying in position when Ekyt nodded to him. Ekyt himself climbed up on the small platform Tsunade and Shizune were on, taking the third cushion for himself. He was up here (a) Because of his samurai past and (b) To make sure Tsunade didn't start getting lazy and ad-libbing.

-

"Now, you, Katsuyori Amakatsu, have reached adulthood in samurai culture. The time has come for you to receive a name and weapon based on your responsibilities upon coming of age. I officially name you Amakatsu Yuushi! Ekyt, please present him with his weapon..."

Ekyt had Tsunade borrow his iron war fan. She made the flicking motion he had shown her, indicating he could get up. It was strange, being ordered around by someone else giving your orders. But Ekyt saw the apprehension in Katsuyori's eyes, and his own apprehension passed. Upon reaching Katsuyori/Yuushi, Ekyt bowed, holding out a sword, still sheathed, edge facing him. Yuushi bowed and took it, and upon taking it, accepting his adulthood.

Strangely enough, there were no taunts from the small crowd. Okkuu had considered it, but he also considered Ekyt's warning to him...

He considered the warning more, and decided that holding his tongue would be best.

--

Ekyt watched from a distance as Katsuyori, er, Yuushi was congratulated by his parents. Smiling upon recalling Ekyt wouldn't have gone to this much trouble for himself, he was strangely content to let someone else have such a moment. Still in his hakama, Ekyt started to walk back home.

"You looked real cute in your skirt!"

Ekyt rolled his eyes at Team Kakashi and Team B.

"Of course. Thank you, Naruto. I dare say I was...sexy?" Ekyt struck a mocking pose, earning laughs from everyone. He STOPPED laughing when he felt breath on his neck, then heard a familiar voice.

"Pardon me, lovely lady! I couldn't help but notice that you're beautiful! How about spending some time with me, the Toad Mountain Sage, huh! Heh heh heh!"

The rest of the group burst into hysterical, tear-inducing laughter, as a red-faced Ekyt turned to face Jiraiya.

"Hey, you're not a beautiful young lady!" Jiraiya exclaimed.

"Sorry to disappoint..." Ekyt murmured, his hand on the hilt of his sword. Jiraiya backed up.

"Heh, don't be hasty now!" Jiraiya put his hands up, as if warding off Ekyt's bad mood. But Ekyt crouched low and drew his sword.

"This blade has fallen many a warrior, and I dare say it could fall a smartass like you! On your guard!" Ekyt shouted, taking a few running steps toward Jiraiya, who took off as if the fires of hell were chasing him. Ekyt stopped and had himself a laugh at the Legendary Pervert running at top speed.

"It was sweet of you to do that for Katsuyori...I mean, Yuushi," Kantai told Ekyt. Sakura nodded her agreement.

"Jus one thing, though, Ekyt- where DID you buy that dress?" Sakura asked innocently. Naruto laughed, while Ekyt shook his head tolerantly. He knew this had been coming.

(Note: I made ANOTHER mistake- Sakura and Naruto are, in fact, a couple at this point! Thanks for the reminder hflp!)

--

(Two weeks pass)

It was time.

Ekyt and Okkuu lined up against the other combatants. The proctor for Okkuu's match was Shikamaru, and that match was first. He was facing a Mist ninja with a nasty gleam in his eyes. Ekyt bowed his head, knowing that this would be a tough fight for Okkuu. Not that he liked the little jerk, but it was his responsibility to take care of this kid.

--

Okkuu stood across from the nameless enemy. **Watch this, Ekyt! I'm gonna prove to you that you're wrong about me!**

The Mist-nin was a unique fighter who used mostly poisoned senbon. That made it best to fight from a far distance with jutsus. Okkuu could do that, he was sure. How hard could it be?

"Begin!" Shikamaru commented. As soon as he said it, the Mist-nin, threw twenty senbon. Every last one hit the overconfident Okkuu, who tried to stand up, but fell back down. The Mist-nin drew a dagger and rushed.

"This is for my Village's honor that was taken!" he shouted. Ekyt looked at Shikamaru, who was grimacing, but not stopping the match. Okkuu was out of it, and about to get murdered. Ekyt knew that the Mist-nin didn't care about the tournament, he was only here to kill. Okkuu wasn't his REAL target. Ekyt, wracked with guilt, took off from the sidelines and skidded in front of the downed Okkuu, plucking a senbon out of his body and using it to block the dagger. The jonin rushed to the floor, shouting.

"That was uncalled for!"

"Disqualify them!"

"C'mon, that kid could've been killed!"

Shikamaru had to stop the match now that Ekyt had interfered.

"Winner- Murakami Karuso," Shikamaru pointed to the Mist-nin, who was still fighting with Ekyt. The jonin hadn't gotten close enough to stop them.

"It's him I want! Him!" Murakami shouted, pointing at Ekyt.

"Then come at me! Let him go! He just tried to kill an innocent kid!" Ekyt was shouting back.

"Shadow Possession Jutsu!" Shikamaru barked, trapping Ekyt and Murakami's shadows.

"The next match is to be Ekyt Kaguya against Murakami Karuso, to begin immediately!"

Ekyt was ready, but stopped. In the confusion, Okkuu was still down, and not getting treatment. Ekyt pushed his way over to Okkuu. Knowing full well that his Poison Removal Jutsu wasn't good enough, Ekyt knelt down to at least try. He couldn't just let the kid die. As he worked, his arms bloodied, he heard a faint voice.

"...Why...?"

Ekyt looked down, to see Okkuu talking. He was struggling now that the poison had spread so much, but he was getting the words out in a faint whisper.

"...Why...would you...help me? After...what I said?"

Ekyt kept working, the blood Okkuu was losing worrying him. **If this was me, no big deal. But he's twelve, this much blood loss...PLEASE don't go into shock on me.**

"Because this is what it means to belong to a village. You and I might hate each other, but I'd still give my life to save yours. It's hard to understand. But that's what a village does- we lend each other strength, then find our own strength."

Okkuu didn't really understand. But he HAD figured out that Ekyt didn't mean him any harm. His body started to feel a little stronger. His mother was a medic, and Okkuu could tell that Ekyt was just trying to stabilize him, until a medic could come. Apparently, the medics had been called, because a pink haired girl showed up.

"I'll take over, Ekyt. You did good," the girl informed Ekyt. Ekyt bowed.

"Thank you, Sakura. Okkuu...just hang in there..." Ekyt said, before he disappeared from Okkuu's view.

--

"Hey, Mist Ninja!" Ekyt shouted across the floor. The crowd parted. Konoha's top genin, Ekyt, was pretty well known. But few had ever heard him talk. The Mist ninja turned around, smirking.

"Is he dead yet?" the Mist-nin sneered. Ekyt smirked.

"You underestimate the Leaf. He's going to live. I'm afraid I OVERestimated you...you didn't even have the guts to come after your REAL target. Instead, you take on an innocent kid. Well, let's see if your poison works against me. Because I'm not going to let this go. You're messing with me, a boy in my care, AND the pride of the Hidden Leaf...And it's my honor to fight you..."

Murakami nodded to his attendants to move. "Have it your way! I'm going to hit you with TWICE as much poison! Let's see you escape that!"

--

Yuushi didn't understand this. Naruto was a good choice for him? How were they similar?

"Hey, Yuushi, congrats on the name thing! Anyway, Ekyt asked me to work with you. See, I've never known my parents. But I started to get people to believe in me, even when I wasn't so sure I believed in myself. That's what you need! That...and a special jutsu that every student of mine learns!" Naruto, of course, had only had one 'student'- Konohamaru.

"New Jutsu? What's it called?" Yuushi was ready to devour this new jutsu.

"Okay, it's called the Sexy Jutsu..."

28 - Poison's Power

“The...Sexy Jutsu?” Yuushi could help but ask. Bad move.

“Sure, lemme who ya! You’ll get a kick out of it, if you’re like you’re pervy sensei! Sexy Jutsu!”
PWOOF!

Yuushi, a very conservative boy, tried to keep his expression calm. Hard to do when there was a naked girl strutting her stuff about six inches away.

“Don’t I impress you, Yuushi-sama? No? Well, then...Ninja Harem Jutsu!”

PWOOF again!

Yuushi’s eyes bugged out. His mouth fell open, and his nose bled. At his age, his hormones were raging, and that much female beauty so close to him- the stoicism had been broken.

“Yuushi-sama, you’re so cute when you blush!” the girl Naruto cooed. Naruto ended the jutsu, laughing loudly at Yuushi.

“Boy, you’re as pervy as your sensei! HAHAHA!”

“Then teach it to me...” Yuushi asked quietly, kneeling in front of Naruto, looking up through the shocks of black hair that covered his eyes. Once he had begun training, Yuushi had pulled his long hair into a ponytail. Because of that, and his blind eye, he got his share of weird looks.

“Say what? No, I was just kidding...”

Yuushi looked up to Naruto. “If it bewildered my sensei, I have to know it. Upon receiving my adult name, there is only one right of passage left- become stronger than my teacher!”

Naruto gulped, a distinct “uh-oh” look on his face. “You, uh, wanna beat your teacher? I mean, I guess I want to beat Kakashi-sensei and the Pervy Sage, but...wow. You mean, like, kill him? In a real fight?”

Yuushi looked down. “Traditionally, it’s possible...but I don’t want to kill him. Just defeat him. He made you my trainer for a reason...maybe he saw this day coming, and didn’t want me to disgrace myself in combat...Either way, I have complete loyalty to Ekyt. That’s why I have to defeat him- to prove that his teaching methods are sound. It would be disgraceful of me not to try.”

Naruto could kind of understand. “Okay, here’s how the jutsu goes...”

I’ve gotta talk to Kakashi-sensei, or Iruka-sensei, or Pervy Sage about this! I don’t know what to do! And I don’t care what Yuushi says, I don’t think Ekyt knows about this!

--

"You're really gonna take me on, after what I did to your buddy? You've got guts, I'll say that for you Hidden Leaf punks!" Muraki shouted back to Ekyt. Ekyt put up a hand for silence from everyone.

"Funny...you couldn't kill two people, tied up in front of you. It took three people to stop the twenty-five you had...in a matter of seconds. Something must be wrong with your head. And, if my head looked like yours- I would have it circumcised."

That little verbal jab caused tears of laughter to fall down every cheek. Ekyt himself seemed amused, which was strange for him. The Mist Ninja did NOT seem amused.

"Just start the damn match, I wanna kill this guy in the worst way right now!" a red-faced Murakami yelled to Shikamaru.

"Yeah, yeah, keep your shirt on. Participants to the center..." Shikamaru drawled. Ekyt walked to the center, but jumped back immediately as the same senbon that had taken care of Okkuu were coming toward him fast.

"Fire style: Dragon's Fire Wall!" Ekyt barked, a wall of fire protecting him. While he was covered, Ekyt took the poisoned senbon out of his pocket, where he had them wrapped up to avoid getting poisoned himself.

"Take these back!" Ekyt threw the senbon. He made handsigns once more, improvising on the Third Hokage's 'Shuriken Shadow Clones'.

"Senbon Shadow Clones!" The senbon multiplied, catching Murakami by surprise. He couldn't dodge them all, and was hit with several. He hit the ground hard, needles sticking out of him.

"Do you want to quit?" Shikamaru asked. Murakami shook his head.

"No...I'll win...or die trying!"

Murakami got to his feet, then staggered.

"That's just going to spread the poison faster..." Ekyt pointed out. It was true. If you laid still, the poison wouldn't move as quickly.

"You're an idiot! That's my own poison, you don't think I thought to protect myself against it!"
SPLASH!

"Water clone?!" Ekyt said in surprise.

"Over here!"

Senbon flew from another direction. Ekyt breathed out hard, in frustration. All he could do was put his arms up in front of him as a block as the senbon sunk in. Immediately, Ekyt felt the effects of the poison.

Damn...

“Don’t move around too much, you’ll only spread the poison!” Murakami shouted mockingly. Ekyt plucked the needles out and dropped them to the ground. He leapt backward to the far wall, sitting as still as possible.

Got to think...what do I do here? I don’t know what this poison does...does it affect chakra? Darn, I KNOW he’s trying to force me to make a move...and I have no choice in the matter there...but what move should I make? I might only get one shot...let’s see...if I can get in close...that’s no good, poison. He’s a long AND short range fighter. How can I match that?

--

“Hey, Iruka-sensei?” Naruto asked over a bowl of ramen.

“Hmm? What is it, Naruto?” Iruka responded. It wasn’t like Naruto to start thinking when he had a full bowl of ramen in front of him.

“Well...I kinda found out something about Ekyt’s student...you know, Yuushi?”

Iruka cocked his head. “Oh? What’s that?”

Naruto went on to explain what Yuushi had said about needing to defeat Ekyt as a right of passage.

“...And I don’t think Ekyt knows about this, or at least he doesn’t expect it. I guess...I need to know what I should do. Do I tell Ekyt, or tell Yuushi not to do this? Should I keep teaching Yuushi? Gah, I hate this!”

Iruka smiled a little. “Naruto, a teacher’s greatest desire and greatest sadness is the same thing: Seeing his student outgrow his training, and become something better. I mean, look at you and me- I’m happy you surpassed my training, but it’s still a little sad when I think back to how you used to be.”

Naruto screwed his face up in concentration. “So I should keep training Yuushi? Even though I knew he’ll fight Ekyt?”

“That’s right. I think that Ekyt would appreciate it, strangely enough. If nothing else, he’ll understand. Do you see what I’m saying, Naruto?” Iruka asked, thinking back to how Naruto used to be.

“I guess so...” Naruto said glumly.

“So, what are you teaching him?” Iruka asked. What a mistake that was. One giant nosebleed later, Iruka wondered if he was one to give advice.

--

Ekyt leaned against the wall, still trying to figure out what to do.

I don't know his weakness...so what should my next move be? I don't have time to try a bunch of jutsus, I've got one shot...I should make it something I'm familiar with, play to my own strengths, instead of his weakness...it's my only hope. This is going to take just about all I've got...but it's my best shot.

Ekyt bowed his head and focused as hard as he could. While not using handsigns, this jutsu required chakra and concentration. Hard to concentrate when you were slowly dying because of poison.

Infinite Darkness Jutsu...

The genjutsu of the Second Hokage, this placed the target in a patch of never-ending darkness. It had taken Ekyt nearly two years to learn, and he still hadn't mastered it. So it was a long shot, but it was the best move he could make.

"Hey, what is this?! Turn the lights back on, retards!" Murakami snarled.

It took a lot of chakra to maintain this jutsu, and Ekyt still had two more moves to make. First, a Shadow Clone Jutsu. The Shadow Clone could read Ekyt's moves, new what to do. He sat down next to Ekyt, and used a jutsu of his own.

Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique.

-

"What is he doing? Has he lost it?! He's just sitting there?!" Kiba was getting impatient, ready to move on. Next to him, he saw his sensei, Kurenai, close her eyes and focus.

"...He's using genjutsu...some kind of high-level genjutsu...I can't tell which one...Kakashi?" Kurenai looked to the silver-haired jonin next to her. Kakashi had his Sharingan revealed, as did Sasuke.

"Ekyt is using the Second Hokage's genjutsu, the Infinite Darkness Jutsu...That's not a jutsu even my Sharingan can copy, since he didn't use handsigns. His clone is using the Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique."

"Why would he do that against this guy?" Sasuke asked. "How is it helpful?"

"If I had to guess, I would say it's because he doesn't know his opponent. He has to use what's most familiar to him," Kakashi said thoughtfully, watching intently.

"And the poison, Kakashi. He probably wants to avoid moving too much," Kurenai added. **This is getting dangerous...**

"He should heal himself before doing all this..." Ino muttered, thinking it was dumb to fight without getting the medical attention you needed. What good was a win if you died in the process?

"It's not that he didn't WANT to, Pig. It's that he COULDN'T," the newly-arrived Sakura said, eyes glued to the floor.

“Sakura, how is Okkuu?” Kurenai wanted to know, worry written on her face.

“He’ll be fine, don’t worry,” Sakura replied with a small smile. “That poison is deadly and fast-spreading, but because Okkuu stayed still, we caught it in time.”

“Why couldn’t he heal himself, Forehead?” Ino demanded.

“He hasn’t mastered medical ninjutsu yet. Because of his fight with Lady Tsunade, he couldn’t train with me or Shizune to learn it. And the scrolls on the advanced medical jutsus aren’t easy to learn by yourself...”

--

Ekyt felt his attacks hit Murakami. But something was wrong...

He threw off one of my genjutsus...I’ve got to have my clone put all he can behind the one that’s left...the Infinite Darkness is still in place...Then, I’ve got no choice- I’ve got to attack with taijutsu. My chakra is too low for anything else. It might spread the poison faster...but this is for the Leaf’s honor!

Ekyt ran across the floor as fast as he could, jumping high in the air. He came crashing down heel-first. Murakami moved quickly, and Ekyt’s foot crashing into the floor, sending pieces of concrete in every direction.

“How did...” Ekyt couldn’t believe it. **Did he hear me coming and move according to the sound I made?**

“How did I know you were coming? I ended your genjutsu! I’m stronger than I look!” Murakami declared, giving Ekyt a kick that blasted him across the battle field.

Damn...my chakra! This stupid poison...I’ve got to make a choice...I can either attempt to heal myself and forfeit my chakra...or I can attack one last time...either way, that guy is tough, he’s far beyond genin level if he threw off both those genjutsus without me knowing...Not that knowing this does me much good now. Agh, damn poison. I’ve got to decide on my move, now!

--

“Okay, I get that you want to beat your teacher, so I’ll help you. First, uh, let’s see how much chakra you have to work with. What’s the hardest jutsu you know?” Naruto asked Yuushi.

“Dance of the Half Moon,” Yuushi replied. “It’s a B-ranked sword Jutsu.”

“Okay. Let’s see...I know! Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Naruto cried. Two hundred more Naruto’s popped up.

“Okay, let’s see this jutsu, as many times as you can perform it.”

“What happens after that?” Yuushi wanted to know.

“Then I decide what awesome jutsu I’m going to show you! Something your teacher can’t perform, too! I’ll make it a good one, I promise!”

That was all the motivation Yuushi needed. This Jutsu, Dance of the Half Moon, was a mix of Hayate Gekkou’s “Crescent Moon Dance”, and Ekyt’s “Dance of the Sickle Moon.” Hayate moved at an incredible speed and made intricate moves, using clones as well. Ekyt did the same, but used Shadow Clones in tandem. Yuushi could only produce one Shadow Clone. So he and one clone attacked in a hard-to-follow pattern with their swords.

29 - Weakness Becomes Strength

Okay...time to make my move. If I end the fight quickly, I can get healed afterward by someone who knows what they're doing. Wish I hadn't given those pills to Sakura, but I had to make sure Okkuu was okay. NOW I wish I had saved at least one for myself...it can't be helped now. I've got to think about the fight...It's obvious genjutsu won't work...taijutsu will be difficult...ninjutsu. But which one? He's got the advantage against all my fire jutsus. Wait...that's it! But first, I've got to make him drop his guard...

Ekyt attaching an exploding tag to a kunai as fast as his numbing hands would allow. He threw the kunai toward the cocky Murakami, who was waiting until the last second to move. But Ekyt didn't wait. Expecting this, he detonated the tag before it reached Murakami.

"What a waste!" Murakami taunted, a water clone splashing to the ground just in front of him.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt shot back. The chemicals that made the tag explode were still in the air, and the fire sent a second explosion reverberating throughout the building. Through the smoke, only one glowing blue light was visible.

--

"Come on, Yuushi, time to go!" Naruto declared, a huge backpack across his shoulders.

"Where are we going?" Yuushi asked.

"Tanzaku town! That's where the Pervy Sage taught me! And that's where I'm gonna teach you!"

"Aren't you concerned for your girlfriend? I mean, you know my sensei likes her..." Yuushi didn't know why he was saying this.

"Hmm? Ol' Ekyt? Nah. I trust him completely. That's why I'm helping you. So, you ready to go? C'mon, times-a-wastin'!"

Yuushi, carrying his sword only, followed Naruto in silence, reflecting on what he had been taught.

Sensei, the time is nearly at hand. I WILL defeat you. I must.

Yuushi's hand felt for a letter he always kept tucked inside his robe. The letter was more precious to him than his own life. It was the only proof that he had family. The only proof that his mother was still living. Yuushi was going to get her back, no matter the cost.

--

Ekyt burst through the smoke, his hand glowing with blue energy.

“Chakra Scalpel?! No way!” the crows murmured.

“I thought you said he couldn’t do medical ninjutsu, what gives Forehead?!” Ino demanded, poking Sakura.

“I said he couldn’t do ADVANCED medical jutsu. Chakra Scalpel is basic, and he can do it. GO EKYT!”

“That kid...he’s something else,” Kurenai muttered with a smile.

“Let’s see if it works before we congratulate him. What he’s doing is risky enough, that other guy has those senbon...still, it’s the only move he could make with low chakra,” Kakashi added, his Sharingan watching every move.

-

Zshhh! Zshhh! Zshhh!

Ekyt’s chakra scalpel buzzed closer and closer. Little cuts started to appear on Murakami, but he still moved faster than the poison-laden Ekyt. Finally, Ekyt fell to one knee, his lower body numbing.

“HAHA! IT ENDS NOW!” Murakami shouted. Ekyt smiled.

“For you...(cough) You forgot something...”

Murakami was pushed suddenly. Ekyt’s Shadow Clone! CRACK!

Ekyt’s arm cut across Murakami’s forearms, cutting tendons, making them useless. As his arms fell, Murakami’s weight shifted. Ekyt’s clone performed a leg sweep, and Ekyt used the scalpel to cut away at Murakami’s legs, too.

“Bastard! You gave your clone your chakra and made him move FOR you!” Murakami shouted. Ekyt, panting, nodded.

“That’s right. You were so focused on killing me, you didn’t notice my clone hiding in the explosion, right behind you. That left you open to attack. My clone may be flesh and blood, and part of me, but that poison is new to him, he can still move just fine. Now that I’m going to take my chakra back...this fight is over.”

Murakami tried to stand up, but couldn’t move. He couldn’t heal himself. And Ekyt’s clone was waiting, just in case.

Shikamaru walked over to the participants. Ekyt was on one knee, while Murakami was face down. Shikamaru raised his arm toward Ekyt.

“Murakami is unable to continue. I declare Ekyt Kaguya the winner of this match.”

--

After being patched up by the medical corps, Ekyt found a dark corner of the arena. He was sitting, shirtless, on a cold metal table, hidden in the shadows.

So many mistakes...I wish I could join ANBU. I mean, for real. I just don't have it in me to kill. One more attack and I could have killed that Mist ninja, and he would have deserved it for what he did.

I envy so many of the others. Kimimaro and Temari, Neji and Tenten, Lee and Linda, and Naruto and Sakura. I'm brooding again, of course. I've got to stop that. (Smiles) This stupid smile...it makes everyone worry about me less, so they let me be. I guess it serves it's purpose. One of them will figure out that I can't be the carefree person that I've pretended to be. The truth is, things have gotten so bad even I'm confused about what I want. Oh well, the chunin exams begin in a short time, I can focus on that. In the mean time, I guess I'd better keep pretending that I'm content and happy.

Ekyt hated himself for that phony smile, he really did. But it made life easier for everyone else, and that was good enough for the time being.

Ekyt pulled on his torn vest, ready for the chunin exams. He hadn't told anyone, but the chunin exams excited him for more than the hopes of promotion. It was a vague hope, but there WAS a girl involved Ryouko liked.

If I was smart, I would stop...I can't pursue this girl. No, more than that, I won't. Still...Anko Mitarashi and I might have been a good pair. But I wonder if it's my destiny to be alone...

--

(Skip ahead four hours)

"The written exam has come to an end. Now, it's time for the tenth, oral-response question. Now, before I ask it, anyone who wants to leave can- you don't have to answer. If you DO answer, you'd better be right- because if you're wrong, you and your team fail, and will NEVER be allowed to take the chunin exams again. I don't want to hear any complaints about this being fair or not. I'm not your friend, your needs don't concern me. So think carefully:

Your sensei is dead. Both your teammates are captured. You are low on chakra, and in the open. What move do you make? Do you run for it? Do you fight? What move do you make?"

Ibikki had belted all that out. It came easy with years of practice. Now, Ibikki waited for the whining and complaining. Instead, he got a question:

"What is the scope of the mission? Mission parameters?" Ekyt asked slyly.

"You are carrying important documents." –Ibikki

“Documents FROM our village, or intelligence about another village?” –Ekyl

“Intelligence.” –Ibikki

“Are these documents crucial to an attack?” –Ekyl

“Having them means the village attacks. Failing the mission means there will be no attack.” –Ibikki

“This is assuming that you yourself are carrying the documents, and not one of your captured teammates?” –Ekyl

“Correct.” –Ibikki

“In that case...the correct is to attack your opponents in an attempt to defend your team. Because the documents don't mean that your village would be at a disadvantage, since they aren't going to attack without them, your team takes priority over the mission. *IF* the documents were crucial to defending the village, you have to defend the lives of many of the lives of few. Since the scope of the mission was to return the documents or there won't be an attack, the safer alternative would be better. Because even if you have complete trust in your team, SOMEONE might talk. Best to return and warn the village, to prime them for any surprises, so that they can act appropriately and protect the Village.” –Ekyl

Ibikki strode over to Ekyl, staring at him with the meanest expression he could.

“And what if YOU were captured? How would you feel being left behind by your team mate?” Ibikki half-snarled.

“I can't speak for everyone, but if my team got away safely, especially with the intel, my job is done. I would delay the attackers by any means necessary to buy my team time to get to safety.”

Ibikki glared at Ekyl, who in turn stared back, his face blank. This went on in silence. Then, five people spoke up.

“He's right, that's the best move to make.” - Mist

“I agree with that guy.” - Rain

“He makes sense.” - Stone

“Best move you could make in that situation.” -Grass

“I see what he's saying.” -Sound

Ekyl looked around the room. Almost everyone had left at this point. There were only nineteen candidates in the room, including Ekyl. Five had spoken up, meaning they had spoken for their teams.

“Those of you who just agreed with what he said...” Ibikki began, making eye contact with everyone.

“You pass.”

“SAY WHAT?!!!” came the cry from the only Sand Village team. “You gotta be kidding! He just committed suicide in your little scenario, how can he serve his village if he's dead?!”

“BECAUSE his death made the most sense for the village. It’s not all about you, and not even your team. The Village comes first. You have a hard time accepting that, that’s your problem. This is my test, and he gave the correct answer. You three get out. The rest of you, congratulations on passing the written exam. Don’t get cocky yet, you aren’t out of the woods, and-”

At that point, the window to the right of Ibikki exploded, and a banner sailed in.

She’s too early, again, Ibikki thought to himself, shaking his head. “Hyperactive as always, Anko.

--

Ekyt had been through this once before, so he didn’t freak out when the snakes wrapped around him, trapping him in place. He felt the cold metal of a kunai against his cheek, making a small cut.

“Well maggots, congratulations on passing. I’m Anko Mitarashi, your proctor for the next exam! Follow the other instructors and wait for instructions. If you screw around, you’re gone from the test, and that’s the BEST that can happen to you. GO!”

The last word made everyone jump, and they all scurried for the door. Ekyt couldn’t, still being held in place.

“So you’re here again...didn’t think I’d have to deal with you until it was time for a mission...well, you’d better pass this time. No more heroics, the jonin will take care of that.”

Ekyt smirked a little. “I understand, I’ll try to behave myself.”

Anko removed the kunai. “Good boy. Y’know, I usually hate kids, but you’re different, so I’m going to tell you this in advance: Be careful, because you’re the chief target this year. Watch your back out there, especially since you’re alone.”

The snakes released Ekyt, allowing him to turn around. “Thank you, sensei.”

Whatever feelings Ekyt had for Anko had passed as quickly as they had come. Ekyt could tell something was wrong, but he wasn’t sure what. All he knew was that his attitude had changed once more. It was as if hiding behind that stupid smile had made him harder, even more complex than he was before. But that complexity spawned Ekyt’s newest problem.

Girls aside, there is one more thing missing from my life- I have no rival. Naruto became stronger because of Sasuke. Sakura became stronger because of Sasuke. Katsuyori became stronger because of his father.

As for me, I have peaked. Without the Third Hokage teaching me, I have no direction, aside from a general ‘get promoted, go fight’ aspect. I need to find a direction and a rival to become stronger.

Perhaps I might find that rival in Yuushi...

--

Naruto and Yuushi had trained all day, making a little progress. Good enough to warrant a night's rest. But Yuushi couldn't rest without reading the letter from his mother. The letter had a date in it, and that date was rapidly approaching.

It means a choice...a move. A sacrifice. But wouldn't it be a temporary thing? I need to find my mother. Tomorrow it all begins. I WILL find her, and I will bring her back safely to the Leaf Village, whatever the cost. I want her to meet Ryouko.

--

Kabuto finished bandaging Orochimaru's arms up.

"You should be healed soon. Luckily, the Third Hokage didn't manage to get your real soul. Interesting trick, switching to someone else's soul at the last second."

Orochimaru was in a foul mood, despite Kabuto's praise. "It should have come to that, Kabuto! That miserable old man, his damn student, and that whole village! The time and effort they've cost me! But I'm going to strike back, and I'm going to use the Third Hokage's last student to send a message. Now that I've achieved TRUE immortality, even if that pest uses that Forbidden Jutsu to seal my soul, I can escape. It's time to begin rebuilding my forces for another attack. And it's time...to claim my new body. I have him in my sites now, and there's no escaping..."

30 - Evil's Shadow

Ekyt smile stayed in place, even in the 'Forest of Death'. He knew very well that he would be attacked by multiple groups. He was by himself, so he HAD to have a scroll. He was named 'top genin', so that put a bullseye on his back. And after what happened in the Mist Village, it was pretty obvious that they would target him. It was just as obvious that Ekyt could do nothing to stop it. He could only react and deal with what his reaction yielded.

I wonder when they'll spring their trap? Unlike them, I've had some strange training. Still...I'm not great by any means...The only advantage I might have is pure studying time. That's what got me this far to begin with.

Ekyt had to jump between to pieces of razor wire. He guessed that a trap was about to be sprung. The dirt below had footprints that had been 'camouflaged', along with the wire. He had to be careful now. He decided to land, forcing himself to keep that stupid smile on his face. It was part of his mask. It hadn't paid to show depression, and pretending nothing was wrong didn't help either. So pretending everything was alright was something new, and therefore had a shot of being the correct response.

**You don't feel emotions...you don't feel pain...only duty...
I wish.**

"Okay, we've got him!" someone shouted. Ekyt stepped to his left as a net suddenly fell. That step turned into a roll as an exploding tag detonated. That roll turned into a dive, as a pit opened up below him. And that dive turned into a quick attack, as one eager Shinobi made his move. Unsuccessfully, as Ekyt's foot had seen to stopping him cold. Ekyt pushed him off, kicking him back over to his friends. They didn't dare break their gaze on Ekyt to check on him.

Rain...Mist...Stone...Sound...that accounts for twelve ninja. That leaves only the Grass ninja unaccounted for. I can assume they're enemies...I knew I'd get ganged up on, but this bad? How do I solve this? They didn't waste any time, either. If I could have gotten to a better location, I might have stood a better chance. Now I've either got to give up my scroll, or attack. If I give up my scroll, I'll still be killed. That leaves attack...but how? I can't use a jutsu on that many people at once. I'll have to improvise...

"I should warn you...I'm accurate at 100 yards with this jutsu! Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt shouted, using his signature fire jutsu after an uncharacteristic taunt. It was easily dodged by the ninja he had been aiming at.

"One hundred yards, huh?!" the ninja taunted. Ekyt shrugged, still wearing the same stupid smile.

"What can I say? Aside from 'You lose'."

It was about then that it hit everyone- something was burning. As they turned, they realized that Ekyt hadn't been aiming for anyone- he had been aiming for a tree that had been burned by an exploding tag

instead! The tree caught fire easily, and that fire was spreading fast. It burned and crackled, and soon spread to the thick green canopy above. The trees in the forest were close together, so if ONE caught on fire...

“This nut will burn down the entire forest! We’ve got to get out of here!”

“We’re from the Rain Village, we’ll just put the fire out!”

The loose coalition that had gone after Ekyt was falling apart, little by little. They could decide they wanted Ekyt dead, but they couldn’t decide who was going to put out a rapidly growing fire. And apparently, they couldn’t pay attention to their target, either, as Ekyt shimmied up a tree and waited for a good moment to strike. When the fire reached his tree, Ekyt decided that a flaming tree branch might make for an imposing weapon. Using a kunai to saw at the branch he was above, Ekyt gave the burning branch a smart kick and watched it fall to the ground. It didn’t hit anyone, but it DID create an opening for attack. From up on his perch, using the fear the other ninja were already feeling, Ekyt could use genjutsu to his advantage. The “Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique” that he chose projected an image across each individual’s mind. The fire had engulfed and killed them all, and the individual was slowly, agonizingly burning to a crisp. This trick only worked on three ninja, leaving nine to deal with. Still too many for hand to hand combat. That genjutsu would wear off eventually, too, if it wasn’t released first. Thankfully, the calvary came: The Grass ninja had come.

“Alright, hand over your scrolls! You clowns don’t scare us!” one Stone ninja declared. He seemed to be wearing an eye patch, and certainly didn’t LOOK the part of a genin. He looked like a bandit, or maybe a weathered old jonin.

Perfect, Ekyt thought from his treetop hideout, This will give me a chance to see what kind of fighting styles my opponents use. And maybe a few will get taken out in the process. If nothing else, I’ve got a little time to plan my counter-attack.

--

Yuushi read the letter one last time, now certain of it’s content. Tucking it into a pouch in his sleeve, Yuushi left Naruto to sleep. Yuushi had to make his move, and he had to do it now, without anyone else. Besides, no one would have to know. It was just to get his mother back, no big deal.

Ekyt-sensei was always doing things like this. Breaking the rules to do the right thing. Now I’m doing the same, to save my last remaining bit of family. I will return to the Hidden Leaf, and finally face my teacher in combat, and I’ll best him, and truly become an adult!

After securing his sword in his belt, adjusting his hakama and gi top, and making sure that he had everything he needed, Yuushi closed the door. The light from the hallway illuminated Naruto’s face for a moment, but the light shrank as the door closed. Naruto’s eyes never even fluttered after a long day of teaching, making it that much easier for Yuushi to leave undetected.

The letter says to wait at the bridge near the border...there, if it comes to combat, I will have the advantage. My sword will work better in close combat. And if not, I know enough jutsus to

defend myself with. This is for my mother. I must rescue her, no matter what!

It was with that in mind that Yuushi set out towards Otogakure, which was better known as the Sound Village.

--

Okkuu sat in his hospital bed, sipping at his apple juice and wishing he could see the Forest of Death for himself.

What did Ekyt mean? He would have died for me? What a stupid concept! You live to serve your purposes, not to further the lives of someone else! And yet...he seemed to do both, and called it the 'true way' of the Shinobi. How can some genin even understand. The guy is a total failure anyway. I should just forget this whole thing and train harder. Then I'LL make HIM see the real Shinobi way!

Okkuu's enthusiasm just wasn't working. Deep down, he knew his bacon had been saved by someone he had cursed out. Someone he had hated for no reason at all. But somehow it made sense. For SURE Okkuu hated Yuushi. That was reason enough to hate his stupid friend, too!

"Okkuu, right?"

Okkuu looked up from his bed to see a scary-looking kunoichi. Being twelve, he also saw she was pretty.

"Yeah, that's me? And you are?" Okkuu said, trying to impress the cute older kunoichi with his firm tone of voice and his eyes that his mother swore were perfect.

"I'm Temari. I heard you've been giving a friend of mine a hard time..." Temari sat down on the edge of Okkuu's bed, her fan clanging against the floor. Okkuu didn't seem impressed by the fan; he was more interested in Temari herself.

"And who's this friend of yours? If I kicked his @\$\$, he deserved it, rest assured," Okkuu sneered back, remembering that girls liked the 'cool' guys. The sneer, of course, was the epitome of cool!

"His name is Ekyt. And you know, he SAVED your @\$\$. Too bad a knucklehead like you couldn't see that gesture for what it really was. It wasn't some sign of weakness on his part, it was a show of strength that he'd protect a mouthy brat like you." Temari leaned back, nodding to someone outside the door. Kimimaro walked in, following Temari's lead, as she had instructed.

"Oh, and who's this? Some freak you also felt sorry for, right? What's this guy's problem? Is he weak, like that idiot who 'saved' me? Or is he just retarded?"

Kimimaro reached into his shoulder and pulled out a bone.

"He just can't keep his bones in his skin, you know?" Temari commented. Okkuu promptly fainted, leaving Temari to laugh, and Kimimaro to feel good about defending his cousin.

--

Ekyt watched a brief fight ensue below him. Things turned vicious very quickly. One Sound Ninja went down hard, bleeding heavily. He was going to die. Ekyt cursed himself, but leapt down, deflecting a kunai and kicking the offender attached. Rolling up his right sleeve, Ekyt used the Chakra Scalpel. He was no medic, but he could at least TRY to save this guy's life. As the sounds of battle clanged all around him, Ekyt desperately tried to save the life of his sworn enemy, the Sound.

"Hang on, hang on..." Ekyt muttered, as much to himself as the ninja on the ground. The ninja's eyes flickered open long enough to see that Ekyt wasn't trying to kill him.

"What are you doing?" came the whisper from the Sound Ninja.

"Trying to save your life," Ekyt responded, focusing his chakra. The dawning realization hit him: **I can't do it...he's lost too much blood...he's reached the end...**

"Hey, anyone a medic?!" Ekyt shouted, hoping that the battle lines would be dropped long enough to save a life. No one responded, they only kept fighting. Ekyt noticed a medical pouch on another Sound ninja's waist. **What kind of people are they? They can't save their own comrade? This is ridiculous! Someone help this guy, I can't do it! Please, I've done my best, at least let him die in comfort!**

The Sound ninja looked Ekyt in the eyes. "You are no enemy of mine...I hold one of the scrolls...take it..."

The Sound ninja had spoken his last. He coughed up blood, closed his eyes, and his head fell to the side.

By now, the Sound Ninja had disengaged from the fight and walked over. Ekyt expected them to feel bad, but instead:

"Damn you, Watashi! You choose NOW to die?!" the kunoichi of the group said, giving the dead man an angry kick.

"You idiot...too weak..." the other muttered. He had a look on his face as though he was looking at dog crap. Ekyt was suddenly consumed by anger. His carefully thought out battle plans were scrapped. He charged at the two Sound ninja, planted a hand on each of their stomachs, and kicked forward. His chakra-enhanced strike sent the two flying, through trees, and finally out the fence that marked the out-of-bounds. This not only meant they were disqualified for not having a 3rd team member, but that they had just been embarrassed.

Ekyt landed next to them, the body of their teammate in hand. Very quickly, Anko and two ANBU agents came rushing over.

"What happened here?!" Anko demanded. As Ekyt was the only conscious person, he answered.

"This one was killed, I don't know by who. Those two...I just removed them. They're trash. They let this

one die, and then kicked his dead body. That's why they're out here. I wanted to make sure this one (Ekyt hands the body to an agent) got a proper return to the outside of the forest. I know he's not 'one of us', but..." Ekyt's voice trailed off, looking at the dead face.

Anko could sympathize.

"...and you tried to save him, didn't you?" she asked quietly. Ekyt nodded.

"I couldn't do it, my medical ninjutsu doesn't extend beyond first aid. I have no talent for it. No one even tried to help him. It was the most disgusting thing I've ever seen. Oh, yeah, I've got their scroll, and they're out a team member. Am I allowed to keep the scroll? It was given to me before that ninja died."

"Absolutely, you can keep it. Nothing in the rules against it. Okay, we'll take it from here, Ekyt. You go finish in there," Anko said, shaken up by Ekyt's story. Ekyt bowed and started to return. Anko called his name once more.

"Ekyt...You're a good kid."

Ekyt returned to his forced smile and walked back he Forest of Death. But now the odds were closer. Apparently, the Grass Ninja were on his side. The Stone, Rain, and Mist were against him. Still, three-to-one odds weren't so bad.

--

Orochimaru had that smirk on his face. The one that said 'I'm evil, and I'm winning'. Everyone in the Leaf thought Orochimaru was dead, except for Sasuke who, in fact, had revived him. Not that Sasuke had a choice in the matter.

"Soon, Kabuto. That little fool will come looking for his mother. And the best part of all this..." Orochimaru's smirk grew a little.

"...is that it will have been Sarutobi's last student that created my next host!"

31 - Right of Passage

Ekyt looked sideways to the Grass coalition. He could have left them now- he had both scrolls. If everyone was tied up in one place, it was an easy victory for him. But these Grass Ninja had come to his rescue. The least he could do was even up the odds before he left. But something didn't seem right. Better to play it safe...

"So you're the Leaf guy everyone's talking about...Well, best of luck. I guess we're allies, for now, but it's not gonna last once we've ruined these guys," said the Grass ninja who seemed to be in charge.

"Fair enough. I owe you one for helping me. Besides, I don't think any of us will object to less competition," Ekyt replied, taking up a guard stance.

"Exactly what I was thinking!" said a Grass Ninja Ekyt hadn't noticed. The guy seemed to grow up from the ground. He put a kunai to Ekyt's neck from behind. "What a fool. There are no allies in the chunin exams! You should die just for that!"

Ekyt disappeared. The Grass Ninja had captured a plain old clone. When his hand passed through Ekyt, he realized he had been duped.

"Damn it! Damn it, that stupid Leaf retard!" the Grass Ninja cursed, throwing his kunai down.

"Stop it, Kirouko. We ALL failed to catch this plot. AND we killed one of our own...too realistic. This guy isn't genin-level...fortunately, neither are we!"

One by one, Appearance Shift Jutsus melted away, revealing a group of twelve Sound Ninja.

"The others were so easy to kill, I can't believe this one fooled us! We're all chunin or higher...damn it. Lord Orochimaru won't be pleased with us...he told us to deliver this guy to him, dead or alive. Now we'll have to wait until the next round of the exams! We'll kill him and make it look accidental, or hit him with a genjutsu..."

Ekyt landed a few feet away, crouched in a combat position. "I don't think it'll work that way. I was on to you guys from the start..." Ekyt straightened up, pulling a fan out from his scroll. It was small, nothing like Temari's. But it had a nasty little trick buried in it.

"Yeah? And how did you guess this one, genius?"

Ryouko flipped open the fan. "It was strange that all of us found each other so quickly. If I ran into one team, it would have been accident. But the forest is huge, and for so few people to all 'find' each other...it reeked of a trap. That, and your genjutsu is sad. You couldn't have fooled one of our academy students with your weak Transformation Jutsus."

"That's it, we're killing this bastard right here!" one hot-tempered chunin shouted, charging. Ryouko

sliced with his fan multiple times. It's metal pleats were razor-sharp, and cut the chunin to shreds. Not enough to kill him, but he was out of the fight.

"You're even dumber if you thought I'd come back alone. I held you at bay long enough to prove I'm worthy of chunin level. But this represents a threat to the Leaf Village, and I can't, in good conscience, let you idiots walk freely anymore."

Whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh- TOK!

Three exam proctors, one Tokubetsu Jonin, and one ANBU agent landed next to Ryouko. Genma, Raina, Anko, Ibikki, and the masked ANBU agent were an imposing sight, even to the twelve high-ranked Sound agents. Everyone braced themselves for a fight.

Ryouko knelt down, as if he was tired. In reality, he was maintaining a genjutsu to create an opening for the jonin to attack.

Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Jutsu! Ryouko thought, one knee, one hand forming a tiger handsign. The genjutsu hit, stunning the Sound Shinobi. That gave everyone the opportunity to attack. Ryouko had every intention of joining in, but Ibikki held him back.

"Your job is done here. Go inform Lady Hokage that you were correct, and wait for her instructions," Ibikki ordered gruffly. Ryouko knew better than to argue.

"Understood," Ryouko murmured, even as he used the Body Flicker Jutsu to get a move on to Tsunade's office.

"Good kid...Shame I couldn't tell him why he was being pulled out. It's better that Tsunade tells him, I guess...it's not every day your only student goes missing..."

--

"He's WHAT?!" Ekyt practically shouted, pacing around Tsunade's office, his now ever-present chakra cigarette dangling from his mouth. "I'm going to find him, this can't happen!"

Tsunade didn't try to stop him this time. "Listen to me- In all it's wisdom, the Leaf Village and it's proctors have declared you worthy of chunin rank. Before you go, we all want to see it with our own eyes- the time you finally take this vest. (Tsunade handed Ekyt a vest, even patting him on the shoulder, at which point the cigarette clenched tighter between his teeth so he didn't drop it in shock) Go with our blessing and save him."

Ekyt gave a grave nod. "I'll drag him back. He can't know what he's doing, he would never make this decision on his own..."

"Ekyt...Happy Birthday," Tsunade called to him just as he was leaving the room. Ekyt stopped, but a smile played on his lips.

"Thank you, My Lady."

Ekyt jumped out the window, darting across the rooftops of the Leaf Village, heading for Tanzaku town.

“Sakura...go to Naruto. He'll try to stop Ekyt- your job is to stop Naruto from interfering. That, and you and him could use a little time, I'm sure. God knows when you'll get another chance like this. So, go on,” Tsunade flicked her hand, hiding a smile as her apprentice practically ran from the room in excitement. Shizune smiled at Sakura going to meet Naruto, but then her face turned grim.

“My Lady...what happened to Yuushi? I mean, what do you think happened to make him to do this...It's just not like him!”

Tsunade sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Shizune, I'm not going to lie- I think this is Orochimaru's doing. I just have a sense when it comes to that snake bastard...I think he's up to something...Shikamaru- You, Choji, and Ino go, and tell me just what goes on- but do not interfere. The last thing we need is Ekyt going off on his own at this point. Only intervene if Ekyt is sure to die- understand?”

--

Yuushi walked to the spot the letter said. Knowing he was early, he checked out the landscape, in case of an attack. He saw where to hide, and where people COULD be hidden, in case of an ambush. Strong trees, weak trees, tall weeds...Yuushi took all that in. Satisfied, Yuushi sat down to compose a poem. He didn't know a thing about poetry, really, so he just kind of made up words and strung them together in different ways until they sounded good. Today, he came up with:

*The dreamer lies in wait,
Nighttime a symphony of torture,
The day filled with hope.
The longing burns inside the dreamer.
Soon, that desire turns him into the warrior.
The warrior will not let go.*

Yuushi didn't quite understand what he wrote, but he thought it sounded good- dramatic and powerful. That was all he wanted. Now calmed, Yuushi closed his eyes, taking in the sounds of the nature that surrounded him, secure in the knowledge that his mother would be coming.

-

“What a fool! He doesn't know what his mother looks like. Kabuto, describe the boy to me...”
Orochimaru, a shell of his former self in this husk of a body. The Third had sealed this body's original soul when he performed the Reaper Death Seal. That left Orochimaru room to take over, just like before. But without that soul, he inherited all that body's injuries and limitations. This body also suffered from the effects of the curse Sarutobi had put on him.

Kabuto pushed his glasses up. “Black hair- long, near his shoulders. He's slim, and very pale. His blind

eye indicates a genetic weakness that usually skips a generation...his eye color is black, suggesting that 'black' is the dominant color for his family..."

Orochimaru smirked nastily. "I trust you, then, to transform into this poor boy's mother. Take your best guess...in the mean time, it will take almost all of my chakra to perform a Cursed Earth Seal...but the boy will be worth it..."

Kabuto turned around, a question ready to go. "Why him, Lord Orochimaru? He isn't strong, he doesn't have a kekkai-genkai, at least not one that's apparent....so, why this unassuming, even weak, boy?"

Orochimaru sucked in his breath- this hurt so damn much! He spoke in a hiss when his strength returned:

"Because of what he means to the Leaf Village. Particularly those who have taught him. It gives me a psychological advantage over those who have gotten to know him- and that group is the same one as Sasuke...can you imagine the despair they'll feel, losing ANOTHER comrade to my influence? It will be...pleasant. At least for us."

--

Naruto was near panic in his hotel room. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a knock on the door.

"Yeah?! Oh...hey, Sakura!"

Ekyt excused himself and walked into the room. Naruto and Sakura were currently doing the hug and kiss thing, and Ekyt didn't need to see that right now. After allotting enough time for that, Ekyt spoke up.

"Any idea where he went?"

Naruto closed his eyes, thinking hard. "He mentioned a letter...but I don't know-"

"A letter! No, this is going to destroy him! That letter...it was from his mother...but it's a fake. I'm sure of it. When he finds out she really IS dead, it's going to ruin his psyche. I've got to stop this! Damn it!" Ekyt hurried out of the room.

Naruto and Sakura watched, noting where Ekyt was going.

"So, uh, everything been okay?" Naruto said carefully, kind of flinching, expecting to get hit. He wasn't used to Sakura being so gentle with him.

"Yeah...just work, you know? But I'm enjoying it. How's your training going?"

--

Ekyt looked back at the hotel, watching his clone race the other way. **Sorry...but this is beyond personal now. I can't let anyone interfere. I've got to think, more importantly...who would trick**

Yuushi? Who would have the motive? I guess anyone who hates me...but what this round-about plot to kidnap, or kill, or whatever? Couldn't they have just slain him, then come for me? this doesn't make any sense, I need more information. Thankfully, Yuushi told me about this letter...I warned him, but I didn't have the heart to TELL him it was fake...That's not even the most important thing now...I need to know who sent it...and why...

--

Yuushi heard someone approaching long before they reached him. This person moved lightly, as if a child, or a female. They weren't making any attempt to camouflage their movements. They weren't hiding...

A trap? No, too obvious to be a trap...is this really it? My mother...No, I can't presume. Better safe than sorry.

Yuushi spun around, his sword drawn. But when he turned, he saw a face so close to his own that there was no doubt in his mind. This was his mother. It had to be. The face, the eyes, the hair...it had to be her. There was no way it could be anyone else.

"Yuushi..." came the gentle voice. "Yuushi-kun...it's so good to see you! You've really grown strong, I can tell! So much that I've brought someone to meet you...someone special, and very close to me..."

Kabuto ended the jutsu just as Orochimaru's mouth hit Yuushi's shoulder. Yuushi cried out in pain and surprise.

"Welcome home...Yuushi," Orochimaru said happily, before breaking into laughter.

-

Ekyt watched from the bushes once he heard Orochimaru's sickening laughter. When he saw Yuushi, he felt his heart snap. **A boy with a gentle heart who deserves so much better than this...now his freedom has been stolen...I can't let this happen, there's still time! I can't do anything about the curse mark without hurting him, and at his age...killing him. No, I won't do it. But I've got to stop him from becoming Orochimaru's next pawn! Or worse...his body!**

Ekyt tore through the bushes, letting a kunai fly toward Orochimaru. Kabuto knocked it down with a kunai of his own.

"Well, you DID come! But it's too late, he belongs to Lord Orochimaru now," Kabuto said, watching Yuushi writhe in pain on the ground. Kabuto pushed back on Ekyt's kunai, knowing Ekyt's full attention wasn't on him. It was distributed between three people. With a distraction like that, Kabuto was sure he could he win relatively easily.

"No...this fight...is mine!" Yuushi declared, holding his sword in a guard. He was on his feet already. This stunned everyone.

"The curse mark took to him incredibly quickly...perhaps there's more to this boy than meets the eye..."

Orochimaru wondered aloud. "But, it's HIS sensei...let them hash this out, Kabuto, there's no rush for us."

Ekyt kicked away from Kabuto, not believing this.

"Yuushi...why would you..." he said, his tone questioning.

"Because, sensei, I needed to become stronger than you- my last right of passage, to surpass my teacher. On your guard, sensei!" Yuushi shouted, rushing in.

32 - Student vs Teacher

Ekyt barely dodged Yuushi's strike. Again and again, his sword slashed down. Ekyt leapt up onto a rock. Yuushi struck again, the rock scattering into fragments. Ekyt was already in the air. His clothes fluttered slightly as he landed. Yuushi pointed his sword at him.

"Why won't you fight me?!" Yuushi demanded, snarling angrily.

"Why are you REALLY attacking me...if you wanted to test your skill, we would have settled this with *shinai*. You drew on me with a sharpened blade, not waiting for me to agree to the duel. It's not at all like you to break tradition, Yuushi. That tells me that you aren't yourself..."

"SHUT UP!" Yuushi shouted. This time, his sword emitted chakra- straight at Ekyt. Ekyt only had time to cover himself up before the strike hit, sending him backward into a tree, where he struck the wood. Now, there was no choice but to fight back.

"I'll give you your duel, Yuushi. And you can keep using that sword. But I won't use my blade..." Ryouko looked around, finding a branch about the right length. He focused his chakra to his hands. The bark began to peel away, then the wood itself, until a sword began to take shape. Ryouko used his "Dragon Fire Extension" jutsu to harden the wood. Satisfied, Ryouko drew back into a guard.

"Yuushi...you've been a great student. This fight isn't easy for me physically or mentally. It's been an uphill road for you as well, hasn't it? No matter what happens...I'll be proud I trained you. Now...on your guard!"

Ekyt rushed, aiming an overhead strike at Yuushi. Yuushi blocked with the side of his sword, zoning away from the strike. Ekyt's foot slashed up in a roundhouse kick, but Yuushi was *just* out of range. This ended the stalemate between their swords. Yuushi swung his sword around, aiming for Ekyt's side. Ekyt swept the attack aside with the back of his *bokken*, then thrust forward. Yuushi stepped to the side and used the side of his sword to knock Ekyt's strike down. He then shuffled forward, aiming to cut Ekyt's thumb. Ekyt shuffled backwards, then took a quick step to the side. Yuushi predicted a strike, but it never came. Ekyt had moved one way, but he had moved his sword the other. The wood hit Yuushi's ribs with a dull *thunk*. Yuushi fell backward to the ground, putting one hand on his side. He had to roll away as Ekyt's sword cut into the ground next to him, caving in the grass next to his head, creating a pocket of dirt. Yuushi swung at Ekyt's legs, leaving Ekyt no choice but to leap in the air to evade the strike. Yuushi followed him up and made a neck-level cut. Ekyt parried the strike with his sword, then returned with a strike to the head which Yuushi ducked under. He took a swipe at Ekyt's side. Ekyt dodged, but felt his clothes tear and a little trickle of blood fly out. As both boys landed, panting hard, Ekyt sensed something. Another attack, from behind him. If Yuushi noticed, he wasn't saying anything, instead taking up his guard again, his blind eye visible now that sweat had matted his black bangs to his forehead and cheek.

Ekyt, more experienced but with less raw talent, waited for Yuushi's move. As Yuushi ran in, Ekyt kicked dirt up, but didn't aim for Yuushi. He kicked the dirt backward, into the eyes of Kabuto, whose

glasses were dirtied. Just then, Yuushi struck again, this time aiming for a thrust to the ribs. Ekyt shuffled to the side, using one hand to thrust at Yuushi. Yuushi parried the strike easily, and since Ekyt held his sword with only one hand, the sword swung around his head into a horrible position. Yuushi knew he won right there. Ekyt was off-balance and had nothing to block with. He thrust without hesitation. But, to his surprise, Ekyt stepped closer to him and widened his stance. The sword passed him, and his own sword was behind his back, the back section of it braced on his shoulders. Ekyt thrust the sword like a pool cue, tapping Yuushi in the forehead with the sword. It was an amazing move that legitimately stunned Yuushi. It was also a revelation for him.

I made a mistake...Ekyt-sensei could teach me so much more, and he doesn't demand a price...and Kantai...that girl...

Yuushi watched Ekyt deal with Kabuto, keeping a wary eye for Orochimaru.

-

"For you, though I can respect you, I'm using a real blade. One very dear to me," Ekyt explained, unsheathing his sword. It wasn't a samurai blade; instead it was a broadsword. It appeared to have chakra inside it. What that chakra was for, no one was really sure, not even Ekyt.

Orochimaru made his move, using his Kusanagi like a giant kunai. Ekyt spun to the side and blocked, using his brace to the back of the blade. Once the strike was repelled, Ekyt leapt between the trees. Orochimaru searched around wildly. Ekyt fell down behind him and struck hard, but Orochimaru had moved. POOF!

"Lord Orochimaru, he's using Shadow Clones!" Kabuto shouted, retrieving the kunai he had used to kill what he thought was Ekyt.

"Get the boy, that's what we came for!" Orochimaru demanded. Yuushi had stayed frozen to the spot for a long while, just thinking. Ekyt jumped down, blocking Orochimaru's path, his arms spread in an attitude of defense..

"You can't have him! I won't let you corrupt an innocent mind!" Ekyt shouted. Orochimaru just kept coming. When he stabbed, Ekyt didn't move, as Yuushi was still rooted to the spot. Or so it seemed. When Orochimaru got close enough, he stopped.

"Damn it! Kabuto, there are fakes! The other two- where did they go?!"

He tricked me?! Damn it...damn that kid...I'll make him pay yet!

--

Ekyt was silent as Yuushi traveled next to him. Yuushi, for his part, was too ashamed to talk. He had been tricked, and then attacked his sensei? How did that happen? It wasn't like him. He chanced a glance at Ekyt, but didn't see what he wanted. He saw forgiveness in his sensei's face.

I want him to hate me, Yuushi realized, it's what I deserve for this. I was beyond foolish.

“Yuushi...” Ekyt said carefully. He landed on the ground below, just waiting, staring straight ahead. “Come here.”

Yuushi walked over, a little scared. He didn't know what Ekyt was thinking. It could be anything. But he didn't have any reason to fear Ekyt, the boy who'd become his big brother. So he walked over. He was surprised when Ekyt grabbed his shoulders, then pulled him into a hug.

“It's my fault...I'm sorry,” Ekyt said, staring over Yuushi's shoulder. Yuushi's eyes went wide, and teared up.

“How...What do you mean?” Yuushi asked, surprised by Ekyt's words.

“I knew how things were, Yuushi. I could have been there for you more. If I had, maybe then you wouldn't have been so desperate to seek out your mother. The one thing a sensei is truly supposed to do- that's what I failed at. It'll be different now.”

Ekyt let go, standing up next to Yuushi. “I need to know one thing before I help you, Yuushi- do you reject Orochimaru?”

Yuushi nodded.

“Then...well, brace yourself. This is going to hurt, and probably knock you out. But I have to stop that curse mark. I couldn't do it before, while it was brand new, the pain alone would have killed you. Now, this seal will just halt chakra flow to it. But it's going to hurt. So...it means you'll have to trust me. Do you trust me?”

Yuushi nodded again. Ekyt himself gave a firm nod. On his hands, the kanji representing 'fire', 'wind', 'earth', 'water', and 'void' appeared, one over each finger. Glancing at Yuushi to make sure he was ready, Ekyt placed his hand over the cursed seal.

“Sealing Technique: Five Elements Seal!”

Yuushi immediately yelped with pain, then slumped to the ground, unconscious. The seal on his body turned purple, then faded, until only a blue outline remained. Ekyt sighed deeply, wishing it hadn't come to this. But this was the only way he knew to deal with those cursed seals.

Ekyt raised his sword, spinning toward the sounds of others arriving. He lowered his guard upon seeing it was Shikamaru, Ino, and Choji. Wow, Ino looked ticked. Ekyt shrugged inwardly, knowing it was because of the way Sasuke and Ekyt had fought. It was still strange to think that Ino and Sasuke were a couple.

“So you got him back yourself? That's good, fighting Orochimaru would have been a drag,” Shikamaru muttered.

“For sure!” Choji agreed heartily. “You okay, Ekyt?”

Ekyt nodded. "Yeah...listen, can the three of you take Yuushi back to the village? And send back up. Orochimaru and Kabuto are on the loose again. I know it's standard procedure to report them myself, but if I leave now, there's a good chance we'll lose an opportunity to catch them."

Shikamaru weighed all the outcomes in his mind, but decided that Ekyt was right.

"Yeah, we'll take him...is he going to be okay? I mean, when he waked up?"

Ekyt nodded. "A little pain, but he'll be fine. I'd suggest asking Lady Tsunade to take a look, though. Curse marks shouldn't be toyed with, and I don't know if my seal was perfect. Besides, she'd choose the best squad to chase Orochimaru with. Oh, I forgot- Naruto and Sakura are in Tanzaku Town. I'll pick them up on my way back. Lady Tsunade gave them time off, and they really shouldn't be involved in this mission anyway."

After a short discussion, everyone agreed that was what was best. They leapt off, with Ekyt heading back into the fire. But this time, killing wasn't on his mind.

I've got to make this battle flashy, to draw lots of attention to Orochimaru. I can't use the Reaper Death Seal right now, my chakra is too low after that seal, and my cigarettes won't restore it in time. If I only had to make that one move...but with Kabuto around, I can't rely on that Jutsu. I'm going to have to make this battle loud and long...

--

Naruto X Sakura here!

--

Ekyt bit his lip, drawing blood. He'd need it at a moment's notice once he found Orochimaru. That, as it turned out, didn't take long. He was looking for Ekyt. For a moment, Kabuto, Orochimaru, and Ekyt all stared at each other. Then, without warning, the fight began.

"Summoning Jutsu! Striking Serpent Summoning!" Ekyt barked, smashing his hand to the ground. His snake, Shuurai, erupted from underground. It was all part of Ekyt's plan- he needed attention.

"A battle of snakes? You fool! You can't hope to beat me!" Orochimaru declared with a laugh, summoning a trio of giant snakes.

"Just like we practiced, Shuurai! Tie them up!" Ekyt ordered. Shuurai slithered at top speed toward the other snakes. Ekyt threw two explosive-laced kunai at the snakes, detonating them in front of the snakes mouths to create confusion. Shuurai bit into one snake, then wrapped his body around the other's, tying them together, and leaving Orochimaru and Ekyt on common ground, easily able to fight each other. Kabuto joined Orochimaru, but only waited for orders.

"Time and again, you've managed to baffle me, Ekyt. How can you, a genin, keep interfering with a Sannin like myself? Kabuto is more skilled than you...but you just keep coming back. What is it that makes you so persistent?"

"I'm driven by a pure motive, Orochimaru. That's it. That's all I need. This time..." Ekyt paused, pulling off his mask so he could put a chakra cigarette into his mouth. "...this time, you targeted my student. That's reason enough for me to fight you. And with Kabuto here, too, I can make this easier, and kill both of you!"

Ekyt knew the Reaper Death Seal, but he couldn't perform it. But he could still use it's name.

"Sealing Jutsu: Reaper Death Seal!" he shouted. Orochimaru panicked as Ekyt was making handsigns. He didn't notice WHICH signs Ekyt was making. He spat the Kusanagi out at Ekyt, controlling it with his chakra. It struck Ekyt, but that Ekyt was a fake- a replacement jutsu. The real Ekyt landed next to the sword. He squeezed the hilt, and it fell to the ground, free of Orochimaru's influence.

"What?! A trap?!" Orochimaru said, shocked. No one had ever stood up to the Kusanagi before.

"That's right. I found a seal that's effective against your cursed seals, and I guessed that it might work here, too. But enough talking. I'm just going to hold onto this...and start doing damage! Shuurai, Restriction Jutsu!"

Shuurai increased his pressure on the three snakes he had wound himself around. Ekyt created two shadow clones to deal with Orochimaru and Kabuto, while he made a gutsy move.

"Time to end this!" Ekyt jumped as high as he could, forcing his own chakra into the Kusanagi. The sword became buried up to it's hilt- right in Orochimaru's summons. The snakes writhed and hissed in pain- exactly what Ekyt wanted. Their thrashing took out more trees and made more noise- they would be found soon. But while he could, Ekyt had to do damage. Leaving the sword buried in the snake, Ekyt took off running. The sword began to carve the snakes up- or, at least the center snake.

Orochimaru and Kabuto were shocked. They hadn't counted on this much fighting spirit.

"This is absurd, he CAN'T be doing this, it goes beyond his limits!" Kabuto said, frustrated by a clone that came close with a sword cut.

"There must be a reason! Think!" Orochimaru shot back. He didn't like this.

I've underestimated him yet again. He's gotten stronger. But he should still be no match for me! I'm being careless. I can't use my full power, and not my secret technique, not yet, and not here, I'm too vulnerable. If the Sound Four could have come...no matter, I'll squash this pesky genin. I won't make the mistake of underestimating him again!

33 - The Mind's Burden

Got to make this as flashy as possible...then that means breaking out *those* jutsu...no choice. Damn it, where's my back up? I've never fought Orochimaru, not like this- I'm not TRYING to win, and I'm not protecting anyone...I'm just fighting. Because I'm the only one able to. The one with so little to lose it doesn't matter if I fail...no, this melancholy shoot has to stop! My life means something, if only to myself! That's it! That's the feeling I needed! Here we go!

Ekyt bit his thumb, then ran it across the back of his neck. "Summoning Jutsu! Umisu, I need all the water you can give me!"

The small water dragon winked. The he expanded until his beady little eyes were mid-level with the mountain-sized Shuurai. Then, from his body, water flooded out, sweeping away parts of the landscape. It also gave Ekyt what he needed.

"Koryuu: Rain Dragon's Wrath!" Ekyt shouted. The water below him began to take shape. Ordinarily, the water molded around Ekyt, forming a dragon. Ekyt couldn't put himself in that position, so the water took shape by itself. Orochimaru's snakes were nearly dead between the sword wound and the strangulation, and the water just added to that. Ekyt didn't even aim for Orochimaru- he aimed for the three-headed snake. The water struck successfully, sweeping the snakes away, off into a gorge.

"So, you killed the weakest of my summons? I'll show you more than that! You've gotten in my way too many times now, you pesty little child!"

"HOLD IT!"

Ekyt sighed. ANBU had finally come.

"Good work, Ekyt. We'll take it from here," one jonin assured him. But Ekyt shook his head.

"No, I've fought him more times than anyone here. And...where's Kabuto!"

A female agent screamed, causing everyone to look at her. It was Hayate's lover, but she had been caught off-guard. Kabuto held a knife at her neck, smirking away.

"I see...so this battle of yours, Ekyt...it was all a big, flashy cover-up to get ANBU here to grab Lord Orochimaru. That's very impressive, and I'm sure the plan was yours. You're very clever..." Kabuto said, speaking in his 'I'm a nice guy' voice.

"Not clever enough," Ekyt spat angrily, "If I'd been MORE clever, then I would have killed you and your retarded master when I had the chance. Then again...even my strongest sealing jutsu might not have been enough to contain both of you...my chakra pool isn't fully developed yet..."

“Stop stalling for time!” Kabuto demanded, seeing through Ekyt’s plan. “Now, I’ve got this girl. An ANBU agent. Someone who meant something to someone...”

That hit home with Ekyt. He watched the girl struggle slightly, trying to position her neck away from that knife. In his mind, he saw Hayate kissing this girl. Before he had died, Hayate had told Ekyt he was going to propose.

-(Flashback)-

“Yeah, (koff) I’m going to ask her to marry me,” Hayate said happily, showing Ekyt a box. He flipped it open, revealing a ring.

“Congratulations sensei,” Ekyt said simply. At fifteen, he looked to be twelve, but acted like he was twenty most of the time.

“(koff)Always so formal? We’re practically brothers now, right? (koff)”

Ekyt rolled his eyes mockingly. “Sorry. Congratulations, Oniisan.”

Hayate put a hand on Ekyt’s head. He had seen how attention-starved the boy was when he first came to the village. Hayate didn’t warm to people easily, but when Ekyt had come to him after seeing him practice his ‘Crescent Moon Dance’ jutsu, a sword in hand...well, Hayate noticed the cold shoulder others gave the kid. Hayate had gotten that too, when he was younger. So he kind of took Ekyt under his wing.

“Listen, Otouto...I know it’s a strange thing (koff koff) to bring up, but if something happens to me, I want you make sure (koff) she gets the ring.”

--

Ekyt put up a hand. This was his fight, and even though he wasn’t the ranking member, it was his decision- this was his mission. The other members stopped moving.

I remember now...all too well...the feelings of acceptance I had for such a short time...from Hayate, from the Third Hokage...and from a few others...(thinks of Lee, Naruto, Sakura, etc)now that feeling is gone...only my parents left, and I can’t get them involved in this...this lifestyle...that means I’m the only one here to make this move. All the others have families, and friends...I have only a few promises, one of which I can fulfill now...Hayate asked me to give that ring to this girl, from him. It’s funny how things turn out...

Ekyt began walking over slowly, his hand inside a summoning scroll, reaching for the box Hayate had left him.

...I was supposed to be at that wedding, just a little while after he died. I still remember what Iruka said at the Third’s funeral...about how when someone dies, that’s all. The only thing left are memories...That led me to ask...

Ekyt dropped his weapons and ended his summoning jutsu.

...how will I be remembered? What will define me...Now is when I will define myself. I want to be remembered, and I want to be remembered as a hero...someone who would do anything for his village...there was nothing the Leaf couldn't ask of me...that's the memory I want...and now I'll make it.

"A deal."

The sharp words echoed. Kabuto and Orochimaru froze, as did everyone else. Ekyt's eyes were downcast. (In an anime, he'd have shadows all around his eyes, indicating doom)

"What kind of deal? You're hardly in a position to bargain!" Kabuto sneered, holding the kunai closer to the girl.

"Kabuto, if you kill her, I'll kill you. That's it. I won't even bother trying to seal Orochimaru's soul. It'll be just you and me in the death god's stomach for eternity, reliving our final battle. I don't want that, and I don't think you do either. I'm not trying to swerve you, or trick you...I just want to make things...better, for at least one person."

Ekyt nodded toward everyone, then gave them the signal to back off. A rain started to fall, drenching everyone.

"All I want is for you to let her go. Let me give her something that my brother asked me to pass on..." Ekyt asked, no emotion in his voice. He saw the purple-haired girl's head perk up when he said 'brother'. "...After that, everyone leaves except me. You and your lord can do what you like. You can say you killed the 'Dragon Boy'- you can boast that you took my body over- you can even kill me and reanimate me. And for allowing me one request...I'll make it easy for you. I'm unarmed, and how much chakra do you think I have after pulling those stunts?"

Kabuto looked at Orochimaru. Orochimaru nodded, already knowing what he would do with Ekyt.

"This is insanity! Damn it, Ekyt! You aren't following procedure!" shouted one jonin.

"Procedure be damned. If you want to play by the rules and get killed, that's your damn business!" Ekyt snarled, suddenly feeling terribly angry. "If you had moved faster, this could have been avoided! I should have handled this myself and just killed these bastards! Instead, I ask for backup and follow the rules, and I wind up like this! Don't explain strategy to me! Just get the hell out of here, and don't waste any more of my time!"

After that temper tantrum, Ekyt went completely void again. "Do we have a deal? Just let me give the girl something, and let her go. That's it, no tricks. My chakra is gone, my weapons are out of reach, and you outnumber me."

Orochimaru gave Kabuto a nod. He shoved Hayate's lover to Ekyt, who caught her around the waist. Between the rain and wind, it looked as though *they* were the lovers. Ekyt sighed again, wishing that was the case. But it would be a betrayal of Hayate's memory to do something like that. Instead, Ekyt

gave her a gentle hug, only so he could whisper his intentions to her.

“Yukao...before he died, Hayate asked me to give you this, should anything happen to him. Now is the best time, I think...so, please...take this ring, in the name of Hayate’s memory...and in the name of his love for you.”

Ekyt heard a sharp intake of breath from the girl.

“Of course...yes, I will. Thank you. Please, be safe,” she whispered back. Ekyt didn’t answer- safety was too much to hope for. Instead, he let go and stood in front of her, arms out defensively. When she hesitated, Ekyt simply said ‘go’.

When she finally ran off, Ekyt stood still, waiting for Orochimaru and Kabuto to come to him. His fight was long gone. For once, with no one to protect, his will to fight was nonexistent. It was as if, by fulfilling that promise, he could let himself go. His troubled mind knew that wasn’t the case, but his tired body just let it go.

--

The purple-haired girl looked at the ring as she and the others rushed away, home to the Hidden Leaf. They had a report to give. But the girl’s thoughts were elsewhere.

“Ekyt...did he propose to you?” asked one of the nameless ANBU agents.

“No...this was from...Hayate...” she responded. She formed a memory of him in her mind, one she could hold on to. The first time Hayate had kissed her. That served to warm her, at least for a while.

(NOTE: More will be revealed about Hayate soon)

--

Orochimaru walked around Ekyt in a circle, licking lips with delight.

“Quite a prize, Kabuto! The Dragon Boy, to be used for whatever we want! Isn’t that...just perfect! After all, he so rudely took his student away...the least he could do is be our substitute host...”

“Lord Orochimaru, that’s not going to be for two and a half years. This one is too dangerous to contain for that long! We should kill him now! He’s been a thorn in your side for too long!”

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion, Kabuto. Your advice is most certainly offensive to the poor boy! Can’t you see he’s upset? Have some consideration of his feelings!” Orochimaru laughed, rubbing Ekyt’s cheek with his hands. Ekyt didn’t move, despite hating this very, very much. Orochimaru knelt down in front of him, trying to get Ekyt to meet his gaze. He put a hand under Ekyt’s chin.

“It’s not like you to just let us do what we want with you. What’s the matter? Did Kabuto strike a nerve when he told you that you were all alone? Don’t feel bad, lots of people are alone...but, then again, most DO find someone who cares for them, don’t they? But you haven’t. Instead, you worked to make

yourself strong. But now you're understanding..." Orochimaru slithered near Ekyt's ear to whisper the last acidic words.

"...that strength alone won't fill that void."

"THAT'S ENOUGH!"

Ekyt vaguely looked up, seeing Naruto and Sakura charge in. Behind them was Ino, Shikamaru, and Choji, followed by three Jonin- Kakashi, Asuma, and Yamato.

"Wood Style: Four Pillars Prison!" Yamato said, clasping his hands together. Wood suddenly grew around Ekyt, separating him from Kabuto.

"We have him," Asuma said into a headset.

"Time to pull out," Kakashi added. "Naruto, Sakura, you're up."

"Right!" They said together!

"Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto screamed. At the same time, Sakura struck the ground, creating a barrier of earth that the clones held up. A few smokebombs, and everyone disappeared.

-

"Should we follow, Lord Orochimaru?" Kabuto asked, waiting for a sound of displeasure from the twisted Sannin.

"No. That one isn't suited to be my host body, he'd only reject me with those annoying jutsus. No, my way was effective...the mind is a powerful, as you know, Kabuto. All I did was speak the truth of his reality, his existence...and he fell like a house of cards. If he doesn't kill himself, the grief will take him over. Either way, he'll no longer be a threat. Come, it's time to leave."

--

This was beyond depression. That was clear. Ekyt hadn't reacted to anything anyone had said or done. Orochimaru's words were still rattling around in his head.

He might be a bastard, but it's true...training was partially to fill that void...only partially, as I truly love my training, and getting stronger. But the way he said it...it was a truth I should have recognized before now...

--

"It's not genjutsu, he would have broken it himself. Sakura's attempt to dispel it didn't work. If neither of them could break it, it doesn't exist. That just leaves the question of what happened to make him this way," Yamato read to Tsunade, not troubling to lower his voice in Ekyt's presence.

"I see...alright, I want someone with him around the clock. He doesn't study, bathe, or even pee without an escort until further notice. Is that clear?" Tsunade asked. Everyone nodded, their minds on Ekyt right now. Asuma, who had been the first to arrive, had heard Ekyt's shouts to ANBU.

They were disrespectful. That right there clued the agents in that something was wrong. Ekyt's know for his courtesy. For him to say something so harsh, especially to ranking members of ANBU...he either had a plan and it failed, or whatever it was Orochimaru said really hit home. With this kid, one is as likely as the other.

"The last one to talk to him was that purple-haired kunoichi in ANBU. She hung around with Hayate."

Tsunade blinked for a moment. "Hayate...I guess it's time to confess...he hasn't died, at least not yet. Whatever caused his cough is a legitimate disease. I informed everyone he had died, because recovery was so unlikely. But he's taken a turn for the better. He's well enough to talk to this girl, and get some answers. Let me see...Naruto and Sakura, take the first watch with Ekyt. Sakura, you'll guard the door and be the lookout, in case Orochimaru isn't done with Ekyt yet. Naruto, you'll be the one to watch him. DO NOT take your eyes off him."

"Come ON, Grandma! I don't wanna watch another guy shower!" Naruto groaned.

"Then let Sakura watch for all I care!" Tsunade shouted back. "Just do what I say!"

34 - Vow of Silence

Ekyt was silent for a full day. Aside from going to the bathroom, he didn't even move from his spot on the tatami mat on the floor of his home. He just sat there, hunched forward, eyes down, staring at nothing. He was thinking, but to anyone else, it looked as if he was dying.

-

"How long has he been like that?" Sakura asked, sitting next to Naruto on Ekyt's couch. Naruto had a lipstick print on his face.

"All day. He's blood-covered, but he hasn't gone to shower, or change. He's just...sat there. ..."

By agreement, neither Naruto or Sakura disturbed him. Something was clearly eating away at Ekyt. Sakura's intuition and Naruto's gut told him that leaving Ekyt alone was the best move. They were only still here because Tsunade had ordered them to watch him. But, unlike usual, he didn't register their presence. It was as if he was somewhere else.

"I even checked to make sure it was him and not a clone. But it's really him..." Naruto pointed out, resisting the temptation to try a Sexy Jutsu to snap him out of it.

"Yuushi came by and talked to him when you left for lunch...Ekyt only looked up briefly, nodded slightly, then went right back to this...whatever state he's in," Sakura added. This was disturbing.

"Damn Orochimaru and whatever he said..." Naruto snarled, baring his teeth.

"Yeah...hey, he's moving!" Sakura said happily. But Ekyt didn't say anything. He shuffled past both Naruto and Sakura, like he was in a trance. Naruto followed him, and Ekyt didn't seem to care. He just shut the bathroom door after Naruto. Sakura stood outside, clasping her hands together, worried about Ekyt.

-

Ekyt didn't say a word as he stepped into the shower, fully-clothed. He had a change of clothes with him. Those he had dropped onto the floor before he stepped into the shower. The water ran for about two minutes. Naruto watched the entire time, making sure to keep eye contact with Ekyt. Ekyt didn't seem to really care about his naked state for once. He just washed quickly. The shower soon turned red from the blood of all the cuts on his body, making for a scene very murder movie-ish. Ekyt shut the water off, dried himself, then put on his clothes. Tossing his towel into the shower, not seeming to care that it was now dyed red, Ekyt walked out of the bathroom, Naruto in tow.

-

Sakura stepped away from the door once Ekyt and Naruto emerged. The shower hadn't changed

Ekyt's mood apparently, as he still walked around silently. He looked like hell, Naruto and Sakura agreed. He was more pale than usual, and the bags under his eyes were darker.

Finally, Ekyt went back to his spot on the tatami mat and sat back down, going back to the position he was in before. He sat that way for a few minutes, then simply laid down, curled up into a ball, and went to sleep.

This was peculiar behavior for Ekyt, and Naruto and Sakura knew it. Going to sleep without studying for hours wasn't like Ekyt. Something was seriously wrong, but who could tell what? And Ekyt wasn't talking. He still hadn't spoken, and it was into the thirtieth hour since his fight with Orochimaru. When he woke up an hour later, it was more of the same. Naruto and Sakura were getting more worried as time passed. So it was a mixture of relief and sadness when they watched Ekyt get up and walk out the door. Finally he was moving, that had to be a good sign. Right?

First stop: the memorial stone. It wasn't hard to guess what Ekyt was thinking. The Third Hokage's death was still fresh in Ekyt's mind, and it was clear that he had been here every day since that day, when he wasn't on a mission.

Second Stop: Ekyt wandered into a store in town. He left with nothing. A few times, his hand had strayed toward various items, but each time he dropped his hand and kept walking. Sakura and Naruto exchanged worried glances, but kept following.

Third Stop: Ekyt stopped in a bar near the Hokage mansion. Silently, he handed the bartender (Aki, Yuushi's adopted mother) a prescription, allowing him to take a special brand of sake. He was old enough now, but this saved him from being hassled for looking so young.

Fourth Stop: Ekyt climbed up the stairs to the Hokage mansion, pausing at the top to look at the Leaf Village before going inside.

-

Lady Tsunade felt a small ray of hope when Ekyt walked in. Upon seeing his face, however, that ray faded as quickly as it came. Tsunade knew why Ekyt was here; he had a report to give after that fight, and he had to give a good reason for mouthing off to ANBU. As luck would have it, one agent was here—Hayate's lover. She had just learned that Hayate wasn't dead, and she was jumping for joy inside. Upon seeing Ekyt, the one who had given her the ring in Hayate's name, she got excited and rushed over.

"Thank you. You kept my hope alive," she whispered happily into Ekyt's ear as she hugged him. Ekyt froze, but hugged back, still not speaking. The embrace was short, as Ekyt gave her a small nod and walked past, to Tsunade's desk.

"What do you have for me?" Tsunade asked gently. She nearly cried upon seeing Ekyt silently reach for a summoning scroll, absolutely no life on his face whatsoever. It was tear-jerking to see him this...depressed? Sad? Anxious? Which was it?

Ekyt took a bundle out of his scroll and laid it on Tsunade's desk, stepping back to let her open it. The Kusanagi rolled out onto the desk. It took Tsunade a few minutes to get over the shock. When she did,

she made sure her words were complimentary to her newest chunin.

“Thank you, very good job. Now I’ll just have this returned to the Village Hidden in the Grass. (Kusanagi= Grass long sword) Let me see, who can do this mission...hmm?!”

Ekyt took the sword back and wrapped it up.

Tsunade distinctly felt her heart break right about here. “You want to bring it to them...is that it?” she asked, looking Ekyt in the eyes. She felt a tear trickle out of one. Ekyt nodded very slightly, meeting Tsunade’s gaze.

“Alright, the mission is yours. Be careful,” Tsunade said quietly, turning around. She couldn’t hold the tears back now. “You two, go with him,” she choked out, meaning Naruto and Sakura.

--

The Grass Village was quite a trip. Naruto and Sakura were lucky to have each other, because Ekyt still hadn’t spoken, forty-eight hours later. He just held the Kusanagi in front of him, staring at it, or maybe through it. Maybe he just stared at it because it was there, and beat staring at the ground.

Things, of course, didn’t go smoothly. Just outside the Grass Village’s borders, the three were met with bandits.

“Well well, what is this? Looks valuable to me! How about I just take that from you, junior?” taunted the lead goon. Ekyt just stared at him, then at the sword. Then he started to walk forward.

“Just hand it over!” the leader demanded, drawing a kunai. Ekyt just kept walking forward, holding the bundled-up sword in front of him. Once he got within three meters of the bandits, they all dropped, screaming about various things.

“What the hell?! What happened?!” Naruto asked, looking around wildly, not sure what had just happened here. Sakura had been in combat with Ekyt more often, and knew what happened.

“Genjutsu. He used that Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique. He’s done it so much he doesn’t make the hand signs for it anymore. He just had to be close enough. It’s a D-ranked jutsu, but Ekyt learned how to make it stronger. By the looks of it, he hit them with an B-ranked version of it. One step higher...” Sakura shuddered.

“A-ranked? What happens at A-ranked?” Naruto asked, dying to know.

“They go insane...” Sakura explained in a hushed tone. Her eyes were on Ekyt, who hadn’t stopped walking, even as he was casting the jutsu. It was scary to think that someone who hadn’t spoken in more than two days could just... do that.

--

Ekyt walked up to the guard. This one was friendly, and didn’t seem at all disturbed by Ekyt walked up

and handing him a scroll.

“Oh, you must be Tsunade’s messenger! Very good, go right in to see our minister. He’s expecting you.”

Ekyt bowed his thanks, followed by Naruto and Sakura. The guard stopped them, but not in suspicion.

“Is he...you know...okay?” the guard wanted to know. Naruto and Sakura again exchanged glances.

“No...and I don’t know when he will be. He was just in a battle with Orochimaru, and something happened to him after that. He hasn’t talked in more than two days. He sat still for a full day...” Sakura whispered. The guard bowed his head.

“Well, you know, he’s alright by us. He won’t have any trouble here, whether he wants to make a speech or never talk again. The fact that he’d return the Kusanagi to us...hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was presented with a Grass Hitai-ate or something.”

The conversation stopped there as Ekyt returned, carrying a new package. He gave another silent bow, then started to walk again. Naruto and Sakura were frustrated with this, but they kept it hidden. He would talk in his own time.

--

Now a full three days after his fight, Ekyt stopped in the middle of the forest. He sat down, just like he had at home. Naruto and Sakura guesses this was his way of saying he needed to rest. They quietly sat down a little ways away, exchanging worried glances. Finally, Naruto got up and walked to Ekyt, squatting in front of him.

-

“Talk to us,” Naruto said, looking Ekyt in the eyes. “What is this about? Is it about Sakura? Because...” Naruto paused, breathing out hard.

“Because if it IS about Sakura, you can have her- just start talking again! No, you know what, just nod- is this about Sakura>:

Ekyt looked Naruto in the eyes. He shook his head.

“It’s not? Then...then what? You CAN still talk, right? You’re just choosing not to or something?”

Ekyt nodded. In the dirt below, he traced a symbol in the ground. It was the kanji for ‘Thought’.

“You’re thinking? That’s why you’ve been silent? You could have just wrote that earlier!” Naruto exclaimed, wonder why Ekyt couldn’t talk, if he was thinking, but decided not to talk about it.

-

“Well?” Sakura asked anxiously. She didn’t know what Naruto asked.

“He wrote down ‘thinking’ on the ground. I guess he just wants some time...what the hell could have done this?!” Naruto was getting frustrated with his inability to help his friend.

“Something really got to him...if he’d just tell us, maybe we could help...but he would have told us by now, if it was...I guess he just needs some time to sort things out and-”

“Hey! Where the hell did he go?! Oh no!” Naruto freaked out. “We let him out of our site! Where did he go?!”

Sakura snapped her fingers. “Orochimaru. That must be it. He’s going to do something! Let’s-”

But the hysteria stopped there as Ekyt walked out from behind a tree. Apparently, he had to go to the bathroom or something, so he stepped out of view. All that hysterical thought for nothing.

--

The three returned to the Hidden Leaf, and walked right into trouble. Okkuu was out of the hospital, and had something to say to Ekyt.

“I didn’t need you to save me,” Okkuu snarled, jabbing his finger at Ekyt. Ekyt simply walked around him without a glance. Okkuu, stunned, ran back in front of Ekyt.

“Did you hear me, you retard? You think you’re some big-deal chunin now, you don’t have to talk to me? Well, I’ve got news, I’m better than you! Whadda ya think of THAT, hot shot?!”

Ekyt kind of blinked, then just jumped over Okkuu and kept walking at his own pace. Okkuu didn’t take too kindly to be ignored, that was for sure.

“Your student is a piece of shoot, just like you. I heard what he did, deserting our village. It’s a shame Orochimaru DIDN’T kill you both! Oh well, if he had, I couldn’t have kicked both your asses! So I guess Orochimaru was right.”

Tok.

Ekyt stopped walking. His foot, laced with chakra, sunk into the ground. He turned around, and finally opened his mouth, more than fifty hours after he had faced Orochimaru.

35 - Appeal of Silence

Silence. Ekyt opened his mouth, facing Okkuu. Okkuu mouthed off, and now he got it- he should have shut up. All the same, Ekyt's words weren't what he expected.

"What a disgrace. A waste. You're nothing but a little brat with a trashy mouth. Do you understand that I put my life on the line to save you?" Ekyt said softly. But he wasn't done. His voiced raised a little.

"I haven't regretted it. Don't make me regret it. Regret does things to a man that you wouldn't believe. It forces our morals aside, sometimes even makes us SNAP!" Ekyt took a few steps forward, toward Okkuu. "You know nothing of real combat. And when you got your chance, you didn't even last ten seconds. And you think you're ready to talk about Orochimaru? You think you're in some special position where you can talk crap and never get hit for it? Because I'm going to tell you right now, in front of all these people: You will never be a real warrior. You're not worthy to pick up dog crap in this village. You're not fit to EAT that dog crap. You're lucky you've made people afraid, even your sensei. You don't scare me, all you do is piss me off. And right now, you opening that little rat trap you call a mouth again...that would be suicide for you."

Ekyt dropped his wooden sword. "Kindly proctor this match, Naruto. It's time I did some teaching..."

Naruto stepped forward, but tried to reason with Ekyt. "You can't fight him! C'mon, it's not a fair fight! One hit from you and he's toast!"

"I'm not going to hit him. Not even a punch, not even once. I don't need to. I guarantee he'll lose this match without me ever taking the offensive," Ekyt muttered darkly. "In fact, just to make sure that little loudmouth isn't scared, I won't use ninja tools. What do you say, you little punk?"

Okkuu laughed, thinking of Ekyt's cousin. "You know what, you're a fine one to talk. You had your cousin and his girlfriend defend you. You're not so scary, you just talk big and choose good people to hang out with!"

Ekyt didn't know that Temari and Kimimaro had done anything. But he didn't care right now. All he wanted was to make this rotten little kid shut up.

"Take all the time you need to beat me, and used whatever means you need to. I don't really care if you cheat. Just try your best, hotshot, and see where it gets you."

Okkuu, momentarily stunned, decided to make Ekyt put up or shut up. He reared back and threw two shuriken. Ekyt stepped to the side, letting them whiz by. Okkuu, counting on Ekyt being distracted, was running headlong into him. Before he could stop, he saw Ekyt's hand whiz down.

Push.

Ekyt pushed Okkuu lightly in the chest, shoving him back a couple steps.

“Don’t look surprised, I SAID I wouldn’t hit you,” Ekyt said. But the hatred in his expression was gone. Instead, he looked thoughtful. As Okkuu rushed again, Ekyt decided he had to know. As Okkuu stabbed with a kunai, Ekyt caught his hand and yanked it around behind his back.

“Who is it that hits you?” Ekyt asked, out of nowhere. Okkuu’s eyes went wide. Naruto and Sakura were shocked. How had he noticed something so quickly?!

“S-Shut up!” Okkuu yelled, kicking Ekyt in the shin. But Ekyt didn’t let go.

“You’ve lost a parent, haven’t you? To Orochimaru, right? Is that why you can talk about him so freely, when everyone else is afraid to?”

Okkuu was stunned. How had Ekyt figured it out.

“It was my Mom...she was a jonin...she died protecting me and Dad. Orochimaru killed her. Ever since then...Dad’s always blamed me, and hit me! It’s...always been...my fault!” Okkuu sobbed, crying wildly. Ekyt didn’t let go, as it was clear he wasn’t hurting Okkuu.

“Okkuu, we’ve all lost someone or something to Orochimaru...acting like you do won’t do anything except get you alienated even more...once you understand that, you’ll be ten times stronger, and maybe...maybe you’ll be the warrior your mother was.”

Ekyt let go of Okkuu and walked away, leaving Naruto and Sakura to wonder just what the hell had happened. How had Ekyt known? And what was he thinking about all that time?

--

Ekyt stayed silent. Again. He handed Tsunade a scroll with his report, then stalked out of the room, in a worse mood than before, but somehow showing even less of a mood. His face stayed smooth and unmarred by expression.

Except where Naruto and Sakura were involved. Apparently, part of Ekyt’s thought process was that he could talk to those two. Even then, his words were very limited. And, somehow, Ekyt’s combat skills grew. Even against Lee, with whom Ekyt had chosen not to speak. But with Lee, he had a reason: Linda, his girlfriend. At one point, Ekyt and Linda had been close, almost boyfriend/girlfriend, but Linda had ended that, and had chosen to hate Ekyt for his success. Ekyt, in turn, disdained her. He had no problem with Lee, he just didn’t need the hassle of dealing with Linda. So he stayed quiet.

Ekyt noticed that this tended to get him even more attention, especially from young females. Not that it was a bad thing by itself, but these girls were too young. They were hardly the warrior types anyway, something Ekyt knew he prized. This all led to another situation that shaped Ekyt.

One night, Tsunade asked Ekyt to walk Sakura to Ichiraku, where she meeting Naruto. It was all part of a plan to get Ekyt to talk again. Instead, it wound up giving Ekyt more reason to stay silent.

The night was quiet, and Sakura was friendly to Ekyt, no change there. Konoha had warm nights most of

the time, and Sakura was friendly to Ekyt all the time, since he HAD kind of saved her life once, after all. Tonight, Sakura overheard some school girls giggling about Ekyt.

<

“I’ve heard him talk!”

“No way, Itsuki!”

“It’s true, it’s true! Gah, he’s sot hot!”

“He held a door open for me the other day. I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t!”

“Come on Tsuba, be real!”

“It’s true, Mae! Ekyt’s a gentleman, we all knew that!”

“Yeah, I guess...”

>

And so on. Gossip. Ekyt didn’t acknowledge it, or the people speaking it. He HAD held the door open for the one girl the other day, that much was true.

“Ekyt, did you ever think you’d be the star of a *shojo* anime in real life?” Sakura joked, giving Ekyt a little nudge. “You should talk to them, it would make their day, and, you never know...one of them might grow up to be a looker! And she’ll never forget that you were kind to her! And who knows what that could lead to?”

This earned a small smile from Ekyt. Sakura happily smiled at that.

“So you can still smile after all! Well, it’s less worrisome when you show some kind of emotion like that once in a while!”

Ekyt thought about that. He hadn’t revealed what had made him silent yet, but Sakura had a point. When Ekyt had tried smiling before, even though it was fake, it had the effect of making people worry about him less. Would it be helpful to smile again? That simpering, fake smile made Ekyt sick, but he didn’t want people worrying about him. This thought troubled him until they reached Ichiraku. Naruto was waiting outside, happy to see the two of them.

“Hi Sakura! I’m buying tonight! You two Ekyt, can you stick around?!” Naruto offered. Ekyt gave what he hoped was a sincere smile, but shook his head. Nodding goodnight, he turned around and walked down a dark sidestreet. There he saw trouble.

-

“Help! Please! Mister, I didn’t mean it! Please, let go!”

The girls from earlier were being held up by a masked bandit. Ekyt saw this and immediately got

involved. Since it was dark, the robber couldn't see his face if Ekyt walked in the right places. So far, he hadn't been heard by the bandit either.

"Heh, you stupid little girls and your fantasies! Now, just hand over your ryo and I'll be on my way. Unless you're waiting for your silent savior! The hero that lost his backbone and took a vow of silence! How pathetic is he? And you know something? You're even MORE pathetic, for thinking him to be someone special!"

Ekyt had reached the robber by now. The little girl, a kunoichi in training, gave the robber a swift kick to the crotch. That only angered him, and he drew a knife.

"Now you're dead!" he shouted, aiming the knife at the girl.

SLASH!

"Huh?!"

Ekyt held the knife in his hand. But he grabbed the blade, not the handle. The blade dug into his hand, but he didn't cry out. He gripped it tighter, then pulled. The surprised robber fell toward Ekyt, and Ekyt's left hand. BAM! Ekyt let the knife clatter to the ground using his left hand to pummel the robber. Jutsus were out, his hand was too hurt to make hand signs, but taijutsu worked just fine. This robber was talentless, and that was why he thought preying on some little girls was a good idea. It was pathetic, and Ekyt explained that with his fists.

Once he had KO'ed this loser and tied him up, Ekyt faced the prospect of dealing with the girls he had just saved. Ekyt never had fangirls, and wasn't quite sure how to react, so he stared. They stared back, not believing that their Shojo-manga fantasy boy had just come to their rescue.

"Yo-you're you!" the one Ekyt knew as Mae sputtered. In his mind, there was a great conflict. To talk, or not to talk? In the end, shattering a girl's hopes and dreams wasn't something Ekyt could do. He would simply say enough to make the situation end peacefully, then go home and think silently.

"Everyone okay?" Ekyt asked, seeing the girls' eyes widen as he talked. They nodded, looking at each other in disbelief.

"Good. Be safe, then..." Ekyt said, turning to walk away, but feeling a tug on his vest. He turned around, trying to stay patient.

"Thank you. But are YOU okay?" the girl asked. This struck Ekyt as strange, but he didn't react as though it did. Instead, he used his new-found knowledge and managed a smile.

"I'm fine. Nothing to worry about. All of you, go home, okay? I have to take care of this and write up my report."

Ekyt walked away, somehow feeling that this wasn't going to be the end. In talking to those girls, Ekyt had done the right thing- but now the gossip would spread like wildfire. Not that it could be helped now.

-

Tsunade looked mildly surprised to see Ekyt. When she saw he was depositing a robber on her desk, she was less shocked.

“Another one? Damn it, this place is becoming a cess pool...alright, I'll expect a report-”

Ekyt dropped a scroll on her desk, giving a small smile.

“-in the morning? Okay then. Thank you, I'll take care of this from here...” Tsunade's voice trailed off. **Did he just smile at me? It's what I would expect, but not from him...just what happened to him the past few days? He's a different kid now...he's doing his job, so I can't yell at him...but that doesn't mean I don't want to know what's wrong!**

Ekyt had silently left the room, leaving Tsunade to think. She soon came up with an idea. Ekyt was cursed with the most bizarre/worst luck on exams- now there was another he could take!

“The Exam Proctor/Teaching Examination! It's perfect for him! And he can finally take A and B ranked missions, so I'll get him to jonin as fast as I can! Maybe that will cure whatever it is that's wrong with him. At least, I hope so...I hate seeing him like this...I even liked it better when he and I fought...”

--

The girls walked home, still stunned by their rescuer.

“Hey ladies! I see you like that silent kid, huh?!” A shadowy figure said in a jolly voice. “What would you say if I told you I could get you...action figures! T-shirts! Posters! Panties! And Manga, all with your favorite silent superhero! Huh, Whaddaya say?! Who's interested? For the right price, I can get you almost anything with him on it!”

The girls immediately ponyed up cash. This was too good! They gleefully snapped up everything the shadowy man had in stock, not thinking of or caring where this stuff came from. They had something to wear to the academy the next day!

--

“Hehe, in a few years they're gonna be lookers, and I'll get 'em then, too! Now, how to do this without Ekyt wanting royalties...”

--

Orochimaru's words ran through Ekyt's head again.

Was he right? Training will never fill the void...he must be. It would be different if I was like him and had no need for relationships...but I want one. I can't deny that. The desire, that it. But I can certainly deny myself that kind of relationship. Any girl I liked has been taken, that's fact. Until one becomes available, my desire for female companionship does not exist. Only myself and

training.

But that's not right...

This was only part of the thought process Ekyt had been turning over in his head for days now. Only a part of the reason for his silence. The rest was just as hard, if not harder, to filter through in his mind. His road to recovery was going to be long and steep.

NEXT ISSUE: EKYT'S NEW CAREER OPTION! AND- WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SILENT, GIRL-SHY EKYT HAS FANGIRLS? AND, EVEN BETTER- WHAT HAPPENS WHEN HE BECOMES A STAR IN A RACY SHOJO MANGA WRITTEN BY AN 'UNKNOWN' AUTHOR? ALSO, UPDATES ON YUUSHI AND OKKUU!

36 - The Shojo Star?

It started in school. Iruka and all the other teachers noticed a t-shirt that was popular among the girls. No big deal, a fad, didn't hurt anyone. But it snowballed. Manga hidden behind textbooks, pencil cases, headbands, eraser- everything. Every possible bit of paraphernalia had been marked with this guy. After confiscating yet another hidden manga, Iruka dismissed the class- there was no getting through to them today, and this epidemic was a problem, no doubt.

"Your class too, Iruka? What is up with this?! Who is this guy?!" One teacher moaned, thinking about how his carefully-planned lecture had been for nothing because a gaggle of giggling girls had decided to gossip about some boy. Then a fight over a pencil...it was disgusting.

"Yeah. Who IS this guy anyway? Brown hair...dark eyes...a cigarette...Asuma? No...then why does this seem so familiar..." Iruka narrowed his eyes, then laughed. "Well, it looks like one of my old students, but it can't be! The guy is so girl shy, it's not possible for him to-"

Ekyt walked in at that moment, to ask for a reference book to study for his exam proctor test. Iruka and the other teachers went silent. Ekyt stared at them; they stared at Ekyt. Iruka knew Ekyt wasn't talking, so he didn't ask. As it turned out, that's what gave Ekyt away. The title of the confiscated manga: The Silent Superhero

"Ekyt...uh, have you seen this before?" Iruka asked, looking at the other teachers as he handed Ekyt the manga. Ekyt took it, looked at it, then handed it back, shaking his head. He motioned for Iruka to follow him.

-

"Iruka, this is ridiculous! I don't know who did this, but I'm going to beat the hell out of them!" Ekyt snarled, pacing around, his cigarette blowing smoke all over.

"Any idea who did this...WHOA!" Iruka snapped the book shut, turning red out of embarrassment.

"What is it?" Ekyt asked, reaching for the book. Iruka didn't seem to want to give it to him.

"It's nothing, really. Just a...well, it's better you don't see..." Iruka tried to dodge away, but Ekyt grabbed the book. He thumbed through it, his shock and anger growing with each page. But he didn't find what Iruka could be talking about...

"What page?!" he demanded.

"123..." Iruka whispered. Ekyt flipped open the book. His cigarette fell as his jaw dropped. Shock, rage, and embarrassment moved across his face. This was worse than reading someone's journal. This was worse than gossip. This was worse than graphitti.

“Who...the...hell...DREW ME IN MY UNDERWEAR IN A SHOJO COMIC?!” Ekyt shouted, glaring at the picture. It was flattering in a way, but drawing someone like that, without their consent! And even worse, the dialogue in the comic!

“Hold me, Silent-sama. Maybe for...the last time! I’m dying...”

“...”

“I’ll be dead soon, and my last wish...is to hear you speak...and to manifest our love...”

“...”

“Thank you so much! Please, be gentle, it’s my first time!”

...what sonofadog wrote and drew this?!

“Iruka...just how bad is this? What have you seen? I’m guessing this manga isn’t all...”

Iruka grew a nice sweatdrop on his head. “Well, let’s see...tshirts, coffee mugs, pencils, pencil cases, erasers, shoes, socks, posters, and...well, I’ve even heard...ahem...panties.”

Ekyt turned around and strode away, clearly enraged beyond words. The offensive manga in hand, Ekyt barged up to Tsunade’s office. In the room already were several girls, all quizzing Sakura about her relationship with Ekyt. Tsunade was looking mildly irritated, while Sakura was near freaking out.

Everyone froze.

“KYAAA!”

The girls mobbed Ekyt, who was clearly uncomfortable. He couldn’t believe it- his face was everywhere. He even saw one poster- this was the nearly-naked representation of him. Ekyt’s face was burning red now. But he didn’t know that it was about to get worse. It was a moment most guys would cherish. But to a straight-laced guy like Ekyt, it was a black mark on his personal record.

“Please, Silent-sama, sign here!”

Ekyt turned to politely tell the girl ‘no’, but his nose began to bleed. The girl had bent over and hiked up her skirt, showing off her panties- Ekyt saw him staring at his own face. He had to blink to make sure this was real. Apparently, it was, because there was still a girl’s butt in his face.

“Uh, keep in mind, uh ‘silent-kun’, it’s illegal to seduce a minor...” Tsunade snickered. Ekyt favored her with a glare, but was soon busy with another poster of his nearly-naked self.

In front of Sakura, too...what is going on here?! Where did this smut come from?!

“Do you REALLY look like that in your underwear?! Boxers or briefs?!?!”

What?! This mob is two seconds away from ripping my clothes off to find out for themselves, and they probably won't stop there! This isn't good...

Ekyt put up his hands for silence. The girls calmed down, waiting to hear the silent superhero speak.

"Who sold you this stuff?" he asked calmly, although his insides were burning with anger and embarrassment. Ekyt was curious as to why Sakura hadn't hit him- he almost wished she had!

She must know that I really don't want any part of this...Oh well, at least I'm not so shy around her anymore, now that she's got a boyfriend. She's no 'threat'...

"A man near the hot springs, in the shadows. He was tall, and he had on a weird headband..." one girl said.

"Yeah, yeah, and I saw white hair!" another chimed in.

"Will you marry me?" said another. Ekyt shook his head, silently apologizing. He had to kill this problem off- now. Quick as a flash, Ekyt was out the window and across town. Halfway to his destination, he used a Transformation Jutsu to turn into one of the girls that had been obsessed with him.

I think I know who this is...

-

Ekyt arrived, landing on the ground. He forgot that he had taken the appearance of a girl, so he got his fair share of odd looks, as he had jumped over a group of young genin, likely giving them a look under 'his' skirt. But he ignored that for now- he had bigger fish to fry. Bigger, more perverted fish. And frying was altogether too good- this was punishable by decapitation!

Bad enough to use me...but to draw me almost naked, then put me on panties?! I guess I should be honored...but still! This is unpardonable!

"Hey there, Itsuki! Looking for more merchandise?! I got ya covered! The latest manga, and the underwear you special ordered!" said the shadow-covered man, holding out a manga that was wrapped in brown plastic, and a pair of THE most trashy-looking thong panties Ekyt had ever seen.

Ekyt undid his jutsu, grabbing the shadowy man around the neck. To no one's surprise, it was Jiraiya.

"You damned pervert! How DARE you? I don't care if you're a legend, you'd better start explaining this smut, or I'm going to turn you into the pervy corpse!"

Jiraiya laughed. "Nice, huh? I never really targeted a girl audience before, and face it kid, a bachelor with mystery about him and decent looks- you could make a mint! I guess you're hear for royalties..."

"No. I'm here to tell you to stop producing this, or you're going to pay, and not with your wallet." Ekyt yanked Jiraiya closer, glaring at him.

“Oh, the naked thing, right? I could just make you more, heheh, impressive. That’s all it is, right? I should know better than to copy directly.”

“WHAT?!” Ekyt yelped, suddenly feeling violated.

“Hey, it was no picnic for me either kid! I don’t like guys! But the money I could make...who could resist?!”

Ekyt wasn’t comfortable with talking, but favored Jiraiya with a snarled bit of speech:

“You’d better learn to resist. I’ve never had a problem with you, but it seems you want me to hit trouble with every Sannin. And if I EVER catch you watching me in the hot spring, I’ll destroy you. Sound fair? Now you collect all that smut back and tell people I’m not a superhero. I’ve got enough problems as it is, I don’t need girls thinking I’m some cute guy who’ll strip in command!”

Jiraiya blinked. “Tell me again...WHY don’t you want girls thinking you’re some cute superhero who will sleep with them?”

Ekyt realized how that sounded. “Not that it isn’t tempting...but it’s not me. I’d rather have one meaningful relationship than be worshipped. Besides, if I’m going to be praised, I want it to be for my skills, not for being silent. That’s what I’ve worked for.”

Jiraiya nodded, apparently understanding to some degree. “Fair enough, I guess. If it makes you feel better, I used my own body as a model, instead of yours. I DID watch you to pick up your habits, though. Sorry about that.”

Ekyt shrugged. “Just don’t do it again. I’ve got enough problems without mothers thinking I’m some porn star thanks to your dirty books. Let’s just keep it in check, okay? Keep the money, I don’t want it...and, Master Jiraiya...if you do this again, you’ll be EATING your work, because I will shove that trashy garbage down your throat.”

--

When one door closes, another opens. Or, when one door closes, a window opens. However you look at it, it’s not always a good thing. Ekyt had been humiliated, and at a crucial time- the exam proctor/teaching exam. This test was notoriously hard, and would require all his effort and concentration. But what Orochimaru said still seemed to ring true.

Training won’t fill the void. Is the correct answer to try to force it to, and to remove myself from ‘that’ world by living in ‘my’ world? I can accept the fact that love is out of reach for the time being, that’s fine. Truthfully, it was never in my reach, due to my own inabilities. Perhaps a return to tradition...I will stay silent, smile occasionally...but I will simplify my life until things have become more clear.

Ekyt had left his eyes closed as he sat under the waterfall. He hated getting his hair wet for some reason, but he ignored that now. His life was discipline, and discipline was life. He would continue life as he always did, but he would spend more time thinking. To do this, he had to sacrifice missions- no

problem. Now that he had graduated from doing D-ranks, there were fewer B and A ranks as it was, which left Ekyt enough time to keep training while he sorted things out. It was the perfect scenario, save for the fact that Ekyt was so uncertain it was pathetic. He had never let a taunt get to him like this.

Perhaps no taunt ever rang so true...Most were groundless accusations, or something I could have retorted to. But this...this was much different. It was something that was truthful, and it's a truth I've been dodging. Well, it's time to put my savings to work once again and make things works for me. If anything has become clear, it's that I can't rely on others to see things the way I do, and I can't change them so that they do.

--

Yuushi walked home with Kantai, eager to introduce her to his parents. But waiting for him at his door were his parents, and the last person he wanted to see.

"Welcome home, Yuushi! I'm glad you're here, because we have big news. Your father and I have adopted another child, and he seems to know you. I know you'll be a good big brother and welcome him home..."

Okkuu and Yuushi looked at each other, each dismayed.

Brothers?! They thought at the same time. This was bad.

"I never knew you two were friends!" Kantai declared.

"We aren't!" both Yuushi and Okkuu said, glaring at each other.

This won't end well... Yuushi thought. **No way.**

--

"The teaching certification exam will begin now. You will have thirty minutes to answer the fifty questions here. Make the most of your time and do not look at someone else's paper."

Ekyt kept his head down and answered all fifty within twenty minutes. They weren't anything harder than what was on the chunin exam, and he had blazed through those questions with relative ease. A lot of this test was common sense. That actually worried Ekyt a little. His version of common sense was different than most other people's, so he wasn't sure this test was working for him. But he had sense enough not to worry about this until after he had finished. Besides him, there were only a handful of others looking to take this test, and they took at least five minutes longer than Ekyt.

All that was left was to wait for the results.

--

E10257...

Ekyt looked at his number, then at the sheet that posted the scores. What he saw certainly didn't help his mood.

For the first time since coming to the Leaf Village, Ekyt had failed a test.

37 - Defining Trait

Ekyt had failed the test, and done so spectacularly. The test, as it turned out, was all common-sense. It was granted that 'common sense' varied from person to person, so this was a difficult test to standardize. That aside, Ekyt asked to look over the test and answers- the test would change the next time he took it, so it didn't matter if he wrote down the answers.

With a 'schunk' sound, Ekyt closed his blinds, then lit some candles to see by. He sat down, two brushes in hand. One was red, the other was black. The red one was the one Ekyt used to write out the correct responses to the questions he got wrong. The black one was to make side notes to himself. So, through all the questions, Ekyt made a note of something. There had to be a pattern to these questions- standardized testing was like that. After two hours, Ekyt didn't see any patterns, other than he didn't seem to have any common sense. One question confused him:

39. A teacher's primary responsibility is to guide and protect his/her students. In which order should these responsibilities come in, from least importance to most importance.

- a. Physical health, mental health, mental growth
- b. Mental health, mental growth, physical health
- c. Physical health, mental growth, mental health
- d. Mental growth, physical health, mental health
- e. Mental health, physical health, mental growth

In Ekyt's mind, none of the answers were correct.

Why would one take priority over another? Assuming the situation is a normal classroom setting, shouldn't all three be equal? If you're talking exam proctoring, then you go by the situation- if the attack is genjutsu, you watch for mental problems. If it's taijutsu or ninjutsu, you look for physical problems. So why would they ask us to pick? Do they have one preference more than the other? What was my answer again?

Ekyt noticed he hadn't answered. Also to his surprise, he had gotten this question correct. He hadn't noticed it, but that was it. The pattern he was looking for. The question wasn't really multiple choice. It was common sense, and nothing else. To pass, you would have to leave the majority of the answers blank. Because common sense isn't 'common' to any situation. Even if the situations had been stated, it wouldn't have mattered. The answer was the same for every question.

I didn't see this before...because some of the answers made sense. And that's why this test has such a high failure rate. It's seems hypocritical, but really it makes sense. If you're proctoring an exam, then of course you have to look at the situation. You have to follow your gut, not some handbook.

Ekyt put the brushes down and leaned back, staring at the ceiling.

Well, at least it stopped me from thinking about Orochimaru...I suppose I'd better check in with Lady Tsunade now, to see about missions. I'm not well just yet, but I need to get out and clear my head.

Ekyt felt a pain in his leg, but dismissed it from sitting in teteheiza for too long.

--

"Okay Sakura, you're free to go for today. Good job." Tsunade dismissed Sakura, who bowed.

"Thank you, Lady Tsunade!" Sakura almost skipped out of the room. Shizune and Tsunade exchanged knowing smiles.

"Nothing beats the feeling of knowing you have someone special waiting for you, eh Shizune," Tsunade said dreamily, remembering skipping off to meet Dan the same way.

"...I wouldn't really know, My Lady..." Shizune muttered, almost silently. Tsunade's trained ears heard her, however.

"I suppose that's my fault," Tsunade murmured, trying to seem relaxed. "I've barely given you enough time for yourself, let alone time enough for a boyfriend."

That took Shizune completely by surprise. "Oh, no, M'lady, that wasn't what-" her voice trailed off, and soon she and Tsunade were silent. A knock at the window broke them from their trance. Upon seeing it was Ekyt, both kind of smirked- what a perfect discussion to have just before this guy gets here. Shizune opened the window for him, and Ekyt dropped into the room.

"Ekyt, good. I've been hoping to hear how you did on that test." Tsunade leaned forward, hands on her desk. She winced inwardly. But Ekyt just shrugged with that small, fake smile on his face. At least he wasn't completely silent anymore- being a shojo star for a few days had cured that.

"Oh, I failed that. But I see what I did wrong, so I'm not too upset about it. I'll figure it out next time, no big deal. Anyway, I came to see if I had any missions today."

Tsunade had been worried about something like this. "Well, to be honest, your behavior recently has been worrisome. I can't give you any missions before you take a drug test." Tsunade waited for Ekyt to protest.

"That's fair, I haven't been myself lately, I know. Okay. Urine sample?"

"Yup. But, um, someone will have to watch."

"Absolutely not," Ekyt replied, frowning. "Sorry, but if you don't trust me enough to let me pee into a cup on my own, we've got a problem. Just have a little faith in me."

Ekyt took the cup Tsunade had on her desk and walked down the hall to the bathroom. Tsunade called for Kotetsu.

"Watch him," she ordered. Kotetsu did. Seconds later- BAM! Exchanging glances, Tsunade and Shizune ran from the room, down the hallway. It didn't take them long to see what had happened.

"...you come near me again, I'll piss in your mouth, and you can run THAT to Lady Tsunade!" Ekyt snarled. Apparently, he had grabbed Kotetsu's head and jammed it through the bathroom door. Tsunade nodded, satisfied.

"Shizune, please write down that he's exhibiting normal behavior."

Ekyt glared at Tsunade for that- it was a cheap trick she had just pulled. Tsunade never needed a urine sample- she just wanted to make sure Ekyt's temperament was the same. Poor Kotetsu was just an innocent bystander who became a casualty. Ekyt shook his head, and turned to walk down the hallway. He felt the pain in his leg again, causing him to limp.

"Hold still!" Tsunade barked, rushing forward. She knelt down and lifted his pant leg. Eyes wide, Tsunade told Shizune to make sure the hospital was ready.

"What for? What's going on?" Ekyt twisted around to look.

"Kid," Tsunade said, "Your leg is full of poison."

--

Sakura stretched out, ready to meet Naruto for their date. It was a wonderful thing, being in love. And it had helped their training. Both of them had accomplished what they set out to do- bring Sasuke back. Now, Naruto was ready to be Hokage, and Sakura was ready to become Lady Tsunade's replacement in the medical corps. Well, that is to say, they were both ready to train to get there.

"How's it going kiddo?" Temari called over, walking by with Kimimaro.

"Oh, hi Temari! Great, how are you?" Sakura called back, waving.

"I'm doing fine, getting used to this place. Boneman's been a big help. So, where you off to?" Temari was more relaxed these days, so she could hold a normal conversation with almost anyone.

"I'm just off to meet Naruto for some food. Then we've got training. They're probably going to split our team up again," Sakura mentioned, this issue making her think a little.

It must be Naruto...the demon fox that only Captain Yamato can seal...so maybe we're switching senseis? I know Sai was on a team for a while...Yuushi is back, and he's going to be paired with Okkuu...so maybe Sai is with them now? Ah, whatever, I'll worry about it later.

"I've got to get going, see you later!"

--

Tsunade sighed, seeing Ekyt in a hospital bed. Not even he was getting out of this one. Thankfully, she had caught this early.

“It’s what Hayate has...catching it this early was a stroke of luck. Shizune, keep an eye on him. I’m going to get the ingredients for the medication myself. Hayate’s road to recovery will be longer than Ekyt’s, since we caught Ekyt’s condition so early....well, I’m off.” Tsunade had paused, as if to say something else, but apparently chose not to.

Shizune looked at Hayate and Ekyt- two great warriors, neither of which got the recognition they deserved. Now, here they were- Hayate recovering from near-death, and Ekyt waiting for treatment. Hayate’s lover (her name was kept quiet after the hostage situation) soon stopped in. She was shocked to see Ekyt lying in a hospital bed. Eventually, mercifully, he passed out.

“They both are going to recover...aren’t they?” the purple-haired ANBU agent asked Shizune.

“Yes, they’ll be fine. Ekyt’s case was caught early, and Hayate has gotten better every day. It won’t be long now. ...”

Shizune thought about what Tsunade had said earlier. About never leaving Shizune time to have a boyfriend. Shizune’s eyes slid toward the out-cold Ekyt. His lips were slightly parted, and his hair was tussled, but almost stylishly so. His headband was hung around his neck. The sterile room was such a depressing atmosphere. It was brightly lit, but that didn’t help. If anything, it reminded the patients about their conditions.

Shizune walked toward Ekyt, not sure what she was going to do. Their ages weren’t too far apart, and Shizune had always thought of Ekyt as kind of attractive. With his lips parted, would it really hurt to kiss him? They were both single, both really into their work, and Ekyt saw Shizune a lot...maybe they could be together?

Shizune smiled sadly, knowing that couldn’t happen. Her duty was to the Hidden Leaf, and to Lady Tsunade, not herself.

Besides, Ekyt would probably prefer someone close to his own age...oh well. Best of luck to both of us, Ekyt.

Shizune, without realizing it, was bent over him. She had meant to kiss him full on the lips. Instead, she checked his head for a fever, and settled for kissing his forehead instead. With Hayate’s wife-to-be watching, it was better that way. She knew better.

“One woman to another...they’re both pretty attractive. I thought about Ekyt when Lady Tsunade told me Hayate had died. But I couldn’t tell if it was love...or pity...or desperation. I hope he finds someone...Ekyt just seems like the type who would be incomplete without a girl.”

Shizune silently nodded her agreement. Somehow, it DID seem that way. Ekyt was a loner, but maybe the right person could change him. Change wasn’t always bad. In Ekyt’s case, change could be a good thing. But someone like Ekyt also didn’t change his ways easily. People with something to prove never do. Naruto...Sasuke...Orochimaru...Tsunade...Ekyt. That all had something to prove, and none of them had

changed their way of thinking.

“I just hope that he recovers quickly- Ekyt being Ekyt, he won't sit still for long,” Shizune commented, ending the conversation.

Oh well. Maybe things can work out for him yet. You don't have to have someone to be happy. Sometimes, you just need a purpose. With Ekyt, one is as likely as the other.

--

Ekyt, even when he woke up, laid still. He just kept his eyes closed, hoping no one would bother to talk to him. He let his mind wander, thinking about how things could have been. Eventually, of course, things all led to Orochimaru's haunting words.

“You train to fill a void...but you know, that won't fill that void.” Maybe not word for word, but he definitely said that sort of thing. But is he correct? I don't even know how to try to test that theory. The void...I know what it is, but yet I don't. It's deep, and it's confusing. Am I part of this 'void', or is this void who I am? Does it define me? CAN it define me? Does something that's missing define a person? I guess it could...I mean, I remember 'that guy doesn't have manners', or 'Lee doesn't have the ability to do anything but use taijutsu', so it's possible, then. But what is it that's defining me? Is it...is it my inability to kill? Or is there more missing? Would I have been complete if I had killed Orochimaru? COULD I have killed him? Better yet...if I HAD, I wouldn't be having these haunting thoughts.

--

Hayate looked over at Ekyt. He had been aware that the boy had been brought in, and was curious if he was awake. Hayate could tell he was, but he could also tell he didn't want to be bothered at the moment. If he did, he would have opened his eyes, or spoken up by now. So Hayate settled back down, finding his strength had returned, at least a little more. Soon, he could leave and go out and be himself again. It would be a second chance- something few people got. That made Hayate want to make the most of that second chance more than anything.

--

Sakura and Naruto, incidentally, ran into Sasuke and Ino. There was no real bad blood, just a rivalry. The four didn't exchange words, except with the person they were dating. But the tension was still there. It was kept in check, though- no one wanted to be distracted from their date. It was best that way.

--

Yuushi and Okkuu. What a story. They hated each other, no doubt. Now they were forced to live together, and even more so, share a room. They learned they would also be on the same team. It, in a word, sucked. But when a nurse informed Yuushi that Ekyt had been hospitalized, neither boy said anything. They just went to check on Ekyt.

-

Upon arriving, Yuushi and Okkuu found Ekyt already had a visitor. Sai was sitting across the room from Ekyt, sketching.

“Has he woken up yet, Sai?” Yuushi asked, looking at Ekyt’s ‘sleeping’ form.

“If he has, he has chosen not to speak,” Sai replied. “I don’t think I’ve met you...” Sai looked toward Okkuu.

“Okkuu. That’s my name,” he said snottily. Sai being Sai didn’t care in the least. He just gave a fake smile, said ‘nice to meet you’, and went back to drawing. Yuushi and Sai got along, especially after Sai risked his life to save Yuushi. So Yuushi wandered over and say next to Sai, watching him draw. That’s when it occurred to Yuushi that most samurai were well-versed in some kind of art. Maybe drawing was Yuushi’s thing?

“Sai-sempai, will you teach me how to draw?”

--

Ekyt, still unmoving, smiled inside at that. Yuushi wouldn’t have asked that question when he first came to the village. Ekyt hoped that, in some way, he had influenced Yuushi to be a better person. He was certainly more friendly. In Ekyt’s mind, it was a small success that he couldn’t completely take credit for, but it still felt good.

It always felt good to accomplish something.

38 - Giving Advice

Shizune checked in again, this time finding Ekyt with three visitors. Ekyt had finally 'woken up', but he wasn't doing anything but sitting quietly. He watched as Yuushi tried to draw with Sai, while Okkuu shadowboxed. It was clearly boring to the young Shinobi.

"Hi Shizune-sensei. How am I doing?" Ekyt nodded toward his leg, which was propped up in traction. Shizune walked over and probed the leg with two fingers, then investigated it with her chakra.

"It looks like the poison is just about gone. You'll be back on missions in no time," Shizune told him, smiling for his sake as she continued working.

"That's a relief. I've had too much time to think. Is there anything I could be doing while I'm sitting here? Some paperwork for Lady Tsunade or something? Not to take work away from you, of course," Ekyt joked to Shizune. Shizune's face reddened a little- if it meant less work, she would marry the kid on the spot!

That feeling of attraction earlier...where did it come from? It's not right, I know, and I'm not acting on it, but still...what caused me to suddenly like him? There are plenty of single men my age. So why this one? Wait...I think I understand...I want a charity case. Someone I can nurse to health, someone who could use me. That's why I traveled with Lady Tsunade- she needed an aide, and I needed someone to...well, to need me. Ekyt gets injured so often, he always needs someone to stitch him up. And it's not that he's unattractive, just a little young looking. Maybe I should take the risk and ask someone out...Maybe I should talk to someone first...I wish Ekyt could just be the one, but I can't...eleven years age difference is just too much...still, maybe I can...

"Sorry everyone, you'll have to leave, visiting hours are over. Ekyt will be out in two hours or so, so if you'd like to wait, that's fine. I need to finish his treatment."

The guests shuffled out of the room, leaving Shizune alone with Ekyt and the unconscious Hayate.

"Ekyt, before you leave, do you mind if I...well, ask your advice? I know this is awkward, but I can't ask Lady Tsunade...I need a guy's point of view..."

Ekyt blinked in surprise, but gave a kind smile (or as close as he could come to one, he honestly couldn't tell if his smiles were kind, comforting, or just freaky). "If I can help, please ask. What is it?"

Shizune blushed, looking around as if to confirm no one else was around for to hear this. This wasn't something she had told anyone before, and Ekyt was both the strangest choice and the perfect choice for such a question.

"Let's say...well, I've had my eye on this guy for a while...he's on my team. I, er, well, wanted to ask him out. But I can't! I'm so tense, and he's so laid back, it always feels so awkward! I mean, what if he says no, and in front of the team?! And Lady Tsunade, what will she say?!"

Ekyt shifted so he was sitting higher, then proceeded to give the most insightful advice he himself would never follow.

“So what if Lady Tsunade doesn’t like it? You’re entitled to a life to, sensei. If you like someone, you should pursue them. Even if they say no, at least you’ve said your piece and made the effort. Getting a definite ‘no’ is better than not knowing at all. And...well, don’t wait too long to do it. (laugh) I made that mistake myself. It’s best to just come clean and be honest. Besides, and I hope you’ll forgive me for saying so, but you’re attractive and intelligent- any guy worthy of you would appreciate that. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Coming from Ekyt, that was pretty damn profound. Shizune nodded to herself, firmly deciding she WOULD talk to him. After standing still for a few moments, Shizune shook herself out of her trance and finishing healing Ekyt’s leg.

“You’re free to go after thirty minutes. You’re going to be walking with a cane for a little while, though. I’ll find you a walking stick to get you out of here. And...I really appreciate your advice!” Shizune bowed and left the room, leaving Ekyt to sit there in surprise. He’d never had a sensei bow to him before.

Everything I just said...why the hell can’t I take my own advice?!

--

Ekyt limped out of the hospital, finding that Yuushi had waited for him. They kept walking and didn’t speak much. Both had a lot on their minds- Yuushi was still upset he had given in to Orochimaru, and Ekyt was still thinking about what Orochimaru had said. Yuushi had one other problem, and this one he hoped ‘sensei’ could answer.

“Sensei, I like this girl. How do I ask her out?”

Ekyt tried not to tough or show his shock in any way- this question twice in one day? Why him? The last Ekyt knew, he was single, and almost hopelessly so.

“Talk to her, Yuushi. Tell her she’s pretty, find out what she likes, see if you have anything in common then just- say it. ‘I like you, would you like to go eat with me some time?’ I’ve heard that girls like sweets, so maybe dumplings...” Ekyt mused, thinking of Anko. Dumplings would do it, yeah, girls like those things. “If I can guess, you’re liking that blonde teammate of yours? Am I close?”

Yuushi didn’t answer- Ekyt had hit it right on the head. Ekyt gave a good natured laugh and patted his shoulder.

“Just calm down and be yourself. And if you’re worried about anxiety- don’t be. You know, that girl might be the cure. Finding someone you can trust with an absolute faith...the more people you have like that, the more control you have over anxiety. And asking a girl out is just like jumping into cold water- once you get over the shock, it’s not so bad. You’ve just got to take the first plunge.”

After spouting that bit of wisdom, Ekyt limped into a store in town. Looking around, he saw a cane he

liked, bought it, then continued on his way.

“Oh, and don’t wait too long- you’d regret that. Besides, what have you got to lose by asking, right?”

Yuushi had to agree. “Flowers...candy...”

Ekyt tapped his cane on the ground in a rhythmic beat.

“Both. Just to be safe.”

--

Naruto and Sakura, Sasuke and Ino, Temari and Kimimaro, Lee and Linda. That was a volatile mix. Sakura hated Sasuke and Ino. Naruto was a rival to Sasuke and hated Kimimaro. Linda was generally disliked by everyone but Lee. Lee and Kimimaro had their differences. For them all to wind up in one place...it was bad enough with two couples, but four of them?

All too soon, Genma and Shizune strolled in, Shizune blushing girlishly, and Genma laughing at some joke he had been trying (and failing) to tell with a straight face. Suddenly, jonin were now involved in the volatile mix. It didn’t stop there- Yuushi and Kantai, two nervous kids on their first date, had also picked this place for their date. Akward might as well have been scrawled all over the walls. A misplaced comment just escalated the tension. Soon, Naruto and Sasuke were out of their chairs, meaning that Sakura and Ino were up as well. Genma and Shizune stood up to control the potential fight. Temari made a remark about Linda, which caused Lee and Linda to perk up, followed by Kimimaro (who didn’t really understand this atmosphere) getting up to glare mildly at everyone. Iruka and Anko, on a lunch break, made the mistake of choosing this place as well. Anko seemed thrilled by the atmosphere, while Iruka was wondering what it was like to have a quiet day.

--

Ekyt walked along the streets, trying to get his leg back into shape. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a strange lump on the fence. Konohamaru apparently still hadn’t quite gotten the invisibility part of his training down. The fact that he was hiding made Ekyt wonder if he was up to something.

Duh. Of course he is. Now, Orochimaru said that-

CRACK!

Ekyt’s cane got caught in a pothole, causing it to break, and him to trip and fall. Konohamaru was standing right there!

“Like my decoy? Sucker! Have a nice trip?!” Konohamaru taunted, dancing around Ekyt. Ekyt rolled his eyes- it was a good joke, which was why Konohamaru had chosen to play it on him. Ekyt didn’t get angry over a practical joke like that- more often than not, he gave a reserved chuckle instead of a verbal beating. But one good turn deserved another. Ekyt used a small Dragon’s Ember Jutsu to light the seat of Konohamaru’s pants on fire. THAT sent the genin running, but it also left Ekyt sitting in the street.

“...damnit...”

Luck was with him in that respect, as Tenten came tearing down the street, looking incredibly miffed.

“Damn it, Konohamaru! You spy one more time, I’m gonna use my shuriken practice to neuter you! - huh?”

Ekyt just sat on the ground, apparently in no particular hurry to get up. “He got you, too, Tenten? I just lit him on fire, so maybe that’ll straighten him out.”

“As if!” Tenten replied, laughing at the small joke Ekyt had made. Her expression softened. “Hey, are you alright? Do you need some help getting up?” Tenten had been called the most responsible of Team Gai, or maybe the most caring- Lee and Neji were always at odds (though it was friendly odds these days), and Gai himself...well, they were lucky Tenten was as patient as she was. Lee and Gai were just too hot-blooded and hyperactive, and Neji was too cynical. That made Tenten the perfect compliment to that team. She didn’t think about that at the moment, instead helping Ekyt up.

Ordinarily, if a girl was ‘taken’, Ekyt didn’t blush around her. He still blushed around Tenten, since he wasn’t sure if she and Neji were an item or not.

“Thanks,” Ekyt told her, getting to his feet and hobbling over to a nearby fence.

“I’m not going to leave you like that. Hold on...” Tenten opened her huge summoning scroll, letting a plethora of weapons clatter to the ground. Kunai, shuriken, giant kunai, giant shuriken, axe, scythe, sai, tonfa...

“Here we go!” she said brightly, handing Ekyt a long staff for a replacement walking stick. “That should keep you on your feet.”

“At least until the next time I do something stupid and get myself injured. Thanks for the help. The least I could do is buy you a drink or something...” What the hell? Had he just said that. Ekyt, off the cuff, just inadvertently asked Tenten out. He hadn’t even thought about it, he just thought one good turn deserved another. But when it DID hit him what he had done...Well, you can’t take back words. Besides, you could get a drink with your friends and not call it a date, couldn’t you?

“I’m not sure Neji would...” Tenten started, thinking of her teammate. “...Sure, why not, I could use something. That’s nice of you.” Tenten and Ekyt got along, mostly because he treated kunoichi respectfully, and not like eye candy. But that still caused Tenten to think about how he acted a little more.

“Y’know, I’m kind of surprised that I don’t see you out more often. I mean, you’re nice, it’s not like you couldn’t be a people person...”

“I guess. But I can’t rest until I’m stronger. It’s really complicated to explain, so I won’t bore you with the details. How about this place?” Ryouko used his staff to point to the Amiguriama. Tenten wasn’t as big on sweets as the other girls, but this place had the best of the best dumplings, so it seemed like a good deal.

--

Everyone froze as Ekyt walked in. Apparently undisturbed, he kept walking, let Tenten order, then got some sake for himself. He and Tenten sat down, chatting about various weapons and how to use them.

The shock of Ryouko on something like a date was enough to numb the crowd. Naruto, being Naruto, had to say something.

“Hey, Ryouko, I didn’t know you had the hots for Tenten!”

Ryouko blushed. “We’re having an adult conversation, that’s all.”

Naruto snickered even more. “ ‘Adult’ huh. About the whole ‘what goes where’ thing?” BONK! Sakura gave Naruto a smart crack on the head.

“Don’t say things like that! If he says it’s not a date, it’s not!”

Tenten had to say something at this point? “A date? C’mon guys, don’t jump to conclusions! I helped him, he bought me a drink, so we’re even. Geez, are all of you so relationship-happy that any time you see two friends hanging out you think they’re gonna try to get in each other’s pants? Grow up!”

Ekyt had to laugh a little. Tenten, for being so adorable, could really pack a wallop when she wanted to. Ekyt was going to say something, but Tenten had beaten him to it, so he contented himself with taking a drink.

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“Thanks for the help. I’ll bring this back as soon as I get a replacement,” Ekyt said, indicating the wooden staff Tenten had let him borrow.

“Take your time, I’ve got others. Get well soon, okay?” Tenten replied cheerfully, giving Ekyt a wave before she walked away.

“Cute. Too bad she’s taken. Ah well, it was nice to sit down and talk weapons with someone for a while. Now, back to business is usual...”

39 - The Poison Mist

The Mist ninja were ready this time. The poison they had stuck in Ekyt's system should have taken effect by now. The proof, in the form of Ekyt himself, came limping by. His leg was bandaged heavily, and it was clear he couldn't put weight on it without his body protesting. They could see the muscles tighten in Ekyt's leg with each painful step. Now was the time to reap the harvest they had sewn all those months ago- for humiliating the Village Hidden in the Mist, Ekyt would pay with his life.

Or that was the plan. Things rarely go according to plan in this world or any other. Ekyt, in truth, had sensed a presence. That wasn't anything special, any given Shinobi could do that. But not every given Shinobi had disrupted a sacred custom of a rival village. Ekyt had half-expected the Mist-nin to do something, so he wasn't completely surprised when four of them landed on all sides of him.

"I had a feeling...once Lady Tsunade said 'poison', there was one really good source...that's you guys..." Ekyt commented. Inside him, something kind of snapped. Maybe it was frustration with nearly every aspect of his life- his health, his love life, his regrets, Orochimaru's words- but Ekyt let a little emotion leak through his defenses.

"It's pretty typical that lowlifes who would execute a kid and an innocent bystander would wait until their prey was nearly incapacitated before they attacked. Just like the scumbags you are."

"You're in no position to say such things! We've come to assassinate you!" one of the Mist ninja declared. The others all reached for their weapons. Ekyt's verbal tirade continued.

"Then you're an idiot- you should have taken me out while you were hidden, and I could only SENSE you, not see you. You've just opened yourself to a counter-attack. Not even getting to the fact that you told me just what you plan to do. Pretty poor tactics. I'm going to guess that you guys aren't high up on the Mist food chain if you've drawn such an easy assignment. Am I right?" Ekyt mentally noted the positions of each Mist-nin. He also checked his chakra- after a stay in the hospital, it wasn't back yet. That left Ekyt with a choice- he could put his mask up and protect against more poison that might be inhaled, or he could pop a chakra cigarette in his mouth and try to get himself back into fighting shape. Taking into account HOW the Mist-nin fought, Ekyt pulled his mask up over his mouth and nose. What chakra he had would have to do. Ekyt didn't know how his body would hold up against more poison, so he had to take any preventive measures he could.

The shuriken began to fly. Between Ekyt's staff and one-legged shuffle, a couple grazed him. These had poison in them- not good. The Mist-nin collectively grinned about that- an already weakened Ekyt was now at their mercy. But unknowingly, Ekyt had learned that, once infected like this, in multiple places, you could more or less move however you wanted and keep attacking. That in mind, Ekyt began to show the extent of his training. While casting a 'Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique', Ekyt was also using his chakra to jump in the air. While doing THAT, his staff was flashing down, cracking one unlucky Mist-nin. The second he landed, the genjutsu hit another mist ninja. A third would soon fall to Ekyt's chakra-laced taijutsu. That was part of Ekyt's plan- if these idiots came close to him, he could use his chakra to aid taijutsu, which meant using a minimum of chakra.

The fourth Mist guy was a problem- a jonin. Under normal circumstances, Ekyt could have given him a good run for his money. But being half-numb from poison was a problem against someone this talented. Ekyt recognized him as a jonin from the execution.

“I’m impressed you rescued those kids. Tell me...what do they mean to you?” the jonin asked, spinning a nasty-looking bladed weapon between his fingers. Ekyt didn’t quite understand the question.

“One’s a friend, the other is...something of a little brother. Why does it matter to you, if you don’t mind my asking?” As if this was a nice chat over sake, these two were just talking this out. Ekyt knew full well what was going on- the jonin wanted his genin cronies to wake up. To keep them under, Ekyt would have to use chakra, and spread the poison. So there was no choice but to keep talking and wait for an opening.

“Well, you know, I guess I don’t actually care. I AM curious- did that jonin die? The one with the cough and the bags under his eyes?” the jonin was just speaking casually now. Both Ekyt and the jonin knew of each other’s plans; it was a calculated game of chicken to see who would give in first.

“He’ll live. Sorry to disappoint. When did you get him?” Ekyt always wanted to know why Hayate seemed so sick. The cough and bags under his eyes...well, the bags under the eyes came from studying so much, Ekyt knew that from experience. You didn’t master a jutsu like the ‘Crescent Moon Dance’ at a young age without some really hard work and long nights. But that cough was a curiosity.

“Years ago, at his chunin exam. I nailed him with a slow-spreading poison just after he beat me in his preliminary match. I was a sore loser back then, what can I say. But to hear you say he’ll recover...well, maybe I’ll get a rematch with him someday, and get to kill him face to face.”

Ekyt gave a derisive snort and as close to a sneer as his numbing face could manage. “Oh please, don’t flatter yourself. He would kill you before you had a chance to reach for one of your poisoned weapons. He’s gotten even more skilled- I know, I’ve trained with him. Trust me, if you couldn’t kill ME, then you’ve got no shot against him. After all, he’s a jonin now, and I’m just a chunin...”

In truth, Ekyt might have surpassed Hayate in terms of ability, at least in some areas. But building him up was the perfect way to stall for time. It gave him enough time to think of a plan, at least. One that was desperate, to say the least.

Never thought I’d ask for help...but these guys are losers, and I can garner some attention while doing some major damage. Now to act for all I’m worth.

Ekyt clenched his stomach and folded to the ground, screwing his face up in pain. With his arms crossed, the jonin couldn’t see the kunai Ekyt had pulled tight to his wrist as he went down. The genjutsu ending, this was the perfect plan to draw these idiots close. As for his chakra...one burst was all he needed. Having lived through worse, Ekyt guessed he could pull this off. He opened his eyes, squinting as though in terrible pain, as the jonin and his team drew closer. Once they reached him, Ekyt rolled over and slashed their ankles with his kunai. The second he had a moment, he used his “Dragon’s Ember Jutsu” to send a message to the sky. It was a desperate gamble to get attention, but Ekyt really didn’t want to die, not like this.

The Mist-nin recovered, having Ekyt covered on all sides. Now that his body was even more numb, Ekyt had to keep the Mist-nin's at bay. Not caring about poison anymore, Ekyt stuffed a chakra cigarette into his mouth, lighting it with a shaking hand. He just needed enough to hold out. He jabbed his kunai at the genin, knowing that the jonin wouldn't bite on such a lame trick. The genin backed up, while the jonin confidently stood still.

"You're as resourceful as they say. But you'll be dead before help comes. Your chakra must be gone, you're running on fumes."

Ekyt realized that they hadn't figured out that his cigarette was a chakra enhancer yet. That was a slight advantage...but how to use it? He didn't have enough chakra for anything big- but maybe planting a little seed of doubt in their mind would be enough. Ekyt ran through his options- Genjutsu...taijutsu...ninjutsu...Given that he had just talked about Hayate, Ekyt decided on the obvious choice.

"Sickle Moon Dance!" he called, only able to summon one Shadow Clone wielding three kunai- one in each hand, one in it's mouth. With that, Ekyt and the clone put on bursts of speed and raced around the jonin, swiping at him while avoiding his attacks.

"Damn it! I knew it! It's that Hayate's jutsu! You rotten little punk!" the jonin was becoming unraveled, as he remembered the very jutsu that had defeated him years ago at the chunin preliminaries. That distraction did two things for Ekyt: First, it showed that he DID have chakra left, planting a seed of doubt in the Mist ninjas minds. Second, it bought a little more time. Both positives in a negative situation.

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Yuushi, who was enjoying himself with Kantai, perked up suddenly. The blonde girl was incredibly sensitive to the boy she knew had a rough life. Even though they were just moving on to hand holding, she wasn't too upset that Yuushi perked up.

"That's my sensei's chakra! He's in a fight! I've got to help him, he's injured!" Yuushi got up quickly, then remembered the manners that Ekyt's training had drilled into him. He bowed to Kantai.

"I apologize for this, please excuse me."

Kantai stood up, too, waving to Tenten, who was still munching on dumplings. Tenten made her way over quickly. Before she did, Kantai told Yuushi:

"Like hell, I'm coming too!"

"What's going on?" Tenten whispered, not wanting to attract the attention of everyone in the restaurant.

"Please follow me, Tenten-sensei, I'll explain on the way!" Yuushi replied, making for the door. Kantai and Tenten were in his wake. Tenten had a sidenote to add:

"Don't add the -sensei thing, Yuushi. I'm not your sensei, and it just sounds weird after my name!"

--

Ekyt had finished his jutsu, with about a third of his cigarette left. The Mist Shinobi were wondering what had just happened. Their jonin was sputtering furiously, and he was cut all to hell from a move that they could even see!

“That poison should have immobilized you by now! How are you...of course. How did I not notice sooner? The chakra in the air...that cigarette!” the jonin snarled, pointing at the offending smoldering chakra source.

“You got it. It boosts my chakra. Unfortunately, not as much as I’d hoped, since I didn’t manage to kill you OR your team...” Another bluff by Ekyt. His legs had turned to jelly by this point, so he was forced back to his knees. If help was on the way, it had better hurry up!

“You know, you probed into my past, you cut me up, and you gave my team a workout...I think I respect you. But don’t think that’s going to stop me from killing you!” the jonin lost his composure and ran forward to stab Ekyt.

The sound of metal meeting metal hit Ekyt’s ears. As he turned to see what had happened, Ekyt saw Yuushi, Kantai, and Tenten standing behind him. Tenten’s summoning scroll was open, and since shuriken, kunai, and axes were all over the place, Ekyt guessed that it was her who had blocked the jonin’s attack. Kantai and Yuushi nodded to each other, then took off in opposite directions. Ekyt was astounded by their teamwork, as the two took care of two of the stunned Mist genin in no time flat. The third proved to be some trouble for the two of them- until Tenten lent her aid, in the form of a bo strike that split the genin’s noggin wide open. In all the confusion, Ekyt had a rush of adrenaline. The kunai were still in his hands, and falling down was the easiest thing in the world at this point, so Ekyt did what came naturally.

THUNK!

“OW! DAMN IT, YOU LITTLE PUNK!” the jonin howled. He would have jumped if Ekyt hadn’t jammed his kunai into both of the jonin’s feet. Ekyt collapsed, conscious but unable to move. That left him at the jonin’s mercy. But the jonin needed to beg for mercy. Yuushi suddenly picked out that this was one of the jonin from his execution- the one who had so gleefully reminded him of his father’s fate. Yuushi’s samurai blood boiled. Ducking low and moving fast, Yuushi drew his sword, cutting twice. The first strike cut upward through the jonin’s chest; the second cut down through the other side of the chest. The jonin screamed, knowing this was the end. Yuushi calmly shook the blood off his sword and glared coolly at the jonin.

“Don’t scream. You won’t die. My father wouldn’t have wanted me to become a murder...not against someone so weak...Besides, I figure you’ll hate it more if I leave you alive and drag you @\$\$ back to my village. Attack again, and that’s it- I’ll forget I’m a nice guy and I WILL kill you.”

With that, Tenten knelt down and hefted the motionless Ekyt onto her back, carrying him piggy-back.

“Good thing you don’t weight anything!” Tenten told Ekyt with a smile. She didn’t get any joy out of

making him blush, but she did admit that it was kind of fun seeing the tough as nails chunin riding piggyback on a kunoichi. But Tenten was the only one with the physical strength to carry Ekyt back. Well, maybe Yuushi could have done it, but Tenten guessed that he'd better walk back with the prisoners and his girlfriend- he'd better score some points with her for getting up in the middle of a date to go fight.

Ekyt, not being able to protest, was just thankful he had blood enough left to blush. Being carried piggy-back by a cute kunoichi...he would NEVER hear the end of this, even though it was just an emergency measure. No one would care about that. In a psuedo-sexual situation like this, Ekyt knew his relationship-hungry comrades would eat this turn of events up with gusto.

Still, it was nice having someone care enough about him to carry him like that. Even better that it was a girl.

She's a great friend, I owe her one. Wonder if I could help her get Neji's attention or something...

40 - Another Tangled in the Web

Tenten rushed Ekyt straight to Tsunade. Ever since he had lost consciousness, Tenten had hurried, not wanting him to die, especially not after she had done her best to save him. It was strange that Ekyt wasn't feeling too much pain from the poison- Tenten would have been able to tell if there were muscle spasms, and she would be able to hear it if he yelled out. But he had been silent. Even if he was unconscious, if he was that hurt, he would be twitched.

Best to ask Lady Tsunade herself...hang in there, Ekyt!

--

In Ekyt's mind, he was conscious, and still debating Orochimaru's words.

"The void in me...it exists, I can agree with that. But what about that whole 'training alone can't fill the void?'. That can mean a lot of things. Strength, love, my past...the way Orochimaru put it, despite what he said, the WAY he said what he did said that I could still fill this void. Do I WANT to? Or am I really a complete person without it? Do we all have a void? Does the void mean 'regret'? If it wasn't so open to interpretation. The only thing I can do is train. I've read every scroll I could find...now it's time to read the ones I haven't found. There must be a library or something in the Leaf Village...I'll have to ask about it, see if I can find it. I'm definitely going to be too hurt to do missions. That sucks, but maybe it's one of those 'blessings in disguise'...If nothing else, I can focus on what Orochimaru said...even if he is a liar, those words rang true with me for a reason...It was no mind trick on his part, that would have been dispelled already. That means that those words touched a nerve, and it's not a nerve I can afford to ignore."

--

Tsunade had begun work on Ekyt right away. As she worked, she found the strangest thing. Well, surprising anyway.

"His body...this poison has built up in him so much so often that he's developing an immunity to it. That explains why he recovered so quick compared to Hayate. Shizune, how long did Hayate receive treatment, and when did his affliction begin?"

Shizune flipped through some papers, while Sakura performed a genjutsu to ensure Ekyt didn't wake up to find Tsunade working on him.

"He was infected almost seven years ago- that's going by our own guesswork. His treatment began three months ago." Shizune looked at Ekyt, trying to think about his treatment. "By comparison, Ekyt's treatment began and ended two days ago, while he was infected a scant few months ago."

Tsunade grunted in thanks, picking at a stubborn pocket of poison behind Ekyt's knee.

“Sakura, made a cut a quarter-inch below the back of his knee. I’m going to have to push the poison out, my chakra can’t suck it up in such a difficult spot. After that, we’re all done here. Shizune, please tell Tenten and her party that he’ll be fine.”

Shizune bowed out of the room, saying ‘Yes M’lady’ as she did. Sakura concentrated as she made the precise cut. Perfect. Tsunade grabbed a vile off her desk and caught the poison as it was dripping out. At Sakura’s questioning glance, Tsunade explained that ‘if he could build up an immunity, or was close to it, then this has the possibility of being a vaccination. Those Mist ninja aren’t done with us yet.’

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Tenten, Yuushi, Kantai, and four prisoners in chains waited for Shizune’s announcement.

“He’ll be just fine,” Shizune said, smiling widely. Tenten, Yuushi, and Kantai all exchanged sighs and glances of relief.

“Damn, I was hoping you were gonna tell us he was dead...” muttered the Mist jonin. That earned him three fists to the mouth, courtesy of three on-edge Leaf Ninja.

“Say that again, and I start cutting your body up. Nothing vital, just things that will hurt...THEN we’ll get to important stuff...” Yuushi growled, his sword under the chin of the Mist jonin. Kantai put a supportive hand on his shoulder, favoring the Mist group with a glare. Yuushi slowly lowered the sword, putting it away carefully. Tenten looked particularly relieved, much to the amusement of Shizune.

I’ve got to know...

“Tenten, will you come with me for a moment, please?” Shizune indicated with her head the direction to go in. Curious, Tenten followed her, wondering what she had to say that she couldn’t in front of the others.

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Ekyt sat up, wincing at the cuts. Thankfully, the pain wasn’t too bad. That, or he had just gotten used to it. Either way, it was nice to be poison-free again.

“They got me pretty good, then?” Ekyt directed his question toward Tsunade, already bowing to her and Sakura in thanks.

“More or less...you’re lucky to have survived. But you helped us capture four enemy ninja...I think they’ll be interested in going home, so maybe we can do a prisoner trade, or something along those lines. At any rate...I’d like to know of your plans. You’ve been distracted, and that means you’re up to something. That is to say, something is bothering you enough to throw you off-track. Am I close? Oh, and please don’t BS me, I know you too well to fall for it.”

Ekyt didn’t bother lie. “I’d like to ask- is there a Hidden Leaf Library or something? The ones with the kind of scroll you don’t let everyone see? I need some new material to study, since missions are out at the moment.”

Tsunade had to laugh- "I was wondering when you were going to ask! Yes, it exists. And yes, you can go there. Keys are 3500 Ryo, though. But for that price, you'll be one of the few with a key, and one of the fewer who go to this place."

Sounded like a good deal to Ekyt.

"Sure, 3500 sounds fair. Just let me go thank everyone who helped me out, and I'll take you up on that offer. Oh...could I have some time off. The leg kind of...complicates things..." Ekyt was referring to the cut Sakura had made, as well as the fact that his leg had been injured before this whole mess started.

"Absolutely, I would have forced you. Now, go on and talk to them, I'll get you a key. But don't tell too many people that this place exists. It's for your benefit AND mine. Also, the materials can't be removed, so you'd have to copy what you wanted by hand- not that THAT ever seems to be a problem for you, given the size of your personal scroll."

Ekyt shrugged, talking up a bit of his own (Tenten had taken hers during his surgery) to use as a walking stick.

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Shizune and Tenten walked to the opposite end of the building, giving them enough room between themselves and the others to talk.

"Tenten...listen, I don't know how you feel about Ekyt, but if you DO like him...be careful."

Tenten didn't understand what Shizune was saying- the question had come out of left field.

"What do you mean? I mean, he's a nice guy and a hard worker, what's not to like? If you're thinking I'm in love with him, that's not the case at all! I haven't done anything more than a comrade is supposed to, and I hope he hasn't gotten any ideas...he hasn't, has he?" It hit Tenten that her actions might be taken as provocative by Ekyt (A piggyback ride? What the hell had she been thinking- if they had been 10, sure! Then again, it WAS in the line of duty...), and she quickly wished she hadn't been so nice. It was a relief when Shizune shook her head.

"No. I mean, he hasn't said anything if he DOES have ideas. I'm just saying...if it happens, be careful. Because he's very...how to put this...fragile. That's all I'll say, as it's really not my business. I just don't want to see him get hit with another tragedy. Between the illness, failing that proctor's exam (New to Tenten), and Orochimaru's words (also new to Tenten)...I'm really worried about him. That's a lot for someone like him to absorb, and I'm just hoping he's alright. And...thank you for taking care of him. Even if you didn't do anything more than a comrade requires of another comrade, you did more than most."

Tenten's questioning look clued Shizune into the fact that she had said too much. "He failed a proctor's exam? And what's this about Orochimaru's words? He fought him AGAIN?! Shizune-sensei, please fill me in- like it or not, I'm involved now that I've given him some trust...I'd like to be prepared, in case he spills his guts to me."

Shizune really wished she hadn't said anything now. How could she even begin to explain Ekyt's inner-turmoil. It was bad enough Shizune knew, but now Tenten would know? It wasn't hard to guess the kid had some problems, but WHAT they were...that was another matter, enough to turn some of the weaker jonin to jelly. Orochimaru? Maybe he wasn't so scary to Ekyt...but why? Because Ekyt hadn't grown up hearing about how terrifying he was? Or was it because he respected the Third Hokage so much that he had a grudge strong enough to bypass fear?

"Alright..." Shizune said finally. "I'll tell you what I know. But you can't tell ANYONE else, okay? Please promise me, Tenten. And even if you DO tell, don't expect anyone else to understand. It's not a long story, but it's...complicated. Let's just keep it between you and me, okay?"

Aieeee! This is supposed to be secret! Oh no, why did I have to say anything?!

--

Ekyt didn't find Tenten, but he DID find Yuushi and Kantai. The two seemed to be having a 'moment'. Ekyt had heard of them, and read about them, but never experienced one. The kind of moment where only you and one other person exist- nothing else matters. You're in your own world, and you couldn't be happier. It was rare to find inner peace when an outer world was filled with turmoil. But Kantai and Yuushi had. Ekyt chose not to disturb them. Someone else could fill them in later. For the first time in a while, Ekyt smiled for real.

Hope I don't become one of those people who lives through their kids...or their students. Either way...nice going, Yuushi. An adult name, your father's sword...and now, a measure of happiness...it's what you deserve...enjoy it, because you never know when it will happen again...

Smiling, Ekyt stepped back into Tsunade's office, closing the door quietly.

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Tsunade produced a brass key that looked very much like an ordinary skeleton key.

"Here you go...Just be warned, there ARE genjutsu hidden on some of the restricted materials. You can handle them, actually. Typically, I'd make you go with a jonin of Kakashi's caliber...but somehow, I'm guessing you'd like this experience to be alone."

Ekyt took the key, forcing a fake smile onto his face. "You're right. I have a lot to think about. Besides that, I'd really like some new reading material. Maybe it's because teamwork is rare for me, but I'm starting to understand the important of creating jutsus people have never seen, so they can't defend against them so easily. I've had some ideas, and I thought that maybe some old ideas would work just as well as some new ones..."

Tsunade was surprised to hear that- it was hard to remember that this kid was twenty, when he looked like he was sixteen and acted like he was much older. What he said made sense. Truthfully, Tsunade was surprised she hadn't been asked about this sooner by Ekyt. She wondered why, but didn't ask.

“Just so you’re not shocked- the place is gigantic,” Tsunade remarked.

“How gigantic?”

“Take enough provisions for three days, you might get lost for a while. If you do, send one of your summons to me, and I’ll fish you out. But knowing you, you won’t want to leave. Oh, and one more thing- when you head there, always dress for cold weather, and make sure that you disguise yourself, as well as the path you take. Not everyone knows about this place, and it would be problematic if they became aware. So take every precaution you can. Oh, one more thing...” Tsunade rummaged around in her desk drawer. After a few moments, she dug up an earthen bottle.

“Here, you’ll need to drink this when you feel pain in your leg. No macho crap, because when you feel pain, that means some of the dregs of poison are acting up. This will kill that poison. You just need to drink one sip. Mix it with your sake, this stuff tastes like crap.” Tsunade made a face, remembering when she had made the batch- it was nasty stuff! Or so Sakura had said...like Tsunade was going to taste it herself. One of the perks of being Hokage...

Ekyt took the bottle and the advice with thanks. “By the way, there’s going to be a nasty fight at Amaguriama about now. I’d guess Naruto and Sasuke would be at it...again. Not to mention Sakura and Ino...” Ekyt smiled for real, thinking that this was perfect- all the people who would want to talk to him, maybe even follow him- they were all in a fight, in one place, not near where he had to go. Perfect. Wait...where DID he have to go.

“Where IS this library anyway?”

Tsunade gave a little smirk- she just couldn’t help herself? “What, you didn’t know? The Underground passages beneath the Hokage Faces- it’s the only place big enough to hold all records of the Leaf Village.”

41 - The Author

Tenten sat quietly as Shizune outlined just what the deal was with Ekyt. Her large brown eyes grew larger with each word of the increasing horror story. Battling Itachi Uchiha, Orochimaru, Kabuto...no promotions...no team...no sensei...poison...illness...so much death. It was unreal.

“And...he’s okay? He hasn’t told anyone?” Tenten couldn’t help but ask. It seemed like such a burden for one person to bear. **And all alone, too...if it was me, I would have spilled my guts to Neji, or Lee, or one of the girls! How did he keep all that inside? And...why?**

Shizune had told Tenten everything except Ekyt’s love trouble. THAT was one stone best left unturned.

“Why didn’t he tell anyone? I mean, isn’t there anyone who would have listened?” Tenten finally asked, almost desperately. She found she wanted someone to be in Ekyt’s corner; to really care about what his problems were. It always seemed there was something separating Ekyt from the rest of them. Now Tenten could almost SEE that separation, and she knew it wasn’t a happy one for Ekyt. It wasn’t a border he had erected by choice- it just happened, and there was little he could do about it. No matter how hard he tried...he just couldn’t break that barrier down.

Shizune sighed, looking grim. “That’s anyone’s guess. He and Lady Tsunade feuded...the jonin had their own teams to worry about...Ekyt had his student, but knowing him the way I do, Ekyt didn’t tell his student any of this, or at least not much of it. It’s not like him to burden someone else. I guess that’s why he stays silent. I’m sure he’d love to talk, to just tell everything. I’m sure it would be a relief...but then his conscience would tell him that he had burdened other people...and he wouldn’t forgive himself. Everything I’ve learned has been forced out of him. It’s been seen by others, or Lady Tsunade herself caused it...”

Tenten stared at the ground, playing with her fingers. “But isn’t that what people do? They burden each other...isn’t that why we live? I mean...I guess I don’t know what I mean...”

Shizune sat down next to Tenten, patting her shoulder. “It’s okay, it’s not easy to understand. If Ekyt himself does, I’d be surprised. He DID have someone to talk to, once...”

“Who was that?”

“The Third Hokage. Ekyt was to be his last student. I...didn’t want to mention this, but Ekyt...Ekyt helped the Third Hokage die.”

--

Yuushi and Kantai didn’t notice when Tsunade dragged the prisoners away. They didn’t notice when the sun set. They didn’t notice their hands meet. It was strange that way- when, exactly, had they gotten to understand each other so well? Yuushi was new to the village, and had hardly spoken to anyone. Kantai was quiet, but still very friendly. The complete opposite of the almost-imposing Yuushi. Yet, their

eyes met, and time stopped. It was awkward, especially for two children, but at the same time...it was as if a blanket had enshrouded them both, leaving the outside world behind. Their eyes were locked. They were both running on instinct now. Yuushi had never been so close to a girl, let alone have any feelings for one. All he knew was what little his sensei could tell him. Kantai had a minor crush, and had kissed a boy on the forehead when she was eight, but this was different. She was just teasing that boy; this boy she really wanted to kiss. There was nothing stopping her. Certainly not the confused Yuushi.

When life takes away your bungee cord, you have to rely on your safety net. Yuushi and Kantai were free-falling. In an instant, their safety net appeared.

Smak.

--

Ekyt didn't use a transformation jutsu- in a village full of Shinobi, that was just announcing you had something to hide. Instead, he pulled on his long black coat, black gloves, and even a black straw hat. In his coat pockets were summoning scrolls holding provisions, extra clothes, and sleep gear.

This library...there's so much knowledge...I wonder how many know about it? Whatever it holds...if it's mysterious enough to keep under lock-and-key, it must be helpful to me. It's not as if I can do anything else. Damn poison...Although, it's not as if I couldn't use the time away from everyone to think. It might be just what I need, truthfully. I won't sleep easy until I've solved that damn riddle of Orochimaru's.

The riddle? I've pieced together that the void is made up of more than one missing element from my life. I've never taken a life, I've never received love in a non-family way, and I don't feel like I belong here. Those are three gaps I need to bridge...training helped me fit in a little bit, so more training should solve my third problem...The other two problems will take work...not least of all because I simply can't fulfill the second...love of a kunoichi...who could care about me? And why should they? When I've done something to deserve their affection, that's when I'll get it.

Taking a life...no pondering there. It's just something that will happen at the right time. But the question is...who? Itachi Uchiha? Orochimaru? Kabuto? Those are the most likely...the question, then, isn't WILL I take a life- it's WHOSE I will be forced to take, and the bigger question...can I handle it? I honestly don't know. I've avoided killing, and I hope I do for the rest of my life. Taking something from someone isn't something you should do unless you can replace what was taken. I understand the 'greater good', but still...killing? It blackens the soul, unless it's done in the purest sense, and that is defense of another. I guess it's up to me to decide what that means, and when, if ever, I'm forced to act on it.

Come to think of it, this has been crossing my mind lately. Had I killed Orochimaru, he wouldn't have taken Hayate's fiancé captive. Granted, in the end I saved her, but at the same time, my inability to kill caused the near-destruction of an innocent life. Isn't that the point where this moral quandary starts? I don't think 'kill or be killed', I think 'kill, or someone else may be killed'. Right, makes sense.

But what if Orochimaru is bluffing? What if all he wants to do is trick me into thinking about

something I don't need to? I should consider that as well...

...

damn it.

--

"He...helped kill...HUH?!"

Shizune's head dropped forward. "The Third Hokage performed a jutsu that's forbidden...the Reaper Death Seal. He taught it to Ekyt before he died. It summons the god of death, Shinigami, and it eats the soul of the target...but in exchange, it also eats the summoner's soul. Ekyt held Orochimaru still while the Third Hokage performed the jutsu...he may have even lent him his chakra to do so. The Third Hokage was going to do the jutsu regardless; Ekyt just made sure he succeeded." Shizune shook her head. "I can't imagine what that must have been like...sending your hero, your confidant, your friend...helping him die like that. It must have killed Ekyt to do that. But he couldn't have stopped the Third Hokage...that left Ekyt with the choice of watching and hoping, or acting and making certain..."

"How awful...that's terrible! How could anyone be forced to make such a choice? It's...it's as if you're asking that person to die! But wait, the Third Hokage was going to die anyway...ah, this is so confusing!"

Tenten stood up sharply, massaging her temples. Shizune remained sitting, her face downcast.

"Please don't look down on Ekyt for making that decision...I doubt a day has gone by where he hasn't thought of it. That smile of his...it's not real. He's good at faking his emotions so no one will worry, but I can tell...he only smiles to please the rest of us. Inside...he's been torn apart. And I haven't even told you everything...there's more, but I really can't say..."

"So that's what's going on with him..."

Sakura and Naruto were standing outside the window. They had heard every word. Not even they had known about this...Naruto, for once, knew more than Sakura.

She doesn't know that part of his problem was that he liked her. But he stepped aside when he found out that she liked me...He didn't even try...but the rest of this stuff...it's like he's got a demon inside him, too. But that demon can't do anything useful for him, not like mine.

"We won't tell him, Shizune. Don't worry. I'm glad we heard the story...it's about time someone told us something about him." Sakura bowed her head, then raised her head, inadvertently meeting Tenten's eyes. Both kunoichi wore grim expressions.

--

Smak.

Yuushi froze- the feeling of female lips on his forehead froze him up. His anxiety was back, but he didn't give a damn, honestly. This was a special moment- his first kiss. It seemed so random, and yet it fit...it

was indescribable. He could tell that Kantai felt the same way.

Kantai wasn't sure what made her kiss him. Honestly, she had no idea. But for some reason, the semi-popular blonde chose to kiss the shy, awkward swordsman. She could tell he had no clue how to respond, and that somehow suited him. She certainly wasn't expecting anything else.

--

Ekyt found the place he was looking for. He took the right tunnel, walked past the coliseum part of the hidden area, then found the wall scrolls that hid the door he needed. Ekyt bit his thumb, squeezing it so the blood dripped out onto his thumb. All the while he was searching for a spot he could mark for himself. Someplace unobstrusive...the lower right corner would do.

"Release!" Ekyt ran his bloody thumb across the scroll, then released the oncoming genjutsu. A gust of wind flipped the scrolls up, allowing Ekyt access to a door made of thick wood. He reached into his pocket, his gloved hand finding the brass key he was looking for. He fit the key into the lock (Noting that the library had been unused for at least six months), turning it, then shoving the door with his shoulder. It gave way, and Ekyt strolled inside. (bam)

"Dear God..."

It was enormous. The floor was earthen, except for one tiled area. The tiles formed the symbol of the Leaf Village. Ekyt forced his eyes away from that, looking upward. He didn't need to guess to figure out he was under the mountain that held the Hokage Faces itself- the room he was in extended upward as far as Ekyt could see. The wooden staircase that led upwards looked rickety, but Ekyt guessed it would hold his weight. But that could come later- he was on the bottom floor now, that was the place to start. So Ekyt took a couple steps forward. CRACK!

"Wha? Crap!" Ekyt grabbed onto the edge of the floor, peering down. He had saved himself from a deathly drop of about...ten feet? Peering down into the hole, Ekyt could see a basement. Even more books and scrolls were hidden away down there. Ekyt hardly knew where to start.

The most forbidden materials must be at the bottom...I'll start at the top and work my way down, then. Might as well make this trip worth it, and save the best for last.

Ekyt had his work cut out for him. He climbed his way to the top, his coat hitting the stair as he walked. Occasionally, he had to end a genjutsu (A nasty false surroundings genjutsu had Ekyt walking on the same ten steps for nearly an hour), but Ekyt reached the top after an eight hour climb. Looking down, Ekyt knew that he had all the time in the world to sort things out. For now, he would let his eyes and his pen do the talking and thinking. He started to search for his first conquest in this new library of wonders.

--

Sai, Yuushi, and Okkuu sat side by side in the Akamadori family's restaurant. On low cushions, they each had a scroll and ink in front of them. Sai was attempting to teach Yuushi how to draw. Yuushi was attempting to learn. Okkuu was annoying Yuushi. What fun. But Okkuu's words weren't getting through to Yuushi. As to be expected, Yuushi's mind was dominated by the surprise of his first kiss. His

drawings wielded better attempts.

“I have been told that art is emotional...perhaps my emotions were always channeled into my art,” Sai commented, seeing Yuushi’s fairly-good drawing. “Your emotions may react the same way.”

--

“Amazing...how could anyone have compiled all this? The authors must have been the Hokage’s...fascinating stuff! And this one...Is that...Latin? I can’t read it, but I can pick it out...let me see...the handsigns are illustrated...let’s see what happens...” Ekyt made a long series of handsigns, referring to the book. The next diagram showed him touching the ground by either stomping or slapping it. Ekyt stomped and said the name of the jutsu, purely out of habit. He doubted that he said it right, but that didn’t matter.

“Flamma Succendo!”

FWOOM!

Flames shot up from the ground. Mercifully, they didn’t do any damage. Ekyt, however, immediately broke out his own scroll and wrote this down.

“Flamma Succendo...what does that mean? I’ll have to look it up...” (Authors note: It means, roughly translated ‘flame to light from below’)

Ekyt was only ten books/scrolls into his search, and he had already dug up this gem.

“The author...Madara Uchiha...the one who founded this village with the First Hokage...wonder what ever happened with him? Not to mention the First and Second Hokages...how DID they die? Madara was too old to be part of the Uchiha Clan ‘Massacre’...maybe there’s an answer here somewhere. Either way, thank you Madara. This is a handy Jutsu you created.”

Ekyt read the book further, finding that there were also English, Chinese and Japanese translations of the same jutsu.

“I’d imagine calling out a jutsu in a strange language in the middle of fight might throw your opponent off...that’s a good tactic, I’ll have to remember that...”

It was chilling to be using a jutsu developed by an Uchiha member he had never met, but Ekyt had been looking for a jutsu like this. It was luck to find such a book on the first floor he checked. This was his first floor, out of twenty-five, not including that basement room. Ekyt had been in the library for ten hours, thought six of those had been travel time. So for four hours he had studied the contents of twenty scrolls. He had hardly made a dent. That made Ekyt smile a little.

More importantly, he hadn’t given himself a chance to think.

42 - Sixth Sense

(One Week has passed)

Ekyt exhaled, not believing his eyes. Down five floors from the top, near the end of the shelves, Ekyt had found another gem. His eyes lit up as he wrote down yet another bit of history, coupled with a jutsu. It seemed that elemental jutsus were huge, and it was also apparent that the Third Hokage had spent a lot of time in here himself. There was no other way to learn all the jutsus in the Hidden Leaf Village. The jutsu currently in Ekyt's vision was an elaborate summoning jutsu. It was no animal summon- it summoned materials and elements in their pure form. Water, fire, earth...the materials could then be used in other jutsus. But that meant you had to be able to hold fire, water, and earth in the same manner as chakra. Only one of Ekyt's attacks could use this jutsu. But still, the potential. Without really looking, Ekyt could tell this was a Hokage-level jutsu. The chakra it used was unreal- just as unreal as the results.

"From what I can gather, you can also position the materials as they appear...so you could pile rocks on an enemy, or rain fire on them. I could never pull this jutsu off...but still, maybe someday. Knowing it is still amazing..."

Ekyt took a second to appreciate the scenery. The library had been carved right into the rock of the mountain. The foyer had stained glass windows, and the very top of the library did as well. Ekyt didn't know why- there was no place to look, the windows were in front of rock. It was hard to imagine that there was a bustling village outside. But when Ekyt read through the scrolls by the First Hokage and Madara Uchiha detailing the village's history, it didn't seem so strange anymore.

Maybe it's a comfort thing...Humans needs sunlight, or something close to it. I've already noticed how brightly it's lit in here during the day, and how that light dims at night. It's allowed me to keep track of the days...I've been here for seven, and still I've barely scratched the surface. I can't learn all these jutsus...in fact, there aren't all that many. It's mostly history, records of people and events...but still...I can't shake this haunting feelings...I can't place it at all, but it's there...ever since I came here and opened that first book, I've felt strange things. Almost like a...presence. But I can't sense if it's malicious...or just watching...

Ekyt closed his eyes, feeling the cold chill of a presence again. **Like someone walked over my grave...** Ekyt bit his thumb, deciding that his questions had reached an important level- important enough to ask Lady Tsunade herself what was going on. Why this place was so forbidden, and why...why was there this strange feeling?

"Summoning Jutsu!" Ekyt thought about summon Holly, but her little legs might not be able to handle all the stairs. Instead, Ekyt summoned a hawk. He was impractical in combat, but you couldn't ask for a faster messenger.

"Taleo, please summon Lady Tsunade. This is getting serious...I need some answers. If she won't come right away, give her this note.

Ekyt held the note up to the hawk. The hawk's eye watched Ekyt's hand, then took the note in its beak. Flying off, it sent dust from an ancient table Ekyt was sitting at flying, causing Ekyt to cough. As he coughed, he banged his knee on the table in front of him.

Chack!

The top of the desk bounced up for a moment. Ekyt wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been looking down. But now that it had...

Ekyt grabbed the top of the desk and picked up the table. To his surprise, he found four green and black scrolls sitting inside the desk. He reached his hand in to grab them, but retracted it quickly.

"What the hell?" Ekyt reached in, quickly grabbing what had caused him to retract his hand so quickly. A snake? "What on earth is a snake doing in here? And how has it survived? It's cold in here, not to mention there's no food...Wait, those scrolls...maybe this is one of those protective summons..."

(A protective summon, or guardian summon, is a summon that appears when a person or item it guards is in danger. It's usually free of the person's will.)

Ekyt dropped the snake. It slithered toward his leg and tried to bite him. Ekyt stomped, hoping to scare it away. Nothing doing. Instead, the snake-grew? Larger and larger, until it was staring at Ekyt. It opened its mouth and hissed loudly enough to open the book behind Ekyt.

Uh oh, this can't be good...I don't think this is part of the Leaf's defenses...

Ekyt drew back as the snake tried to bite again. This time, it would have gotten Ekyt, and could have swallowed him without any trouble. Ekyt had been forced to leap up to the next floor. He hadn't primed himself well for the jump, and caught his leg on the railing. Thinking quickly, Ekyt hooked his legs onto the railing. That put him at eye-level with the snake again. Without thinking, Ekyt reared back and smacked it right in the eye. Not that it needed its eyes to find Ekyt (The tongue on it was enormous!), but that was the only soft spot Ekyt could pick out.

"Ekyt? What the hell? Is this one of yours?!" Tsunade had finally come, and she was greeted with the site of this giant snake trying to eat Ekyt, who was dangling like a worm on a fishing pole.

"Not mine, M'lady! It's guarding those scrolls!" Ekyt pointed, then pulled back as the snake opened its giant mouth to swallow him whole.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt barked, sending a jet of fire right down the snake's gullet. The snake recoiled, trying to get away from the source of its trouble. No dice, as it spun right toward Tsunade. Tsunade didn't play with it, she grabbed it and tore it in half, throwing the pieces to the side.

"Look out!" Ekyt yelled, seeing the large snake had become many smaller ones. This was TOO familiar. "Flama Succendo!"

Ekyt's newest jutsu (that he was capable of performing, at any rate) scalded the tiny snakes, but didn't

hurt Tsunade, who was shocked to see Ekyt do a jutsu she hadn't even heard of since she was a kid. That question rattled around in her mind as Ekyt let go of the rafters with his legs and fell down to the floor below, landing in front of her. He stood up and nodded toward the desk containing the scrolls he guessed belonged to Orochimaru.

"Those are the scrolls, M'Lady. I didn't ask you here for them, but they've moved to the top of my question list...Considering what was guarding them, I'm betting it's something of Orochimaru's." Just saying this triggered something in Ekyt's mind. The feeling he had been getting...it had been familiar, but implacable. NOW he could place it.

"Lady Tsunade, did Orochimaru spend time in here?"

Tsunade gave Ryouko a mild look as she took the scrolls he had found and thumbed through them. "Yes. He was obsessed. Back then, any jonin could come here to read, or even escape daily life. It was a social place...but after Orochimaru left, most people who came here couldn't stand it. They could 'sense' him. So the Third Hokage asked myself and Jiraiya to place seals and traps all over. It's the sort of place Orochimaru would come back to...damn, I never should have let you come here!"

Tsunade ran a hand through her hair, looking furious with herself. "If you spend too much time here, it consumes you. All those jutsus and abilities at your fingertips...it's just too much. The Third Hokage could handle it because his motives were pure. No offense Ekyt, but as pure as your motives for learning are...well, your emotions disturb me. I don't want you to become obsessed with power like Orochimaru did. There are jutsus that can extend life, end life, bottle life, and even restore life. I don't want anyone else to learn those horrid jutsus. Especially not you..."

Ekyt nodded, understanding. "I felt the pull...with that kind of power, I could do anything. But...well, something Orochimaru said to me had really been bothering me. It's the reason I came here. He told me 'you'll never fill that void inside you by training alone.'" Ekyt looked at Tsunade, almost desperate for answers. "I can't fill in the blanks, Lady Tsunade! If I just knew what this void was for certain! Or if it was just another Orochimaru mind game!"

Tsunade forced Ekyt into a hug. "Some things are beyond human comprehension. Orochimaru...he's not human, he's a monster. And he's planted an idea in your head. Think of this: My lover is dead, and I don't have children. Those are voids in my life, but I'm complete as a person. Shizune just found a boyfriend, but she's still serving me, helping me fulfill the Leaf's dreams, instead of living out her own. But she's a complete person. And there's you..."

Tsunade held Ekyt at arm's length. "You don't have a team, or a sensei, or a girlfriend. You don't have natural ability, and your chakra is powerful, but only average sized. You're only incomplete as a person because you're so discontented with who and what you are. Coming to this library, learning all you could...somehow, from you, I don't sense malice. I overheard you muttering once, something about not being able to kill. Truthfully, that's what convinced me it was okay to let you come here..."

Tsunade gestured to the shelves full of untouched reading material. "In here is any number of ways to kill. But by the same token, there's that many ways to protect people. It's because I know what kind of person you are, and what you would do if you knew those attacks and defenses...that's why I trusted you to come here. And you haven't betrayed my trust. By summoning me here, you actually showed me

you were concerned about what you had found. Anyone with a heart and a conscience would be.”

Tsunade let go of Ekyt so that she could walk over to the four scrolls Ekyt had uncovered.

“Results of his experiments...names...notes on various Jutsus...” Tsunade read the scrolls, eventually stowing them in her robes. “Ryouko, what I say will undoubtedly hurt your feelings. Orochimaru had the talent to perform any jutsu in here. You do not possess that same talent. I’m sorry to say so, and I know it’s sounds harsh...but it’s a necessary truth. It’s something you have to understand, or you’ll be lost among these records, trying to master them all. Even if you DID have the same talent...well, if you did, you wouldn’t be here.”

Ekyt wasn’t sure how to respond to that. It was clearly supposed to be comforting, although it came off as more insulting than anything. Before he could open his mouth and say something in his defense, Tsunade had continued.

“You possess a talent separate from Orochimaru’s. You’ve done exhaustive research, the same as he has. But you two can’t be compared. He’s the embodiment of evil. You, by the same token, are the picture of loyalty. I know the Third Hokage once mentioned you as a successor to me, before he died. But he knew you wouldn’t take it, because you won’t take a life, and you won’t take a dream. The same reason you stepped aside and let Sakura date Naruto- you don’t want anyone close to you to suffer. You’d take that suffering on yourself first. And that’s why you study- to protect and serve. The void you feel...that emotion, Ryouko. And it may never be filled- a void exists within all of us. Orochimaru is right about that- training alone won’t fill that void. But, in your case, training IS the answer, because of who you are.”

Tsunade sighed a little, seeing the awe-struck young man trying to compose himself.

“May I stay, then? Those evil feelings are gone...and now I have a great deal more to sort out...And, well, it’s not like me to leave twenty floors of books untouched.”

Tsunade smirked, knowing what Ryouko was feeling. “You can stay here and think...but do me a favor and lay off the books. You’re only twenty, save some for later. You’ve got some new jutsus to play with as it is. For now, make this your sanctuary to think. You’ll be healed shortly, and I’ll need you back on missions. Deal?”

“Deal.”

--

As Tsunade left, Ekyt climbed down to where he was, intending to finish off the shelf he was on, then stop. But Tsunade’s words hung in the air, and what they insinuated left a taste in Ryouko’s mouth that he couldn’t wash out.

I could become drunk on power...I could finish all these and have nothing new to learn...so what she’s telling me is to master what I have first, the way I did with my first jutsu. Quality over quantity. I can deal with that. Two jutsus, five floors, countless tidbits of history...yeah, I’ll stop there. This place...it’s so peaceful, it just reminds me of those voids. So, Orochimaru was both

right and wrong about them...and about me. Somehow, I really take pride in being so different from Orochimaru. And I'll never believe that the Third thought I might succeed him one day. But Tsunade's right- people's lives and dreams aren't things I play with.

And that's why this place is okay for me.

...

I'm gonna stop trying to understand, because I will NEVER understand it. Being cast in the same league as the Akatsuki and Orochimaru...that's sickening to me. I'd rather be less talented than become a slave to evil ambitions. If I learn these jutsus, I'll use them to protect. With so much evil on the loose, I'd imagine these jutsus will be getting a workout.

But those voids...maybe I can still fill them, somehow. I'm not content with who I am, and how strong I am, because I'm not strong enough, simply put. I tie my self-worth to what I do. If I'm doing nothing, that's what I'm worth- nothing. And worse yet, being worth nothing means that I'm worth nothing to nobody. That loneliness again...

...

damn.

Despite knowing two new jutsus (being able to perform one), Ekyt felt even more down. He wasn't going to be able to sift through his thoughts in here, not right now. He would come back later and study more. For now, it was time to resume life outside, and that meant continuing to pretend everything was alright.

But things were more screwed up than ever in Ekyt's world.

43 - Nightmare

Ryouko was even more deep in thought as he left the library for the first time in a week. He could go back later, but it was best to get away now. After only sleeping a few hours in such a long stretch, and having done more than enough studying to allow himself sleep, Ryouko reached home, sent a summon asking Lady Tsunade to hold his missions for twelve hours, and proceeded to fall into a long, but fitful sleep. One nightmare in particular outlined things for Ryouko.

(Fifteen Years in the future)

“I know this is personal for you, Ryouko. You can say no...”

“Think nothing of it, Lord Hokage.”

Lord Hokage shifted; this was almost certainly going to be a problem, but who else could be trusted with such a volatile team?

“I know you’ll handle the Uchiha boy...it’s his parents that worry me...” Lord Hokage admitted, chancing a glance at the only other person in his office.

“Are you worried for my sake, or for the boy’s sake? With all due respect, sir.” Ryouko nearly snapped the question out harshly, but saved his tone, but only barely.

“Both. I know the history there...are you sure this is fine? I’ve heard the boy is just like his father...and even worse, his sister is like her mother...can you look me in the eye and say you can handle that?” Lord Hokage asked, looking up at Ryouko, feeling tired suddenly.

“Lord Hokage, if you don’t trust me, don’t give me the group. If you’re going to ask for my judgment, then tell me ‘too bad, don’t want it’, then you’re wasting my time. And that, as you know, is of the essence,” Ryouko snarled, not bothering to hold his tongue this time. This was getting tiresome very quickly.

Lord Hokage nearly growled back, but he understood Ryouko’s frustration.

“I’ll entrust them to you, then. Best of luck Ryouko.”

Ryouko turned before leaving the room. “The best of the bad luck is reserved for me, Lord Hokage.”

Ryouko left Naruto to ponder that.

I hope I’m right...Sasuke and Sakura with two kids, and giving both to the man who loved Sakura? If I thought anyone else could handle them...Old Man Third might not have been far off the mark in treating Sasuke and his clan with kid gloves...

--

“So who’s our sensei again?” Uchiha Suki questioned her brother. With pink hair and natural black highlights styled by her mother, Suki looked like a strange mix of Sakura and Sasuke.

“Some guy named ‘Ryouko’. I don’t know his family name,” came the reply from Uchiha Kasai. The boy dressed in all black, with his black hair combed out to the sides, while the back stuck out like spikes.

“Hope he’s like the sensei my dad had! Or my mom!” added Uzumaki Yuuka. Her eyes were white (from her Mother’s side), but her hair, while black, went in every direction, in a strange mix of her father and mother’s style.

POOF!

“Let’s see...Uzumaki Yuuka, and Uchiha Suki and Kasai, right?”

The three genin looked at their instructor. Five o’clock shadow, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, hip flask on his belt, and thick brown hair. Suki suppressed a squeel; their teacher was hot!

“That’s us, who are you?” Kasai demanded. Ryouko looked back, eyes half-lidded, the bags under them clearly evident.

“You’re just the spitting image of your father. I’m Ryouko, your instructor. But there’ll be time for that talk once we get to lone pine hill. Follow me.”

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“Okay, so let’s get to know each other a little. Who’s first?” Ryouko asked. No volunteers. “Fine, me then. My name is Ryouko. I’m thirty-five years old. My hobbies and interests are studying and training. What I like and what I hate are pretty much one and the same, and personal. That’s me. Now, since none of you spoke up, I’ll pick. You, Yuuka, please go ahead.”

The girl with the white eyes, black hair, and gray jacket stood up briefly, and talked in a low, but rambunctious, whisper. “My name is Uzumaki Yuuka. I’m 12 years old. I like to work on my Byakugan ability. I like my uncle, Hyuuga Neji, and I hate evil. I want to be Hokage some day, like my dad!”

Ryouko nodded kindly. “Alright, how about you, Suki?”

“The name is Uchiha Suki. I like...(Giggle) well, um (giggle giggle). My goal is to be the top medical ninja, like my mother. (Giggle)!”

Ryouko had to try really hard not to say anything about the giggling. It was all too familiar.

The image of her mother...it’s not hard to see what Lord Sixth is doing here. It’s like a mini version of his team. Am I supposed to be the Kakashi? I’m hardly the cool jonin...

“Alright then, thank you. And you, Kasai?”

“Uchiha Kasai. I don’t feel like saying anything else,” the boy with the dark eyes shot back, his head propped up on his hands.

Ryouko had to literally bite his tongue. **What the hell does this kid have to brood about?!**

“Alright. Before we get started as a team, are there any questions?” Ryouko knew as soon as the words were out of his mouth that it was a mistake to say them.

“Yeah. You’re not a jonin, or even a chunin, why are you instructing us?” Kasai remarked.

“Because I was told to. Is there...a problem?” Ryouko wanted to know.

“Yeah. Some genin training us- that won’t cut it with dad.”

Ryouko nearly snarled his answer. “I know your father. I’ve fought with him, I’ve fought against him, I’ve dealt with him so many times that I know exactly what he’ll think. Rank isn’t important, it’s who *holds* the rank.”

Ryouko surveyed his group. **The Sixth was right...**

“Alright then. Tomorrow, meet at the training field at noon. Don’t eat breakfast, unless you enjoy throwing up. See you later.” BAMF, and Ryouko disappeared, leaving three bewildered students behind.

“You’ve totally got a crush on him, don’t you?” Yuuka asked Suki.

“Well, he IS cute...”

--

“Turn them over to Kakashi, he can handle them.”

Ryouko was through being diplomatic.

“What made you decide this?” Naruto, the Sixth Hokage, questioned.

“Simple. First of all, Sakura’s daughter has a crush on me. THAT is a kick to the nuts all by itself. Second, they asked me why a genin is training them. I asked myself the same question. And I didn’t get a good answer.”

Naruto stood up, next to his old friend. “You know you’re a unique case. You’re as powerful as any jonin. So I can’t give you the rank, big deal. But...if you’re sure about this...what do you plan to do with yourself?”

Ryouko closed his eyes. “Join ANBU.”

Naruto winced. “You know that law about no genin in ANBU...”

Ryouko turned to Naruto, holding three fingers up. "Three Hokages...not one of them could get me to chunin...I thought you might be the one to look at me and see ability..."

Naruto started to say something, but Ryouko talked over him.

"...I'm tired of the political bullshoot, Lord Hokage. My track record, modesty aside, should speak for itself! But that's not enough, is it? It never is!"

The door to the Hokage's office opened, and Sasuke strode in, ignoring Naruto, and heading right for Ryouko.

"Kasai said that some genin was training him...I knew he had to mean you. No offense, but I want someone different teaching him. A jonin. My son deserves that."

Ping.

Ryouko stared Sasuke right in the eyes. "You got your wish- I just got done resigning. Oh, and, no offense, but you can rot in hell."

Naruto had to speak up. "Ryouko, he didn't mean anything by that! You know that's how Sasuke is!"

Ryouko had already taken off his hitai-ate and jammed it in his pocket. "You misunderstand, Lord Sixth- I resign, not just from this assignment, but from everything. I'm tired of being the genin errand boy, getting the leftover scraps of missions no one else wants. It's been twenty years, this is ridiculous. I've overlooked a lot of stuff, but not this time. Not this time."

Ryouko disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving Sasuke and Naruto alone.

"Damn it! I can't say I didn't see this coming, I guess. And I can't blame him either." Naruto brushed back his hair, looking flustered.

"It might be better this way. I mean, he's a loose cannon, a liability. We're better off without him, talented genin or not," Sasuke remarked in his own, subtle-as-a-bag-of-hammers way.

"I had hoped that the years would make him less bitter over all that's happened. I hope he'll come around..." Naruto closed his eyes and tried to relax, knowing now that his intuition was incorrect.

--

Ryouko tore through town, to his apartment, stopping only when he found Kakashi waiting outside the door for him.

"Kakashi-sensei? Did you need something? Oh, that's right, the case file for the new team." Ryouko handed Kakashi (Now in his mid-forties) a folder, and then started to look for his keys.

"I heard you hung up the headband..." Kakashi remarked.

Ryouko shrugged. "Twenty years of getting nowhere is all I have to show for all the work I did. Oh well. I hung on as long as I could; long enough to prove I'm not a quitter. Now...I just can't handle it anymore."

"Is it because Sakura married Sasuke, and you got their kids?" Kakashi asked, a little gleam in his eye.

"Not entirely. Although, in a ironic side note, Sasuke and Sakura's daughter has a crush on me. If THAT isn't a kick to the nuts, I don't know what it."

Kakashi shrugged. "Well, I don't blame you. But it's a shame you've never been allowed to reach your potential. You would be a great instructor. Alright, I'm off."

--

That night, Ryouko lay awake, thinking back over the years. As he began to study at three am, there was a knock on his window. Pushing aside his scrolls, Ryouko opened the window and let Gamakichi hop in.

"Here ya go, your missions from the Sixth Hokage!"

Ryouko took the missions. "Thank you, Gamakichi."

"No problem! Catch ya later!" the orange toad replied, hopping out the open window and into the night.

"Wanna bet?" Ryouko muttered. Biting into his thumbs, Ryouko performed his Dual Summoning Jutsu.

Holly and Taleo, Ryouko's dog and hawk, respectively, were both waiting instructions.

"Holly, this (hands her a scroll) is for Lord Hokage. Don't take any messages from him, unless it regards my request. Taleo (ties a scroll to his leg), this is for the Kazekage, alright? See if you can get a response out of him."

The two animals rushed off to do as Ryouko said. Tomorrow morning, Ryouko knew, there would be all kinds of chaos. But chaos seemed to be the only way out of the rut he was in. A rut that got bigger and bigger every day.

--

As expected, the next morning, Lord Hokage was all but breaking down Ryouko's door. Purposely, Ryouko took his time answering, and made sure to look half-asleep when he DID manage to open the door, which he had miraculously locked from the inside and forgotten how to open.

"What the hell is this?!" Lord Hokage demanded, shoving Ryouko's scroll into his hands.

"Oh, did I write this? Maybe I drank more than I thought...oh well. So, can I take the name?" Ryouko murmured, stepping aside to let Naruto in.

“The name? THE NAME?! IS THAT ALL YOU CAN THINK ABOUT?!” Naruto roared, nearly knocking over a candle holder as he wrung his hands in a rage.

“It’s not a light matter, ‘Sarutobi’ was my sensei’s name, you know, the Third Hokage. I’d like to use the name, since my family name is forbidden. Chakra cigarette?” Ryouko said/offered. Naruto smacked the cigarette away. Ryouko shrugged and lit one for himself.

“Damn it! Fine, the name, okay, sure! But this other note, as you damn well know, is what I’m referring to! What the hell do you mean to say with this?!”

Ryouko pretended to study the note. “Oh, THAT. You mean the ‘temporary body adjustment to Sunagakure for study, under the understanding that the move may or may be for six monthes, although Suna can opt to extend the contr-”

“SKIP THE LEGAL JARGON! You’re going to Sunagakure for six months? And what about your duties here?!” Naruto demanded to know.

“Find another thirty-five year old genin to do them,” Ryouko fired back. No more crap from the establishment. That was how it was going to work. Tsunade’s reign had been bad enough; Ryouko had expected better from Naruto.

“Fine, go! But if you do, it’s a black mark against you, Ryouko!”

Ryouko faked a shiver. “Oh no, you might not promote me?! How will I live with myself?!”

A tap at the window told Ryouko that Taleo had returned from Suna. The crest the bird was carrying told Ryouko that the hawk had brought news from the Kazekage. Holding out his arm, Ryouko let the bird flutter down onto his arm.

“Neiri,” Ryouko said, ending the summoning jutsu for Taleo. Holly had come back with Lord Hokage, and Ryouko was petting her absently.

“Well, aren’t you going to rub it in?!” Naruto demanded. Ryouko shook his head.

“I didn’t get the job. I’m stuck here.”

Ignoring Naruto, Ryouko got up and left, taking an aimless walk, floating down the stream of life. All streams had rocks that altered it’s course; the Leaf Village was a dam, or so it seemed to Ryouko. Wasn’t there any progression beyond it? Something better? Or, if not, some recognition of his abilities here?

--

“Ryouko! Hey, wait up!”

Ryouko nearly swallowed his cigarette. **Can this day GET any worse?!** But Ryouko held up and let Sakura catch up to his stride.

“Hey, what’s going on? Did something happen with you and Sasuke yesterday?” Sakura asked. Time had miraculously avoided aging her very much.

“Not really, nothing worth mentioning,” Ryouko said with a shrug, already feeling for his hip flask, though it wasn’t even ten in the morning yet. It was going to be a long day.

“Hm. Sasuke thought it was worth mentioning...I’m sorry about how he acted. If I had my choice, I’d want you teaching my kids. If that’s worth anything to you,” Sakura said carefully, looking for some change in Ryouko’s face. There was none to be found.

“That’s nice of you. Well, they’re in better hands with Kakashi. Besides, Sasuke had a point. They deserve a jonin instructor.”

Sakura didn’t know what to say to that. “So, what are you going to do now?” she chanced.

“Hopefully stop drinking so much. I really need to lay off the sauce. Maybe I’ll go see what the Akatsuki are up to.”

Sakura stopped dead in her tracks. **Did he say the Akatsuki? Just like that, as if it was no big deal? This is bad. He’s only been like this once before...What made him this way this time around?**

Ryouko kept walking, knowing his words had enough shock value to end the unpleasant conversation. Sakura would, of course, figure out that Ryouko had just said it for the hell of it soon enough. Whatever. One less unpleasant memory to deal with for the moment.

Of course, more unpleasant memories came walking across his path. Kakashi and his new team. Ryouko nodded to Kakashi and the team upon being sure they had noticed him first.

“So you desert us? Loser.” Kasai told Ryouko with a smirk, knowing that Ryouko wouldn’t dare hit him.

“Ryouko-sensei, what’s up? Why did you leave?” Suki asked quietly, feeling a little hurt by Ryouko’s sudden departure yesterday.

“You deserve a jonin instructor, and Kakashi-sensei is the tops. I thought I was going to be leaving to go on a trip, but that didn’t work out.”

Kasai smirked. “Too bad. They wouldn’t take you? Pathetic, even for some old genin like you.”

BLAM!

The building just above Kasai’s head crumbled slightly, Ryouko’s fist being the cause. Ryouko smirked upon seeing the smirk on Kasai’s face. Slowly withdrawing his bleeding fist, Ryouko looked straight at Kasai.

“Look me up in a few years for a fight then, hotshot.”

After that, Ryouko looked to Kakashi.

“Sensei, I got the name approved. Not that I can do much with it, but you know, it’s nice to be able to introduce myself properly now.”

“Well then, congratulations. Sarutobi Ryouko has a nice ring to it. Well, I’m off to give these three the bell test. Let’s see how they do: Better or worse than their parents.”

“It’s like seeing clones of their parents. Although the attitudes are different, to be sure. All except for you, Kasai. You are most certainly your father’s son. That’s both the highest praise and the biggest insult I could give you.”

Just like Sasuke, all Kasai had to say was “Hmph.”

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44 - Dreamy Festival

Kakashi nodded to Ryouko, carefully asking him to leave. He knew that Ryouko's temper was close to the surface these days and didn't want to risk having an angry Uchiha clan hunting Ryouko down for cracking their favored son in the mouth. That, and Suki's puppy eyes at Ryouko were getting worrisome. It was never a good thing (though it was common) when a student latched on to a teacher. Kakashi wasn't worried about Ryouko- it was Suki that earned his concern.

The very image of her mother, Ryouko's biggest crush...and, unlike her mother, she picked him. If only he was that much younger again...

Kakashi hadn't had a stellar love life, but he boasted skill enough that he didn't have issues about his self-worth- at least not like Ryouko.

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Ryouko was still fuming over Lord Hokage's actions (or lack thereof), and took to staring at the Memorial Stone for hours, just as both Kakashi and the Third Hokage had before him. The rest of his time was spent training, occasionally stopping for food or rest. Now that he was 'unemployed', Ryouko found himself perfecting his jutsus down to the last detail- then improving on them. It was all he could do. If he got hurt, he patched himself up, because going to the hospital meant facing Sakura. If someone started a fight, Ryouko ended it and left, because sticking around meant dealing with the police force- that being Sasuke Uchiha and some hand-picked recruits.

It wasn't so much that Ryouko and the 'new' Uchiha clan were enemies...it was just that Ryouko couldn't take any more disappointment. His frustration had become more and more apparent. The village sided with both him AND Lord Hokage on the situation, so there was no hope of rallying anyone behind him. That didn't change how Ryouko viewed the village- he loved it, simply put. Maybe that was why he could get completely depressed over the upcoming festival. He wasn't sure he would attend, in all honesty. It was at this festival that Sasuke and Sakura had tied the knot, so it was a decidedly painful affair.

Standing at the edge of the Hokage Faces, perched on top of the First Hokage's head, Ryouko looked down on the village.

Well, it worked out for them. That's what I fought for, right? Heh. Well, I'd better just wear a mask or put on a brave face. I'd be conspicuous by my absence at this festival.

Still, the place where Sakura and Sasuke finally hooked up...quite a memory. The previous year was Naruto and Hinata getting hitched. The year before that, it was Kurenai and Asuma finally admitting it. That explains why this festival got the simple 'Ai' ('love') nickname. Seems like couples that start here have a happy ending. Good for them. Man, that moment when it was asked 'any reason these two shouldn't be married?'...I'm glad I didn't say what came to mind. One of those stones best left unturned...

Ryouko lit up a new cigarette, running a hand down his chin, feeling the onset of a thin beard. He decided to let it grow to a certain length, then trim it. No mustache though, and it would be more 'stubble' than beard truthfully.

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"I can't do it!" Suki wailed to her friends. Yamanaka Tsuneko ('neko-chan') and Hyuuga Juichi ('ku-chan', cousin of Naruto's daughter) were immediately ganging up on her.

"Come on, he's not your teacher anymore! What could it hurt to ask? Girl, you've GOT to be more assertive!" Neko persisted, giving suddenly shy little Suki a bump.

"Yeah, seriously. Sarutobi-sensei is a good guy, it's not like he'll say 'go to hell' or something! C'mon, you KNOW he's single, and it's not like he's got anything else to do. Just go for it!" Ku persisted.

Ku and Neko could both see why Suki liked Sarutobi-sensei. He was young-looking, handsome, and strong. Plus, that air of mystery around him...

"He's so hot!" Suki finally squealed, turning red, chewing on the lapels of her shirt nervously. "I mean, he smokes, but only that healthy chakra stuff, and he works out. But I'm so much younger!"

"Then ya just gotta turn his head, Suki-chi!" Neko said, eerily reminiscent of her mother. It was like it was the opposite of Sakura and Ino- Suki was being helped, not hindered, by Neko. On the other end, Ku was staying mostly out of it, just as her mother and father would have. She was content to learn about every weapon under the sun, being only of the cadet branch of the Hyuuga family, despite being Hyuuga in name over her cousin.

"Neko-chan, what are you planning?!" Suki demanded. But it was too late- Neko had ideas of her own. Enlisting the help of Ku-chan, she dragged Suki off to her own home- and a fabulous collection of clothes and make-up. It would take two hours, but the girls were going to dress Suki up, like she was a giant Kewpie doll that they could do with as they pleased. That was typical of girls that age. Giggling about boys, but not daring to confess their love. Or, confessing their love, and having the boy in question redden with embarrassment and laugh off the brave attempt to become boyfriend/girlfriend. (Like any of them had any idea what that meant at that age. It would take time before you 'fell in love before and you found that love was more than just holding hands', as the Beatles sang so poignantly so many years later)

But two hours of work showed their efforts nicely. A blushing Suki in a pink, flowered kimono with a dark pink obi was the fruit of their efforts. Looking like that, she could have chosen just about any guy her age. But she was fixated on one older man in particular. The problem- she didn't know that, years back, the man in question had fallen hard for her mother, and had never said a word.

--

Ryouko held his cigarette between his fingers, making sure the ash from the sudden rush of wind didn't

send the ash into his face. Instead, it was blown along with the wind, until it burned itself out or settled itself on the side of the mountain. It was a great way to lose yourself to the outside world. Ryouko had done just that- his mind was in another time, when he had seen a hope for the future. A tiny voice startled him out of that world.

“Excuse me, Ryouko-sempai?”

With a small sound of surprise, Ryouko turned around, seeing Suki blushing nervously, all dressed for the festival that would take place in a couple hours. Immediately, Ryouko saw where this was going.

Just get out now, Ryouko. Don't do this. Aw S***

“Oh, hi Suki-chan. All ready for the festival?” Ryouko asked brightly, forcing a smile. He didn't have to force hard- he liked the girl, just not in the way she hoped.

“Y-Yes sempai! I, er, um...I mean...” Suki was tripping over her words. It was painful for Ryouko to watch, and he almost said something.

No. If I ask HER, it comes off as wrong, no matter what my intentions. If SHE asks ME, it's a little girl's crush. I have to play dumb and let her say it. How do I even know this?

“...Would you...would you see the festival with me, sempai?!” Suki finally managed to say, cringing in defeat. No way Ryouko-sempai would say ‘yes’, there was just no way! **I'm not even grown yet! Gah, why isn't my chest bigger?! Mom was the same way! Damn genetics!**

“Sure, Suki-chan, that sounds like fun,” Ryouko replied, with an almost practiced ease. In reality, he was already wondering if he was doing the right thing, but his mind told him ‘play along for one night or crush a little girl?’, and Ryouko knew he couldn't just act cool toward Suki like that- it wasn't her fault she was the spitting image of her mother, while she harbored emotions that Ryouko wished her mother had felt.

“Where would you like to meet?”

Suki's mind had stopped. She hadn't gotten past asking him in her mental process- now that he said yes, what happened? Where should she meet him? Was she overdressed? What would he be wearing? What would her parents think? Was this really okay?

This time, Ekyt stopped her thought process.

“How about we meet at the festival entrance near the memorial stone? Shall we say, in an hour?” Ryouko said kindly. Suki managed to give him a wide-eyed nod, silently saying ‘okay’. Ryouko smiled. “Alright then. See you soon, Suki-chan. Oh, and please tell Ku-chan and Neko-chan they don't need to hide in the trees. It's better they don't, they haven't mastered chakra control yet.”

With that, Ryouko gave a vague wave toward the tree containing Neko and Ku, and an over-the-shoulder smile to Suki. Suki was rooted to the spot, even when Neko and Ku rushed over and congratulated her, then danced around the mountain.

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Ryouko walked home, picking out his sandals, tabi socks, hakama, gi top, and jacket. The Hakama was deep purple (almost black), the gi top was dark blue, and the jacket was black. Inside Ryouko's jacket was his wakazashi- when dressing the part of his old samurai days, Ryouko carried the weapons as well. Obviously, he couldn't tote a longsword at a festival, so the wakazashi would have to do for protection.

Once he finished dressing, Ryouko made a trip to the Uchiha dojo. Hating this, but knowing it needed to be done, Ryouko knocked on the door. Kasai opened the door, glaring at Ryouko.

"What?" he snarled.

"I'm here to talk to your parents." Ryouko decided to answer stiffly, just as he would have when he was a samurai. He couldn't really call himself a ninja these days as it was.

"Fine. Follow me, Mom and Dad are by the pond."

-

Sasuke and Sakura both stood up, looking to see who Kasai had brought them. They were clothed in kimonos for the festival, with Sakura carrying an umbrella matching her kimono. She and Sasuke (Sasuke looked amazingly like his father nowadays) silently dismissed Kasai, looking at Ryouko. Ryouko looked back, before bowing.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Uchiha-san. I'm glad to see you're both well..." Ryouko stood back up, eyes leveling with Sasuke's, then the friendlier Sakura's.

"What brings you here?" Sakura wanted to know, asking pleasantly. It was rare that Ryouko crossed paths with anyone carrying the Uchiha name, so she was very curious as to why he had come.

"I've come to inform you that your daughter asked me to see the festival with her, and I said 'yes'. It occurred to me that I should obtain permission first. Rest assured, my intentions are only to keep a girl from being crushed, and to act cordially."

Sasuke looked ready to spit fire, but Sakura put a hand on his shoulder.

"Of course it's okay! Suki took a liking to you, huh? Well, can't say I'm shocked. Apparently, you're the 'hot sensei' nowadays."

Ryouko gave a mirthless smile. "Well, 'was' might be more appropriate. At any rate, thank you for your time. I'll see myself out."

As Ryouko left, Sasuke clenched a fist. "I KNOW I can trust him...but still...I HATE the thought of him with my daughter. He's more than twice her age!"

Sakura giggled a little. "Oh, it's harmless! She's fourteen, it's just a little crush. She'll get over him and onto the next cute guy in no time. Besides, it's better that it's Ryouko, someone we can trust

showing her the festival. Too many kids her age have grown up too fast, and might try to pull a fast one on her, since SOMEONE has avoided giving her 'the talk'..."

Sasuke smirked at the irony. "It's YOUR job to give Suki the talk, I gave it to Kasai. And, for the record, YOU didn't move on to the 'next guy'. You married the same guy."

Sakura conceded he had a point. "True, and I didn't fall for an older guy either...oh well, she's young, we all were once!"

--

Ryouko wondered why the younger generation seemed attracted to him. The cigarette, the five o'clock shadow, the looking-young-but-is-actually-older? It wasn't as though Ryouko hadn't seen any kunoichi he couldn't identify with- just none of them seemed to be available. He was older now, and as his age grew, Ryouko felt sure that his chance at love went down farther and farther. He DID remember a rendezvous with one girl, though. She had a slightly darker skin to her, making her look Egyptian or something of the like, but with Japanese features- to Ryouko, it was an absolutely gorgeous mix. Long black hair drawn into a ponytail on one side of her head, long bangs covering one eye, and hair pulled into two long strands on the back of her head- she hardly fit her career. She was no model, or dancer- she was more or less a bounty hunter. She could swing a sword like almost no one else, and that sword could apparently deflect jutsus. THAT was something Ryouko learned when he had tried to defend one of her targets, and had to block the sword once his genjutsu had just disappeared.

Azami...huh. Too bad we're total opposites. We had a chance. We were inches apart, blades at each others necks...I don't know about her, but I felt something. Ah, who am I kidding? Azami-san wasn't shy- if she wanted to do the kiss-kiss fall in love thing, she would have, there and then.

Ryouko had to admit it was a fond memory, strangely enough. He and this attractive, exotic looking girl holding sharp weapons to each others necks, each daring the other to make a move in a calculated game of 'chicken'. Their eyes had met, his dark hazel eyes searching her nearly black eyes, studying first for a threat, then a nearly desperate attraction, and there had been a spark. Or so Ryouko thought. Instead of leaning just a *little* closer, they had each pushed a way, sheathing their respective blades, bowing in appreciation of each other's skills.

'Not too shabby, kid. How old are you?' Azami had asked, her hands on her hips, as though scolding some naughty little boy.

'Twenty-seven,' Ryouko had replied, standing up straight and staring back.

'With a little kid face? Ha! Whatever. In my profession, age doesn't matter. Only what you've done to deserve my attention,' Azami had laughed. Ryouko cocked his head.

'Since you haven't targeted me, I haven't done anything to deserve your attention, I take it?'

Azami raised an eyebrow, smiling genuinely. *"I'm talking to you, aren't I? The fact that you aren't dead means that you haven't annoyed me yet. Heh."* Azami looked up at the setting sun. *"Well, I've gotta go*

kid. Look me up for a drink when you look old enough.”

Ryouko blinked in surprise- he hadn't seen that coming. “If I might ask, how old are you?”

Over her shoulder, Azami called out ‘Twenty-seven. See you around.’

Hard to believe that was eight years ago. It's not likely we'll ever run into each other again. Still...haven't had the desire to kiss someone like that since Sakura. Did that mean it was real? I mean, she was dressed so that guys would notice her, even though she didn't, ahem, flash the goods immodestly. Might have been lust. If you're single for twenty-seven years, then I guess you're entitled to lapses of desire now and then.

Ryouko shook his head, clearing thoughts of Azami away. Nice girl, but he wouldn't see her again, and right now, he was more concerned with making a little girl happy. Inwardly, Ryouko sighed.

I wish she was older, this just feels so awkward. It's more like babysitting. I'll never hear the end of it.

Suki chose then to make her appearance.

“I'm ready, Ryouko-sempai. Were you waiting long?”

Ryouko had been standing here for a half hour. “Not at all, Suki-chan. Let's go then, shall we?”

45 - Theory and Practice

Oh...my...God! I'm getting to see the festival with Ryouko-sempai! This is so amazing! I can't believe it! Me and him at the Ai Festival! It's so unreal!

Little Suki was thrilled as she led the way through stands and people. Games of skill and chance were littered around, along with food of every kind. Occasionally, Ryouko pointed out a game. The first one was a target practice game in which you threw a kunai with on the tip sharp toward balloons which were tied to a wall. You had to hit five to win a prize, but you only started with three kunai. Ryouko gave Suki a small wink as he took the three knives. One after the other, Ryouko lobbed them lazily at the balloons. The person in charge of the game snickered at the lazy throws. He stopped snickering when the balloons, laid out in rows, began to pop. Ryouko took out three rows of five balloons each with his first three knives. The person in charge stopped him, telling him he could take any prize he wanted, as long as no one else saw that technique! Ryouko stepped aside and let Suki pick whatever she wanted. She was awestruck, but walked away holding a tiger ANBU mask, a set of kewpie dolls, and a set of kunai knives that would be the envy of her class.

After that it was food. When a boy from class gave Suki a shove, Ryouko collared him and snarled a warning that turned the little punk into jelly. When Ryouko dropped him, the kid took off at top speed, disbelieving that he hadn't noticed Suki's escort. For her part, Suki was so thrilled with the fun she was having that she couldn't even be troubled by the bigger problem looming on the horizon- how to tell Ryouko-sempai how she felt about him. There was no easy way to do that. And the stories about Ryouko-sensei didn't make that any easier. The stories included:

Ryouko shot down hordes of girls
Ryouko only like blondes
Ryouko was married secretly
Ryouko loved Lady Tsunade

And so on. None had any basis for truth, but people will talk. In the Hidden Leaf, everyone knew everyone else's business. A handsome, talented man like Ryouko being single was a topic that came up now and then. That was, of course, how the stories got started. Suki didn't believe any of that. She had an instinctive feeling that something had happened to Ryouko-sempai in the past. Something that made him too scared, or completely unwilling, to love. Or maybe he just hadn't met the right person; that was certainly possible. It was common knowledge that Ryouko was very picky about most things concerning his private life. He had never spoken his real name, for starters. His appearance always professional. And so on. So, if that's how he was, maybe he was the same with girls?

Ryouko aimlessly found another game, laughing at the concept. It was a samurai vs samurai battle for two people. Now THAT was fun. Wearing padded costumes, complete with masks, people competed with soft toy swords in an attempt to knock each other off of a trampoline and onto a pile of padding. Suki could tell Ryouko-sempai was going to enjoy this.

I wonder who he'll be fighting... Suki wondered, chewing on her fried squid. **Oh, that's right! I**

promised myself I'd tell him how I felt. After this game, I'm going to tell Ryouko-sempai how I feel, no matter what! Please, let me have the guts to tell him! Suki's silent begging was her salvation at this point. Then the game started, and Suki focused on watching Ryouko.

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Ryouko bowed to his opponent, guessing that he would win quickly. Not through confidence- he WAS a samurai. He had to have an advantage. The shout to begin the game came, and he and the other 'samurai' rushed in. To Ryouko's surprise, the two were almost evenly matched. They clashed swords, blocked, dodged, rolled, and kicked, but it was a stalemate.

Who is this person?! Ryouko tried to figure out something while he fought, but the padded costume masked his opponent's body, and the trampoline's bounce covered their footwork. It was impossible to tell what anything about your opponent- in this game, skill spoke for itself.

Finally, fifteen minutes later, the match was declared a draw. Ryouko and his opponent bowed to each other, exiting the makeshift arena. Suki had chewed nervously on the skewer her squid had come on- partially for Ryouko to win, partially for herself to keep her courage up. She had to smile as he pulled off the to gear, commenting on how close it was to the real thing, then accepting a prize of 5000 ryo for the performance he had just put on. The other samurai was getting the same amount of money. But Suki didn't notice that. Instead, she took Ryouko's hand, led him to a bench, sat down, and just said it.

"I love you. Please accept my feelings."

Ryouko instantly bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I really want to Suki-chan. But the age difference is just too much. And, well...you could do better than me. But it couldn't hurt to..."

Ryouko leaned down and kissed Suki on the forehead, much to the girl's surprise.

"If it makes you feel any better, it's not because there's anyone else. You didn't 'lose' to anyone. I know the Uchiha blood in you would boil if that was the case. But the fact is...you can and will do better than me, Suki-chan. Trust me when I say that. And I will be in your corner to back you up when you need me."

Suki should have been heartbroken. Instead, she felt relieved and proved. Relieved that Ryouko had been honest, and proud that she had his support.

"And I'll be there for you, Ryouko-sempai!" Suki shouted cheerfully over the banter of people and the distance CRACK of fireworks exploding loudly overhead. Their bright colors illuminated Ryouko's shocked face- that had gone well.

"Alright then. Let me walk you home, Suki-chan. Unless you have..." Ryouko glanced over his shoulder, seeing the other 'samurai' staring at him intently. Ryouko felt something surge through him. Something that put him on his guard. He knelt down next to Suki and quietly told her to go home and check in with her family. Suki sensed something was wrong and did as Ryouko asked, giving her sempai one last hug before the festival was over. Ryouko watched her go while he stood still, giving the samurai a chance to catch up to him.

“Your fighting style was familiar to me as well,” the other samurai said, shedding her equipment first, then her helmet and mask. The equipment’s removal showed a gorgeous body. Long, slim legs, a firm torso, and so on until her face and hair. Instantly, Ryouko was blown away.

“You...Azami-san...” Ryouko’s hand felt for the handle of his wakazashi. Quickly he drew it, just as Azami drew her own blade. They stood, like two bulls locked in a ritual of superiority. Each blade was just inches away from the neck of it’s owner’s opponent.

“You got it. You still remembered me, huh? I’m flattered. You’ve gotten cute and stayed young-looking. Very nice...very nice indeed...” Azami cooed in her exotic voice. She slid her weapon into it’s sheath, prompting Ryouko to do the same.

“Is that any way for two old friends to act?”

Ryouko gave a mirthless laugh. “ ‘Friends’, Azami-san? Wouldn’t that be stretching the truth a little?”

Azami laughed and agreed. “Yeah. Still, it was interesting to see you again. You were such a lost soul eight years ago...even more so now. I can just tell. So imagine my surprise when your name came up as my next bounty...I turned it down, of course. Someone like you can’t have a price on your head. Besides, I don’t take small-time gigs. All the same...I just couldn’t pass by without seeing you again...”

Azami slid closer to Ryouko, their eyes meeting again. This time, Azami’s eyes were playful, while Ryouko’s were dotted with a mixture of fear and hope. He felt a spark- this time, he didn’t feel it alone, apparently.

“You look pretty hot in that get-up,” Azami murmured, dangerously close to Ryouko’s ear. She picked at his gi top. “Yes, you HAVE stayed in shape, too. I’m surprised you’re alive, let alone looking fit and trim like this.”

Ryouko didn’t move. He just let Azami slither around him. “You look great yourself.”

Azami laughed a little, giving Ryouko a smart swat on the butt, leaving her hand on his leg for a long moment. “Flattery will get you everywhere. Now, I think, eight years ago, we started something. I’m thinking we should finish it. Call it a courtesy, but I don’t like to leave anyone hanging. My clients always get their money’s worth, and they always get what they ask for. Dead, alive, injured...doesn’t matter to me. If the price is right and it isn’t immoral, I’ll do it.”

Ryouko’s eyes slid toward Azami. “Immoral? I guess you mean prostitution, because you don’t seem to have a problem with killing.”

BAM. Azami pushed Ryouko up against a tree, her face inches away from his.

“I kill scum. I never sleep around. I don’t do drugs. But I’m decisive, Ryouko. I know what I want, when I want it, and how to get it.” Azami leaned forward and planted a long kiss on Ryouko’s lips. The kiss wound up being pretty adult-like, which surprised Ryouko for some reason, despite the fact they were both adults. Azami opened her eyes slightly, giving Ryouko a decidedly coy look.

“I believe I’ve collected my last bounty.”

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Suki couldn’t help but be a little sad. In her heart, she knew that Ryouko-sempai was right. That didn’t mean she liked the reality of the situation. Now she faced the prospect of telling her friends and her parents what happened. Her parents would have had to know how this would work, while Suki’s friends would laugh and promise to prank Ryouko until he regretted his decision. Her thoughts were jumbled as she walked into her room, sliding the door closed behind her. She wanted some alone time before she told everyone what had happened.

-

Ryouko backed away from Azami, looking decidedly downcast. Being kissed by a gorgeous woman like that wasn’t a cause for depression. At Azami’s questioning glance, Ryouko ran a hand through his hair.

“I just feel bad for that girl I was with. I don’t want her to feel crushed, like she lost to someone for my...well, affections. I’m more than twice her age, and I’m not her teacher or anything...but still...”

Azami immediately stopped her bounty hunter act. In reality, she was pretty understanding. But she enjoyed the part of the hardass she had to play.

“I can appreciate that, Ryouko-san. She might get the wrong idea if I stick around here...”

Ryouko worried that Azami was going to leave, but Azami had a different approach in mind.

“Let me have a little girl to girl talk with her. I’ll straighten things up.” Azami raised a finger. “BUT-remember, I’m still a bounty hunter at heart, doing jobs for a price. This one is going to cost you. Fair enough?”

Ryouko agreed it was. “Name your price.”

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Ekyt sat up with a start, drenched in a cold sweat. He wondered how he had gotten on his bed for a moment before recalling he had walked here and practically collapsed after studying for seven days with maybe seven hours of sleep total. All the information his brain had collected- it had to have caused that nightmare. But Ekyt couldn’t shake the lingering feeling the dream left. It had felt all too real. The girl...she hadn’t felt so real, although Ekyt wished she had been. Seeing Sasuke and Sakura married...Naruto as Hokage...himself as a loser...it was sobering to Ekyt. Sobering was the last thing he needed. But what could he do about it? A dream was a dream. Sakura was with Naruto, and Sasuke was with Ino. That led Ekyt to push the dream aside as meaningless.

Ryouko? Where did that come from? Cool name, but when do I get it? What am I saying, it was a stupid dream. My name is Ekyt. Man, is EVERYTHING going weird on me? Well, whatever. I’m shaking that dream off and taking that exam proctor test.

Ekyt marched straight to Tsunade's office, asking when the next test was. When 'not for a year' was the response, the stoic Ekyt broke down. Muttering a curse, he nearly put a hole in the floor. Tsunade would normally have been angry, but she could see something was eating at Ekyt.

"Did you get some sleep? You didn't go back to the library, right?" Tsunade felt his forehead for a fever, finding a slight one, caused by fatigue and poor nourishment.

"Sleep is the problem! I had this dream. I know, I'm twenty, a dream shouldn't bother me, but this was...different." Ryouko nervously laid out the entire dream to Tsunade. Now, Tsunade was no expert on dreams, although the Third Hokage had studied them, mostly recreationally. Tsunade had picked up some of the knowledge, so she plucked a reference book from the shelf behind her, flipped it open, and started reading into Ekyt's dream.

"To put it simply Ekyt," Tsunade said, snapping the book closed, "That dream is desire meeting frustration. Seeing all those people married and living out their dreams- that's what you want for yourself. Your frustration is that you don't think you can have that. And as for that girl...well, don't read into her. She symbolizes a weakness for you. A desperation to belong that might someday become a real problem for you. So, take the dream as an 'awakening'- change things before they become that way." Tsunade spun her chair around to look out the window.

"Reality is what we make it. Once we make it, it's set in stone. But we CAN guide its course somewhat. It's going to be all up to you to make your own reality. The people around you will affect it. How you choose to interact with them is what will define this reality."

Ekyt nodded- this wasn't new to him. He understood, but it was like those jutsus he had learned in the library- theory and practice were two very different things. But he didn't have time to think about that now- Someone needed a discreet back-up. A single person who could handle a major problem, if necessary. Jiraiya had been watching the Akatsuki, and he was in to report his findings to Kakashi and Yamato. Team seven didn't know these meetings were taking place- they were top-secret, and often concerned Naruto. Yamato and Kakashi agreed that Ekyt would be a good fit, in case Jiraiya had been followed. He wouldn't be at the meeting- he would be watching from a distance, waiting for a signal from one of the three, or acting if he saw a threat.

Tsunade outlined all this to him in record time. She hadn't thought about Ekyt though- was his fatigued body okay to handle this? If there WAS a fight, it would be a big one, and Ekyt could very easily become a sacrificial lamb. This information HAD to be delivered, and Ekyt would be the one on the front lines, holding back the enemy, as at least one of the three of those meeting had to make it back.

But Ekyt was Ekyt. Tired or not, he was taking this mission. He took up a chakra cigarette, lit it, and popped it into his mouth. He thought about the older version of himself in that dream, realizing he was rapidly developing into the man he was in that dream, at least in looks and skill. It was clear that 'Ryouko' had a similar mindset- but not identical.

"Alright, I'm off. M'lady, if it's not asking too much...when I get back, could I get your help with one of the jutsus I picked up in the library?"

Tsunade gave a tired nod. "Come back in one piece and you have my word that I'll help you out."

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Team Seven never noticed that they were always sent on an unsupervised mission at least once a month. They HAD noticed that their team roster had changed so many times it was unreal. Now their roster seemed to be a set mix of strengths offsetting weakness, with additional members coming and going as necessary. Naruto knew it was for his protection, but when he did the math in his head, he decided that things couldn't keep working like this. Too many people were at risk if he lost control. He vowed to talk with Tsunade the first chance he got.

46 - Live Through Another

The meeting place for Jiraiya, Kakashi, and Yamato changed with each month to lessen the chance of being overheard. With Ekyt watching carefully, the three got down to business.

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“They’re moving forward. They’ve gotten two of the bijuu now. They can safely target the nine-tailed fox- or so they believe. My research has shown me otherwise...” Jiraiya, unusually serious, produced a small scroll. He passed it to Kakashi, who squinted to read it. It was more a series of crude diagrams. Jiraiya began to narrate.

“If the Akatsuki were to capture Naruto, the demon would exit his body. But the demon fox has the ability to heal Naruto, an ability the other bijuu haven’t possessed- at least none of the ones who have been caught and extracted.” Jiraiya pointed to two version of what seemed to be Naruto. One had feral markings, the other did not.

“If the fox were extracted, there’s a good chance Naruto would live, depending on the demon’s own ideas. Naruto explained to me that he’s asked it for chakra before, and it obliged when it saw his courage. So it might very well heal Naruto as it’s extracted. BUT-” Jiraiya held up one finger. “There’s a catch.”

“Catch? What do you mean?” Yamato was following the scroll as well.

“The catch is, this can end one of two ways: The demon may be powerful enough to throw off the Akatsuki, and it could rampage freely again. The other option...if Naruto is without the demon’s chakra, it may impossible for him to do any of the jutsus he knows now. He may have developed, but moves like Shadow Clones and Rasengan would be detrimental to him now. Shadow Clones, as you both know, are flesh and blood creations. Without the healing powers of the demon fox, if Naruto tried to use the Shadow Clones, his body wouldn’t be able to cope. For someone as impulsive as Naruto, he wouldn’t last long. Learning a whole new way of life...I can’t see Naruto doing that gracefully.”

Kakashi closed his eyes for a moment. “There’s one other catch- Naruto considers that fox part of himself...if it’s taken away, he has no chance of doing what he wants. Hokage will be out of his reach.”

Yamato nodded. “Also, Kakashi-sempai, it’s best to consider that Naruto may in, in fact, be killed- Master Jiraiya’s research is unproven, and we don’t have any way to test it.”

Jiraiya nodded his agreement. “Right. But Naruto’s body, if he keeps using that chakra, will deteriorate. He can always get healed by the fox, but even that healing ability has it’s limits.” Jiraiya pointed to his next diagram. It looked like pictures of seals.

“We could always re-seal the fox...but the fact that Naruto can use it’s chakra has saved his life more times than we can count. If we clamp down entirely, the full power of the fox will be trapped within

Naruto, and it could destroy him from the inside.”

“So you’re saying we should only strengthen the seal when absolutely necessary?” Kakashi sighed. “This is a delicate situation. But it all boils down to one thing, really. We can’t let the Akatsuki have Naruto. No matter what. We’ve all sworn on our lives to protect him.”

“He’s in good hands. Between Kakashi-sempai, myself sealing the fox, and his teammates, the Akatsuki will have a hard time getting to him.”

Jiraiya looked even more grim. “That’s a problem...aside from us, there’s one other who has taken the oath to protect Naruto. That Ekyt.”

Silence.

“He’s strong. If his kekkai-genkais were developed more strongly, he’d stand an even better chance. He’s had startling luck against the Akatsuki. Specifically Itachi Uchiha. In fact, I’ve brought this up for one other reason...”

WHOOSH!

Ekyt landed next to Jiraiya.

“They’ve arrived. One of them, but there are two following behind him. I can’t see who, but it’s Akatsuki for sure. They were approaching from behind me.”

The four exchanged glances.

“Well then, we’re in for a fight...” Jiraiya muttered darkly.

“Wait, please, Master Jiraiya. They aren’t aware of you watching- or, rather, we shouldn’t presume they are. I promised to protect Naruto, and right now, that means making sure all of you get back to him and the village safely. We’re far enough away to the point where, if there’s a conflict, we won’t be getting any help. If nothing else, we should either push them back and meet them farther, or meet them closer and hope for backup. But more than that...” Ekyt’s eyes looked even more dark than usual. “...More than that, your information needs to reach the Leaf. And I have my orders...please go back to the village. Orders of Lady Tsunade.”

Ekyt handed Jiraiya a scroll signed by Tsunade, ordering them to do just what Ekyt said- “At the first sight of Akatsuki presence, return to the Hidden Leaf to watch Naruto. Ekyt will act as a barrier.”

No one liked those orders. But Ekyt wasn’t going to hear otherwise.

“I knew the risks when I took the mission to help Naruto. Of all of us, I’m the most expendable, and that’s why I’m here. Naruto is the priority. And you as well, Master Jiraiya- You’re the only one with a hope of handling recon. Yamato-sensei, you’re the only one who can seal the demon. And Kakashi-sensei- you can match the Sharingan. Naruto needs all that.”

There was silence- everyone knew what Ekyt meant, but none were willing to acknowledge it. But orders

were orders...

"We'll send you back up..." Jiraiya said finally. "You've probably got more balls than brains for this, but at the same time...you and Naruto have the purest hearts of anyone I've known."

"They won't launch a full-scale assault. And even if they capture me, I can't be tortured into saying what I don't know..." Ekyt stared at the direction the enemies were coming from, an intense look on his face. Kakashi found himself looking at a young man who'd been forced to grow up early and fast, and was that much stronger for it.

The logic of what he's saying is flawless...he's thought this out privately. If he had told one of us sooner, we would have shot him down...but there's one question...

"Why did you swear to protect Naruto?" Kakashi asked, while Yamato hid the scroll in a wood clone of himself that would be traveling with them. But even the distracted Yamato turned an ear toward Ekyt to hear this.

"Because I want to see him achieve his goals. To be honest, I really don't believe I'll achieve my own. So maybe...maybe I'm living through Naruto. As the years have gone by, I've wanted to become Hokage myself. And you all know how I feel about Sakura. If I can't have my dreams, I want someone I trust to have them. And that's Naruto. Besides that, he's shown me a kinship that almost no one else has extended me. That's why I took that oath."

Somehow, that both surprised and didn't surprise those present.

"I see..." Yamato said quietly, wondering who someone so young choose freely to give up like that.

"I'll make new dreams. Right now, though, I want to see my old ones closer to being fulfilled..." Ekyt strained his ears, hearing a distant rustling of leaves. "Hurry. They're almost here. It's show time. And whatever you do...don't tell Naruto what I said. His damn conscience is as bad as my own. Don't even tell Lady Tsunade...I can't allow myself to be talked out of this. Now, hurry, please. I'll give you a little cover."

Ekyt made handsigns, then raised his leg high in the air.

"Flama Succendo!"

FWOOM! The leaves and small trees lit on fire, creating a wreath of fire in the direction of the Akatsuki. After patting Ekyt on the shoulder, the others left. Ekyt stood still pulling a bone from his shoulder.

Forgive me for forging that scroll...but I can't let this be jeperadized.

--

Jiraiya, Yamato, and Kakashi reached Tsunade office.

"What's with these orders, Tsunade? It's not like you to ask a kid to commit suicide like that..." Jiraiya

laid the scroll out. Immediately, Tsunade's eyes lit up. She pounded her desk, cracking it in two.

"DAMN HIM! I DIDN'T ORDER THAT! HE FORGED IT!" Tsunade snarled. "I'M GOING TO STOP HIM MYSELF!"

Jiraiya held up a hand. "Wait...what he said was absolutely right, like it or not. He IS expendable compared to us. There's no choice- we can send back-up, but we need to let him handle this."

Kakashi and Yamato, with Ekyt's words fresh in their heads, agreed. Both because Ekyt was right, and because they couldn't bear to stooge him off. Tsunade could see the reasoning, but that didn't mean she would like it. She paced around her office angrily. She couldn't afford to leave Naruto defenseless with the Akatsuki so close- their first attack could just be a diversion, while someone else made a beeline for Naruto. With her resources spread so thin...

"I'll send him backup. You three, go guard Naruto and his team. Tell them it's a training exercise, but DO NOT tell them what's happening. Naruto and Sakura would run off to help Ekyt, and that's just putting him in the jaws of the lion." Tsunade didn't say anymore, she just went to work and sent for backup.

--

Ekyt waited. Only one ninja came through the fire barrier he set up. He was face to face with Kisame again.

"You? What're you doing here? Aw well, I know you well enough to know you're not going to get out of my way..."

"That's right fish-face. I know you're not alone. But it doesn't matter to me, I've got my orders." Ekyt pulled a bone from his shoulder, aiming the point at Kisame. Kisame just laughed.

"Fine! Let's see your skinny little frame deal with Samehada!" Kisame aimed to end the fight in one blow. Ekyt blocked the strike with the bone. Kisame voiced his surprise that the bone didn't break.

"I don't have full control over my kekkai-genkai, but I DO know how to control the density of this particular bone. It matches your Samehada. Now, if you're here for a match, let's get down to it. If you're just here to waste my time and pretend I'm gonna be easy to deal with, you're sorely mistaken. Camelia Dance!"

Ekyt took the offensive, stabbing at a high speed. The sheer size of Kisame's sword made it impossible to move rapidly, but that same size blocked most of Kisame's body. Ekyt wasn't making the mistake of messing around- he was aiming for the kill now.

"Not bad, kid! You've gotten better since the last time we tangled! But it doesn't matter. I'm S-ranked, and you're a scruffy chunin! Good luck keeping up with me."

Ekyt kept attacking with the bone, driving Kisame back. Then, surprisingly, he put that jutsu on hold to use his Flama Succendo again, forcing Kisame to jump.

“What the hell? What kind of attack?!” Kisame made the mistake of looking down at the jutsu, instead of watching Ekyt. Ekyt had since joined him in the air. He stabbed down, but Kisame blocked just in time with the side of his sword. Ekyt’s bone passed through the sword, allowing Ekyt to yank it out of Kisame’s hands. He knew it could return to Kisame at any time, but those few seconds might be all he needed. With the flames still going on below, Ekyt moved in for close combat with Kisame. Putting an arm around his neck, then stepping forward so that his leg was behind Kisame’s, he threw the giant blue Shinobi. Using the step for momentum, Ekyt planted a two-footed kick to Kisame’s chest. Kisame’s chest was thick, so Ekyt didn’t stomp on Kisame’s heart like he had hoped, He DID drive him into the ground hard, and right into the flames. Ekyt landed gracefully and jumped away.

Kisame sat up. “Y’know, that stung a little, brat.” Kisame held out his hand, Samehada returning to him instantly. “But you don’t fight fire with fire, you fight fire with water.”

Ekyt didn’t hear the name of the jutsu, but there was suddenly a good-sized body of water below him. He focused chakra to his feet to stay on top of it, looking for Kisame, who was standing opposite him.

“We’ll just see how the “Dragon Boy” handles water! Water Style: Water Clone Jutsu!” Four Kisame’s popped up. Ekyt was outnumbered, but good. He had heard what jutsu would come next from Gai’s report: Either he would be trapped in a sphere of water, or sharks would be underneath him, aiming to eat him at Kisame’s command.

Water eliminates most of my fire attacks...genjutsu...his mind is very strong, and he has lots of chakra. Plus, he’s not alone. But one jutsu can save me here...the question is, will I have enough chakra to keep fighting? Especially if he throws it off. Plus, I’ll need a distraction first. Best to show him a trick I didn’t have before, force him to keep guessing. No summoning, not for Kisame. But maybe I can...My Dragon Trio combo would work, but it’ll drain me. It’s not an options right now. Besides, the first of the trio would just give him more water to work with. So that leaves...

“Water Style: Water Clone Jutsu!”

Ekyt could only manage two clones- he had to conserve his chakra. He was a delay tactic, and that meant stretching the fight out as long as possible. Now, using those water clones to his advantage...perfect.

“Sickle Moon Dance!” Ekyt barked. His bone-toting clones began to move around Kisame quickly. Kisame had seen this trick before. He had to dodge quickly, until Ekyt came in from above to cut him up. So Kisame dodged and dodged, finally seeing Ekyt come from above.

“GOTCHA!” Kisame declared, swinging his sword around him, destroying the water clones, then spearing upward, catching Ekyt on top of his sword. POOF!

“What? Shadow Clone?! And my chakra is with those water clones...but still, he’s outnumbered...”

Ekyt made his move. “One genjutsu I’ll bet Itachi never performed for you! Bringer of Darkness!”

Kisame's eyes couldn't see anymore. He was trapped in a world with no light. He could hear, but that didn't mean anything- his water clones were attacking, so of course there would be noise.

But that's what Ekyt was counting on. Ekyt blazed in with his bone in his hand. He reared back and cut at Kisame's neck.

CLUNK!

Ekyt's strike had been blocked.

47 - Surprise! The Akatsuki's Plan Revealed!

“Now that’s not like you, un? Going for the kill?”

Ekyt knew Deidara, but this was new- a wooden arm? No...it was a puppet arm. Ekyt noticed the strange number of joints, and the awkward, clicking sound it made when it moved. Somehow, it was horribly unnerving to see and hear this.

“Of course...Sasori’s puppets...you gave yourself an arm...huh!” Ekyt pulled his bone free and leapt away. Kunai flew from Deidara’s puppet arm, proving that appendage to be just as dangerous as every other puppet Ekyt had faced. He had come close to death many times because of puppets. But fighting them so many times gave him an idea of how to counter that arm. Unfortunately, this thought process forced Ekyt to forget Kisame, who took full advantage and swung at Ekyt. He couldn’t see Ekyt, since he was still trapped in the ‘Bringer of Darkness’ Jutsu, but he could hear just fine. Ekyt could only partially block with his bone as the sword bit into his skin. The blocking gave Deidara an opening, and he reared back to punch with his puppet arm. Ekyt was caught full in the face, the impact knocking him off his feet and sending him skidding across the ground. He pushed himself to his feet, deciding he had to ruin that pesty appendage of Deidara’s before Kisame broke the genjutsu. Deidara had other ideas. Ones that went ‘bang’.

Three little clay birds darted towards Ekyt. These were designed to home in on him. For once, Ekyt wasn’t holding back with killing, so he could make a more gutsy move than usual. Reaching into his tool pouch, he grabbed a paper bomb and darted straight toward Deidara.

C’mon...Yes! Ekyt cheered inwardly when Deidara’s puppet arm reached out to grab him. With the three birds behind him, Ekyt slapped the bomb onto Deidara’s arm. Immediately, it began to sizzle. Deidara turned to look, and his face turned white. He saw Ekyt’s plan.

He’s going to use that explosion to destroy my arm! Then my clay pigeons will follow him, while he hides behind me. They’ll take the straightest path to him- through me, and right into the flames. They’ll detonate, and he’ll have me done for. I’ve got no choice- I’ve got to save myself first.

“Katsu!” Deidara detonated his clay birds well away from himself and Ekyt. Quickly, he drove his arm into the ground, so the paper bomb would, at most, destroy his arm. He could always get another. But he found his arm was detached. Ekyt’s paper bomb had been a great diversion while he cut Deidara’s arm off. It had dropped to the ground just as the bomb reached it’s end, and Ekyt was a safe distance away.

BWOOOMMMM!

Ekyt couldn’t see through the smoke, but he was sure he had just killed one, if not both of the Akatsuki members. He felt a pang of guilt, but pushed it aside- Ekyt himself had told Orochimaru once ‘don’t believe I’m gone until you’ve made darn sure I’ve got no pulse.’ That in mind, Ekyt waited, trying to

sense something. When three more little birds screamed out of the smoke straight at him, he knew that the artist of the Akatsuki had survived. He wasn't sure HOW he had, but Deidara was alive, and his birds were looking for Ekyt. Without hesitation (thought Ekyt DID wonder why he was suddenly so sure about killing people- maybe the Akatsuki were just so bad they bypassed his conscience?), Ekyt threw three shuriken. Deciding not to stop there, he called out 'Multi Shuriken Shadow Clones!' The three became sixty and took out the birds, and kept right on going through the mist. Ekyt heard some small sounds, but his ears were still ringing from the explosion, so he wasn't sure what he was hearing. As the smoke cleared, Ekyt looked, disbelieving- Deidara and Kisame were largely unharmed.

"You gotta be kidding..." Ekyt muttered. Deidara had managed to create his giant clay bird, which absorbed the Shuriken. Kisame could hear them whizzing through the air and managed to dodge and knock down almost all of them. A few nicked him, but there were no critical hits.

"You've gotten strong, un!" Deidara stepped on top of his bird, smiling like the cat who swallowed the canary. "I think he deserves to learn something from all this before he dies, un?"

Kisame agreed. "You hit me with just enough Shuriken to end your own genjutsu. A rookie mistake for someone like you, but still impress you tried to kill us. You never had the guts to try before. So you DO deserve to know something special. You wanna tell him?"

Kisame nodded toward the direction he and Deidara had come. Ekyt cursed, realizing that he was talking about the third member. If Kisame was here, then it was likely...

"Our target isn't Naruto. Not right anyway."

Ekyt froze, knowing right there it was over. He couldn't match three S-ranked criminals by himself. On the other hand, Ekyt knew that Kakashi and the others hadn't been followed, so he had done his job. Detaining the enemy was hard enough, but Ekyt couldn't appreciate it, especially with Itachi Uchiha in attendance now.

"Then who are you after? I know you don't pay social calls..." Ekyt looked from one enemy to the other, not looking Itachi in the eyes. That was a fight ender itself.

"We all decided that you're the problem. You seem to have luck against us. Or skill, maybe. Either way, you're in our way, so now that we've got you alone, we're going to kill you." Itachi unbuttoned his cloak- stealth was no longer necessary.

Ekyt stood his ground, staring down the three from a short distance. No way out of this one.

"I guess I should be flattered I'm important enough to dispatch three members for. But if you're thinking I'll hand my life over to you freely, you're very wrong," Ekyt said, almost cheerfully. "I'm not going down without a fight. No shame in losing to a three on one gang-up, but that doesn't mean it's okay to surrender...it's just not in my blood."

Three...Deidara, artist, explosives...Kisame, swordsman, water...Itachi, murderer, genjutsu...they compliment each other perfectly. Itachi is a long or short range fighter, Kisame is a mid-range fighter, and Deidara is a mid-long range fighter. If I run for it, I'll get gunned down by Itachi easy. If I stay...well, I've got a shot of doing damage before they kill...guess I know what I'm going to

do.

“Defend yourself.”

Ekyt was rushed by all three, each of them using their own type of attacks. Ekyt used a ‘Dragon’s Fire Wall’ to take care of Deidara and Kisame’s attacks, and quickly dispelled the genjutsu Itachi was using. Ekyt made handsigns, and used his signature ‘Dragon’s Ember Jutsu’. He found it blocked by Itachi’s fire attack- he had copied Ekyt’s handsigns. That gave Ekyt an idea. Jumping away, Ekyt threw two smokebombs down as he pulled his vest off. Then he made hand signs, his arms hidden by the vest.

“Flamma Succendo!” Ekyt landed and stomped the ground, kicking a jet of flames toward the three Akatsuki members. He heard curses from Deidara and Kisame. When the same jutsu didn’t hit him, Ekyt smirked a little.

Between the smoke and the vest, Itachi couldn’t use his Sharingan to see my handsigns and copy my movements. I’ve got to keep that up, and isolate these guys. I can’t beat them three on one, but one on one...it’s a long shot, but I’ve got a chance that way.

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“Did he really block your Sharingan, Itachi?” Kisame coughed, cursing the smoke and the flames both.

“No...but letting him believe so is advantageous for us. If he keeps his hands like that, he’s less apt to defend himself. His chakra won’t hold out forever, and it’s certain that the three of us have larger chakra pools to draw from. He’ll tire himself out, then be forced to use taijutsu. At that range, he’ll be easy prey for Samehada, bombs, or, if I’m forced- Amaterasu.”

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“I thought the two of you might want some revenge. After all, they’ve caused problems for you. And it’s a good chance to get even. Not to mention save a life...I believe you both lose something if this one is killed.”

Tsunade spread her hands on her desk, looking at the two recruits. Well, three.

“And what would my role be?” the third one asked, knowing he wasn’t included in the main mission.

“Get Ekyt out of there, even if you have to sedate him. The chances of him being injured are very high, and the chance of death is higher. Both chances grow with each passing second. So, to all of you- can I be assured of your help?”

“Absolutely!”

“Yes!”

“...Agreed.”

Tsunade gave a small nod. "Alright then. Kakashi tracking dog is waiting outside the door. He'll guide you to Ekyt. If he can't, it won't be hard to miss him if he's really tangling with the Akatsuki."

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Ekyt skidded backward, having been punched hard by Kisame's giant blue hand.

Damn, I got too confident! I should have known a Sharingan as developed as Itachi's could read my elbow movement and match a handsign to it! I'd better think quick...Reaper Death Seal? No, Itachi could throw it off, Kisame's chakra pool is too large, and Deidara's explosives would kill us both before the jutsu could be finished at such a range. Taijutsu is out, but if I keep using chakra like this, it'll be my only option. Worst of all, I can't even look up, because if I do, Itachi has me with his Mangekyo Sharingan...this is bad. If I had someone backing me up to break Itachi's genjutsu, I'd be fine...well, at least for a couple minutes. I could give my dual explosions trick a try...create a gap in the landscape. What would that do? Unless I delay the second attack as long as I can...that's the best move I've got, and it uses almost no chakra...here we go!

Ekyt threw explosive tags attached to kunai as he skidded. They landed near the Akatsuki. Ekyt detonated them, knowing he didn't get the Akatsuki. But he felt it in the air- it was full of the agent that made explosive tags explosives.

"Bad move, un! You just leveled the playing field in my favor! Explosives are my game!" Deidara started to form his birds.

"You think so? Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt's fire couldn't hurt him, but the subsequent explosion could.

"Oh man, this kid's clever! But not clever enough!" Kisame leapt straight toward the flames, his sword in front of him. Samehada could 'eat' chakra- Ekyt hadn't counted on Kisame making a move like that. But there was still one more move he could make. Ekyt took the chakra cigarette out of his mouth and flicked it at Kisame. Kisame was busy fighting with the Dragon's Ember Jutsu, so he didn't notice the cigarette arching through the air and landing right at his feet.

"Kisame, move!" Itachi ordered. Kisame turned to him, not seeing why Itachi had told him to move. Just the pause Ekyt needed.

FWOOOF!

A second explosion that was more like a wave of fire erupted. Ekyt thought of using a water wall to protect himself, but Itachi would only copy his handsigns. Instead, Ekyt took off, running up a tall tree that could withstand the explosion. From there, Ekyt saw that Itachi and Kisame had somehow dodged the explosion. But where was Dei- up!

Ekyt jumped down a branch just as a hand snagged his vest. He shrugged out of it, tugging a couple scrolls free on the way down. Deidara threw the vest back at him just as Kisame hit the tree with his sword hard enough to knock it over. Ekyt fell off the tree, landing hard in a heap.

Move! Damnit! Move! He urged himself. Kisame and Itachi were casually walking over, while Ekyt was fighting with a concussion. **I have maybe one move left...but what can I do? From where I am...one last move.**

“Thorn Rose Dance!” Ekyt slurred, rolling over and yanking out part of his spine, using his Kaguya heritage to his advantage. His spine was long and sectioned, making it a whip with the ability to cut as well as crack. Laying prone on the ground, Ekyt cracked his whip, first at Itachi and Kisame, then, surprisingly, up at Deidara. He managed to hit Deidara, unseating him from his perch. If the impact had killed him, it would have worked to Ekyt’s favor. But instead, Ekyt was now facing three largely unharmed Akatsuki enemies, and he was injured. His last gamble hadn’t paid off. All he could do now was crack the whip and keep them away while trying to regain his bearings. He couldn’t stand- his concussion was severe. Severe enough to cause him to feel nauseous, see spots, and even have the ground spin. Fighting against the Akatsuki like that...

“It’s over...” Ekyt whispered to himself. Kisame’s sword was suddenly in his view.

“So this is how it ends...I did my best, Naruto. All of you...sorry I couldn’t do more.”

The fight was gone from Ekyt. Samehada had it’s next victim lined up.

48 - Akatsuki Aftermath

The Samehada arched down. Ekyt knew it was futile, but he put his arms up anyway. His death was going to be torturous anyway. If Ekyt could grab it, he was going to clutch that Samehada into his body until Rigor Mortis set in. Maybe someone would kill Kisame in those few moment where he would be mostly defenseless. CRACK!

At the last second, Ekyt threw the bone he had taken from his spine up in a block. He couldn't hold of Kisame's strike, but he made the blow a glancing one. The slight deflection coupled with the weight of Kisame's sword knocked Kisame off-balance, giving Ekyt enough time to scramble to his feet and aim a chakra-filled punch at Kisame's jaw. At the same time, Kisame's massive blue fist was aiming for Ekyt stomach. Both strikes hit home, causing devastating results.

Kisame flew backward after being hit square in the chin. He felt his jaw break, then his back ache as he landed on the ground ten feet away. **The little bastard baited me! He let me in close. His chakra must be too low for anything but taijutsu then...**

Ekyt got knocked up high and backward, but landed on his feet, a small cough revealing blood on the ground. He wasn't any less hurt that he looked, but a last-minute will to live instinct had kicked in. **I can barely stand up. Still, that was some kind of damage. He didn't get right up. Kisame has a temper, so he'll come rushing back in right away. I'm too off balance to move...so how do I take away his mobility advantage? Especially in close. His skin is just like the skin on his sword- a kunai won't do it. But that trick I used against the Mist-nin might. It'll cost all my chakra, but there's no choice now.**

Ekyt sank to one knee, forming a shadow clone. He focused his chakra to it, then used a weak chakra scalpel himself, so his clone could follow suit. The clone did. Ekyt had a concussion, but as long as he could maintain a Chakra Scalpel, his clone could, too. Ekyt had also put extra chakra toward the clone, allowing it to use basic speed moves. Even so, this move was a gamble. The clone had most of Ekyt's chakra, leaving Ekyt himself without much of a defense- Something Deidara was quick to take advantage of. He let his birds loose, zipping toward Ekyt's defenseless sides. Ekyt simply cut the birds down with his Chakra Scalpel, but his equilibrium was long gone, so every move he made threatened to topple him over.

Meanwhile, his clone was buzzing around, cutting at Kisame at a close range, away from his sword's most dangerous points, in close near the hilt. Kisame was big, but that didn't mean he wasn't quick at the same time. The clone was running low on chakra, since his real counterpart was using chakra from the same pool. Finally, the clone tried for one last strike. He managed to hit one knuckle on Kisame's ring hand. Something flew towards Ekyt at that same moment. He caught it and hid hit, before his clone was destroyed and he was alone. And soon, he was approached by an angry Kisame. Even sooner, Ekyt felt himself getting hit from all directions. He couldn't dodge anymore, and jutsus were out. All he could do was aim for tendons with a weak chakra scalpel. Finally, his chakra was gone, and only a measure of stamina remained.

“NOW I’m going to kill you. Put an arm up again and I’ll make it slow and painful!” Kisame raised his sword once more, using his non-injured hand to hold it.

“I DON’T THINK SO!” shouted a familiar voice.

“I am with you, Gai-sensei!” came another.

“Dual Dynamic Entry!” the voices said together. Two sets of leg-warmer covered legs, attached to spandex covered bodies sailed over Ekyt and into Kisame. Ekyt couldn’t believe that, but what happened next was even more unbelievable. It was so fantastic that Ekyt was SURE he had to be hallucinating. But it was no hallucination, it was as real as it gets. Ekyt knew that much as he felt sand cradle his body, gently dragging it backward, away from the battle.

“...you’re hurt. It was foolish to take those three on by yourself. This battle is over for you.”

Those ‘comforting’ words came from Gaara. Ekyt couldn’t figure out why Gaara would be here. The last he knew, they barely tolerated each other. Ekyt’s eye had been destroyed by Gaara, and it would take two years to repair it. Ekyt had fought him again and tortured his mind. After that, they had buried the hatchet. But it was a bit much for the Sand’s Kazekage to come and save him, Ekyt thought.

“Lee...take him and go. These fools don’t have enough chakra to do anything else. We can handle it.”

Ekyt tried to get up off the sand, but he fell back down. Part of that was Gaara making him stay put, the other was his concussion telling him he was down for the count. But Itachi was such a threat to any of them- all of them. The other two Gai and Gaara could handle, but that third member was a problem. It would take someone as skilled as Orochimaru to even stand up to him long enough to wear him down. Ekyt voiced that opinion aloud. But the voice that answered wasn’t any of the people that he had noted were here. Instead, he heard the voice of his cousin, Kimimaro.

“I’ll be his opponent. That much, at least, will repay my debt to you from rescuing me from myself.”

Ekyt wanted to protest, but he knew he was just a liability at this point. Instead, he sighed and said “Avoid his eyes. If he calls out ‘Amaterasu’, get out of there.”

Lee hefted Ekyt onto his back. He turned his head slightly as he took off for the treetops.

“Do not worry. They can handle it. ...I must admit, I am jealous of you.”

Ekyt managed to slur “Jealous? Fowha?” (Jeaouls? For what?)

Lee smiled a little forlornly. “I could not have lasted so long against anyone as strong. I am sure that you are stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

Ekyt perked up enough to reply one more time. “Likewise, Lee. And if I’m strong, and you’ve beaten me in every sparring match we’ve had for four years, doesn’t that make YOU the strongest?”

Lee smiled even wider, running faster as thought to prove what Ekyt just said. But in his mind there was one more feeling.

Please return to strength, and quickly. I wish to spar you once more. I do not wish for you to end up as I did when I faced Gaara.

The wounds on Ekyt's head worried Lee the most. He had been ordered to bring Ekyt straight to Lady Tsunade. Today was the day that Team Kakashi was away, so Sakura and Naruto wouldn't go looking for vengeance on whoever did this to their friend, which is exactly why things were planned this way. But no one had accounted for Ekyt living up to a seemingly casual oath so strongly.

I suppose we should not be surprised. It would be unlike Ekyt to do something half way.

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Kimimaro squared off against Itachi. Kimimaro had HEARD Ekyt's warnings about Itachi's eyes, but he wanted to feel for himself what Itachi could do. Or so it seemed. In reality, Kimimaro had an advantage that most didn't have when they faced Itachi: A warning, and backup. That, and a plan. Orochimaru had told him a lot about Itachi.

"You were one who could best Orochimaru. I've never enjoyed fighting, but I feel as though I can look forward to fighting you." Kimimaro pulled a bone from his shoulder, aiming it aggressively at Itachi. That's when he put his plan into action. Nodding slightly, he stared Itachi in the eyes...

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Kisame groaned. "This idiot again?!"

Gai stood across from him, a hand on his chin. "I feel as though I've met you before..." (Note: Gai HAS met Kisame before, two times, and has forgotten his name both times)

"I remember you just fine," Kisame said, barring his shark-like teeth. "Maito Gai. To me, you're just mighty stupid looking guy."

Gai rubbed the back of his head. "You know, that insult sounds familiar as well. But I can't quite place you..."

Kisame rushed Gai, his sword next to him, gaining momentum. Gai reached into his leg warmers and extracted a pair of nunchaku, blocking Kisame's sideways strike. The two men strained with the effort. Kisame was getting closer to Gai's body, even as Gai was putting his full effort behind blocking. Dodging was out- it left him wide open. That sword was long enough to catch him if he leapt. But Gai was far from out of options.

"I don't remember your name, but I DO remember that giant sword of yours. And I remember exactly how to counter it!"

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Gaara and Deidara stared each other down.

"You're still alive, un? Too bad. You came all this way just to die!"

Gaara stared back, his expression unchanging, his body unflinching. "The last time I took your arm. This time I'll take your head."

Deidara reached into his clay pouch, finding himself to have only a little left. **Deja vu, un? This happened last time. Was this the plan? To weaken the three of us, then wait for the calvary to arrive? Itachi and Kisame will be fine with their pools of chakra. I'm almost out of clay, and I lost my puppet arm. This is gonna be difficult.**

Gaara had brought along his old gourd of Sand just for this trip. Without the Shukaku, the sand didn't automatically defend Gaara anymore. But without the Shukaku, Gaara could also think more clearly and more efficiently. That, and even without the Shukaku, Gaara could control sand just fine.

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Lee propped Ekyt up against the wall as he went in to make sure Lady Tsunade was alone. Ekyt did his best to stay upright. At least he THOUGHT he was upright- things were spinning pretty good now. Ekyt forced his hand to find his tool pouch. He lit a chakra cigarette and put it in his mouth. It took him a couple tries, and he nearly took out his own eye.

He was a mess. There was little blood despite the beating, but his body was resembling one giant bruise. Plus the concussion. The Akatsuki were clearly going for a clean kill. **If they weren't, they could have just diced me up. Probably counting on Itachi's Tsukuyomi to do me in. That would be bloodless. No evidence, no retaliation.**

Lee came back out, picking Ekyt up once more. He placed him on a blue padded hospital bed. This was familiar to Ekyt now, so he didn't panic. At least not until they tried to take his cigarette. One thing Ekyt had learned over the years was to make sure you had chakra, or at least have a way to GET chakra. At first, he gently said 'no', then forcefully kicked the well-meaning medic's hand away.

"Leave it, please," he said as calmly as possible, despite having every intention of biting fingers off if that person tried to take his chakra cigarette again.

"Leave it alone, it won't hurt him," came the forceful (yet concerned) voice of Lady Tsunade. She immediately went to work, lifting Ekyt's eyelids, taking blood, healing cuts, and asking questions.

"Concussion...minor, thankfully. It's worse than it seems with the accompanying bruises...no broken bones, just like I thought. No major internal injuries, save for four broken ribs...bruised kidney..." Tsunade gently probed Ekyt's body. He flinched, which was apparently a good thing.

"Alright, he's stable. Everyone out, he needs his rest. I'll be keeping an eye on him personally."

Everyone filed out quietly. Lee wished Ekyt well as he left the room, shutting the door behind him. Tsunade and Ekyt were alone.

"...I never would have sent you on that mission if I had known you'd do this..." Tsunade murmured. "Why? Just tell me 'why'. I want to hear it from you." Tsunade had already heard from Kakashi,

Yamato, and Jiraiya. They would be coming shortly.

“Before I launch into that,” Ekyt began, sitting up as he was feeling much better, thanks to whatever medicine had been pumped into him. “You need to hear this. Before I tell you, please M'lady, promise me this won't change anything.” Ekyt looked Tsunade in the eyes.

“I can't promise you that. I CAN promise that I'll trust your jurisdiction as much as possible,” Tsunade answered, taking the diplomatic route. That was apparently good enough for Ekyt.

“They were aiming for me this time.”

Tsunade shook her head, disbelieving. “For you? Why? It doesn't make any sense...”

Ekyt nodded, then wished he hadn't as everything hurt. “I didn't think so either. But consider this: Every time I fight the Akatsuki, I survive. No matter what it is- Itachi's Tsukuyomi, Deidara's bombs, Kisame's sword...somehow, I survive. Itachi has been in charge nearly every time. Given that I'm nothing special, and yet I survive, there are two possibilities:

One: I AM special, and I'm unaware of it. Unlikely, that would have shown through by now.

Two: I've been being kept alive. Hard to believe, but I've escaped every time. Even today, my injuries were minor, especially compared to what the Akatsuki usually do.”

Tsunade really had to think that over. Truthfully, neither option seemed to be realistic.

“Maybe there's a third option. No offense, but Shinobi stronger than you have been killed by ONE member, let alone three...”

Ekyt closed his eyes. “It's possible that they know you and I were at odds, and that they're testing my strength. They know I'm close to Naruto, so if they get me in their fold, they have a clearer path. I'd know who was probing them, where Naruto was, who he was with...that makes sense.”

Tsunade cringed inside. Ekyt knew that was coming and put her mind to rest.

“I'm not going to join them. Not if they ask, not if they force me. I gave you, Master Jiraiya, and the others a blood oath. If I was going to go back on it, I would have before they beat the hell out of me today. I'm not. And I also ask you to please let me keep helping. I'm now as much at risk as the others involved in protecting Naruto. You don't have to include me in the meetings, I know you can't trust me that much with the Akatsuki buzzing around. But please don't take me off this case. Naruto's the closest to living my dreams out, and that's what I really want.”

Tsunade put a hand on Ekyt's head. “You're a good kid. Just do me a favor and start forming some new dreams- if you're okay with giving up on your old ones. If your dreams stopped with getting a chunin vest...well, you need a new focus. Think about it.”

49 - Strength from Within

The second Tsunade left, Ekyt kicked the covers off him, yanked out the IV's, and put his vest back on. The hell with orders- he had a fight to finish.

"Going somewhere?" Tsunade asked, undoing her transformation jutsu. She had been waiting for Ekyt to do something like this. Ekyt looked at her, slightly panicked. Then he bolted for the window, just making it past Tsunade's outstretched hand.

Tsunade retracted her hand. **I knew he would do this...I healed him so he could. This assault on the Akatsuki should be enough to drive them back, But that means changes for Ekyt. ANBU training beyond interrogation and torture, for starters. I'll have to think this through. At least I won't be without a trainer...**

Tsunade took the opportunity to check on her other patient. Walking down the hall, Shizune falling into step behind her at some point, Tsunade slid open the door to Hayate Gekko's room. He was sitting up, his oxygen mask off, his breathing stable. Next to him was his purple-haired fiancé Yukao Uzuki. Yukao stood up as Tsunade entered the room, bowing crisply.

"How are you today, Hayate?" Tsunade asked amiably, using her chakra to check his breathing. Stable; same as his internal functions. His body was almost fully recovered from that illness.

"I'm fine, My Lady (koff)," Hayate replied, sounding upbeat- or as upbeat as Hayate ever got.

"Very good. If I may borrow Yukao for a moment, I'll be right back with your blood test results." Tsunade looked purposely toward Yukao, who nodded vaguely and got up to follow the Fifth Hokage.

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"Is all well, M'Lady?" Yukao asked. Without her ANBU mask, she was a decidedly pretty young female of roughly 25. With long purple hair and a good figure, she was a standout in ANBU. She possessed an ability to think ahead that many other agents just didn't have. It wasn't something you could teach.

"I'm afraid not. Yukao, I'm about to reveal the blackest secret in the village to you. But I need your assurance that you will NOT tell anyone- Hayate will be told, rest assured. But right now, I need to know I can trust you." Tsunade looked at Yukao through her bangs, hands folded in front of her.

"Of course, my lady. Anything you ask." Yukao wondered what this was all about. She thought she already knew the blackest secrets in the village.

"I need your help. You're familiar with Ekyt Kaguya..."

"Yes, My Lady. I owe him a great deal. He is like a little brother to me." Yukao recalled how Ekyt had let himself be taken prisoner so that she could go free. He had been the one who had given her the ring

from Hayate, back when it was believed he was dead.

“In that case...I need you to instruct him in ANBU. I know it’s unheard of for someone like this, with such a history...but he’s taken a sacred oath to protect someone. No matter how much he studies, he still studies alone- the amount you can learn from that is limited. For his own sake, and the sake of his promise, I need him to become stronger. He’s pushed himself so hard, but I can’t ask more of the person he’s protecting- that one has already been instructed by someone else. But if they’re both to survive...I need your help.”

Yukao gave a grave nod. “Am I to assume these meetings will be in secret?”

“Yes. The utmost secrecy. The only other in ANBU you may consult is Ibikki Morino- he is already familiar with Ekyt.”

“That would explain his genjutsu...When will this training begin?” Yukao asked, wanting to talk to Hayate.

“If he survives...whenever he’s medically cleared to do so.”

“Is he still fighting the same disease as Hayate?” Yukao question, surprised to hear Ekyt was in poor health. Tsunade shook her head.

“If only. No, he’s affected by the plague that you know as the Akatsuki.”

Yukao was shocked, to say the least. “But he’s just a boy! What business could they have with him?!”

Tsunade shrugged. “I’m not sure. From what he says, the Akatsuki think him a threat to their mission. He refuses to let them have their way, so he needs to learn how to protect himself. Let’s leave it at that, because I’ve said too much already. From now on, I want you to be careful as well. Very careful.”

Yukao bowed in understanding. “Very well, my lady. I’ll do my best.”

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Gaara’s sand was driving Deidara back. But like before, Deidara let the sand grab him once. He put explosives in the sand. Gaara was aware of that, and let the sand drop.

“I won’t fall for the same trick twice,” he rasped, glaring impassively at the explosive artist. “I should thank you for relieving me of that demon inside me. My mind is much more clear now. I may have lost chakra as a result, but I’ve learned to do more- much more.” Gaara moved his hands upward. The ground twisted and heaved, lifting Deidara up. The sand cocooned Deidara while Gaara held his hand up.

“Sand Smashing Impact!” Gaara yelled, smashing his hand downward onto the ground. The sand cleared out of the way, leaving a barren, dry ground that would be next to impossible to survive a fall on.

Deidara was hurtled toward the ground head-first. This jutsu was one Gaara created after experiencing

Lee's Primary Lotus attack. It worked the same way, except Gaara didn't have to touch the person- the sand did all the work.

-

Gai and Kisame were exchanging high-speed attacks, bouncing all over the clearing. Kisame was getting frustrated that Gai was simply faster than he was. But he knew that one swing from Samehada could end the threat that Gai posed.

Gai watched Kisame's body, waiting for him to make the right move. He could read physical movement because he had trained himself in the way the body moved. Kisame's sword was heavy. No matter how strong you were, if you kept swinging something heavy for a long time, you would start to tire. And that's what Gai was waiting for. After minutes of swinging that sword, Kisame took one swing at Gai's waist. Gai stepped in and pushed Kisame's arm in the air, knocking him off-balance. That's when Gai took made his move. Taking a strange stance, he yelled his jutsu with his usual passion:

"Asa Kujaku!" (lit translation: Morning Peacock. Eng use- Blazing Kujaku)

An aura began to grow around Gai as he attacked. He had opened six gates of chakra with a practiced ease, so his moves were blurred and all but impossible to block. He and Kisame were both launched into the air where Gai scored a nearly 100 hit combo. Kisame fell to the ground, covered in Gai's aura. Gai fell back down, landing on his feet, but almost immediately falling to one knee- using the gates wore you out- especially six of them.

-

Kimimaro looked around. He found he was tied up. The world had changed into hues of black and red. The clouds above him moved slowly, then even slower, then a little faster.

"You've been trapped in my Tsukuyomi," Itachi informed Kimimaro. Itachi was standing at the foot of a T-shaped block of wood to which Kimimaro was bound. "In this world, I control space and time. You'll be here for seventy-two hours- a split second in your world."

Itachi had a long sword, it's gleaming tip aimed at Kimimaro. "For seventy-two hours, I'm going to stab you with this sword. How long before your mind will crack, I wonder?"

-

Outside Tsukuyomi, Kimimaro and Itachi seemed to just be staring at each other, standing still. Kimimaro was a naturally-talented Shinobi, so he had learned a way to counter this jutsu. But he needed help.

"Wind Scythe Jutsu!" came the shout from Temari. The powerful wind from her fan knocked Itachi into a tree and shook Kimimaro free from the confines of Tsukuyomi.

"I see...I can tell your chakra level has decreased by at least half..." Kimimaro drew a bone from his shoulder, walking toward the downed Itachi. "Well then, I'm going to send you to the afterlife."

“Room for one more?”

Ekyt ran into the clearing, a bone already drawn from his shoulder. Deidara had used his clay bird to escape Gaara’s jutsu, while Kisame’s huge chakra pool saved him from death at the hands of Gai’s devastating attack combo.

The Akatsuki trio were surprised to see Ekyt- he shouldn’t have been well enough to come back.

“We underestimated Tsunade’s healing ability...” Itachi murmured, getting up, apparently unconcerned. “It was a mistake to leave you alive, I see.”

“You bet it was,” Ekyt snarled. “I don’t know why you’re focused on me, but that’s just fine by me. I can call this ‘self-defense’ then...Shall we, Kimimaro?” Ekyt asked, taking up the same position as Kimimaro. Kimimaro gave an amused smile.

“Yes, I think so...”

In unison, Ekyt and Kimimaro shouted: “DUAL CAMELIA DANCE!”

The two began to stab at Itachi in a rapid-fire succession- it took all of Itachi’s skill to dodge the attacks. But even as he was dodging, he was noticing things about the attack.

They share a kekkai-genkai...the one with the white hair is talented...the other not so much. But his timing makes it difficult to dodge. When the white haired one is withdrawing his strike, Ekyt is striking. And vice versa. With the others hurt, and my chakra low from Tsukuyomi...time to withdraw. We’ve already gotten enough information.

As he leapt backward, Itachi told the others to run. “Fire Style: Great Fireball Jutsu!”

The giant ball of fire could hit all the Leaf Shinobi at once. As they scrambled for cover, the Akatsuki made a break for it. They could have pressed their attack, but it was a foolish gamble- their true target wasn’t involved. But it left a bitter taste in the temperamental Kisame and Deidara’s mouths. Itachi took it for what it was- one less way for the enemies to surprise them, more jutsus revealed, and damage done. The Akatsuki were low on chakra. The Leaf Shinobi were injured. That proved that it would take a large force to even contend with the Akatsuki. Information collected, mission accomplished.

--

Ekyt and Gai were both tapped- out of chakra. Kimimaro was okay, but a little disturbed from Tsukuyomi’s effects. Temari was taking care of Kimimaro, which left Gaara to return to Sunagakure. Before he did, Ekyt put a hand on his shoulder. He looked Gaara square in the eyes.

“Thank you. If Naruto knew what you had done for him just now, I know he’d appreciate it. Thanks for the save. Let me know if I can ever return the favor.”

Gaara blinked a little at Ekyt's sudden formality. True, they had buried the hatchet- Ekyt attacked Gaara's mind after Gaara destroyed Ekyt's eye (which was later healed), but all the same...something so friendly was strange. But Gaara wasn't going to question it.

"I'll let you know." With that, Gaara disappeared in a flash of sand and chakra. That left Ekyt to carry Gai, while Temari and Kimimaro took care of themselves. Temari was the only one without an injury. All in all, that was good, considering it was the Akatsuki they were facing, after all.

--

Tsunade was waiting, a staff of nurses with her. "Gai overdid it, he needs to rest...Kimimaro needs a little rest as well...Ekyt...I'll take care of you personally. We have something to discuss."

-

Tsunade and Ekyt sat down. Ekyt waited for the reprimand he knew was coming. He deserved it- he left the hospital and he shouldn't have. But he didn't regret what he did. To his surprise, Tsunade didn't even mention that.

"In two days, Hayate will be getting married. Please don't have yourself killed by then, you're supposed to be his best man. After that, he and Yukao will be working with you. Let me congratulate you on being accepted into ANBU."

50 - Too Much of a Good Thing?

Ekyt listened to Tsunade's sales pitch. It was very good, and equally as tempting. But the years had made Ekyt skeptical. Years of being told 'sorry, no sensei', and suddenly one falls into his lap? It was suspicious.

"It only took near-death for me to get a sensei?" Ekyt said quietly, not meeting Tsunade's eyes. "Is there something I don't know...some reason I was held back until now? Something I haven't been told before?" Ekyt's eyes now looked pleading. "Please tell me. We have a trust between us now. It's not like...before. There's no hunting, there's no chasing, there's no nothing except loyalty." Ekyt felt his head suddenly lighten. He chalked it up to the concussion and kept listening. Tsunade's voice sounded a little...flat. But again, concussion must have been causing that. Ekyt just went with it and listened the best he could.

Tsunade's amber eyes met Ekyt's. "I thought you were a threat. A threat to the very boy you're protecting." Ekyt watched her, but her words didn't quite fit her mouth movements.

Shock reverberated throughout the room. It was deadly silent for a minute or so. Tsunade and Shizune shared a knowing glance. Ekyt sat back, stunned by this admission. The day outside belied the confusion inside; outside was harmonious and peaceful. Inside, dark clouds were gathering. Or so it seemed. The old Ekyt would have been incensed and stomped off; the old Tsunade would have him hunted down. Now that there was a trust, there was only silence.

"Why? What made you think of me as a threat to Naruto?" Ekyt asked, finally prompting Tsunade. Tsunade took a deep breath, releasing it as a heavy sigh.

"Because of how similar you were. Think of it like this: Neither of you are naturally talented. Neither of you had anyone to trust. Both of you had a crush- on the same girl. Both of you aspired to become something better, something greater than you were before, and you both pursued it with an unwavering diligence. Naruto had a demon fox in him- you have inner demons. But you both persevered, even with nearly unequivocal roadblocks before you."

Ekyt shook his head. "That says we're similar, not that I'm a threat to him..."

Tsunade nodded. "I know. But look at this- Naruto chose to overcome his demons by making friends. You isolated yourself from others. But you both kept improving. To the point where, if I had to name one of you as my successor...it would have been tough for me."

Shock again. Tsunade continued, seeing that Ekyt in no shape to ask any questions at this moment. He was letting himself show an awful lot of shock for someone normally so boarded up to emotional impulses.

"You see...Naruto is my sentimental choice, while you were my natural choice. I had others- Kakashi, for one. But Kakashi would never accept this burden- he's too laid back. You and Naruto, on the other

hand, are men of action. Naruto possesses sheer force, and an ability to adapt to any environment or situation. You possess logic and an ability to learn, and then adapt on that. But you had an edge- the people in this village would more readily accept you as their leader than they would Naruto...”

Ekyt felt his mind fuzzing up. He shook his head again, but that didn't do anything except remind him that he still had a concussion. “You could just choose Naruto and put me on the council or something. I mean...damn it...you're lying. You've got to be lying. And...there's something wrong with me!” Ekyt stood up suddenly, his chair clattering to the ground. Tsunade didn't look surprised. Ekyt tried to stay calm, but he was suddenly feeling a pain. But it was like an itch he couldn't scratch. It was the kind of pain that made you wonder if cutting your fingers off with dull kunai would make it feel better. Ekyt was keeping himself in a state of well-controlled near-panic, though he could tell his eyes were darting around freely. His hand kept jerking toward his kunai pouch. There was too much going on. “God...damn it!” Ekyt muttered, swaying on his feet. His first instinct was to pull out a kunai and end the genjutsu, but some instinct told him that if a kunai got in his hands, bad things would happen.

“I had a feeling... a genjutsu dormant in your system. The Akatsuki let you off easily- too easily. No matter how good you are, they've killed stronger Shinobi than you. They didn't get to fully implement their plan, for some reason. Now you've got a genjutsu inside you. Tell me what I said to you just now. Repeat it back.”

Ekyt repeated it. “...But you had an edge- the people in this village would more readily accept you as their leader than Naruto...”

Tsunade cracked Ekyt in the chin, knocking him unconscious. Shizune looked taken aback, immediately dropping down to check Ekyt.

“He'll be fine, I'm just breaking the genjutsu.” Tsunade shook out her hand, looking at Ekyt on the ground. “You heard what I said, right Shizune?”

Shizune nodded. “What Ekyt repeated to you...it was nothing like what you said. You said ‘Your chances for survival are nearly one hundred percent if you don't get involved’...”

Tsunade laid Ekyt on her desk, sweeping it clear of scrolls and papers. “This is Itachi's work. He mixed two genjutsus together- one affected Ekyt's hearing; the other affected Ekyt's ability to act based on what he was hearing. If he had heard what he THOUGHT he heard...”

“...he would have been outraged. He wouldn't have calmly asked why...the Akatsuki meant to use him as a tool. They wanted him to attack us from the inside...” the truth of the situation rapidly dawned on Shizune. “The second genjutsu poked around his brain and found his emotional controls. It removed ‘adrenaline’...”

Tsunade shook her head. “No. They made it so Itachi could regulate the adrenaline. When Ekyt got up, he would have attacked if I hadn't struck immediately. This means they could have used this against Naruto as well...Ekyt only became conscious of the genjutsu at the last second...Naruto might not have noticed at all. And if he didn't, the Akatsuki could, remotely, harness the power of the demon fox. Ekyt was a test subject. The trouble isn't not knowing- it's how we react to this...”

Shizune closed her eyes for a moment. "Sakura is a genjutsu type ninja...Ekyl is as accomplished as anyone who is available right now (Kurenai and Ibiki, both jonin, have better things to do). Have him instruct them both in countering and sensing genjutsus."

Tsunade considered this, but shook her head. "I'll speak with Sakura myself. As for Naruto...Jiraiya tried to teach him genjutsu, or at the least how to break it. If he hasn't picked it up from a legend, Ekyl won't help. Sakura might have a chance to learn...that leads to the problem of keeping the reason for these lessons quiet. I'd have to have a good excuse...Sakura's sharp, she'd pick up on any BS right away."

Ekyl stirred, then sat up, rubbing his jaw. "A 'release' would have done it, M'Lady," he joked.

"Oh, don't whine, I didn't even use a fourth of my power," Tsunade replied. "So, you're awake- how long, and how much have you heard?" Tsunade had resigned herself to the fact that Ekyl had heard enough to have already formed an opinion of the situation himself. He was handy like that- his thoughts immediately turned to the mission.

"Why don't you just tell her the truth? Or, at least, the truth decorated a little bit. Something like 'To combat Itachi Uchiha's genjutsu'. She's not aware of Naruto's situation, but she does know that the Akatsuki are after him. Even throwing in the name 'Uchiha' would have a profound effect on her, I'd bet." Ekyl shook his head, moving his jaw back and forth, making sure Tsunade hadn't done more damage than she intended. He seemed fine, if not a little sore, so he dropped the matter.

"That would make sense. She still feels a little bitter toward Sasuke?" Tsunade seemed surprised to hear this. Ekyl shrugged as if he wasn't sure, no matter what he said.

"If I was in her shoes...I would be bitter. Then again, she's not me. But I still don't think it would hurt. It's something of a honor to be mentioned in a sentence with Itachi. Sakura has a small ego, but maybe playing to her pride a little would help."

Ekyl looked away, trying to pretend he didn't feel violated by that damned genjutsu. "There's a storm coming, isn't there?" Ekyl asked Tsunade. He had asked the Third Hokage the same question, and soon after Orochimaru made his move.

"Yes...there is. The question is what role we will all play." Tsunade looked back at Shizune and Ekyl. "That's why I want you in ANBU. I need you to have that training. Because we're prepared for this war, but we don't have the strength we did against Orochimaru. We have a smaller number of ninjas, and some are too young to fight a war. Especially against an enemy we're not sure of."

"An enemy we know...we just don't know which one. M'Lady, this goes against the grain...but what about a trick? Something easy that will draw our real enemy into the open. We alert our allies to our plan, so they don't get any ideas about pulling a fast one. Our alliances with all but the sand are shaky, at best."

Tsunade sat back. "You have some idea of what's going on...no doubt Sarutobi-sensei had a hand in that. Just what do you plan to do? If I agree, I'll do what I can to help."

"We project weakness. Weakness would lead to a traitor. And we have someone born for the role right

in our village. Sasuke Uchiha would be perfect. To others, it would be a chance to 'prove his strength'- that is, to outsiders. To us, it lays out bait."

"And what is this 'bait'?" Tsunade was genuinely intrigued by this discussion. She had toyed with ideas like this herself, but she couldn't focus on just this one issue. A Hokage had many problems to solve. Doubling as the chief medic-nin didn't help. So a ready-made plan falling into her lap would be perfect.

"You die. Sasuke kills you to prove his strength. Meanwhile, I file in with the Akatsuki and feed them information. Sasuke will draw Orochimaru into the open, and my misinformation to the Akatsuki will keep them at bay. One threat at a time that way. No matter what, only Orochimaru has the manpower to wage a war. The Akatsuki are good, very good, but what they can do is limited to their number. They're too black, they can't recruit conventionally."

Tsunade didn't like the idea, but there wasn't much choice but to consider it. It was a bad plan- it was just very risky to all involved. **Like a gamble...but the stakes aren't ryo, they're lives...**

"Keep your plan in the back of your head. I don't want things to get that desperate. If they do- then we go for it. We roll the dice."

--

"Kakashi-sensei?"

Kakashi looked up from the book he'd been reading for the last hour. He found Naruto approaching. Sighing inwardly with worry, Kakashi put on his game face. Naruto squatted down next to him, looking Kakashi straight in the eye.

"How come I'm different like this?"

Kakashi started to remark about the nine-tailed fox and the village's fear, but Naruto waved that aside.

"No! Why did Pervy Sage teach me so much? And why are we still dealing with the Akatsuki? Even after what they did to Gaara, I want revenge, but it's not like grandma Tsunade to just let that happen- even I know that a pure revenge mission is stupid. So what's this all about, huh?"

Kakashi was backed into a corner now. With typical Kakashi-calm, he said simply:

"Well, we've dealt with the Akatsuki the most. Sasuke and you are both at risk, so it only makes sense to make you guys stronger, right?"

Naruto looked confused, but admitted Kakashi had a point.

"That's why then. They want your demon, and Sasuke will clash with his brother someday. So the question is: why aren't you training?"

Naruto took off, yelling something about getting back to work. Kakashi grinned under his mask, thinking

that some things would never change about his squad of knuckleheaded ninja. That was just fine with him.

--

Hayate was nervous. Normally, his mellow nature never let him show it. But this was different- marriage, as Hayate was learning, was scary as hell.

"Come on, you can do this," Ekyt said coaxingly. "To the village, it's like you've come back from the dead. You can handle marrying the girl you love. All you gotta do is say two words, then plant a kiss on her!"

Hayate gulped again. "(koff) What if she says no?"

Ekyt smirked. "Then you're a free man. No, I'm kidding- she won't say no. She was by your bed every day, she never left your side when she could help it. When we all thought you were dead, and I even mentioned your name, she teared up. Now, it's time. Go tie the knot, you can do it. Just go with it. Once you get out there, you won't even feel a nerve I bet."

-

Hayate was nervous as all hell. **Of course...I ask the boy wonder who's never had a girlfriend for advice. But still...I do love her. Problem solved.**

"I do. (koff)"

"You may kiss the bride."

--

The reception wasn't going to be Ekyt's cup of tea. After pretending he could dance with the maid of honor, Ekyt sought out the bar. He vaguely wondered if his drinking was becoming habitual. To answer his question, he looked around. What greeted his eyes:

Hayate and Yukao
Naruto and Sakura
Sasuke and Ino
Lee and Linda
Yuushi and Kantai
Shizune and Genma
Kimimaro and Temari
Asuma and Kurenai
Neji and Tenten

Ekyt gave a derisive snort toward his own thoughts and reached for the earthenware cup in front of him. He muttered 'kanpai' to himself, then downed the alcohol. He grimaced- it was 'sweet' sake. Still, better than a dose of reality- he was too much of a realist.

“Sensei?”

Ekyt heard Yuushi’s voice, then saw him hop up onto the stool next to him. It was a dark room, so that when you eventually got drunk you didn’t have lights blinding you.

“Something wrong, Yuushi?” Ekyt murmured, downing a second cup. He nodded when the bartender offered him a third refill.

“Well...I was just wondering what an appropriate age is to get married at.”

Ekyt thought for a moment, leaning forward. “Well, I’d say at least eighteen, although personally I wouldn’t think any younger than twenty-one. Why do you ask?” **As if I couldn’t guess...how does this kid with problems coming out the wazoo get his life in order faster than me?**

“I just...well, I really love Kantai. That’s all.” Yuushi knew Ekyt-sensei could smell BS a mile away. But to his surprise, Ekyt didn’t say anything about it, despite having to know where this conversation was headed.

“Love is what matters. Age is irrelevant, I guess. But still, it’s a heavy commitment. Not that I know from personal experience, just guessing based on how nervous Hayate-sensei was. And-”

CRASH! KABOOM!

“C’mon, wassa hell ya wai’in for?! Don’ shtare a’ me wilth those big white eyes! Shtand an’ fight!”

Ekyt got up out of his seat, turning around to find an apparently drunk Lee picking a fight with a sober Neji. **Drunken Fist- uh-oh!**

Ekyt ran over, meeting Gai’s gaze on the way. They both clambered on top of Lee, pinning him to the ground. Tenten forced bread and water down Lee’s throat, while the bartender apologized profusely for her mistake and handed Gai a bottle of Eki-kyabe (sp) for the hangover he was sure to have.

The incident, in retrospect, was perfect for Ekyt. He didn’t see any of the kisses the girls suddenly placed on their guys. It was better that way. Best to deal with drunk Lee now and look forward to his ANBU training.

-

Ekyt wasn’t the only single person in the village. There was another kunoichi, but they were incompatible, that was for certain. For one, this kunoichi had her eyes elsewhere. Unfortunately for her, that boy was taken.

Hinata watched on shyly as Sakura kissed Naruto’s cheek. She burned with a deep lush of a mix of envy and anger. With a sigh, Hinata turned her back on the scene. She hadn’t said anything when Naruto was fair game, so she had lost out, fair and square.

Still...it seems like everyone has a boyfriend or girlfriend these days. I just need to try harder!

51 - Triple Rashomon

Ekyt resisted the urge to drink the fourth cup of sake. That much would have made him drunk for the first time in his life. Passing out would be soon after that. Not that Ekyt would have minded that at this point- it just seemed to be in bad taste to do that when you were the best man at one of your closest friend's weddings.

They really did a number on me...everything aches...damn Akatsuki... Ekyt thought to himself, keeping his face impassive. It was nearly midnight, but this party would go on for three more hours. After that, Hayate and Yukao would have a short honeymoon. Then Ekyt would begin training. Damned if he was going to wait until then. After seeing his life flash before his eyes so many times in the last few days, Ekyt knew what he had thought his strength level was before wasn't as high as he'd hoped.

According to wedding tradition, the bride and groom always left early. Once they did, Ekyt could leave, too. He should have been having a good time, but he knew he had done a good job of at least faking it. Ekyt stood up, when he felt something jingle in his kunai pouch, making a slightly different tone than his kunai. Of course!

The library...Lady Tsunade said to take it easy...so I'll take it easy. I could really use the quiet. Right now, I could use a transformation jutsu and slip out...weddings are so rare that just about everyone in the village is here.

Ekyt's thought process was disrupted.

"No!"

Ekyt swiveled around, instinctively yanking the bar stool between his legs and out in front of him as a weapon. He dropped it, then brought it up quickly as a bottle flew toward him. Old habits died hard.

Neji, apparently drunk, was pestering Hinata. Hinata clearly wanted no part of it, but Neji kept pushing her. No one dared get involved, as Neji was a strong jonin. Seeing this, Ekyt strode over.

"What's the problem?" he demanded. Hinata squeaked and ducked behind Ekyt as Neji took a swing at her. Ekyt, in turn, gave Neji a hard shove just as he threw the punch, so Neji was off-balance.

"You're drunk? Is that all? Pardon me, Hinata, I'm sorry for getting involved." It was clear now that Neji was no threat. He just kept coming back, and Ekyt kept shoving him away. Finally, Ekyt lost his patience and cracked Neji on the chin with a hard right hand. Neji hit the floor. Team Gai swept in and picked him up, nodding silently to Ekyt in thanks. Drunk Lee got fighting prowess- drunk Neji got a big mouth.

"Are you okay?" Ekyt asked matter-of-factly to Hinata. Hinata gave him a tiny smile and thanks, blushing from her own drinks. She hadn't had any sake until tonight, and it was clear she was hit pretty hard by the rice brew. Seconds later, she collapsed, Ekyt moving to catch her.

Through Neji's bleary, drunken eyes, it sure looked like the two were hugging. His consciousness promised to deal with Ekyt later, maybe when he didn't feel so much like yawning in Technicolor.

--

5:00 am.

--

Ekyt entered the library, deep in thought. As such, he forgot the hole in the floor. Typical of Ekyt, he also forgot to focus his chakra in time for the short fall and landed painfully on his side.

"Ugh...that hurt," Ekyt admitted. He remembered where he was and immediately drew a knife- this library was dangerous. The last time he had been here he had been attacked by a HUGE snake, apparently a defense mechanism by Orochimaru. In this dingy basement, there was undoubtedly going to be some kind of trap. Ekyt was ready for it when it hit- three genjutsus.

Three?! I've never thrown off three before! Alright, stay calm, you can do this. First genjutsu: False surroundings-release! (An extra hundred feet of books disappeared) Second genjutsu: Hell viewing- release! (The corpses of half the village disappeared away from Ekyt's feet.) Third Genjutsu: Death Foreseeing-re...re...damn it! I can't do it!

Some genjutsus grew worse the longer you stayed trapped in them. This was one of them. Ekyt saw his death- several times. He felt himself losing control. Releasing the first two genjutsus had weakened him- in order to release a genjutsu, you have to halt chakra flow to your brain. But doing so makes you susceptible to more genjutsu, since the chakra 'cushioning' your senses is gone. So Ekyt saw himself being gutted, eaten by snakes, devoured by a faceless ninja, hung, thrown off a cliff, drowned, and burned.

I've got to break this! Release! Release! No good...one choice left! Ekyt had already had a kunai in his hand, so he didn't have to fight that too much. All while seeing himself falling to the ground many times, at varying speeds, as though watching a flipbook, Ekyt forced himself to bring his kunai up. He then plunged it down into his leg. The genjutsus shattered like glass, leaving Ekyt to deal with the pain of a stab wound. It was a routine thing in this line of work, but you never quite got used to the pain. Especially outside of combat, when you didn't have adrenaline to help you. Still, Ekyt stayed calm and applied a Chakra Scalpel to heal himself. The electric blue light illuminated a scroll that caught Ekyt's eye. Once he had healed himself, he reached down and grabbed it. A chill went through him as he saw it's author was Orochimaru. The notes were scrawled strangely and chillingly, and clearly done over a period of time, as inks of different colors had been used.

"Shinigami gates> Triple Rashomon- defensive jutsu. Dual blood tribute, summoning technique. ..."
There were no pictures to describe just what this 'Triple Rashomon' was, and Ekyt had never seen Orochimaru use it. That made it interesting, but scary as hell. Still, curiosity of the unknown was a human trait. Ekyt knew he shouldn't, but he had to find out what this was. He'd ask Lady Tsunade first. If she couldn't answer, then he'd go ahead and try it for himself.

--

Kurenai noticed Hinata was lackluster in practice today. At first she shrugged it off as just being tired from the night before, maybe even a little hung-over. But as the day went on and Hinata stayed the same, Kurenai couldn't fight her motherly instincts anymore.

"Hinata, is something wrong? You've been sluggish today..." Kurenai always chose her words carefully with Hinata, even know that she was older and stronger.

"Sorry sensei," Hinata whispered. "I was just thinking of Nar...!" Hinata blushed and played with her fingers, looking anywhere but at Kurenai's eyes.

Ah. Boy trouble.

"Well, Hinata, if you want something, reach out and take it. Besides, you're a kunoichi- use your skills. Find out what Naruto TRULY wants. Things may not be as they seem."

Word on the street was that Naruto and Sakura weren't as close as they appeared. Both of them talked incessantly about Sasuke, leading Sakura to worry more, and Naruto to retreat into a defensive shell. It was clear they liked each other- they just had one big thing in common, and that was the problem. If Sasuke had been gone altogether, there wouldn't be an issue. But him in the village, after that nasty breakup with Sakura...there were stories. Mostly wishful thinking, really- such a pretty young girl seemed to have such bad taste in men! First a would-be traitor, then the demon fox container. The 'words' were, of course, just wishful thinking by the village. There was no truth to the words.

"Oh, no sensei! I don't want to make trouble for Naruto! Or Sakura!"

With a kunoichi's cunning, Kurenai smiled. "Well, maybe you could get some help. I think I know just the guy to help you."

--

"Triple Rashomon?" Tsunade asked, reading the scroll. "If Orochimaru invented it, it's no good...But..." Tsunade smiled widely, "It couldn't hurt to try the jutsu just once to find out what it does. It won't kill you, Orochimaru would never do that. But you'll do it by yourself, in training field number four."

"Fair enough, M'lady. Thank you." Ekyt bowed his thanks, then stopped. "A drink some time?" he asked pleasantly. Tsunade raised her eyebrows.

"You want to drink with me? Is that a date?" Tsunade asked, half-serious.

"No. It never hurts to take the boss out though, right?" Ekyt replied with a grin. "Stay on the good side of the brass. Call it a celebration for me joining ANBU."

Tsunade smirked. "Fine by me- shall I bring Shizune and Sakura?"

"The more the merrier. Naruto is welcome, too."

--

In a field by himself, Ekyt bit both his thumbs. He took a deep breath, then called the jutsu.

“Triple Rashomon!”

Two seconds later, Ekyt’s eyes grew wide. Four giant, house-sized gates made of metal and wood (With a heck of a lot of chakra behind them) appeared where Ekyt had directed. They stayed still, and didn’t seem to do anything other than be there. Knowing Orochimaru, that wasn’t the case. So Ekyt reared back and fired several jutsu at the door.

“Dance of the Sickle Moon! Dragon’s Ember Jutsu! Dragon’s Fire Circle!”

Once he was done, Ekyt looked around the gate to check the other side. Not even a dent in the first gate, let alone the other three.

This is great! It might just stand up to the Chidori or the Rasengan. Maybe Kakashi-sensei and Lady Tsunade might help me out...

-

Lady Tsunade punched, and Kakashi used his Lightning Blade. The two most powerful attacks in the Leaf Village, and they only opened a small dent in the Rashomon’s first gate.

“Kakashi-sensei, maybe you should copy my handsigns, so you could use the jutsu too...” Ekyt said thoughtfully. That made sense. Tsunade paid close attention, too, so Ekyt made the signs slowly. Kakashi copied them flawlessly, as did Tsunade.

“Nice find!” Kakashi congratulated Ekyt.

“Thank you. I think I’m going to go rest for a couple hours, that took a lot of chakra. Especially doing it twice.”

--

Ekyt knew why he was doing this- to make sure Tsunade kept on liking him. Asking her to go get a drink...the best way to this Hokage’s heart was through the alcohol content in her blood. Ekyt really wanted one last party- after this, he knew, training would consume him even more. There was no choice anymore.

Ekyt, Tsunade, Sakura, Naruto, Shizune, and Genma all wound up drinking. Ekyt felt a little conspicuous- he was the single one in the group.

I should sit next to Lady Tsunade...if people thought we were dating, it would make my reputation...wait, since when have I ever cared about my reputation?

Hinata found the group next, asking to speak with Ekyt. Right about then, Ekyt became conscious of the

glares he was getting- next to Tsunade and Hinata, two good looking women...and he was single. How that must have looked!

"Sure," Ekyt replied in answer to Hinata's question. Tsunade was really drunk anyway. "What's up?"

Hinata poked her fingers together, not meeting Ekyt's eyes. "I was curious...do you...do you know anything about Naruto and Sakura?"

Ekyt didn't have to guess at what she meant. "As far as I know, they're happy. If it helps any, I know how you're feeling..." Ekyt was suddenly super-conscious of his feelings for Sakura.

"Y-You do?"

"Yeah. I really liked Sakura," Ekyt said with a sad smile.

Tsunade, at that exact moment, was telling a tipsy Sakura and Naruto about Ekyt's old affection for Sakura. Ekyt vaguely overheard, and he was horrified. But he ignored that, focusing on Hinata.

"If you like him, you should just say it. Don't wait- I did, and I regret it. Naruto won't make fun of you for it. And if he says no, well, you've got an answer either way, right?"

Hinata thought Ekyt made sense. "Right. Thank you, I'll do my best!"

--

The next day, Sakura woke up, not remember any of last night.

"Must've been fun...ow...never getting drunk again though!"

"You can say THAT again," Naruto murmured. They had been sleeping on opposite ends of Tsunade's desk. Tsunade herself was asleep on the desk, while Genma and Tsunade were laying in a corner.

Ekyt walked in, bright-eyed and ready to go. Upon seeing the room, a sweat drop grew.

"Uh, good morning? Everything okay this morning?" Ekyt chanced. By the groans, he guessed that this room was full of hung over people. That's when he saw a ray of hope.

"So, uh, good talk last night, huh?"

Everyone blinked at Ekyt. "We talked?" they slurred as one. "About what?"

Ekyt had to force himself not to laugh with relief. "Nothing important! Ah well, back to work!"

Tsunade, I WILL get you for this if Sakura ever remembers what you said!

52 - A New Life

“The old you has to die, Ekyt. Your fighting style has to change, your jutsus need to be renamed, your manner of speaking, your movement- it all has to change.”

Ekyt had expected as much. None of that sounded too terrible to him. Tsunade continued.

“Your mission now encompasses two people: Naruto and Sakura. If Sakura were to die, Naruto would become unstable- too unstable. From now on, consider Sakura to be the Ojou-sama. Your job is to guard her- and Naruto- from the shadows.”

Ekyt looked at the mask and uniform on the desk in front of him. It was so hard to believe.

“Now, take your shirt off. I have to give you the ANBU tattoo. This will give you access to the blackest parts of the village. Also, I can remove it, should I need you to lead a dual existence.”

Ekyt peeled his shirt off, revealing a rangy but toned physique. He stayed impassive while Tsunade spoke, and even as she got to work.

Protect Ojou-sama and Naruto...I will. This means a sacrifice, but there's no choice. It can't be helped- I'm involved. My old life is over, at least until the Akatsuki threat is dispelled. Perhaps that in and of itself is not a bad thing.

Tsunade finished the tattoo, then moved for the uniform.

“This isn't the standard-issue ANBU uniform. Your mission entails more than patrol, so the current uniform wouldn't suit you. Instead, wear this.”

Ekyt pulled the uniform on- it was almost like that of an exam proctor, except this was a two-piece black...something. The pants felt like gi pants- the top felt like a thin jacket. Obviously this was to be worn over regular clothes. Hence the 'dual existence' Tsunade had mentioned.

“You'll wear the mask at all times. Should you need to get involved in a mission personally, do so by shedding this costume. Always wear formal clothes underneath. Address Sakura and Naruto very formally, and make sure to mask your voice. For Sakura- Ojou-sama. For Naruto- Naruto-dono. Never forget that. Now, as you're in ANBU, Kakashi will become *sempai*, as will Yamato and Sai. Do you understand?”

Ekyt bowed silently. This was a lot to take in.

“Very well then. Take this mask. When wearing it, you will answer to the name 'Ryouko'. When you are not wearing the mask, which will be any time you are not with Team Kakashi, you keep answering to Ekyt. Remember to keep your speech and fighting styles separate. You may only reveal yourself under one circumstance- If Naruto or Sakura are near death, destruction, or capture, you may reveal yourself

as a stun tactic to the enemy. If you do so, it becomes your duty to finish the fight. Taking prisoners may not be an option- if the need arises, you execute immediately, without hesitation. Understood?"

"Yes, My Lady. I understand: I am to treat Naruto and Sakura as though I'm their retainer, while assuming a new personality."

Tsunade nodded- Ekyt's manner of speech had changed somewhat. "Now, can you sound a little less toneless? No offense kid, but that's your hallmark..."

--

Ekyt watched Naruto and Sak- no, no, Naruto-dono and Ojou-sama- from the shadows. For a moment, he had a few wistful thoughts about what things would be like if he had gotten to Sakura first. He shook those thoughts from his head.

I'm no longer that person... he thought, watching from a clump of trees, his hand never straying far from his sword. **I am now Ryouko- an ANBU agent charged with the protection of the 'royal couple', as it were. Hard to swallow, but at least I can watch a dream lived out before my eyes. My own dream, but the starring role played by another. In away, that is realization in itself. Good for Naruto-dono...and Ojou-sama.**

-

Kakashi knew about Ekyt/Ryouko's new assignment. He hadn't told his team yet- well, Yamato knew, but no one else. Ryouko's crash ANBU training course had helped big time- if Kakashi hadn't known he was there, he might not have found out, at least not right away.

Well, at least I won't accidentally kill him this way- if he was this careful, I'd assume he was an assassin. Here's hoping his training holds up if one of the others picks up on him.

Kakashi was kind of hoping one of his students would pick up on the fact that they were being tailed (or led, Ekyt/Ryouko moved constantly), but so far Naruto had only discovered ear wax. Sakura was too busy lecturing him on how disgusting that was to notice anything. Kakashi sighed inwardly. This had to be boring for Ekyt/Ryouko, not to mention hard to watch.

Kakashi didn't have time to savor that thought- he had to be on his guard quickly, as an assailant popped up from seemingly nowhere. Just as quickly, Ekyt/Ryouko dropped from the trees and clashed sword to sword with the new arrival.

"If you please, Kakashi-sempai, please take Ojou-sama and Naruto-dono- I will clean up here. Please pardon my hasty introduction; if we meet again I'll do it properly."

Kakashi and his team sped up, past the roadblock.

--

"What the hell? Listen, little boy, go home and play, this is grown-up work!" the would-be assassin

snarled.

“Please do not attack Ojou-sama and Naruto-dono again. If you have a good reason, I have time to hear it,” ‘Ryouko’ offered politely. The assassin sneered at him.

“I do what I’m contracted to do- that’s eliminate those two. I’ve been paid a good deal to get them out of the way. I wouldn’t say that normally, but you aren’t much of a threat. Now some free advice- stay out of my way. If this ‘Ojou-sama and Naruto-dono’ are so strong (as my employers indicate they are), then they can certainly fight for themselves!”

With that, the assassin disappeared. Ryouko wasn’t satisfied. He hadn’t gained all the information he needed to stop this assassin. It was clear that this assassin would be hell to get rid of, though.

-

“What was that about, sensei?” Sakura asked Kakashi.

“Someone has it in for us, it seems. Don’t worry, just keep your guards up,” Kakashi replied, knowing full well that his answer wasn’t going to stave off the next few questions.

“But who helped us? And why?” Naruto asked. He couldn’t help but feel that he knew their defender- he just couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Who knows? Obviously some opposition to our attacker. They seemed to know me, so whoever that was is harmless enough. Let’s just pick up the pace and try not to have to deal with this again.”

“But why does he call me ‘Ojou-sama’?” Sakura wanted to know. **It’s kinda cool, but not from someone I’ve never met!**

“Yeah, and I’m Naruto-dono?! I mean, yeah I deserve the title, but no one calls me that!” Naruto added. Kakashi wished for some headache medicine about now. He wasn’t going to hear the end of this all the way to Suna.

-

Ryouko chased the assassin all the back to Team Kakashi. He had been following silently, hoping to pick up something. All he had figured out was that this person was very fast, and definitely not part of the Akatsuki.

What does ‘employed’ mean? Is this person a bounty hunter among ninjas? As if our world wasn’t weird enough. Well, I’ll have to hurry now, I won’t gain anymore info until I confront this attacker again.

Said attacker had pulled a blowgun from somewhere and lined up Naruto’s head. Ryouko popped up in front of the attacker and blew into the gun- the dart when into it’s owners mouth!

“Ack! Damnit!”

Ryouko tried to get a good listen to the person's voice, but no luck- a mask was obscuring the face and blocking out words and speech patterns. No recourse left but to follow up the attack. Part of changing his fighting style had met throwing in a curveball.

"Yan Xia!" Ryouko/Ekyt barked, smashing his foot into the ground just as the assassin fell.

"Chinese? Japanese? English? You know your languages, and you're persistent! This is your last chance- get away or be killed in a fight that isn't yours! *Lamnia Ventosus!*" (Blade full of wind)

Ryouko had to move quick to dodge what looked like visible wind. He knew all too well just how damaging wind could be. But at the same time, this gave him a clue about his attacker.

Using wind jutsus...likely from the Sand Village then. And that just happens to be where we're headed. Someone doesn't want us to reach that village. Well, better alert the one who matters in a case like this.

Ryouko bit his thumb, weaved a series of handsigns, then tapped his palm on the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

Ekyt/Ryouko had chosen his hawk, Taleo, to deliver a short warning message to the Sand Kazekage. He didn't waste time waiting around- Taleo would end the jutsu after his message was delivered so Ryouko/Ekyt didn't have to wait around. He caught up to Kakashi's group as quick as he could, making sure Kakashi saw him.

-

Kakashi saw Ekyt deliberately slow. That was an unspoken signal that he wanted to speak with Kakashi about an urgent matter.

"Show yourself," Kakashi said, deciding it was safe enough.

"Thank you for giving me an audience, Sempai," Ryouko said, making sure his voice was pitched differently. It was deeper, but more energetic than before. This was also the perfect time to implement the other part of Ryouko's plan to stay unrecognized.

"Forgive my lack of introduction earlier, Ojou-sama; Naruto-dono. I did not know enough about the attacker to show myself. Please forgive my skulking in the shadows." Ekyt/Ryouko sank to one knee, head bowed in a position of deference. "I have more information now."

Kakashi gave a nod for Ryouko to continue. **He seems to have settled into this role quite nicely. Let's see what we're up against.**

"The assassin may have originated from the Sand Village. He or she intends to kill, meaning that this is not the Akatsuki at work. I regret to say that the attacker escaped me yet again.

TOK!

This time the attacker wasn't hiding. A crossbow was leveled at Sakura. Ryouko cursed himself for not noticing sooner. He slid in the way, arms out to protect the targets behind him. He decided to debut his new prowess.

The attacker fired three arrows. Ryouko sprang up from his crouched position and took off (fast!). He bounced off each arrow, deflecting them with his feet as he used them to bounce toward his target. Clearly the attacker hadn't expected this, because he or she didn't have time to dodge as Ryouko landed a clean punch to the cheek. BAM!

"Please go, I will finish this!" Ryouko said, already raising his sword for the impaling stab that would kill. Team Kakashi took off again.

--

"Huh! Ah!" the assassin grunted.

A pair of strong legs tripped Ryouko up, sending him crashing to the ground. He heard the schwing sound of an edged weapon being drawn; he rolled over just in time to block a strike at his neck with his short ANBU sword. His punch had torn the face mask and hood off the attacker. Now he gasped.

"Azami?" he muttered. The distinctive Japanese/Egyptian girl he had dreamed about was now staring him in the face.

"How do you know my name, kid. Wait...wait...R...Ryouko!"

The two had knives at each other's necks. But they knew each other.

"A...dream?" they said as one. For Ryouko, there was no mistaking that long black hair in that distinctive style. (Pulled up to a ponytail on one side of the head. Two long forelocks of hair (one on either side of the head), and then long in the back) For Azami, there was no mistaking this pest.

"You're real?!" they said in unison.

"We have a lot to discuss then, Ryouko..." Azami said quietly, letting Ryouko up.

"I think so...something tells me this wasn't a chance meeting."

INTRODUCE AZAMI!

53 - Information Exchange

“Perhaps you should shed your outer mask and clothing- I’m assuming you, as a stealth agent, are dressed underneath that.”

Ryouko felt he had to oblige. Azami had shed her assassin gear, now clothed in a semi-revealing black dress. Since he had dreamed it, Ryouko had known Azami was a beauty- but in person, she was beyond that. Every move was graceful, every curve, every muscle...she was a knock-out. Dressed in a black gown that started at her chest then fell nearly down to her high heels (Though the sides of the dress were open until midway between knee and thigh), with her hair in that distinctive style...wow. Even Ekyt (the name ‘Ryouko’ was shed with his outer clothing), who was SURE he could never like any girl besides Sakura, was instantly attracted.

Could it be because she’s strong AND gorgeous, like Sakura...no, not like Sakura. Sakura is beautiful in a different way. A ‘safe’ way- Azami is dangerous...is that why I’m interested? ...What the hell am I thinking?! I have to protect Ojo-sama! I can’t exchange pleasantries with a bounty hunter kunoichi!

All the same, Ekyt shed his dark jacket and ANBU mask.

-

Azami kept her surprise well concealed, even from Ekyt’s eyes.

Well, this IS a surprise- he looks young, but fights experienced. But he’s got that rogue-ish dark hair and eyes...but an innocent expression. Certainly not what I expected. I was sure he’d be some stick-figure Shinobi cutout under that uniform. He’s definitely one of those rule-happy types. Tch. All the same...

Clearly, I’ve underestimated him already. Both in looks and abilities.

Amusing.

“So, we’re both shadowy operators. But I think we know each other somewhat already. Perhaps it couldn’t hurt to fill in the blanks a little...” Azami sized Ekyt up. “Do you drink, kid?”

Ekyt raised an eyebrow. “I can handle alcohol. Good for the heart in moderation.”

Azami laughed. “About what I expected from you. You’re the type to watch your food carefully. Once you’re sure it isn’t going to attack you, you eat two bites and say I’m ‘watching my waist’.”

Ekyt grinned. “When you’re right, you’re right. I don’t drink for enjoyment. But if you’re open to exchanging information, I can certainly make an exception. And from here...” Ekyt did his best to sound both joking and serious, “...it seems you watch what you eat as well. I’ve never heard of a fat bounty hunter.”

“And here I thought you’d compliment me on my beauty,” Azami replied, maybe a little disappointed.

“Well, I figured that it would be one of two things: callous of me to say it at our first meeting- that, or you’d point out your beauty yourself. You’re not the type to use false modesty, unless it suits your mission. But with such obvious evidence (idiot! You just admitted she was beautiful!), you wouldn’t deny it.”

Azami gave another, genuine (heart stopping) smile. “Fair enough. As you said, when you’re right, you’re right. But I also don’t rely on that beauty.”

“I noticed that when you blocked my killing strike,” Ekyt admitted. “I wasn’t expecting a leg trap- I would have expected a weapon to weapon block.”

“It takes a lot to catch you off-guard- believe me, I tried. So you flatter me by saying that,” Azami shot back.

“No point in hiding an obvious truth. So that’s why I’m hoping you’ll tell me why you’re doing shadowy work when you could put your beauty and brains to better use,” Ekyt shot a sideways glance. Azami realized he had just inadvertently (Maybe) tried charming her.

Smart, kid.

“Because it pays well. And let me guess- you’re motivated by something other than money?”

“Money’s nice,” Ekyt said with a glance and a shrug, “But I find more satisfaction from protecting those I hold dear than getting a paycheck.”

“Like your precious Ojo-sama? Cute girl. She’s with that blonde kid?”

“So it would seem,” Ekyt said, almost coldly. Truthfully, he had said it that way on purpose. Best to give Azami an opening that didn’t exist.

“I see. So you had the hots for her, but the blonde kid beat you to getting in her pants?” Azami replied, not skipping a beat. “No, I take that back, she’s not the type. Let me guess- you played honorably; he did what came naturally. He wound up winning.”

Wow, is it that obvious? Ekyt thought. **She just hit the nail on the head!**

“Very observant. Yes, I did love Ojo-sama- still do. But I also want to see a...dream, if you will, lived out. That blonde kid is the closest to doing it. As a close friend of his, if I can’t have my dream, I’d like him to have it.” Ekyt raised his eyebrows, but smirked boyishly. “Besides, he’s stronger than I am. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Azami’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Really? I’d love to hear the story behind that. But I know you’re not going to tell me, so I won’t ask.”

“You could ask. But I’d likely lie, so there’s no much point. Forming an opinion of an enemy based on a false impression is dangerous. But you know that already- that’s why you’ve stayed alive so long in

such a hazardous line of work.”

“You make a lot of sense, I’ll give you that. There IS one question I’m going to ask. And, I’ll tell you up front- you have every right to ask me the same question. And I’ll answer honestly. So what I’d like to know is- what was your dream about me like?”

Ekyt was caught off guard again- should he really say? **It couldn’t hurt...I saw her face. She blushed when she saw who I was. Her dream was probably like mine.**

--

“I see...in your dream, we don’t meet for another seven years. Then we don’t meet for another eight years. Then I fall in love with you, and it’s happily ever after.” Azami’s dark eyes met Ekyt’s. “Your dream is accurate- that IS how I would operate, as you’ve already seen. The part where I corner you, anyway. And I can wait for a target as long as I need to, so your dream is surprisingly accurate in that regard as well.”

Ekyt and Azami had sat down for drinks. Both were keenly aware that this was less ‘date’ and more ‘information exchange’. So they were both on their guard. Azami had an advantage, though.

He doesn’t know that I’ve already won. I’ve gotten himself to reveal who he is- now I just need to figure out how to kill him without him raising any suspicion. He’s been one of my targets all along- I never would have known if he hadn’t removed his mask.

Ekyt ignored his drink for the time being. When he DID reach for it, he tossed it over his shoulder. The alcohol hit the ground- and cut right through the earth!

“Acid? I’d have figured something less conspicuous for someone like you. Arsenic, gold flakes...something quiet, and not instant.”

“How did you-” Azami couldn’t believe he had caught that. **He didn’t see it! I know he didn’t! So how did he...**

“I trained with kunoichi; I know how they think. Spiking my drink is a classic tactic. Not the first time it’s happened to me, either. I was the guinea pig for kunoichi back at the academy. Apparently, watching me blush and panic because they’re girls was fun to them. And besides that...” Ekyt’s eyes shifted toward Azami’s leg. Sure enough, there was a pouch with knives creating a bulge under her dress. “...You’re not the type to let your prey get away, no matter what the circumstances. If the money’s right, you can kill in cold blood. If you were counting on me being blinded your beauty, you counted wrong.”

Ekyt said all that casually, except for the last part. That he almost snarled. Azami was surprised by the sudden change in him.

“If you want to know what tipped me off...I’m not the type to stare shamelessly at a girl. But at an enemy, I’ll take a look from any direction, from any angle, at any part of them. If you hadn’t threatened Ojo-sama and Naruto-dono, I would never considered looking near your assets. But just like you, I have a mission to fulfill. And just like you, I won’t accept failure.”

Azami hid her troubled expression quickly, smoothing her face to its normal impassive, slightly-smiling state. **So he thought that far ahead? And he apologized for staring in his own way...certainly an interesting boy. Intriguing...he's right. I kill in cold blood because that's what I'm paid for. But he...this one might be the first bounty I'll regret.**

Changing the subject, Ekyt asked Azami a question that had been burning on his mind. "Well you tell me your dream? I'm sure my outburst didn't help my case, but it couldn't be helped. People trying to kill me tends to make me angry. But, please, I'd really like to know why you knew me on site."

Azami balked at first, but let herself answer. **What's the harm? He'll be dead soon anyway...**

Azami watched the slender boy twist and dodge. He was blood splattered and injured, but he wouldn't stop. Azami couldn't see the people behind him- she just knew that he was protecting them.

"How can one kid be stopping you?! Kill him, and kill them!" came the order.

The boy steeled his gaze. "You will not hurt Ojo-sama as long as I breathe! Come as you will, as many as you will send!" After his speech, the boy coughed up blood. But his grip on his weapon only tightened. He was gripping his sword so hard his knuckles were white where blood hadn't covered them. His mask had long been torn away, so you could see the grim expression on his young face. His lips were pressed tight in an expression of concentration.

TOK!

The boy kicked off, right into the midst of the enemies. He had disarmed three before he even landed.

"Forgive me," he said, even as he cut down more, his sword turning red as the landscape around him. As the surprised enemies counter-attacked, the boy's movements were all useful. Even when he dodged, he was striking. It was only when one man broke from the group and ran towards those he was protecting that he surrendered his weapon. Even that movement wasn't wasteful- the sword transformed the back of the man's head into splattered gray matter. The boy continued fighting with his fists. The enemies with weapons hit him- Azami could see their kunai and swords bite into his flesh. But all the same, no matter what their weapon, the boy wouldn't back down. A sword was thrust into him. He grabbed it by the blade, steadied it, then struck its owner's hands with his fist. The sword clattered to the ground. After that display, the enemies stopped momentarily, unsure that they wanted to keep going. This guy had a lot of fight for someone who was half-dead. Soon, the enemies were fleeing.

*"Fall back! Fall back!" the leader shouted, desperation in his voice. Azami could hear this thoughts: **I cut him! I KNOW it! But he won't die! What makes him so strong?! He should be dead! Dead!***

*Azami had hear own thoughts. **This one...I'm going to remember you well. You took out quite a few of my hired hands. It's such a shame you need to die. Your meddling needs to end, Ryouko/Ekyt. I've tracked you for a year...today, the chase ends.***

The boy fell to one knee, his mission completed. His clothes were ripped- his shirt was cut from waist to shoulder, hanging on by the elastic on his collar. His pants were nicked in several places, front and back. More than half his face was covered in blood.

“Damn it...don’t betray me now...please...” he said. He was begging his body not to quit on him. “Please...there’s more to do...please don’t turn on me...”

The boy began a painful crawl toward his comrades. His stomach dragged across the sandy ground that was dotted with rocks. He didn’t have enough energy to pick his stomach up, so he slid over the rocks, exhaling hard in pain when a jagged edge cut him in yet another place. After a few minutes, he reached his sword. It clearly bothered him to reach through the dead man’s splattered brains, but his resolve wouldn’t allow him to quit- if blood truly bothered him, he would have quit long ago. He picked up his sword once more- he didn’t even feel it’s weight. He couldn’t- the numbness was too great.

Azami couldn’t believe what she was seeing. All the same, she steadied her aim. Her dart hit him in the neck, and he fell, finally defeated. His friends were unconscious- it was over for him. Azami moved in with her knife to finish her kill cleanly. But when she got there, she saw the boy was awake.

“So you...shot me...you’ve earned your kill,” the boy said placidly. The sword fell from his hand. “Damn...my body DID betray me...I asked so much of it...it did all it could...I did all I could.”

Azami sheathed her knife, instead picking out a senbon. She put it into his neck and made a small cut. But it didn’t kill him- poison flowed out of his body. Azami was healing him.

“You’re going to live. It was simply a fluke that I hit you. There’s no honor in a kill such as that...I’ll wait for our rematch.”

The boy smiled. “No...you don’t care about that. About honor, and fair kills. You care about the job getting done. There’s no reason for you to let me go.”

Azami blushed- he was right. Was there any point in hiding the truth?

“...You’re right. I’ve found you interesting since I began hunting you. It was a year ago today when we first clashed swords. You’ve been my strongest adversary...and my strongest desire. I’ve wanted to meet you- to REALLY meet you. To talk to you. To touch you. To kiss you. I don’t know why myself...but you’re fascinating to me.”

The boy’s lips parted in shock. “When our eyes met, that first time...I knew. But I...had my heart set on another. That is no longer possible. Ojo-sama had made her choice clear. Such a kind girl...I would have given my life for hers...I still would...but this isn’t about her. It’s you who’s sparing my life. It seems I owe you a debt...”

Azami nodded in agreement. The boy’s ruined shirt lay at her feet, torn off by a rock. She held it to a bleeding wound on his shoulder. “I’ll see that your debt is paid in full...it’s time I had my strongest desire fulfilled.”

-

Ekyt had blushed a great deal during his story. Azami, however, only blushed girlishly at the innuendo at the end.

“Well, that’s it. Bounty hunter or not, I’m still a girl. You can’t expect me not to care about a guy’s attention. And besides, being a bounty hunter is lonely. Seeing people all the time, but never really SEEING them. A crowded room can be the loneliest place. But- with your skills, you could easily compliment me...as a partner. And our partnership needn’t stop at the battlefield...”

Azami snaked around Ekyt, dangerously close to his ear.

“What do you say? Our dreams tell stories that reflect our souls. And it’s clear what our souls want...”

“Very clear,” Ekyt agreed.

Is she serious? Am I? I shouldn’t go along with this, I KNOW I shouldn’t! But...what if it’s true? What if I really DO want this? She’s not just another pretty face...maybe I can protect Ojo-sama this way? Does protecting her mean I’m not allowed to have dreams of my own? ... I was prepared for that. Not having dreams...

This I wasn’t prepared for.

54 - 'Just Acquaintances'

Azami licked her lips, giving Ekyt an uneasy feeling- like being a snake's prey. But at the same time, it was almost a welcome feeling. But that didn't mean Ekyt had been ready for this. Especially when she put one long, toned leg in front of his legs.

This goes beyond kunoichi behavior...is she serious?

Azami had a different thought. **A challenge...that's what he is. That's why he's so amusing. He's unpredictable in situations where others are most predictable. Just means I have to try harder to get the reaction I want when I want it.**

"Don't go thinking I'm easy; you're the first guy I've ever offered this to." That much was true. Ekyt turned red, but otherwise remained unphased.

"You're still trying kunoichi 101 on me. You're going to have to dig deeper in your bag of tricks to get me with anything like that. I don't kindly to people trying to kill Naruto-dono and Ojo-sama. No matter what they look like or offer me."

Azami actually seemed disappointed by that. "I see...what if I told you that I would stop trying to kill all of you?"

"I wouldn't believe you," Ekyt replied instantly.

"Good point...what if I could prove it?" Azami countered.

"It'd have to be some really solid proof..." Ekyt admitted, not sure about this.

"W-ell...tell you what. Next time I see this 'Ojo-sama' and 'Naruto-dono', don't hide behind the mask- walk up with me. That way I can't make a move without you cutting me down. I won't bring any weapons."

"That's still a big risk for Ojo-sama...not that she can't handle herself..." Ekyt muttered, as much to himself as Azami.

"C'mon, I'll go tied up if you want. If you're into that, I mean. I'll let you frisk me personally to make sure I don't have any weapons..."

Ekyt blushed, and Azami suddenly understood why it was so fun for kunoichi to tease him. **Such an innocent mind in today's day and age...very impressive...but who's he fooling? He's got desires, and I can play off them...he can't resist forever- can he?**

==

As per usual, things didn't go as planned. Well, more accurately, things didn't follow the plan Ekyt wanted them to.

SMACK SMACK!

Ekyt had forced his way between the warring kunoichi, blocking their strikes with his forearms as he braced himself between them. Trickle of blood rolled down his arms as he held his place, exhaling a hard whoosh of breath to dispel his pain. Sakura and Azami hadn't quite taken to each other.

"Enough. There's no need for the two of you to fight."

Naruto seemed to feel there was enough reason for him to jump in. A Rasengan spinning wildly, he launched himself toward Azami. Ekyt shifted his weight and nudged Naruto with his shoulder. Azami's eyes went wide as her hair swayed.

It was a near miss...VERY near...that was no ordinary attack. And him...this 'Ekyt' or 'Ryouko', whatever he calls himself...he's no ordinary soldier following orders! I didn't expect this kind of strength from him.

"There's no reason for this fight. Sakura, Naruto- I ask you to lay off and trust me. I've always been one step behind you...now I push myself to the forefront and assert my own beliefs."

"But she tried to kill us! And you!" Naruto yelled furiously, not believing this was Ekyt saying this.

"So did Gaara. And yet you forgave him. Extend an olive branch of peace here as well, Naruto. Azami will be a strong ally." Ekyt was speaking like a sage, even holding a pretend branch between his fingers in a gesture of peace.

=

Sakura clenched her fist. She did NOT like the way Azami was snaking toward Ekyt. But he didn't seem to mind. If anyone was immune to the charms of a kunoichi, it was Ekyt- so perhaps it wasn't the charm of a kunoichi.

The charm of a friend...something more? Why do I have this uneasy feeling? I can tell Naruto feels it, too...

"He loved you, you know," Naruto muttered. This was, of course, news to Sakura. She had been strangely oblivious to Ekyt's reactions to her, dismissing it as 'she was a kunoichi, that's how he is,' rather than 'she was THE kunoichi, that's how it is'.

"What?! Me?! How do you know?!" Sakura demanded, suddenly feeling...altogether too much.

Kakashi winced- bad timing for this kind of discussion. There was never a good time for a talk about relationships- that was best confined to books. But in those books, relationships like this never ended well.

But it's begun now...there's no turning back. I can still salvage the situation.

“Because he said so. He never felt worthy of you, so he never told you. When you fell in love with me, he kept silent. I don’t know why he did- I wouldn’t have let it go. But he did.”

Kakashi stepped in now. “It was because he wished for you and Naruto to be happy. Naruto, whether you’re aware or not, you’re walking a path very similar to the one Ekyt wishes for himself. But he won’t take that path from you- instead, he’s chosen to support you. I wouldn’t ordinarily tell you how to react, but...take his support. You too, Sakura. You two were happy until Azami showed up. If you’re worried about losing a friend, you needn’t concern yourself- Ekyt will never abandon us. You should concern yourselves with making a new friend. You should trust Ekyt’s judgment- his track record speaks for itself. If he says this girl is okay, we have every reason to believe him.”

“He’s thinking with his penis!” Naruto protested loudly. (Azami heard this and chuckled outright. Ekyt thought his head would pop if he turned any redder.) “If he thought with his head like he normally does, there wouldn’t be a problem!”

“...Naruto, do you really believe Ekyt is capable of that?” Yamato interjected.

“Yes! No matter what image he projects, he’s still a guy under that uniform!”

“While that may be true, Ekyt has certainly proven himself worthy of our trust. He’s put his faith in you two...it’s your turn to put your faith in him.”

Naruto and Sakura clearly didn’t like hearing that from Kakashi. But they couldn’t argue- Kakashi-sensei knew best. All the same, Sakura felt a sudden guilt.

I have nothing to feel guilty about! He didn’t tell me, and I made my choice! But still, seeing that... *thing* walking so closely with him, like they’ve known each other all their lives...it really bothers me. But why? Shouldn’t I be happy for Ekyt? And it’s not like they’re in love or something.

--

Ekyt felt older suddenly. Jamming a piece of straw from the side of the forest road sullenly into his mouth, he kept walking.

“I knew it would turn out this way...she knows how I feel...felt...still feel? Hell, I don’t know.”

Azami dropped her act for a moment. “Listen kid, your shoulders are too narrow to bear the weight of the world. This isn’t your fault. Pretty girls don’t like other pretty girls. If you had your eyes on that hot little number, I would be jealous too. Give them both time, you know? Besides, who knows when we’ll see each other again? Put your trust in fate.”

Ekyt had a hard time leaving anything to chance. But he still hadn’t sorted out his feelings.

“About that...I don’t suppose I could convince you to come to the Leaf Village?”

Azami shrugged. “You never know, kid. You haven’t tried yet. I’m a decisive girl, but that doesn’t

mean I'm stubborn. Are there any hot guys there?"

Ekyt rolled his eyes. "Nah, just me. I'm the Leaf's version of a 'ten'." **When the heck did I get comfortable enough to tell a joke?**

Azami mockingly winced. "That bad there, huh? Tell you what...I'll come by sometime soon. You give me one reason to stay, and I will. Sound fair?"

Ekyt closed his eyes, then swung around and grabbed Azami around the waist. He gazed into her eyes for a long moment- yup, the spark was still there. The spark from the dream that only he saw- at least until fifteen years in the future. Azami was worldly, smart, and beautiful- but this time he had taken her completely by surprise. Typically, with a bounty hunter, surprise meant death for the hunter or the target immediately. In this case, Azami proved she trusted Ekyt by not dicing him to ribbons with the kunai hidden high up on her leg.

She's surprisingly light for her height...wait, do normal people think that before they- never mind, do it quick, before you change your mind!

Ekyt planted a kiss on Azami's lips. Those lips slid over his obligingly. She had recovered from her initial shock somewhat and returned his gesture. They held that position for a long few moments, both sets of eyes closing in tandem with the moment and mood. All too soon, it was over.

"..."

"You're just full of surprises. Maybe that's what I find so fascinating about you..." Azami blushed heavily, realizing he still had her around the waist. The serious expression on his face made her blush harder- she had thought she'd just ease her way through this one, but she wasn't in charge anymore.

"I find you fascinating, too. But it's not one single thing about you that's fascinating- there's a lot I don't know about you. But I'm not going to judge you. It's hardly my place."

Ekyt left a hand on Azami's cheek, withdrawing it slowly. Azami savored a strange sensation- **I believe this is my first time getting goosebumps from a boy...who would've thought it'd be a target? I let him get this close to me...I've surprised myself. I underestimated him, and he took control of the situation.**

...

Good to know someone has my back. Judging by the looks on his comrades faces, he's never stood up to them before, not like this.

"Well then, until we meet again...try to sell your village on the idea of me moving in. You never know, I might find something I like..."

With that, Azami was gone. Ekyt was silent all the way home.

At least they don't know it was me playing the ANBU agent...well, this was a special occasion. I won't need to reveal myself again.

--

“Kid, are you high or something?” Tsunade asked in exasperation. “At what point did it seem like a good idea to French a bounty hunter who has you and your friends on her hit list?” Tsunade didn’t yell- she was just curious. She had learned Ekyl could read the ‘meaning between meanings’, and he knew personalities. So she wasn’t going to go off on him.

All the same, everyone has a weakness...this girl might be his. She might have found a soft spot to stab him.

“It’s...complicated, M’lady,” Ekyl admitted, wincing at how stupid this sounded to someone who wasn’t there. “I didn’t plan on it, it just kind of happened. See, I had this dream...”

Ekyl laid the dream out, not expecting Tsunade to understand. Tsunade had once loved someone, so she DID understand- to a point. That point ended with the wanted poster she produced.

“Azami is quite the popular one with the Sand Village. Apparently she left there after a fight with the previous Kazekage. Her work as a bounty hunter is in very high demand. In other words- your new girlfriend isn’t safe.”

Ekyl coughed really hard. “Girlfriend? Please, not at all. Acquaintance at best, really M’lady...”

“Then how come I haven’t seen you swap saliva with Sakura? Or me, for that matter? We’re ‘acquaintances’, right?”

“Are you jealous, M’lady? I’m still single, better get me while you can...Just to clear it up, I didn’t kiss her like that...”

Tsunade had to bury her face in her hands- something so ridiculous coming from Ekyl’s mouth forced laughter out of her. “Sorry, I’m not into the lolita thing, and you didn’t have a grandmother complex the last time I saw you...”

He’s very relaxed...that’s definitely a plus. It also sounds like he’s plenty confused. He’s had his cap set for Sakura for years- for another girl to just show up...that’s gotta be hard. Well, let’s see where this goes...

“Alright. If your little playmate shows up here, it’s your job to keep her corralled. And I want details, young man!”

Ekyl’s face widened with a grin. “Of course, M’lady...?! Wait, wait, it’s not like that! We’re just-”

“Acquaintances? Yeah, for now. We’ll just see how long that lasts. Tell me, are you going to feel guilty about every potential relationship you have?”

Ekyl nodded. “More than like, yes. You know how I am with guilt. Just like my kunai, it’s always with me.”

55 - The Past Rises to Confront the Present

Azami found her way back home. As 'home' as the place felt.

The place was a nice cabin in the woods, near the border of the Land of Fire. As a bounty hunter, she might have to be on the run at any time, so living near the border was necessary. Her home was plainly furnished, despite Azami being a cultured woman. She had been to lots of places already- China was her favorite place to visit, though nothing beat being home in Japan. Egypt also felt like home, but she couldn't go there anymore. Too many memories.

Azami's hand knocked over a picture on the table near the door. Carefully, she picked it up, sighing when she turned it over.

Father... she thought, missing him terribly. Azami closed her eyes and let herself go back in time- back to when the picture in her hand had been taken. The picture showed a handsome man with thick brown hair hanging from a rope. The picture seemed to come to life.

--Flashback+_

"Azami," the man said, a mix of Japanese and some nationality Azami couldn't quite remember- had she ever known?

"Yes, Father?" Azami, age six, replied, happily rappelling down next to him.

"Did you remember the tools?" he asked, knowing full well she did. That was something Azami had always admired about her father- no matter who he was with, he found a way to make them feel useful.

"I did, here you go!" Azami handed him his belt full of tools. Hammers, chisels, picks, axes, and camping equipment were all contained in that pouch, plus the bags above.

"Ah, thanks! It's so great having you come along on these digs. It would get too lonely without you. Although I wonder about my beautiful daughter crawling around in cobwebs and mummy dust. Are you sure you wouldn't rather be home with your mother? She could teach you a lot, too, you know?"

Azami wrinkled her nose. "Maybe, but I can learn to cook anytime. Seeing mummies and artifacts only happens a few times. Besides, I don't like that Egyptian stuff she makes! I'd rather spend time with you, eating your cooking. Your stew and dumplings are the best!"

Azami's father laughed. He was a handsome man, in Azami's eyes. Her mother was a dark-skinned Egyptian woman, glamorous but high maintenance. She tended to look down at others- including her own husband. She always had the best of everything, thanks to her husband- a gold tiara, an Ankh worn by a pharaoh's daughter, a beautiful home. But her real treasure eluded her- she couldn't contain her husband's thrill for adventure.

“Well then, let’s move on. Turn your helmet light on. Oh, and don’t tell your mother I let you carry the torch, okay? She’d skin me alive (ha ha), then mummify me.”

Azami switched her light on, seeing her father’s face illuminated for the first time. His face and clothes were smudged with dust- dust he didn’t need to be covered in. As a Dean of Education, and even an ambassador for Egypt to Japan, this man didn’t need to be crawling around in the dirt. He could have been the one wearing the suit and tie, sitting in a cushy office, making six figures a year. Instead, he chose this job- he wanted to be near the action. He always said ‘the thrill of discovery using your own hands- it just can’t be beat.’

With a ‘tump’ sound, Azami and her father landed at the bottom- the base of a tomb. What was inside was unknown- that was why they were here. Azami’s father smiled again. He was compact like a Japanese man, but his features weren’t all Japanese. He had large, inquisitive eyes and thick brown hair, for example. He also chose to wear a kind of stubble, making him look tougher. He always said that was to belie his glasses. But he didn’t choose normal glasses- he chose a stylish look, making him look much younger than his thirty years. The students that he taught tended to fall in love with him- both his lectures, and for the girls, his looks.

“Alright now, let me see...right, we don’t know what’s here, so...”

Azami knew what that meant. She took a knife from her boot, holding it and the torch in a defensive position. Meanwhile, her father took a crossbow and shovel up in the same position. He shuffled forward, making half-circles with feet, in case there was a pit ahead- he could feel it before he fell in it that way.

“Hey, Dad, that looks like a royal mark,” Azami pointed out. When she was with her father, she tended to speak a mix of Japanese and English. In a way, she spoke hieroglyphics as well- that’s what they talked about a lot of the time.

“Huh, you’re right! Good eye! Pretty soon I’m going to assist you, instead of the other way around! (ha ha) Well then, we must be close. So...Flama Invocatem?”

Azami’s eyes lit up- she loved Latin! When her dad said ‘Flama Invocatem’, that meant he wanted Azami to move the light forward.

“Lux Lucis,” she replied. (Means ‘light’ in one translation to English)

“Tezheng,” he said instantly. (‘Thank you’ in Chinese)

Azami frowned. She knew what he had said, but she couldn’t think of how to reply. Chinese wasn’t her strongest language. This elicited another good-natured laugh from her father.

“You’ll get it. That’s what’s great about learning- you can never know too much! Of course, your mother wasn’t happy when I said ‘I Do’ in Mandarin (ha ha), but she got over it.”

Azami wondered about that. She didn’t HATE her mother...she just didn’t agree with her. The world was so big, and there was so much to know. Her mother preferred the safety of home where she could claim

to know everything. She had no desire to learn any more than she had to. In Azami's eyes, that was a weakness.

Azami felt her father's strong hand on her head, ruffling her hair.

"You did very well. Look, Azami, we've found it- the tomb of the pharaoh's high priest. Isn't it beautiful?"

--

Azami put the picture down, smiling despite herself at the memory.

My Father...would he like what I've become? It's strange that I'd think of him. Why would I- ah. He reminded me of my father. Ekyt/Ryouko- I'd love to know his real name. He reminds me of my father. Spouting Chinese in the middle of battle, after speaking English and Japanese- heh, I still suck at speaking Chinese out of nowhere.

...

Dad, what would you think of him? I might be serious about him after all...

Azami let her eyes fall to half-lidded as she smiled, maybe a little forlornly. **All this time, my father unknowingly set a standard for me- I could love whoever I wanted, he always said. I know he meant it. What I really wanted was someone like him- that's why I found Ryouko so fascinating. He's like you, Dad. He learns for the sake of protection, just as you and I did. Maybe I'm not ready for any commitments- I know he isn't. But a friend who will protect me, as you did...that couldn't hurt. I know I'm long past the age of needing your approval, but I've just a got a feeling. You taught me to trust my instincts.**

Azami wasn't sure about having a man in her life. Not like a 'relationship'- Azami could PLAY a seductress, but that wasn't really her nature (well, not totally). What Azami wanted was stability- she was alone now. She could use a partner who would protect her and watch her back.

It doesn't hurt that he's cute. It's so strange to think of any boy as anything but a bounty...oh no. My employers! They'll be here soon! Even I can't fight them off by myself! But I can't ask...No, I have to. I've got to swallow my pride.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Two birds landed on Azami's shoulders. Both were splendid Macaw's she had gotten when she was younger- one of the many souvenirs her Father had brought her.

"This one...Sand Village. This one- Leaf Village Hokage! Please hurry!" Azami gulped. She rarely lost her cool- her two pissed-off employers were enough to see that she did.

I should never have dealt with them...I let success go to my head. Now I'm in over my head. There's only one person I can trust now...

==

-Sand Village Academy

Taro looked up from his paperwork, hearing a tapping at the window.

“Huh? That bird...Azami?!”

Taro leapt for the window- any chance to hear from his daughter these days was one he took. Reaching out the window, Taro coaxed the bird onto his arm. It landed with a practiced ease on his forearm, then stuck it's leg out to allow him to take the note. Taro thanked the bird, giving it a toss so it could fly out the window. Then he turned his attention to the note it had brought. It brought a smile to Taro's lips.

“So, Azami found an interesting boy in her travels...can't say I agree with the whole bounty hunter thing...but maybe this guy'll be just what she needs to calm down. The fact she wants me to meet him is a good sign. Well...I haven't taken a vacation since she was ten, so I'm entitled to one.”

Taro grabbed his jacket and briefcase. After a moment's thought, he also took his crossbow off his desk. That wasn't for meeting his daughter's love interest- his semi-fame brought every whackbag with a high testosterone level running toward him to try to 'earn their stripes'.

--

-Hokage's Office, Leaf Village

Tsunade didn't see the bright bird until it landed on her desk. It fluttered down, the wind from it's powerful wings sending papers flying.

“Well hello!” Tsunade said in amusement, reaching for the scroll from the bird. “What do we have here? Ah, it's for Ekyt. Oh boy...I told him that girl would be trouble...but this is the kind of trouble he needs. Sakura!”

Sakura's head snapped up (like she hadn't been listening). “Yes, My Lady?”

“Get Naruto and go to Ryouko. He's leading this mission- tell Kakashi to send Sai as well. He and Yamato have more pressing matters, but I can spare you four. Oh, and promise me that you won't attack this 'Azami' girl, okay?”

Sakura nodded. She'd had time to think. “Lady Tsunade, why do I feel guilty? I, er, found out how Ekyt felt about me. Now I wonder how I could have missed it! And I feel...well, threatened, I guess...” Sakura didn't know how to react to these feelings. Surprisingly, Tsunade looked sympathetic.

“She's new, and she's coming onto your 'turf'. You like Ekyt- even if it's not the same way he felt/ still feels about you, he's got a new friend. Somewhere along the line, you felt like he 'belonged' to you. Kunoichi are possessive creatures. That, and- now, this is one of the basic laws of the universe- 'Pretty girls don't like other pretty girls.’”

That kind of made sense to Sakura. She made up her mind. “I don't know what Ekyt feels towards her, but I've caused him pain. Even without meaning to, I need to make it up to him. I don't know what this

girl means to him, but she means SOMETHING- that's enough reason for me to help her."

Tsunade leaned back as Sakura ran out of the room. **She's growing. They all are.**

--

Naruto had sought out Ekyt.

"Are you serious about this girl?"

Ekyt glanced at Naruto. "Hell of a way to start a conversation. Besides, that implies that her and I are together...we aren't. We're not even friends, really. We just know each other, and hit it off. Nothing more, nothing less."

Naruto was pretty sure Ekyt hedged the question. "Listen, I'm sorry...you know. About attacking her...telling you that you're thinking with your penis...not accepting her as a friend...refusing to forgive her...telling Sakura how you felt...wow, I've done a lot the past couple days."

Ekyt laughed hollowly. "Well, I'm glad Sakura found out. And I'm glad you found out, for that matter- the fact that you and I are on similar paths. Listen Naruto, Kakashi-sensei was right. I want to see you succeed. I won't take your dream from you- not now or ever. You've earned the right to be happy."

"So have you. And I won't mess with whatever you decide to do now...just promise me that when I'm Hokage, you'll be my right-hand man."

"Me? Sure. What happened to Sasuke?"

"He messed with Sakura. So I figure I'll just have him be a jonin for a few years as punishment. After all, Hokage's can do whatever they want."

Sakura interrupted the conversation with Sai at her side. It was time to go.

--

Azami paced nervously upstairs, her crossbow and knives always by her side. When a knock came at the door, she froze. She didn't answer the door- she just readied her crossbow for a fight.

Tap tap tap- the window!

Azami ran over, seeing a hawk hovering just outside the glass. A short note was attached.

Don't answer the door. We'll come to you from the window.

-E

Hurry up then- these guys are dangerous!

On cue, the good guys arrived. Ekyt, leading the mission, signaled for all of them to hide. He winked at

Azami, silently telling her to stay put and keep her voice down. PWOOF!

“Transform!”

Ekyt copied Azami’s appearance, then went to answer the door.

--

BIO TIME!

Azami

Age 20

Mix of Japanese and Egyptian (other ancestry unknown)

Likes: Father, weapons, learning, history

Dislikes: evil, her mother

Other: Azami met Ryouko/Ekyt in a dream. Currently, she’s sorting out her feelings for him. She’s had multiple employers for her extraordinary hunting skills over the years. Left Sunagakure after a fight with the previous Kazekage.

Her past work was as an archeological assistant to her father.

56 - Hunter and Prey

Ekyt, posing as Azami, opened the door cautiously. “Oh, it’s you. What do you want?”

“You’ve failed us,” the hooded ninja on the other side said simply.

“The target escaped. You didn’t allow for enough time. For three targets, I would have needed longer. And working on no information...” Ekyt said, using Azami’s voice. The hooded man was not impressed. But he WAS fooled by the transformation, or at least appeared to be. **Not enough to go on...**

“The punishment for failure in this world is death.” The man held out his hand. A black sphere began to take shape. “Hold still and it won’t hurt for long.”

Ekyt wasn’t sure what that sphere did, but he didn’t want to find out. But he couldn’t reach for a weapon without breaking his illusion. Instinctively, his hand flashed out and grabbed the man’s wrist. The man suddenly became four men.

“This insubordination grows tiresome. I’m going to kill you know. Nature’s Attack: Gravity-??”

Ekyt ended his illusion. “To hell with this. I don’t know what you’re planning, but I’m giving you fair warning- scram. And if you follow us, your life is over. Get me?”

The hooded man (men, actually) looked Ekyt over, seemingly interested. They spoke as one, though four different voices rang out. It was eerie- hearing the same flat voice projected four different ways. These were clones and then some- clones all spoke in the same voice- these voices were altered.

“Well, one of the targets is now helping the hunter. I knew Azami was an attractive girl, but to have seduced such an able Shinobi...”

“She didn’t seduce me, though I thank you for the compliment. She’s a good person- I believe that. And there’s no good person I wouldn’t fight for- or die for.” Ekyt’s eyes had gone steely, glaring from one man to the next. Behind him, he knew that Naruto and Sakura were protecting Azami- that gave him room to work. But suddenly, the men put their hands in their sleeves. That was a horrible tactic- unless they thought Ekyt had Sharingan?

“Your reputation precedes you with us, Dragon Boy. With you, we will cut no corners. It’s not often we reveal our jutsus, for fear that a Sharingan user may be watching. But for you...”

WHOOMPF!

Ekyt was suddenly blasted into the ground face-first. He turned his head so that he could breathe, rather than be suffocated into the grassy bottom of the forest. But the pressure on his stomach was so great he thought he was going to break in half. He couldn’t even move to defend himself- all he could do was shift his chakra to keep his organs and bones in tact.

This is real...this isn't a genjutsu. They're really playing with gravity! But how?! No, not important- how to break free is. But I've got to think...Chakra cigarettes are out- the gravity would crush them. Not that I can move to get one anyway. Better hope for a rescue, then. I'll counter-attack quick when I get an opening. I can at least make their attacks visible. Wait...there's one more jutsu I can use- the most basic jutsu.

PWOOF! CRACK!

Ekyt used the Replacement Jutsu to get himself away. From his new vantage point, he saw the log he had used to get away was crushed into dust- it didn't even splinter first!

Guess I'd better aim to kill. Unless I can get their hands...

"Cloth Spear Jutsu!" came the strange four-toned voice. From all sides, Ekyt was wrapped in cloth!

Cloth Spear?!...I went basic, they went even MORE basic. That wasn't so much a jutsu as a martial art- Chinese in origin. Their plan is obvious- trap me with their cloth, crush me with this gravity attack of theirs. Damn, of course they've reinforced the cloth with chakra. Still, I haven't been standing still up here- I made hand signs, and finished them just in time.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt shouted, aiming his fingers at the origin of the cloth. He readied himself to break free, but when he jumped, he only crashed into the ground.

My fire didn't break it...damn it! I've got one more shot- this time I'm aiming for the person controlling the cloth. But which one do I aim at...I can't pick out the original. Maybe taking out any of them will break their attack enough to let me out? If not, I've only got one option left after that.

--

Azami's father walked into the Leaf Village, stopping for a quick ID check at the gates.

"Reason for your visit?" Kotetsu asked, following procedure.

"Visiting my daughter."

"Alright, go on ahead. Welcome to the Hidden Leaf Village, enjoy your stay," Kotetsu gave a bow of greeting and let the man pass. He got up to go inform Lady Tsunade, as instructed.

Maybe M'Lady's new lover? They look to be about the same age. Why else would she have me inform her when he arrived?

-

Tsunade was waiting to greet Azami's father when he reached the Hokage mansion. That was the only place he would have known to go to, as the Hidden Leaf was large and he didn't yet know where his

daughter and this boy she had found were.

“Ah, you must be the one your daughter sent,” Tsunade said by way of greeting. “I’m the Fifth Hokage, Tsunade. Your daughter should be here shortly.”

Wow, maybe I owe ol’ Ekyt one- this guy is easy on the eyes! It’s been years since I’ve even thought of another man seriously...what would you want...Dan?

“Nice to meet you. I’m Taro, Azami’s father. She isn’t here yet?”

Taro’s hair had lightened to a blonde color now, though he still had stubble on his jaw and fashionable glasses on his eyes. He wore a suit- unheard of in Shinobi circles at this time. He didn’t look his age, though that was a natural effect when compared to the jutsu the vain Tsunade used to camouflage her aging body.

Tsunade shrugged. “I had three of my best ninja go get her. Apparently there was some...trouble. But I assure you, I have the best of my ninja protecting her.”

Taro gave a good natured laugh. “Azami’s always been spunky. Must’ve been a good threat for her to have sent for help. Well then, Lady Tsunade (That’s right, isn’t it?), is there any chance you could direct me toward a place to stay? I’d like to take at least a week here. I haven’t seen my daughter in quite some time.”

“Certainly. Please follow me. There are plenty of places to stay, but the best place would be our newest. It’s also close to our best restaurant/bar, the Akamadori.”

Taro stretched. “Ah, sounds good! I never miss a chance to try some new cuisine. And sake would certainly hit the spot. You never stop worrying about your children; I could definitely use something to take the edge off. I hope she isn’t causing too much trouble for your ninja (haha).”

--

Damn, trouble!

“Azami, what kind of attack is that? I mean, they didn’t even hit Ekyt!” Naruto had been watching intently, but couldn’t pick out what had just happened. Ekyt had just been spiked into the ground. He had been in the center of a perfect sphere that just appeared in the ground. One second it wasn’t there, the next it was.

“They use gravity to fight. By altering gravity in a certain spot, they can make the gravity extra strong or extra weak. I’ve seen them attack...their attack and defense is one move, but you can’t bypass that move with weapons. If you fight them, unless you dodge so well they can barely see you, you’re toast. But there IS a way...”Azami’s voice trailed off as she weighed her risk. “Can you two cover me? I don’t want to see Ekyt die, and my jutsu can give him a chance to take these bastards out.”

It occurred to Sakura that they knew nothing about Azami. Not even her fighting style. But she seemed to know a great deal about them. Should they really trust her?

It can't be helped now- Naruto and I are both close range fighters, we won't do Ekyt any good. But Azami might...

"Right, we'll cover you! You ready, Sakura?" Naruto had ten kunai between his fingers, aimed at the backs of the four hooded men.

Sakura took up the same amount of kunai, but these had explosives attached.

"Ready."

Naruto and Sakura threw their kunai, and Azami used a strange variant of the Body Flicker Jutsu to get near Ekyt.

-

"Did you see that?!" Naruto exclaimed. His kunai had twisted into themselves, then just disintegrated!

"Gravity! So they altered the spots around them. And somehow they're immune to the effects. That's not good! But we got their attention! We've got to get moving!" Sakura and Naruto had intentionally given away their position so that the enemy would break their focus on Ekyt, even if it was just for a few seconds. They could trust Ekyt to make good use of that time.

Naruto and Sakura escaped from the cabin's top floor just as it flattened from the top down.

--

Azami landed next to Ekyt, her crossbow's arrows preceding her and destroying the cloth holding Ekyt's arms. But that wasn't all Azami did.

Remote Chakra Transfer! she thought, focusing on Ekyt. She could sense Ekyt's chakra spike. **That's my secret jutsu. I can give some of my chakra to another person for a short time. I can also take it away from others. But I'd rather not reveal that at this point. If Ekyt's reputation is true, I gave him the opening he needed to end this fight in short order.**

-

Ekyt felt the surge of chakra, but could only guess where it came from. He could think about that later. Right now, he had a fight to attend to.

Physical attacks are going to be problematic. Fortunately, that plays to my strength. I'd better not mess around here- this chakra boost gave me more than enough to toss out two genjutsus. And the first one...

"Bringer of Darkness Jutsu!" Ekyt barked. This was the First Hokage's genjutsu. Ekyt had taken a long time to learn it, and he still hadn't mastered it. But he could use it well enough for this. The jutsu cast the target into a pit of darkness on all sides. They could hear and move, but they were entirely blinded in

terms of sight.

The second Ekyt felt it take effect, he followed up with his next Jutsu.

“Sickle Moon Dance!” he shouted. “Drawing Blade’s Path!”

This was a mix of two jutsus. The first, Sickle Moon Dance, saw three clones attacking in a nearly impossible to follow pattern. They danced in and out of striking range at an incredible speed. When Ekyt was using a sword, the jutsu was terribly effective. In this case, Ekyt was armed with three kunai- one in each hand, one in his mouth. His clones were armed the same as he was. Kunai had limited range, hence the reason for Ekyt’s rarely-used ‘Drawing Blade’s Path’. That jutsu elongated any weapon Ekyt held to a sword’s length. He had crafted the jutsu for just such an occasion. Ekyt wasn’t incredibly strong, but he was clever. He knew his weaknesses, but he didn’t hide them. Instead, he found ways to make them useful. Truthfully, Ekyt couldn’t stand people who preached superiority and tried to seem unbeatable. No one was beyond defeat. If you were, there was no point to training, or learning.

The three clones fanned out and attacked three of the enemies, dodging gravity attacks and even switching places with themselves. Ekyt attacked the one he blinded- he hated taking such a cheap advantage, but in this case there was no option. Ojo-sama and Naruto-dono were here, and these people were clearly out to hurt others. All the same, Ekyt’s conscience wouldn’t let him kill these enemies.

“Azami, please go with Naruto and Sakura. I’ll see that they don’t pursue you.”

With that, Ekyt tore forward. Rearing back to strike, Ekyt buried his kunai into the enemy’s sleeves, feeling them strike into the arms. Satisfied that the enemy was held in place, Ekyt used the kunai in his mouth to sever the hands of his target. THUNK!

“Thunk?! That’s not a human sound...that’s a puppet sound! Well then, guess I don’t need to feel bad about killing this thing! But let’s be safe and do it from a distance.”

Ekyt’s clones finished taking care of the other puppets while Ekyt retreat. He ran erratically, hoping that the puppet was still blinded. When he was at a safe distance, Ekyt threw back kunai laced with enough explosive tags to take out a building.

“Detonate!”

KA-BLAM!

Ekyt was clear of the explosion, but he had a feeling he had missed something.

But why did my genjutsu work on a puppet? There’s only one...but he’s dead!

--

Deidara took his time entering the clearing.

“So, Master Sasori, still think that your puppets are perfect works of art, un?”

Sasori’s ‘heart’ had already shot itself into a new body that Deidara had brought for just such an emergency.

“Shut up. Those four gravity users weren’t strong enough. My mistake wasn’t using a better puppet. No matter, we’ve confirmed our suspicion that our bounty hunter has gone rouge on us. That was all we set out to do. I’ll repair these puppets and they’ll be put to use in another battle.”

“Yes,” Deidara agreed. “This is far from over, un.”

57 - Even it Up

Ekyt forced himself to calm down and think. He could have SWORN that the only puppet master capable of such attacks was dead. Ekyt's mind was working even as he was writing his report, making notes on the run.

But it's the Akatsuki...if anyone could cheat death, it's one of them. Well, forewarned is forearmed. I'll have to let everyone know. And it'll be time to become 'Ryouko' again. But first, 'Ekyt' has to keep appearances up for the Leaf's new addition.

Ekyt and the others had been racing through the trees, eager to get home. Sakura had healed the worst of his injuries (a bruised kidney), and had stayed back near him in case any poisons made themselves apparent. Azami was ahead, with Naruto on one side and Kakashi on the other. This had turned into an impromptu protection mission for Azami. Ekyt gave her a quick glance, giving away nothing in his face. Her long, swaying black hair seemed to dance, as if trying to get his attention.

"So you like her, huh?"

Sakura's soothing voice snapped Ekyt out of his trance. He looked at her, keeping silent for a few moments. He was relieved that she had a smile on her face. Things had been awkward, now that Sakura knew how Ekyt felt. She had been so touched at his actions- or lack thereof. Sakura had already admitted it to herself.

If he had said something, I would have chosen him, and Naruto would have been heartbroken. But now that I know the real Naruto, I know just how caring he really is. I wouldn't want to hurt either one. And this way, I didn't. Still, it's hard to believe Ekyt could like me for so long and not say a word to make me think that he did. I should thank him...but that would embarrass him. So, thank Ekyt- protecting me beyond the scope of duty. It means a lot.

"Yes. I like her. But it's just a friendly thing," Ekyt finally said. He tried to sound unconcerned about it, speaking very casually as he looked for a chakra cigarette. Sakura, of course, knew better. But after such a heavy day, she wasn't going to tease him about it. He looked as though he had way too much on his mind as it was.

And Sakura didn't even know the half of it. She looked at Ekyt again, thinking that he was still cute, but that his stress was so thick it was becoming visible. It almost hung around him, like a black cloud. It was sad. Not that Ekyt had ever smiled or jumped for joy before, but now it seemed beyond him to do such a tiny thing. He was so bogged down that whatever was left of his old personality was crushed under the strain.

What was he like as a child? I can't help but be curious- did he laugh and smile, like we did at the academy? Did he have friends? Or did he just study and study, and try to fit in without ever admitting to himself that he wanted to?

--

Tsunade and Taro (Azami's father) were waiting at the gates. Azami broke away from the group, uncharacteristically calling to her father.

"Dad!"

Taro had been facing the other way, but there was no mistaking his daughter's voice. To him, it was the most beautiful sound in the world. He turned to find Azami half-running toward him, her arms wide for a hug. He smiled, remembering that he once had to get down on one knee to hug her. Instead, he opened his arms and stepped into her hug.

"It's been a long time..." Taro began, "and you've grown so much; into such a beautiful woman. I'd say 'just like your mother', but we both know that isn't true. (haha)"

"You're the same, father. I'm so glad you could come! Things have changed so much since I last saw you. No, more than that, things have changed so much in the last couple of days. And the change is for the better, I promise you."

Azami knew that her father had been disapproving of her lifestyle. She wasn't quite done being a bounty hunter, but now her alliances were different- much less shady.

"So, where's this boy you mentioned? It's not like you to get involved with one of your targets," Taro asked/stated with a laugh. That was true- his daughter wasn't known for fraternizing with her clients. He had heard of her reputation, and it had saddened him at times. But the fact she was strong and independent made him feel like he had succeeded.

Azami winced. "Father, please don't tell him too much about my letter. We're not 'officially' together, as partners or otherwise. I was overexcited. He...reminds me of you, in a way. He keeps his word, and he's not above protecting his enemies, if they need it. I didn't think I'd need to worry about your approval."

Taro stroked Azami's hair- he was still a little taller than her.

"I've never had to worry about you doing something distasteful. Despite your career, you're an honest girl. Your decisions have always been good enough for me. Now, introduce me to this young man. I promise, I won't scare him off. Not like the first guy you brought home..."

Azami laughed outright at that- she had seen her father get mad precious few times. When she brought home the Chinese merchant who tried to sell him on the future of fish scales as weapons, insisting he could get him a 'good deal'- well, that set her father off.

"No, he's nothing like that guy. As if that bozo had a prayer with me. I only brought him home so you two could talk history anyway," Azami informed him, arms stretched behind her head.

"Don't tell me you chose this one for me, too?" Taro asked, raising a questioning eye.

“No, this one I’m kinda...serious about.” Azami blushed, something she rarely did (except when her job called for it, of course). She had surprised herself with those words, truthfully.

--

Ekyt gave his report to Tsunade, wincing as one of his ribs groaned. Sakura immediately put her chakra to use to end the pain.

“Gravity? That’s dangerous by itself, never mind with Sasori at the helm. I can only hope you’re wrong about Sasori. But knowing you, you’re not. Not about this. (sigh) Alright. Sakura, Naruto, Kakashi- you’re all free to go. Get some rest before your next assignment. We’ll call this mission B ranked. That means you get a day off tomorrow.”

The day off was actually for Ekyt. He was on a permanent S-ranked mission as ‘Ryouko’, and it was clearly taking it’s toll on him. Leading two lives was taxing. Not that it was Tsunade’s only reason. She had two other good reasons: Sakura knew how Ekyt felt was the first, and Ekyt and his budding friendship with Azami was the other. Tsunade was going to do everything she could to steer the two kids in the right direction.

Never thought I’d want one of my ninjas to keep his eyes on a bounty hunter...but I’ve got a feeling about that girl. A good feeling. I’ll have to see about getting her a Leaf headband. And I’ll have to see about getting her father to stay here, too...

--

Azami walked over and whispered something to Ekyt.

“Oh, sure, of course,” he replied, letting her lead him over.

“Dad, this Ekyt Kaguya. He’s the one who saved my life.” Azami gave her father a meaningful look, trying to say ‘also the one I really like’.

“Kaguya, eh? You hardly seem the type. Sorry, sorry, that’s a lousy way to introduce myself. I’m Taro, Azami’s father. I’ve heard many good things about you,” Taro offered. **I DO see a little of my old self in him. You were right about that, Azami.**

“It’s nice to meet you. Though you seem familiar, if you don’t mind my saying so, sir. I might be wrong, but- have you written any books.”

Taro’s eyes widened a little- the kid was good!

“A few, yeah. How’d you guess?”

Ekyt smiled around his chakra cigarette. “I enjoy history. You’re the top authority on Sunagakure history and Egyptian history. So I’ve read your work.”

“Oh? I didn’t think kids were into history. Well, I’m glad to know someone still knows how to read these

days. (cough) At any rate, I want to thank you for saving my daughter.” Taro put his arm around Azami, tugging her close. “She means the world to me.”

Ekyt’s thoughts turned to ‘uh-oh’. **That’s the kind of thing you say when you don’t want a guy hanging around your daughter. Is he worried about me being a bad influence? Wait, she’s the bounty hunter here, how could I be the bad influence?! And more importantly, why am I thinking of this? It’s not like I’m ‘with’ her or something! She’s knew here; it’s only natural her parents should know where she is. Stop jumping to conclusions, you dope!**

Taro continued. “That’s why it’s great for me to hear she had such an able person watching out for her. I hope you two will be great friends. Er, you ARE over her trying to kill you, right?”

Ekyt smiled and shrugged. “Ancient history, sir- no pun intended.” **Bad joke? THAT is the kind of thing a boyfriend does to win over a girl’s parents. Hoo-boy. She’s bad for me. I KNOW she’s bad for me. So why...why am I so interested?**

“Dad, is it alright if I go with Ekyt to see the village?” Azami interrupted, cutting her father short. Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed his arm and ran off, as if she was ten again.

--

Ekyt showed Azami around the village, pointing out good places to eat or drink, good hotels, and even introduced her to some people. One person who they ran into was most unwelcome.

“YOU! With HER?! I’m going to have to report this!” Ebisu pushed his glasses up on his nose. He still carried a grudge with Ekyt, apparently. The last time he confronted Ekyt, Ekyt had left Ebisu in a smoking heap with multiple broken bones and burns.

“Still blowing smoke, Ebisu?” Ekyt replied flatly. “M’lady knows she’s here. So, you can report it, but it won’t do you any good. Like make you a REAL jonin.”

Azami had to stifle a laugh quickly.

“I’ll have you know your savage, sneak-attack didn’t hurt me at all! I simply helped you save face in front of a crowd, nothing more! In a fair fight, you wouldn’t stand a chance against the tutor of the Hokages!”

Ekyt flicked his cigarette butt at Ebisu, making sure to aim it just inside his collar. He didn’t want to litter, and what better ashtray than a loudmouth like Ebisu?

“You make a big deal out of her, and I’ll do more than use you as an ashtray, asshole. You know I don’t swear in front of women, so this is a special occasion. I’m warning you once- back off.”

With Ebisu stunned, Ekyt and Azami walked on. Eventually, they reached the Hokage faces.

“That one was my teacher,” Ekyt pointed to Sarutobi’s face.

“Oh? You never told me you were trained by someone like that. Sarutobi of the Hidden Leaf. He and my father are old friends. Or, were...I’m sorry about your teacher. I was employed by Orochimaru at the time, and I heard...” Azami bowed her head, sorry she had brought it up.

“Well, it’s my fault. I helped him to try to kill Orochimaru. But, ah, that’s a bad thing for me to bring up. The view is more why I brought you up here. It’s very beautiful. Especially in spring, with the cherry blossoms in the park down there.”

Azami shivered suddenly. She was used to Sunagakure weather. By comparison, the Leaf village was cold. She had been living on the border of the Land of Fire, and it had been considerably warmer there.

“Cold? Well, it’s probably best we find you a place to stay anyway,” Ekyt murmured thoughtfully. He proceeded to list a few places. Azami stopped him.

“Listen, I’m not like some kunoichi. I’ve got a bone to pick with you first. You can start by getting any perverted thoughts out of your head. Next, you can put your arms behind your back.” Azami raised her crossbow. “Now then, we have a little matter to discuss. What was up with that kiss? I need to know what it means.”

Ekyt was startled by all this. “A kiss is just a kiss, isn’t it? I didn’t hear you complaining at the time...”

“Anyone could get caught up in the moment!”

“Then why’d it take you so long to stop being caught up?!”

Azami stopped there, lowering her crossbow. “This is what I meant when I said I’m not like other kunoichi. I’m not usually the type to stare into someone’s eyes like that. The thing is...I really like you. You understand my jokes, you see through my tricks, and you dodge my attacks. You don’t look at me like a piece of meat you can’t wait to sink your teeth into. The one thing you don’t get...”

Azami used that strange jutsu again (We would know it as ‘Shunpo’ or ‘Shundo’) to get close to Ekyt.

“You don’t get my sense of humor yet...or maybe you’ve never heard of domi -”

“Yes I have!” Ekyt insisted quickly, blushing heavily.

“Then you don’t get my sense of humor. I’m only playing with you.” Azami leaned closer to Ekyt, letting her crossbow drop so she could grab him around the waist. “Thank you for saving me. And...I don’t believe in leaving unpaid debts. So...let’s call this ‘even’, okay?”

Azami yanked Ekyt in and kissed him, pulling him as tight as she could. She didn’t feel Ekyt resist, so she took that as a sign to press a little harder.

Ekyt had never been kissed (not before he kissed Azami), and kissing like this was new to him. There was no tongue exploring his mouth (though maybe it had hit his lips? They WERE kind of dry), but a real, open-mouth kiss? And he’d never been held so tight by a girl before.

Is she simply returning the favor? Or is she subtly saying 'I'm into you, how 'bout it'? ...It must be the first choice. This is just a 'thank you'. Maybe they kiss like this in Egypt? (ß What a dumbass!)

Azami released her lip lock, but held onto Ekyt around the waist. This was awkward for him- something she knew full well.

He liked that pink-haired girl, Sakura...I'm not into girls, but even she said her chest was unimpressive (Note: This was some 'girl talk' the two had that I didn't document) Then again, he's not the type to be blinded by that.

Right about then, Ekyt thought to return the embrace. Azami smiled a little wider- not wide enough for him to tell, but she knew.

No, if I have his attention, I've earned it for me being who I am. That's such a rarity among guys. If only they could understand that we wouldn't dress so disgustingly if we didn't think it was the only way to get to their attention.

I believe this boy will make a strong partner. He thinks with his head and with his heart, not his hormones.

--

Azami let go, which prompted Ekyt to do the same.

"Now we're even," Azami assured him. Then she patted him on the head. "A kiss for a kiss, and a hug for..."

"Saving you from getting crushed by a gravity-based attack?" Ekyt shot back with a smirk.

Azami shrugged. "Let's go with that. Oh yeah, When we can sit down, maybe I'd better tell you what I said to my dad in that letter I sent to him..."

58 - Accepting an Offer

“You know he won’t go for it. You KNOW that, don’t you?”

Tsunade’s amber eyes glared at the council in front of her. But they weren’t backing down. Tsunade was overruled.

They don’t know what’s right anymore! Their minds are rooted in the past! What’s LEFT of their minds. I just waged a costly war with this boy- I don’t want to stiff him again! He’s been nothing but a good warrior and a brave man- I get that now. To do this to him is tantamount to spinning him around and kicking him in the @\$@ again!

“I’m sorry Tsunade, but we feel it’s best. The ‘Ryouko’ project must be terminated,” came one voice.

“Yes. It’s not as though the boy isn’t capable...there are those who are more capable, however...” agreed a second voice.

“But not like him! He would protect those two with his life! You were the ones clamoring for more protection for Naruto! NOW you want to take away what I’ve already done to protect his life?! In what ancient tome did you read that something so stupid made sense?!” Tsunade stood up furiously, but a gentle hand eased her back down.

“(Cough) If it pleases the council...” Ryouko began, still kneeling at Tsunade’s side. Once he was given the nod, he continued speaking.

“Removing me from this mission will create a gap. I’m already included in those who know of Naruto’s imminent danger. Removing me means removing someone with the knowledge and desire to protect him and this village. As you know, I was a genin for years, long after others who gave less to the village were promoted to chunin and beyond. I’ve learned to appreciate assignments, and to take what ones I can get. But removing me- Sarutobi-sama’s last student- from such an important mission...either you think little of my abilities, or you don’t trust me. I ask the esteemed council to tell me which it is, and to give me time to remedy the problem.”

The council nodded as one. “You’re dismissed. As of now, this project is terminated. We will not outline our reasons to you. You may leave now.”

Ryouko was calm as he walked out. He walked past Tsunade, giving her a look of thanks and understanding.

“I appreciate all you’ve done for me, M’lady. I mean that. Thank you.”

With that, Ryouko swept out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

--

Ekyt, first thing, marched to Naruto.

“That was me. In the black, guarding you. I’ve just been removed from that assignment, so I don’t have to feel guilty telling you about it. Do me a favor, Naruto- watch your back, and come to me if there’s any trouble. You’re stronger than me; we all know that. But if you’re faced with a problem your power can’t turn back, seek me out. I’ve promised to help you and Ojo-sama, and I’m going to. The council be damned if they try to stop me further.”

Naruto and his team was shocked, but Ekyt didn’t give them time to say anything. He kept moving- he had to inform the next person of his dismissal. As distasteful as it was, when one door closed, another opened. This door was an interesting one.

-

“So, if you’re still...interested, I’d like to accept your offer.”

Azami had been having lunch with her father, but insisted on speaking to Ekyt when he showed up, even though he had offered to wait.

“Offer? You mean...a partner? You, working outside the law? C’mon, you’re yanking my leg, right?” Azami had narrowed her eyes, assuming this was a joke. But it became apparent Ekyt wasn’t kidding.

“I’ll be limited,” Ekyt admitted. “I don’t kill, and I won’t hunt a Leaf Villager- and no one but criminals. But protecting is what I do, and I’d love to be of service to you.”

Azami looked around cautiously, not seeing anyone who could be a threat. Then she turned back to Ekyt.

“If you’re serious...absolutely. After those gravity-using puppets, I’m a little shaken up, I’ve gotta admit...” Azami hated admitting that, so she tried to get Ekyt to blush. “...So, how about the other kind of partner? Y’know, the whole bedroom scene?”

Ekyt jokingly slid close to her, an arm around her waist as he swept her off her feet. He had a pout on his face as he stared her in the eyes.

“We’ll see where things wind up,” he said with a wink. Then he smiled widely. “Well, you got me to blush after all, but it looks like my counterattack was successful.” He pointed to the red lines under Azami’s eyes.

Azami blushed at the look on Ekyt’s face. **Bedroom eyes? He’s good. Very good. That’s the second time he’s gotten me to betray myself like that. He’s got the makings of a good hunter if he can pull a switch from ‘pissed’ to ‘take me’ in no time flat.**

“Alright then. You might want to get some gear that covers you up. Unless you don’t care if people know you...” Azami advised, righting herself.

“Please, call me ‘Ryouko’ on missions like that. After all, Ekyt would NEVER do something like that. But dark Ryouko, angry at the world and wanting to escape...well, his personality is still in the works. But he and Ekyt...two separate people as far as anyone not in the know is concerned.”

“Ryouko, then. That’s good- Ekyt wouldn’t be cool enough to be seen with me,” Azami shot back, wanting to get some revenge for her school-girlish reaction to Ekyt’s provocation.

“Yeah, that’s true,” he admitted with a laugh. “So, what do I call you on the job?”

“Mistress.”

Ekyt raised an eyebrow. “Commander.”

“Master.”

“Captain?” Ekyt said hopefully, not wanting to call her mistress. Azami thought that one over, chewing her lower lip thoughtfully. Finally, she nodded and gave her approval.

“Captain it is. So, Ryouko, go get yourselves some quick-release weapons- you’re about to enter a whole new battlefield. Don’t kid yourself into thinking I don’t know jutsus- there’s just not always time to break them out, no matter how skilled you are. I’ll get your some more details when I’m done eating.”

“Give your father my best, then,” Ekyt replied, taking to the rooftops.

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Later on, Ekyt and Azami were due to meet. Well, Ryouko was going to meet her anyway. Ekyt hadn’t dressed like this since his vigilante days, but it felt good to be back- free of the political bullshoot that clogged up the system. It was good to take a step back now and then- getting into a rut didn’t solve anything. Getting out of the rut, digging a few footholes, making a new path- THAT solved things.

Swish. Click. Crack.

‘Ryouko’ had replaced Ekyt. A mask over his face, no headband (instead, a hood), long black trench coat (stocked with weapons), and boots replaced his normal wear. Ryouko wasn’t just a physical difference.

Ekyt was polite to a fault most times. Ryouko said what he was thinking, if it benefited him.

Ekyt only voiced his displeasure. Ryouko DID something about it- if it benefited him.

Ekyt was shy around girls. Ryouko wouldn’t shy away from them.

In other words, Ryouko was almost the antithesis of Ekyt. The one thing they had in common was the most important of all- justice. The difference there was that Ekyt followed procedure- Ryouko took the law into his own hands. In many ways, this ‘new’ dual existence was both more liberating and more

taxing than his old dual existence. Then again, one more change was apparent.

Ekyt was alone. Ryouko was not. Whatever the nature of his relationship with Azami, Ryouko wasn't chasing an impossible dream. The girl was still out of his league in his mind, but this girl was interested. That was an improvement. Not that Sakura would ever be completely removed from Ekyt's heart- some things just weren't possible. Ryouko, however, was content to help Azami. Speaking of her, she was due any second.

Azami appeared right on cue, covered from head to toe in white.

"Looking good, Ryouko. Are you ready?"

"I am, captain."

--

Tsunade wasn't happy. Ekyt never turned down missions unless he was majorly annoyed. Such was the case, apparently.

"They shouldn't have done that. If anything, they should have let me make him 'Ryouko' full time...(sigh) I felt better when he was protecting my apprentice and my favorite knucklehead."

Tsunade wanted, more than anything, to see Naruto and Sakura grow into their full potential. They could be two of the next Sannin, Sasuke being the Third. Their potential was easy to read- the sky was the limit. As long as their was training available, they could always be better; stronger. But their lives were also in danger each day. Even with three ANBU agents around them, Tsunade still worried for them. That's not to say she wasn't confident in them. She was more of a concerned mother- confident, but not wanting to take any unnecessary risks. The type of mother who would spare no expense to see her 'children' protected. Maybe even the type of mother who would pay to see her children safe.

"I wonder...the council didn't say I couldn't hire additional protection for Team Kakashi..."

--

Ryouko picked up the letter from the carrier bird- one of the many of the Hidden Leaf. He stroked it's back to make it let go of the letter. It cooed in appreciation, then took off toward the Hokage mansion.

"Irony so thick you could slice it with a kunai," Ryouko commented. "Never thought work like this would come from so close to home."

Azami read the letter, smiling merrily. "So they booted you off that mission, THEN hire you back without knowing it. You've got some bad karma, Ryouko."

"So it would seem, captain," he said with a snicker. "Well, it's your call. I've got no problem with protecting. It's what I was doing to begin with."

"Well, the money is certainly right...you Leaf's are rich little bonbons, eh?"

Ryouko snorted. “Hardly. M'lady won't spare any expense to save her best, though. What she's offering is...generous, for someone who is watched so closely by a council who thinks 500 yen will still buy you enough dango to feed a family.”

“I'm actually more concerned about you,” Azami told Ryouko. “Your two lives might intersect. Are you sure you can handle that? I mean, no offense, but I can tell- even with that mask, you still worry for the girl.”

“All the more reason I should be on this mission,” Ryouko replied. “Put it this way- we get paid by our success rate. When it comes to protecting Ojo-sama, my success rate is one hundred percent.”

Azami pretended to be impressed by the fake show of greed. She knew full well that Ryouko's 'inner-Ekyt' was worried sick. She didn't need this mission for the money- she needed it to make sure Ekyt/Ryouko was stable enough to handle this new life. Call it a dry run for a real mission.

“Fair enough, then. We'll get started right away. Hope you can stand sharing a tent with a girl.”

Ekyt would have blushed. Ryouko would have laughed. Instead, both happened.

“You're not familiar with my sleeping habits if you think I just lay down and crash, then...”

“What if I don't give you a choice?” Azami asked mildly, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“You never know, you might get lucky,” Ryouko said. His inner-Ekyt was screaming at him- that was NOT the correct thing to say to a lady!

“You smug son of a dog!” Azami said with a laugh. “Well, you're fun to work with. Trust me, though- YOU getting lucky isn't something you need to worry about.” **If only it was, though. What do I mean to you, Ryouko?**

“Ah, you wound me, captain.”

I can't tell if she's joking or not anymore...is there really an interest here? If so...one of us has to make a move here. But it won't happen- both of us are cautious by nature. We don't know enough about each other. So it's going to become a contest to see who can find out more about who.

Or am I over-thinking this?

“One more thing, Ryouko- we have a side mission. The Mist wants one of their own caught- alive. He slaughtered a family, then escaped the village. It's our job to bring him in. So don't drop your guard- see, I know a little of your past. You're not popular with the Mist, are you? Something about ruining an execution of theirs...” Azami was curious. This was, in fact, one of the first times she had heard the name 'Kaguya' thrown around- usually, it was taboo.

“They tried to kill my student and a good friend. I stopped them. They came gunning for me. My student

stopped them. They attacked a kid I can't stand...I stopped them. So, it's kind of tradition for them to try to pester me, and for me to ruin them in return. Kind of the way of the world, y'know?" Ryouko said all this casually. Doing something (stupid) like that and living to tell the tale was actually a claim to fame- just not one Ekyt/Ryouko was interested in.

"Well, okay. But if your playmates stop by to play tag, I take no prisoners," Azami warned.

59 - Game of Death

Being 'outsiders', Azami and Ryouko didn't have access to the contents of Team Kakashi's mission parameters. Ekyt could guess- it was either the Akatsuki or Orochimaru. Now, as Ryouko (the more devious of his two 'selves'), he shared this with Azami.

"Either way, we're up against some heavy competition," Ryouko finished. He was practically shaking for a rematch either way. He wasn't sure about this new attitude of his, but he was damn sure going to enjoy it, if he could. It was so liberating, having an alter ego like this. Not that it hurt that this alter ego managed to land him a new love interest and maybe a new set of dreams. And he could preserve his old ones to boot!

Azami's head was on her work, as always. But the thought of working with a partner like this had gotten to her. She was almost hoping they'd be attacked.

Maybe...maybe then he could save me. Then I'd owe him...he'll never fall for the helpless little girl routine...heh, if I'm thinking like this, I must be taking him seriously. I shouldn't feel so calm about falling in love, should I? I mean...my first time, and it's with a boy who...well...

He's better than me. But he thinks that I'm better, and he treats me like I am. Like I'm someone. Like I...belong. Is that why- he doesn't belong either. Is that why we gravitated toward each other like this?

No matter what, I'm going to give him a reason to show how he cares for me after this battle. It might have been Ryouko I met, but it's the complex, sweet and sour Ekyt I fell for, I think. Such a mixture of emotions, and they run so deeply.

"Captain?" Ryouko chanced. Something was definitely up. Even love-challenged Ryouko could guess. "Captain, hold still."

Ryouko put an arm around Azami's waist, then put one on the back of her head. He pulled her head into his chest, patting it comfortingly.

"Don't worry about it, whatever's bothering you." That was all Ryouko said, and all he needed to say.

Azami closed her eyes. **I can hear his heart beat...I like that sound. I can feel it, too. It's comforting, like a metronome. Relaxing. Such an innocent sound, pure almost.**

--

Team Kakashi was on the move, trailed by Ryouko and Azami. They didn't know it, but this trip was going to be one snag after another. The first started innocently enough- a chance meeting on a dirt road. No big deal.

“Excuse me. Leaf Ninjas, I presume?”

Kakashi glanced up- if these were attackers, they weren't making any effort to conceal themselves. And there were only two. Maybe that was why Kakashi opted to be friendly.

“Hello. Yes, we are. And you must be Mist ninja?” Kakashi replied.

“Yes, we are. I'm sorry to bother you, but we're searching for a Leaf Ninja who committed crimes in our Village. I know we're all loyal to each other, but this was such an unforgivable crime. I understand if you can't answer, of course. But have you seen this ninja?”

Kakashi took the pictured offered by the silent ninja. It was Ekyt on the paper. He was standing on a giant snake, holding the Adamantine Nyoï, surrounded by enemies. Kakashi had since heard that war story straight from Ekyt, and he had to laugh inwardly.

So much like his teacher at times, that one. That pose is the Third Hokage's. Oh, better not glance at this for too long. I'll have to make my lie extra convincing.

“I know OF him. He's been in some trouble lately, I'm guessing. I'm sorry I can't help you further.”

The Mist-nin took the paper back. “Sorry to have disturbed you, then. Thank you for your time.”

--

“Well, the Mist-nin! Haha, guess fate really isn't on your side!” Azami laughed. **This is the chance I needed...how do you feel about me, Ekyt/Ryouko?**

“Apparently not. How do you want to approach this, captain?” Ryouko murmured back, keeping his voice low.

“An old trick. You just be ready to fight. I'm going to turn you in, and you're going to escape. We get some extra Ryo, and we ditch our enemies at the same time. Just follow my lead.”

--

Azami pointed Ryouko out, but things weren't going to go as she planned- at least not in every respect. She was definitely going to get proof of Ryouko's affection for her. That was her last thought as she was hit in the back of the head- unconscious. Two appearance-altering jutsus ended- the black and red Akatsuki's cloaks blew in the wind like two jolly roger's.

“Remember, no jutsus!”

Hidan and Kakuzu hated that rule, but it was necessary. They needed more information. Of course, they wouldn't follow that order to the letter.

Ryouko/Ekyt shed his outer clothes and cloak, instead putting a cigarette in his mouth, revealing his normal vest and regular clothes.

“Give her back or I’m going to kill you,” Ryouko threatened, his voice low and menacing. He glared at the two unknown Akatsuki members.

“I don’t think so. I’m rather fond of this cute little @\$\$ on her!” Hidan declared, giving said @\$\$ a swat. He paused for the slightest second to gloat, then found his neck slashed.

“I warned you, you rotten- ?!” the cigarette nearly tumbled out of Ryouko’s mouth.

Hidan blinked. “That kind of hurt, bastard. Kakuzu, you lazy piece of shoot, attack, for the love of Jashin!”

“Don’t tell me how to fight!” Kakuzu fired back. “This is about the only good thing about working with you!”

Ekyt/Ryouko just watched, shocked, as the two argued. He had never seen this kind of animosity between two Akatsuki members before. Even stranger, Kakuzu was getting so mad, he was coming apart at the seams- literally! Threads came from his arm and ‘tied’ Hidan’s head back on. As Ekyt watched the gruesome spectacle, Kakuzu’s other arm came free and smacked him hard. Ekyt/Ryouko skidded backwards, disbelieving.

“Earth Grudge Fear. The only jutsu I’ll need against you. Though you’re with a bounty hunter...if you were to pay, maybe I’d consider letting you go.”

“Go to hell,” Ryouko snarled. He bit his thumb and reached for his summoning scroll.

“TOO SLOW!” Kakuzu shouted. His arms and legs flew into Ryouko, while his torso and head stayed still. “Ah, he’s replaced himself! Hidan, were you going to bother telling me this?!”

“Not until you’d made an @\$\$ of yourself,” Hidan shot back. “Not that you ever need the help. You just let some kid escape your ‘perfect’ jutsu.”

“You know, I remember that your head was just about slashed clean off. I just stitched you up, you should be worshipping me for bothering with you again. But, never mind. I should only need Water for this!”

“I won’t bother with my jutsus. I won’t need them against him.”

“Says the guy whose head was chopped off...”

“Are you two the best the Akatsuki can offer?!” Ryouko finally shouted. He was holding Azami over his shoulder. She had a chakra cigarette in her mouth, but she was still too hurt to move. The chakra would help. “What kind of idiots forget their own hostage?!”

Kakuzu and Hidan were instantly enraged. Hidan managed to get ahead of Kakuzu and attacked using a strange, three-pronged version of a grim reaper’s staff. Ryouko blocked it with his long sword, having since fished it out of his summoning scroll while listening to the two Akatsuki elite argue. NOW Ryouko

was regretted saying anything. Granted, the real Azami needed time to escape, but he could have let them argue longer.

Oh well. Time to try a new trick.

Ryouko reached into his pocket. Hidan put his guard up. But he was hit- with coins?

“What in the hell?! COINS?! What kind of attack is that?!” Hidan shouted mockingly.

“They aren’t worth anything...too bad,” Kakuzu commented, holding one up to the light of the sun.

SCHUNK!

Ryouko stabbed straight for the heart- he couldn’t mess around. No matter how clownish these guys were acting, they had to be good if they were Akatsuki material.

“Well, one down, one to go, huh?” Hidan commented.

“Don’t get cocky, you blonde retard,” Ryouko snarled. “You’re next for kidnapping her, not to mention all the crimes I KNOW you’ve committed.

“Shut your f***** hole! Was I TALKING to you?” Hidan snarled.

“Who else would you be talking to, you foul-mouthed idiot? I just put a sword through your partner.”

“Yes, you did. But you got one heart- four more to go,” Kakuzu informed Ekyt. Two threads shot from his body and caught Ekyt’s shoulder. Blood splattered all over, but it wasn’t a major wound. Ekyt had worse from his own training. SCHUNK!

Hidan’s scythe cut Ryouko in the back. Ryouko coughed up blood, and wondered how it was possible.

It was on a chain?! Ryouko thought, shocked by the attack.

“Get ready- this is gonna hurt like hell!” Hidan told Ryouko, apparently thrilled with this who thing. Ryouko had pulled the scythe out of his back, using chakra to heal himself a little.

“Unlike my partner, I keep an eye on my hostages,” Kakuzu added, holding Azami’s arm.

“WHAT WAS THAT ‘UNLIKE MY PARTNER BULLS****’?!” Hidan screamed, getting more angry by the second.

“Pay attention to your hostage and prove me wrong!”

Ekyt had used the body flicker jutsu to get close, using his ‘Dance of the Sickle Moon’, and attacking with his sword-toting clones. They carved Hidan up, leaving him in pieces. But Hidan’s head just stared up at Ryouko, laughing.

“You’d better find a way to kill me, you little s***! Even if you leave my head, I’ll come back and bite your f***** throat open!”

Ryouko had already figured out that this guy was, somehow, immortal. His rage at Azami’s treatment had taken over, and he kicked Hidan’s head as hard as he could.

“Shut up! I’ll never fall to the likes of you! NEVER!”

The Reaper Death Seal! That’s it...but...but...I have something else to live for now. I can’t let her down...Alright then! No ‘poor me’ crap! I’ll find a way to kill these two immortal bastards, one way or the other! I’ll live, and I’ll save Azami!

But the fight was all but over. The threads from Kakuzu’s body had stitched Hidan together again. Hidan told Kakuzu to let Ekyt see what was happening.

“See here? I’ve got your blood. And that’s going to end the fight!” Hidan licked his lips, then licked Ekyt’s blood off his scythe. “Ah, I can FEEL your pain! It’s good- very good! Now, pay attention, if you want to see how your life is gonna end, man!”

On the ground, an occult-ish symbol appeared.

“I haven’t swallowed yet, but I’ll show you how this works anyway...”

Hidan changed his appearance. Ekyt shuddered- it was as if he was staring at the grim reaper himself. The sight was indescribable to see.

“Now, I’m going to swallow. Down the hatch!”

Hidan swallowed, then stepped into the occult symbol. He held up a shuriken, then raked it slowly down his face.

“Ah!” Ekyt called out, his face bleeding. **Oh no...This can’t be what I think it is! If it is...**

“Hidan’s body is now a voodoo doll- and your blood is the catalyst. Unfortunately, you can’t escape.”

==

Azami woke up, seeing her boyfriend- no doubt now- in a terrible spot. Hidan stabbed himself, and Ekyt’s stomach tore open. He was on his knees, already at his limit.

“Hidan...for the money...let’s work a deal,” Azami said, shameful that she knew this man on a first name basis.

Hidan turned an eye toward him. “I’m listening, Azami.”

“How do I free him? I’ll give you the Ryo the usual way.”

Hidan stabbed himself again, this time slashing himself just under his eye. Ekyt was clearly trying to fight himself free, but it wasn't happening.

I can't let him die!

"There's no way to free him now. Even if you push Hidan outside the circle, you need to exhaust his chakra and remove the blood from his stomach."

--

Ryouko had a similar thought to Azami's.

I can't let her down! And I can't let these guys run free! There's got to be something...

My life is forfeit now. I couldn't do the Reaper Death Seal if I tried...unless I...it's not perfect, and I'll be in huge trouble, but it's my only option now.

"You're immortal?" Ekyt coughed out, struggling to one knee.

"Sure am, man! Why bother asking now?"

Ryouko finished his handsigns. A wind kicked up, blowing his vest open and tearing his shirt.

"Because I'm going to introduce you to Shinigami personally! I know one jutsu not even you can survive! So pay attention- this may very well be the last move of the Third Hokage's last protégé!"

Ryouko's cigarette blew away, landing at Azami's feet. The wind intensified, and it seemed to trap Hidan. Ryouko looked back at Azami.

"Run for it! Get Team Kakashi and get them away from here!" Ryouko shouted.

"What the hell?!"

"NINJA ART SEALING: REAPER DEATH SEAL!" Ryouko shouted, his voice distorted with pain and rage. " I DON'T LIKE TO TRAVEL ALONE. IF I'M GOING TO THE AFTERLIFE, YOU'RE COMING WITH ME!"

--

Team Kakashi heard the crash. The air had gone eerily cold- just like when Orochimaru attacked. Kakashi and Yamato exchanged glances. They nodded as one.

"We're going to check that out. Something isn't right."

It's Ekyt. That's the Fourth's Jutsu, make no mistake. If he's using that, then the enemy is Orochimaru...or worse.

60 - Survival

Ryouko looked to Azami, a sad smile and a nod was all he gave her. She immediately understood he had some kind of plan, and she couldn't let anyone else interfere. That meant Kakuzu.

Ryouko knew two Hokage level jutsus. The chakra you put out was the same. With a few props, you could create some interesting effects. Truth be told, he didn't have the chakra for the Reaper Death Seal. Instead, he forced himself to summon his last weapon, short of the Reaper Death Seal. His emotions. That chakra would boost him a little bit- enough to use the Seal, and maybe even get away alive.

The Third Hokage had taught Ryouko this Jutsu, knowing it would someday be used. But even as he had learned it, Ryouko knew it was meant for Orochimaru, not Hidan. The Third Hokage had taken precautions. After studying for two years with Ryouko, he finally came up with something: Ryouko could, potentially, use the Seal and live. But he had to sacrifice something- his kekkaigenkai, the ShikotsuMyaku, and his emotional chakra.

But that wasn't all that Ryouko had learned from Sarutobi. He had learned a very powerful genjutsu- that of the First Hokage, the "Bringer of Darkness" technique. Ryouko didn't know if a bluff would work or not, but the two had, he imagined, similar effects. So while screaming he was using the Reaper Death Seal and making the handsigns for it, Ryouko was silently using the "Bringer of Darkness" technique. He stopped the Reaper Death Seal handsigns short and instead made the sign of the tiger. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kakuzu had his hands full with Azami.

Ryouko/Ekylt smiled, thinking that they were almost like Kurenai and Asuma. Except he was the genjutsu user, instead of Azami. It struck him that he didn't know what she could do. But that wasn't important now- stopping Hidan was. Make no mistake, Ekylt was taking a gamble.

With Hidan blinded, Ekylt made his move, only then realizing that he had no idea of what to do!

"RYOUKO! GET HIM OUT OF THE CIRCLE AND KEEP HIM OUT!" Azami shouted, clicking her tongue and released an explosive from underneath it. She spit it at Kakuzu, who disassembled himself in the nick of time. In this close, Azami's crossbows would be useless. She drew two swords of Filipino origin and kept slashing away. She saw a set of threads aim for Ryouko and quickly cut them down.

-

Team Kakashi arrived. Immediately, Ryouko warned them to stay back.

"I'll fill you in later! Help Azami, I'll handle him!" Ryouko, of course, had no authority over any of them, but in combat they tended to respect Ryouko's wishes.

"All of you, stay back. I'll handle this one. If I get killed, follow Yamato's orders- understand?"

Kakashi didn't wait for a response- he took off, straight toward Kakuzu. Hidan heard footsteps and aimed a blind attack toward Kakashi's back. Ekyt used the Body Flicker and got in the way of the scythe, knocking it into the ground. The cord that the scythe was attached to suddenly jerked Hidan forward. Fate wasn't usually this generous to Ekyt. Reaching into his tool pouch, Ekyt fished out ten exploding tags. He planted them all over the scythe, then jumped away, waiting until Hidan stopped moving.

The pain from this will end the genjutsu I put on him, but I only need a couple seconds to do this. He's out of his circle of power, so what I need to do is destroy him. With his partner tied up in combat, he won't be able to heal him- not until I've done my damage. But that's not enough...I'm 'Ekyt' again, but in my mind...Ryouko would make this bastard suffer. Sorry Ekyt, no room for nice guys out here now.

"Detonate!"

The tags exploded, blowing Hidan's legs away. The second he was down, Ryouko used the ANBU Paralysis Jutsu. He didn't typically use this jutsu, since it seemed to be in poor taste to take advantage of a helpless opponent. But today, Ryouko wasn't in the mood for mercy. He walked over to Hidan, standing right in his field of vision.

"You like pain, freak? You're going to get a lot of it- but you won't enjoy THIS pain. This pain is really going to hurt, in more ways than one."

First, a genjutsu. Ryouko put all he could behind him 'Death Foreseeing' Jutsu. At this level, it was A-ranked, and enough to shatter a mind.

Next, Ryouko took out his long sword from his summoning scroll. He raised it up ten times- it fell ten times. Hidan was sliced into chunks. The last move Ryouko made was to cut off his head.

"Now then- If you thought you were going nuts before, you were wrong. NOW I start to torture you."

Ryouko picked up Hidan's head by the hair. Unceremoniously, he dropped Hidan's head into an empty summoning scroll. Ryouko put his seal on the scroll. As an afterthought, Ryouko took Hidan's hand, too- the one with the Akatsuki ring on it.

-

Kakuzu kept attacking, but saw it was worthless. Kakashi outclassed him, and now he didn't even have the insufferable Hidan's help. He decided to cut his losses and get back to the Akatsuki with a report- Itachi had been wrong about this 'Ekyt/Ryouko' boy. Saying he was without talent was wrong...no one got lucky this many times.

"Where the hell d'you think you're going?" Ryouko barked, tearing toward Kakuzu. Kakuzu's threads shot at him, but Ryouko blocked or dodged most of them. The threads were durable, so Ekyt borrowed a page from Sasuke Uchiha's book. He caught one thread between his two kunai.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Jutsu!"

Ryouko sent a jet of fire down the thread, toward Kakuzu. Kakuzu cut the thread's connection, then reattached it once the fire was out. As Ryouko got closer, Kakuzu sprung his trap- blending in with the earth, one of his threads shot up and hooked Ryouko's ankle, sending him to the ground hard. More threads came to finish him, but Azami's twin blades blocked them, while the threat of a Raikiri from Kakashi send Kakuzu into retreat mode. No one chased him.

Ekyt was pretty hurt, and he was spent after all those attacks. That made him easy prey for Kakuzu's threads. That was one thing that made the Akatsuki so dangerous- they knew the art of war. A tactic like this ensured that they wouldn't be pursued. Sai's drawings leapt in the way, blocking the attack. Naruto swooped in and picked Ekyt up, while Sakura primed herself for battlefield surgery.

"He's had worse," Naruto informed her. Sakura nodded in agreement, getting to work, while Naruto continued.

"I wonder why the Akatsuki are after him? Is it because he keeps helping me?"

"I'd imagine. Seems like Ekyt has some luck when it comes to them. Anyone else probably would have been killed by these attacks," Sakura murmured, focusing her chakra to Ekyt's stomach, which was the worst of the wounds.

-

Kakuzu stared down the group he was facing. But he disappeared, not even saying a word. He and Hidan had been embarrassed, and it was their own fault- they underestimated the boy's skills, and they gave him a reason to fight. Then they fell for his stupid trick. Their loss was their own fault, not Ekyt's.

Kakashi and Azami didn't lower their weapons right away. When they did, they did so slowly.

"You want to check on him, don't you?" Kakashi said mildly. Azami turned to look at him. She was on Kakashi's Sharingan side, so she couldn't see his expression at all.

"..."

"Go on. I'm not going to stop you. It's clear that you two aren't enemies. If I know anything about Ekyt, I know that. So go on, check on him. After that, we have a lot to discuss."

Azami sheathed her blades. "That sounds fair enough. Thank you for your help."

Kakashi turned to give her a smile (or at least his eye seemed to smile). "Well, you two held them up and gave us a chance to make a well-planned move. And besides... You've done us all a great favor. You just don't know it yet. But that's enough talk from me."

-

"I'd love to know the story behind this one."

Naruto and his team (Sakura was speaking) faced Azami and Ryouko. Ryouko opened his mouth.

“F*** you!”

(Sweatdrops)

Ekyt grabbed the summoning scroll and dropped an exploding tag in.

“I hate this thing. Too bad I have to hold onto it to make sure this...whatever it is...never becomes a full body again. I really need to see if there’s a way to kill him >

61 - More Akatsuki Involvement

Author's note: Sorry for the two short chapters. I submitted only half of chapter sixty! So, this is actually chapter 60, part 2. Sorry about that!

-NG

Azami winced inwardly. **Explaining this won't be easy...and he'll probably be in trouble again. This isn't good...I can tell already- that masked sensei will see through any lie I tell. So why not tell the truth?**

"The truth...Ekyt/Ryouko here got booted from protecting you. He joined up with me. Then we were contracted by Tsunade to offer your group extra support. The council doesn't want Ryouko/Ekyt to keep helping you, for some reason. Whatever it may be, you couldn't keep him away."

"So...a dual existence, then? I suppose your ANBU training WOULD come in handy for that," Yamato commented. "But you're operating outside the law like this..."

"Y-You're not gonna turn him in, are you, Commander?" Sakura felt uneasy. The last thing Ekyt/Ryouko needed was another black mark on his record. He hadn't done anything criminal, after all.

"No, but I wouldn't be out of line to," Yamato said, almost sternly. "I'm just shocked that you would do such a thing. What made you decide to do this?"

Ekyt gulped. "A number of things, not least of all the council seeming to dislike me, for one reason or another." (fidget, fidget)

"Those old crones hate everyone," Naruto grumbled, kicking at some stones on the ground aimlessly. Everyone else seemed to pick up on the fact that Azami was a big reason for Ekyt's decision.

"I'm sorry if I've disappointed you, but I'm just so tired of the politics. This way, I'm more free. I'm tired of getting punished for things that aren't my fault. It gets tiresome. I'm sure you can all understand that. Please understand one thing, if nothing else- I aim to protect you. With or without your permission to do so." Ekyt bowed his head, deep in thought.

"Well, I don't see what it'll hurt. For now, no one mentions this, understood?" Kakashi took charge of the situation, making sure to get an answer from everyone.

--

Azami was ashamed of herself. She had already told Ryouko exactly what she had planned and why. She didn't expect forgiveness or understanding. She waited for the tongue lashing she knew she deserved.

It's my fault that he's so hurt. I-I'm normally so composed, but I've never been more scared!

Scared for him, scared for myself! And worst of all, I feel like I've betrayed his trust.

"So it's my fault they found you. I'm really sorry!"

Ryouko had been patched up, so he wasn't as strong as he wanted. He had torn his shirt with that stunt he had pulled, so his stomach was covered with bandages, leaving his chest exposed. His right arm had been damaged as well, from the shoulder to the wrist.

"Please, don't apologize, Captain. They would have found me sooner or later. I'm just relieved you're alright." Ryouko put his left arm out, patting Azami's head. She had been kneeling next to him, apologizing profusely. "I understand why you did what you did. I'm not an easy person to read, so it's my fault for not making myself clear. Don't give it another thought. Just trust me when I say that I really like you. I wouldn't have taken this job if I didn't."

Azami carefully hugged him, making sure not to undo Sakura's handiwork. She listened for his calming heartbeat, finding it's source then laying her head down. She felt his heartbeat speed up a little- thank, do doubt, to the attention she was giving him.

Ryouko put his good hand on Azami's head, letting it rest gently on her thick black hair. He had been wanting moments like this for a long time now. He had always dreamed that it would be Sakura. Dreams didn't always work out the way you thought they would. Sometimes they threw in a curveball- that wasn't always bad. If things went exactly as you planned, life wouldn't be thrilling, or even worth living.

Ryouko's other arm hurt like hell, but he managed to lay it on Azami's back. He felt a bulge under her dress- a bandage.

"When did you get hurt?"

Azami didn't move. She just mumbled into his chest. "Never mind, it's fine. Hold still, I'm comfortable. And, don't call me captain right now. Just 'Azami'. We're not working right now."

The two stayed like that for little while, taking turns muttering about how they should get moving. Ironically, it was when they started to move that they had to stop.

"Don't move. Either of you."

Ryouko knew that voice all too well.

"Itachi..."

Itachi was standing straight up in front of them. No weapons.

"I need to talk to you, Ekyt. I'm afraid it can't wait. Please don't get violent, I'm not here for that."

Ekyt/Ryouko picked Azami up and placed her behind him. She motioned for her crossbow, but Ekyt shook his head.

“You’ve got my attention, Itachi. What is it?”

He didn’t come to kill me...if he did, he would have just done it now, while my guard was down. So what’s he after? I’ve never done anything but fight him. But even then, it was strange- like he was taking pity on me or something, and letting me live. So why do this?

Maybe I can get some answers as well as give some.

Itachi explained himself in the simplest way possible. “I want my brother to have a stepping stone to get to me. Someone for him to defeat on his way to me. That person is you. Naruto is too personally involved, and the Akatsuki may get him yet. You, on the other hand...I have confidence that you’ll realize your potential. Potential I deny even to the Akatsuki. In another time, you and I would have been comrades. It can’t be helped. Now, remember- speak of this to no one. If you do, I’ll see to it that you’re killed, and that this girl is killed. I don’t want to resort to more evil, but this is how it has to be.”

Ekyt shook his head. “You’re looking out for Sasuke? I won’t ask you why- I’m assuming you would have told me if you wanted me to know.”

Itachi closed his eyes, letting the Sharingan disappear. He left Ekyt with a little bit of advice.

“It’s a shame you weren’t born an Uchiha. You could have done great things with the Sharingan.”

With that, Itachi was gone, and Ekyt was left with more questions than before.

--

Whoomp.

“OW! HAHA, THAT HURT! STUPID LITTLE S***!”

Tsunade glared at the foul-mouthed scroll that Ekyt had just dropped on her desk.

“Oh yeah, here. I forgot, I took his ring, too,” Ekyt told her, dropping an Akatsuki ring on Tsunade’s desk. “I figured it was only fair, since he took a fair amount of flesh off me.”

“You brought me a foul-mouthed scroll? Why, again?” Tsunade poked at the scroll that kept cursing at her, thinking it was one of those gag gifts.

“Funny thing- this guy is immortal. His jutsu...it’s just beyond explanation. It could have killed me, or just as easily anyone, regardless of skill level. If he gets your blood, it’s all over. But, either way...if you’re sure you want me opening that thing...”

Ekyt replaced the cigarette in his mouth, then undid the seal on the scroll. He reached in with a pair of tongs and fished out Hidan’s head.

“Stay back,” Ekyt warned, dropping the head on the desk.

“Ekyl...where’s the rest of him?” Tsunade was absolutely disgusted.

Ekyl shrugged. “Here and there. Whatever left from my exploding tags probably got picked up by his partner. The other guy had five hearts, and he could repair this clown.”

Tsunade noticed Ekyl’s language was more terse and laid-back than usual. **Still upset about the council’s decision. I don’t like it either, Ekyl. I really don’t. Hang in there. Now that I’m on your side, maybe we can get you a team, and even another promotion. I’ll find a way.**

Asuma ambled in. “Hey, Lady Tsunade, I- what the hell is that?”

Tsunade closed her eyes, shaking her head. “This is part of an Akatsuki member. Ekyl kindly dropped him off.”

“Kinda like a cat dragging in a dead fish?”

Tsunade laughed. “More or less.”

“I’M GONNA F***** KILL YOU!” Hidan piped up again, trying to bite Ekyl.

Asuma kind of laughed. “Sounds like the guys who were hunting me. Anyway, I came up to see if I could get a break here. I’ve got some personal business this weekend and I need someone to watch my team. Shikamaru can lead, but this is kind of a big mission, you know? I’d just feel better if they had a fourth member around.”

Ah, Tsunade thought, It’s the second weekend of the month- must be meeting Kurenai. Those two really believe that none of us have figured it out?

“Right, right. Well, Ekyl doesn’t have anything more pressing. In fact, I’d like to prep him and Shikamaru for jonin on this mission,” Tsunade said thoughtfully. “It’s about time I added to my stock of jonin, and those two are more than ready.”

“A slacker and a kid who won’t smoke for real?” Asuma said with a laugh. “Well, I guess they know their stuff. Alright. I know I can trust Ekyl, anyway.”

--

The Akatsuki met to determine their plans.

“Did he really buy that, Itachi? ‘I want you to be a stepping stone’, un? How stupid of him!”

“I wouldn’t be so certain he believed it. I just gave him no choice but to listen,” Itachi replied calmly.

“Either way, while he’s pondering that, the Jinchuuriki will be more open. Losing Hidan was unfortunate, but passable,” Pein informed the group of black-cloaked villains. “Now then, shall we have his body devoured? I’m sure Zetsu could use a meal...”

Kakuzu chimed in this time. “No. The fool is still alive. I hate to say it, but preserve his body. His head will return in time. Even an idiot like that is worth the profits he brings.”

The meeting adjourned, the Akatsuki went their separate ways to plan. No one acknowledged it, but the loss of one member and his ring was worse than any of them cared to think. All the more reason to plan for tomorrow. Even Jinchuuriki’s and their guardians ran out of luck sooner or later.

62 - Beautiful Relationship

Ekyt packed up his weapons and bounty hunter gear and hid them in his closet. He was back to being 'Ekyt' for a while. However, Azami was still contracted to protect Sakura. Knowing that made Ekyt feel a lot better. He was worried about taking this mission, but he couldn't refuse it, or he would lose his chance to be a jonin, instead earning an investigation.

"Ekyt now, is it? Interesting. I'm going to guess that's another codename?"

Ekyt faced Taro (Azami's father), who was in the doorway, smoking and looking around.

"Technically, yes, but I've felt that it's been my name for a long time now," Ekyt replied.

Taro nodded, looking around Ekyt's room. "You read a lot, don't you? I think I see one or two of my books. Tell me...why do you have such an interest in the past, if you fight for the future?"

"Because those who fail history are doomed to repeat it. I've seen it happen. It's what killed my teacher, the Third Hokage. The past never truly dies. It only comes back, stronger and more determined than before."

Taro agreed with Ekyt's words. "Most can't see that side of history. All they see are wars and peoples that don't concern them in the here and now....heh. So, you're twenty, correct?"

"That's right."

Taro crossed his arms in front of his chest, looking thoughtful. "I'd like to know something else, if you don't mind. My daughter...you see, ever since she was little, Azami's been tough. Maybe tomboy-ish, despite her looks. She was practically raised in tombs, in foreign lands, and she knows violence very well. How to perform it, how to stop it, how to love it, how to hate it...she's very jaded for her age. But because of it, she's practical...maybe to a fault. That's why I'd like to ask you a favor."

Ekyt stopped fiddling with his spare clothes and looked at Taro, to show that he understood the seriousness of the situation. Then Taro continued.

"I'd like you to remind her that she is a girl. She may be nineteen, but it couldn't hurt for her to remember that there is a life outside of combat. I had to pull myself away from tombs and back to my other life sometimes- it was hard for me, and I'd like to spare her that pain."

Ekyt stood up, bowing to Taro. "I would be honored. The truth be told, sir, I was going to ask your permission to...forgive me, it's hard to say...I care for your daughter very deeply. I'd like your permission to become closer to her."

Taro laughed good-naturedly, patting Ekyt on the back. "Always so old-fashioned, m'boy? Haha! She is nineteen, she can make her own mistakes...or perhaps, her own success stories. I like you, and I think

you'd be an excellent person for my daughter. So, of course. Just ask her. Although she certainly believes that you are someone worthy of her attention. That in and of itself is surprising. She never seemed to have room for boys on her battlefield. Perhaps she just needed to meet the right boy."

Ekyt had since straightened up. "Nineteen, sir? She said she was twenty...darn, she got me!" Ekyt chuckled. "It's been an ongoing contest between her and I to see who can find out more about who first. I can't believe I didn't see that one. Age aside, I thank you for your permission."

Taro laughed himself for a moment, but then grew serious. "Is it true what she told me? About you protecting her..."

Taro retold the story of Ekyt vs. the various members of the Akatsuki. Ekyt nodded, assuring him it was the truth. Taro's last statement was the one he had been leading up to- the answer he REALLY wanted.

"Is it true you've yet to take a life?"

Ekyt swallowed, but nodded again. "Yes. I would have, but those two the other day...they were immortal. You've heard the story. One I cut to bits, the other I stabbed in the heart. Both lived and counter-attacked. If you question means what I think it means...you needn't worry. I've never taken a life because I could protect without needing to. Should the need arise...I will kill to protect this village or it's people- even anyone who doesn't commit evil acts."

That seemed to satisfy Taro. He smiled and got up to leave the room.

-

A short time later, Azami came in. Ekyt turned to greet her, and nearly wound up killing himself. Out of the corner of his eye, she appeared to be naked.

"Relax! Ancient Egyptian dress. It's gold and mesh, not skin! Pervert!" Azami thumped Ekyt on the head playfully, then ruffled his hair. "But at least I know what you want now. I knew the 'I'm so innocent' act wasn't real! You're just dying to get your hands on me."

"Duh. I AM a guy, after all," Ekyt shot back, catching onto her joke. "So, when's your birthday? I'd like to wish you a happy twentieth..."

"My father told? Agh, you were supposed to earn that one! Oh well. Anyway, I DID come over to get your attention. I can see I've done that very well. Anyway, uh..."

Ba-dump. Wh-what's wrong with me? I...I'm never like this! I NEVER get worked up! Is it him? It is...Ryouko...I need to tell him...I can't put it off.

"I wanted to thank you for saving me yesterday. And I wanted to say that if something happened to you, I wouldn't know what to do. You've started to mean so much to me...I've thought and thought, and I know: I've fallen for you. I've fallen for tough as nails Ryouko, and sweet-and-sour Ekyt. I wasn't sure, but I...I am now. I might just be caught up, and I really need time to think it out...but for now, could we...see how 'us' could work out?"

Ekyt's mouth had dropped open slightly. He'd never had anyone confess their love to him before (Unless you count that dream), and he didn't know how to react. But something told him that he should follow his gut.

"I would be honored. Maybe I'm caught up by you...I mean, you're thrilling, and dangerous, and nothing like any of the girls I've met up 'till now. If you're willing to give 'us' a chance...I'm all for it."

Ekyt and Azami's eyes met. But one question came bubbling to the surface of both their lips:

"Now what happens?"

Neither one had ever had a boyfriend/girlfriend before, and both parties were clueless. For all Azami joked and 'seduced', she'd never had anything like romance before. Ekyt was as clueless as he came across. They both knew where relations ended up eventually- but that was too big a step.

"Uh, let's just take it slow. Play the 'common interests' card?" Ryouko suggested.

"Follow the mood, too," Azami added.

Silence. Azami finally sighed in exasperation- the romantic moment was fading!

"You're such a fool!" she breathed in Ekyt's ear. Seconds later, she was holding him tightly. Then her lips met his. Neither one of them had felt this before; not like this. A deep, passionate kiss to seal the deal on their brand new relationship. It's what they both wanted but never dared to expect.

--

Shikamaru, Choji, Ino, and Ekyt assembled at the gate, waiting for Asuma's orders. He appeared briefly, looking like he was in a rush.

"Alright, Shikamaru- you're leading. Here's the mission- Head to the Land of Tea. Escort Idate Morino from the Land of Tea to the border of Tanzaku town. He's to rendezvous with three ninja who will escort him and his supplies back to Tanzaku town. This is mostly a protection mission, so assume there's enemies. Idate and his cargo must arrive in-tact. The cargo is very valuable to the Land of Tea, and the Hidden Leaf's obligation to protect both Tanzaku town AND the Land of tea mean that there can't be any screw-ups. Understand?"

"Yeah, yeah, we get it, Asuma. Don't mess up," Shikamaru drawled. "What a pain this is."

Asuma walked over to Shikamaru to talk to him personally. "Shikamaru, I've never had a student make jonin. I was going to wait until then to give you this, but this mission isn't A-ranked for no reason. So here."

In Shikamaru's hands were a pair of trench knives, just like Asuma's. Shikamaru slipped them on his hands- they fit like a glove.

“Alright, I’m off. And you, Ekyt- watch your back. Rumor has it that some Hidden Mist Village Shinobi are on the prowl for you around Tanzaku town.”

--

Before they could even leave town, Team Asuma had to deal with a fight.

“BACK OFF, B*TCH!”

“WHO’RE YOU CALLING A B*TCH?!”

Ekyt dove into the fight, prying Azami away from a familiar face.

Aw s* ...did these two HAVE to meet? I guess I knew they would clash...hell, I’m gonna say it- what a drag!**

It was Linda who was fighting with Azami.

“Keep your hands off me, you filthy prick!” Linda snarled at Ekyt, giving him a shove. That earned her a hard punch from a furious Azami.

“Back off! Ekyt, who IS this?!”

Ekyt exhaled. “THAT is the girl I came to the village with. No relationship, don’t worry. Basically, she shot me down, and has since dedicated her life to beating me in every way, shape, or form. Including somehow landing a good friend of mine as her boyfriend. In other words, she’s just a bad egg in a good village.”

Azami looked a little hurt by that. “There was another before me, then?” she asked quietly. Ekyt shook his head.

“No. You’re the first. You were the first to really like me back. With her, I was interested, I admit it. But I was so young and so stupid...I just liked the fact that she was strong. But she’s not. She’s weak. And she means nothing to me, other than that she’s a comrade. I promise you that. It’s you I’m in love with, Azami. I said it, and I meant it. And I mean it now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about her?” Azami asked. **Was he planning to ever tell me?**

“Honestly, I didn’t think of it. I try not to think of her, she tends to make my stomach hurt. She’s no threat to you. Besides, I would have told you anything if you had asked. I really didn’t have time to, since you and I only agreed that we’re in love this morning.”

That made sense to Azami.

“Alright. But when you get back, you owe me a date,” Azami said, complete with a fake pout. Ekyt put a hand on her back, pulling her close.

“Deal. So, when do I get to meet the first boy you ever liked?”

Azami rolled her eyes. “Well, I’m pretty sure he was mummified...or did you mean living?”

Ekyt sighed, shaking his head. “Someday I’ll learn not to leave loopholes when I ask you questions.”

Ekyt looked Azami over, dressed in that gold and net get-up...somehow, she wore it fashionably, and not like she was ‘open for business’. He felt a pang of longing- he wanted to go and hold her again. But that couldn’t happen right now- not with so many people watching. They were far enough away that they wouldn’t be heard, but their actions would speak loud enough. They’d agreed to keep their relationship secret- that way no one could link ‘Ekyt’ to ‘Ryouko’ in that regard.

“Alright, enough drooling over me. Go get ‘em, okay. And come back to me in one piece.” Azami gave Ekyt a discreet swat on the butt, then disappeared herself.

Jealousy isn’t like me! But now I knew that Ekyt likes my native dress. Well, he’ll have plenty of chances to see it. My father approves of him...and so do I. Stay safe, Ekyt. And don’t worry, I’ll protect Ojo-sama while you take care of this mission.

--

Shikamaru laid out his plans, drawing on the ground with a stick.

“We’ll keep Idate in the middle of the four of us. We’ll form a diamond. Choji, you’ll take the left side. Ino, you take the right. I’ll cover the rear. Ekyt, that leaves you to handle the front.”

“Why this formation, Shikamaru?” Choji asked. “Last time, we went with a straight line.”

“Choji, you, Ino, and I are best when we attack together. Ekyt doesn’t know our fighting style like we do, and we don’t know his. Plus, there’s the fact that he’s got a bounty on his head right now. He can’t be attacked from behind this way, which also means our target can’t become collateral damage. If Ekyt gets tied up in a fight, we can keep moving if we need to. Plus, my Shadow Possession Jutsu is a ranged attack that compliments Choji and Ino’s attack styles. Ekyt, all I know about you is that you use genjutsu at times- if I snare someone with my Shadow Possession, they’ll be easy prey for your genjutsu. I’m positioned in the back so that I can back up all of you. If we’re caught up, I’ll stay back with one of you, while the other two keep moving.”

“Makes sense,” Choji said, nodding his head in agreement.

“Alright. If we have to pair off at any point, I’ll stay with you, Choji. Ino, you’ll stay with Idate. Ekyt, you’re the most experienced among us when it comes to fighting solo, so you’ll go with whichever group is more heavily involved.”

“Sounds good to me.” Ekyt was already planning out his attack strategy- he just had a feeling about this mission.

“Alright. Let’s get going.”

At Shikamaru's unspoken command, Ekyt leapt high into the trees, taking off at top speed. As he kept moving, two thoughts crossed his mind.

Azami...and I might be a jonin after this? My luck has finally changed.

NEXT ISSUE: MORE ON AZAMI VS. LINDA, AND YUUSHI MEETS HIS TEACHER'S NEW GIRLFRIEND!

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Anyone else starting to see a relationship between Ryouko/Ekyt and Azami that really has an interest potential to it? It kind of reminds me of 'The Mummy', with Imhotep and Anksunamun (sp- now way I spelled that right!). That wasn't the inspiration for this pairing, but it kinda seems that way now, lol.

63 - Truly Immortal

The Land of Tea was a pretty peaceful place, now that the leader had been picked. The two warring families had finally finished their fighting, with the more just of the two now running the village. Jirocho, the 'boss', was an old acquaintance of Tsunade's, which explained why this mission was accepted and given such priority.

Unfortunately, Jirocho wasn't there to see Team Asuma and Ekyt off. Instead, only the client, Idate Morino, was waiting.

"About time! You guys are slow!" was Idate's manner of greeting. Despite being the little brother of Ibiki Morino (the somewhat sadistic genjutsu master of the Leaf Village), Idate was more or less useless, except for one thing- he could run!

"Yeah, yeah. Are you ready to go? If you're so worried about a timetable, then you shouldn't spend your time complaining- especially not to the people protecting you.," Shikamaru informed Idate. Shikamaru had thought about ignoring this, but he didn't for two reasons. The first was that Shikamaru's reasoning was solid; the second was that Ino would dog the whole trip if Idate didn't shut up.

Unfortunately, Idate wasn't listening.

"Hey there cutie! Such a pretty girl, in with these bozos? Feh, what a waste! How about cutting out and running off with me?"

Ino already had a boyfriend, so she wouldn't have said yes- even if the guy asking wasn't an obnoxious prick. Instead, she took the lit cigarette out of her mouth and put it out on Idate's forehead.

"I'm gonna forget you said anything. It would suck for you if you had to answer to my boyfriend. He doesn't take kindly to people like you at all, not to mention the fact that you're hitting on me."

Ekyt shook his head, wondering if this arrangement was going to work. At least they kept moving, and Tanzaku town wasn't far anyway.

"YOU! ENEMY OF THE MIST!"

"Oh, come ON!" Ekyt groaned. **Already with these guys?!**

He wheeled around and walked toward his attackers. "Listen, you were going to put two innocent boys to death. They were my friends, so I stopped you. That's how it happened. I let you guys keep your pride. I'm honored you put a big bounty on my head, but give it up. This is ridiculous."

The three Mist ninja exchanged glances, trying to figure out if what Ekyt had just said made sense. At any rate, Ekyt didn't attack them. He just stopped and stared, ready to defend himself if necessary.

Whizz!

“Look out!” Ekyt grabbed one Mist Shinobi and yanked him to the side. One of the other Mist ninja grabbed his other cellmate and pushed him away- just in time to be riddled with kunai and shuriken himself.

“Shimuru!” the Mist-nin in Ekyt’s hands tried to pull away from him, but Ekyt jerked him back.

“Go over there and you’re gonna die yourself! That last one had an explosive attached! Now JUMP!”

Everyone did, just in time. Out of the smoke came familiar strings. They were aimed at Ekyt, who was forced to do a quick replacement jutsu. But something had happened.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Ba-dump. (Heartbeat)

What’s this? Before, I was always chasing after Sakura, or a rank- something impossible. Now I’m up for jonin, and I have a...girlfriend. Am I one of those people that always needs to shoot for a goal?

Ekyt rushed through the smoke, throwing shuriken and kunai. He heard the sounds of them being blocked. That meant the enemy hadn’t used a replacement jutsu- at least not yet.

What’s wrong with me? I’m not content...am I? I guess I always wondered about success- would it ruin me? I’m one of those people that always needs to be doing something...so has success screwed me up?

Ekyt burst through the end of the smoke, his long sword drawn and at the ready. Kakuzu and an Akatsuki member Ekyt didn’t know yet were shocked to see him burst through the smoke. Shikamaru and the two surviving Mist-nin broke off toward the unknown member, leaving Kakuzu to fight with Ekyt.

No. Success hasn’t screwed me up. I haven’t succeeded totally yet, so I guess I can’t say. But I feel it now more than ever- a need to protect. Now it’s not just a vague ‘for the Leaf’ thing- it’s ‘for the Leaf, for Ojo-sama and Naruto, for Azami’...more goals, more reason to protect. So I’ve really got to be even stronger now. I can’t afford to be content. That’s just the world I live in. And you know something? That’s just fine with me!

“Hold it! Move and they’re all dead!”

Ekyt stared in disbelief- the green, plant-looking guy (Yes, I know his name, but Ekyt doesn’t, so bare with me, lol) had burrowed up from the ground, and his giant venus flytrap-ish jaws were poised to swallow even the plump Choji whole.

“You! The boy- release Hidan’s hand and head from the scroll. Right now!”

Ekyt didn’t know how the plant-guy was talking, but there was no choice. Ekyt removed his seal from the scroll and pulled out Hidan’s head. Wanting a measure of revenge (and being angry for being caught off-guard), Ekyt punted Hidan’s head. A kunai followed it, forcing plant-man to move and freeing

Ino, Choji, and Idate.

As Ekyt charged in again, he noticed a thread aiming for Shikamaru. Ekyt started to move in the way, but that's when Kakuzu froze.

"Shadow Possession Jutsu. I don't know what kind of cheap trick you're using, but making your attack so obvious only made it easier for me to spring my trap." Shikamaru smirked- just like Shogi. All the pieces had moved the right way.

"Konoha's Shadow Paralysis...I fell right into it..." Kakuzu murmured, furious over how things had worked out.

"If you want to call the 'Shadow Possession' by it's OLD name. I guess that's okay, but to make sure you're up with the times, no one calls it 'Shadow Paralysis' anymore, except my dad. But if you've heard of it by either name, then maybe you've heard of another one of the Nara clan's techniques..." Shikamaru raised two fingers to the side of his face. "Shadow Strangle Jutsu!"

Shikamaru had to stop there, as Hidan had pulled himself together again. The parts Ekyt had been forced to release from his scroll had been stitched together by Kakuzu during the brief brawl that had just ensued.

Damn.

Ekyt nodded to Shikamaru, and they began their counter-attack.

Shikamaru's Shadow Sewing attack kept Kakazu's attacks at bay, giving Ekyt time to clash with Hidan again. Ekyt had talked about this possibility with Shikamaru, and had told him all about Hidan. It was best to keep everyone away from Hidan.

Too late.

Shikamaru couldn't move while using the Shadow Possession like this. He couldn't dodge Hidan's scythe as it struck him in the arm. Shikamaru yanked the scythe out, but couldn't wipe the blood off. "We're done here now, man! Just a little taste, and then your shadow's gonna shrivel up, along with your body!"

Ekyt was already in motion. Just as Hidan swallowed, Ekyt's longsword was slashing down at a precise angle, making a cut on the esophagus. The blood Hidan swallowed poured out onto the ground.

"I know how your jutsu works. Too bad for you. And you know, you COULD watch your mouth when there's a lady present, y'know?"

That was typical Ekyt. He had picked out one of Hidan's weaknesses and played it for all it was worth. And without that blood, Hidan couldn't do any damage to Shikamaru- perfect.

Shikamaru captured Hidan with his Shadow Possession. Using that, he walked Hidan out of his circle of power. Ekyt tore toward him, the two Mist ninja attacking with him. Shikamaru let go of the Shadow Possession, too tired and hurt to keep it going. Hidan swung his scythe toward Ekyt and the Mist-nin.

The two Mist-nin were hit in the stomach, then in the back as the scythe came flying back. Ekyt dodged it both times. He kept his long word out, waiting for the scythe to whiz by him again.

“F***! Are you serious, man?! Again you’re doing this? First you free him, and now you’re doing the brave routine and fighting me? I don’t have anyone’s blood in me since you slit my f***** throat.”

Ekyt looked at his hurt teammates. Shikamaru needed medical attention, and fast. Even more than that, Idate needed to be escorted. With Shikamaru out, that left one option.

“Ino, Choji- take Shikamaru and Idate and run. You two, the Mist Ninja- how far is your back-up? I’m assuming that it isn’t only you two who came after me. Not with a 20 million ryo bounty on my head...”

The two Mist-nin backed up. “No, we were, uh...well...”

“Greedy,” Ekyt finished for them. “Alright, for now, we need to help each other. Do either one of you know the Water Wall Jutsu?” (One of them nodded). “Good. Use that and cover my friends while you and them escape. And understand this- if I find you’ve even TOUCHED them, I’ll forget I’m a nice guy and kill you. Right now, I just want everyone else to make it out alive. In fact...if my team isn’t hurt when I come back, I’ll make a deal with you two- I’ll let you take me to your village, if you leave me unharmed. Deal?”

That sounded like a deal to the Mist-nin. They were really too injured to continue.

“Hey! Don’t forget about me, you stupid a*****!” Hidan snarled. He raised his scythe ready to hit the injured Mist shinobi. Ekyt cursed- he had to stop this.

“GO!” he shouted, creating three Shadow Clones. “Dance of the Sickle Moon!”

Ekyt’s clones began to attack Hidan rapid-fire. One of them cut the scythe free from Hidan’s hands and threw it to Ekyt. Ekyt buried it in the dirt to get rid of the blood. He also took a second to plant explosives on the scythe so he could destroy it for the time being.

Right about then, the Mist-nin used their Water Wall. That gave everyone but Ekyt a chance to escape. He wasn’t done here yet. Using his ANBU Paralysis Jutsu on Kakuzu, Ekyt called forth his Water Dragon, Umisu.

“Umisu, I need all the water you can give me! Flood this place, make sure there’s no blood!”

Umisu did, creating a huge lake. Kakuzu sank to the bottom, paralyzed and unable to swim. Ekyt’s clones were still slicing at Hidan, who was taking damage. With this destruction as cover, Ekyt escaped.

But it wasn’t over yet. Itachi had landed in front of Ekyt, just staring at him. Then he spoke:

“You’ll need to be much stronger than that. At the mercy of two enemies like this, even with all the help you had. It’s pathetic. And even worse, you sent away your only hope to walk away alive.”

Ekyt stood up, back straight, eyes forward, jaw set. “Then kill me. I won’t die a coward, running in terror

from you.”

Itachi thought back to the Uchiha massacre. How little Sasuke was back then, and how he had run away.

“You’re the opposite of my brother. You’re older, so I suppose it’s hardly a fair comparison. Not to mention the fact that your clan has been untouched. If you survive this day, you won’t see me as often as before. If you die, you aren’t worth the trouble to me.”

Ekyt saw Hidan and Kakuzu getting up. The other one, the green guy Ekyt didn’t know, was long gone. Itachi put up one hand, stopping Hidan and Kakuzu from making any further movement.

“Why me? And why should I believe you? I’ve got no reason to believe that you’d really choose me as the ‘stepping stone’ for your brother. I’ve got even less reason to believe that you’d give your brother a real chance at you with any help. Then there’s one glaring fact that’s become obvious to me...” Ekyt looked Itachi right in the eyes. He felt a genjutsu, but it wasn’t anywhere near Itachi’s normal level. It was a B-ranked genjutsu, something Ekyt could break. He did so now.

“...you guys aren’t the genuine article, except for that foul-mouthed guy. You haven’t been the real deal for quite some time. If I was really that big a target, you guys would have come in person, not sent some imitations that you lent your chakra to.”

Kakuzu laughed outright. “Gotta give him credit there, Itachi. He figured us out. Tell me, Ryouko- what gave us away?”

Ekyt/Ryouko gave a small smile. “Because I’m still alive. My skills aren’t on par with yours. No one gets lucky so often. Your real selves typically have huge amounts of chakra, meaning that you should be able to outlast me. But so far, every time we’ve clashed, I’ve just barely managed to hang on. I still don’t know why you’re toying with me at all, because you aren’t targeting Naruto at the moment.”

“That’s true,” ‘Itachi’ told Ekyt, “There are other Jinchuuriki out there besides Naruto. We need them all to achieve our goals. What order we get them in doesn’t matter at this point. We can simply outwait you and take Naruto when his guardians are dead. We’ll take you all out, one by one- however long it takes. Then the Jinchuuriki will be in the open.” Itachi’s explanation was chilling. He never once raised his voice or opened his eyes, even when he spoke again:

“Now if I might ask you a question...Why do you protect the Jinchuuriki?”

Ekyt hadn’t expected this. But he decided to tell the truth. “Because Naruto is a friend, for starters. But more than that...he’s living my dream, or something close to it. If I can’t have that life myself, I’d like to see someone deserving have it. But the reason you’ll be most interested in is the third reason...”

“And that is?”

“...Everyone thinks their motives are pure. No one admits they’re evil; everyone’s actions are justified to themselves. Your actions are killing and making money, and you think that’s right. MY actions are protecting my village and the people in it, and making sure that my opinion of evil never becomes a

reality. And I think I'm justified, just as you think you are."

--

"Idate, you're so fast! Can you get back-up for us, from our village? We can't leave him like that!"

Idate didn't like Ekyt, but facts were facts- Ekyt had protected him. Leaving a protector at the mercy of the worst enemies possible is something the old, cowardly Idate would have done. Right and wrong mattered now.

"Right! I'll get going!" Idate said, already taking off at top speed.

64 - Time and Time Again

Ekyl stared down 'Itachi', 'Zetsu', Hidan, and 'Kakuzu'. He glared forward, a thought niggling at him. It wasn't a good one. It was typical of Ekyl, and it was damaging.

If I had this much trouble against the 'imitation Akatsuki'...then I've overestimated my strength. And if I've overestimated it, as big a pessimist as I am...Then it's all been for nothing.

...

No, you've got bigger problems now. Of this group, you know only Hidan is real. If you kill the others, then that means you're only killing their host bodies- innocent people. No, not innocent...supporters. But can I justify that? Am I even good enough to kill them?

"You're second-guessing yourself? At this stage of the game? You ARE foolish..." 'Itachi's' eyes glowed, boring into Ekyl. "You've already chosen to oppose us. You can run, or you can face us to the bitter end. If you run...you aren't half the man I thought you were..."

"Stop spouting your philosophical bullsh**," Ekyl snarled, out of character. "How could a genius like you ever think like me? You don't know my thought process, and that might be my only advantage. I think I've met the real you before, Itachi. And I know why I survived."

Itachi seemed vaguely amused. "Oh? Why was that?"

"Because I was unpredictable to you. Everyone sees you and starts shaking. I saw you and attacked. You could read my jutsus, but my mind isn't a typical Shinobi mind- you can't anticipate what I'm going to do. THAT is why I survived. It's also why you're not going to kill me now. Because..." Ekyl lit a new cigarette, shifting his weight, forgetting about his injuries, and setting himself straight.

"Because if I DON'T stop you, I'm not half the man I KNOW I am!"

Ekyl thought about his possible promotion to jonin, his new girlfriend (Azami), and the people that had been killed by the Akatsuki. Proxies or in person, these people needed to be stopped. People could only get hurt if nothing was done.

Itachi is the strongest...but I'm going to take out Kakuzu first. That way he can't stitch Hidan together again. My best chance is to throw off Itachi's genjutsu while I fight the others. I'm not going to use the Reaper Death seal on a bunch of fakes, either. I don't know the plant guy's fighting style, and I doubt I've seen everything Kakuzu can do. So Kakuzu and plant-dude first, then. Best not to let them strut their stuff at all. And I'll need a way to block that damned scythe...damned...damned...Orochimaru!

Ekyl bit his thumbs, his back to Itachi. When he spun around, Hidan's scythe was flying towards him. Itachi's Fireball Jutsu was on it's way, too.

"TRIPLE RASHOMON!" Ekyl yelled, smashing his palms into the ground.

--

"We've got to hurry! This way!" Idate kept running, hoping everyone could follow him. He had to slow down a little.

"(cough)I didn't expect this just after we return from our honeymoon," Hayate said to Yukao. (The two tied the knot in Issue 50)

"I wouldn't miss this one, Hayate. I know very well what Ekyt means to you, and you know that he's grown on me as well," Yukao replied, her ANBU mask in place, but a smile in her voice.

"He has that effect on people. Now that you two are in on the secret, it takes some of the pressure off me. I might have been able to handle these guys in my prime, but not so much now. Too many girls and too much sake can take it's toll on you."

Hayate and Yukao were still in awe of the fact that Master Jiraiya himself was coming to help. It was a welcome surprise. Not everyone went on a mission with the Toad Mountain Sage. It was such an incredible chance to learn, and it would be a great story to tell their children someday.

"Wait...Hayate, Yukao- wait until I say to get involved. We're dealing with a fragile situation. Two of them, actually. The first is the Akatsuki. The second is Ekyt's ego. He has zero self-esteem, and if we save him before we need to...Well, I can't have him moping around."

Jiraiya noticed how talented Ekyt was, even back when no one else seemed to. It was true that if you wanted something, and you really gave it every ounce of your being, you could get it. Ekyt had become strong, but he didn't dare believe it. And Jiraiya knew that. But he had seen the kid in action. But nothing could have prepared him for seeing...

Triple Rashomon? He learned Orochimaru's defensive jutsu?! I wish Sarutobi-sensei was still alive, but I remember his prediction. Three new Sannin, and the one who helped them get there...But he can't know that. Knowing Ekyt, he'll stop aiming to be legendary, and just settle for 'stepping stone'. For now, we watch. Then we move in at the right moment.

--

I'll die to win, because I'm born to lose...No. I'm going to be a jonin. I'm going to have a beautiful girl waiting for me at home. I'm going to protect the dream I once had...I can't afford not to. Four on one, and this is the 'Akatsuki'...I've got cover. I need to think. Hidan- physical attacks. Kakuzu- range. Itachi- range. Plant guy...below!

Ekyt leapt up just as Zetsu burrowed from underneath him. Some part of Ekyt's consciousness had been prepared for that move, as he threw an explosive-laced knife right into Zetsu's big green mouth. Zetsu had to spit it out and throw it, but still caught some of the impact from the blast.

While in the air, Ekyt aimed for Hidan. He saw the scythe coming, and used a replacement jutsu.

Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing! Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing!

Ekyt used the jutsu twice, just a split-second apart. The first try was released. The second try hit just as the chakra flow to Hidan's senses was blocked by his first release. The genjutsu struck hard.

Ekyt used a release himself, freeing himself from Itachi's attack. He almost didn't see the threads from Kakuzu in time. He turned his body to the side just enough, forcing the threads to miss him. Still falling, Ekyt bounced himself off the first wall of the three Rashomon, his hand throwing two shuriken.

"Multi Shuriken Shadow Clones!"

Two shuriken became two thousand, all aiming for Kakuzu. Before they hit, Ekyt used a body flicker to land in front of Kakuzu. He grabbed Kakuzu by his cloak and threw him into the shuriken before he could dodge away.

That left Itachi. But the problem- Ekyt's chakra was almost gone. As he always did against Itachi, he reached inside for his emotional chakra.

But it wasn't there.

Damn it! That chakra was dependent on my anger and depression! I don't have as much now, so the chakra is gone! Not gone, no...I feel something. But it's normal chakra. It wasn't there before. Maybe my emotions haven't completely deserted me...

Ekyt rushed Itachi, reaching for a kunai. Time to put his unpredictability to work. Itachi started to make handsigns, wanting to have something to lead to his genjutsu, kind of a precursor. Ekyt let the kunai fly in such a way that the butt-end struck Itachi's hands, cracking a couple knuckles. That apparently shocked the Itachi surrogate, because he didn't have time to dodge as Ekyt's hand blurred and cracked his jaw. With so much chakra behind the strike, Itachi was hit for real, and he flew, skidding into the ground several feet away.

Ekyt had broken at least one knuckle with that punch, and he was panting from the effort. Holding off four fake Akatsuki members was tiring business. He needed to find a way to kill them. No, better yet, he needed to re-group. For the time being, he retreated to the area behind the Triple Rashomon gates.

--

"Now we help him. He's handled himself long enough. Let's go!"

Jiraiya, Yukao, and Hayate, dropped in next to Ekyt.

"Take a breather, kid- you've earned it. Now leave the clean-up to us!"

Ekyt was too tired to argue. "Watch out for the scythe. The guy throwing it...if he swallows your blood, he becomes a voodoo doll. Anything he does to himself, he does to you. And he can't die. The one with the weird headdress uses these-"

Jiraiya nodded grimly. "I know. I managed to catch them practicing one day, and I saw their techniques.

But I couldn't believe it."

"One more thing- those are fakes. I don't know where the real ones are, but all of them but the blond with the scythe are phony."

Ekyt started to get up, but Hayate put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"(cough) I haven't met your girlfriend yet. Can't have you dying on me, can I? Catch up with (cough) your team and finish your mission."

"Right, leave the clean-up to us!" Yukao agreed, patting Ekyt's head. "I can't wait to meet her, too!"

"Pretty girls don't like other pretty girls, you two might not getting along," Ekyt finally managed to joke.

"Tell me you didn't just hit on my wife..." Hayate smirked.

"I don't think my girl would appreciate it if I did, so I'll go with 'no, I didn't'," Ekyt shot back. It seemed having Azami in his life made him more light-hearted and even more fun. He was still all about training, but he could also crack a smile and tell a joke now and then. In a way, Azami was perfect for Ekyt, because she needed him just as much as he needed her. He hadn't figured it out yet, but Ekyt needed someone to protect. Someone close, and personal, rather than just a general idea that he was protecting 'someone, somewhere'.

"Hayate, go easy on him...I think he could beat you up now," Yukao joked, tapping her husband on the arm. "He's not some little genin that can barely hold a sword anymore."

"Hate to break the fun up, kids, but we've got to handle this now. Ekyt, go back to your team. Leave this to us." Jiraiya started toward the fight, making handsigns. "SUMMONING JUTSU: BRING DOWN THE HOUSE!"

Just as his toad crushed Hidan and Kakuzu, Jiraiya made a mental note to talk with Ekyt.

Now that his head's on straight, it's time he got some kind of regular instruction. It can't be me, but I'll find him a good sensei. Just maybe he WILL make legend someday. If not, he'll still be a good jonin, whether or not he ever officially gets the rank.

Hayate and Yukao had their swords drawn, but the fight was over. The real Akatsuki members withdrew their chakra from the hosts upon Jiraiya arriving. Hidan had been carried off by Zetsu. That was what the Akatsuki had set out to do, so mission accomplished.

--

Choji carried Shikamaru to Tanzaku town, while Ino tried to tolerate Idate. In Tanzaku town, there was a clinic that could handle Shikamaru's minor injuries; there was food aplenty for Choji; that just left Ino wishing Sasuke was here, instead of the irritating Idate.

"If you make ONE more pass at me, I SWEAR..." Ino started to rear back with a punch, but Ryouko's hand stopped her.

“You can’t kill the client, Ino. It’s bad for business,” Ekyt said, a tired smile on his scratched and bruised face. “That said...” Ekyt went into ‘Ryouko mode’ and took a step toward Idate.

“If you keep hitting on her, I’ll be dealing with you. And let me warn you- I don’t care if your big brother was a sensei of mine, and I don’t care how fast you run- I WILL catch you, and it won’t be pleasant. So go hit a strip club, or keep it in your pants until you get home.”

Idate backed down, and Ekyt let his thoughts drift to his own home.

--

“I hope he’ll be home soon...” Azami was never this nervous. But she really missed Ekyt. This place was still foreign to her, and he was comforting.

“Why?” Linda asked sarcastically, making a face. “Trust me, you’d be better off without that guy!”

“You threw him away. I don’t plan to let him go,” Azami answered simply, shrugging.

“Yeah. One girl’s trash is another girl’s treasure, I guess. I guess trash WOULD be attracted to trash anyway.” Linda shrugged. Azami tackled her.

Ekyt walked in the gates, and the first thing he saw was Azami pinning Linda to the ground.

“YOU dog!” she shouted.

As Ekyt rushed over to break up the fight, a small corner of his mouth raised in a smile.

It’s good to be home...such as it is.

65 - 1 Year Anniversary Special!

ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL!

It's been one year since I first submitted 'Tides of Time'. Thank you very much to all my readers. I always look forward to your comments (and to my fellow authors, I enjoy giving them back when I FINALLY get a break to do so ^^). Thank you again. Merry Christmas to you all, here's hoping for another year of 'Tides of Time!' (next come the action figures, movies, anime series, and fame...right? What? That doesn't come after a year? ...oh. XD) Well this issue will be a little different, but I hope all of you will enjoy it anyway. E ya soon!

-NG

Jiraiya returned with Yukao and Hayate, all of them unscathed from battle. Jiraiya had something on his mind, though.

"Hayate, you know Ekyt pretty well, right?" Jiraiya began, reaching into his vest to look for a scroll.

"(Koff) I guess so. Is there something I should know, Master Jiraiya (koff)?" Hayate turned his head to face Jiraiya, not sure he liked the legend's ominous tone.

"No, not really. I've just got a question for you..." Jiraiya started to ask a question, but quickly changed it to "...What's his girlfriend like?"

Hayate shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I haven't met her yet (koff)."

Yukao spoke up. "I have. I thought her to be an evil girl. She's listed in our BINGO books, although that listing has been lifted by Lady Tsunade recently. I don't have a picture of her, just a list of facts. She's been very elusive." Yukao found her BINGO book and began to read from Azami's page. It was quite an interesting read.

"...Left Sunagakure at age fourteen. Her last rank was...jonin. She clashed with the Kazekage before Gaara, then fled the village with their Black Ops teams chasing her. She's evaded them for five years, working as a bounty hunter. She's well known in the underground as someone cold, ruthless, and beautiful. Aside from the fact that her father is famous for his studies in Egyptology and Japanese History..." Yukao shrugged. "The girl is an A-ranked criminal who will work for the right price."

A sweatdrop appeared on Jiraiya's head. "And Ekyt is straight as an arrow, except for briefly being an A-ranked criminal in Konoha, and an S-ranked in the Mist Village...both for saving lives, not taking them. How'd he fall for her?"

Yukao had the answer to this one. "Good boys like bad girls. But knowing Ekyt, I doubt he was taken by her beauty and nothing else. If that was the case, he could have just looked around the village."

“After Sakura, I doubt he could. I mean, I went through the same thing with Tsunade. I can’t believe Naruto had more luck than me! Anyway, I think I’d better have a talk with Ryouko. You know, make sure he understands how, uh, babies are made and all that.”

Jiraiya walked off down the street, smiling at a poster advertising ‘Makeout Violence’ as a movie. In his mind, though, he had something else that was making him frown inwardly.

I need to talk to him about what Sarutobi-sensei said about him. I’ve withheld that information for a year now. He needs to know it, unpleasant or not. I don’t know how he’ll react, but things are going well for him now. Maybe he’ll take it better now than he would have a year ago. More is riding on him than he knows. Naruto is the central player, but even he’ll need help.

--

Azami didn’t resist when she felt Ekyt’s hands gently pry her off of Linda. She giggled as she watched him get the courage up to keep lifting her up, even holding her for a second, then set her down on her feet.

“Linda, this has to stop. I heard what you said. I don’t think you’re even worth hitting, but obviously you’re bothering Azami. I suggest stopping, and I mean now. You’ve got your boyfriend. Instead of paying so much attention to me, why don’t you keep your eyes on him?”

Ekyt didn’t even wait for a response; he just kept moving. Azami followed him. She was walking next to him when Ekyt started talking to her. This had been troubling him for some time, but he had declined to ask until now.

“Azami, I really don’t know anything about you…” clearly Ekyt was going somewhere with this, but Azami cut him off.

“All you need to know is that I’m serious about you. Everything else…it’s all minor detail. As far as I’m concerned, you’re my new life.”

Azami wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw Ekyt smile. She smiled herself, but her thoughts belied her smile.

I can’t tell him about my past. It’s not just that I’m worried he won’t like me after that, it’s also the fact that I outrank him. Rank is clearly a sore subject with him, and me flaunting my jonin rank would only make him feel like crap.

Speaking aloud, Azami continued. “So, what did you do while you were on that mission? Turns out your precious Ojo-sama had training with the Hokage, so she didn’t need me.”

Ekyt explained it. They were on their way to Tsunade’s office so that Ekyt could give his report to her. When they hit the top of the stairs, Azami heard about the part with Hidan and the ‘fake’ Akatsuki.

“What?! Are you TRYING to give me a heart attack?!” Azami muttered, giving Ekyt a mocking hit on the chest. “You SO owe me a date for making me worry!”

“That’s funny, because I was just going to get my courage up to ask you out. And you just admitted that you’re okay with being seen with me...”

“Yeah, I did. I was trying to get MY courage up to say *that*,” Azami fired back, entirely truthful.

Ekyt stopped. “Well, I’ve got to warn you...I’m shy. I might be able to talk with you like friends, but dating is another thing. I’m going to be shy as all heck, and even more clueless. If you can deal with that...”

“I can,” Azami replied confidently. “You just go report to the Hokage. I’m going to get ready. And don’t worry, I’ll plan our date, so you can stop worrying about that. And yes, I’m going to tell my father that we’re serious now. So, be ready to meet him. Understood?”

Azami had just rattled all that off like she was giving orders. She guessed (correctly) that Ekyt would have an easier time if she did. For his part, he just nodded, shocked by the sudden ‘Alpha dog’ routine.

“Good boy. Go get ‘em, kid!” Azami told Ekyt, swatting him on the butt. She left her hand there for a lingering second. Ekyt turned around, his wide eyes meeting Azami’s smiling eyes. Ekyt finally smiled back, and Azami went off to get ready.

--

Tsunade listened patiently, but her mind wasn’t really on Ekyt’s report about Idate’s escort. It was on what Jiraiya said.

If that’s all true, then Ekyt is in for a let down...possibly. But I can at least give him some good news before the problem.

“I’d say you handled this mission like a profession. Well then, Ekyt, it’s time for...is something wrong?”

Ekyt’s mind wasn’t on what Tsunade was saying. “I was just thinking about my emotional chakra. It seems that I’ve lost the ability to use it. Instead, my emotions boost my regular chakra. Is that...bad?”

Tsunade spread her hands on her desk. “Medically, no. And that’s all I’m concerned about. Now then, there’s a more important issue. Shizune, please send them in.”

One by one, jonin filed in. Kakashi, Asuma, Kurenai, Gai, Iruka (Promoted to Tokubetsu Jonin in this fic), Ibiki, Anko, Izumo, Kotetsu, and a few nameless ANBU members (Plus Yamato) all took their places. Once Shizune had brought Jiraiya in, Tsunade made her announcement.

“The Village Hidden in the Leaves, in all it’s wisdom, is officially promoting you to the rank of Jonin. You will also receive a special designation for your S-ranked work. The village thanks you, Ekyt. My one regret is that your our late sensei could not be here to witness this. But I’ve never been more proud of you than I am now. And for once, I am able to reward it. Congratulations.”

Ekyt's mind stopped working right about then. He vaguely remembered receiving congratulatory bows and hugs, but the thought that he had finally made jonin was chief in his mind. Unfortunately, his mind couldn't process that fact. The other jonin seemed to understand, so they let his lack of reaction slide. It was a clear-cut case of shock.

Tsunade gave a reserved smile at the scene. **Now I can finally say he's a jonin. It's the least I can do for his dedication. He's earned that rank several times over. This helps me, too- now he's in a better position to help Naruto reach his potential. Naruto will therefore help Sakura.**

Provided, of course, Ekyt isn't completely destroyed by what Jiraiya has to say.

--

Azami got herself ready, making sure her dress was smooth, her hair was just so, and that Ekyt would definitely like what he saw.

He's not like that, though, Azami thought, smiling at her mental image of her awkward new boyfriend, **I don't have to try hard to attract him. But a girl DOES enjoy getting dressed up once in a while. In our world, the life expectancy is so young. Most of the time, we're fighting for our lives. Looks are the last thing on our minds. It's amazing how, for that special someone, you can really care suddenly. I've never had a boy rattle me more than Ekyt/Ryouko. He really cares for me, and no matter what I've done, he forgives that because of who I am. He's the first one to ever make me feel like my past is no big deal. He's dating me while knowing nothing about me except what I look like, and a guess that I just might be strong.**

Azami smirked, putting on a pair of earrings that had been her first find on her first dig with her father in Egypt. They were uncharacteristically small gold scarabs. Around Azami's neck was a thick gold chain that had belonged to the Pharaoh's mistress.

I always believed it would be sad for both my father and myself when the day came that a new man came into my life. Instead, my father seems to have gained a friend, and I've gained something more. It may be too soon to tell, but perhaps...perhaps I've gained a future.

Is it too soon to think about children? No, it's okay to think- I'm not ready for kids yet, but I'll want them someday. Right now, I want Ekyt all to myself. He's so innocent, too...I've got to wonder if he even knows how babies are created. I doubt he got past the 'when a man and woman fall in love' part. And me...I play the part of a seductress, but I really have no clue beyond instincts.

...

Oh, what's wrong with me? Why am I thinking like that?! I suppose it's only natural...I AM in love with him. I'd love to take him to Egypt someday, show him the tombs I grew up in with my Father. And my Father...he'd love to dig again, maybe Ekyt could help him, along with me?

Azami laughed at herself thanks to a sudden realization:

I'm building a life around him and we haven't even dated yet. I guess I really AM sure about him. This means that I should tell him some things, I suppose. Things I've shied away from saying. In

truth, that's when I first realized I was serious about him- I've never withheld words from anyone before.

Azami thought back to the other boys that had made passes at her. All of them were desirable, but something had held her back- that dream. The one with Ryouko fighting his way through enemy after enemy, all to protect what he cared about. It seemed stupid to withhold feelings on a mere dream, but now that all was said and done, Azami was glad she did.

When I think of how little we know about each other, it amazes me that we wound up this way. Not to mention that whole 'killing' thing. But the amazing thing is that he saw through most of my tricks. I don't know how, but he instinctively both trusted me and didn't trust me at the same time, all while projecting that he would do what was necessary to stop me from killing that girl and her friends. I'm lucky he did- I didn't know that Kakashi Hatake was among their ranks. He would have been the end of me.

Time to get going. Maybe Ekyt will meet let me meet some of his comrades today. Does he have a team, I wonder? This'll be interesting.

...

Hope they aren't all like that b*tch, Linda.

--

Ekyt looked bewildered as he met Azami. When asked why, he said 'I've been promoted'.

"Is it that strange? You're really talented," Azami commented.

Ekyt chuckled. "Well, funny story about that- I was supposed to be promoted to chunin four years ago, but the village wouldn't let me. And they've demoted me before, too. Even ranked me as a criminal once. Now I'm a jonin...it's just a weird feeling."

"Weird feeling? In what way?"

Ekyt gave Azami a glance. "Things are going...well. I got promoted, I'm dating a beautiful girl, and the Akatsuki didn't kill me. Things never go this smoothly for me. Ask anyone around here. In fact, I was ranked as a criminal here because of what I did in the Mist Village. You see, I- WHOA!"

Ekyt drew a kunai and quickly blocked a blade aiming for Azami.

"Yuushi, come out of there! Don't attack random people!" ekyt called into the bushes.

"Random? Sensei, that is Azami, the underworld's best bounty hunter! I thought she was planning to kill you!" Yuushi exclaimed, emerging from the bushes, his sword pointed at Azami.

"Not that I didn't try, kiddo," Azami chimed in with an amused laugh. "He's hard to kill, and I've stopped trying."

Ekyt shook his head, somehow not surprised that his student and his girlfriend met like this.

“Yuushi, this is Azami, my girlfriend. Azami, this is Yuushi, my student in the art of the sword. Please try to avoid killing each other.” Ekyt said all that in a tired voice, like he’d done this many times before. In his mind an amused thought came through:

Yuushi hasn’t been hanging around me much. I wonder if it’s that new girl he met. Oh well, he’ll tell me eventually, if it’s any of my business. I guess I’d better focus on making sure he doesn’t swing that sword at Azami again. I don’t know who would wind up killing who, but I’d rather they both kept on living.

Yuushi immediately bowed. He had grown in the past few months into a sturdy young man. With one blind eye, you would think he’d be the underdog in any fight. But his strength was great for his age. He also seemed to be the only guy in the village with his long hair slicked into a ponytail. Wearing a topknot in a ninja village would be tantamount to asking to be murdered, so Yuushi paid homage to his roots in the closest way possible.

“Please forgive my actions,” Yuushi said humbly, his head bowed.

“Don’t concern yourself any further with it,” Azami replied, staying formal as well.

A thought struck Ekyt. “Hold on. How did you know about Azami?”

With that, Yuushi grinned widely. “I’ve been accepted into the Junior Black Ops program! I was waiting to tell you! Kantai was here, too, but she had to go to class! We’re both testing for chunin in six months!”

“Well, congratulations! I’ve seen how hard you work, and you deserve every bit of what you’re getting. Tell me, are you still taking art lessons from Sai?” Ekyt wanted to keep moving, but a good sensei always made time for his students.

“I am, but that can wait. I don’t want to interrupt date. Bye, sensei!” Yuushi scampered off, seeming for once like a happy young man, rather than a burdened child.

--

Azami had set the course for their date. A small teahouse that few knew about. It was somewhat popular among young couples, though. Truth be told, the tea was average, and the snacks just okay. There was very little eating going on. It was mostly a site for talking and dating.

Just before Azami sat down, Ekyt got the bright idea to gently tap her butt. Azami blushed heavily, thinking that this was the first boy who would get away with doing that. (The last one to touch her butt just happened to be one of her targets...his bad luck)

“Now we’re even,” Ekyt muttered in Azami’s ear, smiling lightly at the red on her face. He could practically *feel* the warmth rising off her face.

“So we are,” Azami managed to say, keeping her voice strong and steady. **I can’t believe I almost**

melted just because he touched my butt. It's such a normal boyfriend/girlfriend thing, but it still surprised me. Maybe it's because the boy doing it doesn't seem the type. Maybe he understands me more than I think...

"I'm sorry. You seemed so stressed," Ekyt said apologetically. "I, er, am completely ignorant of how a boyfriend is supposed to act, so I took a wild guess. I won't do it again..."

Azami leaned across the table and kissed him. "It's fine, since it's you. And thank you, it DID help."

-

Jiraiya was outside the teahouse, ready to go in. His talk with Ekyt was important. But seeing the boy with his new girlfriend, Jiraiya decided it could wait, just a little bit.

Let him be a normal kid for a little while. After his date will be soon enough to tell him. Besides that, I think he'd like to know more about who he's dating.

--

MORE ON AZAMI NEXT CHAPTER! THANKS AGAIN FOR A YEAR OF COMMENTS EVERYONE!

66 - The Rose

Ekyt's first date had been incredible. A gorgeous girl that made others (male and female) jealous, and all the while remained humble about it. What had gone on at the café was nothing more than an innocent date, but to Ekyt, it was something else entirely. It was another world. It was a chance to make up for what he believed was a lost childhood. His childhood had been friendless (of both male and female friends), and now he had the heart of a strong girl.

"I never knew you were a jonin! I can't get over that one!" Ekyt laughed. He had laughed when Azami had a look of trepidation on her face while telling the story.

"Here I thought you'd be all jealous. But it turns out you got promoted minutes before you and I hook up for this date. Remind me to never take your feelings into consideration again!" Azami shot a fond glance at her boyfriend. Ekyt gave her his trademark half-smile.

"Duly noted. The fact that you were looking out for my feelings up until this point surprises me. I assumed I was dating the heartless queen of the underworld."

"Yeah, that's it. I suck out your soul after I date you," Azami shot back, rolling her eyes. "You treated me like you were afraid you were gonna break me! I mean, not that it isn't sweet, but give the 'I'm so innocent' act a rest! Haven't you ever been curious about what happens when the hand-holding is done?"

"Divorce, you mean?" Ekyt said, chuckling. "Of course I'm curious. But I'm also a firm believer in such an act meaning something. And, of course, being with the right person. I can tell you feel the same way. You're a classy girl."

Azami sighed. "Oh, play THAT card! You could've had me right there! All it would have taken was a 'you're so beautiful!', and you would have had me!"

"You're so beautiful!"

Azami gave Ekyt a small tap on the head. "Bastard. As if an afterthought like that would land me. The mood's gone anyway." Azami put a bratty pout on her face.

"Tuck that lip in or you're gonna get a spanking."

Boom. As soon as Ekyt said that, he knew it was coming. And come it did:

"I never knew you were into that! I had you pegged as a submissive type. You know, the type to make the girl do all the work. I never realized you were into the rough stuff!"

"I deserved that," Ekyt admitted, smiling inside. **This is fun! Is this what normal boyfriends and girlfriends do? I've never been so relaxed around a girl before! And these jokes- where are they**

coming from?! Well, anyway, now's the time to say the truthful thing.

"I really had a good time, Azami. Shall we do it again sometime?" Given Azami's nature, Ekyt expected a joking reply. Instead, Azami met his gaze and smiled.

"I'd like that very much. All joking aside, you really are a perfect gentleman. My treat next time?"

"The perfect gentleman never let's the lady pay."

"Touche. I guess I'd better get home to my father, then. He's really taken a liking to you. That was one of my biggest worries. If my father didn't like you, I would have had to pick between the two of you. That would have sucked, to put it delicately."

"You didn't have to make that decision. Besides, I would have told you to stay with your father, so the big loser would have been me. I'm more into 'protecting the family' than 'destroying the family with my own selfish desires'. Damn my noble intentions."

Azami shook her head slowly. "You're too much, you really are." **Okay girl, wrap it up now. Give him the kiss and-**

Ekyt beat Azami to the punch, kissing her swiftly.

"See you later," he said softly, putting a hand on her cheek for a lingering moment. Then he walked off toward the Hokage's office, likely off to see about work.

Azami put a hand to her mouth, still feeling the warm caress of his lips. Once again she found herself blushing.

Why does it surprise me every time he does that?

--

Perfect. He's done. Now to tell him what Sarutobi-sensei said.

"Hey, kid! Got a minute?"

Ekyt found Jiraiya standing ahead of him, leaning against a wall. "Certainly, Master Jiraiya. Is...everything all right?" **He's not usually one to seek out my company. Is something the matter?**

"Let's pick up Tsunade, then go quench our thirst. I've been meaning to talk to you, but you know-women here and there, and you just lose track of time."

"I wouldn't know, sir," Ekyt replied, falling into step with Jiraiya.

"Oh no? Then who was that beauty I just saw you with, eh? Someone special, or didya actually learn something from me?"

"Someone special," Ekyt said, finally cracking a smile. "Azami's her name. We've gotten close over

the past few weeks. Aside from making a fool of myself more often than not, she seems to compliment me nicely.”

Jiraiya clapped Ekyt on the shoulder. “Well, good for you kid! You’ll have to introduce me sometime! She certainly improves the scenery here, eh? Hahaha!”

-

Tsunade’s sixth sense kicked in suddenly.

“I know you’re there, Jiraiya. Stop trying to peep on me, you lecherous old fool. I don’t have time for your games. Unlike you, I have duties to perform.”

Jiraiya dropped down from the roof, followed by Ekyt. “Tsunade, I have a request to make of you…”

“Get on with it, then.”

“I’m about to give Ekyt here ‘the talk’. Would you care to join us for a drink?” Jiraiya made the universal sign for alcohol, and Tsunade was hooked. She exchanged glances with Jiraiya as she walked past him.

“Ekyt, will you go ahead and reserve a spot for us at that place across town? I’ve got to ask Tsunade a question.”

“On my way, sir.” Ekyt put two fingers to his face and disappeared into a cloud of smoke.

Tsunade spun on her heel to face Jiraiya. “NOW? You’re giving him the talk *now*? Just when his life gets in order? You DO realize what this talk will do to him, don’t you? How would you feel if, just as you start to feel the slightest bit of satisfaction, someone came and told *you* that-”

“Tsunade, I’m a pervert, not an idiot. I know full well that my timing sucks. But think of this- if I had dropped this on the kid while his life was crap, what do you think would have happened? Suicide? Seclusion? Mental shut down? At least now he’s got someone waiting for him to talk him out of his deep blue funk.”

Tsunade raised her hands. “You’re right. It’s better this way. And he needs to know. So why do you need me there when you tell him?”

“It’s mostly to back up what I say. That, and I think you might need to mix a little drink for him. This might very well send him off the edge, Tsunade. Unlike Sasuke, he doesn’t have Orochimaru to go to. But there’s the Sand Village, or the route you and I took. He can’t be allowed to follow that path; not with the village so weakened.”

Tsunade breathed out heavily. “Alright. I’ll step in when you need me to, and I’ll stop him if he does anything rash. But break it as easily as you can, okay? We’re not trying to ‘break’ him with this.”

“YOU aren’t…” Jiraiya whispered cryptically, “But it might be better if he IS broken. It takes time to

rebuild yourself, and by the time he has, the shock will have worn off.”

“I won’t allow you to do that intentionally, Jiraiya. His psyche took an @\$-kicking for years. You know very well what he can do to himself without ever raising a finger...”

“The same potential that makes him perfect for genjutsu is a double-edged sword that he impales himself on now and then. I know that, but he has to hear this all the same.”

--

Ekyt picked up the rose from the table, absently playing with it. He rolled it from hand to hand, watching it’s red petals twirl.

Something IS wrong, if he’s asking Lady Tsunade to come as well. But what can it be? I haven’t done anything even close to insubordination lately. Is it about Azami? They can’t be thinking of sending her back where she came from! No, that can’t be it. It’s something more grave, or at least more covert. Ouch!

Ekyt had managed to prick himself with one of the rose’s thorns. He popped the finger into his mouth, muttering a curse at himself for being so dumb. It was then that Jiraiya and Tsunade walked into the bar. They both sat down across from Ekyt.

“Oh, miss? Could I get, oh, three pitches of sake, one of amezake, and a special?”

“One for me as well,” Tsunade added to Jiraiya’s order. They both seemed to expect Ekyt to follow suit. He didn’t, however, and the waitress was on her way to place their order.

“Before you begin,” Ekyt started to say, the rose in his hands again, “That you can tell me anything. I’m not going to be upset with you, unless you’re deporting Azami or something like that. Just don’t beat around the bush; tell me straight. And, if possible, tell me how to solve the problem. Because I can infer that you wouldn’t ask me out just for a social call. Ow.” Ekyt had cut his finger with the rose again.

“How many times are you gonna do that before you put the damn thing down?” Tsunade said around a laugh.

“Some people just never learn. They keep coming back for more, no matter what you do to them.” Ekyt spun the rose in the air, this time catching it between the thorns.

“You asked us not to beat around the bush. So I’m just going to say this: Before he died, Sarutobi-sensei evaluated a lot of strong Shinobi. It was mostly for the possibility of having a new set of Sannin, but there was more to it. It was an earnest evaluation of the Leaf’s strength. As it turns out, you were one of the Shinobi evaluated. I asked Tsunade to pull your file, and it gives you your ranking. Now, the numbers won’t mean much until you’ve compared them with another person’s, so...”

Tsunade took the spotlight, laying two folders on the table. “This is your file, and this one is Jiraiya’s, when he was your age, many eons ago. I want you to look at the numbers. Go ahead, we’ll wait.”

Ekyt took the two folders, but set them down. He felt the need for a chakra cigarette suddenly.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Ekyt asked, holding the cigarette up.

“No, go ahead,” Tsunade replied, assuring him it was fine. Ekyt lit the cigarette. His vest fell half-off, and his headband tilted, giving him a disheveled look.

Ekyt Jiraiya

Gen: 8.5 8.5

Nin: 8.0 9.5

Tai: 8.5 9.0

Def: 9.0 9.0

Off: 8.5 9.5

Spcl: 9.0 10.0

Potential: 9.5 10.0

Overall Avg: 8.7 9.4

Excels at: N/A Summoning

My results are surprising...I'm not as worthless as I thought. I'm MORE worthless.

“Kid, don't beat yourself up. Remember, you're being compared to a legend's statistics, and-”

“Please, M'lady, just tell me what it is I've been summoned here for.” Ekyt's eyes had gone dark, though his voice stayed more or less personable. The rose had pricked his hand again, but he paid no mind to it this time.

“What you need to understand is that, compared to so many others, you're the top! I mean-”

“Tsunade, you can't console him. You can't hide the truth from him. Sarutobi's research didn't lie. Ekyt, what he saw was this: At your present rate of growth, you will never be anything beyond what you are now. That is a low to mid-level jonin, or an advanced chunin. The point is that Sarutobi is as honest as they come, and his research is the barometer that all of my generation were evaluated on. Facts are facts: you might have peaked as you are now. Most Shinobi reach their peak around your age. Granted, you started late, but- hey!”

Ekyt got up, his eyes down. “I believe Sarutobi-sensei's research. I won't demand answers from you. But where this conversation is heading- I wish no part of it. I don't want to be coddled and protected from the truth. That I have been this long bothers me.”

“Now, calm down, it's not so bad! You're still one of my best, and-”

“Great, I'm a large to mid-sized koi in a small pond!” Ekyt retorted sarcastically, taking the two Sannin aback with his abruptness. “Stop trying to cheer me up! I don't want or need sympathy, or understanding, or any of that! Do you know how it feels to have given it your all, and then realize that it's not enough? That there's no hope it WILL be enough? Of course not, you two are geniuses!”

Jiraiya and Tsunade were quite for a moment. The worst part was that Ekyt was completely right. His anger was justified, and what he said made sense. When his rage quieted, Jiraiya asked Ekyt the biggest question.

“Knowing these facts, are you still prepared to help us against the Akatsuki?”

“Of course I am. I can’t back out of that mission. Not only is it a promise to Naruto and Sakura, it’s all I can do at this point. I’m just going to be a pawn, and I can see that. But I don’t care, as long as my life is worth something. Now, if you’ll both please excuse me, I’m going to get back to work. Although it’ll kind of suck, knowing that my efforts are futile.”

Ignoring protest from Jiraiya and Tsunade, Ekyt stepped outside. Of course, it was raining. Hands jammed into his pockets and his head down, Ekyt stepped out into that rain. He walked down the empty street, his cigarette hanging from his lip.

All this time, I thought I was getting better and stronger. Instead, I’ve learned that my best can’t ever be enough. Ekyt looked skyward. The rain showed no signs of stopping. **Does this mean I should stop training? Why does it seem like I’m failing if I don’t keep trying? Who am I trying to impress? I should’ve known all this back then. I guess sensei couldn’t tell me himself. How did everyone ever trick me into believing in myself? Or even in anyone?**

...

That’s fools talk. I’ve been defeated, but I can still give my life to protect those both weaker and stronger than me. Sarutobi-sensei tried to save us all from Orochimaru, and he wasn’t even Hokage anymore. He didn’t have to get involved at all. But he did. Just like I do. We’re both such fools, but neither of us can help it- we love this place and the people in it too much to just let go.

...

Look at me, in the rain with a cigarette and a rose, like I’m single on prom night! This is just another way to have a pity party. At least I’m not involving anyone else in it. I’ll need to leave it that way. Summoning Jutsu!

BLAM! Umisu appeared on Ekyt’s shoulder. Ekyt finished writing out a note, smeared by the rain.

“Here. For Azami. If necessary, spit out a water clone, and it’ll speak for me. I just need some time...”

Umisu gave Ekyt’s cheek a fond lick before he scampered off to find Azami. That left Ekyt alone again. Something had changed about him. He didn’t just roll over and admit defeat. This time, he was going to prove them all wrong.

The library. I’ll start with ninjutsu, my weakest. I’ll prove that damn stat sheet wrong- my potential isn’t maxed out! I WILL be stronger!

The rose pricked Ekyt’s finger again, tearing open a old Summoning Jutsu cut. **This thing is symbolical. I just tore open an old wound, mentally and physically.**

...

Then again, what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger. Perhaps the idea from the start? A

clever set-up by my sensei from beyond the grave, using his old students?

67 - The Tournament- Part 1

Ekyt picked a table in the back of the library, near the top. The rickety stairs that led there were a perfect place to defend, if someone attacked him. He had, of course, been careful to leave no trace of himself behind, save for that letter to Azami. Now he had all the time in the world to study, and plenty of tomes to choose from. Three were sprawled out across the three tables Ekyt had gathered. He sat at the center of the tables, taking notes diligently. But his thoughts kept plaguing him.

Did they tell me the truth? Are my stats really so low? Or is this, as I suspect, a test? Jiraiya said a couple of things that bothered me. What were they?

As you are now...

Most Shinobi have peaked by your age...

Ekyt still held the rose, though he had pricked himself nearly a dozen times with it. It was symbolic of his life. There WAS a flower, but it was among thorns. To reach the flower, you had to dodge the thorns. Ekyt didn't do that, he knew- he plowed through the thorns. Dodging wasn't his style.

The second sentence...most Shinobi have peaked by my age...that's what was bothering me, I think. Because Sarutobi-sensei said that learning is a journey. He said that he learned something new, even from the lowest genin, until his dying day. Could this mean that this is simply a kick in the butt to get me going again?

...

Then again, Jiraiya is a legend, and even Tsunade seemed in on the 'joke'. And the numbers didn't lie.

...

On the other hand, numbers could be altered or forged...

...

When you get into second, third, and fourth guessing, the possibilities become endless. I need to stop thinking about the possibilities, and focus on the reality of the situation. I was shown those numbers and told those things for a reason. I can take it either way, but I get the same answer: I need to work harder, and I need to be stronger. That's what it all comes down to. That's what it ALWAYS comes down to. Either I'm being tricked into working harder, or I'm being challenged and told I'm not good enough. My response would be the same either way.

Now then, where was I? Right, offensive ninjutsu. My weakest point.

--

Sasuke picked at his cursed mark absently. **Damn thing is still irritating, even if I can't feel it. I KNOW it's there. The question is, was it REALLY my only chance of beating my brother? Selling my soul- would it have been worth it?**

...

Of course not. I won't join Orochimaru, not now or ever. All the same, I can't ignore the fact that I haven't had a single chance to combat my brother in a long time. The only one's who have are Naruto, Kakashi-sensei, and Ekyt.

Could Kakashi-sensei have been right all that time? About revenge leaving me feeling empty, if I got it? When he said that, I had no one to help me rebuild my clan. That was my second reason for living. Now I have someone, and I can achieve that. Does that mean revenge will still be empty? Or is the fact that there's a purpose AFTER the purpose make things alright? Does it matter? Or does only Itachi's death matter, as it always has? I'm not so young and foolish now. I can make this easy. I can hunt the Akatsuki. If Naruto and Ekyt do, then they can just start including me.

This time, I'm going to tell someone. Ino. And I'm going to tell her to quit smoking, too. It's unattractive.

--

"What do you imagine he's doing now? I'm sure that news devastated him..."

Tsunade had been displeased from the start about telling Ekyt what Sarutobi had said. She knew how it would eat at the new jonin. The question was only his reaction.

"Well, in the past, he's blatantly defied you or he's holed up somewhere to train. Considering that he turned down a mission, I would say it's more likely he's holed up somewhere," Jiraiya said thoughtfully, stroking his chin. "It couldn't be helped. If he's going to tangle with the Akatsuki, he has to be stronger. If breaking him and rebuilding him will do it, then that's what has to be done. I didn't tell him ALL of what Sarutobi said. He'll be angry with me, but it's necessary."

"There was more? Jiraiya, what else did Sarutobi-sensei say?"

"Only that Ekyt's potential was untapped, and his learning was restricted. My focus is Naruto, yours is Sakura, and Sasuke had Orochimaru's curse mark, not to mention his clan's genius. Ekyt had Sarutobi, but not for long enough to do him enough good. We've all had a mentor, or a genius blood line. Ekyt has a blood line, but he won't use it anymore."

"That's right, not since I started to examine Kimimaro's disease. The cells I took seem to have come from the kekkaigekai," Tsunade added, looking at her notes on the research she had done. "In fact, I'm going to seal his kekkaigekai. It'll prevent disease AND give his chakra a boost."

"That's good, but there's more. Tsunade, I think you should pair Ekyt up with Azami. She trust him expressly, and they might just be a good team. If we just knew more about her abilities..."

"What we DO know is that she's ruthless, cunning, clever, fast, and, most importantly, she has the ability to kill. Ekyt is clever, but the rest..." Tsunade shook her head, ending her sentence there. She started with a new observation. "Kurenai and Asuma play off each other very well. Kimimaro and Temari have shown to do the same. The same with Sakura and Naruto."

"It's just like sensei said. You only find your true strength when you're protecting something important to you. Or someone." Jiraiya had thought this out for a while now, for reasons of his own. "The question is- do their fighting styles mesh?"

"There's only one way to find that out," Tsunade said mysteriously.

"How's that?"

"A new tournament idea of mine. You'll see. Maybe you and I could enter...you'd get to call me your girlfriend for a day..."

"I'M IN! Wait, what do you mean?"

"You'll see..."

--

Azami was sitting down, taking a break from training, when she was visited by Ekyt's dragon.

"Hmm?" Azami read the contents of the note, sighing and laughing at the same time. "...That boy...well, I'd better give him a little time. His work is everything to him. Next time I see him, I'll offer my support. Can't force him to take it, that'll only push him away. I'd rather that didn't happen. Besides, if he's training, then this is the time to work on my own techniques. I hope I haven't come to rely on my weapons too much. As a bounty hunter, they were easier. In the world I'm living in now, I'd better make sure I've got lots of options at my disposal."

Azami had spent the last couple weeks just having fun being a girl. A girl with a new life, a new boyfriend, and all the potential in the world. But she couldn't forget that she still needed to be strong. Not that she was the type to let Ekyt do all the fighting anyway. Back in Sunagakure, Azami could have stood up to nearly anyone. Strangely, it wasn't her beauty or her strength that made her so hard to read. It was her thinking. What she thought, and how she thought it.

The best way to describe it would be this: An average Shinobi would, upon seeing a fight, rush in without thinking about their choices. Azami, upon seeing a fight, would get in the fray as quick as possible, considering her options as she moved. In other words, she thought on her feet. Her jutsus, unlike Shikamaru's, were meant to be executed quickly. While Shikamaru could keep fights at his pace (Also being a genius, Shikamaru knew the next two hundred moves in a fight as well), Azami instead *adapted* to her opponents pace, then proceeded to destroy that pace by changing it slightly in her favor. How she did that varied in each fight. But if she was fighting, say, Naruto, who charged in without thinking, she would likewise charge, and before she reached him, her plan would be in effect. That's what made her so dangerous an opponent.

Just like Lady Tsunade says- 'not just another pretty face'.

The ability to adapt was a necessity in the Shinobi world, but those who truly mastered it were few and far between. Azami was one of the few who had.

Her second attribute was her diverse knowledge. She knew fighting techniques from Japan, Egypt, the Philippines, Spain, and even a couple other places. Somehow, all her styles gelled together and made her strong. From what she had seen, in the Shinobi world, most fighters were limited to a certain type of jutsu. Earth Style, Water Style, Fire Style; Genjutsu, Ninjutsu, Taijutsu. It's always best to master one art and make it your own- Azami had done that, and then she built her repertoire.

Truly not just another pretty face.

--

Tsunade's plan went into effect quickly. By the next day, the word on every Leaf Shinobi's lips was 'tournament'. A Tag-team fight. One partner male, the other female.

A couple's tournament. The winner's faced mystery opponents, in addition to receiving a generous prize. A lot of couples thought about joining, but the thought of 'mystery opponents' scared them. Instead, most bought tickets to watch the spectacle. It was sure to be spectacular.

Those who could cast their trepidation aside signed up quickly. Although the circumstances of each couple was decidedly different.

"C'mon Sakura, let's do it!" Naruto declared, enthusiastic as always. **Hope Sasuke signs up!**
"I'm in! Let's show 'em how strong we are!" Sakura agreed, writing their names down. **I hope Ino's in!**
I'll show her how strong I am!

"Whaddaya thing, boneman? Wanna show off a little? Even if it DOES seem a little like bullying...Hahaha!" Temari jotted her name down.

"I should experience this. I never had the opportunity to before." Kimimaro wrote his name down, thinking about how this would be only his second fight in which he wasn't going to aim to kill.

"Just as friends?" Kurenai said, smirking at Asuma. **We're together. He knows better than to say no.**
"Seems like a hassle, but why not?" Asuma replied. **I get it, Kurenai. I'd better not say no...**

"That's for us, Iruka!" Anko wrote her name, then started on Iruka's.

"Anko, hold on! Are you sure?!" Iruka wasn't so sure about this.

" 'Course I'm sure!"

"The last time...I lost to Naruto. Perhaps fate is giving me a chance at redemption..."

"er...that's the spirit, Neji!" Tenten really had to force that out, but she was just happy to have an excuse to fight. **You and me, Temari! You're gonna go down for humiliating me!**

"C'mon Hinata, this is in the bag for us! You ready!"

"B-but, Kiba..." **No, I can't keep running!**

"Heh. We're gonna win this one, easy! With Hinata's eyes and our noses, it'll be a piece of cake! Right, Akamaru?"

"RUFF!"

"This sucks," Shikamaru commented dryly. "My mom's making me do this."

"My family's making me do it, too? I'd rather lick dog turds. Wanna partner up?" Kiba's sister, Hana, questioned roughly. "At least with me, you'll have a chance to win!"

"I see the family resemblance between you and your brother, that's for sure. Well, why not? Better than having my mom dog at me."

Shizune gulped back her nerves. "Do you want to try it, Genma?"

Genma shifted the senbon he had been chewing on. "Sounds good to me, Shizune. Let's give it a shot."

"Whaddaya mean it can only be one guy, one girl! What about best friends?!" wailed Izumo and Kotetsu. (No, I'm not insinuating that they're gay; just single)

"Come on then, Yuushi. This'll make your sensei proud. And me, of course!" Kantai pulled her boyfriend close.

"O-of course, I'd be happy to, if you're interested!" Unfortunately, Yuushi had learned how to treat women from Ekyt, who was clueless himself until just recently. In other words, bowing and saying 'yes' was about all Yuushi could do.

"Let's proctor this one, Hayate. You're in no shape, as of yet."

"(koff) Right, Yukao."

"Come on, Sasuke! We've gotta enter! You don't want Naruto and Sakura to beat us, do you?! Let's go! Alright!" Ino trumpeted, promptly signing her name.

"Hmm." **I'll tell her after this tournament. It'll be easier to say it, coming off a win over both our rivals.**

--

Ekyt shook himself awake, realizing he had just fallen asleep for the first time in three days. That was enough time for him to finish sulking. He had already decided to keep pushing himself, regardless of what Sarutobi-sensei had thought (if he had really thought that). Time to get back outside and back to work.

-

Azami waited for Ekyt at the one place he was sure to show up- the memorial stone. Sure enough, he did. In Azami's hand was the tournament flyer.

"I missed you," she said simply.

"I missed you, too. I'm sorry I had to leave so quick. I just had a lot to deal with, and-"

"You don't have to explain this sort of thing to me. If you want to make it up to me, sign your name on the dotted line. We've got a tournament to win!"

68 - The Tournament Part 2

The tournament was to be held in the same hall as the chunin preliminaries. Each match would have two proctors; one male, one female. Hayate and Yukao were the designated two, as Genma was participating. Right now, the couples lined up to hear Tsunade's speech. Tsunade was standing at the center of the arena, all eyes on her.

"The rules are simple: You fight until one member of the couple gives up. I will not allow death, so the proctors are authorized to stop the match at any time. Remember, this is a Leaf tournament. At the end of the day, we're all comrades. So any bad blood you have can be settled out there on the arena floor. So, good luck to the couples! And if you aren't a 'couple' yet, this is your chance at romance. Right, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru turned his head, growling under his breath. He was standing still, arms crossed on his chest. "Damn troublesome women. Why'd she have to go and say something like that? She's as bad as my mom!"

Hana chuckled wolfishly. "Sounds like my mom, too. And you boys are just as troublesome, so don't kid yourself."

Naruto, as always, had impeccable timing. "Look at this! Shikamaru, you finally find a girl that could tame you! HAHAHA!"

"Shut up, Naruto. I'm only here because my mom's making me show."

"Yeah, same with me!" Hana added, giving Naruto a smack in the head. "We'll just see you out on the floor, won't we?! If you make it to the finals, anyway!"

"DEFINITELY Kiba's sister," Naruto murmured.

"Focus, Naruto!" Sakura urged, tugging on her combat gloves. "Who are we facing, anyway?" Sakura flipped through the program, looking at the preliminary lineup.

Match 1: Iruka/Anko vs. Naruto/Sakura

Match 2: Kiba/Hinata vs. Shikamaru/Hana

Match 3: Yuushi/Kantai vs. Sasuke/Ino

Match 4: Neji/Tenten vs. Ekyt/Azami

Match 5: Asuma/Kurenai vs. Shizune/Genma

Match 6: Temari/Kimimaro vs. Lee/Linda

"Alright! I finally get to fight Iruka-sensei! Hehehe! This is gonna be so awesome! I'm gonna show him how strong I've gotten!" Naruto was practically falling all over himself at the thought of fighting Iruka.

Now that Iruka hadn't been drilling basics into him for a while, Naruto was sure he had a good chance of winning.

"I'm worried about his partner. Anko...she was that sadistic instructor, wasn't she? From the chunin exams?" Sakura strained herself, trying to remember. She tried not to dwell on the old days too much.

"Mmm...Yeah, that's right! I owe her for that cut she gave me, believe it!"

Anko was instantly at Naruto's side. "Anyone I know?" she said, making a small cut on his cheek and lapping up the blood.

"GAH! NO MA'AM!"

--

Kiba was more than stoked now. He was always wired tight, but the thought of fighting his sister really excited him. All the years she had spent lecturing him, like she was a second mother. The time she had claimed Akamaru crapped in the house, when it was really her own dog...oh yeah! With Kiba, payback is a dog!

"You ready, sis? No half-assing this one! Me, Akamaru, and Hinata are gonna chew you up real good!"

Hana impatiently clicked her tongue. "Tk! As if! I was just gonna withdraw right away. But if YOU'RE mouthing off like that, I'll stick around to beat you up, like old times sake! Haha, no noogies this time! We're fighting fang for fang here!"

"You bet, sis!"

Hinata and Shikamaru both really wanted to be anywhere but in the middle of a sibling rivalry.

"What a drag..."

--

There was no bad blood between Sasuke, Ino, Kantai, and Yuushi. They really didn't know each other all that well. Yuushi looked forward to the challenge of facing one of the last Uchiha elite, while Kantai was trying to decide if Ino was one of those cheerleader types, or if she just *looked* that way.

"WOOHOO! Alright, Sasuke! This round is in the back! Easy! Too easy! It's like we'd be picking on these kids! Their 'A' game is out 'D' game! S-A-S-U-K-E! Haha!"

Kantai rolled her eyes. "I really want to beat her. She's one of those doggy blonde types."

Yuushi had already learned something about being an effective boyfriend. NEVER point out your girlfriend's mistakes. Like the fact that Kantai was just as blonde as Ino. He enjoyed this new relationship too much to say something that stupid.

--

Neji and Ekyt stared at each. They had clashed in the past. The question was this: was the past resting in peace, or did it want another go-round?

Azami and Tenten both placed warning hands on their boyfriend's shoulders. But the two boys just kept moving forward, not breaking their glare. The girls were more sensible, giving each other a warm 'hello' and 'good luck'.

"We will settle this out on the floor. Fair enough?" Neji said, straight to the point.

"Works for me," Ekyt replied. His mask in place for the time being, his expression was unreadable. But he offered a courteous bow.

"I wish you both the best of luck. The past is the past. I'm just looking forward to a good fight between respectable warriors."

With those few words, the tension was broken. Azami and Tenten exchanged mild smiles, but steered their boyfriends away before the two forgot about 'respect' and started hitting each other.

--

Asuma and Kurenai were to face Genma and Shizune. That was going to be one mellow match. Of them all, only Shizune was high-strung. She tended to quell that when she was with Genma, though. It was really her work that made Shizune such a worrier. Being Tsunade's attendant had to be nothing short of hellish at times.

Asuma lit a cigarette. Genma chewed on his senbon. Kurenai closed her eye to focus. Shizune pretended she was calm. It was no big deal.

"No hard feelings either way, right?" Asuma offered. Of the four, he was the strongest, followed by Shizune. Then came Kurenai, and finally Genma. They were all close, this analysis was simply going by rank, and how long the rank was held. (Genma is a Tokubetsu jonin, while the rest are all jonin. Therefore, he'd be the weakest in terms of rank. Kurenai is a new jonin, making her only slightly 'stronger'. Asuma and Shizune were close to evenly matched; the breaker was physical strength, and that was Asuma's forte compared to Shizune)

--

Kimimaro and Temari vs Lee and Linda. Kimimaro and Temari were incredibly strong, and both Jonin. Lee was a newly promoted jonin, but the glaring fact that he was incapable on ninjutsu or genjutsu meant this would be hard for him. Linda was a wildcard- her fighting style was known only to Lee and Tsunade. So it would be interesting to see which pair would come out on top.

"Our last match was difficult, but I have gotten stronger! I look forward to facing you once more!" Lee was his typical 'youthfully energetic' self. Kimimaro just stared mildly, not really understanding what the fuss was about. All he knew was that he had to dull his bones so that he wouldn't kill.

Temari and Linda just plain hated each other. Mostly because Ekyt once had a crush on Temari. Linda was out to ruin Ekyt's life; therefore she hated anyone who might have made it pleasurable. As for Temari, Linda had simply pissed her off by making fun of her hair and fan. She didn't know or care about Linda's personal reasoning.

--

"Match one (koff) Naruto and Sakura versus Iruka and Anko." Hayate made the announcement to the crowd. His ANBU-masked girlfriend finished the introductions.

"Participants to the center of the floor."

Iruka stood across from Naruto, while Anko faced off against Sakura.

"Well, this is it, Naruto. The teacher and student have come full circle. You've really grown," Iruka told Naruto in admiration. "But just because you're older now, don't be thinking I'm going to take it easy on you! There might just be a thing or two I can still teach you!"

"HA! I've been looking forward to this, Iruka-sensei! I'm gonna show you how much I've improved!"

Sakura bowed stiffly to Anko, who was still her superior. Anko just laughed and took up a kunai.

"HAJIME!" Hayate called out. He and Yukao leapt to opposite sides of the arena to watch.

"Alright, here we go! Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto took up his trademark handsign and cast his go-to jutsu. A hundred Naruto's piled up in the small space, all charging.

"Damn it, how do we know which one is him?" Anko muttered to Iruka, batting a clone away.

"Keep an eye on Sakura, I have an idea! Clone Jutsu!"

Four Iruka clones took off running. These were the kind of clones that couldn't do any damage, except serve as a distraction. It was the most basic of Shinobi techniques. But therein lied Iruka's strength. He didn't know flashy jutsus, but he DID know that the basics could topple even the strongest jutsu.

"Naruto, watch! The clones aren't touching yours! Don't let them distract you!" Sakura warned. Then she realized that Naruto had just created a trap for her by mistake.

Naruto, you jerk! We can barely move because there are so many stupid clones! Not only that, if I try to use my strength to knock Iruka-sensei and Anko-sensei off-balance, then I'll just destroy your clones! You idiot! Agh, all I can do for now is watch!

"Striking Shadow Snakes!" Anko barked. She knew this particular jutsu of Orochimaru's, having been a disciple of his at one time. She had survived his curse mark, making her very strong. She hated the damn thing, and never used it.

The snakes from Anko's wrists tore through clone after clone, creating small puffs of smoke. That gave Iruka time to drop a smoke bomb.

“Huh? Where’d he go? I’ll find you! Time for another page from Naruto’s Ninja Handbook! Uzumaki Barrage, Modified!”

What’s that, you ask? The modified Uzumaki barrage is when Naruto and his clones throw each other in waves. When the clones are destroyed, they reveal the location of the enemy with the smoke from their destruction.

“Nice work, Naruto!” Sakura called out. She activated her chakra scalpel. Her powers of perception tipped her off- snakes coming from the right. With a shift of her weight, Sakura had cut the snakes. But she had to dodge rapid-fire as kunai rained in towards her.

Ugh! I gave away my own location! I can’t believe it! Sakura berated herself.

Meanwhile, Naruto was inadvertently walking into a trap.

“Gotcha!” came Iruka’s voice. He was stuck to the ceiling, using chakra control! Another basic move that neither Naruto nor Sakura had seen coming! “Naruto, don’t move. I say that for your safety. Just look around you.”

Naruto did- he gasped. There were exploding tags all around him! He had stayed toward the back while his clones attacked. Eventually, he had moved closer to the back wall and a little to the right. Iruka, amidst the smoke, planted the bomb trap on the two walls, plus three tags on the ground. Naruto had wandered right into range!

“Sealed Bomb Square Release! Now, Naruto, if you remember, those bombs activate when you move. Don’t worry, they’re small bombs that will only render you unconscious. But for you, this fight is over.”

“Damn it!” Naruto cursed. **This is just like when he lectured me! I’ve gotta think of a way outta this!**

“Naruto!” Sakura ran to help him, but was cut off by a kunai from Anko.

“Don’t forget that you’re not alone out here. You can’t ever drop your guard in combat!”

Anko’s kunai clashed against Sakura’s chakra scalpel. Sakura struck back, but Anko’s snakes wound around her hand, pulling her in. Sakura thought quickly and threw shuriken, hitting the snakes binding her arm. She kept moving forward, using her momentum to slash Anko’s arms with the chakra scalpel.

“Ugh!” Anko groaned, feeling her cut muscles groan angrily. **She’s gotten good! Guess it’s up to you for now, Iruka. I need time to cast this next jutsu...**

Iruka dropped down from the ceiling, landing behind Sakura. He held a kunai to her neck.

“You two lasted a long time, for facing two Tokubetsu jonin. I’ll treat all of you to ramen later.”

“Don’t count me out, sensei!” Sakura declared. PWOOF!

“A replacement?!” Iruka gasped. He felt a little trickle of happiness- his students DID remember their time at the academy. **You can always rely on the basics! Good job! Now where are you...concentrate, Iruka!** Wisely, Iruka backflipped away, until he was back to back with Anko.

“Here. I can only do first aid, but that should be enough...” Iruka held out his hand, ready to heal Anko. Just as he did, Sakura came flying in, smashing the ground with her fist. The ground twisted and heaved, and dust flew up, covering the arena. The spectators coughed and covered their eyes.

“HEY, IRUKA-SENSEI! GET AN EYE-FULL OF THIS!”

It was Naruto! “SEXY JUTSU!”

Just like years before, Iruka’s eyes widened, his jaw dropped, and his nosebleed sent him flying into the wall. He immediately leapt up, screaming at Naruto.

“CUT THE STUPID TRICKS, YOU LITTLE FOOL! THIS IS A SERIOUS MATCH!”

“No duh! It’s also over!”

The smoke cleared. Naruto and Sakura each had a kunai to the back of Iruka and Anko (respectively). Anko was still incapacitated, and Iruka’s bloody nose had taken some energy.

“How did you do it, Naruto?” Iruka wanted to know. “I had you trapped!”

“Yeah, you had me!” Naruto replied happily. “But you missed my Shadow Clones hidden on my back.” Naruto reached back and pulled off what looked like a giant shuriken. When he threw it, it became a clone. “So when Sakura smashed the floor with her monster strength (“NARUTO!” Sakura yelled, hitting him with her free hand), my clones came out from behind me and destroyed your tags. I wasn’t sure that would have worked, but I had to try!”

Iruka was dumbfounded. **Of course...That jutsu of mine focuses on ONE target- the REAL Naruto, in this case. Anyone else is free to enter and leave the bomb’s perimeter- including his clones!**

“Well done, you two!” Anko said happily. “You DID say you were buying, Iruka? I prefer dumplings, but a free meal’s a free meal. The kids earned it, and so did we! What else from Kakashi’s students, right?”

Iruka sighed, but in truth he was happy. He had helped train two strong Shinobi.

“Winners: Naruto Uzumaki and Sakura Haruno!” Yukao announced. Hayate checked to see if there were any injuries. Once he was sure there weren’t, he called for the next participants.

“Hold on! Where’s the victory kiss, you two? New Leaf tradition: winners kiss each other!” Tsunade shouted down from her seat on the balcony. Naruto and Sakura happily obliged.

69 - Death

Shikamaru and Hana Inuzuka vs. Kiba and Hinata. The four got right into the match. Well, Kiba and Hana did, anyway. They traded dog-based attacks back and forth. Shikamaru, meanwhile, patiently analyzed every move Kiba made. Having been on the same team as him, it wasn't hard to pinpoint how long his Fang over Fang could last, and where he landed after he performed it.

Hinata, meanwhile, was standing in the back, looking timid. She wasn't really part of a couple, though Kiba was now her first choice, since Naruto was taken. Maybe thinking of that is what motivated Hinata to get involved in the fight. Using her Byakugan, she picked out Shikamaru through all the dust and wreckage that the Inuzuka's created by trading attacks.

-

Shikamaru knelt down, timing it just so. "Shadow Possession Jutsu!"

Just as Kiba landed, and was on one foot to take off again, he was snared by Shikamaru's attack.

"Damn it! How did he do that?! I didn't even touch down for a full second!" Kiba snarled, barring his teeth in frustration. He had to count on Hinata...well, this one was as good as over.

"No offense, Kiba, but your combat style gets predictable after a while. You stay in the air a certain amount of time, and then you land in a spot proportionate to your hang time. It's easy to predict what you'll do." Shikamaru held Kiba, making room for Hana to attack.

"This one's OVER, bro!"

Hinata had stood still, but that didn't mean she wasn't thinking. She had honed her skills for years now, just to be noticed. She wasn't going to go down without taking a swing. And her swing was to be a mighty one.

"Protection of the Eight Trigrams!" Hinata yelled (yes, yelled), leaping in front of Hana. Hinata's arms began to move in a seemingly random, endless pattern. In reality, she was creating a cocoon of chakra around her and Kiba. Kiba's shadow was still trapped, but Hinata had blocked Hana's attack, knocking the older Inuzuka girl back to Shikamaru. But that's not all her attack did.

CRASH CRASH CRASH CRASH CRASH!

"What in the hell?!"

Shikamaru couldn't even voice a whole complaint. His attack had just been effectively halted. Hinata had destroyed the lights- every last one of them. It was now completely dark inside the arena. That played to Hinata's strengths, as well as Kiba's. That meant Hana had a chance, too, but Shikamaru was out of the game for a while.

“Alright, Hinata! Nice job! Now let’s finish ‘em! I’ll find Shikamaru with my nose, you keep an eye on Hana! We’ve as good as won this!”

-

Shikamaru immediately sank back against the wall, cupping his hands in his ‘planning’ pose.

No light...Kiba can sniff me out. I’m gonna have to spread my scent out and buy some more time. Meanwhile...

“Hana! Use a substitution jutsu!” Shikamaru called out, shrugging off both his vests. He threw the articles of clothing to opposite ends of the arena. Meanwhile, he pulled out a kunai, a flash bomb, and an exploding tag. Once he heard the sound of a log hitting the ground, Shikamaru made a cut on his hand, squeezing blood free. He then used a body flicker jutsu to get away from the blood. Next, he threw his flash bomb. Using the brief light to find the log, Shikamaru noted it’s position while he kept using body flicker’s to throw Kiba’s nose off.

That’s done. Now, I’ve got to aim just so. Substitution Jutsu!

Shikamaru used the substitution jutsu just over the spot where Hana had used hers. As he landed, he jumped and threw his exploding tag onto the pile. Seconds later, Kiba plowed into him.

“Found ya!” Kiba declared. But he was wrong. He had found another log. “Huh?! I get it...he put his blood on the log, so I’d home in on the scent. I’ll get him eventually...”

BOOM!

The explosive tag went off, setting a fire across the two logs. Shikamaru was in perfect position.

“Shadow Possession Jutsu!” This time, he succeeding in snaring both Hinata and Kiba. The light of the fire was just barely enough for Shikamaru’s attack, but it worked. His long-winded plan had succeeded.

“I declare this match over!” Yukao said in a hurry. Two water-style users rushed onto the floor and put out the flame, while a second crew came and fixed the lights.

“Winners: (kof) Shikamaru Nara and Hana Inuzuka.” Hayate finished, raising his hand towards Shikamaru.

“This is a drag. Do I HAVE to kiss her? The troublesome woman...” Shikamaru was complaining, despite a hard-fought victory. **I should’ve just surrendered!**

“Shut up! I’m not enjoying this either! Let’s just get it over with! For the record, I’d rather kiss a dog’s @\$@ than your mouth!” Hana growled at Shikamaru. Despite the harsh words, she kissed him. It seemed to be a pretty good one, too.

“What the hell was THAT?!” Shikamaru demanded at the end, glaring at her while spitting.

“Sorry. Dogs lick; it’s kind of an instinct.”

--

Azami and Ryouko were waiting for their turn patiently, exchanging attack plans. At one point, Yuushi wandered over and asked advice. Ryouko/Ekyt made time, of course, and explained to him about Sasuke. It was when she was alone that Azami felt it. Or, rather, heard it.

It’s time.

Azami shook her head violent. **No!** she thought desperately. **It’s not! I won’t! You can’t make me!**

Would you prefer your Father dead, and your new home burned, then? As I recall, we made a deal. Backing out now would cause me to complete this mission for you. Or, you can return to us. What will it be?

Azami cursed herself and her captors for this. **I didn’t mean to...I really didn’t...I never thought I’d love him. He was just another target. I’ve finished off at least a dozen men; some cuter, richer, smarter, and stronger than him. But this one...why this one? Why and how? I’ll kill anyone for the right price, but not him! I wanted to believe it...to believe that this was over. I wish I could just ask him...I just want him to hold me...when he did the first time, I knew it was love. And now... Now I’ve got to betray the man I love. If I don’t, he loses everything, and so do I. But if I do, I lose...no, it’s better that way. He’s suffered enough.**

“I know a genjutsu when I see it...”

Azami jumped as Ryouko put an arm around her. His face was set for combat. “Did something happen? That wasn’t any ordinary genjutsu on you.”

Azami tried to laugh it off. “I’m fine, really. I was just lost in thought, I guess. Are we up next?”

“Yeah. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Nothing a kiss wouldn’t cure. You up for it?” Azami cooed, pushing herself toward Ryouko.

“For you? Always,” he replied, leaning to kiss her. Their lips met. Azami’s right hand felt for her kunai pouch. Her left arm held Ekyt/Ryouko tight to her.

SCUNNKKK!

The kunai was buried up to the grip tape in Ryouko’s chest. Blood spurted from his mouth and into hers. Azami let go as he tumbled to the ground, blood cascading from his chest and mouth. Azami stood over him, still holding the kunai, his blood dripping down her mouth. Her body had fallen back into it’s ‘bounty hunter’ mode. Her eyes, though, were sad pools of brown. She looked at him, dying, on the ground.

"I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry!"

Tears mixed with his blood as Azami look at his motionless form.

Well done. All you love is spared now. Return to us.

Azami's face hardened. She used the back of her hand to wipe the blood from her mouth. With a flick of her wrist, the blood from her hand landed across his pained face. She ran for it at top speed.

I'm sorry. I really loved you. But I had to do this to save everything you love. Please forgive me. Ekyt...Ryouko...I love you. I'll never love again now. In that way, at least, I can honor you...

--

Neji and Tenten came back to see if Ryouko and Azami were ready. As they walked in, they were nearly run over by Azami.

"What's her problem?!" Tenten wondered, a little irritated that Azami would just push past. "Was she sick or something?"

Neji saw Ekyt lying on the ground, unmoving. "She was sick, alright. Go get Lady Tsunade. I'll see about his vitals. BYAKUGAN!"

--

Tsunade zipped to the back, giving instructions to keep the tournament moving, and to skip to the next match. She got to the back, seeing Neji checking Ekyt's vitals.

"Low, but they're there. His chakra is instinctively clamping the blood flow, forming a cocoon around his heart. It seems like his assailant only knicked his heart, rather than pierced it. Not that it's good either way."

Tsuande immediately got to work. Her face paled. "Oh...SHIZUNE! NOW! Stay with me, kid!"

--

The light...it's bright. Why is it so dark where I am? And what happened anyway?

Ekyt/Ryouko was standing in the darkness, looking at a light ahead of him. Like a moth, he was drawn toward it. But a hand stopped him.

"Ekyt, not yet. It's not time yet."

Ekyt immediately knelt down. "Third Hokage...but you're dead! Does this mean that..."

"It does. Your lover betrayed you, it seems. But you'll be going back any time now. Just remember: Things are not always as they seem...Now, focus on returning. There's still a chance that your death

may be permanent.

Ekyt focused. He couldn't die- not yet. He had to know just what had happened to him.

Azami...

--

Shizune focused as hard as she could, using Ekyt's hair as a catalyst. She and eight others were sitting with scrolls in their mouths, focusing all their chakra on Ekyt. They had done this once before with Neji, but you never got used to this.

He's dead...No! No! It's not over yet! We can save him! Hang in there, please!

"Give it all you've got!" Shizune yelled.

"It's hopeless! He's dead!"

Shizune shot an angry glance. "Someone replace him! Get him out of here! There's no place for doubt in here!"

--

Outside, Tsunade briefed her available jonin. Kakashi and Gai were the two, for the time being.

"I want the girl brought here alive. She has to answer for this. And NO ONE ELSE FINDS OUT ABOUT THIS. Am I clear?"

Kakashi and Gai hadn't seen Lady Tsunade so worked up in a long time.

"Yes, M'lady. But what happened?" Gai exchanged glances with Kakashi.

"Azami stabbed Ekyt. That's all we know. He's clinically dead, but I'm sure we can save him. Don't kill Azami- she may or may not have meant to do what she did. If there are outside forces involved, we need to know about them. Now, get going!"

--

Neji and Tenten were given a bye to the next round. Shizune was out, so that meant Genma was, too. Yuushi was Ekyt's next of kin, so he had been informed and sworn to secrecy. He was in no shape to fight after a thirty-second match that saw him and Kantai devastated. That left one match in the first round.

"I declare match six open. Temari and Kimimaro versus Rock Lee and Linda Mawashi. The following round will be the following:

Asuma/Kurenai vs. Shikamaru/Hana.

Winner of Temari/Kimimaro and Lee/Linda vs. Neji/Tenten
Naruto/Sakura vs. Sasuke/Ino

...

Now, the current match: Begin!"

--

SPECIAL BONUS STORY: YUYU HAKUSHO (Part 1)

The underworld was a busy place these days. Lord Koenma barely had enough time to deal with his paperwork. His saving grace had come about a year ago now. It was the boy standing in front of him, for that matter.

"Let me see now...Kimihiro, age twenty...oh, has it been a year already?"

The boy in front of Koenma nodded. "It has, sir. I came to see about my parole hearing...I've decided I'd like to go back to the world of the living. I don't dislike it here, but I have too many regrets to let go of. Is it possible?"

Koenma looked through Kimihiro's file. "Let's see here...You died a murderer, which is why you've been here for a year. You've repented your crime, and proven that there were outside circumstances...remind me of those circumstances."

Kimihiro ran a hand through his dark brown hair. "Well, I was at the bank, cashing my paycheck, when a robber came in with a gun. He shot someone to prove he was serious. He leveled his gun at someone else when I attacked him and killed him. He shot me just as he died."

"So your circumstances were indeed extenuating. Killing in defense of yourself or others is pardonable, in a correct situation. As we've had witnesses attest to your story, the underworld has decided to return you to life. There will be a few catches, however. I'll tell you of one now- the rest you'll have to learn on your own.

The first catch is this: If you take another human life, you will die instantly. However, if it's another case of defending yourself or someone else, you will take a demon form and be returned to earth."

Kimihiro nodded, sure that he could avoid killing. It's not as though he had wanted to.

"Oh, one other catch- you will assist my spirit detective, Yusuke Urameshi, as necessary. His spirit guide, Botan, will also provide you with information about your 'condition'. The rest of your life is up to you. Everyone will remember you as being dead, so be certain to have an explanation ready for anyone who confronts you. Now then- do you agree to the terms?"

"I do," Kimihiro responded.

"Very well then. You will be returned to life. Your own body has long been buried, so you'll be using another one of a recently deceased fifteen year old. I wish you luck, and look forward to your return.

Your assistance with my paperwork really saved me!”

Kimihiro gave a small smile. “I’ll try to make a less dramatic entrance the next time I die. Until then, sir, thank you for everything.”

To be continued...

70 - Insane Alliances

Ekyt woke up one more time, really aware that the pain meds were wearing off. Then again, he was thankful he could feel any pain at all.

“Hey. You awake?”

Ekyt turned slowly to a void hurting himself. He found Shikamaru and Asuma relaxing with a game of Go near the hospital’s window. It was apparently sunset, meaning Ekyt had been out of it for at least five hours.

“Yeah,” Ekyt grunted, pulling himself up and out of bed. “Guarding me by orders?”

“Nah, stopped by to see how you’re doing before the matches pick up tomorrow. Your move, Shikamaru.” Asuma took a long drag off a cigarette, sitting directly under a ‘no smoking’ sign. Ekyt would have laughed, but that would hurt, and he was decidedly humorless right now.

“Yeah, me and Hana won, along with Naruto and Sakura. Neji and Tenten and Lee and Linda are moving on, too. Oh yeah, Ino and Sasuke, too. My lazy sensei got a bye because his opponents were needed elsewhere. And I had to fight. What a drag,” Shikamaru commented, cupping his hands and settling into his thinking pose.

“...I see...” Ekyt commented dully, not having anything to say. The hole in his chest throbbed for a second. He glanced down a sheet of instructions Tsunade had left, not seeing ‘no alcohol’ and ‘no chakra cigarettes’ on it. He was going to indulge himself.

“What are the match-ups for tomorrow like, then?”

Shikamaru passed a sheet over to Ekyt. It was a list of the next battles.

-

Lee/Linda vs. Naruto/Sakura

Asuma/Kurenai vs. Shikamaru/Hana Inuzuka

Sasuke/Ino vs. Neji/Tenten

-

“I’ll have to gimp my way to the arena for those,” Ekyt murmured. “These are some great match-ups. Maybe I can bet with Lady Tsunade. ‘tho it’ll be hard to say who’ll have the advantage in luck: the Legendary Loser or myself (ha).”

Why am I so happy? Shouldn’t I be feeling damn near suicidal? Is it because I know Azami had no choice? Am I happy to be alive? Or is it because I got to see the Third Hokage again? When did I earn the right to be happy? It must have come just after I was stabbed. I almost want to drop everything and keep living happily. But in the back of mind...

Ekyt sat down to watch the 'Go' game, already knowing the winner would be Shikamaru. But good alcohol, along with good people, and a nice sunset...it was comforting.

But in the back of my mind, I know I'll be out there again. Soon. I'm going to find Azami, and learn why she did this. If I can free her from whatever evil clutches she's in, I'll do that. If there ARE no evil clutches...well, her and I will have it out. She knows it, too. And since, no matter what they say, these two are guards, someone else is expecting someone to come finish me. If I was Azami, I'd be the one on the way. So it all comes down to healing quickly and getting back in there. Maybe after I fight Azami...maybe then I can enjoy this again.

Well, whatever the case, today and tomorrow are for me- I'm going to enjoy drinking, gambling, and healing. Even if the back of my mind is clouded with fear, anger, or whatever else is in this fustercluck of emotions I've got now- I'm going to enjoy myself, at least once more.

Asuma offered Ekyt a cigarette. Ekyt declined politely, tapping his own box.

"Still on that healthy crap? When are you gonna join the men and have a REAL smoke?" Asuma weedled, happy to see Ekyt in a decent mood. **This kid'll have ulcers WAY too early in life. He's gotta relax.**

"I figure I'll smoke your brand when I'm tired of good kidney function. When are you gonna get off that REAL stuff and try the chakra-boosters?"

Shikamaru looked up with a glare. "Shut up, both of you. In case you haven't noticed, Asuma, it's YOUR turn."

"Wow, Shikamaru...I never knew..." Ekyt said in mock wonder. "I never knew that you'd wind up being so much like your Mom..."

"You want ANOTHER hole in you?" Shikamaru shot back, giving both Ekyt and Asuma a death glare. Asuma had to hide a laugh at Shikamaru's 'mad' face.

If I tell him he really DOES look like his Mom right now, he'll never forgive me. And I've gotta work with him for a long time...

--

Ekyt had planned to sneak out the next day. His first attempt was met with a nurse waiting for him.

"Come on then, Mr. Kaguya. Back to bed," she said with a wink.

"Are you trying to stop me or seduce me? Either way, can it wait?" (SLAP!)

-

On the next try, Ekyt tried to leave by the window. When he dropped off the terrace, he found Naruto

and Sakura waiting for him.

“Oh...busted?” Ekyt asked, thinking about running past them.

“If you come to the matches, will you go back to bed afterward?” Sakura asked, as if she had caught a young child with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Yes. Really, I will.” **Unless the Akatsuki show up...**

“Where you thinking something just now? Maybe about a loophole?” Naruto asked playfully, knowing full well how troublemakers thought. He was one himself. You can’t kid a kidder, after all.

“Nah, nothing so terrible,” Ekyt answered. “I’ll be good. Let’s just get out of here before that nurse comes back. She LOOKS cute, but her slap packs a wallop.”

“Did you say something, Mr. Kaguya?”

Aw crap- said nurse overheard. Ekyt winced. But Sakura stepped up to the plate.

“He’s coming as a guest of myself and M'lady- he’ll be just fine medically. Come on now, Ekyt, time to go to the matches.”

Ekyt remembered that he was enjoying himself today, so as he left with the happy couple, he stuck his tongue out at the nurse. Her clipboard left a mark on his face, though- she had the last laugh.

--

When Ekyt walked in, he got some strange looks. Wearing only an open jacket, his torso packed with bandages, he didn’t look at all like his normal self. With a chakra cigarette clenched in his mouth, he looked around for his target. Aha!

“Lady Tsunade!”

This feels like cheating...But I really don’t give a damn today. Hehehe!

Tsunade looked incredibly surprised to find Ekyt out of bed, wandering around. He explained quickly that he had been escorted here, and that he didn’t want to miss the tournament.

“Besides, if I’m here, you can personally baby-sit my invalid @\$\$.”

“Well, I can’t argue with your logic...alright, but you sit up with Jiraiya and I. And no funny stuff! Got me?”

“Yes Ma’am. Thanks again for saving my life. I owe you...several,” Ekyt smirked, then sat down in the indicated spot. “So, who’re your bets?”

Tsunade Jiraiya Ekyt

Lee/Linda Lee/Linda Neji/Tenten
(Sorry Lee, but I can't root for *her*)
Shikamaru/Hana Asuma/Kurenai Asuma/Kurenai
(long shot, high stakes)

Naruto/Sakura Naruto/Sakura Naruto/Sakura
(It's unanimous. Probably because they're all friends/mentors)

"You SURE About Shikamaru/Hana, Tsunade? Seems like a long shot, even by YOUR standards," Jiraiya quipped, seemingly satisfied.

"If she wins, though..."

"HA! Ye of little faith! Hana won't let Shikamaru quit, if that's what you're betting on!" Tsunade made a good point, showing that there was a method to her madness. "Now then, let's get to drinking! Ekyt, put that damn thing out! I hate smoking!"

Ekyt held the cigarette up. "It's health, M'lady. Chakra, y'know? I want to heal quickly, after all..."

Tsunade's tone quickly changed. **Of course he does... He just got taken down by a girl he was SURE about. I did some things I'm not proud of after Dan died...At least it's healthy. And he seems to be enjoying himself...what the heck, I'll let it slide. He's a good kid.**

--

Azami felt a hand on her shoulder as she packed a bag to leave. She sensed the chakra. It was strange- the only chakra in the Akatsuki that didn't feel outright malicious to her. That didn't mean it felt *right*, though.

"He's straying from his path after your betrayal. I need him to become a stepping stone for Sasuke. Do what you have to, and remember who you're really working for. I'll deal with the fallout as needed."

Azami didn't respond- she didn't need to. As she had heard the order, she had to follow it. And she would, to the letter.

Why do I want this? Is it to see him alive? Or is it to confirm he's dead? Either way, I shouldn't get involved. I've no right to tell him any of the things I want to...I've no right at all. But, all the same...I almost wish he was dead. I know he's not. Itachi ordered me to come 'close' to killing him, and that's what I did. His will to live and my skills combined will keep him alive, if nothing else. Such a damn mess I've created, and all because I fell in love when I wasn't supposed to. Emotions are such a burden... Are they for him, too? What about you, Ryouko?

--

Ekyt knew he was being guarded at all times. First it had been Shikamaru and Asuma. Now he was being tailed by Yuushi and Sai. While he was thankful to have people who cared enough to protect him, Ekyt wished they would give him some peace. Not that Sai and Yuushi were big talkers. Tolerant for the time being, Ekyt looked to the floor. Lee/Linda vs. Neji/Tenten was about to start. Ekyt had really been torn by this one. He was friends with Tenten, and he was friends with Lee. He HATED Linda, and barely tolerated Neji. In the end, Tenten got the nod, as she seemed like she would need the most support out there. Lee was self-motivated; as was Neji. Linda...he didn't care either way.

--

Lee and Neji were about to have their first real contest in years. They had only met in sparring matches before this, and each was eager to give the other his best game. It was kind of an unwritten rule that the guys fought the guys, while the girls faced the girls. This match would be no exception. From the word 'go', this was a heated contest. Neji and Lee traded blows at such a high speed that nearly every spectator gave up watching them and just watched the girls. The kunoichi worked slower and more methodically, and there were always the perverts in the crowd that got off on seeing two girls mix it up. No doubt that Tenten and Linda would really be a thrill for them.

Linda's chakra kunai clashed with Tenten's chain. Both weapons broke, and the two girls rushed in. Linda had the edge in hand to hand combat against Tenten; Lee and Neji were both panting and in bad shape. No more fighting for them. Neji had stood up to Lee's Primary Lotus, while Lee had endured Neji's Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four palms. They were both down for the count. This fight would be decided by the two kunoichi. As it happened, they hated each other, so it worked out just fine.

--

Gai and Kakashi sped along the trees, following Pakkun's nose. When he stopped short, so did they.

"S'no good. That isn't the chakra we've been following. But there are two chakras coming this way. (sniff sniff) Definitely bad news. These guys have enough chakra for four fights with your two. At this range, it's unlikely they've sensed us..."

Gai hated the thought, but a strategic retreat made sense here. "Kakashi?"

"I know, Gai. We're out of here. Pakkun, I know you hate being carried, but I'm going to keep you with us so you can sense that chakra. If it follows us for too long we've got no choice but to fight..."

--

At the Leaf's gates, a stranger wandered in. he had a straw hat pulled tight to his face, and he carried a bag full of scrolls. He looked like a wandering priest, and he was headed for a temple, it seemed. So Izumo and Kotetsu let him by with a few cursory questions.

"Did you feel that?" Izumo said suddenly, closing his eyes.

"Yeah...that's no typical chakra...might be some kind of holy power or something..." Kotetsu had felt it,

too, but he shrugged. "Well, he's new around here. That's probably why it feels so different."

Izumo shifted uncomfortably. "I guess so..."

-

Once inside, the stranger kept his clothes tight to his body. They couldn't entirely mask the odd clicking sound he made as he walked.

Make a fool of me, will they? Give my spot to that crossbow-toting wench, will they?! Well then, they can just see first-hand how Sasori of the Red Sand took an entire nation down with his puppets! It's unsavory, but I need to make an ally...Akatsuki or not, no one does this to Sasori of the Red Sand. NO ONE.

--

YuYu Hakusho (part 3)

Kimihiro watched the train barrel toward him. There was no dodging it- he couldn't move.

"Hah!" Botan swooped in and picked him up. The train sped by harmless as Botan held Kimihiro.

"See? Nothing to it. You just need someone to rescue you once a month, then. You can't fight the suicidal tendencies, and of course each time it will be a different peril. But now you're good for a month! What are you gonna do first?"

Kimihiro gulped hard. "I'll wait for my stomach to catch up with me, thank you. Actually, I'll ask you a question in the mean time. Botan, can you tell me why that group needs my help? They've all got such powerful auras, especially compared to mine..."

Botan shrugged. "I'm not really sure. That's not my department. You could always ask Lord Koenma. Or, you could wait to find out for yourself. I don't mind saying you should wait until you learn for yourself- I wouldn't want to bother Lord Koenma now. He's very busy with his father away and all. But rest assured, it'll be a good reason! (ahaha!)"

THAT is one cheerful version of death... Kimihiro thought. **Well then, we'll have to see how things shape up, won't we?**

71 - Words of Honesty

Thus far, the tournament had been this:

ROUND 1

Iruka/Anko vs. **Naruto/Sakura**

Kiba/Hinata vs. **Shikamaru/Hana**

Yuushi/Kantai vs. **Sasuke/Ino**

Neji/Tenten vs. Ekyt/Azami

Asuma/Kurenai vs. Shizune/Genma

Temari/Kimimaro vs. **Lee/Linda**

ROUND 2 (in progress)

Lee/Linda vs. Neji/Tenten

Asuma/Kurenai vs. Shikamaru/Hana

Naruto/Sakura vs. Sasuke/Ino

ROUND 3

TBD

-

On the arena floor now were Neji/Tenten and Lee/Linda. Neji and Lee were both out of it from each other's most powerful attacks. The strongest would be determined by their female partners.

On Neji's side- the weapon's expert, Tenten.

On Lee's side- Linda, hand to hand combat practitioner.

Now that their weapons had been destroyed, Linda was the decided favorite. Tenten had gotten stronger, as had they all, but she seemed to be confined to weapons. Her peers were taijutsu experts, and Tenten had no hope of matching them, so she carved her own niche. That niche was a small at times- like now.

"So tell me..." Linda asked, a sneer on her face, "What woke you up to the fact that Ekyt wasn't right for you?"

"Excuse me?" Tenten COULDN'T have heard that right.

"Well, sure, you dated him once, didn't you? Sure, you both said 'it's not a date', but- newsflash- two people getting drinks- that's a date! So, what is it about him? Ugliness? No personality? That sword fetish of his?"

Tenten shook her head. "You know, you're pathetic. You've got a boyfriend. So why pick on your ex? The one YOU split up with? Why don't you pay attention to the one you've got? You know, you hang out with our team, and Gai-sensei and Lee, and Neji all deal with it. Me- I hate your guts. But part of love is making sacrifices. I love Neji and Lee in different ways, but make no mistake- I think you're the worst thing that could've happened to our team. We could have allied ourselves with WAY better than the likes of you. But if you insist on hanging around like slime on our sandals, I can deal with it. Just make sure that YOU can deal with ME!"

"Hah! Without a weapon, you're nothing!" Linda laughed, her hand extending forward as the two girls rushed each other.

WHACK!

"Says you, b*tch."

Tenten's fist landed first, clocking Linda squarely on the chin for a solid KO.

--

"Oh hell yeah! Thatta girl, Tenny!" Ryouko cheered, gleefully counting the Ryo he had just won from a glum-looking Tsunade and a stunned Jiraiya.

" 'Tenny'? Just how drunk *are* you?" Tsunade smiled and shook her head tolerantly. **Boys will be boys. Though I've got to say, I've never seen THIS boy so festive. Good for him! Still...Kakashi and Gai should be returning soon...What happened with Azami? This Ekyt won't last. The depression will hit him sooner or later. I'll bet he knows that, too. Best to let him have fun now, while he can.**

"I'm not drunk, M'lady!" Ekyt protested, making a face. "Just happy. It's not every day I can say I beat the two of the Legendary Sannin at something..."

"Spread that around and the only thing you'll beat us in is a race to the grave," Jiraiya threatened with a laugh. "There's lots more matches, kid."

"More chances for me to cash in on some Sannin ryo, then?" Ekyt said with a mocking hopeful tone at the end.

"Good luck with that. Boast once the money's in your hand. I AM Hokage, maybe I should outlaw gambling..."

Jiraiya beat Ekyt to the punch. "Oh, please! YOU?! HAH! You couldn't handle a gambling embargo any more than I could handle a 'beautiful' embargo.

Without thinking, Tsunade shot back with "Oh yeah? Wanna bet on it? Wait...damn it!"

Ekyt laughed, but internally he checked his progress. He was no medic-nin, but being healed so many times had rubbed off on him. Plus, you knew your own chakra level instinctively.

My chakra is at 100%...physically...I'm actually near 90%. M'lady's treatment 'resets' the body at close to it's physical peak. So, aside from my flesh wound, where the blade first made contact...I'm as good as I can be with these physical statistics. When I grow more, it may be a different story- for better or worse. So I should take advantage while I can... That just begs the question of 'what can I do?' while I've got the chance... This physical peak won't last forever. But they've got me on a tight leash...well, trouble seems to come to me, so I can just kick back and enjoy the fights.

...

Ha! I won't take Lady Tsunade's money, but Jiraiya...well, he hadn't healed me, or brought me back from the dead. His money's mine! Now if only I was always so normal and could enjoy this sort of thing forever...

"...Ekyt, I need you to be honest for a minute..." Tsunade glanced at Jiraiya, who nodded once, firmly. "What kind of status do you have right now? We have reason to believe that you'll be followed and an attempt made on your life."

Ekyt wasn't surprised, so he turned his head to show he was listening.

Jiraiya cleared his throat. "It's something I picked up while watching the Akatsuki. You already know why Azami did what she did, or at least you have your suspicions. You're a target of the Akatsuki simply because you irritate them. You're a protector of their target. So it stands to reason they'd find a way to get to you, even when you're protected..."

Ekyt put up a hand. "I'm capable of defending myself, except maybe against Itachi. But he'll get my usual effort, rest assured. Truth be told, I'm not shocked by this."

Tsunade couldn't believe her ears. "You're NOT shocked? Why not?"

"Azami is what she is. She's a dangerous girl. Maybe that's why I fell for her and overlooked it. If you want my opinion, it's that she really DOES have feelings for me, and she was pressured into this. There's more than money talking here...It's hard to say but...Oh hell, I can't just say it...It's a boy!" Ekyt looked suddenly embarrassed, but even a little proud at the same time.

Jiraiya and Tsunade started coughing. They couldn't help it. It was unthinkable. COMPLETELY unthinkable.

HIM?! HE GOT HER PREGNANT?!

"Sorry, sorry, I'm kidding!" Ekyt admitted quickly, not wanting his name to be on the heart attacks of two Sannin. "Really, do you think I'm capable of that? I'm a guy, but I can keep it in my pants!"

Ekyt was rushed by Tsunade and Jiraiya. Jiraiya was kidding- Tsunade wasn't.

"I'm not healed yet!" Ekyt shouted in self-defense. Tsunade stopped just short of his head with a decapitating punch.

“Bastard. I’ll laugh later. Now, were you serious or not when you say you ‘kind of’ saw this coming?” Tsunade withdrew her first and regained her composure.

“I...kind of saw it coming, yes. She’s a bounty hunter, and I was a bounty on her list. But I overlooked that because I was sure it was love. And it may still be. I think she was forced into this. But that’s not important. What IS important is that she’s my responsibility. I’ll be the one to bring her to justice, if justice is what she needs. It’s my fault she came here; I’m just glad I was her only target. Rest assured- my time wasn’t spent just fawning over her.” Ekyt gave a sad smile, and produced a rose. “I made sure to keep my training up. I can’t perfect jutsus, but I can learn them. And I’ve learned how to defend myself. But I make one request- unless others are harmed in the process, when the time comes, if the time comes- let me fight her and her cohorts alone.”

“I can’t let you do that. If it’s the Akatsuki-”

“If it’s the Akatsuki, all the more reason to let me,” Ekyt interjected, spinning the rose. It cut his finger. “Because you can learn more about the Akatsuki through watching my fight. I’ll soften them up for you. I don’t have the talent to defeat them, but I can last long enough to give you a window of opportunity- when they’re tired, finish them.”

Even then, Jiraiya wasn’t going to let that happen. Tsunade even less so. But Ekyt had one more argument.

“This is personal now. They ruined the life I was sure I would have had. I’ve lived twenty and a half years, and I was single for twenty years and five months. I had one month to learn what it was like to be a boyfriend- to have a girlfriend. To experience the kind of fun some people have all their lives. If that part of my life truly is over, then I need to see it through to it’s final chapter. If she’s truly joined the Akatsuki, in mind, body, and spirit, I’ll see her dead myself. But if there’s even the slightest chance that this is against her will...I’ll free her. Whatever it takes, I WILL free her.”

All three parties fell silent at that. After a few moments, the serious talk had passed. Ekyt took a drink, popped a cigarette in his mouth, and counted the Ryo in his pocket.

“Oh...must suck to lose to a brand-new jonin. Haha! I’m SO putting this in my memoirs. Hey, how’s this sound: Lucky loser defeats two Sannin in one fell swoop. And I’ll leave it at that, like I won in a fight.”

“Hmm...my memoirs will say I kicked the @\$@ of a twenty-year-old jonin, demoted to genin, forced to lick my shoes, and serve me for the rest of his pathetic life for a smart-@\$@ comment and for falsifying records. How’s THAT sound? Now, what match is up...”

Asuma/Kurenai vs. Shikamaru/Hana

“This oughta be good...” the three agreed, settling back into their seats. Tsunade reached over and plucked a chakra cigarette. Ekyt opened his mouth.

“Protest, and I’ll bust you for illegally gambling. You’re still a minor...”

“...enjoy...”

--

“Sempai, sempai, SHE’S gonna lead the mission?! Seriously?! Really?! The new girl?”

“Yes, Tobi. And you’re not coming, un?”

“And neither are you two!” Kakuzu said shortly, hearing enough of that crap for one day- or lifetime.

“Shut the f*** up, Kakuzu. You aren’t going either. And whaddaya know- I am!” Hidan interrupted, giving his scythe an experimental swing. “Sucks for you- no profit.”

“Sucks for you- no one to put you back together again. You KNOW that the Kaguya boy will get you, right? Without me to patch you up, you have no abilities besides your stupid, slow jutsu.”

Azami rolled her eyes. She had put on the Akatsuki cloak, leaving it open in front. Beneath it she kept on the gold one-piece jumpsuit that had once been an Egyptian pharaoh’s daughters’ gown. The inside of her cloak was brimming with her equipment, included an ankh that was very special to her. She stood up, the rustling of her cloak enough to get everyone’s attention.

“Be sure of your facts before you brag, Hidan. And same to you before you dog, Kakuzu. You’re both coming. The fact is, Kakuzu was right- your slow jutsu wouldn’t hold a candle to Ekyt by itself. If you think otherwise, you either don’t know Ekyt, or you’re incredibly dense.”

Before Hidan could complain, Azami cut him off by shoving him in the forehead and knocking him down. She glared at him, putting a foot across his neck.

“You think too much of yourself. Check your ego at the door. Don’t you think that Ekyt will be beyond angry? I betrayed him for scum like you. I would hate myself, if there was profit in self-loathing. So get off your high horse, and don’t underestimate him, or anyone there. If there’s one thing I learned about the Hidden Leaf...” Azami loaded her crossbow, aiming it at Hidan’s head. “...It’s that you can’t underestimate anyone there and NOT pay the price. I wouldn’t have thought Ekyt would survive. I underestimated him, and now I have to go clean up my mess. For you, there will be no second chances. An outright defeat is acceptable- a defeat through ignorance is not.”

Azami shot the arrow next to Hidan’s head.

“So check your ego at the door. That goes for anyone else who gets involved.”

-

“Who the hell put her in charge, un?” Deidara whined. He hated this- Sasori was much better. At least, he thought so. No one had seen Azami fight. She was a big question mark.

“Get a clue, sempai! She’s favored by Itachi! Rumor has it that she fought Kisame to a draw!”

Deidara thought about Tobi’s words as he grabbed him in for a choke.

Is that it, then? Itachi knows her combat style? If she's alive, she must have really impressed him...Well then...

--

Asuma and Kurenai stood across from Shikamaru and Hana. Kurenai was smiling- she always enjoyed the student vs. teacher battles. They were great learning experiences for both parties. Asuma would really enjoy the battle, despite his griping to the contrary. It was clear that Shikamaru was his special project, in the way that Lee was to Gai; that Sasuke was to Kakashi; that Hinata was to herself. No relationship was ever perfectly harmonious- bumps in the road like this helped shape people, both teacher and student.

“Now then, no hard feelings Shikamaru? This isn't a GO board- you won't have time to think your way out of this. Stay sharp, and prove to me that you're a jonin we can all depend on. And that you're worthy of the girl you've got on your side.” Ohh, powerful opening shot by Asuma.

“Yeah, yeah. You know, one thing my father taught me- you've got to stand up to a bully. In his case, he didn't- he still married my mother. In my case, I'm going to stand up to you now. I probably won't win, but whatever...I'm here because she (points to Hana) is forcing me to show up...so whatever...”

Hana smacked Shikamaru. “How is that any different than your dad marrying your mom? And stop saying 'forced'! You just want me, right?”

“Oh, shut up! Why're you so hung up on that forced kiss?” Shikamaru fired back.

Asuma and Kurenai listened patiently, laughing to themselves.

“Remember when WE argued like that?” Asuma asked, shaking his head. “If he's THIS worked up now...”

“We still DO argue like that, Asuma. And you're right- his mind is in no shape for genjutsu.”

“No, we don't. We outgrew that kind of arguing. And don't say that what I just said was an argument.”

--

Azami sat alone in a chamber of the Akatsuki's meeting place. Right now, she was the only one here in person.

So you DID survive...I'm glad, Ekyt. I meant what I said when I told you I loved you. I also meant what I said when I promised myself I'd never love again, as punishment for what I did to you. But now that I've been in love, I realize just how wonderful it is? Would you give me the chance to love again, even if it's not you? What would you think? How would you feel? And how will you feel when we meet? You'll insist on fighting me, I know that. And you'll give me a good battle. But winning is different. You've never seen my full strength, and I have never seen yours.

I wish it didn't have to be like this. I wish it with all my heart. Please...die quietly, or kill me quickly. I don't want to suffer through losing you for real. If I didn't have these debts...

Our life together would have been complete...

72 - When Heart's Collide

PLEASE NOTE: MY VALENTINE'S COUPLE FIC ACTUALLY CONTAINED A HUGE SPOILER FOR TOT. SORRY ABOUT THAT!

-NG

Ekyt leapt down from the balcony suddenly. The two Sannin in his company had felt it, too, and nearly stopped him. But they remembered his words:

'It's personal.'

"We have to let him go...damn it, I don't like it, but- EVERYONE OFF THE FLOOR! JONIN AND CHUNIN, YOU KNOW YOUR DUTIES!"

Naruto and Sakura were escorted away by Gai and Kakashi. In fact, they were hustled away quickly. As chief Akatsuki targets, they couldn't be allowed to be captured or killed. Kakashi hated the thought that he might be wet-nursing his team, but it couldn't be helped. They were rushed past Ekyt on the way out. Only he was ignoring the scram order. Instead, he stood still in place, eyes down. Naruto tried to grab him, but Ekyt shrugged it off.

She's here, too. I can feel it... But who did she bring? I know their chakra, but it could be any of the Akatsuki. It's not Kisame, his chakra is much bigger. But who...

--

"Are we really gonna let him do this alone? Honor is one thing, but a suicidal battle against three enemies..." Asuma let smoke leak out of his mouth. He didn't like this at all. Something told him that this was bad, but he couldn't pick out what. Ekyt could handle himself, but this felt different.

"We have to. There's no choice, Ekyt was clear. But that's not Ekyt out there. That's Ryouko," Kakashi said mysteriously. The other jonin just looked at him. Kakashi had forgotten he and his team were the only one who knew.

"He's an ANBU agent. Well, he was. He was supposed to guard my team, and against the very threat he's facing now. But typical Ekyt/Ryouko, he got kicked by fate- hard. The one he protected us from is out there now. And she meant the world to him. Azami, the bounty hunter- the first girl he admitted loving."

--

"Ekyt-sensei! To hell with orders!" Yuushi ran out, his sword half-drawn, standing next to Ekyt.

"Yuushi, you have to go. Now." Ekyt never spoke so harshly to his beloved student. It wasn't his nature to bark orders. The fact that he just did clued Yuushi in to how serious things were. All the same, this was his beloved sensei- desertion wasn't an option.

"If I'm a burden, let the command to commit seppuku befall me!" Yuushi shouted in response, ready to turn his blade on himself.

"Your strength isn't a question. Yuushi, listen to me, and listen well. After this, you'll be more swordsman than me. I may know more in terms of actual skill, but you've surpassed me. This may well be the final lesson I give you. If indeed it is, you must not seek foolish revenge. Revenge is blindness, and leads only to more darkness."

Yuushi knelt down, never hearing Ekyt speak such strong words before. It was always 'good, but try this', or 'we'll get through this'. Death was never spoken of, and revenge was taboo.

"There are things a man must consider before battle. In my case- responsibility. I created this threat, and I must be the one to defeat it. For you..." Ekyt paused, putting a hand on Yuushi head. Then he smiled, even closing his eyes, then raised his pinky. "For you, you must think of what you have waiting for you. Such as Kantai. Even more importantly, you have a long future ahead of you. Don't waste it in a battle that isn't yours. Now then, I must take responsibility for my actions. And you...you must take care of all those you hold dear. If you might do your teacher one last favor..."

Yuushi bowed lower. "Anything, sensei! Tell me!"

Ekyt picked Yuushi up. "Now, you know this humble stuff doesn't fly with me! As for my favor- keep an eye on Naruto-dono and Ojou-sama. I can only leave that mission to you. If it comes to that- I'm not dead yet!"

"I promise...now you must make me a promise!" Yuushi gripped his teacher's shoulder. "Don't die. Your philosophical reasoning has reached my ears, but you're saying what a teacher must. You're a stronger man than I. I only hope I grow into someone like you."

"Now you're speaking as a student must. Go on, now." Ekyt's speech changed at the end to an order. Yuushi gave him a quick hug, then took Kantai's hand and ran off to find Sai and Yamato.

-

"That was heartwarming."

A familiar voice echoed in the arena. Ekyt was instantly on his guard. "Show yourself!"

Azami seemed to materialize from nowhere. Ekyt's mind told him it was a well-done False Surroundings genjutsu. He braced himself for the worst. But Azami just kept walking toward him. The crowd had fallen silent. They knew that this girl and Ekyt were together- or at least had been. The chief question was Azami's choice of clothing, and Ekyt's sudden urgency.

"So...you did join them..." Even Ekyt couldn't keep the sadness completely out of his voice. He stare wavered for a moment, but he locked eyes with Azami a split-second later, determination plastered on his face.

"I had to. It only made sense. My strength was too much for this village." **Damn it, I hate myself!**

Ekyt didn't break his gaze as he walked closer. "Why? Just tell me why. Money? Infamy? Power? What is it that the Akatsuki had that I couldn't hope to give you? You know that I would have done anything for you." Ekyt sounded less like a warrior now, and more like a hopeless boy, wishing that he had control of his life. He hated the sound of desperation in his voice. It reeked of weakness and self-pity. If there were two things Ekyt hated, those had to be it.

"It was all those, and more. Ekyt, I loved you. Don't think for a second that my feelings for you weren't real. I would never lead you along like that. I had never been loved before. You made me feel like I hadn't wasted my life. You treated me like a...person. That's it. Like I belonged..." **Damn damn damn!**

Ekyt's own mind flashed back. Back to when he first came. Back when Sakura treated HIM like he belonged. A small smile reached Ekyt's face.

"If I gave someone the comfort of feeling like they belonged...the comfort that eluded me for so long...then I've no regrets. Except that maybe I didn't do something further for you. If only I knew what... I would have done anything. If you wanted children, I would have given them to you. I'm sorry..."

Azami suddenly got angry. "Don't f***in' apologize like that! You haven't done anything wrong! God, damn it, I'M the guilty one! ME! Why do you..." Azami suddenly felt tears fill her eyes. She grabbed Ekyt's haori jacket with both hands, sobbing uncontrollably into his bandaged chest. When she looked up, she looked more like a scared little girl than a heartless bounty hunter.

"...God, why do you have to be like that? Why can't you be hateful? Or spiteful! Aren't you human?! I STABBED YOU! I TRIED TO KILL YOU, AND YOU'RE TELLING ME HOW TERRIBLE YOU ARE?! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!"

Ekyt put a hand on her head, patting it gently. "Because it's my fault, one way or the other. Give me your guilt, Azami. You needn't live with it. As for myself- I carry my guilt with me as often as my kunai. It's never away from me. The burden of your guilt is one I would gladly carry."

Azami's heart raced wildly. **This isn't how it's supposed to be! I wasn't supposed to say that! I counted on him hating me, at least a little! But he's forgiven me! Why?! Why can't you hate me, Ekyt?! PLEASE hate me! PLEASE! I don't want to hurt you anymore!**

"Azami...C'mon. Look me in the eyes, okay? Thatta girl."

Ekyt put his hand under her chin, forcing her to look at him. It's funny to think how far they both were from the personalities that had made them well known. Ekyt would NEVER hold a girl like that, and Azami would NEVER let one of her targets become the source of her passion. But these two knew each other well, personality-wise. To each other, however, their strengths were unknown.

SCHUNK!

Ekyt's face morphed into a mask of pain as Azami's Egyptian sword sliced into his gut. She still held him, apologizing for the last time. Until she got a splinter. She looked up so fast her neck cracked

slightly.

Ekyt stood across the room, a cigarette in his hand. The look he wore on his face sent Azami's heart racing. It was as if she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar by her father.

"I know you're not alone, Azami. Why don't your two friends go ahead and introduce themselves?"

Azami wanted to compliment on his resourcefulness. She wanted to tell him that he should have confidence in himself; he was stronger than he thought. Instead, what tumbled out of her mouth followed her plan- a plan crafted out of desperation to keep him at bay. She hated herself for even thinking this.

"Alright. But you won't be happy to see them. Especially when I tell you one is my boyfriend."

Azami had to choke the word out, but changed her voice to hide the disgust in it. It had the desired effect on Ekyt, however. His calm, stoic eyes were filled with rage. He couldn't casually stand there with his cigarette anymore. The cigarette was jammed angrily into his mouth. He couldn't pretend to be calm, cool, and in-control.

"...!"

Ekyt ducked just as a three-bladed scythe cracked the wall right near his head.

"F***! Missed! What are you, a little mouse?!" Hidan snarled, appearing to float out of the wall. He withdrew his scythe after giving it an experimental swing around his head. Fortunately, he had maneuvered Ekyt to the perfect position. Ekyt seemed to guess that, too, because he jumped just as he landed. Kakuzu's strings barreled into the ground a split second after his leap. Unfortunately for the flustered Leaf jonin, the strings followed him. Ekyt did a twisting roll in the air, barely dodging the strings. At that moment, Azami took aim with her crossbow and fired off four arrows.

No way he'll dodge- ?!

Ekyt spun again, kicking off the arrows while dodging the strings. The arrows fell harmlessly to the ground, and Ekyt continued his leap, using his kicks off the arrows to stay in the air. Hidan's scythe aimed to ground him. As Ekyt was upside-down, it looked like Hidan had the battle won.

-

"Yuushi, we've got to help him!" Kantai yelled, tugging at Yuushi's sleeve. But Yuushi shook his head.

"That's not my order. And besides that, he's got this well in hand. Remember, he trained with swords for years. That slow scythe is nothing, even in that position. Put your faith in him. He'll do what he has to; he always has."

Yuushi wasn't sure why he was so confident in Ekyt's abilities. Ekyt himself wasn't. But maybe it was because Ekyt had seen a strength in Yuushi no one else had. And likewise, Yuushi had seen a strength in Ekyt that few knew of. There was more to the new jonin than meets the eye.

-

CLAP!

Ekyt's hands closed around the scythe, uncut by the blades. He held it firmly, so that Hidan couldn't yank it back. Ekyt's momentum was exhausted now, and he fell to the ground, the strings following him. Thinking quickly, he grabbed the scythe and cut at the strings.

Azami was beyond shocked. She couldn't help but stare at the real love of her life as he managed to dodge every attack that was thrown at him. Finally, he threw the scythe back and stepped away, looking from one attacker to the next. His eyes were burning with rage. He was clearly trying to figure out how to eliminate at least Hidan. But outnumbered, with no weapons?

-

"Damn...this is bad. He said not to get involved?"

Asuma's question earned nods from Tsunade and Jiraiya.

"It's personal, he said. Still, he'd last longer if he had a weapon..." Tsunade bit her lip in frustration. She couldn't even say 'he'd win if he had a weapon'- that was a gross over-estimation of his abilities. The fact was, he was fighting to die.

"Glad you agree. The kid has guts, he just needs a weapon to help keep those guts in place. I didn't hear him say anything about giving him a weapon...EKYT! CATCH!"

Asuma threw his trench knives down to Ekyt. Asuma was never one to part with his weapon, but a thought hit him:

This IS his fight. He said he'd repay the village, and now he's going to. He's down there to die, but to give all of us a chance. What about the children I want to have? The world will be a lot safer without those guys. I wish I was down there myself. But I can't be. So the least I can do is offer a little help...

-

Ekyt caught the knives, immediately relaxing. But then he saw something that made his very blood boil- Azami running a hand Hidan's chest, clearly teasing and flirting with him.

Azami congratulated herself on finally cracking Ekyt's rock-solid determination. **So that did it. He's lost his cool. Now, his ability to fight will diminish. I'm going to burn the skin on my hand off after this. As if this foul-mouthed jackass had a chance with me...**

Ekyt made handsigns, whispering to himself. He seemed to be making mathematical calculations in his head, then nodding to himself to confirm them once he decided they were correct. He was going to use one of his oldest jutsus, and one of his newest. He'd never used them combined before. In this case, however, facing a battle he shouldn't have even a remote shot to win, now was the time to take risks.

“Azami, do you remember the first jutsu I used on you?”

Ekyt spoke as though reminiscing fondly. It belied his furious demeanor and angry eyes.

Azami thought for a moment, but nodded. “Of course. Yang Xia.”

“A good life with a beautiful girl...The closer you get to something, the tougher it is to see it*...how true.
FLAMA SUCCENDO! DRAGON’S PATH JUTSU!”

(*Yes, from ‘Closer’, Naruto’s latest opening. And, as you’ll recall, ‘Yang Xia’ is the Chinese name for ‘Flama Succendo’)

Ekyt stomped the floor, sending a burst of fire toward Azami and Hidan. To the shock of everyone in the room, Ekyt jumped on the fire and ‘surfed’ it to Hidan. As Hidan moved to jump, Ekyt slashed his leg with the trench knives.

“AGH! F***!” Hidan landed on his hurt leg. “How the hell?!”

Ekyt’s fire carried him to the wall. He hit it feet-first and flipped backward off it just seconds before Kakuzu’s strings came hunting for him. Still in the air and upside-down, Ekyt threw two shuriken in each direction toward his enemies. Not a major threat by itself, but when coupled with a jutsu the Third Hokage used...

73 - The Dragon Trio

“MULTI SHURIKEN SHADOW CLONES!”

Hidan’s body was riddled with them, as his hurt leg prevented him from jumping out of the way. The most he could do to defend himself was to hold his scythe in front of him and close his eyes. Azami had leapt up and under the catwalk that circled the arena, using her chakra to hang from the ceiling like a bat. Kakuzu’s threads blocked the shuriken.

Tak.

Ekyt landed next to Hidan. With a few fast, well-placed cuts, he stripped the scythe away and cut Hidan’s arms up. Then, crossing the blades, he sliced Hidan’s neck with an ‘X’ motion.

-

“Is that the same guy?!”

“When did he get to be so strong?!”

“But he was a genin for so long!”

There were many comments, but the two that meant the most would stick in Ekyt’s ears for a long time.

“That’s the boy who earned the bounty on his head in the Mist Village. No wonder...”

and

“This is a man I want to protect my children.”

Sakura and Naruto stood side by side, not saying much of anything. It pained them both not to be involved, but a dawning realization hit them both. In a battle like this, they would have been one more person for Ekyt to protect. No matter how much stronger they were than him (or so Ekyt believed), Ekyt would have protected them. Even if it meant the fight was forfeit to him. Even if it meant his life was forfeit. Ojousama and Naruto-dono came first. That was why they couldn’t be involved.

“Azami...” Sakura muttered. “Naruto...do you think Azami is really evil?” Sakura pushed away from the railing on the catwalk, tugging on her skirt nervously. “I just...can’t picture it. She doesn’t seem evil. She seems like...well, confused. There’s more going on here than Azami’s letting on.”

Naruto agreed. “Yeah, but that doesn’t do Ekyt any good. Unless he’s already figured it out. I bet he has! That’s why he hasn’t gone after her! Yeah! He wants to hear what she’ll say when her teammates are gone! That MUST be it!”

"I guess..." Sakura said slowly, as if tasting her words. "But there's always the other option- Ekyt loves her. Maybe he can't bring himself to hurt his first girlfriend. Maybe it's a weakness for him. I've never seen him so angry. If I can see his emotions, he's not fighting his style. He's let rage take over. And that might be exactly the opening the enemy needs..."

-

Hidan's head stayed connected by the thinnest of threads, but he fell to the ground all the same. Ekyt kicked the scythe out of his reach and stepped over him.

"That's two..." he murmured, speaking around his cigarette.

Azami had sensed it- a genjutsu- but couldn't reach Kakuzu to break it. Whatever it was must have been pretty terrible. Kakuzu was silently screaming and tearing at his own cloak, as if he felt the cold hand of death gripping his throat.

Seeing that, Azami dropped down from the catwalk.

"I guess it's come down to us..." she said, sounding surprised.

Ekyt blew out smoke. His eyes softened slightly. "I guess so...Azami, please reconsider. I don't want to hurt you, and you don't want to hurt me. Why do this the hard way? Just give me some answers. Whatever bastard is blackmailing you, or whatever- I WILL do anything it takes to free you. Even if it means...Even if it means that you hate me. I can live with you hating me. What I can't live with is you suffering."

Azami looked at her fallen comrades. Both were alive, but out of commission. That left her to deal with Ekyt for the time being. Not that she didn't have her doubts- they just weren't the doubts anyone else would have thought of.

I don't want him to feel bad... We aren't in the same league skill-wise. I'll have to try hard NOT to overpower him. I've never told him of all my abilities. He's never told me of his either, but there's no hope for him. I'm not worried about killing him. I'm worried about crushing his psyche. But if that'll stop the fight...

In a split-second, Azami had cut Ekyt's arm with a long, gold sword of Egyptian origin Ekyt's eyes widened as he felt the cut just as Azami returned to her starting position. The cut was the kind that spurting a lot of blood, but didn't hurt as bad as you guessed it would. Not to say it didn't hurt.

Azami looked at the blood on her sword. She had an idea of how to incapacitate him quickly, or kill him quickly- whichever came first. She had two sets of orders to follow. Pein seemed to be stronger than Itachi, so if Ekyt died against Itachi's wishes, Pein's wishes would be fulfilled. But her true client was Itachi. Well, it didn't matter. She was going to try this.

"Chiburi!" she called out, flicking the blood off her sword. "Hey, moron! Open your mouth!" she yelled over to Hidan. Ekyt's face paled as Hidan obeyed. The blood was going to land in Hidan's mouth.

THUNK.

In desperation, Ekyt threw a kunai. By luck or by skill, the blood landed on the blade of the kunai, which flew harmlessly out of Hidan's reach. It was a close shave, and it forced Ekyt to sit back and think.

She's more powerful than me...She's faster than me...

She's better than me. In. Every. Way. If I'm going to win, I have to do something special.

Something that's risky. Something I've never used before. But I can't kill her. No matter what, my mind won't accept it. It won't let me kill her. Not that that seems to be in my realm of ability. I've got to stop her. If I can outlast her, at least...

WHAP!

Ekyt skidded across the floor, but was punted back where he came from. When he opened his eyes, Azami was standing over him.

"You don't have the luxury to sit still and think. This isn't you against any adversary- it's you against me- someone who knows you better than anyone else you've faced. Now, please, just hold still and let me end this..."

Azami raised her sword high over her head. She positioned the tip at Ekyt's chest. After a deep breath, she plunged the sword down as hard as she could.

At least he won't feel it for long...

CLANG!

Ekyt's hands had halted Azami's blade. She had forgotten his weapon! The trench knives from Asuma had brass knuckles on them, and Ekyt used that to punch the Egyptian blade from both sides. The tip never touched him. In fact, the tip clattered away, far across the room.

WHOOK!

Ekyt's fist slashed up and nearly cracked Azami in the chin. She had to skip backwards to get away from the strike. But Ekyt chased her, throwing strikes at top speed.

"Don't think I just sat there! I GAVE you that opening! And that opening gave me the chance to use one of my own jutsus. Since I didn't want to interrupt your triumph, I didn't say it out loud. But now- DRAGON'S FIRE EXTENSION!"

Flame erupted from Ekyt's hands and feet. Ekyt and Azami's high-speed martial arts battle cascaded from there, and became even more dangerous. Azami parried Ekyt's strikes, and he her strikes. But now the fire adding range to his kicks and strikes began to heat Azami's body. She resorted to using her speed advantage. She managed to get behind Ekyt, but she couldn't grab him. When he spun, fire gave him a brief shield. Azami was no slouch, though- Ekyt's new advantage could be used against him, with a little ingenuity.

The fire must obscure his vision, at least a little. And he wouldn't think anything of noticing his own chakra...

Azami backpedaled, leading Ekyt in the direction she needed him to go. He didn't notice it, but Ekyt was going to break his own genjutsu.

-

Kakuzu was hit with a horrid version of the Death Foreseeing Technique. He was SURE he had released the genjutsu, so when he began to see himself die in the most gruesome ways possible, he couldn't quite snap himself out of it. No matter how many times you saw yourself die, you always wondered if it was really happening. Could you really be dying? This time, was it real?

Then he felt it- warmth. Precious warmth. But the warmth was too...warm. Too hot. BURNING!

“GAHHH!”

Unknowingly, the fire jetting from Ekyt's feet lit Kakuzu on fire. The pain ended the vicious cycle of the genjutsu. It took him a few moments to get moving again. When he got up, he saw Hidan barely standing across the room, in no shape to fight. Using his special jutsu, Kakuzu used his threads to stitch Hidan together again.

-

Ekyt's fire jutsu ended after a minute or so, but it had given him the upper-hand as he dueled with Azami. They both landed unimportant strikes. Azami swung with her broken sword. Ekyt deflected the blow upward, knocking her off-balance. He cut at her with his other hand, the knife nearly catching her exposed triceps. Azami brought her elbow down on Ekyt's arm – normally a good way to strip a weapon – but Ekyt held on to the trench knives, this time aiming the knuckles toward her face. Azami turned to the side to dodge the blow, then brought the sword toward Ekyt in a thrust. Ekyt repeated his trick by punching the sword. This time, the hilt clattered out of Azami's hand. She tripped and fell back, her eyes wide with shock.

Hidan...

Ekyt leaned forward to incapacitate her, but spun around quickly. The scythe was coming toward him. He turned to block it, but Azami tugged on his leg. Instinctively, Ekyt swiped at her, thereby making his guard less perfect. The scythe bounced off his trench knife and hit him high on the leg.

“It's all over, man! Say your f***** prayers, and pray Jashin has mercy on your soul!”

Hidan was up and as good as new. He yanked his scythe back to him and raised it to his lips.
“Itadakimasu!”

“KORYUU: RAIN DRAGON'S WRATH!”

Ekyt had wanted to avoid using jutsus like this, but in case there could be no mistakes. He had to use

the first of his 'Dragon Trio'. This jutsu was one he had developed recently, and it was largely untested. But if it worked, it would save his life. The jutsu was risky, but so was combat.

Water gathered from nowhere. Every bit of moisture in the room and the air was collected and wrung out into this attack. Hidan froze for a split second to look, and that was his mistake. Though he could hardly be faulted- it wasn't every day you had a water dragon as tall as the cavernous room they were in glaring at you.

"HAJIME!" Ekyt barked, pointing at Hidan. The dragon crashed into Hidan at full speed, blasting the sadistic Akatsuki member into the wall. The wall began to crack under the rapidly increasing water pressure, and finally forced Hidan through the solid stone wall and out of the room. That hole had the fortune side-effect of creating a drain in the room so that nobody drowned.

-

Azami couldn't believe her eyes.

I had no idea... He's this strong? He never seemed that way! I mean, this much strength really is surprising. I wouldn't have fallen for him if he didn't possess *some* degree of strength.

Heh. And here I thought I would be the one to shock him. Turns out it's the other way around...

-

"Kakashi, what the hell was THAT?!" Asuma's cigarette fell to the ground, his mouth open in shock. "I've never seen that before!"

Kakashi, who had his Sharingan eye activated, had seen Ekyt use the jutsu before. "Koryuu, Rain Dragon's Wrath. A water-style jutsu that uses every last bit of moisture within a certain area to form an attack. Ekyt has two more attacks similar to that. If he uses all three in his 'Dragon Trio', it's over- one way or another. If it was anyone but the Akatsuki, I'd like his chances."

-

Now that I've started it, I can't stop. I need to stop them. All of them. Even you, Azami. When I looked into your eyes earlier, I read the meaning within the meaning...

"Hiryuujin! Flying Dragon King!"

A dragon made of wind and ice formed at Ekyt's command. His chakra was down to thirty percent. His cigarettes could boost him up to forty-five percent tops, and that still wouldn't be enough to finish this fight. Ekyt knew this, but he kept fighting. His reasoning was easy: He would tire the Akatsuki out, and they would be easy prey for whoever came after him. That was it. It was never in Ekyt's realm of thought to win, though he had some hope after incapacitating two of the Akatsuki attackers temporarily thus far. But his plan was to do damage for the greater cause.

...Her eyes didn't tell the same story her mouth did. Her mouth shouted insults and told lies- her

eyes begged for help. But they didn't tell me WHY she needs help. Until I know that, I can't help her. All I can do...

"Hiryuujin's Rage!"

Ekyt was no master of the elements. This jutsu took a lot out of him, and he couldn't yet control the jutsu to it's full potential. This was twenty percent of the Jutsu's destructive capabilities. But that's the most Ekyt could give. The dragon flew down and allowed him to ride on it's back. That, too, cost chakra.

...All I can do is force her hand. She wants to tell me, but she can't. But why? Why can't you tell me, Azami? Is it trust? Is it my weakness? Why? Why can't you just say? You know I would do anything for you. If I'm a liability to you, I'll get stronger! But please...please...

Don't let this be our last meeting. One month was all we had. One miserable month. What good is strength if you've no one to protect? What good is love if you've no one to share it with? What good is life if all that's good dies?

The dragon plowed straight toward Kakuzu. He couldn't hope to dodge it- the thing covered almost the entire stadium. All he could do was peck at it with his strings, and try to make the threat smaller, or take out the controller. But Ekyt wasn't going to go down so easily. He dodged the strings, and even maneuvered the dragon out of the way for the worst of the attacks.

I never needed anyone...I never WANTED anyone... but then people showed me that there IS good in the world. Linda, Sakura, and then Azami. But Linda and Azami showed me just how evil the world can be. And yet...I still feel a kinship with Azami. I know the world is evil, Azami. Let your problems become mine as well! Even if we can't be together, let me take away this burden!

The dragon hit Kakuzu head-on. It blasted a hole in the stadium wall, but did surprisingly little damage.

"That hurt a little..."

Ekyt turned, but quickly turned that into a roll as Hidan's scythe nearly took his head off.

Got no choice...I've never done it before, but I've got no other option now...Gotta kill those two, or incapacitate all three...The last of the Dragon Trio...

74 - The Last Dragon

Ekyt ran as fast as he could, making handsigns and knocking the scythe and strings down as he went. The last in his dragon trio was one he could barely control. Ekyt had only mastered roughly fifteen percent of its power. Even that would take almost all his chakra, if he wasn't wiped out completely by the end of it.

But I need a distraction... Something that won't use much chakra...Well, it's too artistic for my tastes, but it fits the bill...

Ekyt plucked the rose he had been holding from out of his coat pocket. He threw it high in the air. Putting two fingers under his eyes, he focused the tiniest bit of chakra he could, and...

"Bloom!"

The flower exploded, sending petals scattering all over. Azami didn't bother to dodge- this was clearly a cheap parlor trick designed to distract her. Or so she thought until she felt her arm get cut. Catching a petal, Azami shook her head. Her two comrades were cut up pretty good, though, having decided not to dodge.

Razor blades. Should've known. Someone like him wouldn't be defenseless, even in a hospital bed. He must've planted an explosive agent in the flower, along with attaching razor blades to each petal. That boy really needs to get a girl or something.

Azami had worked so hard in figuring out the trick behind the exploding rose that she forgot that she wasn't allowing herself to get distracted. When she remembered this fact, she was on her guard- possibly too late. Thinking quickly, she yanked the ankh from around her neck.

"Shadow Clones!"

These weren't like the regular Shadow Clones. They weren't clones of Azami- instead, they were clones of nine Egyptian High Priests. All wearing Anubis masks. Azami always felt a kinship with Anubis, and seeing the nine priests brought a small smile to her face. Seeing the look on Ekyt's face brought a bigger one.

-

"You've got to be kidding me! How can she do that?!" Naruto shouted at the top of his lungs. He was practically pulling his hair out, such was his desire to help.

My Shadow Clones are perfect for this! Here we go!

"Multi Shadow Cl-

Sakura grabbed his arm, shaking her head. "It's still Ekyt's fight. Have more faith in him, Naruto."

“This is the Akatsuki! That girl already almost killed him! You want me to let her finish the job?!”

Sakura shook her head again. “No, but... Ekyt can handle this. He’s far from being beaten. I don’t know what he’s going to do, but we have to let him end this fight, on his terms if possible. The second he’s in trouble, though...we’ll go kick @\$\$!”

Yuushi, who was with them, couldn’t stand by any longer. He couldn’t disobey his teacher, either. So he compromised.

“SENSEI! TAKE THIS!”

-

Ekyt saw the sword falling through the air- he just had to get to it. Breaking out the trench knives, he started to hack his way through the sword-toting priests. Their oddly curved blades proved to be difficult, but not impossible to overcome. The twin trench knives Ekyt was wielding were much quicker than the Ada-ish blades he was against. But he needed that sword now. Time for a new trick.

My last dragon isn’t ready yet...So maybe I can speed up it’s arrival and my own speed...It’s worth a shot...

“FIRST GATE, GATE OF OPENING- RELEASE!”

Opening the first gate of chakra DID increase your speed and muscle strength, and that’s what Ekyt needed. But it ate up energy- the last thing Ekyt needed. But in a fight like this, you could hold nothing back.

“CLOSE!”

-

Gai and Lee looked absolutely stunned.

“Close?! He can’t do that! He’ll hurt himself! That technique is beyond forbidden- it’s not even recorded!” Gai was pacing back and forth. “Closing the gate so quickly can do internal damage. Horrible internal damage. Muscle teas, bone breaks, chakra tenketsu damage...”

“Gai-sensei, does this mean that you have attempted this technique?” Lee wasn’t used to seeing anyone else use the chakra gates.

It is foolish to do this! But we cannot step in. Honor and life are one and the same to Ekyt. If we get involved now, we will step on his honor, and that is as good as ending his life. But to use such a foolish technique!

His fight must indeed be desperate.

“He had no choice...” Kakashi was calmly assessing the situation, though it seemed as though he, too, wanted to get involved in the worst way. “He needs that sword. He’s got one jutsu in his repertoire that can clear the way for his last dragon. Going by the fact that he hasn’t used it yet, it must take a great

deal of preparation. It must be a powerful jutsu...But one that Ekyt has not obtained mastery over..."

-

Ekyt closed the gate, feeling his muscles protest, but hold up. In one motion, he scooped up the sword, spun, and drew it.

"Sickle Moon Dance!"

Two shadow clones fanned out and helped Ekyt attack his foes. To the casual observer, it would seem like Ekyt had won. But anyone who was really paying attention noticed something odd- Azami wasn't looking bothered in the least. In fact, she had her eyes closed, and her hands folded in what looked like prayer.

-

So it's come to using the first of my secret techniques...so be it. He's a worthy opponent. Now then- Chakra Absorption! Ekyt already knows I can give chakra, so he's probably guessed I can take it away, too- but he doesn't know how it's done...

-

Ekyt destroyed another clone, ready to face the last one. He cleaved it's side, but found he couldn't tug the sword free.

Huh? But it's flesh and blood! That cut should have torn through it, easy! I didn't miscalculate the angle. If I had, the sword would have just bounced off the ribs. No, I made the right cut...It's a trap!

Ekyt pulled the sword as hard as he could and leapt high in the air. His hand found his kunai pouch. He withdrew one and threw it at Azami. As he did, he noticed a golden light chasing him in the air. He kicked at it instinctively- bad move.

"Gah!"

Ekyt withdrew his foot as quickly as he could; though not before five percent of his remaining chakra had been taken. But his kunai was right on target...

Azami opened her eyes. She thrust a palm upward, stopping the speeding knife just inches from the key point between her eyes. Her palm smacked the steel and deflected it- without cutting her- up into the ceiling. Ekyt fell back down and cut through the head of the clone, this time successful in destroying it. His preparation was complete.

"RYUUZA: DRAGON CONSTELLATION!"

The last in Ekyt's dragon trio. It's power had been sapped when his chakra had been taken, but Ekyt hoped that ten percent of it's potential power would be enough. As this jutsu was, at heart, a mix of fire

and explosions, it fit nicely into Ekyt's fighting style. The Jutsu itself was derived from a Chinese New Year celebration, of all things.

"Guch!" Ekyt fell to his knees and coughed up blood.

Damn...this jutsu had a bigger back-blast than I guessed. It's really pushing me...(koff) But I've got no choice. Master Jiraiya...sorry I won't be joining you after this. For once, I wish your research the best...

The dragon made a dazzling entrance, full of fire and explosions. It cracked the floor and ceiling as it floated up above Ekyt. He felt the heat himself. Burns raised on his exposed arms and chest. But that was of no concern to him now.

"HAJIME!"

The dragon spun in the air like a firework, becoming smaller as it went. When it had condensed to the size of a golf ball, Ekyt put his hand out. The tiny ball settled in his palm. He kicked off, aiming for Azami.

Azami saw what Ekyt was doing. She raised her ankh, using it to help her form a chakra barrier. Hidan, who had been stitched together again by Kakuzu, leapt in front of the attack, spinning his scythe to shield the fire.

I'll never get through all that at this speed! And I can't hold onto this much fire for long! This works much like the Rasengan- power into a ball. But I couldn't hold that kind of pure chakra. My attack is more crude. I have to borrow fire's power to give the attack any kind of punch. I need to increase my speed. This'll mean a burn, but...

"HYAA" Ekyt dropped the ball and kicked it as hard as he could. It sped up to four times the rate he had been going. That was less speed than Ekyt hoped, but it was speed enough.

"Fin."

The little ball stopped just short of Hidan. A second explosion propelled it forward- through Hidan's abdomen- and into Azami.

BOO—M!

-

Jiraiya shielded Tsunade with his Needle Jizo Jutsu. He was able to see the entire attack.

"That much potential...but it won't be enough...Tsunade, do we have some kind of counter-attack ready?"

Tsunade nodded. "I've been in radio contact with them. We've planned it. The second Ekyt goes down, they're rushing the floor. And if they fail...it's up to us. ...

...

Jiraiya...does he have any chance at all of surviving? Any at all?"

Jiraiya smirked, though his eyes stayed grim. "This is Ekyt we're talking about. He'll survive- but he won't win."

-

Ekyt stood up, hardly daring to see what had happened. He could have cried- he felt so much.

His dragon had burned a hole through Hidan's stomach and out the other side. But it had done little else- Azami's chakra barrier lessened the impact. She had caught the dragon and crushed it.

"Well...you DID burn my hand..." Azami was shaking her hand out. No one made a sound.

Is she...trying to save my feelings? Ekyt wondered, forcing himself to do what he had always done- get up one more time. This time, he drew Yuushi's sword. He tucked the butt end into his shoulder, and braced the blade midway with his left hand. The hilt was braced under his right forearm.

"One more...for all the marbles."

Azami shut her eyes. She didn't want to fight him anymore. He wouldn't just die. Part of Azami knew. Had she tried her best to kill him? Her heart was a mix of emotions, some unreadable to the girl. All the same, she knew she had to finish this fight. She held out her ankh, as if holding a blade.

"Ventosus Gladius!"

The two started at opposite ends of the stadium. It would be a running joust. Neither one said anything. It would be Ekyt's Kenjutsu vs. Azami's wind blade. There would be no second chance. The two ran at top speed. Ekyt's hand thrust out. Azami's hand followed suit.

SCHUNK! CLANG!

Azami had stopped Ekyt's blade with her free hand. Her sword had pierced his abdomen. Ekyt's momentum carried him a short distance. Then the blood spurted out of him, and he collapsed to one knee.

I'm alive? I can't do much...But I have to do something...

Ekyt was all but done for. He still held the trench knives Asuma had thrown to him, but other than that, he was defenseless. One percent of his total chakra remained. With the sword through his stomach, it was a wonder he was standing at all.

"Azami...You've been in so many battles..." Ekyt began, walking toward her slowly. "How is it that you're so free of cuts?"

"No cuts you can see, right? I get cut all the time, really. But I have NEVER been cut on the face. No one ever gets close." Azami waited for Ekyt to come to her. She just didn't have it in her heart to charge down a boy that could be blown over by a strong gust of wind.

Ekyt kicked off suddenly. He aimed the knife at Azami. Her leg flashed out and stuffed him in the stomach, stopping him from getting within blade range. All the same, Ekyt swiped as he coughed up blood. He fell to the ground face-first, now laying still.

Azami felt a tear in her eye. She brushed it away, but she still felt a wetness on her cheek.

Blood?!

Azami looked at Ekyt as she felt her cheek. She saw a blue glow recede from the trench knives just as her fingers found a shallow cut on her cheek.

He focused the last of his chakra into the blade to lengthen it's reach... All this time, he didn't do that once. He must have been waiting for an opportune moment. I just assumed that he didn't know how to use the knives...

...

So he's the first one to cut me... At least he can die with that small triumph in mind...Goodbye... I love you.

Azami raised her leg to stomp his neck.

75 - The Illness

PWOOF PWOOF PWOOF PWOOF PWOOF PWOOF

Asuma, Hayate, Kakashi, Gai, Lee, and Linda all stood in the way.

“Don’t you lay one finger on him!” Linda snarled, the kunai in her hand aimed at Azami’s neck. Her body shook with anger and other assorted emotions unreadable even to her.

“But you hate him! Why would you save him?!” Azami backed up, ready to fight the jonin, if necessary. Only two of them were in her BINGO book (Asuma and Kakashi), and she could potentially fight them with the backup she had.

Linda’s glare steeled. “You dumb dog. I don’t hate him. My goal was always to stop him from going in to combat ever again. Now you’ve done that for me. I want him alive so he can see how much better I am than him. He was my first rival, and damned if he’s not going to be alive to see me become better than him!”

“That is enough. Linda, I will deal with this problem now. Ekyt was one of my best friends. I will not let him die in vain!” Lee put up his guard.

Asuma’s trench knives clattered to his feet. Ekyt’s hand was extended away from his body, as if he had thrown the knives. To everyone’s surprise, he spoke.

“Sorry...not dead yet...(koff)But win anyway, huh? GAH!”

Kakuzu’s threads pierced Ekyt’s arms and legs. There was as spectacular explosion of blood, followed by Ekyt’s attempt to regulate his breathing to deal with the pain. Lee and Gai rushed over to him and began to fight a high-speed battle with Kakuzu.

“Kakashi, you take the girl. You stand the best chance,” Asuma admitted. “Kurenai and I will deal with that scythe guy.”

-

Tsunade stood up. “Jiraiya, Naruto, Sakura- you’re with me. We’re not leaving Ekyt out there. We can’t have the others worrying about defending him while they fight. If we’re attacked- Naruto, it’s up to you. Jiraiya, you stay with him. Sakura and I will do what we can for Ekyt.”

The three raced to the floor, dodging in and out of battles. They reached Ekyt in record time. Tsunade sighed as she reached his side.

“Damn you, boy. You always do this...”

Ekyt's eyes flickered, registering that he had heard the comment. Tsunade took that as a good sign and enlisted the help of some Naruto Shadow Clones to lift the hurt boy. Ekyt would have protested, if it was possible. He seemed to know that he was beaten, and was, for once, allowing himself to retreat. It went against his nature, as it seemed to be a dishonor, but there was too much to do to allow himself to die.

The crowd took off their headbands, some even bowing their heads. Tsunade almost told them that Ekyt was alive, but announcing that to the enemy that had come to finish him off would be bad.

For once, he gets the recognition he's worked so hard for. And he's probably not aware of it. He's lucky, really. If his sword hadn't glanced off Azami's at just the precise moment it needed to, he would have been cut right through the kidneys.

"Come on, let's get him out of here!" Tsunade shrugged off her jacket and laid it over his face, continuing the 'dead' charade. After a moment, she made one more snap decision.

"Naruto, time for Hokage training- go help Kakashi. Sakura and I will deal with Ekyt."

-

Once outside, Sakura and Tsunade immediately began treatment. They healed him into consciousness in short order. Ekyt immediately shook off the clones and walked. But he didn't head for the hospital. Instead, he dragged himself toward the river, finally plopping down on the ground under a nearby tree. He stared at the tranquil scene for quite some time without speaking. When he did speak, he said the last words Tsunade and Sakura ever expected.

"...I never told you anything about my past, did I?"

Tsunade and Sakura exchanged glances. They had time enough before he'd bleed to death. The chance to hear him tell some of his story was too great. They both sat down under the tree as well. Ekyt closed his eyes and began to talk.

"It wasn't easy having an illness no one else could see. (koff) No one believed me. To everyone else, life was all about dates, or work, or school... For me, I had to work just as hard just to leave my house each day. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep...For thirteen years, I've been a slave to this condition. I've never wanted to be one of the pack...but now I just want a measure of normality..."

Ekyt wiped away some blood from his mouth with his sleeve. Doing so reminded him of the hole he had in his gut, and he winced. But no way he was going to sit there blood-faced with two of his most trusted friends.

"...I never had friends. I couldn't go anywhere. School was impossible. Getting bullied at every turn, even by girls. And I was small, so they were often taller than me. And stronger. I was always a martial artist, but I would always try not to hurt anyone. God knows it was tempting. How easy would it have been to snap the wrist of a bully grabbing me by the shirt, right? But it wasn't acceptable."

Sakura and Tsunade exchanged glances, thinking to themselves that if this was all Ekyt said, they could sympathize.

“All because of anxiety. A miserable demon that hid inside me, invisible to almost everyone. But then, my solace came- my training. My dojo got behind me. They understood me, and helped me get stronger. I made friends. Chakaro...Kayla...Linda. But one by one, they disappeared. Chakaro and Kayla just...strayed. Not the kind of people I could be proud of anymore. And I got closer to Linda. What a damn fool I was for trusting her. But it's really thanks to her that I'm here. I had to get away, and the Hidden Leaf was perfect. Nothing but martial artists...the one place I may be comfortable. But my life...it's been one regret after another. One mistake after another. One regret after another...”

Ekyt felt tears, but didn't brush them away. For their part, the two kunoichi had never seen him so vulnerable and helpless before. It was to their surprise to find that this young jonin, who had braved so many wounds, was reduced to tears by an invisible master. The two girls had to choke back tears themselves. It explained so much about Ekyt. Things they'd been curious off, but could never quite word correctly when they'd thought to question it.

“So much wasted time...time I'll never get back. Time I could have lived life just for the sake of enjoying life. I could have had a girlfriend, trained harder, been a jonin so much earlier! But now, instead, I'm here, whining and feeling sorry for myself. The two things I hate the most, and I've become them. And the third feeling is the worst! Weakness! My strongest jutsus, batted aside as though they're nothing! And the plague I've unleashed on this village by showing weakness. I should have stopped her, at any cost! The Reaper Death Seal! It's beyond me in this state, but if I had just done it at the start of the fight... Now I've endangered others with my weakness!”

Tsunade stood up forcefully. “Sakura, continue healing him. And you, Ekyt- this is going to be hard for you, but I need you to stay with me. I need you to really listen to me. Can you do that?”

Ekyt's tear-stained face was trying to resume it's stoic setting, but failing miserably. It was about all Ekyt could do to just nod.

“Good. Now- The girl was beyond you. The other two, coupled together, are too much for you. They're too much for almost anyone. But you can't blame yourself. They were after you, yes, but don't think for a minute that this village, these people, who have come to love and respect you, would have let you fight this battle on your own, no matter what you said. You are never as alone as you were before. Your past needs to die. You need to be a new you. One who can be sure of his strength. Because right now, in front of me, I see the future of the Leaf. A young jonin with a long life ahead of him. A life that will be spent doing good, and protecting whoever needs it. My point, Ekyt- you're needed. You're necessary. You're loved. And you can't blame yourself. Azami is what she is- and you are what you are.”

“She was beyond me...” Ekyt repeated. “So far ahead...impossible to catch.”

“Things are never that hopeless. This is a new threat, and not one you're ready to face. Train your mind, body, soul, and tame those dragons. This fight isn't over for you yet. Your heart wasn't in that last attack, was it? Or maybe you just didn't have enough chakra at that point. You still care about that girl, and you couldn't bring yourself to kill her.” Tsunade didn't sound angry, or accusatory. In fact, she sounded the nicest Ekyt had ever heard her.

“But I've always done what I have to do! And this time I couldn't do it! I couldn't stop her! Damn it damn it damn it to hell!” Ekyt clenched a fist in vain. Tsunade put a hand over his fist, pushing it down.

“Now isn’t the time. Blame is pointless. If you feel there’s a wrong, then do what you always do- right it. And this time, don’t try to go it alone. You have support- learn to use it, will you? Damn kid, you’re always worrying me! And you’re always making my apprentice work overtime!”

Sakura smiled at the joke. Her smile grew broader when she noticed Ekyt’s weak smile. But it faded quickly. He was really choking on his words now. They must have been painful for him to say.

“I will never understand people. I’ll never understand how to love, or what it means to be loved. Yet I’ll feel it as strongly as anyone. Love and strength to protect that love...two things I desire, but two things I may never attain...”

Ekyt got up, healed enough to walk. He bowed deeply to the two kunoichi. “Thank you. Thank you so much. Hearing me out was the kindest thing that’s been done for me. And that kindness won’t be forgotten...Even as my life takes a new path.”

With that, Ekyt straightened up and with the kunoichi. He had a great deal of thinking to do during his treatment. Perhaps it was time to embrace a new lifestyle? No matter what was said, this was his fault. He had given Azami trust, and that trust had led to this attack. People could die because of him.

**Azami, you didn’t tell the whole truth out there. You have a reason for doing this...
But if you didn’t trust me enough to tell me...
Our relationship was over before it started.**

That thought suddenly striking him, Ekyt broke away from the two kunoichi. They caught up to him quickly, but just tagged along. They now understood what had made Ekyt the way he was. He couldn’t let this go. There was no solace for him, no rest for the weary. And Ekyt himself had just faced an awful truth.

His limits.

-

Gai and Lee fought Kakuzu, who was at fifty percent. That genjutsu had really done some damage. His attacks were fast, but Gai and Lee, with the chakra gates, were faster. They couldn’t quite get a hold of Kakuzu, though, so they could only punch and kick, and wait for an opening. Finally, Lee saw one.

“Gai-sensei! HYAH!”

Lee’s foot slashed up and kicked Kakuzu under the chin. To reach him, Lee had slid through Kakuzu’s legs while Gai occupied him. The kick knocked Kakuzu into the air. His strings attacked Lee, but he was too quick for them. They met only the ground as he rolled away.

“Right! ASA KUJAKU!”

Gai had been warned by Kakashi (who had fought Kakuzu before) to not let him rest at all. Keep the pressure on him, keep attacking. Don’t let him unleash his full power. With that in mind, Gai broke out

his strongest taijutsu. 'Asa Kujaku', or 'Morning Peacock', was a whole lot of power spanned across rapid-fire strikes. This high in the air, Gai had plenty of time to hit Kakuzu over two hundred times. While Gai landed on one knee, Kakuzu crashed and burned. His chakra was all but spent.

-

"Who's the f***** hottie?" Hidan asked, upon seeing Kurenai. Asuma's trench knives swung into his scythe, knocking it down.

"Now, Kurenai!" Asuma struggled to keep Hidan's scythe down. Behind him, Kurenai began to disappear.

"Demonic Illusion: Tree Bind Death!" Kurenai's voice came from nowhere and everywhere, apparently. A tree shot up from the ground at Hidan's feet. It grew to adulthood and wrapped around him.

"What the f*** is this?! Some stupid illusion?! RELEASE!"

Kurenai's illusion was released, and she was in a perfect position to be targeted by Hidan's scythe. But Asuma wasn't going to let that happen.

"Fire Release: Ash Burning Product!"

Asuma smoked a lot, but for a good reason- it became a weapon. He inhaled, then released a breath filled with ashes from his cigarettes. It was capable of causing third degree burns. And when used in tandem with his next jutsu-

"Flying Swallow!"

-It was usually deadly. As Ekyt had done before, Asuma pumped chakra into his trench knives and sliced away. Arms first to stop a counter-attack, legs next to make sure Hidan couldn't run, and finally a slice to the neck.

-

Kakashi and Azami glared at each other. But Azami closed her eyes calmly.

"You win. The copy ninja is out of my league. Will you give Ekyt a message for me?"

Kakashi didn't drop his guard. "I'd be happy to. Naruto, make sure the others are alright."

Azami opened her mouth, but something at the door caught her eye. Or, rather, the door being kicked open violently caught her eye. She shook her head- he couldn't be back!

But he was. Ekyt was flanked by Tsunade and Sakura. He limped toward Azami, his eyes locked with hers. When he reached her, he said this:

"I don't know who you're working for. The Akatsuki tried to kill you, so you can't be just working for

them because you want to. Someone has something on you. But you won't trust me to tell me what it is. That, Azami, is why this relationship couldn't work."

Never mind the shock that Ekyt was still alive. The fact that he was saying this to Azami was shocking enough.

"I'm sorry. This relationship was doomed to fail. You never had any trust in me, or any faith in my abilities. A warrior prides himself on his strength. You distrusted me. I don't know why, and I won't ask. But you did. My love was true, and will be until I meet another, if I meet another. But for now... This relationship is over."

If Azami had been surprised at him before, she was beyond surprised now. She had stabbed him, hit him, mutilated him, and of all things, her distrust was what destroyed them.

I was wrong. Ekyt wasn't defeated. I was.

Azami raised her arms. "Shadow Control: Movement!"

Three black circles appeared on the floor. Each one swallowed up one of the defeated Akatsuki members.

The Leaf was safe once more. Ekyt finally collapsed from exhaustion and wounds, and was brought to the hospital. While he was unconscious, many stopped by to offer him support, and even bring gifts. There was masses of people ready to guard him. Ekyt had finally been accepted, it seemed.

Asuma came in with Kurenai.

"Damn shame... Still, he DID survive... I'll have to see about getting him some kind of weapon made of the same metal my trench knives use..."

Kurenai had other ideas. "He won't be himself for quite some time. If he needs to escape, maybe he could do that work with the Fire Daimyo, like you did."

"Twelve Ninja Guardians?" Asuma thought for a minute, but shook his head. "No. I hate to say it, but he's not ready for that. He needs someone to train him. He's got the potential, though."

Tsunade nodded silently, bidding them to leave. She pushed the hair off Ekyt's face, sighing at his bloodied state.

When he wakes up, he will be going through hell...again...

76 - The Invisible Assailant

Ekyt seemed to be okay. No trench coat, no extra cigarettes, and nothing out of the ordinary. To anyone looking on, it would seem as if he was finally at peace. He had been fully accepted as a member of the Hidden Leaf, after long, arduous years of trying. His jonin vest had been mended, and it was back on him each day, without fail. Secretly, his home had been searched, and nothing strange had been found.

In the week it had taken him to recover, Ekyt had done a lot of thinking. He thanked the sensei's and students who took up the fight on his behalf profusely, promising with a smile that it wouldn't happen again. Everyone wished him well, gave him flowers and cards, and so on. It was a normal existence- the very existence Ekyt had wanted.

The day came for his first mission back. Tsunade seemed to hold back, but he put her at ease with a few words and an uncharacteristic grin. She returned the smile and handed over the mission log. The mission wasn't horribly hard. It was a solo mission to bring the Leaf's annual report to the Fire Daimyo. The scroll tucked safely away in one of his makimono pouches, Ekyt was on his way.

Tsunade watched him go, mixed emotions in her mind. On the one hand, Ekyt needed some time to be alone. He looked and acted fine, but no doubt he still had much to sort through. On the other hand, after that vicious attack, should he be left alone? Tsunade had finished that idea before Ekyt was out the door.

"Ekyt! I'm adding Ibikki Morino to the mission roster! Rank-wise, you're the highest, so you're going to lead."

"Yes M'lady."

Nothing in his response to give anything away. And his eyes are calm. The order didn't bother him at all. Good! I'll ask Ibikki to let me know how he does. Maybe even what career he's suited for. It's about time he figured that out. He's got a lot of potential to embrace. ANBU is out for now, thanks to the council. But there's still exam proctor, teacher, field instructor...

A knock on the door brought Tsunade back to the real world. Shuffling papers to make herself seem as though she hadn't just been daydreaming, she called out 'come in'. The door swung open and Asuma came up.

"Asuma? This is a surprise! You aren't one to pay a social call," Tsunade said mildly, wondering why Asuma was here.

"I know, Lady Hokage, but I had a thought. After what happened the other day, Ekyt needs two things: An instructor and a goal. From what I can see, he's the type who needs someone, or a cause, to serve, while obtaining greater rank himself. He's not the type to just be content at any given point."

Tsunade nodded her agreement of Asuma's assessment. Asuma took that as a sign that he could

continue.

“With some training, he could be one of the Twelve Guardian Ninjas of the Fire Daimyo.”

“That’s exactly what Ekyt needs! (That and a girl that won’t stab him)” Tsunade exclaimed. But Asuma shook his head, not quite sharing her enthusiasm.

“It means a choice, M'lady. He couldn't guard the Fire Daimyo AND the Leaf Village. We'd lose out on him. There's no question it would be great experience for him, and a much-needed escape. But at the same time...”

Tsunade's enthusiasm disappeared as quickly as it had come. Was she willing to let him do that? Yet more thoughts struck her as she thought this over.

It's not fair for me to choose for him. But if he takes that job, he won't ever find a girl. If he doesn't take the job, could I offer him some kind of alternative? It really all come down to what he wants. I doubt he can think the world 'girl' without imagining a stab wound right about now...

“Thank you, Asuma. I'll think about it. It'll be his decision, of course. Who did you have in mind to instruct him?”

Asuma half-shrugged. “I didn't think you'd really consider it, so I didn't think that far ahead. But, for a job like that, Ekyt needs a diverse skill set, especially at his age. Maybe a mix of instructors. That's the best thing I can think of.

-

Sasuke had managed to escape Ino for a few minutes, claiming he had a mission. Really, his only mission was some quiet time. He really like the Yamanaka girl, but even if you liked her, she could become tiresome quickly.

“Uchiha! Come here!”

Sasuke turned his head in the direction of the voice. It wasn't a voice he knew, so he was on his guard.

“Who's talking to me?” Sasuke demanded, looking all over for the source of the voice.

“You don't know me. Lucky for you. If you'd known me a week ago, we'd have been enemies. But now, I've got a new interest. You're the brother of Itachi Uchiha, correct?”

Sasuke immediately tensed up. The years hadn't lessened his hatred toward his brother. Beyond hatred, though, was the lack of understanding. Why did Itachi do what he did. There had to be more to it than just 'gauging his strength', right?

“I'm his brother. What of it?”

The voice from the shadows seemed to smile. “I know where to find him, that's what. But I'd need a

favor in return..."

Sasuke looked around, then moved closer to the voice. "What is it you want in return for this information? And how do I know I can trust that information?"

"Here, look. Here's my proof." The voice had a body, too, as it extended an arm out from the shadows. The arm was covered by the sleeve of an Akatsuki cloak. That was proof enough for Sasuke.

"Fine, I believe you. And your payment for the information you've got?" Sasuke's blood had started to boil over now.

"I want the cloak off his body. I don't care if the cloak is damaged; I just need it. Do we have a deal?"

"..."

--

Ekyt returned with Ibikki. Not much could be said about their mission. Those who divulged the Fire Daimyo's secrets usually disappeared. That didn't stop Ibikki from telling Ekyt a few things.

"Your genjutsu the other day was great. And you're doing it without handsigns now, you damn show-off. Now just sharpen up the rest of yourself and get a few scars. You've never known the pain of capture, have you?"

Ekyt's mind was scarcely on that topic, but he shook his head. "No. I've escaped every time, by luck, skill, or rescue. I doubt it was skill."

"Well then, we're going to find out. You have one, glaring weakness- females. You won't hit them. You'd better get over that quick, if you hope to keep surviving. Chivalry be damned in battle. Save your 'loving' attitude for outside the battles. Oh, one more thing- you saw the twelve guards, correct?"

Ekyt nodded. "Sure did. The ones that wouldn't let us within fifty feet of the daimyo, right? Those guards?"

"You got it. You see how quickly they moved. They're all different people, but those are the best of the best. Asuma was one of them, once. Kakashi was asked, and of course Master Jiraiya and Lady Hokage, too."

"That got me wondering- why doesn't the Hokage have her own guards? I know she's powerful, and with all respect to that power, with the Akatsuki and Orochimaru around, shouldn't more precautions be taken?" Ekyt had been wondering about that for quite some time, and just now felt he had a good audience to phrase his concern.

Ibikki didn't waver in his answer, despite his obvious displeasure. "That's ANBU's job. Hell of a job they did with our last Hokage. Left up to them, she could be in huge trouble."

"If even you, part of ANBU, is saying that, then there's trouble. The Third didn't have Naruto and

Sakura in his company. Those two are remarkably effective against the Akatsuki.”

Ibikki softened his gaze as he faced Ekyt. “And you?”

“Me? I’m now the worst choice. How many can say their ex-girlfriend is part of the Akatsuki? That, and I’ve never beaten them- I’ve only escaped each time, or forced a stalemate.”

Ibikki didn’t question Ekyt’s feelings toward Azami- it wasn’t his nature. Instead, he replied saying “I’m glad to see you getting a love life didn’t interfere with your training. Your fight was spectacular.”

Coming from Ibikki, that was like Tsunade offering to share her sake with you. Ekyt smiled at the compliment.

“All the same, my fighting style was proven ineffective against those three. It’s strange to think I fared better against Orochimaru.”

“Not strange at all. You two are opposites. You, believe it or not, are the stronger opposite. Orochimaru has already lived a lifetime. He knows more, yes, but his plans are self-centered. You take into account a lot more. Because of that, you may actually be the better strategist.”

“I doubt that very much,” Ekyt laughed. “But it’s great that you think so highly of me. In any case, this must be record time for a mission like this.”

The small talk continued for a while before the two went their separate ways. Ekyt had enjoyed the day, as he didn’t get to chat with Ibikki very often. It seemed all was well with him.

-

Slam, click.

Ekyt shut the door to his room, leaning against it, suddenly exhausted. He put a hand to his heart, the other on his brow. Sweat decorated his forehead and ran in beads down his neck. He breathed heavily and suddenly felt like he weighed three times his normal weight. But it was all normal. It had been like this ever since he came home.

In public, Ekyt was Ekyt. At home, Ekyt was...not quite himself. Or, perhaps, even more like himself.

Throwing himself face-down on his black comforter, Ekyt grabbed the covers and twisted them with his hand, his whole body heavy with emotion. His chest raised and fell with deep breaths meant to control these feelings.

Worry- Worry that he’d caused the village’s ruin by unleashing Azami on them.

Guilt- Guilt that he’d been unable to pick up his own mess, and fix his own mistakes.

Anger- Anger that he had failed.

Frustration- Frustration in that Azami was so far ahead of him

Hopelessness- the Hopelessness he felt. About everything. About nothing.

It was all so impossible. There was no way one human could deal with it. His emotions hurt. They tore him up, night after night, day after day. Anytime he was alone, his emotions dominated him. The emotions he needed most- hope and love- were nowhere to be found. Instead, each night, he finally surrendered to the pain and misery. For one last emotion was kept from him. The only one that stopped him from killing himself. It was ironic, really. That missing emotion:

Complete devastation.

The village hadn't been destroyed yet. No one had been killed because of him. Therefore, Ekyt's sanity remained intact. He had no hope of fixing the situation; yet his mind wouldn't allow him to feel entirely hopeless. It was a void that had become saturated with weight. It was all things real and unreal. It was greater than despair, but less than utter defeat. There was no name for it. It was just a feeling. An indescribable feeling from within.

It was the most horrid genjutsu. And yet there was no way to break it. Inescapable feelings that felt like one of the attacks Ekyt himself unleashed. Was it possible he'd caused this much suffering on another person? And yet it couldn't be- the people he used genjutsu on appeared before him again and again. That left one option, one truth:

I'm weak...

Strength was a lie. Weakness was a truth. Life and death were full of shoot. Was this living? Was this dying? This pain was indescribable. No, no, that wasn't true. Ekyt had felt it before.

My anxiety. I used to feel better alone. Now I know how friends feel, and that's what I need. But I can't. I can't do it. I got over anxiety on my own. I'll beat it again. But why does it feel so impossible this time? Before, I had hope. Where's the hope? Where is it? Where is it? Have I lost already? Have I lost my mind? The battle? Both? No, no, insane people wouldn't think this way. I've just been set back far- far past the point where I once was. Telling my story must have been the problem. I re-awakened some of my weakness. No, all of it and then some.

...

Can I really fight this battle again? I won once, but this time...

Checkmate. There's no earthly way for me to do this. But perhaps there's an unearthly way. A spiritual way. Praying helped me through the first time. But prayers can't cure everything without effort. I must make that effort. I can't live like this. I have to do this. For myself, for once. I can't concern myself with others until I can control myself. And that means a heavy price.

Solitude once more...

Such an unwelcome prospect, but it's the only one I have. I can't rely on anyone else, no matter whether they've offered or not.

--

Azami waited for Itachi on the outskirts of the Leaf's lush forests. He came, without fail, right on time.

"Did he live?" Itachi asked, without any other greeting.

"I would assume so. His chakra was gone, but he was rushed away by the top medic-nin. With all respect, I know him very well. He's alive. Just as you asked..."

Itachi closed his eyes. "Good. He may someday prove a help to Sasuke. You've done well. Now, per our agreement..."

Azami put up a hand to stop him. "Itachi, I need a favor. I know the extent of your power, and you know the extent of mine. Can you tell me...how he's doing? Ekyt, I mean. He knows something's up, and he won't sit by quietly. Even if what he said was true about my lack of trust, he can't let it go. It's not his nature."

"What are you asking?" Itachi was strangely calm about it. Sometimes you couldn't be certain he was evil.

Azami blushed. "I'd like to know...Can you tell me how he is? I mean, can you check up on him somehow? I just...I can't let him go either. Not without knowing..."

"..." Itachi waited a moment, then spoke on a different subject. "I'll assume you'll have nothing else to do with the Akatsuki, in that case?"

"Not true. I have nowhere else to turn until my debt to Pein is paid. I always keep my word."

--

Ekyt walked in to Tsunade's office, immediately bowing to the three women in the room. He stayed on his hands and knees, humbling himself.

"My lady, I beg you for time to heal. My wounds...the ones I spoke of to you and Ojousama...they haven't healed. I've bluffed my way through it. But...but there's nothing there. I've been destroyed from the inside, and I need to heal, or I'll never be any use to anyone. I'm beyond desperate. This battle is one no one can help me with. My duties...oh damn it! I can't leave Naruto-dono and Ojousama unprotected!"

Tsunade had her eyes closed, hiding the tears in them. Sakura and Shizune watched in silence. This display of emotion and confusions seemed so strange, considering the source. Every broke down now and then, but not Ekyt. Ekyt was supposed to be a rock- largely unchanged, yet shaped and weathered by events.

"Of course you can have time off. And as for Naruto and Sakura. Ekyt, they're full-fledged ninja. You can't baby them. You can only help them. But right now, you need to help yourself. Go with my blessing. Take what time you need, and come back to us healthy. The burden you carry is horrible, but the person who carries it is much stronger. Unlike Naruto, your power won't lend you any help. For whatever reason, it seems you can't access your emotional chakra. This feeling that you're no doubt having is your excess emotions building up. Until you learn to control them or release, your mind will be clouded and your body burdened. Tell me your plans, then go with my blessing."

Ekyt bowed even lower. "Training. In solitude, in the woods. No human contact whatsoever for a month."

I WILL conquer this. I promise you! All of you! I'll train, and I'll come back and protect all of you. I won't fight on borrowed strength anymore. If this anxiety is meant to run my life...no, I'll defeat it!"

"That's stupid!" Sakura protested, kneeling down next to Ekyt. "Friends exist so they can strengthen each other. Ekyt, you keep trying to put the weight of all our problems on your shoulders. But no one can carry the burdens of the world. Let us help. Don't try to prove something ridiculous to yourself. Who are you trying to impress? No one doubts you!"

"...I doubt myself, and that's my biggest weakness of all. I can't let this happen again. If I fail, someone might die. And I can't let it happen. I just can't. I can't let this go, Ojousama."

"Ekyt..."

Ekyt looked up, his face set. "Then order me, Ojousama."

"What?!"

"Order me. You and Naruto-dono are my responsibility. If you think wrong for me to leave, then let the order to stay befall me!"

Sakura didn't know how to answer. Ekyt was kneeling before her, bowing so his head touched the floor. No one in the room was helping her. She had to make this decision for everyone.

What's best for Ekyt? That's what I need to know. He's in no shape to tell me...Then it's up to me.

"Ekyt, I order you..."

--
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Bleach Break!

Want Bleach to be a regular fic of mine? Please let me know!

-NG

The Soul Reapers had gathered on and off all day, taking turns guarding. In the Soul Society's version of a break room, a small group were sitting down- some for the first time in days.

"Hey, Captain Hitsugaya- is that guy new?"

Hitsugaya turned to see who was being indicated. The 9th seat in his company had dropped in to make sure Hitsugaya's weapon was in top condition, and that the Captain himself was doing well.

"Him? No. He's been here for years. Good Soul Reaper, too. Just not the type to stand out." Hitsugaya shrugged. "Behind the scenes is his thing."

The Soul Reaper in question got up and walked out the door. His Zanpaku-to wasn't particularly impressive (not that you could judge those things by a glance), and he wasn't tall, or well-defined. The perfect type to fit in with a crowd.

-

"Rukia? You've got a visitor."

The guard gave the Soul Reaper a nod. It was returned in passing as he reached Rukia's cell.

"How are you today, Miss Rukia?"

Rukia rolled her eyes. "Again with the 'Miss' thing? Didn't I say not to call me that?"

"A title is a title, you know? I'd get in trouble if I DIDN'T call you that."

"..."

"Anyway, I just dropped by to see if there's anything I can do...guard, give us a minute, will you?"

The guard shook his head. "She's dangerous. Can't let you do that."

The Soul Reaper gave him a mild glare. "It's private. And I'm a big boy- I can take care of myself if Miss Rukia decides to fight me. I just need a couple minutes, alright?"

The guard went through this every day. He wasn't about to stop the nameless Soul Reaper; it was just a matter of each of them fulfilling their duties. The guard had to caution him. Taking heed of that caution was arbitrary.

"Sure thing. Five minutes?"

"That'll do. Thank you."

The guard walked away, wondering if this Soul Reaper had a thing for Rukia Kuchiki. She wasn't overly attractive- then again, neither was he. Rukia DID have her distinguished name, though that seemed to mean little to her.

Whatever. The guard shrugged. None of his business. It was obvious neither one was doing anything illegal, so it was no skin off his nose.

77 - Success is the Journey...

Sakura thought back to every time she had worked with Ekyt. Never once had he wound up on his knees before her, begging for her advice. He had never looked so desperate and lost.

He once said that he's never humbled himself unless it meant saving a life. He isn't saving anyone right now, so that must mean he has no clear answer. And somehow he trusts me above even Lady Tsunade to make a decision for him. But what really IS best for him?

Sakura studied Ekyt again, seeing someone so lost and confused it was beyond pitiful. She had to amend her thoughts.

No, I was wrong. He IS saving a life- his own.

"Ekyt, I order you..."

Sakura gulped, steeling herself with a firm breath. SLAP!

Ekyt skidded across the carpet, hitting the door with his back. He looked up, his eyes wide, like a puppy that had been kicked. Sakura's hand stayed in place, showing that she had just slapped him across the face but meant no further harm.

"Get a grip on yourself! Look at you! Is this you? Is this you?!" Sakura grabbed Ekyt's vest and hauled him to his feet, then continued her tirade. "Get the hell up! How can you let some damn illness beat you? You've been through worse hell than that! Get over yourself! Your sad about Azami, and you're mad about being beaten. We've all been through it! All of us! Do you think feeling sorry for yourself would help now, when you've never felt sorry for yourself before. You HATE people that pity themselves! So you're just going to become what you hate?!"

Ekyt stayed on his feet this time. It took a minute, but he worked out a response. "I see... I'll take my leave then, Ojousama. Thank you for your advice."

The girls watched him leave, not making a move. The second Ekyt left, Sakura looked to Tsunade and Shizune.

"You did the right thing. Pity isn't what he needs. He needs understanding. But none of us can understand. So he needs to know that he's worth something to all of us. That slap to the face was just what he needed. But he might not realize it right away."

"I can deal with that, My Lady. I can't bear to see him so defeated. I hope I slapped some sense into him."

Shizune looked worried, of course. That was the norm for her. "What will he do now?"

Tsunade looked out across the peaceful village. Many green vests like Ekyt's were visible. There was no trepidation in the ninja wearing them, though. They all had their battles, but rarely did they get more personal than Ekyt's most recent one. That thought in mind, Tsunade sighed heavily.

"He'll likely go to the library and lock himself away for a while, in the one place no one can bother him. He can study, mope, cry, train, whatever- but most of all, he can conquer that disease in him."

--

Ekyt aimed for the edge of the forest, the farthest edge from any civilization. After an hour or so of wandering, he found a clearing that suited his needs. He plopped down and extracted a new training advice from his summoning scroll- a 'Go' board. Sitting down formally in the clearing, he laid the board out. He took three black stones and placed them in a triangle. In the center he set a white stone.

The board stayed that way for a while. Ekyt studied it from every angle. His hand moved the white piece, then two of the black pieces. Frowning, Ekyt repeated the move. He nodded, confirming some thought.

Each time the white piece moves, the two black pieces that aren't the targets follow...

In his mind, Ekyt pictured himself taking place of the white stone. The black stone in front of him became Azami, while the other two transformed into Hidan and Kakuzu. Each time the Ekyt stone moved, so did the Hidan and Kakuzu stones.

There's got to be a way to deal with all three at once. Speed won't work- Azami's faster than me. Genjutsu might work, but putting a genjutsu on three people, and then holding it, takes chakra and concentration I don't have. If opened the gates of chakra...no, Azami would just do that, and do it better. I can only manage three Shadow Clones at any given time, while she can manage ten- that I've seen. She's probably capable of more.

Her execution is flawless. There's no hole I can pick at, either. She saw just about all I had, short of the Reaper Death Seal. And I could do that, but I don't want to die. And I would be forbidden to, unless the time was right. Besides that, she could outrun that, too, since I couldn't hold onto her long enough...

Hold on long enough?

Ekyt immediately flopped down on the ground, just lying there. He had inadvertently torn his heart open again. He couldn't hold on to her, as lovers or enemies. How useless was he? He couldn't decide whether losing her or the battle was more painful. His stoic mask has been shattered in spectacular fashion.

I'm not normal, nor am I a freak. So what am I? There's no middle ground.

Gathering his thoughts up again, he looked back at the Go board. He had to launch three attacks to satisfy himself in this case. He looked at his strengths.

Genjutsu

Fire
Swords

And his weaknesses:

Won't kill
Emotions
Relative inexperience
Hates water

He came to one conclusion.

I can't win as I am now. My weaknesses outweigh my strengths. For a long time, I've tried to do away with weakness. Maybe instead, I need to focus on my strengths. I need one more strength, not one less weakness.

For a moment, Ekyt was ready to take on the world. But a second realization grounded him once more.

But this latest weakness...The one I've had for so long now. Is it defeatable? I can't get stronger as long as it's there. Anxiety is a no-no in battle. It clouds your senses and slows you down. I thought I'd won this battle. That makes it that much harder to start from nothing. I feel it, even now- away from my home, my throat closes, my stomachs flares up, my breathing becomes heavy, and my chest hurts. My mind is crowded. I can't focus. I can't focus. Can't focus can't focus. Am I okay? No, I'm not okay. I'm not okay. Will I ever be okay? This is worse than physical pain. No one can help me with this. I'm on my own. Now I see the difference. Before, I choose to be alone. Now, when I would take support, I can't have it. Not because no one would support me, but because I can't ask them. This burden must be held and defeated by my own strength.

Now to make a diagram...

Ekyt was no artist, but he took up a blank scroll and ink. First, he drew a human on his knees- himself. Next he drew chains around the ankles, arms, waist, and chest of the figure. He started to draw one around the neck, but stopped.

I defeated that one- I admitted I'm fighting a losing battle, and I'm doing something about it. That's one shackle removed. The rest will take time. Eventually, I'll have the shackle removed and I'll be on my feet again.

--

This solitude meant torturous nights. Night spent curled up on the hard, cold earth, body shaking. Sweat running down the brow. Healing like this normally took years. It had taken Ekyt ten years to get control the first time. He didn't have ten years. He lived in a different world. He had to get over this **NOW**.

Naruto used Shadow Clones to learn. Ekyt wondered if he could do the same thing, but was hesitant to

try. If he was attacked out here, he was alone- he would need every last bit of chakra. His cigarettes were out- he couldn't put things in his mouth for fear of choking. It made eating and drinking hard. His body ached, and he longed for the bed he knew he had waiting at home. But he couldn't go. Not yet. He had to win. Losing wasn't an option. Losing was admitting that the evil he faced was stronger and always would be.

--

Tsunade waited for Asuma on top of the Hokage mansion. Her arms were crossed, giving her a stern, impatient look. But really, she was thinking. She heard Asuma land on the roof.

"You called, Lady Hokage?"

"I did. Have you heard about his death?"

Asuma nodded. "Yeah, sure did. Damn Akatsuki. Can't believe they got one of the old Twelve Shinobi Guardians. When I worked with him, I always thought he was unbeatable..."

"If there's a bright side, it means that Ekyt has his chance to get in that group. I don't know what else to do with him. Asuma, I'd like to ask you, along with your team and Kakashi's team, to drag Ekyt back here from the woods, then take him to see about that position."

"I don't know if he's ready yet. I mean, he's good, don't get me wrong, but still..." Asuma rubbed the back of his head, thinking about Tsunade's request. "You know, it couldn't hurt to get his name in the mix. But why the huge send-off?"

Tsunade uncrossed her arms. "Isn't it obvious? I don't care what he says, Ekyt needs company. I'd send Gai and Kurenai, plus their teams, if they weren't off doing missions. And on the way, there are two fine jonin who might be able to teach Ekyt a thing or two. Do you believe he's peaked? Without any instruction?"

Asuma admitted she had a point. "I suppose he couldn't have. Studying and experiencing are two different things. Alright M'lady. But is it alright if we delay the mission by a couple days?"

Tsunade raised a questioning eyebrow. "Oh? What for?"

Asuma gave a lopsided smirk around his cigarette. "I followed up on what I said. Ekyt's gonna be getting a brand new toy when I drag his @\$\$ back here. It'll make the trip easier for him, I'd imagine. A metal that can conduct chakra. A geek like him would drool all over it."

Tsunade chuckled at Asuma's description of Ekyt. "I don't doubt. I'm surprised he doesn't have some already. But, in any case, as long as he gets to the Fire Daimyo, time doesn't concern me. The rush is for Ekyt's sake."

--

There were fingernail marks on the ground. Claw marks of desperation. Too many fears, too many

emotions! There was no escape, and nothing to be done about it. The ground was the nearest target. Anything to escape the emotions- any pain was worth it. This was the kind of horrible, irrational pain that made you wonder that maybe, just maybe, if you chewed your fingers off, the mental pain would go away.

It wasn't insanity. It was an extension of a normal emotion that had mutated until it consumed Ekyt's very existence. But each passing day brought about small changes. He could chew and swallow again. He could drink again. Sleep was still hard, but getting better. Leaving the safety of the clearing wasn't happening yet. But still, this was better progress than Ekyt had hoped for.

Time for meditation and chakra concentration.

Ekyt peeled off his vest and shirt, revealing his still-cut chest. It had gotten slightly more muscular, since exercise was a natural combatant against anxiety. Pushups and situps had made Ekyt's torso tougher. He refused to work on his abdominal muscle too much, lest he look like the SON OF A dog who Azami was falling all over.

After a short walk, the waterfall came into view. It was clichéd, but sitting under a waterfall really DID help your mental focus. It also worked when you wanted to test your chakra. The water could conduct the chakra, altering the fall of the water around you. Without chakra, the water could crush you easily. But the slightest focus diverted it enough to keep you alive.

Ekyt had just settled down and started to focus when he heard the crackling of branches. Ekyt immediately treated the sounds as a threat, even though whoever was making the sounds was giving Ekyt every chance to prepare for battle. That was easy enough. Ekyt kept sitting under the waterfall and simply reached down his right leg to his kunai holster.

One...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight...nine. Nine people were here. The chakra was familiar, though Ekyt couldn't place it. For a moment, he forgot anxiety and just became his warrior self. But as he leapt up, his vision blurred and his stomach knotted. Before he could rationalize those reactions, his throat had a lump in it, and his hand was quivering.

Stop it! Ekyt admonished himself, to no avail. His body continued to give him warning signs when there was nothing to worry about. Now Ekyt couldn't feel his shins. It was a strange but certain sign that his anxiety was just about spiraling out of control. He had to do something- anything. Anything to dull the pain.

"DAMMIT!" Ekyt howled. He reared back and punched a tree, breaking the fingers on his right hand. The pain snapped him out of his anxiety just in time for him to see who had come for him.

Team Kakashi and Team Asuma were waiting patiently. They didn't seem totally shocked to see Ekyt in the state he was in. That, or it was well-concealed shock. That must have been it, because it took Sakura a few seconds to remember to fix Ekyt's hand. She noticed that he was shaking at first, but then sagged, as if exhausted.

Asuma didn't like what he saw. He had a twelve day trip to snap Ekyt out of this. Asuma's reputation was partly on the line here. But the fact that he recommended Ekyt at all mean that he was certain Ekyt

could handle it. Granted, it was before he saw the state Ekyt was in...

"Here. You're gonna need this. You've got a new assignment."

Asuma was blunt as ever. Ekyt just stared hollowly back, waiting to hear more. While he was distracted, Sakura gauged his mental and physical states.

His chakra is fine... Mentally, he's stable, but horribly confused. Physically, he's stronger than before. That's better than I'd hoped, going by Lady Tsunade's description of this illness. It's so hard to sense, but I've been with Ekyt a lot. It's faint, but it's there.

"The twelve guardians to the Fire Daimyo? Me? Are you sure? I mean..." It seemed to dawn on Ekyt just how messed up he was. By himself, it was hard to care how he looked/felt. But this was like exposing a huge weakness.

They all came? Asuma, Shikamaru, Ino, Choji, Kakashi, Yamato, Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. Thank you...all of you. I can erase one more shackle on that drawing. But there's still so many more. And only twelve days to get rid of them...I don't know if I can do it. But I've got to try.

Shaking, though not as bad as before, Ekyt got to his feet. He was so anxious he didn't even care that Sakura and Ino had caught him half-naked. They were both 'taken' so it didn't seem to matter anyway.

Once he shrugged his clothes on, Ekyt allowed the group to form a circle around him. He was puzzled by that for a moment, until he realized that his mental state must have been in question. He wasn't going to complain. Instead, he would take the chance to collect himself.

-

The others noticed immediately that this wasn't the Ekyt they knew. They had been ready for the worst, and were glad to find that he wasn't in worse shape. His defeat had opened a lot of wounds- some old, some new, and none good for him. You can learn from a defeat, it's true, but sometimes the lesson you learn isn't what you need to learn. For someone so free of self-confidence, a blow like that could be undoable. That's why the two teams from the Leaf jumped in. They had to rescue Ekyt from himself. At some point or another, he had worked with all of them. So they were all acquaintances, if not friends.

"Now then, Ekyt, are you up to learning something today?"

Ekyt was already shaking, but some instinct kicked in and he nodded. "Yes. Anything to get my mind off this..."

"Glad to hear it. Now then, your genjutsu is fine. Your taijutsu will need work, but that's later. For now, your biggest weakness is ninjutsu. You know a good amount of jutsus- now it's time to perfect those. Can you tell me what kind of defense you would use against a wind-type chakra?"

Ekyt thought about it for a few moments. You couldn't get close to the wind, so...

"I would use genjutsu, and stay away from my target until he was incapacitated."

A reliable enough answer. But not when you were dealing with S-ranked threats. Kakashi nodded to Asuma.

“Ekyt, open that package after this lesson. The lesson is this: Try your strategy on me. I’m a wind-type chakra. Let’s put your theory to the test. Choose any one teammate as back-up. Even Kakashi or Yamato. Shikamaru is with me.”

Ekyt tried to pick out a weakness. Shikamaru’s secret jutsu was mid to long range. Asuma’s wind attacks would be short to middle range. Ekyt himself was a ‘gap’ fighter. That meant that he started long range, moved to middle range, then ended the fight in short range. Anyone could compliment him, theoretically. But in this case...

Naruto and Sakura are close range. Yamato’s wood jutsu would create shadows for Shikamaru...Choji and Ino...no, I don’t know them well enough. So that leaves...

“Sai.”

--

78 - ...Not the Destination

That was a surprising choice. Sai, of all people? Ryouko didn't share his reasoning, though, and he wasn't asked to.

"Alright. Let's go!"

Shikamaru used an obvious Shadow Possession Jutsu. Ryouko leapt up to avoid it. He flung kunai at Shikamaru, hoping to force him to move and break his Jutsu. Asuma swept in with his trench knives and batted the kunai down. Shikamaru didn't even move, and even more importantly, his shadow continued to chase Ryouko.

"Art of Cartoon Beast Mimicry!"

Sai attacked with his lions. They aimed for Asuma, forcing him to divert his attention. Ryouko got the hint and aimed for Shikamaru with a genjutsu, though not before Shikamaru changed his attacked to a Shadow Stitching jutsu. Now being in the air seemed like a bad idea. As he landed, Shikamaru's Jutsu switched back and trapped him. Ryouko tried to use a genjutsu, but felt cold steel at the base of his neck.

"Alright, it's over. Now, can you tell me why your plan didn't work, even though it made sense?"

Asuma withdrew the trench knife from Ekyt's neck, and Shikamaru let go with his Shadow Possession Jutsu.

"I have no idea," Ekyt admitted.

"That's fine, you weren't supposed to. The problem is that you rely too much on yourself. You know your strengths, and you know other's strengths. But how to integrate them is your first problem. When you're one of the Twelve Shinobi Guardians, you'll need to learn how to work with eleven others. People you don't know, and some you won't like. I guarantee you'll want to kill at least one before all is said and done. All you have to do is trust them. Plan their downfall in your head, and be ready to fight in their stead, but make sure you can focus on your own fight."

Ekyt's face must have looked bewildered, because Asuma explained further.

"You noticed how Shikamaru didn't move when you threw the kunai at him? It's because he let me take care of it. And even if I didn't, his jutsu could have protected him. You, on the other hand, took action too soon, and didn't work with Sai. You assumed he would hold up his end of the fight while you handled yours. It doesn't work that way. Now, we're going to try this again. You against me and Shikamaru, without backup. GO!"

Ekyt immediately shot a blast of fire at Shikamaru, followed by a genjutsu aimed at Asuma. Asuma released the attack and charged forward. Ekyt drew two kunai to fight Asuma's trench knives, but that

left him open to Shikamaru's Shadow Possession again. Using a replacement jutsu was his only option. But Ekyt added a little flash and sizzle by leaving an exploding tag in his wake. Asuma would have to move, but he didn't. Instead, he kicked the log away from himself and Shikamaru, allowing it to explode harmlessly high in the air. Ekyt, meanwhile, dropped in behind Shikamaru and grabbed him in a headlock. Before he could even shout a warning to Asuma, a hand cracked Ekyt between the shoulder blades, dropping him into the dirt and freeing Shikamaru. He rolled over immediately, but found a kunai and two trench knives aimed at him.

“...”

“You did better that time. A hostage would normally work, but Shikamaru and I have a special trust. You haven't found anyone to trust like that. Being honest, it was Azami that came closest.”

Everyone flinched- this had to be a sore subject. But Asuma kept on it. Even as a wave of anxiety hit Ekyt and he began to panic, Asuma kept on him.

“One ruined relationship can't govern you. Emotions can't govern you. Illness can't govern you. You want strength? Then you've got to reach out and take it. Now, rest for a minute and collect yourself.”

Everyone suddenly perked up. Ekyt was still on the ground, but there were kunai all around him, held their by Mist Shinobi.

“Don't interfere, Leaf ninja. We just want the boy, and the bounty on his head.”

Everyone expected Ekyt to stand and fight. But he couldn't. He was clearly trying and failing. He was up to one knee, panting incredibly heavily. There was an almost crying sound in-between gasps of breath; a high-pitched 'hehhh' that sounded unnatural. His eyes were unfocused, and his hands shook.

“THIS is what we're after? That can't be right! Check again, Natsumi- this is the guy with the bounty on his head?!”

There were ten Mist-nin, and they were all perplexed. How could this pathetic thing be the scourge of their sacred ceremonies?

Everyone stood still, not wanting to let on that Ekyt was, in fact, the one they were looking for. Each Leaf ninja denied it, saying that this was a new jonin who had gotten injured. To Ekyt, though, there was more going on.

They're protecting me... But they're in danger, because of me. Because of my weakness...

“This is the man I want protecting my children...”

“That's the guy with the bounty on his head...”

Those two comments...even in the midst of my fight at that tournament, I heard those two comments. I don't know who said them, but I remember they helped me keep going. But are those two comments true anymore? I've got to do this. I've got to stand and fight...

Sweat cascaded down Ekyt's face. He couldn't feel his shins or forearms, plus everything in-between, except for the knot in his stomach and the pain in his chest. All the same, he couldn't let the others pretend he wasn't who he was. Even if he died, Ekyt had always wanted an identity of his own. He was always one of the crowd, and as much as he prized that, he always wanted to be the one who stood out, just a little bit.

"HYAH!"

Ekyt palmed the ground, and fire shot up. The flames launched him in the air, where he twisted until he was facing the right way. He kicked down, planting both feet on the chest of one pursuer. Using that momentum, he kicked another in the jaw, landing crouched in the center of the remaining eight. From there, he created two Shadow Clones who charged the two ninja on either side of him. The others charged, either convinced of their target or to help their teammates.

"FLAMA SUCCENDO!"

Fire rocked up from the ground and burned the first wave of two ninja. The next two were stuffed in the gut by a fist, then thrown backward into the next wave. By now, the others recovered and attacked. Ekyt met them head-on.

**What if I get sick? What if I can't breathe, or I throw up?
No no no, stop it! It won't happen! And if it does, it does!
Control your breathing, and stay calm!
I feel sick...
It's just your anxiety!**

...

But what if it's not? What if it's the one time it's real?

Ekyt's rally was over. He had wounded his attackers enough to discourage them. He stayed on his feet, but to anyone that knew him, the fight was over. He would be helpless if attacked again in this state.

The nine exchanged glances. Once again, they were together, and Ekyt was by himself. It was almost like a metaphor for real life. For Ekyt, there could be no one. His instinct to protect is what both drew people to him and pushed them away.

"Now you see... Now you understand..." Ekyt panted, on all fours again, looking at the group of nine. They had started walking, but turned back to face him.

"Now you understand why I could never ask a girl to join me. This is living. I could never ask anyone to share this personal hell!"

There was silence. Everyone got the sense that Ekyt wasn't done talking. They were correct.

"I don't know why I'm scared of girls. I'll never understand. But that doesn't mean I don't desire one for myself! But it's selfish to ask someone to take on my problems! That's why it bothered me so much with Azami. I made her problems mine, but I couldn't let her take on my burdens! And in the end, she

couldn't come to me with her problems! I had to protect her, and I begged for her trust! Instead...instead I learned why I can't have a normal life. That's why I'm always alone, and why I take on impossible burdens in fight-

To me, strength is my only solace. Trusting isn't something I can do. Friends betray you. Girlfriends leave you. The more things change, the more things stay the same. And worst of all, when I finally learned to trust...

That trust was betrayed."

Naruto pushed his way to the front of the pack. He knelt down next to Ekyt.

"Do you believe that? After all you've been through in the Leaf Village, you still don't think you can trust anyone? Even after the nine of us drag you to the Fire Daimyo to make your life better, you think we're going to betray you?"

Ekyt shook his head. "It's not like that. It's more of... I have to protect, but I won't let myself be protected. I could let more advanced jonin fight against the Akatsuki, but instead I..."

"You take on the fight..." Yamato finished for him. Ekyt nodded.

"Yes. I can't stand to see people I care about hurt. Even when I know they're better, if I can fight, even if I lose, they stand a better chance of winning. And all this comes BEFORE the anxiety."

No one knew quite what to say after that. Ekyt NEVER opened up. The only one present who had ever heard him do so was Sakura, and she had been certain Ekyt's last speech was a 'deathbed confession'. But now she wasn't so sure.

He never opened up before for a reason. Because no one ever understood him? Does this mean that he trusts all of us on a different level? Are we somehow 'worthy' of understanding him, or something like that? Well, whatever the case, he's speaking now, and if I'm sure of one thing, it's that he didn't have many listeners before.

To Sakura's surprise, it was Ino who beat her to the punch.

"So this is what's been floating around in your head? This kind of...what's the word...self-abuse, maybe? We all knew you beat yourself up over your studies, but do you really give yourself a good butt-whooping for everything?"

Ekyt had since gotten to his feet. He couldn't make eye contact with anyone- part of his anxiety that had, no doubt, made people wary of him. The bags under his eyes had gotten thicker. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that this was a sick man. There was no hint of fire in Ekyt's eyes right now. How frustrating must it have been to have an illness no one else could see tangibly? An illness that no one could explain to you? An illness no one could understand? An illness that many have, yet is unique to each? How lonely an existence it must have been...

And when the girl left him, it became even lonelier... Sakura thought, studying Ekyt, as though that

would give her an idea of what was going on in his head.

And then he lost the fight against her. He had no self-respect to begin with... No doubt that was damaging beyond our understanding... Yamato stayed silent, not sure about getting involved just yet. Technically, Ekyt wasn't his problem. Yamato wasn't unkind, but his orders were very specific.

So it's a cycle. His insecurities feed his other insecurities. And the cycle was broken when he found Azami... Kakashi decided to give the matter further thought. **So he DID need a team. Moreso than we thought. Not for his strength, but for his health.**

"It's...so...Goddamn unfair!" Ekyt roared suddenly, punching a tree as hard as he could. The tree shattered into splinters, cutting Ekyt into bits. He didn't pay it any mind- he just continued his rampaging. "For fourteen Goddamn years it's been like this! I hide it, I beat it, I fight it, but it never ends! WHY?! WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO?! WHAT'S BEING ASKED OF ME?! IF STRENGTH CAN'T BEAT THIS, WHAT CAN?!"

Ekyt had lost his composure, finally. There was still no fire in his eyes, despite the angry outburst. Instead, his eyes held nothing. No emotion, save for frustration. That disappeared as Ekyt brought himself under control again.

"I'm...I'm sorry. I've dragged all of you into this now... A matter that no one else can understand... This is my cross to bear. All of you have your own, and I shouldn't complain that this one is heavy. I'm not going to die from it, and I can beat it. Theoretically."

What am I doing? Ekyt wondered. **Asuma lost his father. Choji is fat. Sakura thinks she's homely. Ino thinks too much of herself. Kakashi lost his teammates and all his family. So who am I to dog?**

But why shouldn't I?

No, it's unfair to the others. If I have to complain, I'll do it in private. I won't trouble them again, not like this. They're insisting on lending me their strength, and I'd be stupid to pass it up. But when I DO borrow their strength, I will take it with dignity and pride. Not with a temper tantrum. I will not lose my control like that again. Not ever again in public.

Even the distracted Ekyt perked up when a girl came running up. She was clothed in a white gi top with a red hakama.

A Miko? What's a Shinto priestess doing here? Shikamaru wondered.

"Please, I beg you, Leaf Shinobi- help us! Our temple is under attack! We can't fend them off any longer without aid!"

Everyone looked to Ekyt- the obvious baggage of the group. To their surprise, he was standing up straight and looking somewhat more healthy.

"Lead the way," he said firmly, bowing in greeting to the shrine maiden.

“Yes, this way!” she said. Rather, stammered. After she made eye contact with Ekyt, she couldn’t seem to meet his eyes again.

Oh? The girl’s blushing? And only when Ekyt spoke? Well, he’s certainly a ladies man suddenly! I wonder if he noticed?

Ekyt started to run, in the middle of the pack. Red was etched on his face.

Yup, he noticed. Asuma thought with a grin. **A miko and Ekyt? That’s no odder than Ekyt and a bounty hunter, I guess...Tho’ I might be jumping the gun a bit. Ekyt’s hardly in any shape to fight, let alone worry about his love life.**

--

The Fire Daimyo sat behind a curtain, looking out at his twelve guardians. His head guardian, Masato, bowed and stood near the Daimyo’s chamber, ready to repeat his words. He nodded and bowed after each sentence. He spoke very softly, though his words echoed. The room was so dark it was impossible to see your hand in front of your face.

“Shinmaru, you will be evaluating a potential new member. You will likewise be evaluated. Should you fail to defeat this newcomer, you will be removed from the Twelve Shinobi Guardians, and he will take your place.”

Shinmaru, who wore a mask that covered his face except for his mouth, bowed respectfully, but asked ‘Why was I chosen?’

In response, he was handed a BINGO book. It came from the Mist Village. Intrigued, Shinmaru looked at the page that was marked.

“Ekyt...adopted name of Kaguya. Twenty-five million ryo bounty when turned over to the Mist Village. Known genjutsu specialist. Fierce opposer of the Akatsuki. Currently a jonin in the Hidden Leaf...”

Shinmaru immediately saw why he had been chosen. Truthfully, there were two reasons. First of all, as the newest guardian, it was his position that Ekyt would be after. Shinmaru was more or less a temporary guardian. He was sure to have the spot, he was told, unless a challenger came. The second reason- fighting style.

“This will be an interesting fight. There’s no disgrace to be had by loss- only honored to be gained by winning.”

Masato bowed again, speaking the Fire Daimyo’s words. “Shinmaru, the Fire Daimyo wishes you luck. He also wishes to remind you that death must be avoided, lest you break your word, and your probation terms...”

“Yes. I know I’m here as a criminal, and I wish to repent. I’ll repent by continuing to serve the Fire Daimyo with all my energy. My crimes must be repented.”

79 - Crippling Anxiety

The two teams (and Ekyt) followed the Shrine maiden. They were surprised to find that she had enhanced speed, as though she was shinobi-trained. No one said anything about it. At one point, Ryouko tripped, but he kept going. Sakura dropped back quickly.

“You okay?” she asked quietly, not wanting to alert the others. It was kind of embarrassing for a ninja to trip over his own feet.

“I...don’t know,” Ekyt admitted, looking worried amongst his determination. “But I’ll have to try to be okay. Thank you, Ojousama.”

Sakura smiled at him. “Anytime. And, c’mon, call me Sakura. You’re not guarding me right now.”

“No, I suppose not. I would say it’s the other way around, in fact,” Ekyt replied, mildly smirking. This gave Sakura a good look at his face.

He’s exhausted. Anxiety disorders put a great deal of strain on the brain. The brain uses energy to deal with the strain, leaving the person without much other energy. Those bags under his eyes are bigger, too. And his eyes...they’re the same. Still that lingering sadness. It’s as if everyday, he loses. But the feeling is only reflected in his eyes.

Ekyt, stop trying to hide your feelings. Let us help. It’s why we’re here. You aren’t alone anymore. I can’t be in love with you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be there for you.

Sakura hated to see Ekyt this way. Even if it meant another girl like Azami, Sakura wanted to see Ekyt loved. For that brief month with Azami, he had been a different person. A happier one.

The Miko ahead of them clearly was interested in one of the boys from the group. Sakura hoped it was Ekyt. For his sake. Although she still felt terribly possessive of him.

-

“Will you hurry up?! Your damn side missions are slowing us down, you greedy bastard!”

“Money makes the world turn.”

“You can’t take it with you. And you’re an old f*** as it is!”

“I will disprove that theory by taking it with me, no matter what you say.”

Hidan and Kakuzu were arguing, much to the surprising of the few remaining temple members. They were all protecting one person- an old monk that supposedly held some horrible, unimaginable power. Shrine Maidens with naginata and exploding tags lined up with spear-toting monks. So many had already been slaughtered by the Akatsuki.

One Miko stood more aggressively than the rest. Her daughter had escaped, and that was all that mattered to her. She wasn't especially fond of the old monk they were protecting. He just had an aura about him. He seemed kindly, and the priestesses who had been here longer swore he was a nice guy. The younger monks loves hearing him tell stories, and often prayed with him. But this Miko couldn't get past his aura.

Maybe that's part of his power? He may not be intentionally intimidating.

"Why do you always want to go to f***** temples? Not like prayer will save *your* soul now. And you never let me kill! It's my religion, and I don't appreciate you depriving me of it!"

-

In the bushes, the miko hid, along with the other ten. They looked at the situation. No one was looking forward to this one.

"If we use a distraction, I can nail them with my Shadow Possession... But what from there? And they're powerful enough to fight my jutsu... It's not like I have the luxury of time to think, either..."

Asuma puffed on his cigarette, thinking carefully. He was in charge of this mission, so it would be his call when all was said and done. But what was the right call to make?

"Asuma, let me go."

Ekyt seemed to be ready to fight now. He had put a chakra cigarette in his mouth (in his mind, he erased another shackle), and reached for the package Asuma had given him. Out tumbled out two tonfa.

Asuma appraised the situation. "Alright. Sakura, you tend to the wounded. Sai, Yamato, and Ino go with her. Shikamaru, you and Choji back me up. Kakashi, you and Naruto back up Ekyt. Sasuke, you keep the innocents out of it. If things go wrong, Kakashi gets out of here with Naruto. Everyone understand?"

There were nods of agreement and understanding.

"You sure you're up to this?" Asuma shifted to face Ekyt, his face dead serious. Training is one thing in your state. This is combat."

Ekyt looked over at the frantic Miko. She still had red on her cheeks, though she could have had a crush on anyone. "Combat is what we do. Ready or not, I'm involved. And besides..."

A smile grew on Ekyt's face.

"This is a unique opportunity to beat the crap out of my ex's new boyfriend!"

That earned some laughs. But not everyone was deceived. Team Kakashi knew Ekyt well, and they could see that he was still horribly troubled, despite what he had just said. They were learning more about Ekyt every day- stuff he probably didn't want them to know. He hadn't opened up before now, and even when he did, he didn't say anything but things that would dull their concern. 'It's anxiety', for example. He didn't actually really talk about himself.

But now certain truths began to make themselves apparent. Chinks had appeared in Ekyt's armor before, but not like this. His mask of stoicism has been shattered, at least for now. The only shard that remained in place hid his emotions from complete strangers.

-

Asuma and Ryouko rushed out of the bushes. Using a shadow clone jutsu, Ryouko sent one clone to the Mikos and monks. The clone bowed and said 'help is here. Please stay out of battle, and help our medic evacuate the injured.'

Ryouko made a beeline for Hidan, breaking in his new tonfas spectacularly by blocking a flashing scythe. Turning under the blade, he flicked a tonfa open and smacked Hidan in the nose, using his chakra to lengthen the blade. The other tonfa flashed up and aimed for a kill strike at the neck, but Hidan blocked with the cord attached to his scythe.

"You again?! I steal your girl, but you come back? You just can't leave it alone, huh?! I don't know how you survived her, but you won't survive me!"

"Oh, please!" Ryouko laughed, trading strikes with Hidan. "She's ten TIMES the fighter you are! You're all abs and no brains, retard! If you DID have brains, you would know she's just as likely to kill you as kiss you!"

"I'd love nothing better, you f***** moron!" Hidan shot back, dodging away from Ryouko's tonfa strike. Ryouko's leg nearly hit Hidan, but he had to retract it to avoid getting a cut with the scythe. For all his boasting, Ryouko wasn't confident at all. Truthfully, he felt anxiety welling up.

I'd better finish this quickly. I don't know how long I can last... If I lose control here and now, a lot of people are in for a world of trouble. If it was just me, no problem. But if I get hit, everyone over there will come flooding over to help me, and they'll just get hurt. I can't let that happen! I need strength for them, not myself!

Despite the pep-talk, Ryouko felt himself losing control. He focused on the fight the best he could. One word ran through his mind to help him.

Azami...

-

Asuma clashed with Kakuzu, pressing his attack to prevent Kakuzu from unleashing his own devastating attacks. Trench knives clanged against Earth Grudge Fear strings. Asuma was a pro at this, and soon found his opening.

"Fire Style: Ash Burning Product!"

Asuma's fire attack, born from his chakra and ever-present cigarette ash could cause third-degree burns. He had just hit Kakuzu with it point-blank. He used his free moment to look over at his young

comrade.

He's struggling, but keeping himself in check. Just like everyone says: He'll do what he says he'll do.

-

Azami...

Ekyt suddenly felt something. A horrible, cold chill. He was sure it was an Orochimaru-level threat, at least. But instead, it slowly dawned on him.

I'm scared. I'm really scared. I can't beat an immortal. Why did I think I could? I'm a jonin, but what does that mean? I've failed at everything! Everyone else is alive and living their lives, but I'm not. Is it because I take on their burdens? Or is it because I'm weak?

I was too weak to confess to Ojousama, and I lost my chance...

But that wasn't life or death. This is. That scythe is coming close...really close. It's only a matter of time before he hits me...

Schwing!

Ekyt's tonfa, slow in reacting due to his own thoughts, didn't entirely block Hidan's scythe as it slashed his leg. Ekyt flicked the tonfa open and smacked the scythe, but Hidan held tight. At some point, he had wound the cord around Ekyt's legs. He yanked the cord to send the young jonin spinning to the ground.

-

The young Miko watched the four men battle. She had feelings one of this group, but she couldn't admit to herself which one. She felt a kinship with Ekyt, for certain.

He's young, like me! And yet he's out there, risking his life for strangers! All I did was run! I've trained for combat, both with men and demons, and I did nothing to help!

The Miko gripped her naginata tighter as she saw the young jonin go down hard. Blood ran out from his leg. His opponent licked the blood up. The Miko gasped, having seen this ritual performed many times already. She frantically glanced toward the young jonin, seeing panic in his eyes.

Up until this moment he's been certain of his moves. What changed? No matter. I know what I have to do...

Sneaking a glance at the man she had a crush on, the miko rushed out on the battlefield, ignoring cries of protest from the others.

-

"Are you kidding?! This is all you've got?!" Hidan crowed at Ekyt. Ekyt just glared up at him. There was no fight in his eyes anymore. Just a lot of smoldering anger and hatred. But he couldn't make that

useful right now.

That all changed with a flash of red. Ekyt blinked- what was red?

The miko! No! Move, legs!

The miko's naginata clashed with Hidan's scythe, knocking it aside for a moment. Moving in, she slapped a tag on his chest. Holding her hands in prayer, she chanted for a moment.

"CHAKRA SEAL!"

The ward on Hidan's stomach glowed blue. He swung his scythe wildly, aiming for the Miko's side.

SCHUNK!

Ekyt's own body was in the way. His tonfa could block the odd strike Hidan had used, and to save the girl, he had to do it. But there was no calmness in his face or eyes. He had felt this pain so many times before, but this time was different. Death and all that went with it petrified him. He tried to put on a brave face for the girl he had just saved, but felt sure he failed miserably.

"You're alright, aren't you?" he asked, standing up despite the scythe in his side. He didn't pull it out- bad idea with puncture wounds.

The miko looked horrified at his bloodied state, but helped him get all the way to his feet.

"I'm fine. Thanks to you."

Ekyt forced a smile onto his face. "You managed to beat him...something I've never seen before. Shinobi?"

She shook her head. "No. Just a Shrine Maiden with a thing for combat."

"Ah. Please excuse me-!"

Ekyt threw his tonfa up in a block, but he was too late. He severed the string, but it still caught the miko in the chest.

No! he thought desperately. **No! It can't work like that! It can't work like that! It can't! NO NO NO!**

Ekyt slung the miko over his shoulder, using a body flicker to land near the group that had come with him. He laid the girl down at Sakura's feet, then looked desperately at the medic-nin. Sakura immediately focused her chakra into the task at hand. A green glow healed the girl's chest.

"I'll be back," Ekyt snarled, taking off at top speed.

-

Asuma had seen what had happened, but he couldn't do anything about it. He felt Ekyt appear next to

him.

“Asuma, I’ve got an idea. This guy is a greedy bastard. So...”

Ekyt reached into his back pouch. To everyone’s surprise, he held out a thick wallet.

“Will this do? It’s twice the amount on both our heads,” Ekyt told Kakuzu, referring to himself and Asuma. “There are ten of us, and one of you. Take this, and go away without injury. Don’t take it, and you’ll get hurt, if not killed. So you get a sweet deal. Sixty-five million ryo into your own pocket, and all you is walk away.”

Ekyt threw the wallet at Kakuzu’s feet. After counting the contents, Kakuzu picked up Hidan and disappeared.

--

Sakura worked on the miko away from the group, as she had to open up her gi top.

“I’m...going to die...aren’t I?” the miko asked.

“...” Sakura focused harder.

“It’s alright, I’ve no regrets. I died in battle. It was...a dream of mine. Although to live through battle was the greater one!”

“...”

“Do you mind if I...(cough) tell you what guy was making me blush?”

Sakura smiled kindly, though sweat ran down her face from her effort. “Sure.”

“It was...the masked guy. That silver hair...so hot!” the miko giggled at her own vanity. “It’s funny how...I could ignore all my ‘forget vanity’ training for this...Oh well. Please thank...the young boy who helped me.”

The miko breathed her last. Sakura grimaced, but forced herself to keep her composure. She put a hand on the miko’s neck, just to be sure. Then she used her hand to close the girl’s eyes.

-

There was silence. No one knew what to say. Not least of all the mortified Ekyt. He’d never had someone die in front of him like that. Someone he could reach out and grasp, and protect. But he hadn’t protected.

I concerned myself only with the scythe. I should have moved quicker. Picked her up and jumped away. But I had no idea. How strong must Kakuzu be to forget about combat with Asuma, just to take a vindictive swipe at me? Certainly stronger than I am...

Ekyt let his head fall back against the wall. There was so much weighing on his mind now. He could only hope against hope that the exploding tag he had put in that wallet had done it's job.

Soon, Asuma walked over to join him.

"It isn't your fault. It's mine. I'm the more experienced jonin. I should have known that you weren't ready for this. And that last string...it got away from me..."

Ekyt was still silent. Asuma put a hand on his shoulder, then left silently, leaving Ekyt to his thoughts. He went over to rejoin his group. They were sitting in the temple, resting after having helped with clean-up.

"She'll be laid out tomorrow. We've been invited to stay until then..."

"Is that a good idea? In Ekyt's state, I mean..." Yamato glanced over at him. **That hit him hard...**

"I doubt he would leave, even if we told him to. He feels responsible. Really, I should have known better. He wasn't ready to face those two. He must've known- otherwise he wouldn't have had that much cash on him to buy that greedy prick off."

It hadn't sat well with the others at first- Buying off an enemy. They felt better when they heard that it was counterfeit money with an exploding tag. Still, letting those two get away...Not that anyone was going to say anything. It would have destroyed Ekyt. It hadn't been pretty after the battle- he had, nearly hysterically, said 'no' to treatment. It had taken all three jonin to force him to let Sakura near him.

Sakura was nearly as traumatized. She hadn't ever failed to save a life before. But she knew it was part of the job, so that softened the blow a little bit. Enough to keep her sane and thinking clearly. It hadn't been her fault. It was no one's fault. People died in war. It was a fact. It didn't change the fact that she wanted to cry.

Ekyt ghosted over now, picking a spot outside the circle the other nine had formed. Ino was cuddling with Sasuke. Sakura and Naruto were together, having saved a lot of lives. Naruto's Shadow Clones made great nurses in a pinch. In fact, there had only been the one fatality since they had come. Three others were dead, but that had happened before the Leaf force had come. It showed just how powerful they were, and how well they worked as a team.

"You're one us, you know," Kakashi told Ekyt, dragging him into the circle.

"I don't deserve such company," Ekyt managed to say, smiling at his little joke. "But, thanks." Without asking, Ekyt plucked a cigarette- a real one- from the box Ino had. She didn't protest, though, contrary to her personality. He lit it immediately, coughing at first. But slowly he just adapted to it.

I hate this. But it's my first cigarette...right in line with the first time I've TRULY failed. Strangely, I feel calmer now. Is it because my prefect record is broken? Or is it because I know this isn't my fault? Or maybe, because it IS my fault, I can take responsibility away from the group...

It had taken death, but Ekyt realized he would need help to get over his problem. He didn't need to ask

the group to help- they already had. He would stay a loner most likely, but Ekyt could at least let himself borrow their strength.

“Thank you...” he said in a quiet force. Everyone nodded their heads. He returned their nod, then walked over to see the miko’s body one more time. She was so beautiful, even with the hole in her chest. It had been patched up expertly by Sakura. Tomorrow would be the funeral.

Death is a part of life...of war

Grp. (sound of a glove closing)

But I WILL make the Akatsuki pay for taking an innocent life. I can learn something from such a brave girl. Thank you, nameless miko...

Please forgive me for not being able to protect you...

Ryouko held her hand for a moment. Sakura had told him that it was Kakashi she had the crush on. But all the same, her last words had been for him.

80 - My Intuition and My Wisdom Grow

Itachi opened his eyes, letting his chakra return to his body.

“Well?!” Azami asked anxiously.

“He’s suffering. Kakuzu and Hidan killed someone he was trying to protect, so no doubt things will only get worse for him now...”

Azami snarled, thinking of the way she would destroy Hidan. She couldn’t yet, of course, but she would in due time.

Or should I leave him for Ekyt? After all, I’d want to beat the crap out of my ex’s new boyfriend, too... Not to mention that killing thing. Bastard.

Strangely, it seemed like Itachi had some compassion when it came to Azami.

“Do you want to see him? It’s very possible...”

--

At the funeral, Ekyt was quiet. But there was fire in his eyes again, and for that everyone was relieved. Though they soon felt guilty for feeling that relief. In a shattered temple, with bodies laying all around. Among them, the only one to get a real funeral was the brave miko. What she had done was far above and beyond the call of duty.

Her method was so effective...two hits and she had Hidan defeated. I suppose her chakra seal has since worn off, because her chakra is gone...

Right then and there, Ekyt planned to learn that technique. He would ask after the funeral. The shrine maidens and monks were grateful to him, so maybe they could throw him a bone.

“I can’t believe it...my baby sister...”

Ekyt was startled to find someone at his elbow. It was a shrine maiden, around twenty years old. She looked just like the girl in the casket. So much so that Ekyt had to do a double-take. He bowed to her and spoke quietly.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s no fault of yours. The little fool! I told her to let me handle it, and for her to stay hidden! But she had to be brave...” the girl let a tear trickle down her face, though she quickly wiped it away with her sleeve. “Why be brave if all it does it earn you a horrible death.”

Ekyt wasn’t sure what to say for a moment. But, slowly, words of wisdom crept into his head. “Men and

women should be judged on how they lived, not how they died. If they lived a brave life, shouldn't they be praised. I'm very grateful to your sister for her bravery. It taught me an important lesson. I hope it has that effect on others as well."

This miko was silent, contemplating what Ekyt had said.

"You're right, warrior. I hope I can be as brave when the time comes."

Ekyt got an idea. He could learn from her. "Or maybe help others be brave, and possibly avenge your sister?" he asked quietly, a hint of suggestion in his voice.

"What do you have in mind, warrior?"

"Chakra Sealing. I need to know how to perform the jutsu with a ward, as your sister did. Is there any way you can help me learn? I'm a frequent opponent of the ones that destroyed your temple, and I wish to make sure that their reign of terror is stopped. With that seal, it might just be possible."

"Do you plan to kill?"

"...Yes."

The miko lowered her gaze, thinking to herself. "I am trained against killing...humans, anyway. Those two are demons who need to be exorcised. Fine, warrior, I will help you. But you'll need a partner-someone you trust with the utmost faith."

"Male or female?"

"That is entirely up to you. You don't seem like the type to fondle women's breasts, so perhaps a male would be better for you."

Ekyt blushed at the notion. "I understand. I'll pick someone and get back to you."

The miko pointed toward the waterfall at the back of the temple. "I will meet you there when you have your partner."

-

Azami leapt out from behind a crate, knocked the Rain ninja unconscious, and dragged him into the alleyway.

"Will this weakling do?" Azami asked Itachi, who had been sitting quietly and preparing himself.

Itachi opened one eye. His Sharingan spun, focusing on the body. "...Yes. This jutsu leaves me vulnerable to attack while mediating, so you'll have to alert me to the presence of anyone. I place my trust in you..."

"Right. And when you've set up the jutsu, you set it to my appearance, and I take control and start

talking.” Azami understood the plan, having even ran through it in her head a bunch of times. “And if the host dies?”

“It’s of no concern to your own health,” Itachi informed her. “It will only have a measure of your chakra- however much you decide. Just for a conversation, you won’t need to give it much.”

--

Ekylt looked from person to person, trying to decide who he trusted. The senseis wouldn’t like this technique. And if he screwed up, who could afford to have his chakra sealed?

“No one, that’s who... But I could...Naruto!”

Naruto perked up, having heard his name. He had been talking animatedly with Sakura, but put his conversation on hold.

“Hey, what’s up?! Man, you gonna hit on the hot miko or what?!”

Ryouko shook his head. “No. Not yet, anyway. I wanted to ask you- do you think you and your shadow clones could help me out. And maybe Sakura, too, in case I mess up and hurt you or something...”

Naruto ignored the suspicious overtone in Ekylt’s voice, called to Sakura, and left to follow Ekylt.

--

The Miko was sitting under the waterfall. Her gi top was folded neatly on the ground. She seemed comfortable, sitting under the waterfall in her breast wrap and hakama.

“Whoa! Sorry, I didn’t know!” Ekylt exclaimed, as much to the miko as to Naruto and Sakura.

The Miko didn’t seem disturbed. “Good, you’re here. If you’ll stop the childish reaction to nudity, we can begin. We’re born naked, and naked is natural, in the right environment. Besides, I’m sure it’s nothing you haven’t seen before. Now then, which one is your partner.”

Ekylt pointed to Naruto. “He is. The girl, Sakura, is a healer, should we require one.”

The Miko moved closer to Ekylt. He was tempted to back away, but felt that would be the wrong reaction. “Have you no confidence in your abilities?! You are but a child, pretending to be a warrior! The wisdom you spoke of earlier made me believe otherwise, and I had hoped that you might be able to stand up to this new, terrible threat! But you’re just a perverted child!”

Ekylt wasn’t sure what to say to that. “I’m the pervert?! YOU’RE the one walking around almost topless! And no, I don’t have confidence! How can I have confidence in something I’ve never performed before? Faith comes with experience, not blind trust! I doubt even a shrine maiden believes in that which she can’t experience with complete trust. If you DID, wouldn’t you forget about learning to fight and let the trees destroy your enemies?!”

The miko grabbed Ekyt's vest. "You have guts. That's necessary, believe me. Because you're going to be without chakra for an hour. You'll spar the two you brought with you without it. The first step to sealing chakra is to see it done. The second is to experience the complete absence of chakra with your own being."

"Hold on! Without chakra means that any injuries he sustains will be twice as painful!" Sakura protested.

"You care for him, do you?" The miko smirked.

"He's a friend. Isn't that how it normally is?" **That dog!**

"Then place your trust in him to be a competent warrior!"

Man, I wonder if Sakura wears breast wrap, or... Naruto slipped a glance toward Sakura, which earned him a punch.

"I can read your thoughts, pervert," Sakura admonished playfully.

Ekyt, however, took off his vest and shirt. The miko nodded.

"Good. You've noticed that the ward must be applied to skin. Perhaps you're not entirely useless...heh. Fine then. Go sit under the waterfall and purify your body. The tag tends to burn, so the water should deter it a little. But be prepared for pain. And you two!" The miko spun to Sakura and Naruto. "Don't use your killing strikes, but beyond that- don't hold back. You won't be doing him any favors."

Ekyt took his place under the waterfall, while the miko sat down to prepare. That left Naruto and Sakura to talk.

"He's serious about this. I'm almost worried..." Naruto glanced at Ekyt, not even blushing, despite a single girl being right there.

"He came to us for help. That's what this trip was for. I was worried he'd clam up more after what happened last night. But it looks like that death slapped him in the face and lit a fire under his @\$\$. "

Sakura tightened her gloves and gave Naruto a playful smile, winking and sticking out her tongue. "Shall we, then?"

"You bet!"

-

The miko smiled at the young couple. Then she turned her focus to the other young man. She could feel the jealousy running through him. But he was so desperate not to show it. She stood in front of him as he sat on a rock under the waterfall.

Darkness in his soul. Self-doubt, self-hatred, self-pity. And yet his actions are for others. An

enigma, this boy.

“Tell me, warrior- the pink haired girl- you fancied her, yes?”

Ekyt didn't look up. “Yes. But I stepped out of the way willingly. If my life has been hard, then the boy she's with now has had it ten times as hard.”

“Selfless. And yet, it is for her sake that you train?” the miko smiled, wagging a finger. “Just what is she to you?”

“Ojousama...and a friend.”

The miko gripped Ekyt's chin, forcing him to meet her gaze. “Next time, say ‘friend’ first. That's what she wants to be to you, not ‘Ojousama’. Do you get my drift, warrior?”

“...I follow.”

“Good! Now then, I'm going to put the seal on you soon. So, in case you die, I should say ‘thank you’ beforehand.”

Ekyt stared back. “For what?”

The miko brushed back his wet hair and kissed his forehead. “For helping my sister. And for helping me cope with losing her. I thank you for that, warrior. Your strength helped give me strength.”

“All I did was fall down, and she saved me, really,” Ekyt told her, in modesty. All that earned him was a slap on the cheek.

“I gave you a compliment. Talking down about yourself in the same manner as the compliment is the same as refusing the compliment. Is that it- do you refuse the compliment?”

“...No. Thank you for the kind words.” Ekyt forced his face into making a kind smile.

“That's better. You're much better looking when you smile...” the miko leaned forward. Ekyt forced himself to make eye contact- if he looked down, he'd really get an eyeful. But it felt sinful to peep at a miko.

That, and my conscience won't let me get away with it.

She kept leaning forward, staring at him so seriously he was sure that she meant business. Instead, she flicked him in the forehead.

“I guess it can't be help. Men are perverts. Oh well. Enough teasing. It's time for the seal.”

The miko chanted a little bit, holding a ward in her hand. Ekyt paid close attention, but couldn't catch her words. Then she slapped the ward on his chest. Instantly, his body got heavier, and his breathing labored slightly.

“Now, you two- attack him!”

Without chakra, Ekyt was a normal person. He had to block and dodge like a normal person. He realized quickly that he had to be very selective of how to block Sakura’s strikes.

Even if she holds back, her lightest punch can shatter a bone, if hit dead-on. I’ll have to deflect her punches and counter-attack. And Naruto...I’d better stay the heck away from his Rasengan. I like Naruto, but he might forget to hold back...

So Ekyt blocked, punched, kicked, and dodged. He got cut up and bruised badly. Man, Sakura played rough! Naruto seemed surprised by pure martial-arts, although he adapted quickly, as he always did. Soon, Ekyt was overrun. The attacks slowed. When they did, he went on the offensive.

There can be no rest. There is no rest for the weary. Each moment I don’t learn this technique is another moment I will never get back. If I can’t understand this technique, then I’ll never know why Azami did what she did. And I’ll never be anything but what I am now.

My throat is tightening. My stomach is churning. It’s anxiety, isn’t it? It always is.

...

But what if it’s not?

NO! Stop thinking like that! It’s anxiety, and it can’t hurt you! Keep fighting!

By now, Sakura could tell when Ekyt’s anxiety was going to get out of control. Pain could snap him out of it, but she couldn’t bring herself to inflict that pain. Neither would Ekyt do it to himself. Instead, he would suffer through it. In silence and alone, as always. But this time, to Sakura and Naruto, it seemed like Ekyt wanted to say something. Like he could open his mouth, but couldn’t pick the correct words. Had their offers for help finally reached his ears?

Ekyt kept fighting, though his breathing was becoming labored. When he finally got hit, it took him far longer to recover than usual. He skidded toward the waterfall. A Naruto clone dove on him. Ekyt wrestled with it in the water, but couldn’t get the upper-hand.

What if I drown? What if I can’t breathe? What if I die? What if my chakra never comes back?

Ekyt’s mind was racing now. The clone got the better of him and punched him. Ekyt blocked it just enough to avoid a critical shot, but it wasn’t a shot he needed to take at all.

The miko watched all this, her eyes indifferent to Ekyt’s suffering. When it became apparent that he would be overpowered, and that his mental state was deteriorating, the miko took action. She killed the Naruto clone with a swing of her naginata. She also cut Ekyt across the shoulder. Blood seeped out around the hand he put there to slow the bleeding.

“What the hell?” Naruto lost his temper and sent a clone after the miko. She cut it down and kicked the oncoming Naruto in the forehead.

“For help, a price must be paid,” the miko informed them. She looked down at Ekyt, who was still

holding his shoulder. With a glance, she evaluated his mental condition. He was losing control. **I know nothing about his condition, but there's clearly something wrong. He seems to react to pain. That little cut I gave him won't hurt it. It may, in fact, help him. He has fifteen minutes to go. I can't stop this prematurely. Events that are set in motion cannot be interrupted. If he's survived this long, he may be able to handle the technique. It's not merely slapping a tag on someone. It takes a special kind of attack. Defense and offense in one strike isn't something everyone is capable of. But anyone who can overcome mental anguish that manifests itself through physical problems must be able to multi-task well enough to perform this seal. Ekyt, by the end of this you will undoubtedly hate me. I hate to be this way towards such a gentle soul, but what must be done, must be done. And I want to see my sister avenged! If not through me, then through a technique unique to our family!**

"A 'price'?! How's him saving your @\$\$ for a price?!" Naruto snarled, his eyes lighting up and the 'whiskers' on his face becoming more jagged as he watched a friend suffer. "He was ready to give his life for your stupid temple, and when he goes to learn from you, all he gets is abuse and a miko who isn't shy! That's just wrong!"

"Naruto! Enough! A price must be paid when a service is rendered." Ekyt was finally up, his breathing going back to normal. "I have no trouble with doing what she asks. If a cut is the only price I pay..." Ekyt smiled, closing his eyes as well.

"Then I'll call that an excellent trade. Wouldn't you? Now, please, keep going. I believe I've got some time left..."

Naruto did as Ekyt asked, throwing punch after punch. Ekyt dodged backward, just barely evading each strike. A smile spread across his face.

I can do this. With help, I can do this. I get the feeling that this miko is acting this way to ensure I understand how dangerous this is. Or something along those lines. In any event, I need to take this- and myself- seriously. I have someone to avenge now. It's not just about my own ends. Which means this is a 'cry for help'. A cry for help I can't ignore. If I try to handle this on my own, I'll fail. For once, I will let myself rely on the others. After that, who can say? If I'm the only one at risk, then I'll handle it myself. But I won't endanger someone else because I was too stubborn to ask for help.

Ekyt caught Naruto's arm and threw him to the ground. As Naruto rolled away, Sakura came in, her fists flying as well. Ekyt was reluctant to hit her, or even touch her. Because, well, she was a girl. All the same, holding back in combat was a veritable sin. He would just have to be creative.

Ekyt deflected her punch, then stepped forward, pushing her own arm against her chest. He trapped her foot as well, then gave her a little shove to make her stumble backward.

"HEY! You flat-out threw me! And you just push her nicely?! How come?!" Naruto protested, running at Ekyt.

"Because she's a girl. And a good friend's girlfriend at that. You'd hurt me if I hurt her. Besides, she's a friend. And Ojousama, too."

The miko smiled at that. **So he heard me after all. Well, I'm sure the young lady will be thrilled that**

he said 'friend' first. Beyond that, he really wants to learn this technique. I hope it won't bring him the same fate it brought my sister. I don't want him to die, too. But something tells me he won't. He's not the type to just die. Lightning may strike him, but he'll live through it, learn from it, and grow because of it. He's bent, not broken. But I doubt many can see that. If people took the time to really look at their fellows, at the people around them, they would see that some people are transparent, while others require more thought. A puzzle, of sorts. Some more-so than others.

81 - Cross to Carry

Ekyt went crashing to the ground again, but clambered right up and kept blocking and striking in return. The cuts and injuries mounted, until he was one giant bruise. His own attacks hurt him. But he just had to last a little longer...

Naruto and Sakura attacked simultaneously. Both landed their initial strikes, but found their arms pinned. Ekyt had twisted his body in such a way that he caught one of their arms beneath his own, trapping them tightly. He stepped forward, forcing them both to the ground.

“Well, well, you not only survived, but you counter-attacked. Defense and offense as one movement. The seal is entirely possible for you. I need to remove your own seal first. That’s going to hurt, though. Chakra flowing back into your body at such a high rate isn’t natural. There’s more, however- it is important that NO ONE HELP HIM. His pain must stay his pain. Even if it’s your wish to take the pain from him, you MUST NOT get involved. Either of you.”

The miko finished her speech. Ekyt was clearly exhausted, so she sank down to his level. They were both sitting on the ground. Ekyt’s body was marred with scratches and bruises. Sakura and Naruto had held back a little, though it was still impressive that Ekyt did as well as he did.

“You did well, warrior. Now, once again I thank you. I certainly hope that you can escape this order with the ability to seal and without hatred for me. My techniques are extreme, I understand, and I’m kind of mean to you, aren’t I? But understand that it’s my job to make sure you’re prepared for what comes ahead. Go back under the waterfall. It will help dull the pain you’ll be feeling. After that, the seal will be within your grasp.”

“Is that right? Well, it’s I who owe you a debt of gratitude. I’ll go ahead and get under the waterfall now. If I might ask you a favor...”

Ekyt dug out his wallet- his REAL wallet- and handed over a generous amount. “Please treat everyone to dinner on my behalf. I don’t want them to see me suffer more than I already have. I understand now- it was wrong of me to conceal so much from them. But, some things are private, and I...”

Ekyt seemed less like a warrior and more like a regular boy, concerned with appearances.

“I...I just don’t want them to see me at my worst. And I need some time to myself to think. To sort things out. A lot has happened already; and so much more will happen soon. If it won’t violate my training...”

The miko took the money. “I’d say that’s fine. No matter how much one strives to attain a state of nothingness in the mind, it’s my belief that simple vanity will remain. I don’t see how it hurts to indulge vanity now and then. Sometimes, it’s even less painful for those around you.”

The miko took a look at Ekyt as she walked away. He had his head down, and his eyes were dark and pain-laden.

But that's not all the pain of the seal being released. There's another pain. Support from his friends or not, in the end, this will be defeated by his hand. Friends will just hasten the pain's defeat. Some wounds run very deep, however. The closer they are to the heart, the larger the emotional scarring.

His heart may very well be a mass of scars.

-

The water roared overhead, creating a picturesque scene. A mix of nature's tranquility and harshness all in one package. The water rained down, falling into the small pond at the bottom. The pond led to a stream that fed the water into a large valley.

Ekyt sat on a large rock that was directly underneath the powerful spray of the water. He sat perfectly still, though pain coursed through him again and again. The mist hid him mostly from view; though there was no one to hide from. Still, the solitude helped Ekyt put his body at ease despite the pain. His mind was active, as always.

I was never meant to be a part of this. This world, my ideal world. I was supposed to be somewhere else. But I forced fate to bring me here, and I don't regret it. I almost cherish the mix of heartache, jealousy, and happiness I get when I see Naruto and Sakura together. It reminds me that I'm human; a distinction I longed to rid myself of. Humans are such impractical creatures; always fussing over looks, or smells, or anything impractical. Planning for peace instead of readying for war. But now that I've lived with them, I see that maybe being human isn't so bad. So, maybe I WAS meant to be here. Despite the pain and losses and frustration, I feel more complete as a person. I don't have all the answers. Now that I admit that, it seems easier to accept. Fighting the inevitable will only earn you extra pain.

But is that right? All human emotions bring me are pain. When I wore the mask and at least pretended I didn't have emotions, it was so much easier to live. But it wasn't easy to deny the feelings I started to get. Love for the village, love for Ojou- ...Sakura. Then love for Azami. All the same, those real feelings led to pain.

Maybe part of being human is not understanding the whats and whys of the world. Maybe being human means taking what life has given you, and making the most of it.

The thought made him sigh deeper. He lowered his head more, not yet feeling his chakra return. It would take time and pain, the miko had said. He just had to be patient. The water pushing against his skin helped him focus on anything but the pain. His thoughts inflicted mental wounds. But some wounds healed. Some were too hard to comprehend.

I still love Azami. But what if someone else comes along? Did Azami truly desert me? There's no doubt she could have killed if she truly tried. So, then, she held back. Was it to discourage me from following her? If she had a problem, she'd have told me- wouldn't she?

...

No. She was so strong this whole time, and I never knew it. She, on the other hand, could gauge my skills accurately, and knew that I couldn't come out on top in that fight. She seemed genuinely surprised that I fought as much as I did. But does that mean she thought me to be weak to begin with? Is that why she shouldn't tell me what was going on?

Or, the other potential truth: She's genuinely evil, and I was blinded by my love for her and

didn't notice. Until I speak to her again, there's no way for me to tell.

Ekyt felt pain well up in his chest, directly under where the seal had been placed. The top left corner of the ward began to burn. The flames licked Ekyt's chest, but inside of him is where it hurt. A particularly nasty shot of pain forced him to breathe in quickly while clenching a fist. Slowly, he unclenched his fist and breathed out. The pain dulled slightly.

I see. The faster the ward burns, the more pain I feel. I can control it to some extent. My chakra is returning. So, then how does this seal work? Is it dependent on my chakra, or my opponent's chakra? Is it me putting chakra into their body through a ward? Or does the ward just seal their chakra?

Night had begun to fall, and the water got cold very quickly. A few minutes of freezing told Ekyt to get out from under the waterfall. He climbed up on the roof (still chakra-less) of the temple, looking up at the moon. It was three-fourths full tonight, and shone very brightly. The white-blue light offered no warmth. Instead, it offered a pretty, serene picture. Normally, Ekyt's nights were spent in frantic study. Moon gazing while he was unable to study seemed to be okay. He could clear his thoughts up here just as well as anywhere else.

It's peaceful...

There was a 'whump' sound, and suddenly Ekyt wasn't alone. The miko had come to moon gaze as well, apparently. She sat down near Ekyt, checking the seal on his chest.

"By morning your chakra will have returned in full," she informed him. He nodded in reply before asking one of his many questions.

"If the ward were to be ripped off...would my chakra still return? And what kind of side effects would I have?"

The miko smoothed her hakama as she sat formally. "Nature is certainly beautiful," she commented, happy with the serenity of the moment. "But to answer your questions- your chakra would return, but it would likely have a similar effect to...well, to put it this way: Imagine that waterfall ran dry. The pond below it would dry up, and soon the river would as well. That's what the ward does to your body, except with chakra. Now imagine a flood. A horrible downpour. The banks would overflow on the river. That's what would happen to your body if you removed the seal quickly. Your chakra would expand so quickly that your body would suffer massive damage. I don't know the extent of the damage, but it would be enough to ruin any fight for you."

Ekyt thanked her for the answer, then asked his next question: "How does the ward work?"

"It puts your chakra into someone else's body. Similar to breaking a genjutsu..." the miko paused to shift her position to a less formal one, then continued. "...Except that your chakra actually stops their chakra flow as long as the ward is active. Your chakra will branch out in response to the...spell, for want of a better word, the user puts on the ward, and will block your opponent's tenketsu. As long as you maintain a minor focus on the ward, their chakra will stay blocked. This cuts into your chakra, but it makes the other person far less dangerous. For example, if you were to fight with one of those jonin

downstairs, chakra vs. chakra, it would be a hard match. But if you took their chakra out of the equation, they would have to fight without ninjutsu, genjutsu, or chakra-enhanced taijutsu. Even the chakra gates would be blocked.”

This struck Ekyt as surprising. Not the material- that all made sense. But the fact that this miko knew so much of the shinobi arts. He decided that was a question for another time, however.

“Now it’s my turn to ask a question: Who is it your heart pines for, warrior? I feel there was another besides the kunoichi with the pink hair...” The miko seemed strangely curious. Ekyt, only knowing females by stereotype, assumed it was a gossip topic or something. Perhaps even started by Sakura herself.

“You’re a sharp girl. There was another. She was the most cold, ruthless bounty hunter you can imagine. I met her in a dream, if you can believe that. But then, as if by fate, we met in person. In less than a month, there were few I trusted more than her. We were close. Then, one day, we were to fight in a couples tournament. She was to be my new partner for missions, since I don’t have a squad of my own. But before the tournament, I knew something was wrong. I thought it was a genjutsu, and I went to comfort her. She asked me for a kiss. Where I come from, I’m considered incredibly shy. But for her...anything. So I kissed her. That’s when she stabbed me. The first time, I mean. She returned to finish me a few days later. I fought her and her comrades. I gave all I had. When all was said and done, I barely scratched the enemies. And she showed me just how far below her I was. She could have killed me so many times...but she held back. But that made me wonder...”

Ekyt paused, steadying himself. He hadn’t told anyone else about his suspicions yet. Somehow, this shrine maiden seemed to be the perfect one to tell.

“...It made me wonder if I drove her to this. If it was my weakness. Not my weakness as a fighter, but my weakness as a person. Was I someone she could open up to? Could she come to me with her problems? In the end, I opened up to her, and I burdened her with my problems. But she didn’t feel she could trust me enough to tell me her’s. Her problems were a burden I’d have readily taken on. She knew that, I’m sure. So now I wonder- just what happened? And the answer I got was that some outside force made her do this. She had no choice in the matter. She was blackmailed or something like that. All I know is that I’ve got to help her. Even if the truth IS that I’m not good enough for her, or that she really is evil...I’m responsible for her. I brought her to my village. I don’t know how much she knows. But if she has to be stopped, it has to be me that stops her.”

The miko twirled her naginata, watching the moon reflect off of it. “Do you still love her?”

“...I do.”

“Could you love another?”

“...I think so. But I’ve only ever been in love twice, and my track record is dismal. So I don’t know if I could even try again. I’m...y’know...damaged goods now. Who wants a guy with a crippling mental issue no one else can see? To them, it’s just weakness.”

“You are a thoughtful boy, warrior. But you’re also a complete idiot!”

The miko fired up. She grabbed Ekyt by the waistband of his pants and hauled him to his feet. "Do all those people down there, worried for your safety, mean nothing to you? How can you say that this problem of yours is 'just a weakness'. Damn it, you're exasperating! You take one step forward, then two steps back! Get it in your skull that those people give a damn about you. They'll do ANYTHING to help you! Just TELL THEM WHAT YOU'RE FEELING! Don't hold back!"

Ekyt narrowed his eyes, his mouth set. "I'm sorry, but I can't. Those people's hearts are pure as new fallen snow. I won't let them carry my burdens. I would take on their burdens, if I could. But to ask someone to take away a part of your life...it's weakness. Before you yell at me, I'll tell you why: Because you learn from loss. You learn from getting knocked on your @\$\$, then having to haul yourself back up. I can trust those people with my whole heart, but I won't let them take on the one, tiny cross I have to bear!"

The miko was taken aback, and showed it with her mannerisms, but Ekyt wasn't done.

"When my problems get too heavy, I'll call on them. But now, this...this problem. It's nothing! The girls down there fought over the same boy for years. The pink-haired one lost him. But she found another. The blonde boy- he's been shunned and alone for most of his life. But now he has friends. The sensei with the mask lost all his friends and family. All of them down there have had a misfortune greater than mine."

The miko nodded her head. "You're as kind as they believe. But do you understand that you're making them worry? They don't want you to keep secrets like that. They want you to be honest and open. If you can't do something, tell them, and they'll help you through it. If you truly want to protect them, and you're willing to give your life to do it, you first have to let them become a part of your life. And I know just the drill to make you do that. The last drill: Planting the tag and maintaining it."

"Maintaining it? What do you mean?"

"You'll see, warrior. I'll gather your friends."

82 - Ekyt: The Next Guardian?

Ekyt was to have a sparring match with Kakashi. The first move was Kakashi willingly letting Ekyt place a chakra seal on him. To do so, Ekyt had to do three things:

1. Put a little chakra into a ward
2. Plant the ward on Kakashi's bare skin
3. Chant a 'code' that would activate the seal

The code could be anything the user wanted. Ekyt chose the words 'Tiger and Dragon' as his code. He slapped the tag on Kakashi's arm.

"Okay. Now remember, concentrate on guiding your chakra into his body. BEGIN!"

Kakashi rushed Ekyt, stabbing with a knife. Ekyt blocked with his own knife, but the miko rapped him in the head.

"FAIL!"

Ekyt had forgotten to focus his chakra into the seal the instant Kakashi had attacked.

"Damn it!"

"It's fine. You, the pink-haired girl! This time, you're going to back Ekyt up! But before you do, talk with him for two minutes."

-

Sakura and Ekyt walked off to the side.

"You trust me, right?" Sakura asked earnestly. **The miko said to say this...but why?**

"I do."

"Even in combat?"

"Yes, even then."

"Okay then. I want you to trust me. You kneel in the back, and stay behind me. Focus completely on the tag on Kakashi-sensei. I'll keep him at bay while you keep your chakra flowing. Don't lose your concentration, okay? I've got your back. We can do this."

-

Ekyt did as he was told, and the results were decidedly different. While he knelt in the back, Kakashi's

moves, while expertly executed, were slower. Much slower. Sakura landed a half-speed punch on him, ending the drill.

So that's it... Ekyt thought, nodding slightly to himself. It's like when Shikamaru does his Shadow Possession. He trusts his teammates to either provide a distraction, or keep the threats away. Or he's backing someone else up. He trusts them, and that's why it works.

The miko instructor nodded, apparently satisfied with the results. "It looks like you've understood it. When you master this technique, you'll be able to fight full-speed while maintaining the tag. Until you can do that, plant the tag and drop to the rear of the battle. Your enemies will be obliterated by your teammates in no time, as long as you keep your concentration on that tag, and you trust who you're working with."

Right. So I'm useless in combat after I get that tag on. But it does do what I need it to... At any rate, there's no way I'll master this in time for this 'tryout' match. But if the Akatsuki show up again...

Ekyt knelt at the miko's feet. "Thank you so much. I owe you a great deal. If you're ever in need of my help, I'll do whatever I can to help."

The miko lost her cool exterior, turning a furious shade of red at being addressed like this. "J-just beat those idiots! Now, go! Your friends tell me you have a tryout match in a few days. Go on, start traveling!"

"I will. Thanks again," Ekyt called over his shoulder with wave, walking back over to his group.

The miko gave a cordial wave to Ekyt and co. She put her sleeve over her face the second they were out of site.

I see why he has that group of friends. For all the abuse I gave him, he was polite and kind the entire time. He's very cute as well. If it was in my nature, I would wish that he would fail in his quest and return to me. Imagine, twenty years old and I've never been on a date, or even kissed a boy! No way there's anyone else like that in the world! That guy wouldn't like me if he knew that! I'm such a loser!

-

A few times along their trip, Ekyt lost control of himself. He would breathe heavy, feel faint, feel sick, and the like. Each time, a member of the group he was with now stopped and reminded him that he wasn't alone. They understood he couldn't ask for help. He barely understood this problem, much less knew how to explain it, or what help he needed to get through it. It seemed like the support was enough.

As they grew nearer to the place where Ekyt's test was to be held, Ekyt found himself having a lot of questions.

What kind of test is this? I know it's a fight, but there's likely some special parameters. And these guardians must be on level with the Akatsuki, if they're protecting the most important person to our land. I've won against the Akatsuki, but I've also lost, depending on the

circumstances. And the circumstances I'm about to fight under are hardly ideal...

-

"Asuma, what kind of threat is he facing? And can we watch?"

Kakashi was usually the authority on these things. Back when he did everything by the book, he had learned lots of rules- even the rules of different nations. But this was different entirely. He had been asked to be one of the Daimyo's guards, but had declined due to his absolute loyalty to the Leaf. There were never any details given about the test, and he had never asked.

Asuma thought back to his own test. "There are no spectators. You can bring whoever you want with you, and they can wait for you, but they can't go in the room with you. Although it's highly encouraged to bring a medic, because the likelihood for injury or death is high. VERY high. Sometimes, the losers are even executed. That's the risk you take."

Everyone had their own thoughts about that. But they all led to one thing- worry for Ekyt. He wasn't at one hundred percent yet. He had heard of the repercussions for failure, but he didn't brood about it. Instead, he gave a weak smile and asked for a drill in chakra control.

"I need to tame my dragons," he said simply.

"Later. Right now is the time for you to make one very important memory. There's a Korean Barbeque place up ahead. I actually had a meal there before my test. Maybe it's superstition, but I swear the meat there is good luck. And if anything, that's what you need."

Asuma was never that nice. He never left anything to chance. He was blunt, almost to the point of being rude. But he would reward hard work. And if there was someone long overdue for compensation for his hard work, it was Ekyt.

-

It was a party. There were so many memories. Ones that would warm the coldest heart. Naruto putting chopsticks up his nose, while tucking the other end into his bottom lip. Choji's voracious eating, coupled with Ino's remarks about how girls would like him more if he lost weight. Sasuke and Naruto glaring at each other during an improptu eating contest (things hadn't changed much since the Land of Waves in terms of maturity level, apparently). Sakura's disdain at the stupid eating contest. There was the hope of seeing Kakashi remove his mask, only to have Yamato put him in a wooden enclosure so no one could see. When Yamato himself tried to look in, Kakashi jabbed him in the eye with an outstretched chopstick. Then Sai tried to give everyone pet names again:

Choji: Chubby (A brawl ensued)

Sakura: Plain (A brawl ensued)

Ino: Hottie (Sakura smacked Sai again)

Naruto: Idiot (A brawl ensued)

Shikamaru: Lazy (...no response)

Asuma: Chimney (...no response)

Sasuke: (No one even let Sai say anything there. Sasuke would've killed him)

Ekyt: Single (Ouch! But it WAS funny)

At the end of the meal, they each had a glass of sake. Among them, only Kakashi, Yamato, Asuma, and Ekyt were actually of legal age. They all held their liquor well. The girls didn't, and started to perform an impromptu strip show. That was quickly grounded by their boyfriends, though they weren't in much better shape.

It was so...normal. And that normality was what was missing from Ekyt's life. He had laughed and joked with the rest. Even if it was only once, it was indeed a memory he needed to make. Finally, Asuma thrust a cigarette into his hand.

"Call it good luck. I know you're not a smoker, but at least take one puff. Then stick to your healthy crap, okay? My cigarettes enhance my jutsus, but they'll only ruin your lungs. Your chakra cigs are safer, and serve a purpose."

Ekyt took the cigarette with a nod of thanks. "So, if I lose, I die, huh?"

"It's possible," Asuma admitted. "You don't sound worried, though. Confident?"

"No, not at all, really," Ekyt replied with a small chuckle. "But I've come this far. Turning back isn't the right choice. If I gave up, I'd never heal myself. Besides that, I've been near death so many times it doesn't seem quite as scary anymore. I always wind up getting saved, it seems."

Asuma didn't have the heart to tell him that if he lost this time, there would be no saving. The group of ten would become a group of nine, and they may not even have a body to bring back to the Village Hidden in the Leaves.

"Well, you'll do fine, so I'm not worried."

That was a hell of a lie I just told. But maybe if I have confidence, so will he...

That's what Asuma hoped anyway.

-

Two days later, the awesome sight of the Fire Daimyo's mansion greeted their eyes. Ekyt, Kakashi, and Asuma had all been here before. The mansion was five stories tall, with multiple small temples around the garden. The crest of the Land of Fire was on every banner, and the banners dotted the entire landscape.

"Welcome!"

A group of five girls, dressed traditionally, all crowded around the speaker. He was a tall man, dressed formally in an incredibly fancy servant's kimono.

"Which one of you is 'Ekyt'? If you will follow me, please, when you're ready. There is no set time for the fight to begin, so you may take as much time as you need to prepare. The girls here will take care of

your friends.”

On cue, the girls led everyone to one of the buildings that Ekyt had mistaken for a temple. It was, in fact, a formal entertaining room. Cushions and low tables filled the high-ceiling room. Each member of the group picked a spot. Immediately, tea and snacks were served to them.

“Man, I never wanna leave!” Naruto declared, tucking in without waiting for anyone else. Everyone was used to his loud eating and drinking, and paid no mind. Most attention was on Ekyt anyway.

He was dressed as carefully as anyone had ever seen him. His uniform was straightened and tight to his body. His vest had been mended carefully, and every button shined. His headband had been cleaned until it gleamed. Even the knot that held it in place was tied symmetrically. Unlike the others, he never wore sandals, opting instead for lightweight boots that were long enough to protect his shins.

“This is it, then,” Ekyt announced. “Thank you all. Win or lose, I’ll make all of you proud of me, and I’ll make sure that I honor both my headband and those who helped me feel like I really deserved it. You’ve stuck with me this entire time, even while I beat myself up and refused help. Thanks...Just thanks...”

Everyone shouted words of encouragement and luck. And with that, Ekyt followed the servant.

-

Ekyt was led into a darkened room. He could sense fourteen chakras, plus his own, after the servant bowed out.

“So, you wish to test for a spot among the Twelve Shinobi who guard the most honorable Fire Daimyo?”

Ekyt gulped. “I do.”

“Please state your village.”

“Konohagakure.”

“As we already know your name, Ekyt Kaguya, we will begin. There are no special rules for your match. But a word of advice: If you lose, you will be killed. Do you wish to back out of the challenge? You may still do so. If you do, you may not return for a rematch ever again, barring any outside judgment from the Fire Daimyo himself. Do you wish to proceed.”

“...Yes.”

Ekyt’s voice carried certainty in every tone. He was ready for this. He wanted to do this. There was no turning back now.”

“Very well then. Will his opponent please step forward now, and prepare to fight immediately after introductions?”

The light flicked on, blinding Ekyt for a moment. He didn't drop his guard at any point, though. When he could see again, he saw his opponent for the first time.

"How do you do? My name is Shinmaru, and I'll be your opponent. Best of luck to you, challenger!"

Shinmaru was roughly six feet tall. He was bald, though he wore a small mustache on his upper lip. His skin was creased, making him look older, though he spoke as though he wasn't yet out of his twenties. His body was that of a younger man as well, as evidenced by his muscles when he threw aside his haori jacket, revealing a bare chest and stomach, and arms that were clearly no stranger to the inside of a gym.

Ekyt, by contrast, was maybe five feet nine inches tall. He had a thick mop of dark brown hair, and wore a typical jonin uniform, though it was black in color, instead of blue. That made his green vest stand out all the more.

Taijutsu... Ekyt thought to himself. He gave a small, courteous bow.

"Thank you, and good luck to you as well. I'm looking forward to our fight."

The voice from nowhere that had made the announcements spoke again. "Whenever you are ready, the match will begin. There is no time limit, and no special circumstances. Challenger may forfeit at any time and leave unharmed. Guardian may not forfeit, under penalty of being stripped of his position. Begin whenever you are ready."

83 - Faithful and Valuable

The two stared each other down. This was a sparring match, but with massive ramifications. Ekyt broke out his tonfa, already deciding how he was going to attack.

He and Shinmaru rushed each other. But something was strange. Neither one was getting any closer to the other.

“Release!” they shouted in tandem. As a genjutsu shattered, they realized they were next to each other. In surprise, Shinmaru struck with a kunai, while Ekyt flicked a tonfa open in an attack. The two attacks canceled each other out, and the combatants leapt back to their ends of the battlefield.

“Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings. That’s what my attack was...” Shinmaru seemed to be making calculations in his head. “You don’t have the Sharingan eye, and you didn’t copy my handsigns anyway. That means that you somehow returned my attack on me, or...Or you used the genjutsu without making handsigns. That’s really impressive!” Shinmaru applauded. “To use genjutsu without making handsigns! I never DID figure that out! But it seems as if my jutsu packs a little more punch...Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!”

Ekyt used the same jutsu at the same time. Both combatants were silently engaging in a battle of mental superiority, each trying to force the other into a corner with nothing but illusions. Done properly, you could tell your opponent that you were putting an illusion on them, and even knowing in advance, they couldn’t break it. The stalemate between Ekyt and Shinmaru would be decided by he who broke the opponent’s genjutsu first. They were both standing still, their hands in the sign of the tiger. Sweat ran down their faces from the mental effort it took to keep a jutsu in place so long.

I hate to break out all my tricks early, but...Demonic Illusion: Death Foreseeing!

Ekyt used his favorite genjutsu trick: Casting two at the same time. That took a lot of practice, and wasn’t particularly effective when the opponent saw it coming. But it was quick, and often created an opening that Ekyt could use. Through the illusion he was suffering (He was in the Leaf Village, and everyone he saw died as he ran by), he saw Shinmaru stumble, then shake his head. Genjutsu couldn’t be broken by pain from another genjutsu, and you could sense when it was broken. Armed with this knowledge, Ekyt let the illusion on him continue, while he used his own illusions full blast. Shinmaru was likely seeing the death of himself in several gruesome ways, coupled with the illusion of being tied up with a fire spreading towards him. This battle was fought in a world of illusions. Ekyt could see clearly, so he aimed to close the distance between them.

I was wrong about him being a taijutsu specialist. If he uses genjutsu, then there’s a chance that physical attacks are his weak point. So let’s try that out. I don’t know my enemy, but I DO know myself. So I should trust my strengths to eventually expose his weaknesses. Let’s see if he can keep his illusion going while defending himself against my frontal attacks.

It became evident very quickly that Shinmaru could. In fact, he had a skill Ekyt didn’t.

As a kunai swept up to block Ekyt's tonfa strikes, Shinmaru's other hand made handsigns. (Similar to Haku) Sensing the chakra change, Ekyt jumped backward, holding his tonfa in a guard.

Cigarette. he thought, popping a chakra cigarette into his mouth. He knew a jutsu was coming, but he didn't know from where, or what kind of jutsu.

"Earth Style: Boulder Graveyard!"

The entire ground shook. In the high-ceilinged (but windowless and dimly-lit) room, rocks shot up from the ground in seemingly random places. A massive boulder grew up from the ground in the middle of the room, while slender, more jagged rocks aimed for Ekyt himself. Forced on the defensive, and still fighting an illusion, Ekyt countered by releasing his own genjutsus, then quickly reapplying the Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique. It seemed to catch Shinmaru off-guard, as the rocks slowed down. But that wasn't right. A boulder slammed Ekyt in the stomach, knocking him toward a sharper rock. Ekyt spun in the air and missed the rock-mostly. He felt his left shoulder tear open. He couldn't even recover, as more rocks shot up. But the sharp rock cutting him open released the genjutsu that was on him, allowing him to see more clearly, if just for a few seconds, before the next genjutsu hit him.

So he's created a combination offensive/defensive attack with those rocks. But it's restricted his movement as well as mine. Could that mean that speed isn't his strong suit? It's not mine, either, but maybe I can make it work in my favor somehow...Ah!

Making the appropriate handsigns, Ekyt decided to take his first risk. He focused his efforts on making his genjutsu show Shinmaru drowning. Then he followed up with his "Tatsunokuchi: Dragon Gargoyle! Summoning Jutsu! Umisu- Water Style: Flowing River!"

From the gargoyle's mouth spewed an endless amount of water, courtesy of Umisu's own abilities. It saved Ekyt's chakra while adding to his illusion. If Shinmaru felt real water hitting him, maybe drowning would seem realistic to him. It also gave Ekyt some room to work. But this plan backfired.

"Water Style: Tidal Crest!" Shinmaru cried loudly, aiming a hand toward Ekyt.

The water in the room shifted toward Ekyt. The continuous stream had weathered the rocks, smoothing the sharp points. No more chances for a vital hit that way. That also made the rocks slippery, adding nearly zero chance for escape to the already formidable amount of problems.

The giant wave coming at Ekyt was a problem, to be sure. He took a calculated risk and ran toward the wave, diving through the bottom of the water. The wave crashed harmlessly over him, as he avoided the crest itself. When he looked back, Ekyt saw the wall was full of holes where the white cap of the wave had hit.

Good thing I took a risk. I would've been skewered like dango!

Keeping his momentum, Ekyt slid toward Shinmaru. He took aim with his tonfa, hitting Shinmaru in the leg hard enough to break a small bone in the shin. As Shinmaru fell, Ekyt smashed him in the stomach, then again in the face. Shinmaru fell hard, curling up into a fetal position.

“It’s over. I win- !”

Ekyt bit his lip hard, then spun around just in time to deflect Shinmaru’s attack.

“Tricky genjutsu can come from anywhere, at any time. While you dove through the wave and closed your eyes, I put a genjutsu on you. Still, you’re very good for a boy your age. If you had waited two more years, you might have beaten me. You’re only going to get stronger.”

Ekyt thanked Shinmaru for the praise as they traded taijutsu strikes.

“I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t refer to me in the past tense quite yet, though. We aren’t finished here!”

Ekyt used a replacement jutsu, attaching an exploding tag on the log he used to replace himself with. Shinmaru ran away from the log, but Ekyt used a body flicker jutsu to reappear and kick the log toward Shinmaru. It exploded, this time really hitting Shinmaru in the leg with a ton of splinters. A minor burn also added to Shinmaru’s woes.

Shinmaru skidded backward. “Pretty good, kid! You actually wounded me! That’s farther than most get! But it’s not over by a longshot! You haven’t seen half of what I can do!”

Then Shinmaru vanished.

No. He didn’t vanish. He’s moving at a speed so great I can’t follow him! The water!

Ekyt swung wildly at the rippling water, but hit nothing.

“You’re not even hitting my after-images!” Shinmaru declared, standing on top of the giant boulder in the center of the room. A split-second later, he was crashing into Ekyt. He actually held on to Ekyt and drove him- and himself- backward and out through a wall. Their brawl had spilled outside, ruining Ekyt’s water strategy. But he thought quickly.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu! Dance of the Sickle Moon!”

Two clones wielding tonfa’s like Ekyt’s stood back to back to back with him. They all widened their tonfas with their chakra and started to swing. They didn’t hit anyone, but they really weren’t supposed to.

Now then; Bringer of Darkness Technique!

WHABANG!

Ekyt knew his darkness genjutsu had worked when one of his clones finally smacked Shinmaru. It also ended the genjutsu, but it had done it’s job. Ekyt grabbed Shinmaru and wrestled him to the ground. The clones held him down, and it looked like the fight had been one. But then the clones dissolved.

“What the hell?!” Ekyt exclaimed. **He didn’t move! They had him! What the hell did he do?!**

Shinmaru spat at Ekyt. It hit him in the face. Ekyt was disgusted, but then it got worse- his flesh began to bake.

“ACID!”

“That’s right!” Shinmaru confirmed. “Do you know why I’m bald, and my body almost completely hairless? It’s because I’ve dunked myself in acid in order to build up an immunity to it. That way, I can put it on my skin, and spit it on my foes. Then they can’t get near me, or touch me! If you thought all I was good at was genjutsu, you were dead wrong!”

Ekyt dunked his face in the water quickly, though the acid had given him a nasty burn. The fight had gone well, up to this point.

How the hell do I beat this guy? I’m going to have to KO him with my tonfas. It’s what he’s expecting, but I’ll have to let him expect it, and just somehow crack him in the head anyway...

Ekyt was running out of options, and he had to think fast. To take away the speed factor, he had to enclose Shinmaru somehow. But he couldn’t grab him, and clones wouldn’t work either. They were evenly matched when it came to genjutsu. Ekyt couldn’t hope to be faster than him, so he would have to strategize better.

Then the solution hit him. He reached for a ward, keeping it hidden in his sleeve. He whispered the activation. All he had to do was set it.

Shinmaru grabbed Ekyt in a bearhug.

“AGHHH!”

The acid bit into him, eating through his clothes. Ekyt held fast, and slapped the tag on Shinmaru’s bare chest. Immediately, Shinmaru’s grip weakened. Keeping his mind on the tag, Ekyt slammed Shinmaru to the ground.

“Now it’s over. Your chakra is sealed. And there’s no way to- ?!”

The tag was disintegrating at the corners. That took Ekyt’s mind off the chakra he was putting into it, and the tag disappeared. Only burnt ash remained.

“Whew! I don’t know what the hell you just did, but it was a good move! Too bad it didn’t last!” Shinmaru was up again, and fast as ever. He blindsided Ekyt with a kick that knocked him through another wall.

-

“What the hell?!” Naruto exclaimed, as Ekyt came flying into the room, his clothes torn and his face bloodied. He skidded across the table, taking out the food and drinks. The girls screamed and ran for

cover. Before Ekyt could even roll to his feet, he was kicked again, this time bouncing off the back wall. His headband slipped and fell off. A half-second later, a hand was around his neck.

“You’re defeated. Admit it. Because next I squeeze your windpipe, and I kill you.”

“(koff) Fine, kill me. But not in front of them.”

Ekyt braced his feet against the back wall, and kicked forward. Shinmaru had him around the neck, though, and Ekyt only managed to slam himself into the table. Shinmaru held him up. Slowly, the life was being choked out of Ekyt.

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“Asuma, what do we do?!”

Asuma was up in an instant. His knives were at Shinmaru’s neck.

“Alright, he lost. So let him go, or you’ll be fighting me next...”

Asuma’s threat proved substantial. Shinmaru let go, and Ekyt clattered to the ground. Immediately, the others gathered around, and Sakura began healing him.

“Burns over one-third of his body...but other than that...”

Sakura’s diagnoses brought relief to everyone in the group. Everyone except Ekyt, that is.

I was defeated, and he didn’t even seriously hurt me? How strong is he? Or how weak am I? It doesn’t matter. He’s the victor.

“...shoot...”

Everyone looked sympathetic. Shikamaru asked about the strategy Shinmaru used. When Ekyt outlined it, Shikamaru thought it was tricky.

“If you had Shadow Possession, it would have been easy enough to snag him early on. But without it... Man, must’ve been a drag.”

“Yeah...”

Shinmaru walked over to Ekyt. He bowed to the Leaf group, who all tensed up, ready to defend Ekyt, should Shinmaru try to finish the job.

“Guys, don’t worry. I knew the risks. The loser gets killed. I lost, so I’ll accept it.” Ekyt smiled lightly at them, then turned his head to face Shinmaru. His face showed no trace of anger. And why should it? Shinmaru hadn’t done anything wrong except be a strong fighter.

Shinmaru shook his head. “You’re brave, and you fought well. Asuma told me about your illness. To

fight with that, you are a gifted warrior. You did lose, however, so you won't become one of the guardians. But still, you've earned this. It's a special kind of...promotion, I guess, from the Fire Daimyo himself. Seems you impressed him!"

In Ekyt's hand was a waistcloth, similar to Asuma's. It had the same design and writing, except for a small 'ni' (two) in the corner.

"It means that you'll be counted on to help the Fire Daimyo in a time of war, or should he come to your village. So, in a way, you're a comrade now. I wish you the best of health and fortune, friend."

Ekyt was speechless, though Shinmaru seemed to understand. Ekyt managed a bow, which Shinmaru returned.

-

"Go on, wear it home. You've gotta show Lady Tsunade, at least."

With the waistcloth tucked proudly into his pants, Ekyt walked side by side with his...friends.

For once, I feel that I deserve their company, and this vest. I'm a jonin of the Hidden Leaf, and an associate of the Fire Daimyo. I'm not Kakashi, or Yamato, or Asuma, but I can at least feel like I'm worth something now. Even if I DID lose. Now it's gonna bug me. How the hell DO you beat a guy like that? And more importantly, why did that tag disintegrate? Was it because I lost focus, or because of that acid?

Before the ten had gotten far, they saw someone blocking their way. The cigarette fell from Ekyt's mouth.

"A-Azami?!"

84 - The Smile

Azami smirked. “Not in the flesh. This is just a host body to speak for me, I’m afraid. I’m surprised to see you’re alive. In a way, I mean. I guess I had hoped that you’d live.”

Ekyt was beyond shock. So he ran on instinct. “Azami, please- just tell me the truth- why did you do what you did? Who is it that’s blackmailing you?”

Ekyt noticed a slight change in Azami’s face.

“...I’m working for two people. One of them I genuinely work for, and another who is a dupe. One of whom wants you alive, the other wants you dead.”

“I know better than to ask you for names. But can you tell me one more thing?”

“What’s that?” Azami answered.

“Tell me what YOU want.”

Azami (Or, at least, her host body) blushed a little. “I want...you. I want you to live, and I want to be with you. But I...I’m promised to another. And I love him as well.”

Ekyt didn’t seem shaken outwardly, though the entire group knew that hit him hard.

“I see,” he responded thoughtfully. “Well then, please do me a favor. Tell the boss that wants me alive ‘thank you’. And tell the other one who wants me dead...”

Ekyt’s face turned the meanest anyone had ever seen.

“You tell that son of a dog that, for enslaving you and trying to kill me, I’m going to destroy him. And Azami- you need to practice more. You’re a horrible liar. I know someone put you up to this. I WILL find out who, and I WILL find out what he had on you that made you do this. And then, I’ll free you. And once your free, you can choose who you love. And if it isn’t me, I’ll support you with all I’ve got, no matter who it is you really love. Unless it’s Hidan...”

“THAT dipshoot? Forget it. I was just trying to piss you off when I said that,” Azami answered, her tone dismissive. “I’m looking forward to killing him myself, to be honest.”

“Not if I do it first,” Ekyt shot back. “But you can have his body. Since I’ll have ruined his head...”

The two seemed as though they were a couple again. But Azami’s admittance of there being another made that impossible. But they could still share a laugh as friends, right? Well, no. Ekyt couldn’t. ‘Friends’ wasn’t something he understood when it came to villains. She couldn’t be anything more than an old acquaintance while she stood among the Akatsuki. That’s not to

say his feelings didn't run deep for her.

"Tell me...the new person you love...is he strong?"

It was clear that this killed Ekyt inside, though he put on a stoic front.

"Yeah. Really strong. You've met him a few times. I wish I could tell you who it is, but I'm afraid you'll try to hurt him. Just because I can't be with you doesn't mean I want to see you get killed..."

"So he's stronger than I am, then?" Ekyt questioned with a smile. "Must not have been difficult. One last question, of course. Is he among the Akatsuki's ranks?"

"...Yes. I'm having the worst time trying to decide between the two of you!" Azami finally blurted out. "You were the first boy I loved, but he's what I always imagined...I'm just so confused!"

"Let me make your decision easier, then. Pick the stronger one, Azami. The one who has the strength to protect you. The one who can succeed where I failed. And no hard feelings, okay?"

Azami's 'avatar', for want of a better word, registered her shock. "You never give up on things that are important to you. Why would you so readily give up on me?"

Does this mean that I don't really matter to him?

Ekyt had said what he did for a calculated reason. **Azami can read me like a book. She knows how I'll react to everything. Throw a wrench in her plans, and I might get a glimpse at the real her, and what she's really thinking/saying.**

"Well, you made your choice pretty clear. (ha ha) Between the two stabbings and that last fight, I couldn't hope to stand up to you. I still care for you, and like any gracious loser, I'll cheer you on from the sidelines. That's the duty of a friend."

An affable smile spread across Ekyt's face. To the untrained eye, it was a good thing. To those who had spent the past few years with Ekyt, however, it held the same meaning as a coming comet.

-

"Look at that! Sakura, you remember that look on his face?!"

Naruto's outstretched hand pointed at Ekyt. He was wearing an affable smile, eyes closed, even with small laughs after his speech.

"I know..." Sakura murmured quietly. "The last time he was like that was when the Third Hokage died. So that must mean Azami is dead to him, or..."

"Or he's figured something out," Naruto finished for her, nodding.

It dawned on Naruto that there was someone who should be made aware of this development.

“Hey, Asuma-sensei! You see the look on Ryouko’s face?”

Asuma could, obviously, and told Naruto as much. “What about it?”

“The last time he had that expression, he got the twenty five million ryo bounty on his head in the Mist Village,” Naruto informed him.

“He last wore that expression when the Third Hokage died,” Sakura added. “I think it means that he’s figured out something important, or he’s about to become very dangerous.”

-

Something is very wrong. Ekyt isn’t taking any of my bait. And he’s too...mellow...

Azami bit her lip. What she had said was partly true. She DID have a crush on someone else. But Ekyt was her first love, and she wanted him back. The thought of him holding another woman irked Azami to no end. And that damn smirk on his face now...

No, he’s trying to get a reaction out of me. If he wants to play THAT game...

Azami gritted her teeth, trying to stop herself from retaliating like a child.

-

“So I guess I didn’t mean all that much to you?” Azami asked, rage in her voice.

“Why would you say that? It’s pretty obvious I DO care for you if I’ve promised to free you from whoever’s blackmailing you. (heh)”

“I never said anything about blackmail!” Azami shouted, wanting to strangle him.

“But you didn’t deny it, either. And since there’s no way I snuck that past you without you noticing... It seems you take me for a fool...”

“Not at all! I was the fool, really. This conversation is pointless. It’s only making things harder for both of us, isn’t it?”

The anger was gone from her voice, replaced with genuine sadness.

“Not at all. It was good to talk to you again. And someday, we’ll be talking in person again. But if there really IS a guy that you’ve met...well, save me a dance at the wedding, okay? So, until we meet again...Goodbye.”

Ekyt walked past the avatar, leaving the stunned group of Shinobi behind him to catch up to his pace. Azami’s ‘avatar’ woke up as she removed her chakra. It was clear he wouldn’t know anything, and that he hadn’t done anything wrong except be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Next meal is on me,” Ekyt called back, still with the affable smile on his face.

-

Kakashi, Yamato, and Asuma gathered in the back room of the bar they had wound up at. Most of the kids were drunk. Great adult supervision. But it was important to have a few moments to talk, jonin to jonin.

“The kids didn’t like having to hold back...Naruto especially,” Yamato informed Kakashi and Asuma. “They can’t understand why they had to come along on this trip if it was only about Ekyt. They were glad to help, but they aren’t sure what they did to help.”

“I expected as much. I didn’t expect Naruto to be able to keep himself in check. But he did, for Ekyt’s sake.”

“It’s a shame he didn’t get the job...” Asuma muttered. “He would be a great guardian.”

“Failure was just as important. Ekyt gauged his strength against an enemy in a controlled environment. We need to make sure he uses that information to his advantage.”

“Yeah, I was curious about that, Kakashi. Why the special focus on Ekyt all this time?” Asuma lit a new cigarette, checking on his squad with a glance. “Is there some special reason?”

“Yes. He doesn’t have a sensei, so he advocates for himself most of the time,” Kakashi explained, choosing his words carefully. “He handles himself well, and he’s come a long way in a short time, in terms of strength. Because he doesn’t have a team, he can take on select missions. Such as Lady Hokage’s new plans to counter the Akatsuki.”

Yamato hadn’t heard of this yet. “New plans?”

“Troops,” Asuma interjected bluntly. “Lots of them. Special jonin and advanced jonin only. Kind of like a second ANBU that mobilizes against the Akatsuki’s interest.”

“That’s right,” Kakashi agreed, nodding. “And Ekyt is to be part of this. As a leader, in fact. He’s tangled with the Akatsuki as much as anyone, so Lady Tsunade wants him to become...how to put it...She wants his head on straight. She wants his problems solved so that he can lead without the excess baggage he’s carrying.”

“If that’s her goal, why not make him a regular squad leader for a while? Isn’t that the best way to give him experience?” Yamato didn’t understand why they were taking this dangerous stance on Ekyt’s training.

“It’s time. The Akatsuki are a black organization that probably has followers everywhere. We need to discourage those followers now, before they become full-fledged members. No matter how could they are, the Akatsuki can still be overwhelmed using superior numbers. But we have to strike quickly while working on little information. So some shinobi- such as Ekyt- are being rushed to a greater potential as fast as possible.”

Asuma was involved in this task force. He and Shikamaru were part of a squad (along with Izumo and Kotetsu) that were to be ready at any time to move out.

“Is that why Lady Tsunade was letting him have this tryout? I’m supposed to tutor him or something?”

Kakashi shook his head at Asuma’s question. “No. The idea was to give Ekyt a commanding officer and comrades. His weakness now is his lack of experience operating with others. His attacks, as you have seen, can be devastating. But he can’t quite make his fighting style mesh with anyone else’s. But before we could correct that problem, we needed to work on his confidence.”

“And that didn’t go well…” Asuma glanced at the group again. Naruto and Sakura had passed out. Choji was stuffing his face, and Ino was talking to Sasuke. Shikamaru and Ekyt were having a discussion, likely of tactics, using a ‘Go’ board as a reference.

“It didn’t? But he seemed so confident. And he DID earn the approval of the Fire Daimyo,” Yamato said in a low whisper.

“Yeah, but Naruto and Sakura told me that the last time Ekyt had that kind of expression on his face, he got the bounty on his head. It was the same thing when my dad died, too. So he’s either figured something out, or he’s horribly devastated. With Ekyt, which do you think is more likely?”

Kakashi shook his head. “He’s a closed book, even to me. His moods are impossibly to read. He has potential- less potential than my group, but he has the makings of a sturdy jonin. But his emotions- or lack thereof, at times- deter that. And despite all this, there’s yet another, darker reason as to why Ekyt’s getting this attention. Yamato, you’ve been involved with Naruto’s training. You know that I’m pushing him hard, as well.”

Yamato nodded. “That’s right.”

“And Sakura has Lady Tsunade. Sasuke is naturally talented, and since he can copy jutsus, he more or less studies on his own. But of them, Naruto is the special case. Becomes he carries the Nine-Tailed fox. Yamato, you can suppress the demon’s power, and my team can protect Naruto.”

“I see! Ekyt is close to your team, and he’s in on this whole ‘Akatsuki’ thing, so he’s another counter-measure!”

Kakashi nodded darkly. “That’s right. Ekyt was the Third’s student- he knows a jutsu that can, when the time is right, counter almost anything the Akatsuki has. The plan was to develop his strength and harvest that jutsu- the Reaper Death Seal.”

“So he was a pawn?!”

“Yes and no. He’s no pawn- he’s very aware of what he’s doing, without us ever telling him. He protects Naruto and Sakura of his own volition. It’s more like we’re choosing to harvest his unique ability. Ekyt is very protective of anyone in the Leaf Village, and that’s what makes him perfect for this sort of thing.”

“And he’s aware of this?” Asuma interrupted. He wasn’t sure he liked where this was going.

“In a way. He agreed to this sort of thing with Jiraiya and I. (See previous chapters) But, this is a last-resort thing. The Akatsuki rarely moves in the open, so we have the advantage of time on our hands. In addition, we know their target. So everyone involved can lead normal lives- until the Akatsuki strike.”

“We’d better get back to our teams,” Asuma said quietly. “Kakashi, one question- They didn’t make Ekyt a jonin just for this, did they? To rush him into combat?”

Kakashi shook his head, a smile in his eyes. “No. He earned that vest. Ekyt’s getting this attention because he deserves it. He wants to help, and that passion isn’t something everyone gives. So he’s got guts and drive, and that more than makes up for his lack of natural talent.”

85 - What Are Friends For?

Ekyt excused himself from the rowdy group, going outside to catch his breath. Despite his accomplishment from yesterday, he was still burdened by a lot of heavy worries.

I have to be strong for the people in there. I have to be strong so they can have fun and live their lives. My own life is shot to pieces. I exist only for others.

Is that right? Is it true? Is it healthy? Have I given up on my own ambitions? If so, what were those ambitions? When did they grow out of my reach? When did I grow too weary to pursue them? Do others feel this trepidation?

Naruto? ...No. He charges headlong, and learns as he goes?

Sakura? ...Perhaps she used to. She has an analytical mind, and has overcome a lot.

Sai? ...Who the hell knows?

Shikamaru?... No, he's planned for the trepidation, and how to beat it in two hundred moves or less.

**That leaves me. I have no idea what the trepidation is, let alone how to combat it.
(sigh)**

The others can't know of these thoughts. They'd only try to talk me out of it and further burden themselves.

Maybe if I laid out what I actually feel...

-I've lost at love. Azami, Linda, and Sakura...

-I've lost in combat. The Akatsuki, the Twelve Shinobi Guardians.

The two things that matter most to me, and I've failed at them both, leaving me with only a sense of helplessness. And yet, some kind of hope shows through every time. Some vague little flicker of success. Then it disappears as I reach out for it.

Ekyt imagined himself on one side of a pane of glass. On the other side was the world he wanted to live in. He had a hand pressed to the glass, looking longingly to the other side, all the while knowing that it couldn't happen. Not the way he was now, maybe not ever.

I want to shatter that glass...I want to shatter it into a million pieces. I want to be part of that world. The world the others live in. Or, if nothing else, I wish to become the glass, to keep those that aren't part of their world out. The more realistic of the two goals is to replace the glass with myself.

A deep voice snapped Ekyt out of his trance.

“You’re thinking too much again. That’s not healthy for anyone but Shikamaru.”

Asuma had seen Ekyt in the trance, and knew that nothing good could have come of it. Snapping him out of it didn’t do much either, though.

“You’re right. I’m just kind of overwhelmed with all that’s happened. If it’s alright, I’m going to head back. I’ve got this weird pain, and I’d like Lady Tsunade to look at it.”

Now that was a sentence full of holes. Not least of all because Sakura could have taken care of any pain Ekyt was feeling (well, physically at any rate). But Asuma seemed to understand. A lot DID seem to fall on his younger comrade’s shoulders, even if by choice.

“Alright, go ahead. I’ll let the others know.”

Ekyt plucked a rose from a table, cursing as he pricked his finger.

“Best to have a surprise weapon handy in this day and age (ha ha),” Ekyt explained, nodding to the rose. “Who would guess something like this could have such a bite to it!”

“And is that a metaphor for yourself?” Asuma couldn’t help but ask.

“Oh, no. A rose knows it’s place- it’s where it grows. As for me, I’m still unsure exactly where that is. But I’m getting closer to the answer.”

“Don’t lie to me.” Asuma was blunt as ever, lighting a cigarette. “You don’t think you’re any closer. Do me a favor and try not to beat yourself up too much. If things get to be too much, it’s not a crime to take a step back. It did wonders for me. In fact, we were in the same position. I disagreed with the brass, too- except it was my father. So I left, and things were better when I came back. I think that would have done you tons of good. It still might.”

Ekyt dropped the false tones, though his smile stayed in place. “True though that may be, there’s still much for me to do. And as I said, I’m still unsure as to where I fit in. But that can be answered on another day, I suppose. For now, I’ll settle for answers to a simpler set of questions. I just need to understand one thing- what is it about me that’s different? I’m a jonin, and I use techniques like a jonin, but I still feel...displaced. Like I’m a different type of jonin. Hell, even a different type of person. I don’t suppose there’s any easy answer, but I thought I’d ask you anyway. I’m not an observer looking in, and I don’t have the unobjective perspective you do.”

Asuma hadn’t seen this question coming. **He doesn’t feel like he fits in? How can he feel like that? We’ve gone out of our way to include him!**

...

No, it’s not that. There IS something different about him. But what is it?

“I don’t know. All I know is that you’re one of us. That is a concrete fact. But that’ll only be real when you believe it for yourself.”

The answer seemed to hit Ekyt hard. But he shrugged it off, as he had seen other jonin do.

"I think I understand. I'm younger than all of you, but not by all that much. It just seems that way because of how you all carry yourselves. That, and you've all experienced more than me. Huh. Oh well, experience will come. Especially with the Akatsuki and Orochimaru lurking about. I just hope I'll have the courage when the time comes to do my job. I've never taken a life, you know. I don't want to kill, but at the same time..."

Ekyt looked toward the sky, his young face marred by a look of curiosity and self-disgust.

"...I need to know if I CAN."

Asuma patted the younger jonin on the head. "We've all wondered that. Trust me- when you've been pushed to your limits, and there's something you'll give anything to defend...Well, your body will act on it's own. Your mind will forget about your inhibitions- until after, of course, when you can't take it back- and you'll do what needs to be done."

"Do you think that applies to me as well, then?"

"Especially you. Do you plan to do the stupid, heroic things you do? Like jump in front of scythes, kunai knives, jutsu, and the like? It just happens, right? Well, it works the same way. You'll find your knife, or your jutsu, or whatever, will just work. You'll hit a spot and it'll be over."

"I need to be able to live with the regret. There was something your father told me, actually," Ekyt muttered, leaning against the building. "He told me 'Ekyt, there's a storm coming'. And sure enough, Orochimaru showed up. I'll never forget that feeling. Just before he came is even more memorable. It felt like the eye of the hurricane. The calm before the storm."

"...And you're feeling that now, right?"

Ekyt nodded. "I am. But this time, everyone's older and more experienced. All the same, are we ready? The village can't take another hit like the one Orochimaru caused."

"The Will of Fire is something else my Dad taught us. And all of us have got it. That'll be enough to combat any storm. So let your mind rest a little, alright?"

Ekyt obediently nodded, closing his eyes. His mind shut down a little, as the darkness relaxed him.

"Either learn to relax like that regularly, or channel your passion like Gai and Lee. Although, with you, that might not be so strange..." Asuma stroked his beard, deep in thought against his own advice.

Gai's team, huh? I wonder... Shipping Ekyt off with them can only be a good thing, right? Oh, wait, there's Linda... So much for that. He needs something extra, but that isn't it.

--

After a day of travel, the weary group saw the temple that the Akatsuki had attacked. Outside, in fact, was the reason that they returned by the same road. The miko that had trained Ekyt was outside,

sweeping the front of the temple. All eyes darted to Ekyt. He wasn't blushing, so maybe he hadn't seen her yet.

"S'funny...in my religion, Priests are only men, and they aren't allowed to marry. I wonder if that goes for mikos as well... Oh, oops..."

Ekyt had uttered that aloud by mistake.

"No, a miko can marry... Why, is there an interesting one around for you? HmMMMMM?"

"Don't do this, Kakashi..." Ekyt snarled in a low voice. The color had risen in his face.

"Ah, now there's the Ekyt we know! Go on, just run up and kiss her!" Ino added, giggling at Ekyt's face.

"Oh, damn it, you're all gonna get in the act now?!" Ekyt shot back. **Yup, they are. Heh. So this is what having friends is like? It's nice... They're overbearing, and don't really know me, but they have my best interests at heart. I should have made friends sooner.**

Sakura was next. "Oh, come on, you look so handsome with your uniform cleaned, and your headband shined up. And that sexy waistcloth...it's almost too much for any woman to bear!"

(Asuma glanced at his own waistcloth at this point. Is THAT why he met Kurenai?)

"Yeah, too bad it's my head attached, and my nasty little brain calling the shots!" Ekyt finally let himself chuckle a little. "No way. I haven't known her long enough to try anything. And besides, I just talked to my ex. That's kind of a ten on the turnoff scale."

Now Naruto tried his luck. "Aw, c'mon, just think of what was under those bandages on her chest. She didn't seem to mind you looking..."

Sakura smacked Naruto, naturally.

"No, no, that kind of perverted thinking doesn't do anyone any good. Besides all that, I'm sure she has better prospects. And furthermore-"

"Anyone I know?"

"GAH!"

They had drifted close to the temple, and Ekyt hadn't noticed. The Miko had just overheard everything he had just said.

"Ah, haha! No, no, no one in particular, of course! Just, y'know, idle chit-chat! Ah haha!"

The Miko didn't seem impressed by that little display. She DID seem to be fascinated with the waistcloth Ekyt was wearing.

“Oh, so you won?!”

Ekyt sheepishly turned his head. “No. But I impressed the Fire Daimyo. That in itself if enough, I suppose.”

The miko locked eyes with Ekyt. His face reddening slightly, Ekyt gulped.

Oh...It's the first time I've seen her eyes. They're brown. Darker than mine. And rounder. And larger. Up close, she's actually pretty cute. She's got a good personality going, too.

“You, come with me!” the miko declared suddenly, pulling on Ekyt's arm.

“Uh, wait? What? Gah!” Ekyt had no choice but to let the miko tug him. “Go on without me, I'll catch up!” he called to the others.

-

The miko sat Ekyt down near the waterfall where she had trained him. They exchanged small talk. About the weather, Ekyt's fight, the beauty of the temple and the surrounding land. All the while, the miko had a strange expression. Her face was red, and her eyes were wider and softer, and less stern. As she listened to Ekyt speak, she let her mind drift.

I don't know if there's a spark or not, but I need to be sure. I know he's single, after all he's told me. Maybe he'd... Would he? Would it hurt to ask? If it was another guy, I'd say yes. But there's something different about him. He's not as pure as nature or anything like that, but at the same time...

There's something curious about him.

The miko held up her hand. “Listen, I'm going to tell you something that I've never told anyone, except my little sister. I don't know why I'm telling you...but here goes...”

It all came out. The twenty years old, the no dates, the no kisses, the whole thing. The miko laid out her past relationships- none.

“Now you think I'm pathetic,” she mused, smoothing her hakama. “It's to be expected. I mean, c'mon, a twenty-year-old who's never been on a date (Ekyt winces), never had a boyfriend (Ekyt gulped), and never been...kissed. (Ekyt tugged on his collar)”

“Funny you'd say that. It's been the same way for me, save for a month where I dated the bounty hunter girl I told you about...But, getting to the point. Miko, I owe you a great deal. And if you're getting at what I THINK you're getting at...well, it's the least I can do, isn't it? You're a pretty girl, and I have no doubt you'll find just who you're looking for, be it today, tomorrow, or a year from now.”

Ekyt ran a hand down her cheek. Her skin was so white, and so smooth...

“Hold still, okay? I'm not any good at this...”

kiss.

The miko's eyes widened- it was what she wanted.

**But I didn't think he'd actually do it! I mean...I mean...I don't know! It's so nice, being kissed!
But is there a spark? Is there?**

...

No. There's not. Just because I want it to be there, doesn't mean it is. There's no spark between us, at least not now. But at least I know. And now I can say I've been kissed...

Ekyt let go, backing away a little. The smile of mixed emotions had returned to his face. The miko had no idea what the smile meant, and thought it was for her sake.

"You'll find who you're looking for. You've too much potential not to. If it might be I that lends advice for now..."

Ekyt thought of his specifications for a girl, then tailored them to fit a female.

"A shinobi will be your ideal match. Your combat potential is incredible. But you lack just what I lack- self confidence. There's no drill to give you that, unfortunately. I would know, believe me! But you've got courage, and that's only a step away from self-confidence."

The miko was close to tears- she hadn't dared admit to herself that she hoped this was love. All the same, she hugged him tight anyway.

"Friends, then?" she asked, far too timidly for her usual nature.

"...Sure."

The miko seemed to cheer up instantly. It was faked, of course, she was actually very sad, but a girl had to keep up appearances.

"Alright then. Now- explain yourself! How the hell could you lose?! Are you telling me that his chakra wouldn't seal?! Damn it, that's what I get for rushing your training!"

"No, no, it's not that! The guy doused himself in acid, and it corroded the tag! Seriously, I had it down!"

Back away. Swallow your pride, and let her have her pride. That's best, for now. I need to catch up with the others. Best to let her get it out of her system. Maybe someday there'll be a spark between us. For now, Azami is just too fresh in my mind.

86 - Seven Swords

Ekyt did his best to proudly display his new waistcloth. Tsunade complimented him on it, though his smile worried her.

“Now is the time to tell you, I suppose. Ekyt, it’s time we gave you a squad. You’ll be mobilized against the Akatsuki shortly. Your cell will include Hayate, Yukao, and one person of your choosing. Though I won’t allow you to pick Yuushi or Kantai for the time being. I would strongly suggest someone who knows healing beyond a first aid level.”

The other jonin had known, and congratulated Ekyt. Tsunade let that go for a bit, before announcing her last bit of news.

“Before I let you go off and lead, you will need a little further training. You’ll join Team Gai for an S-ranked mission. After completion of that, you’ll be given your squad. And by the way- who did you fight at your tryout?”

Ekyt had to stop and think. “Shinmaru, I think it was.”

Tsunade frowned. “Shinmaru? What did he look like? And fight like?”

Ekyt launched into the story. As he told it, Yamato and Sai both opened up their BINGO books, flipping through them.

“Is this him?” Yamato asked, holding a picture up.

“Yeah, that’s him! Oh, crap, he’s a criminal?!” Ekyt yelled in shock.

“Not if he’s one of the Twelve. He must’ve come clean. What’d he do, Lady Tsunade?” Asuma asked.
Damn, he’s got a bigger bounty on his head than me!

“He was famous...infamous, rather...for burning people in acid. He experimented on himself. I actually healed the fool, back when he belonged to the Hidden Leaf. I healed him so many times. He would douse himself in acid.”

“So that’s how he did it, huh? I couldn’t touch him because he was dunked in acid...” Ekyt muttered, putting a hand to the burn on his cheek. Sakura reached over and began to heal it. It felt better almost instantly.

“If you fought him and lived, then you’ve gotten strong. It’s funny to think, Ekyt, but you’ve really come a long way. If everyone will please excuse us for a moment, I need to speak to Ekyt in peace.”

-

Simply put, Tsunade needed to know how Ekyt was feeling.

“I’m fine, really. Why do you ask?”

The smile. That damn smirk. It was never a good sign. Ekyt was stoic and angsty- not smiley and happy. Even though it’s what his friends wanted to see, they wanted it to be genuine. Not like this. This was...a venomous smile. A poison, consuming Ekyt. But that couldn’t be helped for the moment.

“...It’s nothing. Rest up, and meet Team Gai tomorrow. Now, you’re a jonin, but you’ll be with two other jonins. Gai and Neji’s orders take priority, unless you’re instructed otherwise. This is an S-ranked mission, but it shouldn’t be too hard for you. If you all play nice, that is. Linda will be there- can you handle that?”

Ekyt smirked a little more. “Of course. I can work with just about anyone. You must understand- I’ve spent a week being beaten up by Asuma, Kakashi, a Miko with a mean streak, the Akatsuki, and myself. Linda can’t do anything to me.”

Well, that was certainly an interesting answer. Not the one Tsunade was looking for, but it would have to do. It was better than she’d dared to expect. After a breath, Tsunade continued...

--

Ryouko let himself relax against the fencepost, waiting for Team Gai to show. A group that wouldn’t be late. It was just that Ryouko was earlier. He couldn’t sit around anymore. The thought of the miko’s sister dying bugged him to no end. He had done his best, and it hadn’t been enough. Granted, there was little he could have done, even at full strength.

Stop it, Ryouko scolded himself. You were sick. You still are sick. It’s no one’s fault. All you can do is make up for it. So get your head on straight, kid. You’ve got work to do.

“Such a horrible habit; smoking again?!”

Ryouko exhaled (exaggerating it, of course, to piss off his detractor). “Oh, you came, Linda? Good, I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

Team Gai had arrived, Linda in tow. She was attached to Lee’s arm, much to the chagrin of Neji.

“Why would you want to talk to me? Need to be abused or something? Weirdo.” Linda frowned. **What the hell is this? He usually avoids me like the plague!**

“Heh, aren’t you cute, with your false anger? No, actually, I should thank you. I heard some stories from the tournament. Apparently, you stepped in and gave Azami a lecture. I couldn’t believe it. Even though you were trashing me while I was on the ground dying, you still helped. I just want to say I appreciate it, and that it makes us even.”

“EVEN?! YOU OWE ME, SCUMBAG!” Linda roared, grabbing Ekyt’s collar. She gave him a hard shake. “Don’t you dare bring up the past! Don’t you even go there!”

“Oh, I’m going there. If you’ll recall, I bailed you out before we came here. Back when we could get along. I remember because right after that we went our separate ways, more or less. As I recall, I beat up the bad guy who tried to kidnap you, asked you for a date, and you turned me down cold.”

Linda grimaced- she hated remembering this sort of thing.

“Yes, yes, don’t gloat! You did save me that once. Fine, we’re even. But if you EVER bring this up again, I’ll rip your...ahem.”

Lee looked to Ekyt, apparently for answers. “Linda was the target of an attempted kidnapping? When was this?”

Ekyt pulled the cigarette out of his mouth, tapping his chin. “Bout eight years ago. A year before we both came to the Hidden Leaf. Back then, she and I were the top two in taijutsu in class. Her being number one, of course. I was number two, though not too far behind.”

“Number two, like taking a dump,” Linda growled, giving Ekyt’s arm vicious tug. Then she saw the smile she had been warned about.

“Well, it’s ancient history. Long story short, I pulled my usual stupid stunt, and that as that. At any rate, we should get going, I guess.”

Team Gai had also noticed the smile- it was un-Ekytish. Almost disturbing. But they had been briefed about that, and about his medical condition. They would have to simply keep an eye on him.

--

Haitsuchi (Ashes and Earth) (Fire, Earth)
Mimizu (earthquake) (Female seven sword)
Okayu (Cleaning water)

The Mizukage frowned at the prospect. He hated to do this, but was there a choice? The people were up in arms- those who had been informed. Being a smaller village full of vicious shinobi, unrest couldn’t last, lest the risk of war become apparent.

“The Seven swords...Kisame, Raiga, and Zabuza have been accounted for. Jishinkaminarikajioyaji (earthquakes) has been my aide for years. That leaves the other three...”

But using them is dangerous. VERY dangerous. And the boy who interrupted our ceremony may no longer have possession of the sword...Still, the bounty on his head will be erased if I use the three...

Very well. I will use them- they will bring him back here- alive. And then, from that, we will have our sword returned to us. As well as it’s rightful heir. Katsuyori Akamadori...

The boy must not be allowed to mature. The easiest way to stop him, short of killing him, is to kill the source of his hope. And that’s his teacher.

Either way, the target remains the same. Ekyt Kaguya, you have to die. And you will.

--

Team Gai's mission was to ensure that the peace was kept in border towns. The rumor that had been passed to the Leaf Village by an informant was that trouble was brewing near the Mist Village. Normally, that would be left up to the Mist authorities, but the trouble was spilling over into the Leaf's side of things.

"Do you smoke those just to piss me off?!" Linda snarled under her breath.

"Partially," Ekyt shot back, making sure as he turned that some ash hit her face. "But I also like that they help my chakra. There are other things I could do to piss you off, besides that. Such as talk to you..."

Linda just gave up. Tenten chuckled, and even Neji gave a small grin.

"So, a guardian of the Fire Daimyo, then? Even a second-tier, that's impressive. Your power of youth must be exceptional!" Gai commented, striking a pose.

"That is right! You should be very proud of yourself!" Lee added, taking up a pose all his own.

"Thanks, Gai-sensei. And you too, Lee. So, how far is this border town?"

"About four hours on foot, at this pace," Neji said. Then he thought about what Ekyt was doing. "Don't you dare!"

But Ekyt was going to dare. "Gai-sensei, Lee...We can make it in two hours!"

Ping. A challenge?

"You dick!" Linda snarled. She knew that Lee and Gai couldn't pass up a challenge. Ekyt knew that, too. He was just going to tick her off.

I hate that guy! I should've let that girl kill him!

No, no, better yet- I'll have the pleasure of killing him! Ugh! A four hour trip in two hours! That prick!

And Lee and Gai were off at top speed.

But that was a mistake.

"NOW!"

Ekyt and the other were on their guards instantly. In front of them stood three Mist shinobi. But one glance and you knew they weren't average.

The one on the right was about seven feet tall. Across his back was a sword just as long. It was shaped like a butcher's knife. The black-taped hilt was just barely visible over his bald head.

The girl in the middle was smaller, about five foot four inches, and looked nice. Kind of pretty, even. But a sword was carried lengthwise across her back. It was short, but decorated nicely. Her long blonde hair ran halfway down her back.

The man on the left was of average height. On either side of his waist were two matching swords that flared out in four different directions at the end of each blade. His hair was black and wild, going in every direction, then flattening out at the ends, like a weird tree.

“Who are you?!” Neji demanded. He was in charge here, with Gai and Lee somewhere up ahead. They were still within wireless range. Tenten immediately tapped out an emergency beat with her mic.

“Do you mean our names? Sorry for the lack of manners. My name is Okayu.”

The first one to speak was the one with the wild hair. He made no move toward his swords.

“Okayu, why so formal? Hiya, I’m Mimizu! And you must be our targets!”

This one seemed to be a little ditz. She was cute in her own way, though.

The last one held up a scroll. On it was “Haitsuchi.” After putting the scroll away, he made handsigns. Everyone was on their guard, except for Linda. She strode to the front of the group and made the signs back.

“Oh! Sign language!” Tenten exclaimed. “I have no idea what they’re saying though...”

“Linda, translate!” Neji barked.

“It’s...good...to...meet...you. We...want...the...one...who...wears...the...sword...” Linda told them, following the handsigns. She frowned, and signed back.

“You mean him?” she said/signed, pointing at Ekyt.

“Afraid so,” Mimizu replied, maybe a little sadly. “I don’t suppose you’d come with a quietly, right? If you did, that would kinda suck, since you wouldn’t live up to your nickname...Dragon Boy. AKA-Ryouko.”

“Right,” agreed Okayu. “Ryouko Kaguya, AKA Ekyt. Charged with stealing a sacred Mist relic.”

Ekyt narrowed his eyes. “Neji, if I might take over as leader for a minute...since they seem to know me...”

Neji nodded his consent, then stepped back. Ekyt continued.

“I am him, but who are you? I’m sorry, let me be specific- what reason do you have to hunt me?”

Mimizu seemed to be the leader, surprisingly enough. “Y’see, you went and took a special sword from us, and then ran off with our hostages. Kinda rude, dontcha think? So, sorry, but you’ve gotta come with

us. If you're a good boy, death won't hurt!" She even added a cute laugh at the end.

"I took the sword because it's rightful heir is my student. And I saved him and a friend from a wrongful execution. I know you would do the same. I'm not against the Mist Village."

Mimizu jumped up to hang from a tree. "Yup, maybe, but you made an awful lotta people angry! So, it's nothing personal, but we gotta cut you up!"

Ekyt shook his head. "Who are you people? Carrying those swords, I would guess...but you can't be the seven swordsmen. You look too young- no offense..."

Mimizu looked at the others. "Man, he catches on quick!" She jumped down and landed on Ekyt's shoulders.

"Thing is, we're the heirs to the Seven Swordsmen. We're the sons and daughters of the originals!

Flipping off him, Mimizu landed back on the trail.

"So, you gonna come quietly, or do we gotta get rough with ya?!"

Ekyt couldn't help but be skeptical- how could this goofy group be the legendary Seven?

"Well, as nice as you are, I'm not coming quietly. And you're not ever getting the sword. I don't have it, and I don't know where it is."

"Betch'yer lying! Oh well- let's get 'im!"

87 - Hidden Relationship

It had only taken seconds. Ekyt drew his tonfas and counter-attacked with two Shadow Clones. Each one of the Ekyt's paired off against a Swordsman and began to duel. But as the battle was happening, it became clear that these Swordsmen were of an Akatsuki level threat. Even the girl, who you could swear couldn't hurt a fly, was buzzing around at top speed. There was no way to counter without being tricky.

Things didn't stop there, though. While two of the Swordsmen kept attacking, the third, the deaf/mute, cast a jutsu. Ekyt strained to hear or see what it was, but he couldn't figure it out. Although a dead giveaway came a second later.

Mist.

"Kirigakure's signature jutsu: Hidden Mist!"

"NEJI!"

Neji turned to see that his eyes had been blinded long enough for him to miss what was going to be a critical strike. He tried to block, but his hands were knocked down by one of the cases the girl held.

SCHUNK!

As the girl stabbed, Ekyt dove in the way, catching the blade right in the stomach. He coughed up blood, but held his defiant pose.

Neji was speechless.

"Neji...Protect your girl..."

Ekyt pulled himself off the sword, wobbling as he walked. It was clear he was hardly in any shape to stand, let alone fight. The three Mist-nin took advantage of that, all three tackling him and putting their swords at his neck. Ekyt didn't struggle at all.

"You've got me...let them go..." he choked out, not moving an inch.

"Geez! That was heroic, ya know? You're not such a bad guy! But we're gonna take you with us anyway. C'mon guys, let's get going!"

Ekyt's eyes bored into Neji's. "This is it. I hated you... But for her sake, don't drop your guard. And your eyes...you rely on them too much. Even perfect vision can be blinded..."

With that, the Mist ninja carried him away, leaving Team Gai angry and defeated.

Linda walked over to the spot where Ekyt had been held captive, cursing angrily. But as the mist lifted,

she noticed something on the ground.

A blood-splattered Leaf Village pendant.

--

Yuushi had to tell Ekyt- he would be so proud! At fifteen, he was a man in the samurai world. And as such, he was going to take his wife. Kantai had said 'yes'. She was without parents, and Yuushi felt no connection to most of his current family. They were tailor-made for each other.

Ekyt was the only one Yuushi really trusted. They had been inseparable, until their strength outgrew each other's company. But when it came to the sword, Yuushi always went to Ekyt.

But now...

Yuushi looked up, seeing a shadow extended across the grass. It was Neji. He had something in his hand.

"Here. Your foolish sensei...Just take this!"

Neji thrust the object into Yuushi's hands, then stormed away. Once alone, Yuushi remembered that he had something in his hand. When he opened his fingers to see what it was...

His brow began to sweat.

His knees shook.

His sword clattered to the ground.

His eyes teared.

No... His pendant... What happened?!

--

In the Hokage's office, a lot of voices were shouting at each other. No one was accomplishing much. Naruto was shouting at Neji; Sakura was shouting at Naruto; Tsunade was shouting at them all.

"SHUT UP! WE'RE NOT GETTING ANYWHERE!" Tsunade roared.

Damn it, I need him back! He's crucial against the Akatsuki! There must be something we can do!

"You and your 'all-seeing eyes'," Naruto snarled under his breath. "And your stupid 'it's destiny' crap! Neji, you SUCK!"

"We have to get him back. The question is...how?" Tsunade murmured. That made everyone sit up and take notice.

Yuushi had since been briefed on what happened. In his mind, there was only one way to settle this.

"If it's swords they fight with, it'll take a swordsman to take them down."

Sakura had to try hard to not phrase this in an insulting way. "Yuushi, we all want to save him. But if he, a swordsman himself, was defeated...I mean, he's got more experience than you...I...well, I don't think..."

"You don't think I stand a chance?" Yuushi finished, his voice flat. "You're right, Sakura-sensei. Maybe. But maybe I have other talents. If nothing else, I WILL find him. Whether I go alone, or with a team."

That brought up the question of who should go.

Let's see...a tactician, like Shikamaru would be perfect. Yuushi...yes. He can't be stopped. Neji will have to go. And with him, Tenten. Plus a jonin or two...

"Alright, I've made my decision!" Tsunade announced. "Yuushi, you will be second in command. First in command- Shikamaru. Like it or not, we'll need genius strategy to do this without causing a war. Yuushi, you're closest to Ekyt. Neji and Tenten...and Hayate. That's who I can spare, and that's who's going to go. This is closed to discussion."

"WHAT?! COME ON, GRANDMA!"

"YOU HEARD ME!" Tsunade screamed, cutting off Naruto. "BACK TO WORK, ALL OF YOU! PREPARE TO LEAVE IN TWO HOURS TIME! ASSEMBLE AT THE GATE!"

Massaging her temples, Tsunade was left alone with Sakura and Shizune. To the two of them, she confided something. Something big. Something that, if it went wrong, the shinobi world would be rocked in a big, bad way.

--

Ekyt walked with his captors, not making any attempts to escape or fight back. It wasn't that he couldn't- it just wasn't the smart thing to do. Not yet.

"So, care to tell us why you did what you did?" Okayu asked.

The swordsman didn't seem like bad guys, really.

"...To save my student. He was going to be executed. I couldn't let that happen."

"Ya know mister, I don't think you showed us any of your real strength back there. You were too busy protecting brown eyes' boyfriend. You're probably WAY stronger, huh?"

Ekyt didn't know how to answer. Should he just go along with them?

"I didn't show you much of anything back there, I guess. I have lots more tricks up my sleeve. But, to be honest, you three seem like good people, and I'd rather not fight you. Not even because I think I'd win; it's because that you seem like the type who'd feel guilty if you killed someone."

The 'Swords' seemed to agree on that.

"We inherited the swords, and we inherited the talent..." Okayu said, looking at his own bladed. "But the lust for blood...Not at all."

Ekyt had an idea suddenly. "If I come quietly with you, and even make you look good, will you agree to leave anyone who comes to rescue me out of it? They'd just be following orders. I don't care for my own safety- I don't know anything anyone could torture out of me, so I'm useless to you anyway..."

Haitsuchi started to sign, facing Mimizu so she could translate.

"The sword..." she said, frowning. "He said he doesn't know, Haitsuchi. He's not lying."

"I meant it. I don't know. But if I were to give you a sword that I prize...might we call it even?" Ekyt asked carefully and clearly, in case Haitsuchi read lips. "I keep it in a summoning scroll. If it will guarantee my friend's safety, I'll hand it over peacefully. If all of you will keep your swords at my neck, and restrain my left art, too."

I'm giving them every reason to trust me. I'm not going to pull a fast one. I just know someone's going to come after me. I need to buy their safety. Even if it costs me my own safety.

"...Hey, mister, if we didn't restrain you, would you run?" Mimizu wanted to know, jumping up onto Ekyt's shoulder.

"...No...no, I wouldn't. I don't want you to fail your mission because of me. I know what would happen if you went back without me. I really think you're good people saddled with a bad job. People think that way of shinobi and samurai all the time."

After a moment, Ekyt voiced aloud what he'd been thinking all along.

"But, I WILL try to escape after you've completed your mission. I just have more I have to do. My death is kind of...well...foreordained, I guess. There's someone I have to take with me when I die. Neither of us can exist while the other does, so if I meet him again, I have to kill him. Then I, too, will die."

Well, that's a half-truth...maybe. Ekyt thought. **I DO plan to kill Orochimaru with the Reaper Death Seal next time I see him...if I can't defeat him normally. It'll PROBABLY cost me my life. And I DO hate him...**

Maybe this is one of those self-fulfilling prophecies or something?

The three Swords exchanged glances.

"If it's not a Mist shinobi, then I don't see any problem..." Mimizu muttered. "But still...Mister, hold still, okay? We've got to make this look good..."

What looked like metal prayer beads were wound around Ekyt's wrists. They were white in color, and

surprisingly heavy.

“Do you mean it, mister? Ya know, about not knowing where the sword is and all that?”

“Yes, I do,” Ekyt answered firmly. He felt a strange sensation on his wrists. It was only for a moment, though, so he assumed he had imagined it. Or maybe it was sweat. He was sweating from exhaustion now, coupled with the cold sweat of capture and awaiting death.

“There, you see, Haitsuchi?! He’s not lying! They would’ve turned red if he was!”

Ekyt turned around, wanting to hear what they were talking about. It dawned on him that the beads around his wrist must be what they were referring to. Were they some kind of lie detector? Ekyt had never heard of the use of such a thing. He and Ibikki just kind of knew when they cracked someone.

Instantly, Ekyt was thankful they took a gentle approach.

“Pardon me...it’s Mimizu, right?” Ekyt asked/said carefully.

“Yup yup!”

“Can I ask you how old you are. I know you aren’t supposed to ask a lady that, but the rules are different when it comes to a captor...”

“Oh, I don’t mind telling you!” she answered brightly, still up on his shoulder. (Ekyt was blushing, naturally- young or not, this girl was wearing a skirt, and was dangerously close to giving him quite an eyeful)

“I’m twenty-one!”

Ekyt stopped short. “Really?”

Mimizu pointed at herself. “I know, I don’t look it or act it! But mister, you don’t look or act twenty! You look fifteen, but you act like you’ve been doing this for twenty years!”

Okayu had been quiet, but it was clear he was the most deep-thinking of the three. (well, maybe Haitsuchi was, but you honestly couldn’t tell with the deaf-mute thing. Or was that an act?)

“Hey... You know, he’s gonna see the Mizukage personally. No offense Ekyt, but there’s no way he’ll let you live.” Okayu was deep in thought, speaking his words carefully. “Who was it you saved, anyway? Anyone we might know?”

Ekyt hesitated- should he tell them? In the end, he decided to come clean. “The one guy you wouldn’t know. I lived in the same village as him for years and didn’t know him. But the other one... He was a kid from the Mist. His family was murdered. I don’t know why; I’ve never asked. All I know is that his father was Kideyori Akamadori. And his name is-”

“Katsuyori?!” Okayu piped up. He got right in Ekyt’s face. “Tell me, is he okay?! Is Katsuyori okay?!”

Ekyt let Okayu catch his breath. "Yes, he's fine. I've been training him, and he's grown a lot. He has a girlfriend, a good life, and he's a chunin. Not to mention in our Black Ops program."

Okayu let go of Ekyt, calming down. "I see...well, that's good. I'm...I'm glad to hear that..."

"Okayu, what's the matter, huh?!" Mimizu asked, leaping off Ekyt's shoulders to tug on Okayu's arm.

Okayu reached down for his canteen. Stepping away from Mimizu, he splashed the water on his head. Ekyt backed up, ready to kick away if this was some threat. But instead, Okayu turned around to face him.

"Do you recognize me now? You didn't see it in battle, but it should be plain as day..."

Ekyt stumbled. The unshakeable, stoic warrior had seen his stoicism crack.

"You have the same face...And...And your eye!" Ekyt managed to say.

Okayu nodded. "That's right. I'm Katsuyori's brother. Kideyori Akamadori was our natural father's name, and he was one of the Seven Swords."

88 - Shape Myself

"I watched him from the shadows," Okayu said, poking at the campfire with a stick. Ekyt was sitting freely, no weapons drawn on him. He didn't make any attempt to escape.

Okayu continued. "I watched him learn and grow. I saw his hardships. Then I saw him leave one day with a nice family. I had always planned on adopting him myself, but when I saw him with a REAL family..."

"...You had to let him go..." Ekyt finished for him, looking at the man who was Yuushi's brother.

"That's right...I had planned to save him before his execution, but then you got involved. I was one of the guards your water trap took out. I saw you escape with him, and I heard him call you 'sensei'. I couldn't come back for him then, either. He had a real life. Who was I, someone who had let him be taken away, to say that I was best for him?"

Ekyt got up, looking at Okayu. His eyes bored into Okayu's- a site all too familiar to Leaf Village prisoners. But Ekyt wasn't casting some horrific genjutsu. He was gauging Okayu's statement and mind.

...He's speaking truthfully...

"Where will I be executed?" Ekyt asked, thinking to himself the best way to do this. He had plenty of tricks up his sleeve to escape this. This whole thing stank of corruption. Why would the Mist want to wipe out one of their own heirs to the sword? And why was Okayu allowed to live?

"The same place as Katsuyori was to be killed, I would guess..." Okayu frowned, a thoughtful look creasing his brow.

Ekyt's eyes shifted sideways to him. "Do you want to see him again? He's been given a new name, since he turned fifteen, by the way. It's 'Yuushi' now. But regardless...if you're willing, you two should be reunited. And I will see it happen."

"But mister, if you do that, you're gonna get yourself killed!" Mimizu piped up, sitting on Ekyt's shoulders again.

"That is of little consequence. When it comes to my student's life, my own takes a backseat. I have no one waiting for me in the Leaf anymore. My sole duty has been to protect others. Four others. Three of them I've protected successfully, but the fourth... I failed her. And I failed myself."

Ekyt tightened his glove, looking up at the sky. "Maybe, in a roundabout way, helping to reunite two brothers would make me feel like less of a failure. At least then Yuushi's life would be complete. I'm not a role model for someone with so much potential. Rather, I shouldn't be. But that'll mean squat until I

finish my plan.”

“Plan? Whatcha gonna do, mister?!”

Ekyt put his hands behind his back. “I think it’s best if you restrain me. Take me to your village and complete your mission. After that, I’ll escape. And then- !”

Three kunai flew into the clearing, aiming for Mimizu. Ekyt grabbed her around the waist, plucking her off his shoulders in the process, and tossed her behind a tree for cover. Then Ekyt steadied himself for a fight. You can imagine his surprise when he found himself ready to tango with Shikamaru, Tenten, Neji, Hayate, and Yuushi.

--

After an explanation, everyone calmed down. The three swords met Ekyt’s...friends? Well, they were, minus Neji. In fact, Neji was downright hostile. He grabbed Ekyt’s arm and told him they had to speak in private. Their conversation didn’t stay private for long.

“I never said you owed me! And I didn’t ask you to come ‘save’ me!” Ekyt growled, in response to something Neji said.

“Oh? Well, the Hokage seemed to think I owed you!”

“Well, she’s not me!” Ekyt shot back. “I did that for Tenten’s sake! I’d hate to see you die, Neji, but it’s HER I was saving when I took that sword for you. Make no mistake about it!”

“I didn’t need your help!” Neji yelled, trying to intimidate Ekyt.

“Then what the hell are you doing here? The others I can understand, but you? No matter what, you and I don’t see eye to eye. And we never will!”

The two looked close to blows. Neji gave Ekyt a shove. Ekyt didn’t do anything in response. He just shuffled away, muttering something back.

“If I hit you, I’ll only hurt my hand and Tenten’s heart.”

--

Ekyt was joined by Mimizu as he stopped to lean against a tree. His gut still hurt from a sword going through it. He wondered how he managed to survive stuff like this all the time. Maybe he was just tough?

“Hey, mister! Listen you’ve gotta get outta here! The leader’s coming! Mister!” Mimizu whined, tugging on Ekyt’s sleeve, trying to pull him back toward the group.

“I’m still a captive, remember?” he said calmly. “The others should leave. Me?...I stay. You’re not going to fail your mission because of me.”

“But the Mizukage! He’s gonna be really mad! What are you gonna do?! You can’t fight him!”

Ekyt's smile had returned. But the question remained- had he learned something, or was there something bothering him? Or both? His words didn't relax anyone who knew what the smile meant.

"No? I think I can. I can fight. Maybe I won't win...I probably won't win. But I can't run. Not when your lives are involved, too. If I had been caught alone, I would have run for it. But now that there are others involved...I can't run. I have to see this through. But you can help me, Mimizu."

Mimizu stiffened her face. "How can I help?"

"Make sure that Katsuyori and Okayu get away, to talk. It's important that they do. Katsuyori has had a difficult life. He can't die here. He's got a girl waiting for him. Now he has a family. The expendable one is myself- his 'teacher'. And I can barely lay claim to that title."

The silent observer, Haitsuchi, silently ran off. Or so he thought. He couldn't see, hear, or sense Mimizu perk up as he ran away.

"...Mister, Haitsuchi's gonna-"

Ekyt gave a sadder version of his smile. "I know. He's going to tell the Mizukage we're here. I guess it's time to fight. If you'll pardon me for a minute...I need to talk to Yuushi...er, Katsuyori...alone."

--

Katsuyori contemplated Ekyt for a minute. Now in his sixteenth year, Yuushi was a man in samurai terms. Having talked with Okayu, he now knew so much more about himself.

"Do you remember how we first met, Yuushi?" Ekyt asked, not yet facing his student.

"I do. Of course. We had anxiety in common." Yuushi frowned, wondering why Ekyt would bring this up now.

"Good. You know, a teacher is always supposed to see his student's full potential. I knew you had potential with the sword, but life... I counted you out too soon. For that, I apologize from beyond the depths of my heart."

"Sensei, I-" Yuushi began, but Ekyt raised his hand for silence.

"You have surpassed me, in life if not with the sword. So I have one final lesson for you. After that, we will cease to be master and pupil. We will even cease to be equals. With the sword, it's YOU who is more powerful now."

Ekyt spun to face Yuushi, his face set in his half-smile. A sincere one.

"Now, the last lesson: When a man must fight, and when a man must run. Do not let your ego, or your swordsmanship, blind you from what's important. This battle...I must fight it, and I must bear the burden alone. But I have a favor to ask of you...should this be 'it'."

Ekyt's smile was gone now, his face smoothed into a mask of indifference. Except to Yuushi.

Tears?

"The last lesson: Protect what's important. That was, as you'll recall, the first lesson. But that is a lesson by itself. Confused? Don't be- it's easy. Life is circular. We are born, we grown, then we shrink, and are 'unborn'. Life is circular, then so is the sword. The first lesson is the last: Protect what's important. And what's important now is your future. We're only four years apart in age, yet you're much better than I when it comes to living. Your own future must be protected. That of yours, and your wives, and your children- We may be of the same generation, but it is YOU who is the future."

Ekyt unsheathed Sutoru, contemplating it's blade. He ran his thumb down it lightly, creating a small but steady flow of blood. Across a scroll, Ekyt ran the blood.

"I'm going to teach you the handsigns for a Summoning Jutsu. Use them with this scroll, and use a sign at the end. 'Bird' will summon my hawk, Taleo. 'Dog' will summon my dog, Holly. 'Dragon' will summon my water dragon, Umisu. And 'Snake' will summon my snake, 'Shuurai'. Use whichever you need to escape. Wait until I've engaged the Mizukage in battle, then run. Take Mimizu and Okayu with you, and all the rest of the Leaf ninja that came with you. If you'll insist on waiting for me, do so at the edge of the forest- away from the lakes where the enemy might get power. If I'm not caught up to you in an hour, report my death to Lady Tsunade. And...ask her to inform Azami."

Yuushi was taken aback by the tone in his sensei's voice. There was no hint of remorse- there was only a mix of fear and determination. It was the fear that offset Yuushi the most.

"You don't think you'll make it..." Yuushi said carefully, not trying to mess with Ekyt's state of mind. Not least of all when he was smiling in that uneasy way.

"Probably not," Ekyt agreed. "But what must be done, must be done."

"I see...then I won't talk you out of it. I'll do as you ask..." Yuushi murmured, unhappy with the order. Deserting your teacher was terribly wrong, and went against everything he had been taught. But above that was one absolute rule: Sensei knew best.

"Thank you. Do it for the sake of your wife. You, Yuushi, will be missed. I myself...I am expendable. This is a senseless fight...but something won't let me run. Call it bravado, or fate, or anything. But the fact is that something has planted my feet, and I can't just let it go."

Yuushi didn't understand. But he wasn't going to argue. It wasn't his place.

"Goodbye, then. But know this, sensei: There is no doubt in my mind you'll survive."

--

[Ryouko]

I sat by myself, needing to think. I was up against a hellish force. I would be facing power greater than those of the three Swords from before. But this time, I did the right thing.

I saved no one's feelings. I sent everyone away. I couldn't bear the burden of having to protect someone. Not at this crucial moment.

They all have somewhere they belong. From the start, I was groomed to protect them. Shikamaru will become the greatest mind in the Leaf Village, among those who strategize.

Hayate and Yukao will someday pack the deadly one-two punch ANBU needs.

Neji and Tenten are already very good, but they'll only get better. And their offspring...I wonder what happens if you combine weapons with the precision of the Byakugan?

And Yuushi...he now has his brother and a bride. What more could I teach him? His skill with the sword already eclipses my own.

Azami...Sorry, we won't get to face off like I'd hoped. If I survive this battle, I may just be strong enough to take you down. No, I HAVE to be strong enough to take you down. I unleashed the plague that is you on my village. It's my duty to end that plague. If our paths don't cross...that might be best. My heart aches to see you again, but if you truly love another...

That is best.

Because my life has been about death.

My future is the blade.

My past shaped me.

I must now shape myself. Shape myself into the man I need to be, not the man I *want* to be.

...

Why must I fight this time? I know it's nearly unwinnable, and I could just run. Why is something keeping me here? It's not my honor as a warrior. It's an irresistible feeling that tells me I have to be here. I have to be here, in this place, here and now. But what is it that's supposed to happen?

Why am I here?

...

Really, I've failed at everything but my job. The girls I loved found better men. My student eclipsed me incredibly fast. And my peers...they're stronger. But maybe I'm happy. Half the village still hates me, but the other accept me. That must be it.

It's the sense of belonging that's keeping me here. I'm *supposed* to be here because I belong here. I can't leave because this is where I'm needed most. I'll leave fate to tell me why, rather than keep thinking about it.

I hate leaving things to chance. But fate...

Well, I guess that's a different matter...

-

Ekyt put the cigarette in his mouth, sure he'd need it's help to make it through this fight. He would strike hard and fast. He couldn't afford a prolonged battle. His best chance was to somehow show that he was too much for them to handle.

Well, I did that last time, didn't I? Let's see if I can add a few thousand more ryo to the bounty on my head.

The smile stayed in place. Something still niggled at Ekyt, something that told him to keep smiling that insipid smile.

89 - I Can't Face Her Like This!

Ekyt waited, cigarette in hand. Ten were ground under his boot as he waited patiently. Who was he waiting for? He didn't know himself- just that it was going to be a fight. Truthfully, that fight had already begun inside him.

This smile always means something big. Good or bad, better or worse, til' death do us part... It's like marrying my emotions. I'm a slave to them. Before I fell in love, I served no feelings from within. Now look at me.

It's not altogether terrible, though. I wish I could just figure out what it is that's causing this insipid smile. It's irritating, not knowing my own feelings. I've never been any good with that; and even less with expressing them.

Ekyt looked up casually, seeing a large force of ninja surrounding him. He flicked the cigarette away, staring down his attackers. He felt strangely calm, and he let it bleed through to his actions.

"Here for the bounty? Or the sword?" Ekyt asked pleasantly, trying to not look threatening. Maybe there was a mix-up, or maybe they wouldn't take him for a threat, so he could gain an edge.

All at once, they attacked. In a half-second, Ekyt had picked out their ranks. In the second half of a full second, his traps sprung and suspended the Mist shinobi. An intricately-laid web of exploding tags ensured they would stay snared for a while.

"Now you relax up there. If you're the first wave, you must be genin pawns. Trying to assess my threat level for some higher-ranked ninja in the background. Am I right?"

With that confidence that Ekyt spoke and felt, he tried to think of the last time he had felt so confident.

It was with Azami. When I was in my ANBU persona. But why is that surfacing now?

Screw thinking about it! Just go with it!

"I won't take hostages!" Ekyt announced, standing at ease in the center of the clearing.

"You mean to kill all of us?!" a genin shouted, suspended by his ankle, high above the ground. There was more than a hint of fear in his voice.

Ekyt rolled his eyes. "No. I just mean that you Mist ninja don't take care of each other. No one would get mad if I took you hostage. That, and I have no desire to take life. That's why I'm here alone- the company I keep tends to be more violent than I."

Ekyt opened up his summoning scroll, carefully extracting his prized sword, *Suitoru*, the absorption blade.

“If you’ll call off this retardedness, then you can have this. It’s not ‘your’ sword. But then again, neither was the last one.” Ekyt paused, letting his voice echo for a moment. He continued after that little pause. “Can whoever is masterminding this crap please just come out and face me like a man? Cat and mouse gets old. That, and my traps already caught lots of mice.”

“SUMMONING JUTSU!”

A giant lake fell from nowhere. The water flowed, destroying the landscape and killing many people on the ground. Ironically, Ekyt’s captives were safe, high up in the trees in nets.

WHOOMPF!

Ekyt went sailing, a foot planted in his chest being the reason. He never let himself get kicked like that. He landed hard on his back, though the damage was minimal. He rolled to his feet, not yet seeing the animal that had accompanied the lake.

False modesty aside, that is an Orochimaru-level threat that just caught me off-guard. I’d better not take chances.

Biting his thumb, Ryouko ran blood on both his shoulders and the back of his neck. Three small tattoos, normally concealed, flashed briefly.

“Summoning Jutsu: Air, Land, Sea!”

Poof Poof Poof!

Ekyt was standing atop a hawk (Taleo), a water dragon on his shoulder, and a miniature snake around his neck.

“Taleo- seek! Umisu- suck the water!”

Taleo began to circle, with Ekyt riding on top of him. Umisu, the water dragon, leapt down into the lake below. In a few short moments, the lake was half gone, drunk up by the tiny dragon. That finally revealed Ekyt’s opponents.

The Mizukage himself, and his giant...Leech?

“Lord Mizukage?!”

The Mizukage was a man of about fifty years. He was rough-looking and battle-scarred. There was no doubt he was in charge because he was someone who loved bloodshed for the sake of bloodshed.

“So, you forced my hand? A child, like you, is a nemesis of my Village? Allow me to make a prediction for you, then...”

The Mizukage raised his hand. “There will be a new series of legends, and very soon. You may very

well be among them. Or perhaps, you'll be their stepping-stone..."

Ekyt knew this ability. "Clairvoyance? Sorry, your predictions come five years too late. I was already told this by the Leaf's Third Hokage. And I *choose* my path." Ekyt bowed his head. "If I am to become legendary...to me, that means serving others. And I already serve the both the past legends and the future legends you speak of- THAT I am sure of. If I am numbered among them, then I'm honored. If not...well then, at least I'll have helped the next generation in my own way."

The Mizukage stayed on top of his leech, walking in a small circle. After a few circles, he took out a battered black ops book.

"Let me see...Ekyt, adopted name of Kaguya. Age twenty. Jonin, Leaf Village. It seems you're proficient in genjutsu, while your weakness is offensive ninjutsu. And yet, you managed to blitzkrieg my village during a sacred ceremony, largely working alone. Impressive."

Getting the drift, Ekyt asked "So how many ryo are on my head now?"

The Mizukage just darted forward in response to Ekyt's question. Again reacting too slow, this time it would cost Ekyt...

It was almost artistic, in a gruesome way. Ekyt's left eye was marred with a diagonal scar. Blood flowed freely- too much to be a minor injury. Blood coagulated around the lids, making it impossible for Ekyt to open his eye.

He didn't even want to try, for fear of what he might or might not see.

A cry of pain and rage bubbled up from the depths of his soul. But the pain wasn't entirely physical. In a rage, Ekyt exploded!

"YOU! YOU TOOK AWAY MY RIGHT TO FACE HER AGAIN! WHAT I HAVE LIVED FOR! WHAT I HAVE TRAINED FOR! WHAT I WOULD DIE FOR! BUT NOT HERE! NOT LIKE THIS! NOT AT YOUR HANDS!"

Ekyt's mind had long been obsessed with stopping Azami. Add in his ever-present anxiety, and perhaps you have a weakened mental state. That state led to the emergence of Ekyt's last link to Azami-Ryouko.

Ryouko and Ekyt are mostly polar opposites. What stands out is that Ryouko will end fights much less passively than Ekyt. And he really couldn't care less about a number on his head- if anything, he would see that number increase.

In short, Ryouko was everything Ekyt wanted to be, deep inside his mind. Someone who could fight without restraint. Someone who could be a tricky bastard when the situation called for it. Someone who would do whatever needed to be done. Ekyt wasn't that man. But Ryouko...

"Shuurai, I need some acid on that damn leech! Then bind it! I'll handle his owner! This just went BEYOND personal!"

Summoner and summon moved in perfect harmony. It's proven that when the brain hits a limit, it will stop feeling pain. This is not altogether a good thing. Pain the body's warning sign. Without it, you don't know when your true limit has been hit. But sometimes that is best left unknown.

Shuurai wound himself around the giant leech, squeezing until he could bite his own tail. When he did, both he and the leech disappeared. No one knew where summons went when they weren't being called forth, but both were back there now.

Caught by surprise, the Mizukage hadn't had a chance to land after leaping toward Ekyt a second time. His sword was poised (Ekyt hadn't seen the sword the first time) perfectly on Ekyt's blind side.

WHACK!

Ekyt's tonfa smacked the Mizukage across the stomach. The sword fell from his grasp. Twenty more times the tonfa raised and fell before the Mizukage hit the ground. Before his world went black, he saw Ekyt standing over him, his tonfa poised for a killing strike.

"You aren't worth it," Ekyt spat. No, Ryouko. Ryouko spat. "What kind of leader are you? Well, that doesn't matter. You're gonna help me leave this piss-ant country of yours. Now get up, or I'll forget that you're worth the trouble for the moment."

Ryouko grabbed the Mizukage around the neck. After a moment's thought, he snapped both of the Mizukage's arms, then stomped on his fingers. After putting a kunai to his neck, Ryouko began to drag him toward the border.

--

Hayate's eyes widened- there was no way he was really seeing this.

He...he captured the Mizukage? Wait...no.

Ryouko dropped the luckless genin at the edge of the border. He looked at the group waiting for him.

"You noticed, too? Clever bastard, using a replacement jutsu with a human. Not bad genjutsu, either. I doubt the Mizukage was ever actually there. Still, he fooled his own people, so I didn't bother to break the genjutsu."

Ryouko melted away, and Ekyt became himself again. Then the pain came.

"Gah!" Ekyt quietly wailed, sinking to his knees, holding his eye. **Again! My eye!**

Focusing his chakra until it glowed with the tell-tale green of healing energy, he pressed his hand to his eye. This would preserve his eye until he could get real medical attention.

Even in his pained state, Ekyt couldn't help but feel that this was too easy...

Nothing to be done about it now. I got lucky to stay conscious with this kind of pain.

The pain...did I push it away? Or did I overcome it somehow? What exactly happened? I'm never that vicious...that focused. I didn't even think or care of what would happen if I kept attacking. I could have killed him... Was it rage over my eye? Or was it something more deep-rooted, psychologically speaking?

Never mind. I'm in charge until we get home.

Mimizu had taken up residence on Ryouko's shoulder again. She weighed nothing, so Ekyt didn't protest. He just kept his hand over his eye and began to walk.

No one dared speak. The trip home was traveled in silence.

--

Haitsuchi stood over the lifeless corpse. Blood dripped off his sword as he silently surveyed the damage he had caused. Incredible damage to his own Village. A blow from which the Mist could very possibly never recover from, if the truth became known.

The Mizukage lay at Haitsuchi feet, drenched in his own blood. He was long dead.

"Complete," Haitsuchi said aloud.

"Excellent work," a familiar voice complimented. A snake on the ground was the source of the voice. "Now then, add the finishing touch."

Haitsuchi took a small dagger from his belt. With careful precision, he carved a Leaf Village symbol onto the Mizukage's back.

"With any luck, that bratty apprentice of the Third Hokage will be blamed. We can demand him as reparation for this slaying. Once he's in our hands, we'll kill him. He won't be there to protect those Leaf children anymore. Once the Reaper Death Seal's heir is removed, we can begin the next invasion of Konoha!"

Orochimaru, back in his lair, smiled widely, licking his lips. Things were going his way.

The most troublesome thing is that what the Mizukage said was correct. The potential for the next legends to eclipse even myself is disturbing. But they aren't yet at their peak. Ekyt isn't either, but he's the one who possesses the knowledge of the Reaper Death Seal, and the will to use it. He must be destroyed before I can destroy Konoha. My pride demands it.

He clenched a fist. The Third Hokage had come so painfully close to destroying Orochimaru. It had never stopped running through Orochimaru's mind. It ate at him.

The most perfectly laid plans can be laid to waste. I myself gave Sarutobi the opening. I must not allow his apprentice, who is still in his prime, the same opening. I will kill him before he matures

fully.

It's his state of mind that makes him so dangerous. It's erratic. Other shinobi you can predict. But him... If you didn't know his ultimate goal was to protect his Village, then he would be a complete mystery. But that little bit of knowledge is just what gives him away.

Orochimaru glanced at the mummified had still wearing the Akatsuki ring. He had kept it all these years. Orochimaru had no use for the ring, aside from irritating the rest of the Akatsuki by keeping it. That in and of itself was enough for him. The Akatsuki wouldn't just kill him until they found out where the ring was.

If only I could have taken over Ekyt. Or even Naruto. They have remarkable luck against the Akatsuki. Or perhaps skill? Though I find it hard to believe that any brats like them could hope to master any jutsu capable of taking down someone more powerful than myself.

90 - Unhealthy

Tsunade immediately took care of Ekyt. Sedating him, she also called in Ibikki to analyze his subconscious.

"I've been suspecting weakening for some time..." Tsunade murmured, biting her lip. "When he overcame the pain of his eye this time, he also experienced the pain of 'loss' again. Before he had Azami, there was no 'loss'; only 'void' of "never having". It's unhealthy. Especially for him."

"Especially?" Ibikki asked, somewhat concerned for his younger comrade. "In what way, M'lady?"

"In the only way that makes sense. Ekyt copes with everything by throwing himself into his work. Studying takes a lot of brainpower and willpower. Ekyt has both in spades, but when his anxiety also takes up residence in his mind, added to his new sense of loss...It's an unstable mix. *Dangerously* unstable."

"And how is it treated? You don't sound like you've given up on him yet," Ibikki pointed out.

"True. He needs a purpose, Ibikki. I need to keep him away from combat for a while. His eye won't heal for a month, at least. That should be long enough for his mental state to stabilize."

Ibikki narrowed his eyes. "A desk job? For him? I don't see it working out."

Tsunade shrugged, revealing her idea. "I plan to make him the leader of a branch of ANBU. That, and let him go ahead and guard Naruto and Sakura the way he seems to want to." She steepled her fingers, eyes dead serious. "He told me a prediction from the Mizukage...it's eerily similar to one the Third Hokage made..."

Tsunade explained it quietly- no one needed to know about this. Ibikki's eyes widened- the man who was never surprised had been caught off guard.

"Either a legend himself, or a stepping stone for the next three...No wonder you're so intent on keeping him in fighting shape..."

Tsunade patted Ekyt's head. "Well, he's a good guy without all those reasons, too. What gets me is that he's such a loner. And yet, everyone seems to want to be his friend. Like the two Mist Ninja that followed him here."

Tsunade and Ibikki contemplated Ekyt a little longer. There was a black patch over his hurt eye. The scar would almost completely heal, save for a small line under the eye itself.

"Right then. Let's release the genjutsu and get him up."

--

“Yuushi...I’m so proud of you. I’ve watched you grow into a man. With a bride, and skill with the sword that I never dreamed imaginable. You need to learn of your real self- your past. That, I can’t teach. But your brother can.”

Ekyt never wore his trench coat much more, but he had broken it out today. A breeze tossed it, along with his hair, as he stood atop Lone Pine Hill. Inside of him, there was an internal battle. But he knew the correct answer without really thinking.

“You should go with Okayu. And your wife, too. At least for a while. Your heritage is yours to embrace, and you should do so.”

Yuushi walked toward his teacher, feeling so much that it was impossible to describe. He reached out a hand, but withdrew it. Instead, he got to his knees and bowed; his head touching the ground.

“You are and always will be ‘sensei’ to me. And more than that...family.”

Standing up, Yuushi made his way over to Okayu. “I want to learn of our heritage. But I don’t want to uproot Kantai to do so. Won’t you stay here, brother?”

Okayu looked to his comrade. Mimizu wore a smile.

“Of course!” Mimizu yelled out, waving brightly. “You got a brother! Man, that’s so cool! And I’m staying, too! You people are fun!”

Ekyt gave a rare, genuine smile. “Well, I’ll leave you to get settled. It’s time I took my leave anyway. I’ve got a new job, starting tomorrow.”

--

I sounded as happy as I could... Ekyt thought, sorting out all that had happened. I now have a huge bounty on my head. I have a hurt eye and leg. And I may never been the same. My injuries will heal. But though a teacher’s greatest desire is to see his student grow beyond his own abilities...I guess I wasn’t ready for it. I’m only twenty; I’m not ready to sip sake on a porch and make proverbs about the sun and moon!

And Yuushi...man, a wife at his age, and a brother he never knew he had that gave an eye for him. I’m glad his life is coming together.

But what about my own? My strength has grown, but other parts of me have grown more distant.

That instant in battle... I felt it. Like ‘Ryouko’. Is that healthy, though? Could ‘Ryouko’ do what ‘Ekyt’ couldn’t? Is he a match for Azami? They’re both me, but Ryouko is another side of me. One less explored. Maybe he should be.

And maybe I should tie up some loose ends...

--

The rain poured down on Ekyt as he made his way toward Taro's house. Taro, Azami's father, liked Ekyt, and was completely disgusted with his daughter. Sitting down over a cup of tea, the two chatted amiably for a bit, before Taro finally bit off a nasty sentence.

"Damn her! How could she do that to the best thing to ever happen to her?!"

Ekyt finished a long gulp of tea. "Well, she was coerced. She didn't have a choice, apparently. I would believe her. Your daughter is a great many things- evil is not one of those things. I won't believe it."

Taro clapped Ekyt on the shoulder. "Thank you for the loyalty you're showing my daughter. A lot of other guys would have moved on. You certainly shouldn't lack female suitors..."

"Just one other, actually. A Shrine Maiden, of all things. But I couldn't do that to her. She isn't accustomed to seeing bloodshed, and I won't break her if I can help it."

At least not until I found for sure Azami doesn't love me. Once I'm sure, then maybe I can think about other girls. But loyalty first. As far as I'm concerned, Azami is my responsibility.

"At any rate, sir, I want to contact your daughter. Do you have any ideas, any at all, about how I can reach her?" Ekyt let himself sound desperate at the end. He felt that desperation in real life, but he could normally hide it. For now, emotions would serve their purpose.

Taro scratched his chin. "Well, there's always her birds. They can find her. But, and no offense son- I know you're a soldier, and you're gonna hate hearing this- but you couldn't beat her at full strength. And now..."

Ekyt looked down at himself. "I know. One good eye, and a cut torso. But this is the best time to contact her. The company she keeps is dangerous, and there's a chance they'll come after me. I want to make use of that chance now, while I can. If I'm less of a threat, she might actually hear me out."

"...Just...help my little girl..." Taro choked out, holding his arm up. He made a strange clicking sound with his tongue. A tropical bird fluttered down to his arm, immediately upon landing raising its leg to take a message.

"I'll do all I can. And then I'll do more," Ekyt promised, writing a note out.

"Not to get hung up on details, but...is this okay by your village?"

Ekyt produced a badge. "Director of Special Investigations, newest branch of ANBU. I'd call this special. It's an immediate threat to the village's security, so..."

Taro smirked. "I should know better than to question you. It's strange how you always manage to make things work out...Well, somewhat."

"Let's hope the same applies with your daughter, then. Both for her sake and mine."

Taro cocked his head. "Just answer me this- have you gotten stronger since she betrayed you? Because when I saw you fight, I saw someone who, despite himself, held back..."

Ekyt had grappled with this constantly since that day. "I know. I didn't mean to, but I did. I was scared to kill someone. Anyone. If I had...maybe I could have convinced Azami to stay. Even she couldn't fend off the whole village without any backup. If I had just killed those two..."

Ekyt stood up, straightening out his ANBU trench coat.

"Well, I can sit there and grapple with it. Or I can make it right. I've been a thinker for too long. Now I'm going to 'do', instead of think."

Taro nodded, not quite sure what Ekyt's semi-cryptic answer meant. All the same, he decided to move on. "Okay then. Just tell me- what do the white strips on your coat mean?"

Taro was referring to the lines on the inside pocket of Ekyt's coat.

"Well, they have two meanings. The best way to think of them is a symbol of rank. Something beyond Jonin, but below Hokage or Legend. An elite, I guess. I was told to wear them somewhere on my uniform from now on. I've no idea why, though. I haven't done anything outstanding."

I beg to differ. But that's not my place. Taro raised his eyebrows. "Well then, I won't keep a man away from his important work. Best of luck to you, then. And congratulations."

Ekyt smiled, inclined his head, and turned to leave. Just outside the door, Taro noted, a small girl jumped up on Ekyt's shoulder. He made no indication that he even felt her, so Taro didn't say anything either. With Ekyt's senses, there was no way that girl was dangerous if he didn't perk up when she jumped at him.

--

"I can't let her go, Mimizu. Not like this..."

"Ya can always shack up with me!"

Ekyt rolled his eyes. "You're sitting on my shoulder. It would be awkward to...y'know...with someone who can do that..."

"Oh, is THAT your problem? No biggie (hehe!)"

Mimizu suddenly ballooned- no, it only felt like she had. Ryouko hit the ground, face-down, with Mimizu on top of her.

"I can control my personal gravity! Isn't it cool?! I can make myself any weight I want!"

"That's really interesting. How about letting me up now..." Ekyt muttered around a facefull of grass.

"Sowwy mister director-person!"

(Note: Wow, I just realized how horribly similar Ekyt is to Kenpachi Zaraki of Bleach fame like this. Sorry about that; I just noticed it now!)

Outside, a large bird fluttered down to land on Ekyt's shoulder. He raised his arm to allow it to land. Then a second came, though this one was a big, tropical bird. The notes, as it turned out, were to make Ekyt's life a living hell. Big time.

From Azami:

We need to talk. In person. Come to the temple where Hidan and Kakuzu attacked that Miko. I'll be waiting.

-Azami

-

The second note left Ekyt ashen. The letter shook in his hands. His breathing was rapidly becoming hyperventilating.

From Tsunade:

The Mist are demanding your body for murdering their Mizukage. Escape now. Contact every twelve hours by rotating summons. Don't ever reveal your location.

I know you're innocent. We're going to prove that innocence. But for now, I don't know where you are, and I don't want to know.

I'm sorry about this, kid. Stay strong.

-Tsunade

Mimizu had peered over Ekyt's shoulder. She gasped.

"But you didn't-"

"I know..." Ekyt said. "Well then. Mimizu, please do me a favor. Tell Okayu and Yuushi what's happened. Anyone else who needs to know will be informed by Lady Tsunade. I'm going to leave right now. I've got what I need in my summoning scroll."

Mimizu looked pretty teary-eyed. But she sucked it up and hugged Ekyt.

"Be careful, okay?" she managed to say around tears and sobbing.

"I will. You, too."

And with that, Ekyt took off at top speed.

--

Pein addressed the whole of his Akatsuki ranks. The most dangerous group in the world.

"Itachi and Azami, have you two decided on your personal method of action?"

Azami patted her stomach. "We're going to have a baby."

The Akatsuki rumbled with laughter. The thought of Itachi procreating; in effect helping to repopulate the very clan he himself dismembered...

"And that baby will host the tailed beasts. ALL of them," Azami continued. "But it will take very selective breeding. DNA taken from extremely potent sources. A captured target won't do. Too weak. But if you were to take the DNA from myself, Itachi, and a few others..."

"You breed a weapon. But it won't matter. The child won't be of any use for at least ten years, plus time in the womb," Kisame protested. Others nodded their agreement with him.

"The child will be developed externally, in a surrogate environment, and will be enhanced in every way possible. I have compiled a list, in my time as a bounty hunter, as a means of keeping track of those who would benefit this organization- cooperative, or otherwise..." Azami announced, producing a list. It was long, containing twenty-one names. But the most prominent names:

Naruto Uzumaki- Hidden Leaf (Strange luck)
Sasuke Uchiha- Hidden Leaf (Heir to Sharingan/Uchiha genius)
Orochimaru- Sound (Knowledge)
Jiraiya- Hidden Leaf Associate (Summoning)
Tsunade- Hidden Leaf (Hokage designation) (Strength)
Ekyt/Ryouko Kaguya (adopted name)- Hidden Leaf (Potential)
Hiru Nigetsu- Hidden Mist (Defense capabilities)
Poe Jiyuchan- Hidden Grass (Sp. Offense)

"Each target will be collected, and then terminated. My list continues with a list of corpses that we've managed to recover. This includes Zabuza Momochi of the Hidden Mist's Seven Swordsmen."

Silence followed Azami's announcement. There were (understandably) question marks all over this statement. But Pein gave his approval, and the plan was agreed on as a secondary tactic. With an amendment.

"That much DNA will make for an unstable creature. Pick one live target and aim for him/her."

Azami instantly knew which target she would pick.

I DID say I wanted to have his children. Too bad this will be more like 'rape' for the poor boy.

-

As they were leaving the meeting, Itachi and Azami had attended physically, along with Kisame.

"It pains me to do this, Itachi. Is there no other way, Itachi?" Azami asked. "I've hurt that boy and his village enough. I have been as unfaithful as any woman can be, short of prostitution. I never minded before, but Ryouko...he was special. He saw me as more than a set of boobs."

Kisame rolled his eyes. "If you can't bring yourself to do it, I'll just chop him up for you. You've got too much of a heart left to be one of us, girlie. Maybe you're a problem yourself..."

Azami favored Kisame with a glare. "Just try to eliminate me. I'll kill you instantly. Believe me, my life will end soon enough. Once I've paid my debt to the Akatsuki, I will take my life. It's the least I can do for those I've hurt in the name of this damned organization."

-

Hidden within a toad's mouth in a nearby puddle, Jiraiya made notes. And boy, he had one hell of a report for Tsunade and the others involved...

91 - On the Road

Ekyt saw Azami waiting on the lonely dirt road that led to the temple. She looked strangely down-trodden for her normally perky personality. This was reflected in the way she spoke.

“Hello, Ekyt. It’s been a long time.”

Ekyt stared her in the eyes. “It has. I hope you’re well.”

“I am, thank you. You seem to have recovered nicely from the many surgeries the Akatsuki have forced you to have.”

Ekyt cracked his neck to the side. “I have. I’ve been put back together so many times now. It’s hard to believe I’m still alive.”

Thundered sounded in the distance. Rain drops began to fall; lightly at first, then they picked up speed. But neither one moved from their spots.

“Let’s cut to the chase, okay?” Ekyt asked, a hint of begging in his voice. “Why did you need to talk to me?”

Hope crept into Ekyt’s mind. Hope that Azami would be his again. Hope that she would run over and kiss him. Hope that they would become a couple once more. Hope that they had a future together. Hope that love brought them back together.

“I...My husband wanted to speak with you. It’s very difficult for me to say this to you, who I loved first. But it must be said-!”

Ekyt had frozen. There was no trace of emotion or life on his face. No understanding in his eyes. Not even anger.
Only defeat.

“Is he...is he a better man?” Ekyt asked quietly, his voice deadly calm.

“...No. But he’s stronger than you,” Azami said apologetically.

Ekyt turned around. “Tell me...why did you join the Akatsuki. What did they have over your head?”

Azami bowed her head, hands nervously twitching together. “They have a jutsu planted dormant inside my Father. If they activate it, he becomes a walking bomb. He’ll destroy an entire village. That’s why I have to serve them. Or, at least, that was the reason. Now, it’s for my husband.”

“And your husband?” Ekyt questioned. “Who is it?”

“...He wants to talk to you, Ekyt. In person. He says he has something to show you, and that you have to come. If you don't, then the temple will pay for your sins.”

Ekyt stood up straighter. “Take me to him. I'll talk to him. But please, don't let him hurt anyone at the temple.”

Azami patted Ekyt on the shoulder, but he flinched away. She was genuinely hurt by that. “I thought we might still be friends...”

Ekyt turned his head slightly to face Azami. “Right now, you've got me by the balls. I loved you. I probably still do. But make no mistake- you're no friend.”

Azami was beyond stunned. But she bowed her head and led the way to her husband.

-

Itachi was waiting at the temple, standing calmly in front of the entrance. Ekyt's heart fell, but his blood boiled.

THIS is who replaced me?! This criminal?! Azami...I can tell. You love him. I don't know what he promised you, but there's no love in his heart for you.

“Ekyt, do you remember our agreement?” Itachi said by way of greeting.

“There was no 'agreement', Itachi! There was only you telling me that I WOULD help your brother defeat you! Don't act like this is a favor among friends!”

Itachi didn't seem phased by the outburst at all. “That's fine. You needn't do anything special. But you see, my little brother is essential. And you are the one who has to help him reach the level he needs to be at.”

“You can't make me,” Ekyt shot back. “Saying you'll kill me if I don't is a false threat. And you can't torture me into doing something without affecting the outcome.”

Itachi reached behind him. “You're two-thirds correct. But I CAN make you. This is why I attempted to force Sasuke to sever his ties. Because they become weakness. No matter how strong you yourself are, someone else is will be more vulnerable than you.”

Itachi held the Miko up by her wrists. She writhed and tugged defiantly, but her eyes were wide with fear. Ekyt saw this was the same shrine maiden that had helped train him in the art of chakra sealing. He had his tonfa drawn and was dashing towards Itachi before his mind even processed what he was seeing.

Azami skidded in the way, the ankh around her neck blocking him.

“That isn't smart if you want her to stay unharmed. Please, just cooperate. I don't want to see you get hurt.”

Ekyt glowered, but tossed down his weapon. “What, then? If I help your brother, you'll let her go?”

Itachi pushed the miko down. "You're a man of your word. Give me your word that you'll help Sasuke when he faces me next, and I'll release the girl."

Ekyt nodded solemnly. "You have my word. But answer this- why couldn't I just kill you right now, all by myself?"

"Do you mean besides the fact that you're overmatched and outnumbered?" Itachi pointed out. "Because you won't interfere in my brother's revenge. You might help him take it, but you would never take it for yourself."

"...Fine. But I can't return to the village. The Mist believe I killed their leader. There's no way to prove my innocence. So if you want me to get to your brother, you'll have to clear my name."

"Agreed," Itachi said.

"One more thing, Itachi," Ekyt called out, leaning down to untie the shrine maiden. "Just tell me this: Did you marry Azami just so I couldn't have her? Was she just more leverage to you?"

Ekyt hadn't spent all that time suffering under Ibikki Morino for nothing. He had just planted a crucial seed of doubt in the head of Azami, while forcing Itachi to stay on his guard. It wasn't the ideal situation, but that tiny vindictive swipe made Ekyt feel MUCH better.

--

The Miko was on all fours when she saw a hand reach down for her. Knowing who it belonged to, she took it gratefully.

"Come on, let's get your inside," Ekyt told her, helping her into the temple.

"Why are you here?" she asked, recovering her strength little by little. The various maidens and monks came running to assist Ekyt in bringing her in.

Ekyt explained the whole situation, even the being framed for murder part.

"I should get going before those horrors come back. Sorry to have endangered you," Ekyt announced, apologetically.

"Why?" called one priest. "Why leave? They attacked before you came, and they'll only attack once you leave!"

"That's right!" a shrine maiden added. "You should stay here!"

Ekyt tried to beg off, even though he liked the idea. "I shouldn't. That's taking advantage of your hospitality, and I"

The miko he had helped (and kissed, at one point), tugged on his arm. "You're the only one among us who knows what those villains are after. And you're the only one who can fight them. Not to mention that you have people who can come help."

“If you’re on the run, what better place to hide out for a while than a temple?” called another monk.

“Give him the storage shed in the back,” suggest the miko’s mother. “A shinobi needs to train, free from prying eyes. Get him a monk’s robe as well, should he need to blend in.”

Ekyt knew there was no point in arguing. And this arrangement DID make sense, after all.

It’s going to be a long wait. At least six monthes away from my home. After that, I’ll go home, whether or not my name is clear. And when I return, I’ll be a better man. A stronger man. A man who could hold the village’s weight on his shoulders. And when I return, I will become what the Leaf Village needs. Be that a hero, or someone behind the scenes.

...

And after that, I’ll face you again, Azami. You’re married now, and I wish you the best. But right now you’re like a caged bird. I’m going to open the cage door for you. Whether you fly out or not is up to you.

--

“We should have just taken his DNA. It’s not like you to be this inefficient, Azami...” Itachi intoned, his voice trailing at the end, prodding for an answer.

“I will kill him in time, Itachi. But...But not yet. When I face him again, the ideal scenario would culminate in both of us dying. I need to let him get strong enough to face me at full strength. Then I’ll push him to use his Reaper Death Seal. If I must take his life, then my penance will be my life...” Azami said stiffly, clearly dreading that horrible moment when she would take two lives. “But I thank you, Itachi, for marrying me. I don’t know how true your love is for me, but rest assured- my heart is yours now.”

--

Once by himself in his shed, Ekyt finally fell to his knees. He was a defeated man. Mentally, physically- he had nothing left. Seeing Azami with Itachi, of all people...

Is this love? Why did I play that game? Why did I desire a girl of my own? I’ve faced nothing but heartbreak with her.

And yet, I love her.

But I have to let her go. She has no choice but to serve them. At least, no choice until I create a choice for her. I’ll stop the Akatsuki. I’ve already promised to do it for Naruto and Sakura-Ojousama. This is just one more person to do it for.

Ekyt started to stand up, but fell back down. He was so drained. He had never felt so weak!

I can’t get up again. I can’t do it. This is it. I can’t face the world anymore. I’ve failed. No amount of determination will save me. I don’t have the village behind me, I’m on the run from the law for a crime I didn’t commit, and any girl I’ve ever liked has somehow not worked out. I just...I just can’t take it anymore! We all have limits! I’ve thrown myself into my work, even just

**to escape as much as to accomplish my goals. But I'll never be happy. I'm not allowed to be happy.
WHY?!**

The Miko came in, carrying a tray of food. She gasped, and the tray clattered to the floor.

“Are you alright?!” she half-yelled, bending down to help Ekyt up. When she saw his face, hollow and devoid of emotion, she could understand.

It as a mental blow. All this is too much for him. He needs an escape...! I know! He has to leave here someday, but maybe he can make an impression...

Propping herself under his shoulder, the Miko hefted. Thankfully, Ekyt didn't weigh much, and he was steady on his feet once he reached them. Well, mostly.

“How about teaching us, Ekyt? You can't protect us forever, but maybe you can teach us to protect ourselves.”

Ekyt was shaking now, but his mind was starting to clear. **I owe it to them to teach them. And while I teach them, I'll also teach myself. I need more strength to get past this. I can't let Azami go- not like that. And I gave my word to Itachi.**

I need to fix this. Things can't stay this way. I'll make things work. I'll spend six months here. Then I'll move on.

“You're right,” Ekyt finally said. “I'll teach. It's my fault you're in danger. So I've got to correct the problem, and thank you for your hospitality.”

The Miko gave a small smile. “I knew you had it in you. To keep fighting the good fight, I mean.”

Ekyt shrugged. “I suppose you're right. I'm not sure of what your religious beliefs and what they dictate, but I believe we all make our own fate.”

The Miko started to reply, but found Ekyt pulling her into his chest. She returned his embrace as he bent down to whisper in her ear.

“I want you to make me a promise, shrine maiden. I want you to promise me that, if any trouble arises, you'll get whoever you can and run to the Leaf Village. A temple can be rebuilt- a life, once lost, cannot.”

The Miko gave a little smile. “You got it. So, if you need anything...”

Ekyt nodded his thanks. “I appreciate it.”

92 - Blood-Soaked Darkness

The midnight oil burned in the shed as Ekyt studied. If he went back to the Leaf, he would have to be beyond prepared. Scroll after scroll was left in his wake. Night after night, he was ravenous with his reading until exhaustion set upon him. It was times like these that made Ekyt miss Master Sarutobi the most. This studying would go so much easier if he had the Master's wisdom.

The content of Ekyt's studies soon changed. Once he ran out of scrolls on conventional jutsus, he began to experiment. The thought that you could connect chakras for the purpose of healing and breaking genjutsus was a fascinating premise, yet largely unexplored. What if chakra could be 'shared', or even 'linked'? What if there was a way to make even the most dangerous jutsu less dangerous, by having the damage be distributed amongst a 'whole' rather than a single being?

Might this have saved Master Sarutobi's life? What if, had he and I joined chakras, the Reaper Death Seal might have taken away some of our lives, rather than all of his own life? And if you expand upon that, what if ten people were 'joined' for the same reason. Then one-tenth of the life of each would be taken. And you can continue on that premise...

Or, along the same thought process, what if you could magnify the power of jutsus in this way? There must be a way to accomplish this...If chakras are joined by touching, and interfered with by the tenketsu, as demonstrated by the Hyuuga clan's abilities...

Ekyt rolled open a scroll, tacking it up on the wall of the shed. On it were all the tenketsu, labeled with numbers. It was like connect the dots. They were skin level, and tiny as a pinprick. But if there was a method to somehow connect/disconnect tenketsu...

It would take thought. On the lam, Ekyt would have plenty of time for thinking.

--

Back in the Leaf, Tsunade was arguing with the two diplomats from the Mist.

"I'm telling you, he bolted!" Tsunade snarled, slamming her desk. Sakura and Shizune were both clutching hidden weapons, ready to defend their boss as necessary.

"Of course! Because he was afraid!" one Mist rep crowed, chucking at his joke. Sakura was behind him in an instant. She grabbed his wrist, giving it a violent twist.

"Insult him again and see what happens. I guarantee he didn't run for fear of you idiots. He could take down your whole village by himself," she growled, cinching up her wristlock a little more with each word. When the man finally whimpered pathetically, Tsunade gave Sakura a mild glance. Sakura let go and returned to her post.

"I don't know where he is, and he's not stupid enough to tell me," Tsunade informed her guests

bluntly. “Not that I would tell you even if I DID know. So, if you’ll kindly show me proof that it was my man that murdered your leader...”

“This is ridiculous!” Shizune suddenly belted out, clear as a bell. “That boy has NEVER killed! Not even in defense of his own life!”

“I promise to inform you if any information surfaces about him. Rest assured. Now, I’ll have my jonin escort you out of my office. Do mind your manners. They aren’t always very even-tempered, like their leader!”

Say WHAT?! Sakura thought, turning away so Tsunade wouldn’t see her trying to suppress her laughter.

Two nameless ANBU agents filed into the room, each taking one Mist-nin with them.

As soon as the door slammed, Tsunade took a long drink. She slammed the cup down on her desk with a vicious ‘clatter!’

“Damn it! This is the worst possible time for this!”

Tsunade had outlined Ekyt’s wavering mental stability. He needed rest, not to be running from the law for a crime he didn’t commit. He was needed in the village. Especially with the prophecy now declared by two former Hokage’s.

“His mind can’t take this! I only hope he’s managed to keep himself calm...”

Sakura looked particularly downcast. “I kind of took him for granted. I mean, how could I have known he loved me?! And then I let Azami take his heart, and...And after all he did for me...DAMNIT IT!”

Sakura was near tears, thinking that one of her best friends now needed her support, and he was out of reach.

“It’s not your fault,” Tsunade told Sakura, pulling her into a gentle hug. “We’ll found out what happened. The Mist-nin gave us a report. If we know any two things, it’s these two things: Ekyt’s no killer, and Ekyt can take care of himself.”

--

Ekyt found teaching relaxing to him. As it turned out, Monk’s were natural fighters. With their meager diet, they stayed in shape. With their studying of sutras and nature, they were natural scholars. And some of their clothes even.

“Intriguing...” Ekyt muttered, putting on a monk’s robe. He slipped stone prayer beads around his neck and wrists. “You priests and priestesses are natural combatants...”

Ekyt went on to explain how their attire could easily be turned into combat uniforms. The long monk sleeves were perfect for concealed weapons. The rope around the waist was perfect for flexible weaponry. The metal or stone prayer beads were natural for close combat. And if you could memorize a

sutra that was the length of a ninjutsu scroll, handsigns would be easy. Not to mention that they already knew chakra sealing jutsus.

And the girls wore what samurai used to wear, and their hair were already in ponytails, making for an efficient combat get-up.

Ekyt started them on hand to hand combat, advising them to dress as they normally would, since that's how they would fight. If it was uncomfortable, then it was best to get used to it.

Everyone paired up. Ekyt himself faced the Miko who had trained him in chakra sealing. They all bowed to each other.

“Guards up. Make sure you have your lead hand extended a little. Good! Now, my side, punch. Those opposite me, block with your forearm.”

Everyone did as he instructed.

“Good! Those opposite me, kick with your front foot. Make sure you don't use your toes to kick, and don't kick high. Aim for knees, groins, stomachs, and chests. But not heads. Go ahead and throw a front kick. My side, block and counter with a punch. Begin!”

The monks and maidens performed it perfectly.

“Good. Now then, let's get into some self-defense strikes. Those opposite me, reach out and grab your opponents wrists with your right hand. Then, step toward your partner, so your leg winds up behind theirs. Then, put your hip against theirs and turn sharply, throwing them down. Those being thrown, make sure you tuck your head, and tap your leg when it hurts, so your partner will know to let go.”

The Miko did this move flawlessly, throwing Ekyt down, then going so far as to kneel on his chest to pin him down. For a brief moment, their eyes met. Both smiled a little.

“Good. Another few tries at this, and we'll move on to other things. At the end, I'll teach you chakra control. You'll find that how ninjas do what they do becomes clear, and you'll also see how easily things come, with time and training. For example...Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

Three clones popped up around Ekyt. One of them walked up the temple, hung upside down and washed the windows. Another clone took up a broom and swept the steps. The last clone bowed to Ekyt and took up a fighting stance. The two put on a great performance. Then the clones disappeared and Ekyt nodded.

“The nice thing is that chakra and nature tend to harmonize. So you're placed in an ideal situation. And you're already proficient with weapons. Just make sure you stay true to your kind and gentle roots. Don't let new abilities corrupt you. I doubt I need to say it to any of you, but history is full of instances of the very thing I'm warning you about.”

-

Back in his shed, Ekyt had tried to force himself to rest. Instead, of course, he began to reach for a scroll. Deciding he could do both, he took the scroll with him, along with his tonfa, and decided to scout

out the temple and it's surrounding area. It was a pretty remote forest, so there were plenty of secrets to be discovered. Secrets, when known and understood properly, were a tremendous tactical advantage. But if you were the one being surprised, it had the nasty effect of giving your opponent the advantage.

This place is a natural defense fortress. These woods are nearly impenetrable. That means that the only way to attack is from the front. And that forces a bottleneck. Perfect. Once I give those monks weapons and jutsus, they'll be able to handle themselves.

-

Ekyt laid low for the first week, being very careful. Whenever he went out, he went out looking like a monk. But since that was rare, that left him with plenty of time to teach himself how to create weapons from sticks, rocks, and even vines. All this was in addition to his increasingly large supply of jutsus and other techniques.

He also began to have something of a life. The Miko often came to visit him, and even stayed and chatted. It had been awkward at first, since that had tried kissing and discovered that their wasn't a spark. But both of them, who were shy about the opposite sex, found themselves becoming comfortable with each other.

The children around the temple began to take to Ekyt, often asking him to tell stories of what he had seen and done. Some even just wanted to hang out with him because he was a 'cool shinobi'. He took all this in stride, and rapidly became a favorite around the temple.

He didn't know anything about the Shinto religion, but he was always respectful, and made sure he pulled his weight; either by teaching or by helping out with what needed to be done around the temple.

It was all the acceptance with no strings attached that he'd never gotten at the Hidden Leaf Village.

-six monthes later-

The Miko was keeping Ekyt company again, as the midnight oil once again burned in his shed. She found that staying with him at night was comforting. She had even slept over a few times. That raised some eyebrows at first, but upon the other seeing how innocent Ekyt was, it just became a case of 'oh, they're such good friends!'

If Ekyt was a captain, the Miko had become his assistant captain. The Momo to his Aizen, or maybe the Matsumoto to his Hitsugaya. The Miko's feelings were certainly that of admiration for her first male, non-monk friend. They would often talk for hours at a time. Most of the time it was regarding Ekyt's research. Since the Miko could seal chakra with a seal, the question was 'could the seal become a 'connector' for chakra?

"Break time," Ekyt finally announced, stretching. "I'm going to meditate under the waterfall, I think. It helps control chakra, too, so..."

"Oh, sure, go ahead," the Miko said brightly. "I'll be by the guards. There've been some reports of bandits lately."

Well, bandits didn't often hit up poor temples, so Ekyt wasn't immediately concerned. He waited until the Miko had left, then took off his clothes, grabbing a towel and his hakama.

-

As Ekyt meditated, he heard shouts for his help. Him specifically. The Miko came running up frantically.

"It's them! Bandits!" she whispered. Ekyt immediately leapt up, his private areas covered by short black ANBU shorts, and immediately followed the Miko.

Damn it! They must be looking for me! Well, I'll take care of that. Then, it'll be time to leave again. I can't involve this temple in my personal affairs.

It's been six months of bliss, too. But I suppose I can't run from this forever.

--

Azami and Itachi just seemed to be waiting. They were surrounded and outnumbered, but the new-to-ninjutsu monks and priestess were no match for them. They seemed to know that, so they settled for keeping their attackers isolated.

"BACK AWAY!" Ekyt shouted, charging toward the cluster. They listened to him, and dispersed as he strode over.

"Well, look at you!" Azami exclaimed, whistling comically at Ekyt's nearly-nudeness. "And- Oh my God! Your eye! What happened?!"

"None of your concern," Ekyt spat, backing out of the way of Azami's reaching hand. "I'm not your husband. You don't need to be concerned for my sake."

Azami sighed sadly. "But you know I care about you, right? Ekyt, here's the bottom line- Itachi and I are having a baby. And we need your DNA."

Ekyt cocked his head, not sure he heard that right. "My DNA? As in, sperm?"

"Not necessarily. Any DNA will do," Itachi answered. "You see, through selective genetic engineering, we can conceive a child- without sex- and make it a mature adult in mere months."

"Maybe so, but why would you want to do that to a child?" Ekyt asked, genuinely curious. "No doubt, you're making it a weapon somehow. But cutting out it's childhood- a part of it's life? That's wrong on some many levels..."

"...A weapon. One with Itachi's eyes, my natural and unique abilities, and your ability to learn and adapt. It would be an ideal child."

Azami had a faraway look. It again made Ekyt wonder if she was being forced to do this, or if it really was her own free will. But he couldn't wonder for long. There was no time.

With one step, Itachi was in front of Ekyt. Before Ekyt could avert his eyes, Itachi had snared him with Tsukuyomi, one of his most fearsome jutsus.

The world was black and red. Clouds moved backwards, then forwards, then backwards again as Itachi controlled time and space.

“Uhh...” Ekyt groaned. He was tied to a stake, arms behind his back, legs slightly spread.

Itachi was standing in front of him. But Azami was with him. Ekyt had never seen anyone else in the Tsukuyomi besides Itachi. He narrowed his eye at the new series of events.

“Chakras joining in one body. It can be achieved only when two people of immense power trust their wills to each other,” Itachi intoned. “You’ve escaped my Tsukuyomi twice- but can you do it now, when it’s twice as powerful? And with Azami’s chakra, and your lack of emotional chakra...”

“No...I still have emotional chakra,” Ekyt shot back.

“Don’t lie. It’s unbecoming of an upstanding warrior like you,” Azami tossed out dryly. “We’ve been watching. We know.”

“Your eyes...you can use them to cast genjutsu, as I can. Not as powerful, especially with only one eye (release!), but it’s saved you before...But what if I do this?”

Itachi reached forward, his hand now holding a kunai. Ekyt found he couldn’t close his eyes as Itachi put a kunai into it.

Ekyt’s yells echoed in the nightmare realm of Tsukuyomi. His mind was nearing it’s collapse. Blindness was maddening to someone not born with it.

93 - The Return Home

In real life, Itachi closed his eyes. Ekyt, still in his guard, fell forward slowly. He landed hard, now unconscious.

No one moved until Azami reached for Ekyt. The temple's inhabitants came alive, but were silenced by Itachi's shadow clones. No one was harmed seriously, however. Just enough to make sure Ekyt couldn't be helped.

Taking a hypodermic needle, Azami gently put it in Ekyt's arm. Once she had taken a sufficient amount of blood, she backed off for a moment. Then she touched her hand to Ekyt's arm, healing the small insertion wound. Ekyt never stirred.

"I'm sorry you all had to see that," she told the crowd. "He'll be fine, but I would suggest taking him back to the Hidden Leaf. He'll need advanced medical attention if he is to come out unscathed. I wish him, and all of you, luck."

A giant shadow, controlled by Azami, swallowed Azami and Itachi. That was the end of the conflict.

The Miko was the first to reach Ekyt. There was no blood, no nothing. But Ekyt was lying face-down, unconscious.

"We have to take him to the Leaf Village!" she announced.

"Here, put him in this. It was my mother's, before she died..." one priest offered, pushing a wheelchair toward her. The Miko took it gratefully. Two monks helped her heft Ekyt into it. She bent down and smoothed his hair, pulling it away from his eyes. It was painful to see his young face so...still.

"You should go alone, Asuna Hideyama-kun." The elder priest had limped out of his home, slowly making his way toward the bewildered shrine maiden. "It would be in the boy's best interest. An entourage to sneak him into a home he had to leave...that would not do."

The Miko, now known as 'Asuna', understood that logic.

"He told me once about the man he just fought," Asuna said quietly. "He said it was a horrible experience, and that he truly feared him. But Ekyt...he's so powerful! How could he be defeated so easily?!"

"Answers may be found at his home, Hideyama-kun. We won't expect you back until the boy has recovered."

Asuna nodded, quickly ran to get her naginata, prayer beads, and chakra sealing tags, then began to push the motionless Ekyt toward the Hidden Leaf.

--

Ekyt was wheeled hastily by Asuna to the Hidden Leaf. The guards, Izumo and Kotetsu, gave no trouble. They, in fact, called nearby jonin Kakashi to escort them to the hospital. Kakashi, in turn, ordered a small group of chunin to keep people away. If Ekyt was hurt this bad, someone might try to finish him off. A murder on the Leaf's streets would prove troublesome.

Kakashi shook his head sadly upon hearing what had happened. "If he had been at full strength, he could have fought harder. Tsukuyomi is terrible, but after being on the run for six months, and his mental condition already deteriorating... It was too much for him, I guess."

Asuna cocked her head curiously. "Mental state? Weakened? He was alright when I spoke with him! Until that dog came!"

Kakashi made eye contact with Asuna. "It wasn't something he was aware of himself. He wouldn't have known how to express it, even if he was willing to. It's his anxiety, plus a sense of loss when it comes to his first love. And then when you add the stress of being on the run for a crime he's most certainly innocent of... It's mentally taxing."

"I suppose it would be," the miko admitted, speaking thoughtfully. "But why did she put a needle in his arm?"

Kakashi was a trained shinobi, and a very good one, so he didn't freeze at the question. Nor did he blurt out the truth right away. He considered his options carefully. But, ultimately, he decided the girl who had gone to so much trouble to help Ekyt should know. He turned his head toward her so that his good eye was facing her, and he spoke in a low voice.

"The group that attacked your temple twice now needed Ekyt's DNA. They plan to create a living weapon, and something about him makes him a desirable...father, for want of a better term."

"But the girl!" Asuna sputtered, suddenly feeling sick to her stomach. "I mean, she didn't...she didn't seem like she wanted to do this. She seemed to regret all of it. Even her partner wasn't horribly vicious. I just feel like...well, if they wanted him dead, he was like this (points at Ekyt) when I found him. They could have just killed him then and there."

This was important information. Kakashi glanced at Ekyt. The boy had to wake up and remember everything. His information could make or break the Akatsuki's next plan.

"Asuna, thank you for bringing him here. Please do me another favor and don't tell anyone that he's back. It's better for Lady Tsunade not to know. That way, she isn't lying if the Mist authorities come and ask for Ekyt."

"But what if he dies?!" Asuna exclaimed. "He needs medical help! And his good eye-!"

Kakashi smiled, even a little proudly. "Don't worry. We can safely work with Lady Tsunade's apprentice. She won't tell if ordered not to by me. And the Mist ninja won't think to grill a subordinate. And even if they do, she won't sell him out."

-

Team Seven was having an impromptu meeting when Ekyt was wheeled in. Kakashi immediately silenced them. But Ekyt lit up. His eyes were still closed, but he brightened, and he reached out. But he grabbed- Sasuke?

“Huh? Me?” Sasuke said, thinking it strange that a guy he didn’t particularly like would be so desperate to reach out to him.

Ekyt couldn’t quite talk yet, and he couldn’t motion for a brush and ink. So, instead, he bit his thumb. (Quietly, Sakura and Kakashi breathed a sigh of relief- Ekyt’s mind was still there if he could think to do this. His mental state was still a question) They all gathered around as he scrambled around, feeling for a flat spot on the floor.

Using his right arm to move his left hand, he spelled out ‘ITACHI WANTS: SASUKE AND EKYT VS HIM’ in his blood on the floor. He desperately tugged at Sasuke’s arm, willing him to understand the blurred writing.

Sasuke nodded, taking Ekyt’s hand and hauling him back up into his chair. Sasuke’s teammates were shocked at the sudden display of compassion. Sasuke kept his hand clasped around Ekyt’s.

“We’ll handle this. You rest, and when you’ve recovered, we’ll take him down. Now, relax. We’ve got your back here.”

Ekyt didn’t have any choice. His brief moment of consciousness was gone, and he slipped back into darkness. He didn’t notice that his good eye was functioning, which would have eased his psyche a little. But nothing was ever easy.

-

Sasuke clenched his fist, angry at the situation. “I’ll kill Itachi. I’ll rip him into tiny pieces. I’ll do it RIGHT NOW.”

“Sasuke, wait. That isn’t right. See if Ekyt lives to fight with you, as your brother wants. Ekyt’s involved in this now. Your brother’s...well, ‘wife’, I guess, is Ekyt’s problem. And you saw what she can do.” Kakashi tapped his chin thoughtfully. “If Ekyt neutralized her, then you’ll have your chance at revenge. And Ekyt will have his chance to get some closure.”

“I’m not going to wait! Whether Ekyt lives or dies is none of my concern! Only killing Itachi! That’s all I have left. I need to kill my last memory to my clan, and I need to do it now.” Sasuke was set in his ways. Ekyt would simply be collateral damage. Small change when you think of an entire clan being wiped out as something like ‘collateral damage’.

Kakashi shrugged. “That’s great and all, but your bother made the terms of the fight very clear. He won’t show himself until his terms are met. Look, just wait a week- if Ekyt hasn’t shown any improvement in a week. Then I won’t stop you from going.”

Sasuke still didn't look convinced, so Kakashi played his other ace in the hole.

"Some special Sharingan training, then. I've recently discovered something more, and I think you would benefit from it, too. But it takes a week."

Sasuke sighed in resignation. "Fine. One week. Then I'll have my revenge."

Asuna had stayed quiet throughout all this, instead tending to Ekyt. She bandaged his thumb, sat him upright in his chair, and even straightened his hair. It was unnerving to see such a shinobi so totally destroyed. And with a move that had taken a single second to perform.

"Where do I put him?" Asuna asked. "I know you said he can't go to the hospital..."

Kakashi thought for a moment, but immediately designated Sakura to lead Asuna to one of Ekyt's favorite places.

"Take him to the library. No one will disturb you there. If you can get him to the upper levels, so much the better. Less chance of anyone stumbling across him."

--

(Sounds of walking through water)

"What is this?!"

Ekyt heard his own voice with a repeating echo. In the pitch blackness, all he could do was feel his way around with his feet and hands. He felt water. But was this a stream? A lake? A river? None of those?

There's no sound here. Nothing but walking and my own voice.

Even the thoughts Ekyt kept quiet were resonated.

"Inside somewhere? But where? The mountains, maybe? An echo?"

Distantly, Ekyt heard something else. Cries for help. Mostly girls, screaming for any kind of help. Reacting instinctively, Ekyt ran towards the sound. He ran for hours, but he never got any closer. The cries for help didn't cease; didn't let up. It was killing Ekyt. But things became more damaging.

The voices became familiar. Sakura, Tenten, Temari...all of them were yelling. The sound of chains groaning was added to the mix soon. Then more came. More sounds. Sounds of Ekyt's parents, sounds of Lady Tsunade. There was too much noise. Too much to process. He couldn't keep up with it! It was maddening!

"No! Stay calm! CALM!" Ekyt shouted to himself. He tried to force open his eyes. When that didn't work, he frantically tore at his eyes. The eye that was covered with a patch would only show a small yellow line for vision. But his other eye-
It wasn't there.

“Summoning Jutsu!” Ekyt called weakly, planning to use Holly to navigate in the darkness.

Nothing happened. Things were hopeless. It was all hopeless. The endless noise continued. The darkness stretched on and on. The water continued forever. There was so much to process. So much...so much...

--

“Waking him up is the easy part,” Sakura explained to Asuna. “See, this is more or less a genjutsu. Or, maybe an after-effect would be better. Either way, he just needs my chakra to interrupt his long enough to break the hold on his mind.”

But Sakura frowned. Something was bothering her about this.

“Ekyt could normally break this on his own. The fact that he’s trapped in a genjutsu and doesn’t realize it...it might a sign of what Lady Tsunade was afraid of. His mental condition...it’s deteriorating.”

“Can anything be done?” Asuna asked, a hint of desperation in her voice.

“Yes. Ekyt needs to stay here. Studying seems to help him, so if he’s in this, which is theoretically a therapeutic environment for him...he may recover.”

“ ‘may’?”

Sakura gripped Ekyt’s hand. “There’s a chance that he’ll never be the same man again. He won’t be an empty shell, but...well, he’ll either come out of this at his strongest...”

Sakura paused, but finally said “Or he’ll be weaker than he’s ever been, and he won’t recover.”

Sakura put her hand on Ekyt’s shoulder. For a moment, she just held that position, focusing her chakra and her mind. Then, she injected her chakra through her fingertips and into his tenketsu. Her chakra coursed through his body, attacking Itachi’s opposing chakra and breaking it’s connection with Ekyt’s brain.

Ekyt woke with a start. Instinctively, he kicked forward, spinning in a circle to face his ‘attackers’. His good eye was still closed.

“Open your eyes!” Sakura shouted hoping the command from her might just jar him into unconsciously listening to her. But Ekyt didn’t listen. He kept it squeezed shut, gradually sinking down to his knees as his adrenaline pulled back. It was clear he was still under the influence of Itachi’s genjutsu.

Sakura had seen enough. She strode over to him, speaking slowly and calmly, in soothing tones. The boy didn’t yet have his mind about him, so he was more or less running on basic animal instinct. The chance that he would attack her was high.

“Ekyt, listen to me carefully. You’re okay. It was a genjutsu, that’s all...”

“No! That bastard tore my eye out!” Ekyt shouted, backing away. His back hit the railing of the topmost level of the library. He felt it, trying to judge where he was. Sakura kept trying to calm him, but it wasn’t

happening. Sakura finally had no choice but to cut his muscles, then leap on top of him.

“Hold still!” she snarled, grabbing his eyelid and forcing it open.

Immediately, Ekyt stopped fighting. His ragged breathing started to calm. He took in his surroundings as his mind began to reboot. Finally, he slumped over, exhausted and ashamed of himself. He was supposed to be an expert on genjutsu, and he had fallen for this?! After seeing Tsukuyomi at least twice before?

“...I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Ekyt asked timidly, not facing Sakura or Asuna. “I...I’ve never...I don’t understand why...”

Sakura and Asuna sat on either side of him. Ekyt didn’t even respond to the female’s touch.

“I...I just lost it. I didn’t even think- I mean...What kind of warrior am I? To lose it like that. And I went down without a fight! I know better than that!”

Gently, Sakura explained everything to Ekyt. The fight, Sasuke, and then, finally, the hardest part- his deteriorating mental condition. It was hard to watch her stoic friend actually become fearful at the end. It was so unlike Ekyt that it even stunned Sakura. But she had to finish delivering her message. After she reminded him that Lady Tsunade didn’t know he was here and couldn’t find out, she added the more urgent points.

“I want you to listen to me carefully, Ekyt. You need to stay here, in the library, and study. You *cannot* go into combat right now. Your mind can’t handle the stress. That’s why you blanked out against Itachi. Now, your condition isn’t very advanced, so you can make a full recovery. But you **MUST GET SOME REST**. And consider that an order.”

Asuna had asked Sakura if it was okay to mention something to Ekyt. Sakura had to be present. Other than that, they could speak freely.

“I wanted to apologize to you, Ekyt,” Asuna said, running her hand down the spines of the many books that were behind them. Thin layers of dust formed on her fingers, but that beat turning around and facing Ekyt. Apologies were never easy.

“For what?” Ekyt had wracked his brain, but couldn’t think of any reason for Asuna to need to apologize to him.

Asuna finally had to face him. “For getting you to kiss me. I shouldn’t have done that. It meant a lot that you were the first boy to kiss me. But I shouldn’t have pressured you. And beyond that, I need to thank you for being honest with me. And...”

Asuna was gathering courage now, and could speak her mind in a strong voice.

“And I know there wasn’t a spark between us, but I want us to stay friends. You saved my life twice now, and it will take me a lifetime to repay that debt to you. But I promise you, I will repay it in full, if you’ll just tell me how.”

Ekyt didn't know what to say at first. This was something of a love confession mixed in with a love denial, and that made his head ache. But after some thought, he managed to say something useful.

"You don't owe me anything. Just live a happy life, and stay as honest and brave as you are now. It sounds corny, but that's the best favor you could do for me. If you enjoy it, keep training. And remember that you can always come to me for help."

Ekyt tried to keep on a brave face, but what he meant to keep hidden came bubbling to the surface.

"Listen to me spout that crap! What am I saying?! How can I ask you to come to me for help when I can't even help myself?! I may have damned this whole village because I let myself fall in love!" Ryouko clenched a fist, lowering his head. "But it won't happen again. I won't love again, if it means putting the others I love in danger. I won't be that selfish!"

Sakura opted for the gentle approach. "Ekyt, falling in love isn't selfish. You couldn't have known that Azami would do that. And besides, you know she didn't have a choice. Maybe she still loves you."

When that didn't work, Asuna stepped up the plate. She grabbed Ekyt's shirt collar and yanked him close. She wasn't a huge girl, but Asuna had plenty of power. She actually had Ekyt up on his tiptoes.

"Oh, get over yourself! Whining 'cause your little crushes didn't work out! Aren't you a man? You're gonna let some woman knock you on your @\$\$. If you can't come back from this, then you aren't a man. You have no spine. You have no guts. Go ahead, stay in here until you think the world's a fair place! Don't fall in love. Deny your feelings. Deny that you have emotions. Deny that you're a person; a person who has every right to love and hate. Go ahead and deny that you're a warrior, and that overcoming the odds is what you do."

Asuna let Ekyt's shirt fall from her grasp. She almost regretted the approach she had taken with him, but knew that it was necessary to play the bad guy here. Sakura couldn't do that job.

Ekyt didn't even try to process that. Not the way he was now. Instead, he asked "How long do I have to stay here? And are there any other rules I should know?"

Sakura hesitated, then held out her hand. "I'm so sorry, Ekyt. But...By order of Lady Tsunade's chief apprentice, under our article 24 of 'Shinobi unfit for duty', you are relieved of your duties as a shinobi of this village until further notice. When you receive that notification, then and only then can will you be allowed to resume your duties. It's for your own health and safety. I'll need your vest."

94 - Aftershock

Without a word, Ekyt stripped the vest off. But instead of handing it to Sakura, he threw it down the fifty stories. His headband followed it. There was silence, marred only by the 'clang' of the headband hitting the ground below.

"I assume I'll be allowed to create temporary quarters for myself? Or has a holding cell been provided on the lower levels?" Ekyt snapped. But he turned away, already starting to pace the top floor, no doubt feeling constrained by his 'confinement' already. Not that it could be helped. And it wasn't anyone's fault- everything Sakura had said was absolutely correct, and Ekyt's presence DID have to remain secret.

"Rations will be delivered to you. And cigarettes and alcohol, if you like. Female entertainment is also available to you..."

Ekyt gave Sakura the dirtiest look he could muster. "If that's all, then please take your leave. I have no need to speak with someone who would...never mind, I apologize. You're just trying to lighten the mood, right? Sorry, I still don't get 'emotions'. I have them, but I don't understand them...I should seal them away"

Sakura had expected this much, and worse. But she and Asuna left Ekyt by tacit agreement. Before they had gotten far, Ekyt called them back.

"Any shinobi, healthy and recently deceased, who wouldn't mind his body being donated to science...deliver them to me, if it's alright. Six months on the run haven't been spent crying my eyes out. I might as well finish my work."

Sakura actually smiled a little and hugged Ekyt, eyes tearing out of happiness. Upon noticing his bewilderment at that, she explained:

"When I shook you out of that genjutsu, I was worried that you might come out a different man. I'm glad you're still you."

Holding him at arm's length, Sakura amended her statement a little bit.

"But, please- promise me that you won't do some Orochimaru thing with that body? Autopsy it, test it, whatever- but don't go into the 'forbidden arts' thing, okay?"

"It's nothing so dramatic," Ekyt assured her. "I just have a theory, and it's too dangerous to test on living people. Besides... That thing...that thing that Azami will give birth to somehow... It's got my DNA in it. And I need to stop it. If it's a part of me, it's my responsibility...Besides, what I do may very well present a disaster such as the Third Hokage's death again..."

Ekyt reached into his coat pocket, holding something small and black reverently. He put it on- his old mask. He slipped it on over his nose and mouth, taking a minute to get used to breathing through fabric again.

“To remind myself that I’m ‘Ekyl’, and not ‘Ryouko’- whoever he is to me.”

Sakura put a hand on Ekyl’s shoulder. “You DO know that I didn’t invoke act 27 of our articles. The one about ‘unfit for command’, right? You’re still Director of Special Cases of ANBU, you know. And your assistant wants to see you in the worst way. Careful- I don’t want her coming out of here pregnant!”

BAM! A shoe smacked Sakura’s head. It’s source was a rather flustered Mimizu just making her way to the top of the stairs, breathing hard either from anger or from traveling fifty flights up.

“Watch what you say, pinky! I gave up trying to get into his pants! Although, sex IS a stress reliever, right? Heals the mind and all that?”

Sakura shrugged. “Well, that IS true. But is Ekyl up to it physically is the question? I don’t think he’s had much training in the area...”

Ekyl just...deflated. He shook his head, red all over.

“That’s...beyond cruel. You girls are mean. Watching me squirm and loving it! How cruel can you be?”

Sakura put a hand under Ekyl’s chin, stroking it. “MUCH more cruel, kiddo. MUCH more. But, for now, I’ll leave you to your work. And Mimizu will stop you if you try to leave. I’ll deliver you a research subject as soon as I can. Oh, your eye! I’d better heal you!”

While Sakura did that, Ekyl asked Asuna for a few wards to experiment with. They tied into his research- something she well knew. She was the only one privy to the course of Ekyl’s study, and he had sworn her to secrecy. She was all too eager to help. As she handed the ward’s over, Sakura’s treatment was done for the day. Ekyl would need further treatment, but his eyesight would return in full sometime soon.

Standing in front of one of the stained glass windows in the library, Ekyl put a hand to it’s glass. He wanted to be outside. His life had been all about isolation. After being so close to death, and realizing all the things he hadn’t seen or done, he sorely regretted his self-exile. Who would have thought he would ever regret not spending more time with one of his greatest fears- females.

“So, any hot guys in the Leaf Village?” Asuna asked Sakura and Mimizu. It was her first try at ‘girl talk’, so she was sticking with an easy topic.

“Oh, a few,” Sakura replied. “There’s one guy on my team that might fit you nicely. Provided he’s not gay, like I suspect. He’s only slightly harder to read than Ekyl over here.”

Ekyl chuckled, but immediately felt something go wrong. He was standing near the railing, and quickly pushed himself back with his arms. His quick thinking likely saved his life as he began to fall forward. He hit the carpeted floor with a ‘thud’, arms just barely breaking his fall. Immediately, he began to sweat across the brow, as if his head was overheating.

His legs wouldn’t respond to his brain’s commands.

What’s...what’s happening?!

-

shoot! shoot! Ekyt thought, sweat dripping down his brow. He saw the girls run over to him, but he couldn't stand up. It felt so pathetic, lying on the floor, face-down like that.

"Does it hurt?!" Sakura half-shouted, only long hours of training keeping her calm. She knelt down, checking Ekyt's vitals.

"No! I can't feel anything! My legs are completely numb!" Ekyt half-shouted himself, only long training keeping him calm. "I must have over-exerted myself after Itachi's genjutsu! It's mental effects were still lingering!"

Sakura sighed with relief. "Your incapacitation should be temporary, in that case. It's the same effect as your chakra being gone, except it only affects your lower body. You should regain feeling within the week."

Ekyt didn't answer, save for crawling toward his wheelchair. When Asuna went to get it for him, he said "No! I'll do it!"

Though the effort was clearly painful, Ekyt climbed to the wheelchair by himself. He pulled himself up onto it's seat, his legs dangling uselessly behind him. But he made it up by himself. Without a word, he wheeled himself back over to the window.

No one said anything for a time. It was clear that Ekyt's predicament had reduced him to tears, and no one wanted to further ruin him by asking him 'are you crying?'. Instead, Sakura and Asuna left, hearing 'thank you' from over Ekyt's shoulder directed toward them. Sakura repeated her promise to bring Ekyt a corpse, then told Mimizu that Ekyt was 'in her care' for now.

--

Mimizu thought of herself as more than an assistant. She wasn't going to handle paperwork for Ekyt- she was going to fight by his side. All her life, she wanted justice and understanding, and she believed that she found a mortal example. She didn't worship Ekyt- she admired him.

A man so dedicated to his work and to his home that he won't complain about paralysis. Proud yet quiet about his pride. Strong, but he doesn't preach his strength. He's not like any shinobi or swordsman I've ever seen. Once he can't compete in one field of his work, he switches to another and continues.

Mimizu stopped herself from perching on Ekyt's shoulder- she didn't want to break his wheelchair. She also didn't read any books, aside from some comics and novels she had brought from home. She wouldn't let herself be labeled as a 'leak'. She wanted citizenship in the Leaf. Her only friends in the world were here, in the leaf. Okayu found his brother (Yuushi), and this place wasn't war-torn and full of blood.

"Mimizu, would you throw my tools down? I hate to ask, but I don't think I could muster the strength to get up there right now..."

Ekyt was down in the lowest basement, setting up a small lab for himself. It had taken the allotment of his chakra to create the four shadow clones he needed to get him downstairs. Not to mention the strain of maintaining them. For now, he had only half his chakra. The body was an amazing thing, Ekyt was learning.

When his paralysis hit, the lower half of his tenketsu shut down, chakra still sealed in them. The rest of the chakra diverted itself to flow around his upper body. In this way the body didn't overheat or overexert itself. It was funny to think there was such a failsafe measure within such a fragile piece of meat.

It's almost serendipity that this happened to me when it did. My study on chakra needed a boost. And here it is. Now I just need to solve my mobility issue. Some kind of chakra puppetry, perhaps? No, that ties up my hands...Well, maybe my paralysis will wear off by then.

Mimizu happily bounded down the stairs to deliver Ekyt's tools. He thanked her, then studied her for a moment.

"Sakura left out an article that needed to be cited," he commented, reaching into his pocket. "Any associate of an ANBU director must be marked properly with a Leaf Village insignia. And I threw my headband away, but it's not my only one. I've destroyed so many through training...Well, I want you to take this one. It was my spare, but now it identifies you as my assistant. Or, in the field, assistant captain."

Mimizu took the headband. She stared at its shiny surface for a moment. She had never gotten a headband in the Mist- at least not one she felt she earned. Even though she and her fellow swords were the elite, they were never recognized.

Acceptance...

She leapt up and hugged Ekyt.

"Thank you thank you thank you!" she declared hopping up and down beside his wheelchair. She then proceeded to kiss him on the cheek.

"Now, Mimizu, once you put that on, we can't have that kissing stuff," Ekyt said sternly. Then he broke into a big grin. "But it's not on you right now, is it? So it's cool. Here, let me put it on. It's kind of supposed to work that way anyway. How do you want to wear it?"

Mimizu thought for a moment. **My right arm...my sword arm. It might deflect an opposing blade...**

"On my upper right arm," she declared, holding out the arm. Ekyt tied the headband on. It looked good where it was, and Ekyt smiled and gave her a nod.

"Good. One more thing. You'll need one of our short ANBU swords. This one I actually...well, made myself. It should be sturdy enough. But its guard is special. It's the Leaf's symbol. I think it'll serve you well."

Ekyt handed the sword over, then began to wheel himself over to an old wooden table he'd dug up. He laid his tools on a smaller table next to it. One experiment was all he needed. Just one working example...

--

Azami watched, removed from the act, as the child bearing hers, Itachi's, and Ekyt's DNA was 'assembled'. She was his 'mother', but in name only. She could not love the 'child'. It was created from hate. And it wasn't a pure creation, either. It wasn't made with either man she loved. It was crafted in a laboratory, with the purpose of killing one of those whose DNA was inside it. It was meant to destroy.

"He will reach maturity in twenty-four hours."

Itachi looked at the creature, equally displeased. Azami wondered what was running through his head. More importantly, what precautions might Ekyt be taking?

"I've sent word to the Leaf Village that Ekyt is innocent of the murder of the Mizukage," Itachi said matter-of-factly. "We can't have him in hiding when this is unleashed."

"Who committed the murder?" Azami wanted to know. Ekyt was talented enough to murder, but equally incapable of it due to his pure soul.

"Orochimaru," Itachi replied. "He tried to frame Ekyt, to get him executed. Ekyt holds what Orochimaru fears most, so it's only natural he'd want the boy eliminated."

Azami already knew what Orochimaru feared.

"The Reaper Death Seal. Of course. He would fear that, the one sure way to kill him. It's thankful he's never obtained the Sharingan."

--

Lady Tsunade actually cheered. Holding a paper that cleared her jonin, she hugged Sakura and Shizune.

"Sakura, let him out of the library! He's GOT to come party for this! YES!"

Sakura gasped. "My Lady- you knew I had hidden him?"

"Of course! Did you think you could hide anything from your master?!" Tsunade crowed. "Never mind, go get the boy and bring him here, on my orders."

Sakura hesitated. She was sure that Ekyt wouldn't be in the mood to party, since he was in a wheelchair at the moment. But she couldn't disobey Tsunade, and it would ease his mental strain for him to know that he had been declared innocent.

"Right away, My Lady!"

--

Ekyt had done it. A secret of chakra had been bypassed, and he had proven his theory correct.

“Chakra, even of the deceased, can be stored. Orochimaru’s immortality jutsu, plus chakra sealing tags, plus the gates of chakra... They fit together. If I seal chakra in a tag, then give the tag a false set of ‘tenketsu’, so the chakra continues to cycle and stay fresh, then I can store chakra indefinitely...And if that’s so, then I can use that chakra to perform normally out of reach attacks.”

Mimizu came running, panic all over her face.

“Ekyt! Sakura is coming!”

“That’s fine,” Ekyt said dismissively, recording his progress into a book.

“The Hokage is with her!”

“Oh, shoot!” Ekyt muttered. He was going to run, but decided there was little point. Instead, he would just wait.

Seeing his decision, Mimizu climbed up on his shoulder, giving him an affectionate glance, then standing ready to defend him.

--

Tsunade walked in, immediately looking down.

“Oh...”

Her heart sank. Ekyt was in a wheelchair, with one eye. On his shoulder was his fierce assistant. But seeing what stress had done to the boy made Tsunade want to sob. But seeing the resolve he had to keep living his life as a shinobi...

That made her want to sob even more.

“Ekyt...you’re...innocent. Oh, come here!” Tsunade finally broke down. She squeezed Ekyt, leaning down so he could do the same.

“My Lady...I’ve done it. My research. I can defeat that thing the Akatsuki’s coming with...”

Mimizu leapt off Ekyt’s shoulder, barring her teeth at something in the rafters. Ekyt immediately pushed Tsunade behind him, rolling his chair toward Mimizu. She had been silently trying to get his attention for a while now.

“I see them!” he shouted. But he had barely gotten the words out of his mouth before two ANBU agents landed on either side of him.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Tsunade demanded. “I gave you no orders to harass him!”

The agents turned towards Tsunade. "Master Danzou gave us our orders, My Lady. We're to kill him before he recovers his strength. Please don't get involved. We do not wish to spill your blood."

Ekyt stayed still, thinking his way out of this.

"Danzou? The blind man with the cane wants to take down the one-eyed, wheelchair bound version of me? How typical of him. Striking when he thinks I'm at my weakest..."

Everyone was amazed when Ekyt started to get up. Finding no other alternative, he used a simple form of chakra puppetry. But that used up one hand...

"You mean to die standing, upright? A man's death, Ekyt!"

But Ekyt wasn't done. Mimizu at his side, he kicked forward, making handsigns with a single hand. Mimizu had her sword drawn in an instant.

Tsunade and Sakura just stood there.

With one hand?! Tsunade thought, absolutely amazed. How far has he come in his exile? He's no longer an ordinary shinobi! Has Sarutobi's prediction come true? Has he become...a legend?

Tsunade studied Ekyt, but shook her head.

No. Not yet. But there's no longer any doubt- he will fulfill the Third's prophecy. But it's more likely as a stepping stone for the next legends, than as a legend himself. Sad, but maybe it was his choice all along...

-

Mimizu was already done with her opponent. She sliced him into twenty pieces before he realized she had drawn his sword. Now to see what Ekyt would do.

No genjutsus this time. Instead, Ekyt picked the least destructive jutsu he could.

"Flama Succendo!"

The fire rose up from beneath, like usual. The ANBU agent jumped. Predictably. He tried to cast a paralysis jutsu on Ekyt, but felt it being blocked.

No...not blocked. There's no target there! Only a little chakra. But it moves like a-

Ekyt came from behind, still in his wheelchair, one hand controlling the corpse he had made to look like himself. The other hand grabbed the agent's leg and slammed him down into the 'operating' table Ekyt had used. Ekyt's 'corpse-self' chose a scalpel and began to slice away, until the agent's arms and legs were bloodied, and his mouth was gagged.

Ekyt, in his wheelchair, sagged; he was exhausted. That was a lot of chakra, and he had only half his normal amount.

Mimizu leapt up onto his shoulder, looking around viciously. Ekyt laid his head on his hand, looking really tired. But he looked up to the others and managed a small smile.

“Let’s get going. I have a few more days to keep my promise to Sasuke, and right now...well, let’s have a little fun.”

Sakura began to push Ekyt’s wheelchair. Tsunade picked up what remained of the rogue ANBU agent.

“Incidentally, My Lady...isn’t this a job for the ‘Special Investigations’ end of ANBU?” Ekyt piped up.

“I’ll be happy to arrest Danzou...”

95 - The Dark Underside

NOTE: THIS CHAPTERS CONTAINS MILD-MODERATE SPOILERS TO THE REAL NARUTO UNIVERSE.

-NG

Chapter 95

Danzou was set to meet with Tsunade. The day, as Ekyt would remember, was warm and sunny- until Danzou came. Then the sky darkened, and rain spilled from the clouds. It would be forever etched into his memory: Danzou walking in, two flunkies at his side. His eye and Danzou's eye meeting, each knowing what would happen if the other made a move.

Sakura was tense, tightening her glove almost compulsively. Shizune kept on reaching for the needles hidden on her forearm, ready to react to the slightest touch.

Most of all, there was Ekyt. Mimizu on his shoulder, he was the picture of calm intensity. He projected nothing but confidence as he listened to Danzou not even try to cover up attempting to assassinate him. The others were nervous, angry, or both, but Ekyt was simply calm and ready to go.

"Elder, we both know what has happened, and why you're trying to remove me from the equation."

Ekyt's voice seemed deeper and more powerful- rather like the Third Hokage's voice. But that was just another part of Ekyt's quiet confidence.

"Yes, we do. Your connection to our foolish Third Hokage and your insistence on avoiding killing," Danzou agreed. His wooden walking stick suddenly seemed a lot more dangerous. There was no doubt that Danzou had some kind of abilities that were well hidden due to age and disease. No one could command respect without some kind power. Otherwise, that 'respect' was called 'love'.

Ekyt was amiable, though not smiling. "Well, I'm not going anywhere. You, Elder, are the one at the disadvantage here. Our village tends to agree with my way of thinking. And I refuse to back down from you, whatever your credentials."

"Do you think I disrespect you, Ekyt?" Danzou asked, cunning in his voice. "Would I order your assassination if I didn't believe you to be a problem?"

"Not at all. I'm honored you've bothered with me," Ekyt replied, spreading his hands in front of him. "But the problem here is that I don't want to die- not at your hands. And certainly not at a flunky's hands! I will, no doubt, die before my time, but it will be a warrior's death. If nothing else, I'll see to that. So that leaves us little to discuss, doesn't it?"

Danzou moved closer. Ekyt wheeled closer. They were close to eye level, so bent with age was Danzou.

“Our sacrifices for your kind should speak volumes about us. What do your sacrifices say?” Danzou questioned, meaning for it to be harsh. He didn’t count on Ekyt’s answer.

“My sacrifices? Well, charity should be mute, elder. Otherwise it isn’t charity. But that notwithstanding, the impression I hope to leave is a man who was certainly desperate. Thirsting, but never finding water enough to quench his thirst. Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

“And the meaning of this metaphor?”

Ekyt’s face tensed slightly. “I contradict myself. I protect peace, yet I’m a warrior. I need war to be a warrior, don’t I? Beyond that, I enjoy fighting, though I don’t enjoy killing. Paradoxal, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Danzou replied. “I believe war to be a necessity, and I want to see our people prosper. Don’t you wish the same?”

“Of course!” Ekyt said, almost snottily. “But I don’t want to prosper at the expense of others. That is the difference in our thinking. And this recent attempt on my life makes me believe that this won’t be resolved with mere words.”

Danzou straightened slightly, drawing himself up as much as his old bones would allow. “Are you asking me to fight you?”

Ekyt shrugged. “My words were certainly open to interpretation, weren’t they? You can take whatever meaning you wish away from them. That’s certainly your prerogative, Elder.”

“What kind of ANBU leader would be so squeamish about taking a life?” Danzou asked Ekyt, venom dripping into his voice. “You have yet to kill a man. And yet you ask your assistant to kill!”

Mimizu rushed to Ekyt’s defense, immediately and with her usual intensity. “Captain Ekyt has never asked anything like that of me! I kill if it’s necessary! And you’re tempting me, you old-”

Ekyt patted Mimizu’s back. “No need to get upset. He has a right to an opinion, after all.”

Mimizu grumbled, but calmed down, crouching on Ekyt’s shoulder, suddenly feeling vicious. **Old bastard...**

“Now then, Elder. We’ve made our meanings as clear as two ‘deny we exist and burn before reading’ ANBU commanders can. The move is yours. Should you choose not to move, then I’ll be happy to finish this. I’ve never killed, and I certainly didn’t believe an Elder of my own village would be the first person I’d kill...”

“Do you mean to try?” came Danzou’s challenging reply.

Ekyt raised his eyebrows. “Well, I have a warrant for your arrest. If you choose to fight me...yes, I do.”

Using his chakra puppetry, Ekyt worked his legs so he could stand up. He stood next to Elder Danzou,

their shoulders touching. Both their heads were lowered as they spoke in serious tones. (Note: Think of Aizen and Ichimaru in the 3rd Bleach ending, 5th squad version)

“I WILL kill you, Danzou. Directly or indirectly. You’re a threat I can no longer ignore. I won’t die by your hand. This is fact.”

Ekyt and Mimizu were ‘connected’ it seemed. Because the instant Ekyt’s chakra scalpel was activated, Mimizu took off, running on the ceiling. Danzou’s guards turned to her, but found her sword cutting their arms off before they could even think of reacting.

And Ekyt? His hand, glowing with a blue energy, plunged into Danzou’s stomach. Three inches below the navel exactly, Ekyt struck Danzou’s ‘Ki’ point. This bent Danzou over even more, allowing Ekyt’s hand access to some vital organs, which he began to rip apart.

“Old bastard. You made me a liar...” Ekyt said, shaking his hand off when Danzou fell to the ground and blood leaked from his mouth. “I said I’d kill you. I guess I am soft. Or maybe killing you feels like kicking a puppy. Or, more likely, I just wanted the pleasure of arresting you.”

The ‘day’ would be remembered for ten minutes of small talk, threats, and a fight that lasted less than thirty seconds. It didn’t take much to define a day. It was a simple increment of time. It’s meaning and value varied person to person. For Ekyt, this moment was just another of him doing his job, and satisfaction that he had just nearly destroyed someone who hated his sensei.

To Mimizu, the day would mark the first time she’d seen even a hint of what Ekyt could do. It reaffirmed her decision that he was someone worth her time and admiration.

For Tsunade, the day showed her that Ekyt could be the man that the next three Sannin needed to walk with them. It also outlined him as a man that would get his hands dirty when it was required- whether it was asked of him or not.

“My Lady...it might be best for me to return to the library. It won’t do to have too many people view my weakness. It’s not a vanity. It’s more of...well, I don’t want every idiot with a kunai knife trying to ‘prove a point’ by taking me out. There are greater things I’ll need to prepare for...”

Tsunade watched her best agents taking Danzou away. Distracted, she answered “Fine. Anyone in particular you don’t want to see you, or know about you?”

Ekyt clasped his hands, steepling his fingers. “That’s easy. I only want to see one person. Taro Masamitsu. Azami’s father and I need to talk. And, of course, anyone who’s already seen me this way. But I do not want Yuushi to see me. Okayu is fine. I don’t want my assistant captain to get lonely when I go rather...comatose.”

Tsunade raised an eyebrow, not liking the tone of this conversation. “Comatose? What are you planning?”

“Training, in a word. Using genjutsu to create a training situation. I can tailor the situation to my specific fears, and then destroy those fears,” Ekyt told her. “I know fear is part of my humanity, but there will be

plenty to fear when the Akatsuki come. In fact, Danzou has awakened a new fear that will need to be dealt with..."

"And that is?" Tsunade led him on, making a 'keep talking' gesture with her hands.

Ekyt sighed, a look of shame on his face. "I do need war. Without something to protect, I have no purpose. But I want peace for everyone else. It's a mind-bending fear for me, My Lady. One I...have no counter for. Not yet. But it's not a pressing concern, I suppose. War won't be eliminated within my lifetime. Well, it's doubtful anyway."

Sinking back into his wheelchair, Ekyt looked very tired. Not surprising, as he had expended half of his half of remaining chakra in that short burst.

I hate this...but there's no choice. I have no other way to prepare. I'll trust Mimizu to protect me while I'm under in the genjutsu...

"Ekyt, I want you to make me a promise," Tsunade said finally, her voice kind and forbidding at the same time. "I want you to promise me you won't throw your life away unless absolutely necessary. You know Sarutobi's prophecy about you, don't you?"

"The one about 'becoming a legend or helping the others to be legends?' Yes, I know of it."

"Good. Because I'll give you the purpose you need. Protect the next legends. And more than that-become one yourself. Don't settle for understudy. Take the main part. You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

Ekyt spun his wheelchair around, heading for the door. "I do, My Lady. And I promise you. But one thing at a time. I must correct my mistake. This is something I have to do. I can't let the Akatsuki win. If they do, legendary or not will be the least of our worries."

--

Ekyt couldn't let on the real reason he was so ashen. The reason he was sure that Danzou's goons had shown up like that. Not to mention the reason he had to silence the old man.

"Mimizu...I've sided with Itachi."

Mimizu didn't stop walking. She didn't even turn her head. But he could practically smell the fear coming off her.

"There's more to that story than any of us knew," Ekyt said quietly, hands folded in his lap. "He's the good guy here. And I need to let him know just what went on. It explains why he's been so intent on keeping me alive. Why he's never given me a real fight... I was a fool to believe I could have stood up to him."

Itachi, you knew the Third Hokage's belief. That someday Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto would form the next Sannin. And you heard about me, too. I don't know how, but you want me alive to protect your brother. You need to know things have changed...that I might not be able to do that...

How did Ekyt discover all this? And when?

“Mimizu, when I was in the library for the first time, I read a book authored by Madara Uchiha. And in it, there was an unauthorized history of the Leaf Village. I didn’t want to read it- this was the blackest of books, and shouldn’t have existed... But I couldn’t stop. I needed to know more...”

Things became difficult for Ekyt. He stayed in his chair, but it was obvious that he wanted to get up and pace. Sitting down all the time was killing him.

“Say no more. Ekyt, I’m your assistant. That means my loyalty is to you. You don’t need to explain yourself to me, unless you feel you need to bare your soul to someone. And what I’ve heard...or, rather, haven’t heard. This is one of those ‘deny it’s existence’ things, isn’t it?”

Ekyt nodded, smiling slightly. “Yes, it is. What I say next might very well save our village. We need Itachi. That bastard child of Azami’s has his DNA in it, too. I can’t defeat it. Not alone. Even if it’s just one time...I’m going to fight alongside Itachi.”

Mimizu cocked her head. “You’re telling me this for a reason, and I’m not liking where this is going...”

Ekyt patted her head, trying to comfort her. He actually reached out and hugged her- an extremely rare gesture, coming from him.

“Don’t worry. This is very likely going to annoy all the wrong people, and I don’t want you caught up in the cross-fire. I’m going to take a page out of Itachi’s book. Well, sort of. Mimizu, I’ve written the truth- my truth- of what’s about to happen. I want you to give it to Lady Tsunade. She’ll understand. And then...I’ll need you to kill me.”

Ekyt was already writing something down on a sheet of paper, even summoning his hawk will speaking so matter-of-factly about the darkest hour of the village.

“More accurately, you’ll ‘discover’ this book, ‘kill’ me, then give the book to Lady Tsunade. Before my body is discovered, too. Only a select few can enter this library, so it could be days before I’m found out. By then, I may already be in combat.”

“And as for me? I won’t leave your side!” Mimizu said firmly, clutching Ekyt’s arm with an iron grip that belied her tiny frame.

“You can stay loyal to me and what I stand for, but we’ll be physically separated out of necessity. If I might ask a favor of you...”

“Anything!”

“Take care of Asuna and the others. I plan to come back alive. But if I don’t...well, I’d like to die knowing that the people I worry about most are secure. And of course, that includes you. So make sure you take care of yourself, too.”

Mimizu hugged him tighter, burying her head in his chest.

“How long will you be gone?”

“Don’t over think this. I won’t even be leaving the village. And my ruse might not be necessary. In fact, I leave it up to you. If people find out I’m asking Itachi for help...well, then you’ll be a hero when you put that sword in ‘me’.”

Mimizu was considerably relieved. She noticed, however, that Ekyt’s chest was shaking, as if he was holding in some heavy emotion.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I was just thinking of the letter I’m sending to Itachi. It’s a hard one to write, but...It needs to be done.”

Ekyt had finished the letter, and even summoned his hawk, but he couldn’t quite get the gumption up to let it go. It was the hardest letter he’d ever written:

Itachi,

I know the history. I’ve sided with you. This creation will not be under your control. Creating a being like that is very risky, no matter what kind of power you command. We need to stand together to stop it.

Also...on the matter of Azami. I’ve said some terrible things to both you and her. And I will never be able to apologize enough. I am unfit to be in the company of either of you, be it skill or as a man. Forgive me, hate me, whatever you need to feel. But I ask two things of you:

First, that you’ll consider returning to the village. It’s time your brother had the family he needs, and only you can provide that.

Second... This is difficult to word, but... Take care of Azami. I told her to pick the ‘better man’ of us. When I said that, I had vague hope it might be me. It’s my fault she’s being torn apart emotionally. No matter how she tried to hide it, I could tell. Please tell her that I advise her to pick you. No, go further- tell her that I said she needs to pick you.

Itachi, our pasts aside, we agree on one thing- Konoha. Even if you hate me, if you can find it within to love Konoha enough to fight alongside me...

If not, then we’re doomed. And it will only be a matter of time before your creation turns on you.

Consider carefully before responding. Send word by summon before arriving.

Regards,

-E

PS: Tell Azami her Father will be fine. I’ve learned how to undo the jutsu within him.

--

Itachi read the letter dispassionately, frowning in thought and concentration. Someone else knew about

his greatest secret. That was both good and bad in a situation like this.

He won't tell anyone else. But return to Konoha? That would mean meeting Sasuke again. But if he's right...and this thing can't be controlled...

The rest of the letter wasn't what Itachi expected either. But Ekyt had often surprised him, so he didn't dismiss any of it as crap. Instead, he showed it to Azami.

"Back to Konoha?" she asked, a hint of longing in her voice. She wasn't a high-maintenance girl, but the thought of a real home appealed to her.

"It's best," Itachi told her confidently. "There is too much truth here to dismiss all of it as worthless. But there's no doubt he'd one this in secret. We'll need to be prepared for if and when the village rejects us...or Ekyt."

Azami sighed a little, but reached into her cloak, revealing a spare cloak. "He can always join the Akatsuki if he needs to run. I think a bigger problem is Kisame."

Itachi didn't agree. "Kisame's loyalty is to me, and to violence. Not to the Akatsuki."

"We'll need to be ready to leave quickly, then..." Azami looked away, pink on her cheeks.

"Are you worried about seeing him again?"

Azami shrugged. "Not so much that. I just wonder how he'll treat me. I mean...I DID try to kill him...twice. And I DID betray him after swearing I loved him. I'm not worried about him hurting me- I'm worried that I'll reflexively kill him if he tries something stupid."

Itachi and Azami both leapt backwards suddenly, as if by some unspoken cue. A giant snake came from under them. It was mostly purple, but had black markings and yellow eyes. It's jaws were wide enough to easily swallow the entire Akimichi clan in one gulp.

If there was any doubt in who was behind the attack, it was gone when the 'perfect child' Azami and Itachi had worked on was swallowed up.

Itachi landed, coughing up blood. Azami immediately dug for pills inside his robe.

"We're going to Konoha," Itachi said, taking a pill.

"Lady Tsunade can cure you, too," Azami reminded him, thinking of the amazing work she had seen firsthand. "But I guess we can classify this as a business trip. If Orochimaru plans to absorb that thing, he just got the Sharingan."

--

Ekyt laid on the table, his eye fluttering rapidly. It was as though he was dreaming. More likely, he was having a nightmare.

Mimizu, Asuna, and Okayu watched for a while, making sure he was okay. When they were sure he was fine for the time being, they began to talk quietly amongst themselves. It was mostly mindless chatter, since Asuna didn't know Mimizu and Okayu well. And especially since Mimizu didn't know a good deal about Okayu.

"This place is nice. I'm going to hate going back to the temple after this." Asuna stretched her arms out happily. This position also gave her a chance to check on Ekyt out of the corner of her eye.

Okayu and Mimizu were going to make homes here. Okayu didn't want Yuushi to be without his brother anymore, and Mimizu felt herself to be the Hawkeye to Ekyt's Mustang. Both of them had found the purposes they were lacking as two of the 'heirs to the Seven Swordsman'. It was nice to be respected without being feared. The two went hand and hand in the Mist Village.

"I can't believe the Mizukage was assassinated like that!" Okayu exclaimed. His hands twitched toward his swords. "Not that he didn't deserve death, but still..."

"The old man wasn't THAT bad! Besides, we did stuff he told us to all the time. We probably could have ganged up on him and took over the government." Mimizu said this so casually you really couldn't tell if she was serious or not.

Is she really just a twenty-one year old girl? That ambition sounded awfully real... Asuna thought to herself. Of all of them, she was the most useless in combat. That bothered her to no end, given her new company.

That, and criminals seem to want to destroy my temple. Wouldn't it be great if I could give them a beating, so they'd never try it again?

Mimizu noticed that Asuna was deep in thought, so she did what she always did when Ekyt started thinking too much. She jumped up onto the miko's shoulder.

"Whatcha thinking about?!" she half screamed, right in Asuna's ear.

"Ah! Don't do that! I'm not that self-mutilating idiot!" Asuna shouted, pointing at Ekyt. "What in the hell is he doing to himself, anyway?!"

Mimizu bit her thumb. "Well, he put himself in a genjutsu to train. At least, that's what he said. What that genjutsu is about..."

She shrugged. What Ekyt feared, besides girls was anyone's guess.

"I...wish I knew more. So I could help him on the battlefield..." Asuna whispered.

"Ohhh, a widdle cwush?! Huh, is it? Is it?!" Mimizu wheedled, hanging from Asuna's neck by her legs.

"No! I'll have you know he kissed me once, and there wasn't a spark! But...I have to admire him. All the ways he's been rejected, he keeps finding reasons to protect the people that reject him. And he just keeps getting stronger. In fact, when he spent six months hiding at my temple, when he and I would talk at four in the morning, these ideas would hit him. He'd tell me, writing it down while he talked. He explored every possibility. But one night, he was quiet. There was even a tear in his eye. He totally

didn't want me to see it, of course. Guys are like that."

"He hardly seems the type to just cry. What was his reason? Did he say?" Okayu had to admit to himself that he was curious about someone like Ekyt crying.

"Well...it went like this..."

--

(Four months earlier)

Ekyt was playing with a kunai knife, sitting in his shed. It was past midnight. The night looked just like any other night. But to Ekyt, this night had special meaning.

"Hey. Is something wrong?"

Ekyt shook his head, shaking himself out of his trance. Asuna was carrying a tray of tea. She set it before him, on a low table. Then she smoothed her hakama and knelt down herself.

"Nothing's wrong. Hey, when did you become my servant?" Ekyt intoned, chuckling a little.

"Oh, shut up! You don't know where the kitchen is. And knowing you, you can't cook, so you'd just needlessly tear up the kitchen."

"And you just happen to be the one who has to clean it, right?" he shot back, smiling. He really enjoyed the mindless bantering with the young priestess. He felt comfortable around her.

Is it love? I've asked myself so many times. I had 'love' with Azami. It's a pretty distinct feeling. If I'm still doubting it, then I'm not in love. At least not yet, anyway. God, why am I thinking of that horror story that is my love life tonight, of all nights? There're other things to worry about.

Or is that thought process why I'm still single?

After a few minutes, Ekyt apologized. He had taken to wearing a dark purple hakama, with navy blue gi top. He fit in a little better that way.

"I'm sorry, I'm just distracted. See, tonight is kind of a couple anniversary's for me. I never thought about it before, but the night the Third Hokage died was the same day I came to the village. And that's tonight. Hard to believe he's been dead for a year already. Not to mention all that's happened during that time. I wonder if he'd approve?"

Asuna cocked her head. Ekyt was always in a pensive mood, it seemed. The boy seemed to live to reminisce about regrets. Regrets he could do nothing about.

Ordinarily, Asuna would give him a smack for thinking like that, but she decided that losing someone close to you was an okay reason to be in a thoughtful mood.

Asuna thought of her sister for a moment. But Ekyt's voice broke her concentration.

“Kiss me!”

“Huh?” Asuna managed to say. But Ekyt was already reaching for her, his face getting close to hers.

His eyes...they're so serious...He's not going to stop at a kiss! Oh, be gentle!

Ekyt was sitting back down, chuckling a little. “Sorry, sorry. But I can tell when you're starting to dwell on things you shouldn't...”

“You bastard!” Asuna roared, bouncing her half-full cup of tea off his head. “How DARE you pretend to defile an innocent maiden with that serious look?!”

“Hey, YOU took it in what context you wanted. Don't blame me!” he replied back, taking a calm gulp of his own tea. “But it DID feel good to play with you like that. Now I know why the kunoichi back home always did that to me when they could.”

Asuna grumbled, but she calmed down and had a laugh. A priestess who had a dirty mind was a funny thing.

“Besides that, I can tell you like to be in charge from the way you browbeat when you trained me.” Ekyt sat back down happily, well aware that Asuna would probably consider killing him.

Anything to forget...For her, her sister. For me, the way I helped my sensei die.

Will I ever stop questioning that? There was no way to talk the Sarutobi-sensei out of performing the Reaper Death Seal. If I had done it, then he would be sad. And it wasn't my place. That was his grudge to settle. For me, I was the student who was supposed to support him.

And I did. I tried to kill Orochimaru first. And when it came to it, I helped him do what he felt was right.

So why do I feel so bad about it? Damn it, it's messing with my head! Why did he have to die? And why did he die for nothing? That stupid snake bastard survived! Just like he always does! Damn it!

A tear of frustration ran down Ekyt's face. Asuna, who was just getting ready to playfully tackle him and 'playfully' beat the crap out of him (Since he wouldn't fight back. He still won't hit girls), had leaned close. She saw the look on his face, and a snapshot of it formed in her mind.

Once he noticed she had seen, he brushed the tear away angrily. “Sorry. I was just thinking of Sarutobi-sensei. And how I helped him die...”

He'd explained this to Asuna before. She just gave him a quick hug, then excused herself to get more tea. It was clear he needed a minute to settle down; that wasn't likely to happen with a girl in the room.

--

“...So I couldn't do much to help him. But I tried. It must have killed him to help his sensei die. I guess that would bother me, too. After all, I watched my sister die. Maybe that's why I try to take care of Ekyt. When my sister died, he did all he could to save her. And he also went out of his way to make sure I was taken care of. That stupid jerk is a class act.”

As Asuna tried to compose herself, she heard a moan.

“...kill me...” came Ekyt's voice, weak and burdened.

Everyone rushed over, seeing he was still in the genjutsu. Clearly, it was too much for him. Time for a wake-up call.

Mimizu tapped his shoulder, muttered 'release', then stepped back. It was lucky she did, because Ryouko took a wild swipe at the air and nearly beheaded her.

“Ugh...I couldn't last...” Ekyt muttered, a hand to his head. “How long was I under?”

Mimizu shrugged. “Three hours or so. A really long time!”

Ekyt groaned again, sitting up with some effort. “Not long enough, but it'll have to do. Oh, hi everyone. Sorry, 'm a little groggy righ' now...”

No one made any big deal about it. Everyone had heard about Ekyt's habits, so no one was too surprised. They also didn't ask what he had been training about. It seemed to be a private matter. Instead, they sat back and watched him get into his wheelchair.

“I'd better eat something. I must've burned through almost all my chakra after that stunt.”

--

No one had ever really seen Ekyt eat. It seemed like he lived on Chakra cigarettes and training. And maybe some sake. But he must take good care of himself to be in such good shape.

Drinking his tea silently while the others talked, it was becoming uncomfortable for Ekyt. The wheelchair, the eye patch, being forced to hide in the library... It was not the life Ekyt wanted; not by a long shot. He wanted to belong to the Leaf Village. He wanted to make his life. Granted, he did still want to be a legend, but how likely was that? He was more likely to walk with the legends as Sarutobi-sensei had predicted. But maybe...

He didn't say legendary status was out of the question...and Lady Tsunade DID tell me to aim higher than a servant to the legends. Maybe they know something I don't?

But look at me? How could I be a legend like this? I can't even leave the library!

No matter, that's now what's important. What IS important is what Itachi does next.

The others saw Ekyt deep in thought, and tried to be quiet. But their quiet was what alerted him to their eyes watching him.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. That genjutsu I put on myself was pretty brutal. I was just thinking about it.”

Ekyt took a gulp of tea. It didn't seem like anyone believed him. But they weren't going to say anything. Instead, Mimizu hopped up onto his shoulder, taking her place as his self-appointed guardian. Ekyt had to smile a little, and relaxed unconsciously. There would be time for stress later.

96 - Dream World

Chapter 96

Ekyt revised his plan a little bit. Faking death was too extreme, and it would have likely landed Itachi in hot water, since he was the most likely suspect. Instead, Ekyt laid out his plan carefully to a select group. All those involved with Itachi one way or another heard the plan, hidden deep within the library's confines.

As Ekyt spoke, he could practically feel the kunai that would no doubt be in him for suggesting that they cooperate with an apparent traitor. Having spoken to Lady Tsunade alone first to lay out the truth of Itachi's betrayal, he knew that she at least would consider what he had to say before killing him.

"This...thing, for want of a better word, is too much for even the Akatsuki to control. Itachi is willing to help us destroy it. We know what he can do. I promise all of you- if he does anything to hurt the village, I will kill him. There's one jutsu even he can't survive. As the Third Hokage's apprentice, I know it, and I will use it."

Ekyt stopped talking to let all that sink in. Just then a bird appeared with a 'pop' on his shoulder. It was one of Azami's tropical birds. Ekyt eagerly tore open the envelope. He suddenly let out an audible growl and a nasty curse word.

"Esteemed council, we have no choice now. This letter is from Itachi and Azami. And apparently, Orochimaru stole their 'ultimate body'. I don't need to tell you that this means we are in grave danger as a village."

There was chatter for a while, but eventually someone called out a valid question:

"How are you going to get Itachi in here? Our village wants to kill him!"

Ekyt smiled, a little sadly. "Well, there's one way, and I'm going to do it. Those of you who know about this; control who you can and stop them from attacking him. In the meantime, I'll make sure that he'll have a way to get in safely."

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Itachi and Azami waited outside the gates, patiently awaiting Ekyt's instructions. Izumo and Kotetsu were right there, and clearly scared, but they respected Ekyt enough to trust him. Gradually, Izumo got up the courage to lean over and say to the two Akatsuki members 'Welcome back'.

Itachi nodded his head, while Azami gave him a quiet 'thank you'.

Ekyt wheeled up, the entire town in tow behind him. They all gasped and reached for weapons upon seeing their guests, but Ekyt paid that no mind. He continued to wheel over to Azami and Itachi. He spun

his chair around to face the village once he reached them.

“Listen to me, all of you!” he said loudly, without yelling. “Our village is in grave danger, and these two could very well save us. Last night, Orochimaru took an ‘ultimate body’ that the Akatsuki created. It has the Sharingan of Itachi Uchiha, the cunning of Azami Masamitsu...and the ability to adapt and learn of myself.”

Ekyt continued to explain what was happening. He saw Jiraiya in the crowd, watching over Naruto. He saw Sasuke tensing up, though he had been told of the true Uchiha clan history. It was hard to let go of a lifetime of hatred in a few short hours.

At the end of his speech, Ekyt pushed his wheelchair away. He sank to his knees, bowed down, and lowered his head.

“I ask forgiveness of this village for keeping this dark secret. But our darkest hour approaches, and we have little choice but to make friends with those we’ve called ‘enemy’ for years. I ask that all of you reserve your anger and hatred for me. I will gladly accept any punishment- including execution- at the close of the coming battle. Anything you would bestow on Itachi, give to me instead. And welcome back one of the Leaf’s most revered clans.”

Itachi and Azami exchanged glances, but each in turn sunk to one knee and asked for forgiveness from the village.

“CHIDORI!”

Sasuke had leapt from somewhere high, aiming his most powerful attack at- Ekyt? Ekyt stood still, apparently ready to accept it.

Itachi’s hand flashed up and grabbed Sasuke’s arm. His other hand reached out, aiming for Sasuke’s face. Sasuke winced-

Tap.

Itachi tapped Sasuke in the forehead, just as he had done when they were younger.

“Not now, Sasuke.”

Sasuke just stood there. Ekyt had already known this would happen, so he kept quiet. This was a moment for the remaining Uchihas, not to be interfered with unless necessary. The village hadn’t reacted badly, so that was a victory.

I knew it, though. Sasuke’s whole life has been hatred and hunting for the one person stronger than him whose approval he’s needed. Now that Itachi is ‘good’, there’s a giant void. And he’ll need a new ‘villain’ to fill that void. As a thanks to you, Itachi, I’ll fill that void if I need to.

This was harder on Ekyt emotionally than he expected. He had more or less turned himself into a villain for the good of the village, and he wasn’t liking it very much. But there was no turning back. He had to see this through.

Garbage and knives soon flew through the air at Ekyt. He didn't attempt to move, save for blocking an occasional knife. Then he found a familiar someone in front of him.

"STOP IT!" Naruto shouted. "WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?! LOOK AT HIM! HE'S CRIPPLED HIMSELF TO MAKE HIMSELF USEFUL TO THE VILLAGE! HOW CAN YOU TREAT HIM LIKE THAT?! I'LL TELL YOU WHY- 'CAUSE NONE OF YOU WOULD HAVE THE GUTS TO DO THE SAME THING!"

The village muttered amongst itself- it seemed Naruto had a point. But Naruto wasn't done.

"HE GOT ON HIS KNEES AND BEGGED YOU FOR FORGIVENESS! HOW MANY TIMES HAS HE HELPED YOU?! ANY ONE OF YOU! AND WHAT DID HE ASK FOR? NOTHING! NOTHING BUT YOUR ACCEPTANCE!"

Naruto was a pretty emotional fellow, and he was actually crying a little. Whether it was for Ekyt's sake, or whether he was remembering his own struggles, no one could be sure.

"...the world can't be that cruel..." he whispered. He turned to face Ekyt. "It can't be that cruel. It can't be!"

Ekyt patted Naruto's back. "It can, Naruto. You know that as well as anyone. But there's plenty of good in them. They're just acting out. If they were really angry, they would have killed me. I'll never forget who it was that stood up to them. Thank you, Naruto."

The Nine-tailed fox reacted to Naruto's emotions at times. The pain of Sasuke's 'death' at Haku's hands being the first example, with many others following. The Nine Tails had to keep it's host body healthy, mentally and physically, or it risked death. With that in mind, it's chakra began to seek out Ekyt's hand. When it found it, a small measure leaked into Ekyt.

Ekyt suddenly felt a fire in his tenketsu. But it wasn't a bad feeling. And when the fire reached his waist, the warmth spread to his legs. They had completely healed. Little by little the feeling had returned to them, but now they were completely better.

The nine-tail's chakra? Is that what did this? ...Naruto, I owe you. And I'll see that prophecy through- I'll take care of you and Sakura, and Sasuke until you've reached legendary status. Thank you, Naruto.

Naruto sniffled a little, then broke into one of his trademark grins. "You know what? You sound like the old man. The Third Hokage."

"That's some high praise, Naruto. Thank you."

"Hehe! Who do I remind you of?" Naruto wanted to know. Ekyt wasn't really thinking about that, but he said:

"Hmm. You're a mix of the Fourth Hokage and Master Jiraiya, I think. You look the Fourth, but your

combat style reminds me of Master Jiraiya.”

That said, Ekyt stood up, walking straight toward the town. He held out his arms.

“Punish me, then. But give Itachi and Azami a chance to help defend us. Put aside this grudge, or our village will suffer. This is Orochimaru! O-ro-chi-ma-ru! You saw what he did to us last time! The people that died! Our leader was among them! And he sacrificed himself so that our village would live on. I don’t believe that anyone in the village would be selfish enough to withhold forgiveness to someone who wanted to protect peace above all else!”

Sasuke stood directly opposite Ekyt.

“If we have Itachi, we sure as hell don’t need you. Preaching this ‘peace’ crap. Who are you kidding? Any one of us could handle Orochimaru. You wouldn’t have the guts to kill him if it came to it.”

Ekyt just shook his head. **Remember, you asked for this. You made yourself the villain. You have to stay strong. Now, say it. Finish it.**

“It’s funny that you say that. Someone who hasn’t cared about the village at all, until just now. I never expected credit or recognition- I only wanted acceptance. But if the elite Sasuke Uchiha won’t give me acceptance, how can I expect anyone else to? Maybe we need to spar this out. If I lose, I’ll leave the village.”

“Are you two outta your minds?! Don’t do that now!” Naruto protested, soon joined by the others.

“Ekyt, you aren’t well enough for this! Please, don’t do it!” Sakura pleaded. **I don’t care how good Ekyt’s gotten! This is Sasuke!**

Ekyt rethought what he said. “That’s fine. We won’t do it now, anyway. Sasuke, after this battle, then I’ll spar you. Let’s not risk either of us getting hurt over something as stupid as this at such an important time. Now’s not the time for personal grudges.”

Sasuke had other ideas. “If you want to back away, that’s fine. But if you do, you lose by forfeit.”

Ekyt couldn’t help himself- “Fine. We’ll do this, Sasuke. Just as long as you know it’s selfish of you to put your own needs above those of your village. Er, Just one thing...”

“What?!” Sasuke snarled, ready to get this over with. **I can’t forgive him! He made my brother into a hero! I have to kill him!**

“When was the last time you saw me fight?” Ekyt asked. There was no hostility in his voice at all. Just an honest question.

“...When you fought the Akatsuki at the couple’s tournament. Why?”

Ekyt lowered his mask. He wasn’t smiling, but he was smirking, almost nastily. “That’s good. Because since then, I’ve got a LOT better. So go ahead, and make my day. If you’re so hell-bent on making me your enemy- Go for it!”

Ekyt's voice echoed like a gunshot. The town had heard Sasuke, too, and new Ekyt was just answering. But somehow, him saying that it was okay for them to make him an enemy- somehow it suddenly seemed as if it really was okay.

"But not here," Ekyt told him. "Not where someone might get hurt, or the village might get damaged. No, we need a fitting location. Wouldn't you agree?"

Shikamaru was walking by at that moment. Hana Inuzuka was with him. It was funny to think they got along so well. Ever since the couple's tournament.

"I'll help keep the crowd in check. If you guys think you'll be able to fight somewhere without an audience- forget it," Shikamaru chimed in.

Ino had been watching from the sidelines. She kept thinking 'Sasuke's my man; what have I done for him?'

I've got to do something!

With a rush of courage, Ino rushed Ekyt from behind. She held a kunai to his back.

"I can't have you hurt Sasuke!"

After a tense moment, Ekyt spun around and slapped the kunai from her hand before she had a chance to move. Ino recoiled, thinking he was going to hit her. But Ekyt didn't- a girl defending her man was admirable, and shouldn't be punished.

"This is why I didn't want to do this. We need our village to come together, not be torn apart. Friend or foe doesn't matter in this situation! Hate each other after! But don't let the village die just because you're too embroiled in some disagreement to fight anyone but each other. We've had peace because we've always done this. Now is not the time to fall apart."

"Enough preaching from you! I've heard enough!" Sasuke yelled, freeing himself from Itachi's grip. He rushed Ekyt, but found Shikamaru's Shadow Possession stopping him. With that pause, Azami and Itachi went over to Ekyt. Naruto and Lee joined the group, too.

Ekyt didn't meet Azami's eyes at any point.

"I can work with you," he told her. "And all is forgiven. Give me time to warm up to you again."

"I know," Azami replied. "And thank you. I know how hard it was for you to do this for me..."

Ekyt gave a lopsided smile. "I don't think you do, and I wouldn't expect you to. It's fine, okay? I'm just glad you didn't ask if 'we could still be friends'."

It was only a small joke, but it lightened the mood considerably. Until Itachi told Ekyt a hard to swallow truth.

“Ekyt, don’t fight Sasuke. You can’t win.”

That floored Ekyt. It truly did. And it showed. Immediately, Naruto and Lee started to chime in with compliments, but Ekyt held a held up to ward them off.

“He’s right, and I know it. My job was to get you in here, make myself look like the bad guy until Orochimaru came, and then return my life to normal. But ‘normal’ isn’t good enough. It’s what I’ve wanted for a long time. A girl, maybe kids, and then...I don’t know. To get old like the Third Hokage. But I know it won’t work that way. I’ve never been trained, and I don’t know what to do with myself after this battle. But I doubt I can stay here. The village might not welcome me back.”

“Then why?!” Naruto demanded. “Why take that risk?! You love it here! Why ruin it?!”

Ekyt didn’t have to think hard about how to phrase his answer so Naruto understood.

“Naruto, you’ve wanted to be Hokage your whole life. If being Hokage meant the village being destroyed, would you still want to be Hokage?”

“No, of course not!” Naruto answered with vigor. To him, that was an incredibly stupid question.

“Then look at it that way. I love the village. But if I didn’t do this, there might not be a village left to love. We all do our parts in a war, and this is mine. Well, part of my part. The other part is still in question. Can you understand that?”

Naruto had his eye mostly closed in concentration. One hand under his chin, he muttered “Well, I guess so.”

Ekyt clapped him on the shoulder, then left to prepare himself for the worst. He would have a couple more nights in his own bed. Maybe.

He was asleep as soon as he hit the pillow. And he dreamed. But unlike before, where his personal world had all but ended (see issues 44-45), this dream was different. Very different; in both good and bad ways.

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Dream world

Ryouko seemed to fall into his body. He was crouched on impact, and immediately noticed he was dressed differently. He was wearing all black. Even black gloves with the fingers. But no mask. That was odd.

“Go on, explore.”

A voice in Ryouko’s head told him in a rich, booming voice. Instinctively, Ryouko listened, walking around the village. Something about the voice was familiar and unthreatening. It should have scared him, but it didn’t at all.

The sun was shining. There were sounds of training, sounds of talking- everyday life sounds. A happy village, moving through time peacefully and prosperously. Not even a dark cloud in the sky.

“This is the Leaf Village as you know it now. The people are in harmony, aren’t they? It’s calm and peaceful.

“It is,” Ryouko agreed. “The village is beautiful. It feels like home.”

“It does. Will it disturb you if I walk beside you once more?”

“No, not at all,” Ryouko said, even smiling a little. NOW he knew the voice.

The Third Hokage was next to him, just as Ryouko remembered him. Dressed in his Hokage robes, a pipe clenched in his teeth, the pensive look on his face.

“Ryouko, this is the village as it is today. Many have, no doubt, denounced your warning as myth. Itachi and Azami were welcomed in by Tsunade. The rebirth of the Uchiha clan is at hand. Tell me, how long have you know the truth?”

“For a few months. Since I read a book authored by Madara Uchiha. It was clearly not supposed to be in that library. But I had to read it, for some reason. It felt...like I had to. Like there was no choice...”

Ryouko and the Third Hokage walked for a while, occasionally stopping to look at something, or to rest. Ryouko’s legs were still weak from the muscles atrophying while he was in the wheelchair. Eventually, they reached the top of the First Hokage’s head, overlooking the village.

“Ryouko, do you have doubts about what you’ve chosen to do? You know your plan well by now. Does it make you want to do things differently?”

Ryouko shook his head. “No. I wish it didn’t have to be this way, but I cant think of an alternative. Besides, look at this place! It’s so happy and peaceful! I love the village so much. I want it to stay like this.”

Sarutobi took his pipe out of his mouth. “You’re going to see two futures of the villages. One in which you are successful; one in which you are not. This doesn’t mean there aren’t more futures; fate doesn’t apply to one’s actions. But this is what can happen. I’ll be leaving you for now. I’ve missed you, my student.”

“And I you, sensei,” Ryouko replied, a tear leaking from his eye. “If it’s in the cards, I’ll keep watching over the village, as you no doubt have.”

It figures he could do this. After all, using that crystal ball like he used to. If only he had been in his prime when he fought Orochimaru...

With that, the dream truly began.

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Ryouko's first view was of a safe village. The many trees around the village had grown taller, with thick green leaves. The air was clean and fresh. The streets were mostly unmarred by litter. As close to paradise as you could find on earth.

It appeared to be at least ten years in the future. His feet seemingly 'programmed', Ryouko walked to his first destination.

Uchiha Dojo

The Uchiha dojo. Ryouko opened the gate. What greeted his eyes was a cute little girl with Sharingan eyes and long, jet-black hair; playing with a toy kunai. She was incredibly cute, and clearly was one of Azami's offspring. The eyes must have come from...

"Itachi...so they DO have children. Real ones. The beginning of the new Uchiha clan! Wow..."

A little blond boy, also with Sharingan, came tearing around the corner, throwing shuriken at targets scattered all over the place. The blond hair could only have come from Ino. The eyes were from Sasuke. As was the stellar aim with shuriken.

"How can he stand her?" Ryouko wondered. "Well, love IS blind, I suppose. But in Ino's case, love should be deaf instead. Save poor Sasuke's sanity that way..."

Ryouko gradually noticed the dojo had been repainted, cleaned, and upgraded. There were lots of chunin and jonin going in and out, so Ryouko guessed that it was also the police station again, or at least a place of some importance.

"A success...That's good. Where else...The Hokage's office!"

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Hokage's Office

The Hokage's office was messy, by contrast. Clearly Shizune wasn't keeping Tsunade in line. Or...

"Or we have a new Hokage! Is it...Naruto?"

A slightly frazzled Sakura strode in, carrying a stack of papers and scrolls. They were balanced precariously, and she nearly dropped them several times.

"Lord Hokage!" she called out. Ryouko followed her gaze. He saw a man in a white trench coat looking out the window. Painted flames decorated the bottom of the coat. Yellow hair stuck up in all directions on the Hokage's head.

Ryouko's first thought was 'The Fourth Hokage?!', but he knew better. He was looking at Naruto.

"Yes, Sakura? Oh, right...sorry. I was just..." Naruto mumbled, looking at something in the distance.

Sakura rubbed his arm comfortingly, laying her head on his shoulder. "It's okay. It's been ten years today, hasn't it?"

Naruto nodded, still staring at the same spot. "It should have been me, Sakura. But he thought on a different level."

"Well, that was typical of him," Sakura said, giggling a little. "But it was that thinking that saved us. Even if it did ruin him. But you remember what he said..."

"Every damn day," Naruto commented. "He told me 'Naruto, whatever else happens, protect what we've done here today. Never let it be forgotten that, no matter how great, any one shinobi or village may be toppled if we lose our vigilance. But even worse would be to lose ourselves, and our humanity.'"

Sakura sighed, remembering the words as well. "Shall we go pay our respects?"

Naruto nodded. He put on his Hokage hat and walked out of the room. Sakura stayed put for a moment longer, thinking of something now that she had some solitude. But then she quickened her pace to catch up with Naruto.

Ryouko saw where he had been staring, and he decided to take the rooftop express to get there.

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Battleground

There was a spot in the village where it was clear- there had been a battle here. A spot where the blood wouldn't quite come off the streets. You could just tell there had been something big here.

"Now class, do you all know about the battle from ten years ago? Oh, Lord Hokage!"

Iruka was teaching. Anko was by his side, and there were lots of eager young students at their feet. They all turned to greet their leader.

To think I'm calling that little brat from the academy 'Lord Hokage'...Naruto, you've done well. I can't believe I can say 'I trained the Sixth Hokage'!

Iruka's chest swelled with pride at the thought. He had helped in forming a future Hokage! It was such an awesome thing to think of! It made all his hard work matter more.

"Please, continue. It's just...that day," Naruto commented, looking at a spot on the ground. It looked like any other spot, except to those who really knew what had happened.

"Alright then. So, on this spot, Orochimaru was defeated and killed using a forbidden technique. A shinobi from our village, one who had never killed before, used a forbidden sealing jutsu to save all of us. His actions before the battle include assisting in restoring the Uchiha clan, and also being a post-humus legend," Iruka told the class with a practiced ease. "As the last student of the Third Hokage, he was taught this jutsu in preparation for a future war."

Ryouko's heart had begun to beat impossibly fast. His mouth had run dry. He had finally noticed a plaque with his name on it. When he read it, he got chills.

"I...did it? I beat Orochimaru?! And I...I sealed his soul. I died like the Third Hokage."

"Exactly," said the Third, beside him again. "I debated my decision to show you that jutsu many times. In the end, when you performed it and saved the village...well, I was proud. But I also wish you would have survived somehow."

"Did I die gracefully?" Ryouko asked. **Look at this...peaceful, and everyone gets their wish. But I have to die for that to happen?**

"You did...mostly," the Third told him, deep in thought. "You were clearly afraid to die at that moment when you felt the shinigami's hand. Or, rather, you had too many regrets to let yourself go. So as you were dying, you used a kunai knife to leave a message. In your own arm, you carved 'take his eyes'."

Ryouko thought he knew what that meant, so he didn't comment right away. Instead, he tried to forget his doubts.

If I do this, we win! I die, but who cares? Look at all the lives I save, or make better! And people remember me. I guess that isn't so bad.

"Have you no questions?"

Ryouko kind of woke up when the Third Hokage prodded him. "Why was I so afraid of dying? Look at all the good it accomplishes! Surely the 'dead' me had this dream, too, and knew that it was the best course of action."

"Do you believe that, or are you letting your eyes tell the story?" Sarutobi questioned. He had that way of making you think of even the most sure thing. Something about his voice, maybe?

"It's pretty obvious. Why, was there another way? If Orochimaru had the Sharingan, he could copy all my jutsus."

Sarutobi gave Ryouko a warm, knowing smile. "That is the answer. But you must realize WHY it is the answer for yourself."

Ryouko hated riddles like that, but it couldn't be help. He also wondered why he kept referring to himself as 'Ryouko' in his thoughts. He had buried that name, along with his love for Azami. But it must have meant something, considering how he kept thinking about it.

"To the next future, then," the Third announced, holding his crystal ball out. "I warn you, Ryouko, this one is more...disturbing. It will be hard for you to swallow...Are you ready?"

Ryouko nodded, and the Third Hokage sent them to the next dream.

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Ryouko landed hard, noticing that his attire hadn't changed. But this future...It was dark. And evil. The trees were dead; the houses were burned; only piles of bricks and mortar remained of the stone buildings. Potholes marked every road. The sky was gray with black clouds. This didn't seem right. How could things have gotten like this?

"I've got find myself! Did I die?!" he wondered aloud, running toward the thick of a commotion in the center of the village. What he saw made him sick to his stomach.

He saw himself, being forced to kneel, arms tied behind his back. Standing above him was Sasuke. Sasuke's sword was drawn, and aimed at Ryouko's neck.

"You should have used your stupid seal! You idiot! You almost damned our village! My brother is dead! His wife is dead! Tsunade is dead! Everyone is DEAD! We won the war, but at what cost? When all it would have taken was one life! Well, I'm going to at least see that your life is ended for your cowardice! You don't deserve to live anymore, you disgraced peasant!"

"Captain!" Mimizu shouted. She threw her sword, slicing him free. Ryouko took off at a run just as Mimizu was pierced by a brutal Chidori. Her body fell next to another one who had protested Ryouko's execution- Asuna's.

The miko's beautiful face had been left unmarred, save for blood dripping down it. Her white top had been stained red with the blood from a stab through her chest. Her eyes held a look of shock.

Ryouko looked around desperately- wasn't anyone going to do something?!

No one moved. Cursing, Ryouko took off after himself. It seemed like he was in a time warp as he ran, because he saw himself age and change.

The bags under his eyes grew darker, and he wore an Akatsuki robe now. Always on the run from those who would chase him, he never got to rest. His body never healed, and even less his mind. But all that was left was to keep running. There was no way to go back in time to undo that mistake. Things had happened this way, and now his life was ruined. Death would have been better.

"It...happened? I knew I would make myself out to be the villain, to help Sasuke! But I..."

Ryouko was at a loss for words. He didn't want to die; so many regrets! But he couldn't live if this was the outcome!

Sarutobi had reappeared. "It's troubling, but you had to see it. Ryouko, before you perform the Reaper Death Seal, think of those who you'll hurt by leaving behind. You saw how sad they were even after they had ten years to cope. Can you imagine the day it happened? And as I recall, you've a promise to keep, do you not?"

Ryouko understood. "I do. And I'll do my best to see it through. But I don't know how else to defeat Orochimaru in this 'ultimate body'. There must be something I'm missing!"

Sarutobi clearly wanted to say more, and actually just tell Ryouko the answer, but couldn't. Instead, he said "Or maybe the answer is looking you right in the eye."

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When Ekyt woke up, he felt terrible. His life was the thing that would destroy the village. How could he make that impossible choice?

I will because I have to. I'm going to enjoy today, though.

First up was Ichiraku ramen. Ekyt ordered miso pork ramen, and actually ate it slowly to savor it. It was as good as Naruto claimed. Maybe even better.

Setting the empty bowl aside, Ekyt just sat for a moment, enjoying himself. He soon found another bowl in front of him. Ryouko wasn't someone who made a big deal out of food. If it tasted decent, he would eat it. Unless he was on a diet, in which case his diet was significantly smaller and more select.

"Go on, eat up."

Ayame, Teuchi the ramen maker's daughter, had supplied Ekyt with the new bowl. He thanked her, and asked what the occasion was.

"Well, I can tell when someone's down on themselves. I see you walk by so often, and you always seem so sad," Ayame explained, smiling kindly. "You know, if you stopped in more often, you could always talk to me. I'm just a ramen maker's daughter, but you never know where you might find the support you need, when you need it."

Ekyt would have clammed up normally. But he was trying new things today, so why not try talking to Ayame? She was a nice girl, and pretty. It seemed she also had a heart of gold.

"I...I'm the one who brought Itachi Uchiha back. The village hates me for it, and on top of all that I might have to do something where'll I'll...have to leave the village." (Ekyt almost said 'I might have to die', but that sounded too dramatic and invited an easily predictable response.

He went on to explain why he had done it, and that he knew about the consequences.

Ayame leaned on the counter and gave Ekyt a smile. "Someday they'll understand that you did it for their sake. And besides, not *everyone* in the village hates you. You're too nice a guy, Ekyt- they'll come around. So, hang in there, okay?"

Ayame had a nice smile, and was kind to just about everyone. Ekyt could suddenly appreciate a gesture like this a lot more. It was a small thing, but it meant a lot.

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97 - Destroy What You Love

Walking around, Ekyt heard a lot of nasty things directed at him. But some people thanked him for bringing back Itachi. But one group was hell-bent on making Ryouko pay.

“You’ve damned us all, you idiot!”

“Look at what you’ve done!”

“We trusted you!”

Spit, fruit, bottles, and even rocks came Ekyt’s way. He just stood there and took it. But just like before, others stepped in to keep him away from any serious harm.

“Alright, scram, all of you!” Asuma growled. “That is a Leaf Shinobi you’re attacking! Whatever your reason, you’ve no right to attack him. Now get out of here!”

Kurenai checked on Ekyt first. She wiped the blood off a cut on his cheek, treating him like he was a young genin again. He half expected a pat on the head.

“Don’t let that bother you. They’re just confused, and they don’t want to believe Orochimaru is a threat again. It’s a painful memory.” Kurenai made sure to explain in a voice that left no room for argument- she was right.

“Yeah, you’re only doing what you have to do,” Asuma added. “And that takes guts. But still, if you’re thinking of offing yourself like my dad did...don’t make it your first option.”

Kurenai nodded her agreement. “That’s right. You’ve got people who care for you now. We’ll be sad if you die. The Third Hokage had lived a full life- you haven’t. So don’t be hasty, okay?”

--

After Asuma and Kurenai, Ekyt saw a scene that never failed to make him smile.

To Ekyt, the bond between instructor and pupil was next to sacred. They were supposed to be close friends; confidants even.

If any two symbolized that bond, it was Rock Lee and Might Gai. They trained together, and even looked alike. It was uncanny that two people not born of the same family could become so similar.

Ekyt intended to walk by quietly, but was stopped by Gai. Gai always had a kind word. But good advice? Not something you expect from a goofy-looking fellow like that.

“Remember, the key to beating a Sharingan user is to look at their feet. You can judge their moves from there.”

Lee took up a guard. "When this is over, we will spar; just like old times!"

Ekyt gave a weak smile. "Yeah. Just like old times. You mean where you totally kick my @\$\$?"

"Indeed!" Lee called back, rushing over for a hug. Ekyt hated that, but figured 'what the hell; I'm dead in a few days', and let Lee give him a hug.

If I stopped him, he might feel guilty when if I die...and if he dies, I'd feel guilty, too. Sigh. Things are so complicated. If it was just like it used to be; back when I was a luckless genin and no one liked me...then this 'death' thing would be so much easier...

--

The next stop was the memorial obelisk near the training fields. The black stone with all the names carved in it served as a reminder- shinobi are human. They are flesh and blood; they perish; as do all things. Our existence is transient at best. Some are remembered, as on the stone. Others die, nameless and forgotten, their achievements not remembered.

I wonder which I'll be? I guess I'd like to be remembered. On this stone, with all the names of shinobi who left us too soon...

Kakashi soon joined Ekyt. For a time, they both stared at the stone, remembering comrades; thinking of their own lives. How fragile this thing called 'life' was. And yet, how much it meant.

"...You do realize you're doing what you think is right?"

Ekyt didn't look away from the stone while Kakashi spoke to him. "I do."

"Then it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Give them time; they'll come around. Pretty soon, they'll be happy to have the elite Uchiha clan back. And you'll be the guy who made it possible."

"And if I was wrong? If Itachi DOES turn on the village?"

Kakashi tapped his covered eye. "That's when people like you and I clean up the mess. Even if it IS Itachi Uchiha, or Orochimaru, or whoever."

Ekyt nodded his head, thinking quietly to himself about what he planned to do. What he had heard in the dream- how was the answer right in front of him? What kind of weakness does the Sharingan have?

Wasn't there only one way to find out?

"Kakashi-sempai...how about a sparring match later?"

--

Ekyt's last stop was to walk by the Uchiha dojo. It was being rebuilt by Itachi and Azami, plus volunteers. They were all hard at work, though as the sun set the people left one by one. Some people gave Ekyt a small, hurried bow, as if they didn't want anyone else to know they supported him. Others

glared at him. One of them gave him the finger. Ekyt didn't react to any of it, save for nodding at those who treated him nice.

Ekyt suddenly wanted a drink...and a cigarette. It was night time, and the streets were empty. So Ekyt walked across the street and bought a pack of cigarettes. He wouldn't smoke enough to damage his lungs- just enough to calm him down. Alcohol didn't slow his heart down when he was like this, and he needed his wits about him. But he wasn't going to become a full-fledged smoker over this. He would just do what he needed to be calm down and stay efficient.

Forgetting the long term health effects for the moment, Ekyt turned his mind back to the task at hand.

Itachi, we've both made sacrifices...All I ask in return is that Azami is taken care of. You've earned a rest.

To think I'd be calling you 'comrade'... I didn't see that coming. And even if I had, I wouldn't have believed it.

"Ekyt..."

Ekyt heard Azami's voice. He vaguely wondered how he must look now- holding a cigarette, a trench coat on, his tonfa at his sides. No doubt he'd let his five o'clock shadow grow into something closer to a beard. That happened when you didn't sleep all night.

"Oh...hi. Sorry to have disturbed you," Ekyt replied amiably, giving a small wave. "I was just finishing up my walk. It's good rehab for my legs."

That was true, but not the reason he was out at this hour.

Hell, I'm not sure of the reason myself. Am I just looking for reasons to stay alive? Or is it just saying goodbye to the village?

"We need to talk," Azami said, her voice leaving no room for argument. "We can't leave things like this."

Ekyt gave in and turned around. "Listen, I've already made peace with this-"

"But I haven't!" Azami protested. "And how can you? We were in love, Ekyt! IN LOVE! I don't know how that can mean so little to you!"

"It means a great deal to me. But I'd rather see you happy in the arms of someone else, than only partially happy in mine," Ekyt told her firmly. "I did love you- probably still do. But now your job is to take care of Itachi. My job is to take care of this village. I'm not it's Hokage, but there's too much here I care too much about. That includes you."

Azami stepped into Ekyt, giving him a hug. "Damn it, why can't you be at least a little mad at me? Don't be so agreeable. I deserve to be yelled at... I mean, look at what I did to you! And now you've saved my Father, and helped me meet my new lover..."

Ekyt gave her a hug back. "You know that's the kind of guy I am. Stupid. (laughs) But really, Itachi is better for you. You two are in tune, and your power is off the charts. So it's better that way. So, just...let it go, okay? This is how things are, and it's best that they're like this."

Azami let go, looking toward the Uchiha dojo. "Yeah, I guess..."

"You can't control who you fall in love with, Azami. If you could, then I would have picked someone in my league."

With that, a typical Ekyt-ish quip, Ekyt gave her an over-the-shoulder wave, and walked away. Or, he started to. He felt someone appear at his side.

"It will be easier for you if the village hates you."

Ekyt looked over at Itachi. "How do you figure that?"

"Experience."

"Ah."

After a short walk, Itachi stuffed an Akatsuki cloak and hat into Ekyt's hands.

"You still have Kisame's ring, right? Wear that. It goes on your left ring finger."

Ekyt knew that this was just 'in case of emergency' advice. He thanked Itachi, then excused himself. He still had to talk with Mimizu and Asuna, then square with Lady Tsunade. There was a lot to do, and only a little time to do it in.

Gradually, Ekyt thought of a way to 'plan' out Orochimaru's attack.

If I leave the village, then the 'Reaper Death Seal' leaves with me. That would give Orochimaru an opportunity to attack; either me or the village. If he attacks me, then that's all the better- I can kill him without a problem. If he attacks the village, I can come back and get him from behind.

And now, Itachi just handed me my escape plan. I'll need a few volunteers to make it look good, though...

Ekyt stopped himself, turning back to Itachi. "Wait a second. Itachi, I just need to know something. The Akatsuki...is there anyone that we really need to fear? Anyone stronger than me?"

"...Only two. Tobi and Pain. Everyone else has a match in this village. Someone who can stop them without losing their life."

Ekyt had only used that question to lead up to his next one. This one had been haunting him for a while now, and he needed an answer. He could rest until he heard it straight from Itachi himself.

“...When he fought, how much of your power did you use against me? I know you never battled me at full strength...”

Itachi stayed quiet for a moment, studying Ekyt. Then he looked straight ahead again.
“You never disgraced yourself, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“That wasn’t my question,” Ekyt pointed out, keeping his voice firm. “How much did you hold back against me?”

“...I held back thirty percent. But consider that I haven’t fought you in more than six months. I’m not sure I’d have to hold back so much now. You’ve gotten stronger. And the fact that I came here on your request proves that. I wouldn’t come running for someone weak within a weak village. And I took you at your word. Consider that.”

Ekyt forced himself to be satisfied with that for the time being. He still felt like Itachi was hedging his question. But Itachi likely had his own reasons for that. As an odd duck himself, Ekyt wasn’t going to question Itachi.

“...Thank you, then. Good night.”

Ekyt kept walking while Itachi stopped. He watched the younger boy go, then turned back and went to his wife.

“Will he be alright?” Azami asked, clutching Itachi’s shoulder.

“...Time will tell. But he’s not weak; as a shinobi or a man.”

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“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!”

Ekyt...no, Ryouko. The mask was gone. It was Ryouko doing this.

The (abandoned) store burned, Ryouko staring dispassionately at it.

“Why are you doing this?!” an ANBU agent called out. He and his partner rushed Ryouko. But Ryouko sent them both flying with kicks.

“Because you turned your backs on me! After what I’ve done, all you can do is condemn me? If that’s how it is, I’ll give you plenty of reason to!”

Ding!

The hat with the bell on it rang.

Whoosh.

The long cloak blew in the wind.

Tok tok tok.

The jonin came running.

And the cause of all of it- Ryouko. Wearing an Akatsuki cloak and hat, and even wearing a ring, he had caused destruction to his own village. It was time to run, before Lady Tsunade came.

Came as planned. It's killing me that the village was so willing to see me go that they all agreed to play a part in seeing me leave. I just hope I can come back...

--

Ryouko was to rendezvous with Kisame. Kisame was loyal to Itachi above the Akatsuki, so he would follow Itachi's suggestion of 'Let Ryouko take my place until he needs to come back' without question. Having seen Ryouko fight, Kisame could respect him enough to not feel burdened.

Samehada shouldered, the tall, blue, gill-faced shinobi waited at the appointed place.

"Here's your ring back," Ryouko said, by way of greeting. On his left index finger was Hidan's ring.

Kisame gave a hearty laugh. "Well now, you're just about the last person I'd thought I'd be partners with. Since you're new to this, I'll just have to teach you. And you'll learn quick- you're talented enough. And if it turns out you're not, I'll just tear you up with Samehada a little, and we'll just see if you get more proficient!"

Against his better judgment, Ryouko took that as 'acceptance'. His tonfa were now hidden in his sleeves, but he took them out to play with them as the two walked.

"So Orochimaru's the cause of your headache, eh Leaf boy?"

Ryouko barred his teeth inside his mouth. "Yes, he is. And he's going to be too much for anyone now that he's got the Sharingan. Why the hell did the Akatsuki create that? How arrogant must the leader be to think that this plan couldn't backfire?"

Kisame laughed again; not generally a pleasant thing. "I thought the same thing. But Itachi wanted the damn thing. Probably because he doesn't want Azami to get lonely when he dies."

Ryouko had heard about that, but didn't know the details. He decided that, if anyone knew the details, it would be Itachi's partner.

"Just how close to death was he, Kisame?" Ryouko's eyes slid toward Kisame under the brim of his hat.

“He should have been dead a year ago. Some miracle drug kept him alive. Although now that Tsunade’s got a hold of him, he’ll probably be fine. As you might guess, the Akatsuki doesn’t exactly have health care. If someone dies, we just pick someone else.”

“Will we be meeting up with them? The rest of the Akatsuki, I mean. Because I’ll be in for a fight if we do.”

“WE will be in for a fight,” Kisame corrected. “You might think we’re just greedy, criminal scumbags, but partners look out for each other. If Itachi had a beef with Deidara, then the artist would have to get through Samehada to get to Itachi. Except for Hidan and Kakuzu. But you’ve heard their arguments first-hand. It’s a shame you didn’t kill them both.”

“It IS a shame,” Ryouko agreed. “I didn’t expect loyalty within the Akatsuki ranks. I figured money was what united all of you.”

“Oh, it does. But some of us genuinely care about each other. Or some, like me and Itachi, have other reasons. I like to kill, for example. Which reminds me- you’d better concoct a reason why you’re joining us. And make it good. Even if it’s all crap, you shouldn’t walk in with no cover story. Especially if you’re trying to take Itachi’s place.”

Ryouko’s mind immediately went to work on that. It was best to have a grain of truth in his lie, so he picked out the most accessible lie.

“I’m too restricted in Konoha. I could do better things with less moderation with the Akatsuki.”

Kisame thought that was pretty good for a lie. But then again, he also knew more about Ryouko than the other Akatsuki.

“Did Itachi ever tell you why he picked you to keep challenging Sasuke?” Kisame asked after a while. He wasn’t one to appreciate the forest for the trees. Every bit of bark was the same as any other bit of bark.

Ryouko thought for a second, but couldn’t recall Itachi bringing that up. “No, it never came up.”

“Well, it’s because you two are similar. You both have that ‘anything for Konoha’ mentality. That, and you would challenge Sasuke. You two were more likely to come to serious blows than Sasuke and Naruto.”

“...I’m surprisingly flattered by that,” Ryouko commented mildly, lighting a chakra cigarette.

Kisame smirked a little at Ryouko’s reply. It almost sounded like Ryouko really WAS looking forward to his new lifestyle.

“You DO realize that Hidan will want his ring back, right?”

“I know.”

Kisame was a little surprised by his lackadaisical attitude against a legitimately tough foe. "And you know he'll want to fight you for it, right?"

"Most likely. If he does, then I'll get him out of my way."

"You cocky bastard!" Kisame laughed. "But you know, you've got guts. These people aren't going to be happy to see you, and you're just gonna walk in like you're one of us."

"If I'm not one of you yet, I'll MAKE myself one of you."

--

You could have cut the tension with a knife.

The Akatsuki were all here, all in the flesh, and all staring at the one who had arrived with Kisame.

"Gimme back my ring, f*****!"

Predictably, Hidan was making a challenge. Ryouko turned his head toward him, keeping his voice just above a whisper, and making sure there was absolutely zero emotion in it.

"Why don't you take it from me, then? If I'm good enough to keep it for this long, maybe you don't deserve it."

A fight already. No one was really shocked about that. They were still shocked Ekyt was even here.

"Hidan, don't do that. There's no profit in killing him like that. He'll just destroy you like before. Let Pain take the ring from him." Kakuzu didn't have much faith in his partner's abilities, it seemed.

"F*** that! He's mine!"

WHA-BAM!

Kisame's giant sword crashed down in front of Hidan.

"Hold it right there. This guy (nods at Ryouko) is Itachi's replacement. Learn some manners. Don't forget that one partner defends another. So if you plan on getting him, you'll have to tangle with Samehada, too."

Ryouko took two steps forward, staring mildly at Hidan.

"Do you know how to get respect in prison, Hidan? You pick the toughest guy out and punch him. Win or lose, you've got respect for being a guy with a good sized set. You can serve that role for me, if you'd like."

Ryouko's hand pulled his hat off. He let it flutter to the ground. When the bell on it rang, he and Hidan charged.

Destroy the Akatsuki from within...that's my mission. And that means I'll have to kill... But what choice is there?

There's gotta be another way! I'd like to take this stupid organization over...Well, I'll start with Hidan. I can't kill him, which means I don't have to hold back. Let's just see if my power has grown any...

Hidan's scythe bounced off Ryouko's arm. His tonfa knocked it aside. With his other hand, Ryouko threw a chakra sealing tag. It hit Hidan right on the chest- exactly where he'd aimed.

When Ryouko first learned this jutsu, he had to chant some kind of code to make it work. Now, with all his practice, he only needed to make a single handsign.

"Seal!"

Hidan's chakra was sapped- but only for a second. The tag peeled off and fluttered to the ground. Ryouko half-expected that. He darted in, smashing Hidan across the face with a flick of his tonfa. He grabbed the cord Hidan's scythe was on and yanked. Hidan came flying back toward him. Bracing his tonfa under his forearm, Ryouko stepped into his strike and smashed Hidan in the stomach.

"Acgh!" Hidan coughed up blood. The blood spilled onto the floor. Ryouko pushed Hidan backward and battered him with his tonfas. Switching to beating Hidan with one hand, Ryouko made handsigns with one hand.

"Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Jutsu- Modified!"

Ryouko hit Hidan point-blank with that jutsu. But it wasn't his old attack. The old attack came from his hand and did minimal damage. *This* attack came from his mouth. The fire singed Hidan pretty good, but that wasn't it. A black line of ash stayed on Hidan. Ryouko pressed his attack, slapping an exploding tag on Hidan. When it exploded, the black ash burned red-hot.

Even Hidan couldn't completely enjoy this pain. He was being completely routed in this fight.

This kid...he's different! He doesn't give a f* if I live or die! He's not protecting anyone! He's not holding back! He's just beating the s*** out of me! I've gotta counter...**

Ryouko focused his chakra into his tonfa, forming a cutting edge. Mimicking that idea into his other tonfa, Ryouko first cut Hidan's scythe, then his arms (Which were holding his collapsible spike with which Hidan punished himself), and finally his neck.

An arch of blood sailed in all directions. Hidan's head rolled to the floor. Ryouko picked the head up, glared into it (thereby putting a genjutsu on it), and stuffed it into a sealing scroll.

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There was silence. No one had expected that.

“Don’t look so surprised. I’m not that strong. He was just too weak. So it’s better for the Akatsuki if I just go ahead and take his place.”

Kisame chuckled loudly, not keeping his dislike for Hidan a secret. “Hahaha! Look at that! Immortal or not, he’s no good to us now. Ryouko here is no Itachi, but he’d a damn sight better than that moron.”

Kakuzu was looking at Ryouko. Eventually, Ryouko noticed and turned to confront him.

“...You aren’t the same boy as you were at the temple...”

Ryouko’s gaze didn’t change or waver. “No, I’m not. I was scared, and I had too many people to worry about. Too many problems. Now I’m free of those problems, and I can battle to my true capabilities.”

“And do you think you could beat me? You’ve got twenty-seven thousand ryo on your head, labeled by the Mist Village. I could cash in on that anytime I wanted. I can already see why you defeated Hidan...” Kakuzu had analyzed the battle in his mind, and he saw Hidan’s mistake.

“Oh? Tell me then- why did I defeat Hidan so easily? I’d really like to hear how you think it happened.” Ryouko’s voice dripped with sarcasm, though his face showed nothing but a genuine curiosity.

“He let you get the advantage. You closed in on him and just kept hitting him. He didn’t get a chance to use any of his weapons. Against you, his slow jutsu didn’t stand a chance. But he only had marginal skill anyway. If you tried that against anyone who knew what they were doing, you would be defeated easily.”

Ryouko closed his eyes, resting a little bit. “You’re halfway there. I also knew his fighting style, and exactly how to counter it. Beyond that, he’s the most easily rattled of all the Akatsuki I’ve faced. The fight was over when his first strike didn’t draw blood.”

Not to mention that I needed to make that fight look lopsided to prove a point. I’m not that strong. Every other time I’ve seen someone fight Hidan, they’ve sat back and let him do what he wanted- including gulp their blood. I don’t understand why no one didn’t just push him out of his stupid circle, then maim his body beyond repair.

Then again, in this case, I didn’t plan a strategy. I just kept attacking and didn’t give him an opening. If he was any kind of a shinobi, he would have figured out that one Replacement Jutsu would have been the end of me.

Ryouko was going to have to keep his guard up until he has finished with the Akatsuki. He knew he could take down a couple of their weaker members, plus Kisame was siding with him. That left the problems- Pain, Tobi, Konan, Kakuzu, and Zetsu.

“...You’ll need a partner...Kakuzu...” Pain said, pointing at Ryouko, then at Kakuzu.

“I’m Itachi’s replacement; Kisame should be my partner. Our styles would mesh better. Kakuzu and I would kill each other at the drop of a hat, anyway.”

"I've got no problem with it. I'm very interested to see what kind of guy we have replacing Itachi. It's not every day we get a new member. And it's certainly not everyday it's one who Itachi respects on some level!" Kisame said.

No one said anymore on the subject.

--

Tsunade had a few minutes to herself, for a change. As she always did, she worried. Worried for her village. For herself. For Naruto. For the future. For the past. But this time her worries had a theme.

How heartless am I to let the village do that to Ekyt? Necessary or not...no, there HAD to be another way!

Shizune had noticed Tsunade's demeanor, but didn't want to comment. As an observer, she remembered a lot of details- sometimes more than Lady Tsunade herself. This time, she flashed back to a conversation between Tsunade and Ekyt. It took place one day when they discussed what would happen if Orochimaru got his 'perfect body'

Tsunade and Ekyt had talked back and forth- what was the best way to deal with Orochimaru.

"The Reaper Death Seal. Make sure he STAYS dead," Ekyt maintained.

"Because it worked so well for the Third Hokage?"

"You know as well as I did that he wasn't on top of his game!" Ekyt protested. "There's no other way to do this gracefully! Not before a ton of lives are lost, and the village is destroyed! Because you can be sure, even if we beat Orochimaru, the Akatsuki will come calling next, and we can't fight both off!"

Tsunade couldn't argue that point, so she didn't even try. Instead, she asked Ekyt a question about what he'd be willing to do to help the village.

"I'll do anything. If you need a hero, I'll be a hero. If it's a villain, I'll be a villain. Scapegoat's fine, too," Ekyt answered instantly.

"Do you mean that?" Tsunade wanted to know. It wouldn't be an easy promise to keep. Part of Tsunade wanted Ekyt to say 'no', really. She had warmed to him over the years, and had actually gotten fond of him.

"That's a bad habit, M'lady," Ekyt told her, walking toward the door.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Ekyt gave her a half-smile. "Asking questions you already know the answer to. My loyalty is absolute."

--

Kisame stopped suddenly.

“I guess this is far enough,” he announced. He turned around to face Ryouko.

“Far enough for what?” Ryouko asked, hiding a sneaking suspicion he already knew the answer. Here, surrounded by tall trees and small ponds on either side of the marsh-ish area.

Kisame grinned nastily. “Well, funny story- all this time, I was ‘loyal’ to Itachi. But really, I serve another master. I’m not going to say who- not that I think you’re a threat to him, but I’d hate for you to make trouble and tell someone else- but you’d be surprised.”

Samehada arched down. Ryouko threw himself backward, skidding through the woods. More swings followed, and Ryouko just barely dodged each one. Finally, his back hit a thick tree. Kisame swung again, sideways this time. Ryouko just barely threw up his tonfa in a block in time. The force of the blow swept him away, but he was unharmed other than that. The giant tree that had been behind him fell to the ground with a thunderous sound.

Ryouko should have looked where he was going, because he landed right near one of the ponds!

“Perfect! Water Style! Water Shark Bombs!” Kisame shouted. Water erupted from the pond next to Ryouko. Ryouko was caught flat-footed, and threw his tonfa up in strike after strike, knocking down the water bombs aiming for him. But he himself got wet, which was the whole point of Kisame’s attack.

“Water Style: Water Torment!”

What?! Oh no, the water!

Ryouko turned and ran for the trees- he had to get away from the source of that water! But he couldn’t outrun the wetness on his own clothes! The water began to pull in all directions. Ryouko’s body ached in protest- his arms and legs were going to snap off!

Ugh...I’ve gotta...escape!

“There’s nowhere to run!” Kisame declared. He ran forward incredibly fast, with an agility belying his size. Samehada hit Ryouko right in the chest, and cut clear through him! Sploosh! Ryouko’s Akatsuki cloak was saturated with water from when his water clone burst.

“Water Clone?! Where’d you go?!” Kisame began to turn to look for Ryouko. “You can’t escape!”

Three Ryouko’s appeared, each on opposite sides of the clearing. They were hidden in the trees, peering down at Kisame. They all looked to the ‘original’ Ryouko. Once he nodded, they all took off for Kisame, their legs extended in kicks, or their hands extended in punches.

Kisame sensed them coming. With a laugh, he spun around and cut the first clone in half. The second one managed to grab him from behind, but Kisame grabbed the clone’s arm and threw him down. The third clone had stayed back just enough. Now he charged in, throwing shuriken and kunai.

“Bah! Those stupid little cuts will do nothing!” Kisame yelled, laughing as only his left sleeve was torn

off by the attack. His powerful blue arm threw the last clone clear across the marsh.

Ryouko made his move next. He came flying down from the top of a tree. His tonfa, with his chakra extending them, bit into Kisame's shoulder. Using the handle of the tonfa, Ryouko stripped Samehada away from Kisame. In the same instant, he slapped a tag on Kisame's arm.

"Chakra Seal!" he declared, focusing all his energy into the tag. Kisame froze for a moment, then rushed forward- though much more slowly.

"Seal my chakra? Good move, but I've got enough strength to back up it's loss! And from the looks of it, you can't stop focusing on that stupid tag!"

Ryouko stayed still as Kisame ran toward him. Kisame had been correct about the tag- Ryouko did need to focus on it completely. But there were other elements in place that could help.

Now!

From below, a cord popped up, camouflaged by a thin layer of dirt. The tripwire sprang into place and sent Kisame sprawling to the ground. From behind a nearby tree, Ryouko's fourth clone popped out. This clone carried three kunai. He leapt high, and then jammed the kunai down- right through Kisame's hands! The last knife, in his mouth, jabbed into Kisame's body three inches below his navel (though it entered through Kisame's back).

Ryouko relaxed- no need for the tag anymore.

"Can you feel it? I've severed your tenketsu, Kisame. Your chakra will be gone until it repairs. And your chakra will never be as large as it was. It'll take all you have just to swing your oversized sword."

Kisame lay on the ground, unable to escape the kunai through his hands. All he could do was growl at Ryouko. But after a few minutes, he stopped growling.

"You shouldn't have won, you know. Your chakra nature is fire! Water always beats fire! How'd you do it?"

Ryouko shrugged. "Strategy. When you attacked my clones, I had the one that held back plant that tripwire. Then my last clone pulled it tight at just the right moment. If you had noticed either clone, I would've been in trouble. Oh, and that tag- it needed to be placed on skin directly."

Ryouko stopped for a second, bending down to Kisame's level. His face was icily calm, unnerving even to Kisame.

"Just be thankful I'm not Kakashi. He'd kill you. Me...I'm going to leave you to rot. That way, the elements killed you, not me. I don't want to bloody my hands."

With that, Ryouko left.

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Zetsu entered the marsh, popping up near Kisame.

“Do I get to eat him now?! The fool lost to a child!” the black half of Zetsu said.

“No. The Leader might have use for him,” the white half of Zetsu replied. “Do you need help, Kisame?”

98 - Blood Spilled; A Life Taken

Back in Konoha, deep underneath the Uchiha dojo, there was an urgent meeting going on. After Ekyt's sudden change into an Aizen-ish traitor, there was talk of what would happen next. Those in the know had shown up to ask Itachi himself.

Azami laid out tea, then sat down next to Itachi, her dark eyes glazed over with thought. Itachi had already told her about this, so he didn't interrupt her own thoughts.

"Simply put, Ekyt can handle most of the Akatsuki. The two that will give him trouble are the two top leaders. They are Tobi and Pain. Everyone else, if he moves at the right speed, will be difficult, but winnable battles. He knows this. By now, Kisame will have turned on him, and likely has been defeated. Ekyt also holds a ring from one other member, Hidan. Hidan is no match for Ekyt."

Sasuke 'hmphe'd' loud enough to get Itachi's attention. When their eyes met, the brothers both fell silent.

"I don't see why he's your 'protégé' all of a sudden, Itachi. I could've handled this job just fine. So why Ekyt?"

Itachi met Sasuke's eyes once, firmly. "I didn't choose him. He had no other choice once he brought me back here to fight Orochimaru. He made himself into a villain so that the rest of the village would stand together and fight off this threat. It was how it had to be."

"He's weak! He won't kill to save his own life!" Sasuke snarled, pounding the table and upsetting the tea.

"You're right, Sasuke. He won't," Itachi conceded. "But he'll kill to save other's lives. The threat the Akatsuki pose needs to be eliminated. By doing that, the rest of us can combat Orochimaru and his newest threat."

"T-then we need to help!" Sakura said finally, standing up. "We need to send out a support team for him! Someone that operates from the shadows! Someone who can kill who he can't!"

"...Whoever goes will be at a huge risk."

"Who cares? It's better than letting himself be at risk alone!" Naruto declared, pumping a fist. Sakura stood with him. Kakashi and Yamato knew that they had to go where Naruto went. And they wouldn't object to this mission, that was for sure.

--

Ryouko avoided dealing with Deidara just yet. He didn't fear the artist- it was his partner, Tobi. Itachi had warned him Tobi wasn't what he appeared, and was in fact very powerful. That meant that the next logical one to destroy was Kakuzu. But he didn't like his chances- each time they had fought; Ryouko

had paired off with Hidan. The one time he and Kakuzu had clashed, Ryouko had bought Kakuzu off, and had hoped a trap hidden in with the counterfeit money would take care of him.

But at least with him I have a reason to kill him. If he's allowed to live, he'll come after me, with the bounty on my head. I can't have that. Not right now. That would ruin everything. No, better yet, I'll provoke him. Make it look like self-defense. Then beat him. That gives me time to prepare anyway.

Ryouko felt a presence behind him. He spun, his tonfa spinning out as his sandals crunched in the leaves.

KLANG!

"Kid, calm down! Listen, you aren't going to be able to handle this one by yourself. I was nearby, and I figured you could use a little help."

Ryouko's eyes went wide. "Y-You...sir! Master Jiraiya!"

Jiraiya flashed a goofy grin. "The one and only! Now then, tell me about the plan that your brain is hatching. We'll just see how I can fit myself in, sport."

--

Azami and Sakura took a few minutes to speak girl to girl. Their respective men were both dealing with some complex feelings at the moment. So the girls decided to take care of themselves while the boys hashed out battle plans.

"Hey, Azami, listen. I'm really sorry about how I've acted towards you..." Sakura finally said, playing with her fingers. "I just...didn't like to see someone so beautiful taking Ryouko away. I know, he's not 'mine' or anything, but..."

Azami gave a small chuckle. "Don't worry about it. I know how it is. You had every right to be suspicious. I don't exactly look 'innocent', after all."

Sakura giggled herself, but shrugged. "Well, that was part of it. But I guess I didn't want to see him get close to someone else. He's been hurt so much, and I couldn't trust you."

Azami sighed deeply. "You were right not to. But, at any rate, let's take a walk. It's good to stretch our legs once in a while, and there are things you need to hear about this whole situation."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Sakura wanted to know. She and Azami began their walk around the village.

Everywhere you looked, the village was silent and dark. It was normally so calming to the citizens here. But not tonight. Tonight, most had mixed emotions. Some hated Ryouko; some supported him. Others didn't understand, but followed their own sentiments regardless. There was a lot of confusion and chaos.

Azami ran a hand through her hair. "First of all, I really did love Ryouko. But I fell for Itachi really hard. I don't know why, and I feel like I destroyed Ryouko, after all he had done for me. He gave me trust that no one else would. He gave me a chance at a real life. But, even though I was blackmailed and had no choice... No, I DID have a choice." Azami changed her tune mid-sentence. "I did. The whole time, and I didn't see it. I should have gone to Ryouko to begin with."

Sakura didn't say anything right away. Once she organized her thoughts, she told Azami: "A lot of people underestimate him. He's one of those guys that works hard behind the scenes and doesn't get the credit he deserves. But to anyone who knows him, you couldn't have anyone better watching your back."

"Maybe so," Azami admitted. "But still...anyway, why I called you out here. Ryouko isn't likely to come back from this mission alive. Pain and Tobi are beyond Orochimaru. There are jutsus on my memory that prevent me from remembering details, but I just know...They can't be defeated. Not in the normal ways. If Ryouko takes them on, then even the cost of his life won't be payment enough to defeat them."

Sakura gave Azami a hard stare. "Are you still underestimating him? He is a shinobi of the Hidden Leaf. He will find a way- he always does. And I'll patch him up at the end of his mission, just like always. He has a mission, and he won't die until it's completed!"

Azami found that she believed Sakura. **I am guilty of underestimating him, aren't I? Like at the tournament, when he fought Hidan, Kakuzu, and I. He was the only one to ever cut my face...**

"You're right, Sakura. You know him better than almost anyone, I'm sure. Now, before we head back, there's one last thing I need to say..."

Sakura cocked her head to show she was listening. Azami took a deep breath, and began.

"Ryouko won't come back as the same boy you knew. Killing someone is terrible...awful...what it does to you is indescribable. Whatever reason Ryouko has for killing the Akatsuki, his mind won't be the same. And with his growing mental illness...how long do you think he'll have? He may be on borrowed time now..."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "You didn't hear me? Let me say it again: You don't know Ryouko. You spent a few months with him. I've spent years with him. That piddling little mental instability won't slow him down. If he's defeated, mentally or physically, he'll train, come back stronger, and defend this place and its people to the last! He's beat that stupid illness, and he'll come back here...home...to all of us."

Azami shook her head. "I'm older than you. You might know Ryouko, but I know what war does to men. They're changed, Sakura. No matter what. How can you be sure Ryouko will stay here? He's a villain here, after all. No matter what happens, the history books will always talk of his deception and treachery. Even if there's a happy ending and the people learn he's no traitor."

Sakura hadn't thought of that. **Did Ryouko know this when he took the job?! He can't be serious! He has to come home!**

"...That's why we need to give him a reason to come, Sakura. How about it- what makes him come back

here? And what would sweeten the deal? A girl? That miko, maybe? Or his assistant?"

Sakura looked skyward, seeing the dark clouds in the darker sky. The stars were beautiful tonight.

"No...he just wants to belong here. He's told me that before. As long as there's a place for Ryouko, and someone to protect...he'll be back."

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"We can't be sure of the boy's intentions, after all. Hidan challenged him, and Zetsu personally vouches for the boy acting in self defense. In both cases, the child showed skill."

Pain had heard Konan, and valued her opinion. But he had another problem with the situation.

"...The way he fought, it's not a stretch to believe that he planned out how to fight those two. Then again, he's also faced them in combat more than once. Hidan isn't the brightest, so that's understandable. But Kisame..."

"Likely overconfidence," Konan mused. "If I were fighting a child so small and sickly looking, I might drop my guard a little as well. But either way, it's clear we shouldn't just underestimate him."

"Surveillance, then," Pain decided. "Zetsu will do to keep an eye on him."

"And Kisame's ring? The boy didn't take it this time."

Pain took it from Konan's hand, turning it over in his own hand. Quite a valuable thing, this small ring. "It belongs to our next recruit. Someone who can keep pace with this new boy, I think. Because if the pattern is consistent, Kakuzu will be eliminated next."

Konan blinked. "A pattern? Explain, please."

--

Ryouko explained his plan to Jiraiya in as much depth as possible. A lot of it depended on circumstances and reactions to other parts of the plan. But all in all, it was well thought out. Except for one major part.

"Master Jiraiya...each time I've had one of the Akatsuki at my mercy, I've failed to kill them. I stored Hidan's head in a summoning scroll, and I cut Kisame's tenketsu beyond repair. But I should have killed them, both times. But I couldn't..."

Jiraiya looked thoughtfully at Ryouko for a minute. Unlike usual, the boy wasn't burning with shame when it came to talking about his faults. As if he had resigned himself to believing that this was one fault he wouldn't cure.

A shinobi that won't kill is like a dog that won't bite. But maybe this guy is the one in a million goofy kid that can make it work. I wonder just what Sarutobi-sensei intended for him, taking him

under his wing like that. Why not assign him to a squad? Why lie to the boy and say there were no spots? What are you protecting him from, Sarutobi-sensei? Or rather, were you preparing him for something?

Ryouko felt Jiraiya pat his head.

“You know, those who resort to killing don’t always make the right move. I think you could kill- you’re skilled enough. But you don’t want to. If the situation is right, then you won’t hesitate. I can tell.”

Ryouko didn’t ask why he knew. He just took it for granted that the Toad Mountain Sage would know better than he would.

“Needle Jizo!” Jiraiya suddenly called out, grabbing Ryouko and enveloping both of them in a cocoon of Jiraiya’s spiky hair. Black threads bounced off them, followed by a huge purple hand. The hand’s force was enough to knock them both backward, skidding on their feet until they hit a thick tree.

In front of them was Kakuzu, ready for battle. This was the one battle Ryouko wasn’t ready for yet. But he could improvise- he hoped.

“Master Jiraiya, we should keep this as discreet as possible, I think,” Ryouko commented. He was digging his hand into his back pouch.

Jiraiya smirked grimly, matching Ryouko’s tone. “I agree. But what happens can’t be helped, right?”

“Naturally!”

Ryouko threw two shuriken, calling out “Multi Shuriken Shadow Clones!” as he dodged to the side, high up in a tree. Jiraiya, meanwhile, took to hiding behind a rock, waiting for opportunity.

Kakuzu held up one hardened arm, deflecting all of the hundred-plus throwing stars that were aiming for him. He sent the same arm after Ryouko, who jumped over it. That turned out to be a bad move as Kakuzu’s other arm came hunting for him. That arm barreled into him, pinning him against a tree.

“Gah!”

Ryouko coughed up blood, and instinctively began to push against the arm holding him. But it wouldn’t budge. And here came the other arm to finish him!

“Rasengan!”

Jiraiya’s version of the Fourth Hokage’s ninjutsu, the swirling chakra sphere, cut right through both of the arms, which were comprised only of black strings at this point. The hands aiming for Ryouko and the one holding him both fell limply, giving Ryouko a chance to hop down and prepare his next jutsu.

Kakuzu strings began to chase Jiraiya now. What bothered Ryouko was that he hadn’t seen Kakuzu transform yet. They had given him every opportunity. Why wasn’t he taking the bait?

Does he have backup or something? Who's left? Itachi is gone. Kisame is out of action. Sasori is missing, but hasn't been seen for some time. Orochimaru left a long time ago. Hidan is incapacitated. That leaves Deidara, Konan, Pain, Tobi, and Zetsu unaccounted for. If these guys usually fight in partners, that leaves Kakuzu alone. It can't be that he's not taking us seriously. If it was just me, sure, but against Master Jiraiya, too? No way. Something has to be up.

Stealth was still an issue, so both Ryouko and Jiraiya kept their strongest jutsus in check. They couldn't keep that up for much longer. And they couldn't exactly sit back and discuss a plan. There had to be a way to destroy this guy- right?

Damn it, we can't get close... Jiraiya thought, dodging around the strings and hands again and again. **Ryouko's thinking about it, too. If one of us could get in close...no, if I could get in close. After that talk we had, Ryouko has to be thinking about that. So maybe...**

Ryouko suddenly had an idea! It was so simple, how hadn't he thought of this before?!

"Bringer of Darkness!" he called out, using two other genjutsus as distractions. Very quickly, Kakuzu stopped moving recklessly. He was clearly trying to use his ears instead of his eyes, so he stopped making noise.

Jiraiya grinned- perfect! He rushed in, kunai in each hand, and hacked away. He had stabbed Kakuzu several times before his retaliation. That was easy to dodge, though.

"Bringer of Darkness!" Ryouko repeated, plunging Kakuzu back into a pit of darkness. Jiraiya slashed again and again, then dodged.

Finally, Kakuzu only had one heart left. That made Ryouko freeze- this was killing indirectly, wasn't it?

"Do it," Jiraiya ordered firmly. "You have to. If you let him go, he'll kill again. He won't stop. Think of all the lives he's taken."

Ryouko's hands began to shake. Could he really do this? This is what it meant to be a shinobi. You took life away. You did so to protect others. You didn't have to enjoy it- but you had to do it. There was no option.

I've been lucky...Most shinobi have killed by now. But me...my first kill at age twenty...I've done all I can to avoid it. My conscience should be clear. This one has to die.

Ryouko had heard about what Kakuzu had done. He was greedy. He was vicious. He was sure he was invincible. Didn't he *deserve* to die?

No...but he's gonna anyway. He killed that Miko...Asuna's sister. The least I can do is bring her the head of the bastard who got her!

Ryouko looked at Jiraiya. His mouth opened- then he dove at the Sannin, pulling him down. Ryouko laid on top of him.

Deidara's bombs detonated just a few feet away.

Ryouko groaned, but didn't move. Everything hurt. Not least off all, his conscience hurt.
Damn it...I messed up. If I had just done what I was supposed to, this wouldn't have happened. Now I'm going to die. I don't mind that, I guess. But what if I've killed Jiraiya, too?

With that, Ryouko laid still.

-

Jiraiya pushed Ryouko off him.

He saved me! I'll get that bastard for killing him! Stealth goes out the window now!

Ryouko groaned again- he wasn't dead! But this, as it turns out, wasn't much help to Jiraiya. Now he had to be careful again. If the others noticed Ryouko was alive, they would finish him off, no questions asked.

I've got to buy him some time. If he can just get up one more time and use that Reaper Death Seal...

"Alright. Ryouko, it's too bad you're not conscious to see this. But it's not something you could learn anyway...here we go! Sage Mode!"

The only outward effect of this jutsu was Jiraiya's nose becoming bigger and growing warts. That, and two arguing old frogs were sitting on his shoulders. It was laughable, really. At least to Kakuzu and Deidara. Neither of them had any idea of what had just happened.

"His nose looks like a sea urchin, un!" Deidara crowed from up on his clay bird. He was bent over laughing. He nearly laughed himself right off his perch.

"..." Kakuzu was less cocky. He knew that if this was a Sannin, there had to be more to this jutsu. No way just changing his appearance was all of it.

"Alright then. Now, who's first? You're both about the same level now..." Jiraiya looked from one to the other, sneaking a glance at Ryouko afterward. The boy had moved, but only a little bit. The back of his clothes had been burned away by the explosion. But there was surprisingly little damage.

I wonder...could he be playing possum? Jiraiya wondered. Knowing Ryouko, he had focused his chakra to his back to protect himself just in time. So it wasn't out of the question. The explosions had been small, and not right on top of him. So he could be setting up a trap.
I'll risk it. I'll lure Kakuzu over, then tackle Deidara.

"Jiraiya-boy, that young'n alright?"

"He's laying face-down, Pa! How well c'n he be?"

The two frogs fell into their own argument. Jiraiya paid them no mind as he got ready to make his move.

That was the plan. But it didn't work out quite like that. Kakuzu and Deidara both forgot Ryouko entirely and aimed for Jiraiya. Deidara's bombs were forcing him to stay away from Ryouko. They were clearly guiding him toward a certain spot. This was becoming a problem. If Jiraiya didn't have to worry about Ryouko, then there wasn't a problem. He could squash these two. But buying his hurt comrade time was getting dangerous.

-

Ryouko laid face-down, his hands moving into his vest pouches. He was running on auto-pilot, while his mind was elsewhere. He absently took long drags off his cigarette, all the while wrapping some razor wire with exploding tags.

This hurts...but I'm not going to die. I've got to get up. I've got one more battle, at least. If I die after that, I can accept it. But before then...

He put his cigarette in one of the exploding tags. The lit end stuck out, burning down slowly. At this point, it would take about thirty seconds before it reached the exploding tag.

Looking up, Ryouko noticed where his enemies were. They were herding Jiraiya toward something. Deidara was up on his bird...perfect.

Ryouko took six kunai, tying three to each end of the razor wire. His fingers were shredded, but that didn't matter right now. What mattered was that he had finished his plan. Now to put it into action.

Spring and throw...

Ryouko did just that. He jumped and threw the weighted wire. He got it over Deidara's bird. The three kunai on the opposite side of the bird dug into trees. The other end Ryouko pulled on. He had left himself wide open for attack, and Kakuzu was going to take the bait. He was too greedy not to.

Kakuzu did, and Jiraiya was waiting. A full-power, Sage-enhanced Rasengan shattered Kakuzu's last heart. That, as it turned out, would be the end for Deidara as well. He looked to see about Kakuzu's fate. When he did, Ryouko's cigarette burned further, with the small flame finally hitting the exploding tag.

Once again, Ryouko pulled Jiraiya down. Jiraiya had seen this coming and summoned a protector toad. The toad stood in front of both of them...

BOOOM

...just in time. A blast of hot air mixed with sulfur hit Jiraiya and Ryouko, stinging their eyes. A second explosion, an even bigger one this time (Deidara's bird was rather explosive, it seemed) knocking them both backward. But the fight was over.

Ryouko was shell-shocked from killing Deidara, but Jiraiya forced him to keep moving. There was no time to feel sick now.

"...no choice, right?" Ryouko finally muttered, his face as pale as Jiraiya had ever seen it. He was

burned and bloodied, but still standing. "...they had you with that trap. I just saw it in time..."

Ryouko extended a shaking hand. Jiraiya followed his hand. His mouth dropped open.

There was a giant circle, in the shape of a mouth, on the ground. The explosions had knocked the thin layer of dirt camouflaging it aside. It was clearly made by Deidara, so you can bet it would be a bang.

"I saw it when I was lying on the ground. I could have just warned you, but it looked like they had you boxed in. So I...I finally..."

Jiraiya had known the boy would take this badly. What he needed now was some kind of salvation. No one that was sane enjoyed killing. And in this case, there really was no alternative. Killing in defense of another isn't a sin. But all the same, there are something you never forget:

-Your first love

-Your first time in bed with a girl

-Your first kill

It would figure he'd only get the last one right. But maybe a girl can help him. That Shrine Maiden and his assistant would keep an eye on him. There's no doubt that Ryouko can't be alone for the next few days. In fact...

In what was an extreme kindness, Jiraiya knocked Ryouko out in such a way that he would sleep until a medical ninja treated him properly.

"...Very interesting, Jiraiya. Certainly not the outcome I expected."

Jiraiya turned slowly. This voice...

"It's me! You know! Tobi, the 'good boy'!"

That isn't Tobi's voice. Or, rather, not his normal voice. This voice is more sinister, and dripping with malice...

"Oh, relax, I'm not going to fight you! Not right now! I just thought I'd check on the boy, that's all. He's caused a lot of trouble for me, you know! Such an interesting child..."

"The boy's fine," Jiraiya snarled, hefting Ryouko up to a more comfortable position. "And you can't have him."

"...Well then. Tell him this: He's delayed my plans by several years by destroying a good deal of my organization. So you can tell him that his mission is accomplished...and that, from one who has a right to say so..."

Tobi paused, removing his mask. Jiraiya stepped back reflexively. That couldn't be right! It had to be some kind of transformation jutsu! And yet... There was no exhausted chakra from Tobi in the air.

Tobi let Jiraiya observe, then replaced his orange mask and finished his sentence.

“He’s become the legend that Sarutobi believed he could be.”

--

Jiraiya carried Ryouko back to the Leaf Village, slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Ryouko didn’t stir once.

Kisame...Hidan...Deidara. And I’ve eliminated Kakuzu. That leaves Sasori, Pain, Konan, Zetsu, and Tobi. Four out of nine Akatsuki eliminated.

Jiraiya could tell the looks he received were actually for Ryouko. The village hadn’t completely forgiven him. Yet they didn’t completely hate him. That was at least one small comfort to the boy.

Most of these people will never know just what he really did for them. But that’s the life we lead. Live in silence, die in silence.

Tsunade and Shizune were waiting, with Sakura and Naruto. They all looked a little alarmed when they saw Ryouko being carried. But they all breathed a sigh of relief when Jiraiya told them just what had really happened.

“We’ll talk in my office,” Tsunade said quickly, turning to lead the way.

--

“Before we wake him up...” Tsunade announced, tugging Sakura forward. “Sakura, I want you to check his mental condition. He will be monitored, regardless of what you find, but this will decide the course of his treatment.”

Silently, Sakura stepped up, focusing her chakra just so into her fingertips. While Shizune administered a genjutsu sedative, Sakura planted her fingers on Ryouko’s temples. She could tell by the way his chakra flowed that he was either okay, insane, or both.

“...His chakra is normal. A little relaxed, in fact. As the sedative and Master Jiraiya’s strikes wouldn’t affect his chakra flow in that way, it’s likely his mind is at ease for the moment. It’s when we wake him up that’s going to worry me.”

“Be prepared to put him right back out, Shizune,” Tsunade told her assistant firmly. “He’ll give his mission report. Based on that, we’ll either put him back to sleep, or release him into the company of a few certain individuals for mental therapy.”

“...Tsunade, we need to talk.”

Tsunade heard the serious tone in Jiraiya’s voice. She glanced at him, but nodded her head.

“No visitors yet. Keep him under, Shizune,” Tsunade snapped, following Jiraiya upstairs.

--

Jiraiya explained everything to Tsunade in detail.

“Four of the Akatsuki ruined. Their plans are on hold for a few years. That gives us a lot of time. Most importantly, it gives Naruto time to train. With that kind of leeway, he could easily become good enough to fight them on his own.”

“...That’s not all you wanted to tell me. What else?”

Jiraiya actually gave her a small smile. “It’s happened. Finally. Ryouko reached legendary level the other day. ‘Tobi’ made the declaration. He has a right to say so.”

Tsunade’s mouth dropped open. “He has? I’m not surprised he did...but so soon? He doesn’t seem like a legend yet...”

“Well, did we, back in the day? Give him time. And maybe someone to learn from after all this. Or at least a training partner. Maybe those three...after all, he’s supposed to help them reach legendary status.”

“He **WOULD** find a way to make both parts of that prophecy come true...” Tsunade sighed. She felt burdened, but it was Ryouko that concerned her. How could she deal with this? Now that he had been bestowed with the ‘legend’ title, he could easily tell her that he couldn’t be just sitting around.

“You know... Do you remember how Sarutobi taught us? Maybe it’s time to give Ryouko that kind of role. Give him a squad of genin, fresh out of the academy. Give them missions that keep them around here, and keep Ryouko’s role to a minimum. He’ll remember Kakashi and his team’s experience. Chasing cats for months before they got a ‘real’ mission. And by then, Ryouko will have healed up, and calmed down from having been forced to kill.”

Tsunade had considered that. Jiraiya bringing it up reinforced it enough in her mind. Though she thought she might take it a step further.

“I’m going to put him in an advisory role, too. He’s supposed to help the next set of Sannin. He can do that more when he heals. For now, I’ll give him some kind of desk job.”

“Do you really think he’ll go for that, Tsunade? It’s not like him to just lie down and not fight that kind of thing.”

“He won’t have a choice. I’m going to plant a mild virus in his system that will make him lethargic until he’s given an antidote.”

--

Ryouko’s hospital room was kept undisclosed. While he was unconscious, the village fought over what to do with him.

“Most say ‘execute him’... And we can’t just tell them what he did for them... This is a no-win situation...”

The jonin gathered put their heads together. The best they could think up was to kill Ryouko in an honorable way. Kakashi, Asuma, and Gai would have to do the killing. But all the same, there had to be

a way for Ryouko to escape.

“If he’s give the time and the opportunity, maybe we can let him go. He’ll need to prove to the village that he’s on their side. We just need to give him that chance.”

“An official pardon from the Fire Daimyo would do it,” Asuma muttered. “Wait...Lady Tsunade, didn’t you say some Shinmaru guy was an S-ranked criminal here, and then he got a pardon from the Fire Daimyo, and now serves him? That’s perfect for Ryouko’s situation!

“If he escapes this ‘execution’ thing... But even if he DID get the pardon... the village would still be mad. The only way to really settle this is to have him speak to Itachi, in front of everyone. And have both of them clearly establish that they have no problem with each other.”

“Or send Ryouko away for a year, until people cool down. Maybe he could take a solid guardian spot. He’s a million times stronger than before.”

--

Sasuke sat near Ryouko’s bed, staring at him. Sasuke’s face was eerily calm, and only half illuminated by the moonlight.

“What a mess you’ve made...” Sasuke said to Ryouko. “You know, it was easier when I just wanted to kill my brother. But then you come along and forced my own reasoning out of my head. I’m going to kill you for taking my reason to live. And the best part is...you can’t fight back!”

Ryouko had heard that. His body wouldn’t respond the way he wanted it to, and he couldn’t completely dodge Sasuke’s sword. It caught his arm as he rolled off the bed. No time to deal with that, though.

Ryouko kicked the bed onto Sasuke, scrambling toward the window. There was Sasuke in front of him. There was no point in trying to stop, so Ryouko lowered his shoulder and rammed into Sasuke, sending them both spilling out the window and onto the street.

Sasuke focused his chakra and stuck to the side of the building. Ryouko couldn’t do that thanks to the virus in his system. All he could do was grab onto one of the rooftops with pure strength. That made him a sitting duck.

Sasuke’s sword extended toward Ryouko. Ryouko turned to avoid it, but it still cut his side. Blood spilled to the ground below. The ground wasn’t too far, so Ryouko let himself fall the rest of the distance. He landed crouched, and took off as fast as he could. He had to find someone- anyone!

The virus only made him slow- physically. In reality, it also messed with his chakra. He only had a minimal amount, and it took all his concentration to focus it.

Damn it!

Sasuke was hot on his trail, occasionally throwing a kunai or shuriken. When one hit Ryouko, he felt the shock of a Chidori hit him. Sasuke was putting chakra into the damn things!

But I'm well enough to keep him from getting a clean kill...I've got to keep stalling him somehow!

Ryouko had been dressed in the all-black jonin uniform, minus the vest. If he had his vest, he could have gotten at his ninja tools. Even his headband would have been a big help! That in mind, Ryouko kicked in the door to Ichiraku. As this fight was taking place at 2:00 am, it was empty. But there were still a few knives lying around. Ryouko scooped them up, then exited out the front. Sasuke was waiting for him.

"No where to run now. I'm going to kill you for what you did."

Ryouko didn't mince words- he kept running, trying to think of something. But he couldn't. He needed an antidote for this virus, and he could only get that from three people: Sakura, Shizune, or Tsunade. But neither Sakura nor Shizune would be a match for Sasuke now. He had to find Tsunade.

Two more shuriken hit Ryouko's back as he turned a corner. They only scraped him, but the shock from Sasuke's chakra forced Ryouko to one knee. Out of instinct, Ryouko braced himself against the wall he had just tried to get around. Panting heavily, he drew one knife tight to his chest. The other knife he was holding was aimed upward.

Sasuke came from above, and tried to leap over Ryouko. Ryouko let the first knife fly, missing Sasuke. The second knife he was holding aimed toward Sasuke's ankle. But Sasuke blocked it with his sword. Ryouko used his free hand to grab one more knife and stabbed at Sasuke's stomach. Sasuke blocked it with his arm. Ryouko disengaged quickly, and just in time, because Sasuke's body lit up- a full-body Chidori.

"Damn it!" Ryouko cursed, taking off again. It occurred to him to head toward the gates. There was always someone on guard duty there.

Sasuke seemed to know that, too, so he stood in Ryouko's way. The bridge was the only path to the gate for Ryouko when he was this weak. But he had one more trick. Back in Ichiraku, he had grabbed cooking oil. With his chakra, he could manage a small fire jutsu. This would mean a burn, but there was no other way.

As Sasuke moved in menacingly, Ryouko spat the cooking oil out, then snapped his fingers to emit a spark. The oil caught fire and blasted right into Sasuke's face. There wasn't enough to do serious damage, but it gave Ryouko time to scamper across the bridge while Sasuke put himself out.

"I NEED TSUNADE!" Ryouko shouted at Izumo and Kotetsu. "IT'S AN EMERGENCY!"

But the two hesitated. They had been torn between supporting Ryouko and following the village's general opinion.

Schunk.

Sasuke's sword, cut Ryouko's side again. Ryouko dropped to his knees, the pain getting unbearable.

"Now die!" Sasuke declared.

Pwoof pwoof pwoof pwoof pwoof

Kakashi, Gai, Asuma, Yamato, and Hayate all appeared in clouds of smoke just in time. Kakashi grabbed Sasuke's sword arm. Yamato used a wood jutsu to keep Sasuke still. Gai grabbed Sasuke's other hand. Hayate held a kunai to Sasuke's throat. Asuma stood in front of Ryouko, shielding him with his twin trench knives glowing dangerously.

"Good thing we left when we did," the newly-arrived Tsunade said. She strode right over to Ryouko. "I'm sorry about this. I had no idea this would happen...but no matter. Your mind has had time to heal by now. So now it's time for your body to get back to 100%."

It dawned on Tsunade that she was helping the newest legend to his feet. Pride caught in her chest, even though she had little to do with it. If anything, she had been his biggest obstacle.

But I've never been happier to be beaten...

As he stood up, Ryouko noticed even the jonin had stopped to look at him. He had no idea why.

"There you are!"

Jiraiya had just arrived, and he was sporting a huge grin. With him was Naruto.

"It's a pretty historic day, isn't it, Tsunade? It's not everyday we get this kind of thing happening to us here in the Leaf!"

99 - Crumbling

Sakura had numbed Ryouko's arm and inserted a needle with a vaccine into it. She immediately noticed Ryouko perk up a little. He gave her a silent nod of thanks.

"Ekyl, today is a proud day for you, and for Lord Third. As told to Master Jiraiya by...someone who has a right to say...

I name you the first legend of this new generation!"

Ekyl ('Ryouko' had melted away by now) was shocked. Literally frozen to the spot. He couldn't even say anything. But that was understandable. So much had happened the past few hours. It was a lifetime's worth of activity in one short burst.

"..."

Sasuke was burning with anger. His jonin guards had relaxed the second Tsunade had relayed the news. He used that as an opportunity to get away and take another shot at Ekyl.

Ktang!

Ekyl had ducked low and smacked Sasuke's hand, knocking the blade into the air. In the same motion he drove his elbow into Sasuke's stomach, then gave him a hard shove backward. The '12 Shinobi Guardians' waistcloth fluttered as he moved.

"Do we have to do this, Sasuke? I promise you a fight- once Orochimaru is dealt with."

Sasuke grinned nastily, retrieving his sword. "Funny thing about a fight... You don't have to agree on the time and day!"

Sasuke had landed deftly behind Ekyl and stabbed. Ekyl had seen this coming and used a Replacement Jutsu. He had a kunai to the back of Sasuke's neck.

"Funny thing about a fight...even if both parties don't agree, that doesn't mean that the attacked can't become the attacker."

By now, Itachi and Azami had come. It was surprising to everyone that Sasuke's face burned with shame when his brother came near. Could it have been genuine brotherly love? After all the Uchiha boys had been through, could they have somehow bonded?

"Enough, Sasuke."

That was all Itachi said. And all he needed to say. There was some unspoken understanding between the brothers. Sasuke glared once more, but lowered his head and apologized.

"..." Ekyl couldn't think of anything to say that could help the situation. So he kept quiet.

“Kid...time to quench your thirst...and show you something else from the Third Hokage.”

Ekyt met Jiraiya's eyes. He looked around the circle, then dropped to his knees and bowed. He couldn't bow low enough to these people. They had saved his life, and they had stuck by him, no matter what. Even old enemies could become new friends. Friends could become closer. And those that were somewhere in between could quickly shift to being either friend or foe.

Ekyt got up and followed Tsunade and Jiraiya. He suddenly felt both proud and burdened.

--

Under the Hokage mansion, there was a meeting room. Only the elders and Hokages had ever congregated there. A lot of the blackest history of the Leaf was dealt with down here. Things that were unspeakable, and even largely unbelievable. There were millions of scrolls, meticulously stacked in some kind of order. But there were eight scrolls that were black, and over them were blood seals of the Hokages.

“The Third's Crystal ball did more than just watch over the village,” Tsunade began, reaching for a scroll. Jiraiya pulled up three cushions to a low table that was in the center of the room. Unlike the rest of the room, it was kept spotless. Not a speck of dust.

Above the eight black scrolls were eight similar packages. They were drawstring pouches, but even a raw genin could tell you weren't supposed to touch these things. A Hokage-level chakra emitted from them.

“Before we spring this on you, I need to know that you're okay with what's happened.”

Jiraiya was completely grim while talking. Ekyt bowed his head, then sat down on his cushion.

“...I am.”

“Of course you're not. No one is ever fine with this. The moment you accept killing as a way of life if the moment you take the path of evil. Orochimaru's path.”

Jiraiya's tone was harsh; unforgiving even. Ekyt knew that the tone wasn't for him- Jiraiya was back in his youth, fighting Orochimaru to stop him from leaving. And failing at that, as well.

“The Third Hokage left you specific instructions, Ekyt. I wish I could give you more time to mull this over. But there is no time. We need to take a gamble...”

Tsunade dropped the scroll and package in front of Ekyt.

“I'm betting on you. I know you're going to fight Orochimaru. And you know you won't be alone out there. But for now...we need you to follow Sarutobi's instructions.”

--

--

Ekyt unrolled the scroll first. But it was blank, save for something similar to black summoning marks in

the center. Instinctively, he knew that whatever was in the package went in the center of this scroll.

As he began to work, a deep melancholy hit Ekyt. Things seemed so hopeless. Now that he had become a legend...what happened next? What was he supposed to do? Both the girls he had been in love with had gone with other men. And let's face it, he's not getting any younger. With his twenty-first birthday just a few days away, Ekyt felt precious little to celebrate about.

Work! he commanded himself. He unrolled the package, and from within it came a familiar object. Sarutobi-sensei's crystal ball.

Without understanding completely why, Ekyt put it on the center of the scroll, built up his chakra, and began to look. At first, things were black and cloudy, but soon the clouds lifted. Ekyt looked closer, his brow furrowed in concentration. He began to relay what he saw in a monotone voice.

"...Orochimaru will aim right for the heart of the village again. His objective is to destroy it, whatever the cost. He has thousands of men. And he's made an ally with the Raikage and his men, who are still outraged over the 'Hyuuga incident'."

Ryouko removed the crystal ball and unrolled the scroll more. He found writing. This time, it was hints on Orochimaru, and a detailed history of the Uchiha clan.

"...I've got to go see Kakashi. Master Jiraiya, if you'll please bring Sasuke and Itachi as well...this whole matter is going to come down to the Sharingan. There must be SOMETHING I can learn by sparring with them."

"You do remember that Sasuke will try to kill you..." Tsunade reminded him.

"I know. All the better. If he succeeds, then I don't have to worry anymore. If he comes and me full-force and I win, I'm likely to learn something to defeat Orochimaru. I can learn from this. And I'll be the one to fight Orochimaru."

Ekyt turned around on his cushion, bowing to Tsunade and Jiraiya.

"Now then, my will...My Lady, should I perish in combat, I want all my worldly assets to be used to rebuild whatever parts of the village become damaged. I plan to beat Orochimaru, but I'm not optimistic enough to think there won't be some kind of cost."

Ekyt stood up again, pacing around the room. He looked nervous, and his hand automatically reached for a cigarette he didn't have. But that didn't matter a second later, when an idea struck him.

"Yuushi and Okayu...Asuna and Mimizu... My Lady, I'd like your permission to use a forbidden jutsu. One I created and want forbidden, actually. It's not dangerous. But it's not something I'm proud to have invented."

There was no argument. Jiraiya and Tsunade grasped the seriousness of the situation. If Ekyt wanted to break a rule- one he set himself- things were serious.

“Tell me what you need,” Tsunade told him firmly.

Ekyt nodded, his face paling. This was easily going to be the most awkward jutsu he had ever done.

--

Shizune, Sakura, and even Hana Inuzuka joined Ryouko, Mimizu, Asuna, Yuushi, Kantai and Okayu in a giant medical room that was normally a morgue.

“We have four bodies, recently deceased. Asuna, you work with Hana. Shizune, you work with Yuushi and Kantai. And Sakura, you’re with me. We only have a little time, so we have no room for error...”

Neji Hyuuga came in next. He and Ekyt had been cordial long enough for Ekyt to ask him for his help.

“Please tell me what you see in this tag, Neji.”

Neji’s Byakugan focused on the tag. It was a red tag, and roughly as long as a kunai knife, and maybe as wide as your hand. But it was slightly warm to the touch. As Neji looked, his wide eyes got wider.

“It’s...tenketsu. It’s a chakra network.”

Ekyt nodded, saying a quiet ‘Thank God’ under his breath.

“Good. I wasn’t sure that this worked. That is my chakra sealed in those tags. Medics, I need you to plant these tags inside the body, dead center mass, three inches below the navel at the ‘Ki point’. ...”

Ekyt put a hand to his head, frozen for a moment. His mind, not one hundred percent recovered yet, flashed back to the Akatsuki. All he remembered were six people, all with odd piercings. And these weird eyes...

He shook himself back to reality.

“Please do cosmetic surgery where possible. I hate to disgrace the dead, but we have no choice if we’re to help the village this way. I also ask that none of you ever repeat what went on in this room today. This jutsu, which I’ve called ‘Pure Resurrection Chakra Clone’, is going in the books as forbidden the second the medics are finished.”

Ekyt stopped once more, meeting the gaze of everyone in the room.

“I’m not proud of this. But that’s not why it’s so important to keep quiet. If Orochimaru finds out about this, my plan- our best hope, as it goes- is ruined. We get one shot to do this correctly. And... since at the end of this, I’ll likely be executed by the village... Thank you all. For everything. If I AM executed...I’ve only got a couple regrets, and none of which have anything to do with the Leaf Village. If dying in service to your village is every shinobi’s dream...then I’m going to die with a smile a mile long.”

With that, Ryouko left the room. He had three prior engagements to deal with.

--

Itachi defeated Ryouko, but not by so much this time. In fact, it had taken Tsukuyomi to bring Ryouko to his knees. He had managed to land a hit on Itachi, too. But he hadn't learned more about the Sharingan. Despite that, something niggled at Ryouko. He felt like there was something he had overlooked. Perhaps it would become more apparent in the next fight...

"Itachi, you mentioned that you were going to go blind, right?" Ekyt asked, getting up from the grass and wiping blood from his mouth.

"Yes. The only way to avoid it is to take the eyes of another Sharingan user. My brother and 'Tobi' are the only two who could qualify. So I'll be blind rather than hurt Sasuke or face 'Tobi'."

"Well, I've been thinking about this. This 'fake' body you created that Orochimaru stole...it has the Sharingan, right? If I manage to take his eyes and give them to you...will that stop the blindness?"

Itachi wasn't sure. This thing DID have Uchiha eyes and blood, as he had personally contributed himself. Theoretically, it could.

"But how likely is it that you'll get the eyes? Against someone even I have little chance of defeating easily..."

Ryouko looked away, speaking out of the corner of his mouth.

"Itachi, we both know that I'm going to die after this. Either by execution, or by opposing Orochimaru. But I WILL take Orochimaru with me. The second he falls...take his eyes. If I'm alive, I'll deliver them to you. But no matter what...get his eyes."

--

Next was Kakashi. He was slightly easier to fight than Itachi when he focused only on his Sharingan. It was here that Ryouko began to notice something. He was learning to read body language, and was adapting well. He was never a believer in watching an opponent's eyes anyway. Their eyes didn't pull a kunai on you, after all.

Still, in his haze of concentration, Ryouko lost the fight. But again, not by much. This time, however, he had picked up on something- something big.

"Thank you, Kakashi-sensei. That was fun. And it really helped."

Kakashi patted Ekyt's head, giving him a smile. "Sure. Now, since you're the de facto leader of this fight...where do you want me?"

"You're asking me? If I had my way...you'd be with Naruto, as would Yamato and Sai. I have my doubts that the Akatsuki will back off entirely. Especially since we're taking a hit from Orochimaru, no matter how quick he's beaten off."

"Protect the Jinchuuriki, eh? Makes sense to me. Now do me a favor: live through your fight with Orochimaru. Because there's no way the village will execute you after that. Not if my team and I have anything to say about it."

Ekyt thanked him again, though they both knew that there was little to be done if the village decided to

kill Ekyt after all.

--

This was the last match. Ekyt vs Sasuke. There would be no holding back. And Ekyt would get to test what he had learned against Kakashi and Itachi.

The boys fought for nearly an hour, both exhausted. Sasuke had, so far, copied Ekyt's jutsus because Ekyt threw them one by one right back at Sasuke. There was no time for Chidori or anything else. It was this last jutsu that would decide if Ekyt had figured out the Third's clue.

"Fire Style..."

-

Ekyt lay down, chest heaving with exhaustion. He didn't want to get up from this spot on the grass, even with Sasuke lying nearly within arm's length. It had cost a lot of energy, chakra, and pain- But it worked! Ekyt had one advantage on Orochimaru now! With a grim smile, he knew he could win. He HAD to win.

And thankfully, Itachi and Azami had kept an eye on Sasuke during their match.

"Thanks, Sasuke. You might have just saved the village..."

"...I hate you. But...I hope you win. If I had my way, you and Orochimaru would kill each other. That way the village would be safe."

Ekyt gave Sasuke a tired grin. "You might just get your wish."

--

Naruto and Sakura actually went to seek Ekyt out. They found him, sitting in a dark corner of a tea house, nearly shaking.

"Naruto, down here!" Sakura told him while pulling on his leg. They ducked down to listen/watch Ekyt. He was muttering to himself, and had a Go board in front of him, arranged in a strange way.

"(mumble mumble) ...Orochimaru will take at least 3, and he'll still do damage. But we won't be alone after that. The Akatsuki won't wait long. What's left of them...those eyes...I've got to think of something. There's no way we can survive two assaults on the village. I've got to stop this somehow...(mumble)"

Ekyt began to move the pieces on the Go board. They clacked as he arranged them a certain way. In the center was a mass of white stones, surrounding by little green stones.

"The Leaf is here..."

On one side were purple stones. They surrounded the village, but were thin.

"Orochimaru's men..."

And finally, there were red stones. There were only eight of them, but six of them were big stones- closer

to rocks, really. And one was a rock the size of Ekyt's palm.

"Akatsuki...six of him...one of her...and that one..."

From a leather bag, Ekyt pulled out large white stones with green stripes on them. He placed twelve of them down.

"Tsunade, Jiraiya, Itachi, Azami, Sasuke, Me, Yuushi, Mimizu... Then we have Kakashi, Naruto, Yamato... (Ekyt added more stones)...Sakura and Asuna can deal with the medics... and Kakashi, Yamato, Jiraiya, Naruto, and Shizune can draw the Akatsuki away. No, what am I saying?! I can't ask them to do that. It's not my call anyway!"

Ekyt stopped his muttering and picked up his teacup. He must have been angry, because the cup shattered in his hand and all over himself. But he didn't seem to notice that so much. Green tea dripped off his headband and fell onto the table, onto the one black stone in the center of the white ones.

"The memorial..."

-

Sakura and Naruto watched this, hearing every word. It was clear that Ekyt had been planning for something, and he had no idea what else to do.

"Keep the Akatsuki away...But he's letting Orochimaru in...Why?" Sakura asked, mostly herself, her hand on her chin. "If we kept Orochimaru out with some of us..."

"Hey, yeah!" Naruto agreed. "That's right! We can counter-strike! And the Akatsuki...They can chase me! I'm what they want, anyway!"

Sakura was silent, her head dropping just a little. She finally spoke up, not lifting her head. "...Naruto..." she said. Her head snapped up and her eyes met his. "Don't do it! I love you!"

Even though they had been dating, that wasn't something Naruto expected. It got even more odd when Sakura flung her arms around him, adding 'don't go' into his ear.

--

Ekyt had known that Sakura and Naruto were there. He also heard what they had both said. He smiled a little to himself, maybe even a little forlornly, and swept the board clear.

"Killing this bastard child of Itachi's is my duty... I thought of Itachi...but no one should have to bury their own child."

I can see it... when he was going to die; he had hoped that...thing...would somehow be of some solace to Azami. It had himself, me, and her in it. Neither of them can kill it. It's my job to do it.

Ekyt wished he could go back to being 'just a servant' of the Leaf. But now he was being pushed to the fore, and he had to deal with this distaste head-on. He was outmatched, outclassed, and likely

outnumbered. But Naruto and Sakura had just really fallen in love. And Azami and Itachi were happy...the Uchiha clan was being rebuilt...

What was one sacrifice, amongst all that? One life gone, exchanged to protect many?

That was both the warrior's duty and warrior's pride.

Ekyt knew this, and yet he hoped that he wouldn't have to call on his warrior's pride.

Leaving the distracted Naruto and Sakura, Ekyt put two fingers to his face and disappeared in a puff of smoke and leaves.

-

There was one other difficult situation that needed attending. Two girls had openly shown interest in Ekyt.

First was Mimizu. She was his Assistant Captain when it came to ANBU's Special Investigation's unit. She was a rogue Mist-nin accepted into the Leaf because she was a former 'Seven Sword'. She could cut someone ten times before they could even move. She was twenty-one, the same as Ekyt, cute, and perky.

Second was Asuna. She was a miko (Shinto Priestess) whose sister had been struck down by the Akatsuki. Ekyt had failed to save her. He then begged Asuna to teach him a jutsu unique to her family. She had taken a liking to him. In contrast to Mimizu's super-sweet nature, Asuna was more frank, and abused Ekyt during training. But she's as socially awkward as he is. Plus, she nursed him back to health when his mental state plagued him for a year's time. They had kissed, and there hadn't been a spark-but that could change, right?

-

The girls waited together, having both been asked to meet in the dark teahouse by Ekyt.

"Good luck," they said to each other in unison. They both nodded in return, then sat down, waiting for Ekyt to come in.

The door flap moved aside, and Ekyt came in. He was dressed in his usual uniform, but he looked more tired and sickly than usual. The stress was aging him, though he still had a baby face.

"...It was my birthday a couple days ago," Ekyt began. "I've been depressed since then. And now, I have a decision weighing on my mind. And then we come to this decision. ..."

Ekyt closed his eyes. "Mimizu..."

Mimizu sat up straighter. But then Ekyt said:

"Asuna..."

Ekyt lowered his head and eyes, sinking to his knees in front of both of them.

"I have no answer for you. All that's been on my mind is death. Death is not the way for a relationship

to start. I just...I have no answer. All I know is the martial way. Love...it's not something I understand. But it's something I want."

Asuna stood up, her tea clattering on the table. Mimizu's wide eyes looked at her, shocked at the abrupt movement. She noticed that Asuna's fist was clenched so tight her knuckles were white.

"Ekyt...I can't wait anymore. We agreed there was no spark. And the way you're talking, you think this place will be a war zone and you'll die anyway? Right?!"

She marched up to him and hugged him. It was so abrupt and out of nowhere that no one was sure how to react.

"...I'm going back to my temple..." Asuna told him, her tears falling on his shoulders. "I came here to see you get well...I did. Now I'm going to leave before I see you die."

With that, Asuna marched away, not even looking back.

"..." Ekyt had nothing to say. Eventually, Mimizu took up her favorite perch on his shoulder, watching the other girl walk away.

"She's holding back, I betcha!" Mimizu exclaimed, just like usual. She spun so that she could face Ekyt. "Are ya gonna be mad at me if I go with Okayu? I kinda had a crush on him for a while and all..."

Ekyt looked her in the eyes, his gaze even and unreadable. "Are you doing that to make this easier on me?"

Mimizu shook her head like a little kid, her blond hair swishing back and forth. "Nuh-uh! He's just hot! Hot in a different way than you, y'know?"

Ekyt gave his reserved chuckle, and then a downright melancholy: "I know...But you two match up nicely, I think. Go get 'im, girl."

And that left Ekyt alone. Again. He wasn't sure if he had loved either girl. But he knew that their friendship had changed forever. Just standing there, Ekyt spoke to himself.

"This is what Orochimaru does...this is what the Akatsuki do...they ruin lives. I'll see it ended. I can't let this happen. I just can't. Because of the Akatsuki, I've lost three chances at love. ...No. Because of *myself*, I've lost at love.

All that's left is my loyalty to the Leaf. And they hate me. They want me dead. And considering who I'm fighting...they might just get their wish."

There was no sage advice when Ekyt could have used it the most. Master Sarutobi was dead. Tsunade couldn't associate with Ekyt anymore- not because she didn't want to, but because she needed the village's support. For now, Ekyt was 'tolerated'. In other words, anything he did, he did alone. Or with the support of a very few in secret.

"I need to take a walk..." Ekyt said to no one in particular. And for no particular reason, his walk took him to the Leaf's Hidden library.

As he opened the door, Ekyt felt himself relax. But that wasn't right... Why should he relax? He couldn't relax! He just had to strategize. But there was no one to bounce ideas off of. No one to talk to, now that Mimizu and Asuna had left his side. Yuushi was married, and had a big brother now.

In a way, losing all these connections makes this that much easier. I don't have any family here. No wife, or girlfriend... So if I die, who am I hurting? No one but myself. And I don't matter.

Desperate for company, Ekyt took out his summoning scroll. Once he opened it, Hidan's head was now his company. The thing could still talk. Granted, it wasn't much help, consider half of what was said was expletives, but it beat being alone.

"Everyone else's life has come together for them. Why not mine?"

Ekyt had finally said it aloud. The thing that had bothered him the most. He had never cared much what others thought- or at least he had convinced himself that he didn't. But truthfully, it mattered now. Here, in a place where he had been accepted, and even respected...to suddenly be hated hurt a whole lot. He had been forgiven by the village before, so Ekyt had half-assumed he would be forgiven this time, too.

Being wrong hurt like hell.

Ekyt sealed Hidan's head again, letting his head drop into his hands. He really was at the end of his rope. That's when he felt a warm, familiar hand on his shoulder.

"Honey, don't you have anything to say to your Father and I?"

Ekyt's mother, Shinobu, had her hand on her son's shoulder. Ekyt's Father, Shiro, gave the boy a nod instead. Each gesture was affectionate in its own way.

Shinobu was an average sized, beautiful (in a motherly way) woman. She didn't show her age, and was kind to just about anyone- until you crossed her son or husband.

Shiro always had Ekyt's back, whether Ekyt knew it or not. Now that the boy was more powerful than his Father, that seemed all that much more important.

"Mom? Dad? What are you doing here?" Ekyt was astonished, and couldn't get up quick enough to give his parents hugs and kisses.

"That's my doing, Ekyt. I wanted your parents here."

Tsunade and Jiraiya, with Naruto and Sakura, stepped into the room. Naruto was looking around, amazed. He didn't know about this library. Sakura did, of course, since she had to treat Ekyt's wounds here more than once.

"I'm sure Ekyt doesn't tell you all that goes on his life." Tsunade shot a sideways glance at Ekyt. "But

there have been a number of notable things recently that you should hear. Firstly, he has slain his first man.”

“Out of necessity to save me,” Jiraiya added instantly. “He was so hesitant to do it, I thought I was a goner! And I’ve never seen anyone beat themselves up so much over it! You raised a fine man.”

“Not to mention he was named the first legend of this new generation. An accomplishment that, in and of itself, sets him apart.” Tsunade opened her mouth to say more, but Ekyt’s fist slammed the table.

“ENOUGH!” he roared, tossing the table out of the way, growling at nobody. “Don’t you DARE compliment me! Killing a man makes me a legend?! How about the rest of my messed-up life?!”

Enraged, Ekyt stomped around in a circle, his fury shocking everyone in the room.

“I’ve ruined every good thing I’ve had! I’ve fallen in love three times, and not once did it work! One girl betrayed me, one left me before I could say anything, and another loves someone else! And a fourth just randomly picked another, better man! What is legendary about me?! NOTHING! NOTHING IS LEGENDARY ABOUT ME!”

Naruto and Sakura both stepped forward to calm Ekyt down, but he drew back into a defensive stance.

“If I have to raise my hand against the two of you, I’ll never forgive myself...” he said in a low, warning voice. “This isn’t a happy occasion. Orochimaru is coming, and after that, the Akatsuki! And if you think the dregs that remain of that damned organization aren’t enough to destroy us, you’re wrong!”

Ekyt pulled out his Go board again, setting it up as before.

“No matter how many times you play, you lose. The white is us, all bunched up and waiting for an attack. But if the one stone with the green and red stripe attacks the purple stone...in other words, if I attack Orochimaru... The Akatsuki will invade before Orochimaru’s men have weakened us. There are enough strong shinobi to fight them off...with lots of losses. But if we -”

“You are NOT my minister of defense, young man!”

All eyes were on Tsunade as she admonished Ekyt. Ekyt was across the room, but he strode straight to her and looked her in the eye.

“I’m not, but SOMEONE has to make a plan. Do you have time to do that, My Lady? Or, rather, do you have a better idea?”

Tsunade dug her heels in, as did Ryouko. This was going to be one explosive argument.

“Excuse me? Are you telling me you approve of this war?”

“Are you telling me that you can delude yourself into thinking there’s no problem here?!” Ekyt shot back.

“Junior Danzou.”

That did it. Ekyt snapped.

“You’d compare me to him! TO DANZOU? The very man I’ve fought against?! My Lady, this has proven that you and this village both have turned your backs on me. My course of action is the only one that makes any sense. I will act with or without your blessing. So you can send people to back me up, or I can go myself.”

Shinobu caught a glimpse of Sakura. Ekyt had often mentioned the pretty young female. It was obvious she was with Naruto, another person Ekyt spoke or wrote about frequently. It didn’t take Shinobu long to see why Ekyt liked the girl. It was obvious she cared for him, on some level.

The other girls he had written about were scattered in terms of how detailed he went. He had talked in length about Azami, though. Through Tsunade, Shinobu knew what happened with that. She hadn’t known until that point that her son had fallen so deeply in love that he still held some feelings for his would-be assassin.

It’s no wonder he’s become so upset. Legendary status has only made life harder for him. This is his world, and there’s nothing I can do for him, except support him as any parent supports her child.

Ekyt bit his thumb. Slowly, he ran it across the metal of his hitai-ate headband. A line of blood had been drawn through the Leaf symbol.

“Then I act alone, so you won’t be involved in whatever happens,” Ekyt said, finally.

“Don’t be stupid! Of course I won’t let you act alone! I’m just asking you to rethink your attack! If we let Orochimaru in, we can trap him! And if the Akatsuki come, they’ll aim for Orochimaru first! Then we can eliminate them both.”

Ekyt sat down on a hard wooden chair, rubbing the blood off his headband. He put a real cigarette in his mouth and started to think.

“I can beat Orochimaru...and with my other jutsu, I can protect a few key points in the village. But the Akatsuki will post a problem. I’m going to be hurt or killed, Lady Hokage. My plan calls for that from the start. I’m going to need to be healed, and very quickly.”

100 - Shuushin (Final Trial)

Ekyt took Lady Tsunade aside and told her everything. Every detail of his plan. The risks versus the potential reward made it clear that it was the obvious choice for the Leaf. But it meant making waves among the other countries. The only real ally the Leaf had was the Sand. And that was problematic, because Ekyt and the Kazekage didn't exactly get along.

"Please, My Lady... I don't want to, but I have to do this. This HAS to be dealt with, and dealt with quickly."

Tsunade was still processing Ekyt's insane plan. No normal person would have cooked it up. It was too dangerous. WAY too dangerous. And Tsunade wanted to tell him 'no, you can't do that!' in the worst way. But even worse was the feeling that she HAD to say yes. As risky as the plan was, it was the only plan they had. And they had no time to form another.

Ekyt's parents look on at their son, both worried about and proud of the boy. They had always been a tight knit family.

"He's taking this seriously. I'm glad he grew into a dependable man," Shinobu commented. "I don't like that killing business, or this assassination attempt he's doing..."

"A man does what he must," Shiro commented. "This isn't our world. This is his. And he knows best. We have to accept that."

"I know, I know," Shinobu murmured, watching her son pace around the library. "But look at him. He's so...uneasy. His anxiety isn't there, but he's not happy, either. When he visited us and told us about that girl, Sakura. Or Azami, even. He was so happy. His life had come together. But now...now it just seems like he's back to where he was."

Tsunade had inadvertently overheard, and had to tell Shinobu and Shiro just what was really going on. She asked Shizune to get all of them some tea, directing Ekyt's parents to sit down at a table in the center of the Library's first floor.

"It's a hard story to follow, but I'd imagine you've heard at least a little of it..."

-

Ekyt sat up on the highest floor of the library, his head buried in his hands. He felt the thin scar horizontally across his left eye, left by the Mizukage. His fingers traced it, recalling the pain and rage.

"Now I'm going to assassinate someone. End a regime of evil. There's so much riding on this. But...what if I can't do it? I don't want to kill! I don't want to! I want to fight, and I want to help. But when it comes down to it...I'm scared of taking lives. And this time, I'm...I'm starting the fight."

I know for sure that if Orochimaru lives, we'll all suffer...so there's no choice. But why does that

seem like I'm twisting truth to suit me?

Ekyt's mind flashed to Asuna and Mimizu. Mimizu had found a man in her life, one she had always spoken of fondly. Ekyt already missed the girl sitting on his shoulder, flirting with him. But she had moved on. On to something better, and something real. Ekyt never knew just how serious she was about him, but he could never take her flirting seriously.

Asuna, though...

Ekyt got up and tore down the stairs. His parents were in deep conversation with Tsunade, so he wouldn't be missed. He couldn't leave things like this.

--

Asuna walked slowly toward the gate, her head bowed slightly in thought.

A miko doesn't need male's companionship. Only nature's. And he wasn't the right one anyway. I feel bad leaving him behind like this, but it would just make things harder. For him and for me. He'd have to worry about protecting me; I'd have to worry about how I feel about him. It's not love, but...I don't know what it is. Maybe it's because I feel that, no matter what he does, he's something like a pure soul. When I heard he killed someone, I felt more sad for him than ever before.

"Asuna!"

Asuna couldn't believe it. Her ears HAD to be playing tricks on her. She turned around slowly, almost not daring to look up. But when she did, she saw that her ears hadn't been messing with her.

Ekyt came running up, out of breath. As he bent over, hands on his knees to catch his breath, Asuna noticed that his pants had wet marks on the legs. It was either sweat or tears, and Asuna knew Ekyt was capable of producing both.

"I...I couldn't let it go like this, Asuna! If I let you walk away now, I would regret it the rest of my life!"

Ekyt drew in a breath, then drew Asuna into a tight hug.

"I'm sorry that it wasn't love, Asuna. I'm so sorry for everything I've put you through, even as a friend. It's so unfair to you. And it's damned unfair to me, too. I want to be your friend, at least. I know it can't work like that...or maybe it can, I don't know! All I know is that I can't just let you go back to that temple. Not without saying goodbye!"

Ekyt held her by the shoulders, looking her in the eyes. But he looked confused, and kind of...wounded. He hesitated for a moment, but then kissed her on her smooth, white cheek.

"uh!" Asuna managed to squeak out, completely taken aback. Once she recovered, though, she ended the tender moment by giving Ekyt a hard shove. So hard, in fact, that she accidentally laced it with chakra and pushed Ekyt to the ground.

“You bastard! I was making this easy on you!” she shouted. “You can’t fight and worry about me at the same time!”

Ekyt was still on the ground, dirt all over his uniform. “You think I wouldn’t worry regardless?! You just thought I was going to pick Mimizu, right?”

“Didn’t you?” Asuna was much more quiet. **I thought for sure he’d...**

Ekyt looked away. “No. I didn’t pick anyone. Mimizu picked Okayu. And I chose to take a mission into the Sound Village.”

“The Sound Village? But that’s...you can’t go there!”

Ekyt drew Asuna close, but not in a hug. This time, it was to whisper to her.

“I have to kill him. I don’t want to, but I have to. Orochimaru is going to come here and slaughter the village, now that he’s obtained the Sharingan. He’ll be all but unstoppable. I have to stop him before he gets complete mastery of the Sharingan. It’s going to ruin me, Asuna. I’m going to come back, but I’m not going to be unhurt, mentally or physically. That’s why I had to say something to you now.

“If I lose my life, my limbs, or my mind, I need you to know that you’ve been important to me. I’m so sorry that I couldn’t save your sister. I’m sorry that I couldn’t give you the love you wanted. And I’m sorry, above all else, for making you take care of me when I was at my weakest. I know it bothered you. And I’m sorry. But I’m NOT sorry I met you, and I never could be.”

“You...you idiot,” Asuna sniffled. But she gave him a hug back. “If you come back...no, when you come back...the temple is always there for you. You taught us to protect ourselves. And we’ll protect you in your hour of need. Just come home, okay? Besides, you never know...how things will turn out.”

--

“...in other words, as a legend, he’s the bravest and the best for this job. Our village is going to be hit by two wars if we don’t take the preemptive strike your son suggested. To put it another way...this is our only chance for survival.”

Tsunade let that sink in. Shinobu and Shiro had been surprisingly calm about all this. She had told them everything that had happened to their son, and in detail. The injuries, the failures at love, near-death episodes, the criminal record, the clearing of that criminal record...all of it.

“I’m just so proud of him,” Shinobu finally said. “If this was his idea, then I trust him. He has to do what he thinks is best or he’ll never forgive himself. And if people got hurt because he made the wrong choice...”

Shiro took a deep breath, looking at the huge library. He wasn’t an avid reader, though Ekyt was. Shiro didn’t even especially like martial arts. But he had been behind Ekyt one hundred percent in his pursuit.

“Now I know why he had to move out. To protect us. Someone would have targeted us because of him. I never thought we’d get that kid out of the house...”

Shinobu gave Tsunade a frank, 'woman to woman' look. "And the girls he loved..."

"He never sealed the deal, no way," Tsunade told her, chuckling. "He's incredibly girl shy. His crush on my student lasted for three years and he never said a word. He stepped aside and let someone else have her. The second girl...it destroyed him when she betrayed him. She's since taken a husband, but it hurt her a lot, too. She genuinely loved your son. As for the other two...nothing even close to serious. Truthfully, I had hoped he'd found his girl one of the first two times. But it just doesn't come naturally to him, and he'd rather see someone else happy than feel happy himself, if I had to guess."

"It's not that, really," Shinobu admitted. "He doesn't want to desert us. You called him 'Ekyt', right? I know for sure 'Ekyt' would feel like he'd be leaving his father and I behind, and he just can't do that to us. I've told him I'm okay with it, which is probably why he finally loosened up a little."

After a little chuckling, the library doors opened again. It was Ekyt, back from talking to Asuna. He looked tired and battered. His right arm was still bandaged from Sasuke's sword. He favored one side to avoid the wound on his side, where Sasuke had stabbed him. There was a small burn on his face from using the cooking oil for an impromptu fire jutsu on Sasuke.

But his eyes were alive. They weren't 'happy' eyes, but they were eyes that carried a mission.

"My Lady, for Otogakure I need a small strike force. Jonin who can get in and get out, fast. I'd like to ask for Asuma, Gai, and Kakashi. When is Kurenai due?"

Kurenai was pregnant, and Ekyt had to know about her status. He wouldn't allow Asuma to fight in the war if he had a child newly born or on the way.

"Stable. She won't give birth for another month. Asuma will be good to go with you. I can only give you ten days. And two days are travel each way..."

"Don't worry about that. Worry about preparing for an assault by the Akatsuki," Ekyt told her bluntly. "Let me handle the Otogakure campaign. We need all our manpower to stave off the Akatsuki, if they're coming like I think they are."

"After Jiraiya sedated you, he told me that Tobi said he would be delayed several years because so much of his organization had been destroyed. Are you sure the Akatsuki are a threat?" Tsunade asked.

"The Akatsuki- tell the unabashed truth? I doubt it, M'lady. And even so, the chance to strike at us while we're weak might be too much of a temptation for the remainder of the Akatsuki."

There was a lot to take into consideration. This 'strike force' Ekyt talked about would only get him IN Otogakure- not back out. And if he managed to kill Orochimaru, getting back out amongst all that chaos could either be a blessing or a curse. Ekyt himself was a question- this mission was asking a lot of his mental health, which was still a question, though he was stable. Killing a man had shaken him badly. Going into Otogakure would mean bloodying his hands yet again, and likely not just on one man. If there were any innocents in Otogakure, they were bound to get hurt. For each one Ekyt tried to save, another would die.

"This could kill me...it might very well be the end of me..." Ekyt mused, strangely calm. Was it because he was finally doing something? Because he was the only one he had to worry about on this mission? If he failed, no one got hurt but himself. And he would do damage; enough to slow Orochimaru, if nothing else. As strange as it was, this mission was beyond S-ranked; yet there was no pressure. No one actually expected him to win. And his parents. They were PROUD. Proud of him, even though he thought for sure they'd be upset at what he'd done. But they understood. Just like always, they understood.

"My Lady...Mom...Dad..." Ekyt said quietly. He walked up a couple steps on the library staircase. He turned, paused dramatically, and said:

"Leave the porch light on for me. I'll be back in ten days. For once, I just KNOW it. I won't lose in Otogakure. I'll be back here, and things will be right. The way they SHOULD be."

Ryouko leapt back down, giving a small half-grin. "I've got to get my clothes together. And prep my team."

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Black gloves with full finger- check.
Black gi top with $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves- check
Chainmail armguards- check
Tabi boots- check
Boot knife- check
Black cloth headband-check
Black jonin pants- check
Black jonin vest- check

"You look totally bad-@\$\$!" Azami commented. Even Itachi gave his grim approval with a nod.

"Seriously hot!" Sakura joked. Naruto flipped her the bird behind her back.

"And now, a gift from your parents. If you'll accept it, 'Mr. Legend'," Shinobu added. She fastened a pendant around Ekyt's neck. It held half of the kanji for 'victory'.

"It might be clichéd, but I've got the other half."

BAM!

The door was kicked in.

"Am I too late? You're not leaving without me!"

The boisterous shout was Mimizu, sitting on the shoulder of Okayu, Yuushi's older brother. There was an awkward silence. Mentally, Shinobu ticked Mimizu off on the list of possible mates for her son.

Those good genetics are gonna go to waste! My stupid kid can't land a girl! And Sakura and Azami would have been great ones, too! Beautiful, intelligent...

Ekyt was quiet. He was lost in thought, it seemed. A thought so deep not even the rowdy Mimizu could shake him from his thought process. Or maybe it was Mimizu on someone else's shoulder. She was still technically his assistant, right?

No, we need to end that.

"My Lady...I'd like to disband ANBU's Special Investigative Services, effective immediately, under the grounds that it has become superfluous to the village's needs."

"So disbanded," Tsunade replied, noting it in her head so that it would be recorded later. Since the organization didn't 'officially' exist, it wasn't hard to remove traces from the record books.

--

This was the blackest of missions. It would be recorded almost nowhere in the Leaf Village. Only a small, black book kept in an unassuming place in the Leaf's vast library would chronicle this mission. It would be authored by Ekyt, who added his own personal touch. When Tsunade would read that part, she would think of how cunning Ekyt really was at times. It made her thankful they were on the same side.

She watched as Ryouko talked with Naruto. It seemed awkward, even if Sakura wasn't around. Instead, Ryouko gave Naruto a cryptic message.

"Naruto..." Ekyt began, but he flashed back to the dream he had. Naruto as the 6th Hokage; Ekyt himself dead; a peaceful Leaf Village. If that was the scenario he was creating by doing this, Ekyt had to make sure it was acted out correctly. He had burned a quote from that dream into his memory, and he spoke it to Naruto now, for once confident.

"Naruto, whatever else happens, protect what we've done here today. Never let it be forgotten that, no matter how great, any one shinobi or village may be toppled if we lose our vigilance. But even worse would be to lose ourselves, and our humanity."

This was in reference to the attack Ekyt ((NOTE: I've used Ekyt and Ryouko interchangeably on purpose to illustrate that they are the same person)) believed was coming on the Leaf. It was clear Naruto had absorbed it. For once, someone's words had really hit home with him. He just clasped Ekyt's hand and tried not to cry.

"I will. I can do that much. But you'd better come back alive! 'Cause if you don't, you'll make a liar out of me!" Naruto declared with his usual bravado.

"Oh? How's that?" Ekyt had to ask. He was a little amused by that statement. He couldn't quite catch the meaning.

Naruto grinned broadly, raising an arm for emphasis. "'Cause you're a comrade, and I don't let my comrades die!"

Ryouko grinned back, but the pit of his chest had begun to ache. He already knew how this would end, and it was better for everyone if, just this once, Naruto WAS made into a liar. Ekyt couldn't come back.

Unless I'm really, one hundred percent right about the Sharingan's weakness. If I am...I might just make it out alive. Lord Third Hokage...Sarutobi-sensei...I hope I picked up on your clue in time!

--

Ryouko had a few loose ends to tie up before he left. One of those was with Jiraiya. And for once, the big guy with the white hair was not happy. And he cut straight to the chase. It was so forward and so close to nasty that Ryouko's feelings were actually hurt. They met in the woods, on a small, secluded dirt path.

"I can't let you fight that battle. I don't care what he did to you, Ryouko. As cruel as that sounds, what he did to you can't be as nasty as what he did to me. You never made friends, you wouldn't understand. But when a friend betrays you..."

Ryouko stepped up closer to Jiraiya, letting his anger out.

"Really now? I've been betrayed plenty of times. And you want to either save that friend or kill that friend, right? Rather than let that friend become an enemy, you want to stop it!"

"Oh, you DO understand. Then you'll let me have the fight with Orochimaru. Good. Good talk."

Ryouko tugged on Jiraiya's giant scroll, yanking him back. He pulled the Sannin close and looked him in the eye.

"...This attitude of yours that you're pulling...it makes me want to fight you. It makes me want to handle Orochimaru even more. You of all people should understand what Orochimaru does. For you to pull this selfish crap... No wonder you couldn't take the Hokage title..."

The two were close to blows. Ironically, each understood the other's position. No one was really angry. There were just a lot of hurt feelings, and they all happened to come to a head at the same time. As the two legends glared at each other, it dawned on them how stupid this was. They both dropped their gazes and muttered apologies.

Then it hit Ryouko. A feeling of being watched. Familiar eyes, yet different from any he'd felt before. They peered right into his soul, it seemed.

"So this is your pain. A newly-found mastery over an old problem. You know, Ryouko, some things are better left undone. You shouldn't defeat your greatest opponent so easily...let me bring him back!"

Immediately, Ryouko's body began to react. It was anxiety all over again. He had just beaten it. For it to come back so quickly, and so strongly...

It destroyed him.

But it was worse than that.

It was Orochimaru's eyes that he had felt, and Orochimaru's voice he had heard.

He's managed to obtain a mastery of his new abilities so quickly? He's got me... he's won without throwing a punch.

Ryouko hit the ground, shaking violently, but keeping his composure.

You know how Sharingan works. He got you through the eyes. Cover your eyes, and give Jiraiya a chance to beat Orochimaru... If that doesn't work, then my eyes will have to go.

Ryouko tugged his headband down over his eyes. He had to work from touch to find his scroll and brush, but he finally did. He scribbled down a short message to Jiraiya. It was what he had learned about the Sharingan. And just in case Orochimaru could count strokes and guess what he was writing, Ryouko used a simple code. He wrote:

Fukusuke had to do what he did. 3
Ayame is kind of hot, isn't she? 7
Kikunosuke is lucky. 9
Ecchi is your style for sure. 11
Shikamaru used to hate apples. 4
Enishi was a great villain for sure. 52
Arashi mountain will have a violent winter 36
Leaf can overcome, right? 98

Jiraiya read the scribbles that qualified as coded writing. He immediately understood it. It explained why Ryouko had been going nuts challenging the three Sharingan users in the village to impossible matches.

“You WOULD figure that out, Ryouko. Thank you...”

Ryouko heard him, but by now he was barely in control of his thoughts. All the unpleasant, inescapable images he had worked so hard to erase had come back, virtually crippling the young legend.

Jiraiya now had one more reason to kill Orochimaru.

**I've never seen anyone suffer so uniquely. I've seen him take a nearly direct bomb blast and shrug it off. But he gets taken down by something no one can see...
It must drive him insane. As a warrior, especially.
Helplessness is the one enemy none of us can beat.**

--

It was official- Ryouko had been taken off the mission roster. His Mother and Father comforted him, saying that 'maybe it was best'. They had since been told about his gradually worsening mental state, and about the bomb blasts and lightning-laced kunai knives he'd been hit with recently.

But though they couldn't see their son's eyes, they could tell that this was the worst kind of pain for him. Being unable to protect the things and people most important to him. It sounded cheesy, but someone like Ryouko needed that kind of purpose. And now that it had been taken from him, he really felt defeated.

Each time anxiety had come back, there had been a ray of hope for him. A light at the end of the tunnel. This time, there was nothing. He was an outcast from his home. His love life was gone. He couldn't protect anyone or anything. In fact, he had become a danger to all those things.

While sitting there in the library, Ryouko blurted out what would be his saving grace.

“It feels like a genjutsu that can’t end...”

That’s when it hit Tsunade.

“Ryouko...do you remember your ‘Emotional Chakra’?”

Ryouko was getting anxious again, and he had begun chewing on his arm. Anything to dull the mental pain. He nodded around that action. Tsunade took his chin in her hand and made him look her in the eye.

“If you can call on it again, you can defeat this. Your anxiety is real, but a genjutsu brought it back. Your emotional chakra can agitate your normal chakra, and it can break the genjutsu.”

Tsunade saw a little life in Ryouko’s eyes.

“...But if you do it, you’ll risk hurting your mental state even more.”

Tsunade knew that it wouldn’t matter to him.

“...If you’re going to do it, go to the temple and see that miko again.”

Ryouko immediately left. The second he did, Tsunade smiled at Ryouko’s parents.

“Poor kid. I hate lying like that. All this time, his ‘emotional chakra’ was nothing more than his regular chakra changing due to stress. He’s the only one I know who can change his chakra nature by his emotions. Unconsciously at that!”

This was, of course, nonsense to Ryouko’s parent’s. They weren’t shinobi- they had no clue what Tsunade was talking about. But it seemed to be a good thing for their son, so they kept listening.

“Ryouko’s natural chakra style is hard to determine. He’s kind of a blank slate. He can do lots of jutsus, but he needs a catalyst. He can’t create water, for example, but he can use it if it’s around. Fire is something he can create, which makes me think he’s a fire type. But his earth jutsus are a close second. It’s hard to determine that, because there’s earth all around, all the time. When his emotions act up, and he can call on this ‘second chakra’- actually a rush of adrenaline- he actually boosts his own attack and defense. And it’s a healthy thing when he does it!”

“And why does he need to go see this Shrine Maiden again?” Shinobu finally asked, having heard enough things she didn’t understand for a while.

“How to put it...your son is a hero type that responds best in ‘impossible’ situations. ‘Impossible’ for him is landing the girl. If we get him all hot and bothered around her, then he won’t focus on his anxiety, and even more importantly, he’ll fall into the ‘hero’ role.”

--

Ryouko had planned to wait to use this plan when he had left the village. But with things going to...wrong...he made the decision to use them.

All four of them.

Built in secret, in a chakra-tight bunker, and kept hidden under military cover, was the chief intelligence Ekyt had received from the Akatsuki, coupled with his own research. It had taken meeting Asuna, the Akatsuki, and seeing the Third Hokage battle Orochimaru, but Ryouko had finally managed to put something together that truly felt 'legendary' to him.

There were four Ekyt's in the chamber, not including the original. In a Pain-like set of circumstances, Ryouko built his backup plan from shinobi who had agreed to donate their corpses.

"They contain my chakra...they look like me...the last thing to do is to test them. Let's see..."

Ekyt tapped one of 'himself' on the shoulder, awakening it from a genjutsu state of sleep. This clone got up, clicked it's heals together, and saluted Ekyt.

"Good. You were the first. If you work, the others should as well..." Ekyt mumbled, tapping the clone on the shoulder to free it's voice and limbs from a second genjutsu.

"Thank you, sir. As the original of 'me', you have my admiration."

Ekyt patted the clone again, this time affectionately, before moving on to the others.

The next one was a female, and immediately began to primp and clean her/himself and the surrounding area.

"So they retain tendencies from their living counterparts...Interesting. And unforeseen...It shouldn't matter...I hope..."

The 'female' smiled and bowed.

"Thank you for awakening me, master. I love you!"

"Erk...ah, well, thank you. But, I'm not 'master', and you can't love me. You ARE me."

"I cannot love myself?"

"Yes, yourself. But not me. You are you, and I am me."

"But you said I'm 'me'."

"You are 'me'. But you're supposed to say 'I' when referring to yourself."

"But I was referring to you as well. You are me, and I am I..."

The female was confused, particularly with her new male parts. Her speech reflecting feminism and strangely enough, also a position something like a servant. Perhaps a maid of some kind? No, that couldn't be. What jonin would be a maid? Perhaps a caring female jonin? That was more likely.

“Yes, well...congratulations on your ‘birth’. And remember, you are a boy now...”

Hoo boy. Awkard. This one will have people thinking I’m...ugh.

Next up was a smaller Ekyt. A young genin had died in battle. His dying wish was to be made into something useful to his village. And hence he had been made into one of Ekyt’s backups.

Unfortunately, this one seemed to be a little bit...off.

“No girls? Man, this sucks! I’m gonna scope out the academy!” the clone declared. Ekyt shook his head, however, and sat the clone down.

“No. Not yet. This is a trial run, to see if you’re functioning as you should.”

“Yeah, like you weren’t into girls too! And the ones around here are prime real estate!”

“...”

That left one last clone. This one had been created from a foreign shinobi; this one from the Sand Village. They had donated the corpse to prove that Ekyt and Gaara had truly buried the hatchet. It had been quite...nerve wracking on Ekyt’s part. Gaara had ruin Ekyt’s eye at one point (since healed by Sakura), and Ekyt was partly responsible for Gaara’s sister defecting to the Leaf and finding a boyfriend. Kimimaro and Gaara didn’t get along, understandably. So tensions were stretched to the breaking point.

Ekyt awakened the clone. This clone was apparently going to be the strong and silent type, so Ekyt just shook it’s hand and moved on. It was time to tell all the clone’s their orders.

“You, the first clone,” he announced, pointing at the male that had said he ‘admired’ Ekyt. “You will accompany Jiraiya to Otogakure in my stead. The second clone, formerly a female- you will patrol the borders with clone number four. And clone three- you will roam the village and act as intelligence in the event of an attack. You report directly to myself and Lady Tsunade.”

“Understood!” they said as one, moving in the direction indicated by their various instructions. Ekyt himself aimed for Tsunade’s office- there was one last thing he had to discuss.

--

“I can’t be of use in this attack...but I CAN keep other safe. I don’t need my eyes to maintain a barrier jutsu. We can create a safe haven for the shinobi to fall back to, if the Akatsuki attack before Orochimaru, or while he’s still alive.”

It was unnerving to see Ryouko standing there, eyes covered by his headband, and a real cigarette in his mouth.

Tsunade nodded to Shizune. She pulled Ryouko’s headband off. He blinked at the sudden light for a while, but that was it. Nothing else happened. Not until Ryouko began to burp and tear at his own throat. Shizune recoiled, thinking the boy would be sick. Instead, an arm protruded from Ryouko’s mouth. Then eyes. Then a head.

Orochimaru!

The Kusanagi came from Orochimaru's mouth and aimed for Tsunade's face. She hadn't moved yet. Shizune was quick on the uptake, and she dove in the way and took the sword for Tsunade.

"Shizune!"

Orochimaru climbed out of Ekyt completely. Ekyt only made some gurgling sounds before falling to the ground, blood coming out his mouth and his eyes rolled up into his head.

Orochimaru stood up fully, speaking around the sword in his mouth.

"My dear Tsunade, it's been so long since I've seen you last! I see you're well..."

Tsunade didn't reply. Instead, she tried to figure out how to save Shizune. A remote chakra search showed that Ryouko was okay; just unconscious.

"You don't want to talk? My, the princess is certainly unwelcoming toward visitors! Sarutobi-sensei would never have been so cold!"

The sword pushed further into Shizune, now poking out her back. She was still alive, but fading fast. She couldn't use her Poison Gas Jutsu in here- Tsunade and Ryouko would be dead, and the gas would stay contained. But she could...

"Die!" Shizune shouted, pulling the hidden string in her hand, launching the needles on her forearm. They all sped for Orochimaru's face.

klank klank klank klank klank!

Each one was knocked down by Kabuto, who had leapt in through an open window. He dropped the corpse of an ANBU agent down to the ground below.

"You should be more careful, Lord Orochimaru. She almost got you, and I don't have an antidote for that kind of poison..." Kabuto said in his 'I'm so friendly' way, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

"I give you trust, Kabuto. Be satisfied with that. Not many hold my very life in the palm of their hand, as you do..."

-

Ryouko could hear the exchange. His eyes still closed, he let his eyes re-adjust.

I knew it. I shouldn't have opened my eyes! But Shizune startled me... I hope she's okay. It can't be helped now. I have to do something...let's see...

As he laid face down, Ryouko slid his hands under him. He used the blood from his mouth to create a summoning circle from memory. He couldn't make handsigns or get at his scrolls, so this was the only

option.

Summoning Jutsu!

A small frog appeared by Ryouko's neck. He made brief eye contact with it, speaking to it through a genjutsu. This frog was one of Jiraiya's messenger frogs- one he had given Ryouko a summoning contract with for just such emergencies.

-

"You've obtained the Sharingan, haven't you!" Tsunade stated, rather than asked. She could see the tomoe of the Sharingan in Orochimaru's eye. It spun rapidly, becoming the Mangekyo Sharingan.

"Indeed I have. And I have mastered it as well. Do you want to see the form that it's original body existed in? The one Itachi Uchiha himself crafted?"

Without waiting for an answer, Orochimaru peeled his own skin off. Brown hair, shaggy on top, was revealed first. A pale face, dark eyes, and a slender body.

"Can you see all those mixed in? Itachi himself shows in the demeanor; Azami in the grace; and the child on the floor in cosmetic appearance. Quite a weapon to use against this village, isn't it?"

-

The frog looked back at Ryouko, putting a genjutsu on him.

Cause a distraction, and we'll solve this!

The second Ryouko was freed, he made his move.

--

"Raagh!" Ekyt roared, leaping up and grabbing Kabuto by the neck. He rammed him into the wall, punching him in the face so one side of his glasses broke into Kabuto's eye. His fist struck Kabuto on the neck, denting his windpipe. Kabuto could barely get in enough air to keep breathing, never mind moving. He would die in minutes if not helped.

"An eye for an eye, Orochimaru!" Ekyt declared, sounding strangely calm as he punched Kabuto yet again. "If you kill Shizune, I kill Kabuto. If you kill Lady Tsunade...I'll kill you. I can finally mean it when I say it- I WILL kill you! You get one chance to withdraw before I finish Kabuto!"

Orochimaru's only reply was to push his sword through Shizune and toward Tsunade. The sword struck her in the shoulder.

"Agh!"

Ryouko ran toward Orochimaru, but found a high kick meeting him in the chest and sending him flying into the wall. Before he could even think of moving, Orochimaru's arm was directing snakes toward him.

It was all Ryouko could do to hang from the ceiling to avoid the snakes.

“Striking Shadow Snakes!”

Four snakes snared Ryouko around the waist. A fifth aimed for his neck, but Ryouko got an arm in the way, so he managed to keep himself from suffocating.

“My, aren’t you a pain!” Orochimaru declared, morphing a second face out of the back of his head so he could glare at Ryouko. “I thank you for helping me get in here. It was unintentional, but I’m thankful for any kind of help, really. Now then...do you want to see the eyes that would have defeated you eventually?”

Ekyt slammed his eyes closed, but he could *feel* Orochimaru’s eyes boring into his, right through his eyelids. The genjutsu that had driven Ryouko back into panic attacks earlier was now back on him. But there was no escape- he couldn’t run, or do anything to distract himself.

I...I’m going to go insane! Wait! Lady Tsunade- she said use my ‘emotional chakra’...if I can just... No. Not yet. I can’t yet. I’m still distracting Orochimaru. What can I do in this position?

Ryouko opened his eyes and fired back with genjutsu. Orochimaru’s Sharingan broke it instantly, but things felt different for a minute. Ekyt repeated the process- there!

When I force him to release my genjutsu, his Sharingan does that- That means he can’t use it elsewhere! The genjutsu he has on me lessens. He has to know that, and he’ll try to snare me again. I’ve got to keep pushing him...

-

Tsunade tended to Shizune, keeping an eye on Orochimaru and Ekyt. They were locked in a silent genjutsu struggle. For now, Tsunade could try to heal Shizune, then assist Ryouko.

The frog on the ground, gone unnoticed, opened it’s mouth and croaked.

-

“Gotcha!”

Jiraiya leapt out of the frog, tackling Orochimaru to the ground while throwing a kunai to free Ekyt. As soon as Ekyt landed, he got over to Tsunade.

“My Lady! I’ve got your back! This can’t be an isolated attack!”

“Never mind me!” Tsunade snapped. “Alert the village! Get people moving! Evacuate the children to the safe areas! Mobilize ANBU! This is a code red emergency! You have my authority to act with any powers the Hokage has! Now, go!” Tsunade glared at Orochimaru, hatred coming from every pore. “This is between the old legends. Take Kabuto outside with you.”

“Understood!”

--

Ekyt's four duplicates were already on top of things. The one that had been with Jiraiya continued to Ootogakure to keep an eye on the situation there. Orochimaru's men would be coming; that was certain. The real Ekyt authorized him to kill anyone who talked about attacking the Leaf Village.

In the mean time, he ran around the village, issuing orders on Tsunade's authority. The women and children were evacuated to hiding areas dotted around the landscape. They were assisted by the four Ekyt's.

ANBU headed to the front lines, eliminating all threats who came calling. But when the number of casualties rose to one hundred in a few minutes, Ekyt knew his fear had come to pass.

“It's happening, isn't it?”

Azami had been the one asking. She was unusually quiet. Beside her was Itachi. In contrast to his normal self, Itachi was taken with emotion and anger. He wanted to storm to the front lines himself. But Ekyt had to stop him.

“Pain will be here soon. I can't fight him alone, Itachi. You can match him. THAT is the best choice for the village.”

Azami looked quietly at Ekyt, thanking him silently for helping her husband. But then Ekyt broke into a grin.

“Besides, you've got someone else to watch out for now. My parents will be okay where they are. They already know what I'm doing, and they understand there's no way to talk me out of it. But you- you've gotta watch your girl's back. You've got the 'someone just for you'- hold on to her.”

Azami instantly felt guilty. She was sure she had been Ekyt's 'special person' before she betrayed him. And now he was helping protect the person she had chosen over him. That took a level of integrity that was unfathomable in her mind. All the same, she let her guilt fade as Ekyt ran off, planning as fast as he could.

--

“We have to attack them in clusters. Don't let one Pain isolate any one person. Each one has a weakness that can be exploited. We have to keep them separate, too. If you encounter a Pain by yourself, don't engage him- get out of there. Don't attack unless you have at least two jonin with you.”

Asuma, Gai, Kakashi, Itachi, Azami, Naruto and the Ekyt's were the ones who would attack chiefly. They formed impromptu cells, even as they fought off Orochimaru's men, who had begun to pour in.

Asuma and Kakashi would team up. With them for support would be Shikamaru and Sasuke.

Gai and Itachi would team up, along with Azami. Their support would be Rock Lee.

Ekyt would team up with Naruto. Their support would be Sakura and Hayate Gekkou.

The rest of the Hidden Leaf was engaged in combat with Orochimaru's men. This elite group would hunt Pain. He WAS coming, Ekyt was sure of that. In the mean time, they used mostly taijutsu to fight off the less skilled Otonin.

Each one had bloodied their hands with numerous kills. No one had time to feel guilt or regret. All they could do was protect their home.

All around was destruction and explosions; kunai clashing and people screaming. It was a full-blown war. Even though the Hidden Leaf had been prepared this time, they were no more sure of the outcome than when Orochimaru attacked the first time.

This time, however, some of the Leaf's of the village had matured and grown into warriors with strength that Orochimaru himself would have feared for his life, had he been thrown in among them.

Worse was to come. The Village Hidden in the Clouds, still angry over the Hyuuga incident of many year's past, cast their lot with Orochimaru. They attacked, coupled with the Sound shinobi. The war began to look uglier and uglier.

Even worse, however, had come to the Leaf's gates- Pain was here.

--

The three legends stared each other down. Orochimaru was now, no doubt, the most powerful of the three. Having obtained the Sharingan, he could have taken them down with genjutsu alone. However, strength in numbers was an advantage that Tsunade and Jiraiya could play; and did.

"Jiraiya, the roof!" Tsunade yelled, leaping upward herself.

"Right behind you!"

Orochimaru's tongue snared Jiraiya's heel as he jumped, though, and pulled the Sannin back down. Orochimaru's sword came flying down once more.

SCHUNK!

Shizune managed to dive in the way, taking the full brunt of the sword through her stomach.

"Shizune..." Jiraiya managed to utter, completely shocked. "No..."

Shizune coughed up blood, but kept the fierce look on her face.

"I'm fine, Master Jiraiya! Please, fight with Lady Tsunade! You must stop Orochimaru!"

Orochimaru gave a violent tug, and his sword exited Shizune's stomach. She fell to the ground, blood trickling from her mouth, and gushing from her wound.

--

“What the hell? It can’t be!” Raido (scar on his nose, was with the Third Hokage at the Chunin exams) said aloud, looking to his partner, Genma.

“We’ve gotta look. It won’t be like last time! Let’s go!”

Genma and Raido had been beating themselves up ever since the Third Hokage’s death. They had been able to do so little back then. They never dreamed they would get a chance to make it right- but they HAD trained for just such an occasion.

“Hayate and Yukao’ll be there! We’ve just got to get in place ourselves!” Genma called back, strangely calm. He always did stay calm under pressure.

--

“Send word to the Sand! We need their help here!” Ekyt shouted to the bird keepers. These birds delivered messages.

“We can’t release them! Orochimaru’s snakes can get them, no matter how high they fly!” came the reply.

“Just do it! I’ll cover them!” Ekyt yelled back, already making handsigns.

“SUMMONING JUTSU!”

With that came Taleo, Ekyt’s hawk.

“Go with them, Taleo. See they get to Sunagakure safely,” Ekyt ordered the bird. “And be careful yourself.”

Taleo took to the sky majestically, heading up a formation of carrier birds that was about to be attacked by Orochimaru’s snakes. Taleo rushed down to the snake and clawed out it’s eyes, then hefted it by it’s tongue. The forked sensor between his talons, Taleo swung the giant serpent into the side of a mountain, putting it down for good.

“Good! Huh?!”

The academy was being attacked now! Iruka and Ebisu were defending it alone, Konohamaru and some younger students behind them. Cloud Jonin came at them from all sides, herding them into a corner. Desperately, Iruka threw a kunai. Then:

“Four Square Bomb Release!”

KABOOM! A huge explosion wiped out a few jonin. Iruka’s Jutsu involved paper bombs and a chakra-covered area. Those jonin had entered it, and it detonated of it’s own accord. It made the approaching enemies come carefully, at least at first. But that was all the time Iruka had to plan- he had bought a few extra seconds. And nothing came to mind. He and Ebisu looked at each other, nodded, then began their attack. Their kunai met two attackers, but they fell far too easily.

Ekyt held two bloody kunai knives, bodies lying around him. He exhaled on his cigarette, looking and

feeling like the jonin he was told he was.

“Iruka, we need to finish evacuation procedures before ANBU moves in. Can I count on you and Ebisu to deal with that? I’ll give you some help. I’ve got a clone that needs some work now, since his mission was terminated.”

The first Ekyt clone, apparently good with children, began rounding them up and herding them off to the safe houses. Ebisu and Iruka nodded, belatedly, and corralled the remaining kids. One child looked back at Ekyt, and saw him cover the faces of those he had killed.

Whoa...He actually feels bad?

--
--

On the roof, the three-way standoff was still going on. Jiraiya and Tsunade were trying to force Orochimaru’s hand, it seemed. But what was their plan?

Genma, Raido, Hayate, and Yukao were their plan. All four landed on the corners of the building.

“Together now!” Genma ordered, making handsigns. All four jonin sounded in unison:

“Konoha Style Barrier Jutsu: Leaf Catching Complex!”

A green barrier sprang up around the three legends, trapping them inside. But it was all part of the plan for Tsunade and Jiraiya.

“Now! Sage Mode- Senjutsu!”

Jiraiya took his most powerful form. The Elder Toads of Mount Myoboku were on his shoulders, and Jiraiya himself was at full power.

“That’s one jutsu you can’t copy! Now, let’s get going! Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld!”

Orochimaru didn’t copy the jutsu- there was no point. Instead, he meant to attack, running at Jiraiya with surprising speed. Tsunade took a swipe at him, which only sidetracked him for a split second. But that was all it took.

“Demonic Illusion: Toad Confrontation Singing!”

Fukasaku and Shima struck up a tune, and Orochimaru couldn’t cover his ears in time. He was paralyzed by the toad’s song.

“And finally- Wild Lion’s Mane Jutsu!”

Jiraiya’s hair ensnared Orochimaru, digging into him with sharp points and binding his arms. Jiraiya himself grabbed Orochimaru and leapt with him into the swamp.

I'm going to do it this time, Orochimaru. I'm going to kill you- even if it means we die together!

--

Immediately, Naruto rushed to the side of the nearest Jonin. It was against his style, but he had no choice. In this case, he picked a Ryouko. The first clone. Other jonin gathered around him.

Pain (Orange hair- the one you see most often) wound up for a jutsu. The real Ekyt and Kakashi couldn't allow that to happen. Kakashi prepared his Mangekyo Sharingan while Ekyt bit both thumbs and prepared his defense.

"Giant Push!"

That was Pain's Jutsu- aimed at the cluster protecting Naruto.

"Triple Rashomon!" Ryouko yelled, putting all he could into the jutsu. Three giant walls, Shinigami gates as legend has it, sprang up in front of Naruto. Ryouko held the gates fast with his chakra, while Sakura put all her weight and strength behind it.

"Got it! Mangekyo Sharingan!" Kakashi announced finally. The force of the giant push disappeared thanks to his special Sharingan. There was a brief moment where no one but Ryouko moved.

"Dance of the Sickle Moon!"

Three clones joined him in a sword attack that was swift and fierce. The blades all bit into Pain successfully, each clone attacking an arm and a leg, leaving their blades inside the wounds they created to help hold Pain still. That left Ryouko himself to administer the killing blow.

"Ryuuzo: Dragon Constellation!"

Last seen against Azami, Ryouko had spent hours learning to control this dragon of fire and pure heat. As the walls of the Rashomon disappeared, the people were given a clear opening as Ryouko made his move.

The dragon flew into the air, spinning and compressing until it was the size of a golf ball. But unlike last time, it retained the features of a dragon. It fell into Ryouko's hand, and he took off at top speed. The swords from his clones held Pain in place and still, while he ran straight at Pain.

SCHUNK!

A board from a destroyed building stuffed itself into Ryouko's stomach just as he reached pain. It was sharp, and jutting out the other side. His spine was destroyed, and it was game over. But with one last gasp of strength, Ryouko thrust the dragon into Pain's body. It slipped inside and exploded, blowing Pain's upper body away from his lower body.

--

Orochimaru and Jiraiya sank in the deep swamp, deeper and deeper, until they were surrounded by blackness. Thanks to the two frogs on his shoulders, Jiraiya would last underwater for quite some time.

Even as their song stopped and Orochimaru began to struggle, Jiraiya held fast, letting them sink even further.

Tsunade now summoned her slug, Katsuyuya, and instructed her to heal everyone in the village that could be saved.

Please, Jiraiya, you've got to make it! Please!

It was as short and desperate a prayer as Tsunade had ever dared to pray.

--

Sakura stayed calm- or, tried to. She had just seen a good friend sacrifice himself to protect her boyfriend. Ryouko had died the same way he had lived- noble, and luckless. And likely in pain.

The other Ryouko, next to Naruto, however, made his move. It was the last move any of them expected.

He grabbed Naruto and tried to kill him. Naruto was no pushover, and ended the attack with the Rasengan, right in the gut.

"What the hell was that about?!"

Another Ekyt came by. Sakura could pick him out anywhere- the real one. She had been so taken by surprise that she had thought that clone was the real Ryouko. But it wasn't.

"He went bad? Never mind, no time," Ekyt said, in a terrible rush. "Keep kunai and jutsus on that Pain until it's gone. I guarantee, it won't stay dead..."

Sure enough, Pain sat up. Kunai and Shuriken met him, putting him back down. But Ekyt was attacked from behind. Paper began to cover him from head to toe. He fought and fought, but had no way to escape. The last piece aimed to slip over his mouth and nose...

"FIRE STYLE: FIREBALL JUTSU!"

The Uchiha brothers shouted in unison, burning the paper that was on top of Ryouko. Amazingly, he himself was untouched. However, he now had an interesting fight on his hands.

"Ryouko, leave this one to the three of us!" Azami shouted at him. "Go deal with your evil twin over there!"

Itachi, Sasuke, and Azami would fight Konan. The fight was a complete mismatch. The sheer talent of the three was staggering, even compared to the brilliant Konan. Fire style jutsus would always trump her odd jutsu, when used effectively. That left Ekyt vs. Ekyt.

-

Pain realized his mistake. It had taken all his energy to attack with that Giant Push- even that of his other 'selves'. Now he himself was close to being destroyed. Or, at least, this version of himself. The others would not regain consciousness in time to be effective. If he 'died' here, even for an hour, the tide of

the war would turn.

There will be other chances...

Kakashi's Lightning Blade roared in, striking Pain's already injured torso. Kakashi pulled back quickly, just avoiding Pain's return strike with his strange black sword.

"Oodama Rasengan!"

Naruto was next, blasting Pain with one of his most powerful attacks. But still Pain lived.

'Tobi' could make his move...But he won't. I'll have dealt damage enough to Konoha for his cause...for now. In ten years, he'll try again, no doubt.

Pain attacked again, this time succeeding in killing two people. Yuushi and his brother, Okayu, fell side by side. Mimizu, Okayu's new fiancé, lost all her composure and sliced at Pain until she was cut down herself.

Even genin were now coming running, trying to hold down Pain. He got to his feet, all but indestructible. One boy, standing more boldly than the others, was drawn toward Pain by that mysterious power. This boy was Okkuu Kazuki, one boy who had idolized Ryouko once he got over his initial, baseless hate. His limbs were pulled in different directions, until his body was divided into left arm and left leg, right arm and right leg, then torso and head. He was alive for the entire gruesome thing. Many lost their nerve at the sight of this. Everyone hesitated just long enough to suddenly be drawn in, all together. All but Kakashi and Yamato were pulled in tight.

"Sempai...I'm beginning to think we won't win this one..."

The kunai and shuriken that had riddled Pain were now aimed at the Leaf shinobi.

"Know Pain," he said simply.

--

Ekyt clashed with his damaged clone, trying to deal the death blow. Even injured, his clone was as effective as the real thing. More so, because less chakra had been expended by the clone. Not to mention his fighting style would be a mystery to Ekyt. They shared chakra, and therefore changes in chakra nature. But jutsus were unique and different.

"What made you go bad?!" Ekyt asked, as much to himself as to his clone.

"Do you want to believe it's your 'bad' side manifested? Your frustration realized? Sorry to disappoint. I was a traitorous jonin in life. Why wouldn't I be one in my 'second' life? Frankly, I think it's YOU who is bad, and I who is righteous.

"Is that right? Well, too bad. You're going back to hell."

“Don’t get cocky! You don’t know me like you’d think! Bring on your best, and I WILL top it. Each and every time. Because when you put me together, you didn’t know your chakra would act like ‘jumper cables’ to my old tenketsu. So, in effect, I possess two chakras- yours, and my original. And my original was powerful enough to begin with!”

The next move was the last. Ekyt’s kunai slashed his clone’s head in half, ending the threat.

“I would have liked to give you a better battle. But not while the village is at stake.”

--

Hundreds had already been killed. Konoha was, largely, winning the war. There weren’t many Sound shinobi, and the Cloud shinobi just weren’t up to snuff against Konoha’s finest. This time, the knowledge that Itachi Uchiha was among the ranks; that Itachi’s soon to be wife was a match for Itachi himself; and that ‘Ryouko’ had been named legendary rang in their ranks, and they were intimidated before ever reaching the village. Only the urging of the jonin kept the Cloud troops moving.

Trees began to sprout up from the ground in strange places. They all grabbed Shinobi who had dropped their guards. As they struggled, Kurenai came from the branches and killed them. The ones who escaped Kurenai didn’t escape Asuma. His twin trench knives hacked and slashed until there was nothing left. This was a group of ten Sound Jonin.

“Orochimaru was just trying to trick us. He has very few shinobi. And even fewer are even close to jonin level...” Asuma exhaled, smoke flowing from his mouth.

“But why?” Kurenai asked. “Why go to so much trouble?”

“To get the Cloud Village to agree to attack with him. They stood no chance on their own.”

The newly arrived Gai was supplying that information. He had a very troubled look on his normally jovial face.

“Something’s wrong...” Asuma muttered. Immediately, his head turned to the Hokage building. “A barrier!”

“Relax. That one’s Leaf made. Master Jiraiya and Lady Hokage have Orochimaru trapped up there,” Gai informed them, still looking nervous.

“I get it! So if they die, Orochimaru will still be trapped!” Kurenai exclaimed.

“If Lady Hokage dies, we’ll have war. The Cloud and Sound villages will have been all but destroyed, leaving a war vying for their territory. Meanwhile, we’ll be severely weakened yet again. The Mist, or Rain, or anyone else will definitely come for us. Aid from Sunagakure aside, we’re on our own.”

“Who’s giving orders?” Kurenai wanted to know; realizing that communication with Lady Tsunade would be cut-off for sure.

“Ekylt is. Lady Tsunade appointed him specially at the last second. I hope he’s still alive.”

--

Yamato clasped his hands together, created a wood barrier in front of the rest of the civilians. He held it as the shuriken and kunai pummeled it. But it held fast.

“Ekylt’s coming,” Kakashi told Yamato. “He has to have some plan. We’ve got to buy some time...”

“Understood, sempai! Let me see...Wood Style: Forest Re-birth!”

Trees surrounded Pain, and they just kept growing, reaching high into the heavens, until their height peaked. To attain that height naturally, the trees would have had to have lived for 300 years. All this in a few seconds.

Kakashi clapped Yamato on the shoulder. Yamato thought it was to congratulate him, but it was only to tug him close to whisper a warning:

“Yamato, you need to stay alive. Only you can seal Naruto’s demon away. That means that you DO NOT DIE.”

--

Ekylt had rushed back to find the scared Leaf crowd backpedaling from Pain. One by one, they were being sucked in and destroyed in gruesome ways. All around were corpses, and various parts of bodies. Among them, Ekylt recognized Mimizu (his former assistant when he was Director of ANBU Special Services), Okayu (Mimizu’s Fiancé, and Yuushi’s brother), Okkuu (An old student of his), and finally Yuushi himself.

It made Ekylt’s very blood boil. Almost all his links to the Leaf had been slaughtered. The Uchiha brothers had their hands full, and clearly things were going to get worse. That left one option. A resort that scared Ekylt more than the Reaper Death Seal. It was all he could do at this point, as he in no way had the strength to pull six souls. There was no proof even that Pain COULD be killed.

Ekylt chose a scroll- in this case, a red one. With one of his clones was the another scroll just like it. By focusing his chakra, Ekylt could summon the clone to him.

BLAM!

The tall, silent clone appeared before Ekylt, crouched, waiting for orders. Ekylt closed his eyes, hating the thought of this. But what had to be done had to be done.

“I need you to help me attack Pain. Head-on. How is your genjutsu proficiency?”

“Better than yours,” the clone said bluntly.

“Good. Keep Pain...in the dark. Use the “Bringer of Darkness” jutsu. I’m going to try something, and I’ll need you to hold that genjutsu. If Pain attacks you, attack his face and pull out those black things. Anything that might help us out...”

--

Everything went dark for Pain. No light at all. It was a genjutsu, and a very sturdy one. Easy to break, though.

Something's interfering?

A purple flower kept appearing in Pain's mind, stopping him from reaching a light his consciousness created at the end of the darkness.

--

Ino and Inoichi Yamanaka used their mind jutsus on Pain. It was a risk to them, but for Ekyt's plan to work, it was necessary. As was putting Naruto himself at risk for a moment or two.

"Naruto, hold back all you can while making this a solid blow. I just need you to put him down. We may need to do this five more times..."

The Rasengan would do it. It would have to.

--

Pain heard the attack, but couldn't dodge it. A full blast of chakra stuffed him right in the gut, sending him tumbling backward.

--

"NOW!" Ekyt shouted, if only to himself. He braced his right wrist with his left hand, and focused his chakra. "FIVE ELEMENTS SEAL!"

Ekyt jammed his hand into Pain's face. Just in time, as the Yamanaka's withdrew their minds. This might have damaged them. As for the seal, it would Seal Pain's black marks. Ekyt was betting that was how he kept healing and getting chakra. And if that was the case.

Pain aimed for him right away. He had lots of chakra of his own, even cut off from the 'other' supply. He began to pull Ekyt in, and had him dead to rights.

--

Tsunade concentrated as hard as she could. She was ready to use her 'Genesis of Rebirth' jutsu. But before she could, water from the swamp drenched the entire top of the Hokage mansion.

A soaked Orochimaru held a limp Jiraiya up by his hair. He dropped the soaked Sannin on the ground, smirking at Tsunade.

"Did you really think it would out so nicely for you, my dear Tsunade? When I've attained all this

power? That perverted old fool never had a hope! And when I kill you, the Leaf village won't have a prayer!"

Tsunade's years behind a desk had taken their toll on her. Too many dumplings and too few workouts (though Sakura's role increased) had slowed her. Orochimaru was almost on her before she struck back.

"Too slow! -WHAT?"

Jiraiya's hair tripped Orochimaru, which sent him stumbling right into Tsunade's punch. Her fist met Orochimaru's jaw, rocketing him across the Hokage building's roof.

Jiraiya hopped back to his feet, unhurt. He had dropped out of his Senjutsu mode. That left him the one option- the one Ekyt had given him in code.

"Orochimaru! I'm going to finish what Sarutobi-sensei started!"

--

Ekyt couldn't fight Pain's pull. The strange black sword Pain used was poised and ready to impale him.

I've done all I can...my genjutsu won't be any good now...I can only hope my clone figured out what I was doing...

Pwoof! Schunk!

The clone Ekyt had just talked with leapt in front of him and took the sword strike. He blocked Pain's pull with his body. The clone Ekyt and the original exchanged glances. Ekyt nodded, putting the Bringer of Darkness Jutsu on Pain once more. His clone, meanwhile:

"Forbidden Art: Sealing! Reaper Death Seal!"

Schling!

A kunai thrown from Kakashi beheaded Ekyt's clone, while a Shadow Clone pulled Ekyt out of the line of fire.

"Don't you know what would have happened?!" Kakashi yelled, out of character for him. "You would have died! It might be a clone, but it's YOUR chakra the shinigami would have eaten! You would have been the one who'd have died!"

Ekyt looked Kakashi firmly in the eye. "I know. Call it suicide by clone. I wasn't sure I'd have the guts to do the Seal myself. So I set things up..."

"You're really an idiot, Ekyt. Ryouko, whatever. For once, drop this martyr act you seem to need to pull, and fight like you're supposed to! You're a Shinobi of this village. No one short of the Hokage herself should use that jutsu, and definitely not like that! There are FIVE MORE of those things! You piss away your life on just one, you're only helping the enemy! Now, straighten up, and let's take him down!"

Kakashi's pep talk hit home with Ekyt. Now, this was a normal battle. Just like any other battle. It was life or death, just like any battle. And it wasn't just Ekyt's life at stake- just like any potential battle.

Time to act like the legend they insist on claiming I am.

--

*"Fukusuke had to do what he did. 3
Ayame is kind of hot, isn't she? 7
Kikunosuke is lucky. 9
Ecchi is your style for sure. 11
Shikamaru used to hate apples. 4
Enishi was a great villain for sure. 52
Arashi mountain will have a violent winter 36
Leaf can overcome, right? 98
."*

"What the hell does that mean? That stupid kid used a code like that? What do those numbers mean?"

Jiraiya and Tsunade were scratching their heads, trying to crack Ekyt's code. Sakura happened to walk in at that moment, looked over Tsunade's shoulder, and said:

"F...A...K...E...S...E...A...L? Fake seal? What's THAT mean?"

Tsunade and Jiraiya immediately shooed Sakura out of the room, sweatdrops adorning their brow.

"How did you miss that?!"

"What about you?!"

The two Sannin shelved their argument after that, though. It was to be expected that Sakura could understand Ekyt better. They had spent more time together, and were closer to age.

"Fake seal, huh? So he's counting on Orochimaru's Sharingan to pick up the seal..." Jiraiya stated, chewing on his thumb. "But I have to stop short of the last handsign, while keeping it in my mind..."

Jiraiya made the handsigns as fast as he could. Orochimaru followed them, seemingly out of habit. The last sign of the jutsu, an un-named clap of the hands, was where Jiraiya pulled up. Orochimaru, however, finished the handsigns.

Immediately, the roof grew cold. It was an inhuman, awful coldness. Clammy. It felt heavy, too. No one could have mistaken it for something earthly.

And when Orochimaru found out what he had done. That he, himself, the 'strongest' of the Sannin, had

been tricked into signing his own death warrant, he was beside himself.

“There’s no taking that jutsu back now, Orochimaru!” Jiraiya shouted to his former best friend. “You’re going to die, and this time permanently!”

Tsunade instructed Raido, Yukao, Hayate, and Genma: “Hold that barrier! Don’t let Orochimaru out! If he kills us, so be it! But don’t let him out!”

--

Kakashi and Ekyt joined in with the Uchiha brothers, and Azami, and many other Leaf Shinobi. Anyone who knew a fire jutsu joined in.

“Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!” –Sasuke and Itachi

“Fire Style: Fire Blast Jutsu!”- Kakashi

“Fire Style: Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Modified!” –Ekyt

“Fire Style: Fire from Above!”- Azami

“Naruto, now!” Yamato ordered, pointing.

“Right! Wind Style: Wind Rasenshuriken!”

Naruto’s newest, most powerful wind style jutsu- a Rasengan that took the form of a shuriken. Wind style Jutsu to fan the flames of Fire Jutsu. A way of harmony among shinobi styles that was all but lost. Naruto had always meant to help Sasuke’s fire ninjutsu, and now he could.

The Shuriken hit, sending the flames even higher. One by one, everyone let up on their jutsu. Could the charred, blackened mass that was Pain have survived?

A hand shot up, grabbing Naruto around the neck.

“I have you, Ninetails!”

Kakashi’s Lightning Blade cut Pain’s arm off. Ekyt unleashed a taijutsu barrage, ending with his “Backward Konoha Snap Dragon”, (Ekyt grabs Pain’s arms and legs while standing on Pain’s back, using chakra and momentum to put the unprotected Pain into the ground) after which Naruto put one more Rasengan into. In the same move, Naruto summoned Gamabunta. It seemed like overkill, but Gamabunta’s sword is what it took to hold Pain down.

Pain was alive as the sword was put through his body. He STILL tried to reach Naruto, though he couldn’t move. His chakra was too weak to use his special jutsu for at least another five seconds.

When Gamabunta’s sword didn’t do it, Ekyt pulled out a scroll. His last option for Pain.

“Sealing Jutsu- Five Elements!”

This was the same move that put Hidan’s head into his summoning scroll. But it didn’t work quite the same way. Hidan was S-ranked. Pain was something beyond that. He was almost- literally, in a REAL sense- immortal and self-healing. His chakra fought Ekyt’s all the way.

“D-Damn it! I can’t hold him! He’s going to break free! There’s no option left! I’ve got to use the Reaper Death Seal!”

But Naruto put a hand on Ekyt’s. His ‘whiskers’ had turned jagged, meaning the nine-tailed fox was riled up now. But could that be what it would take?

“Use my chakra, too! We’ve got to seal him! And you’re not gonna die! You’ve got to be there to see me become Hokage! To see me and Sasuke fight!” Naruto was shouting now, as the Hokage-level chakras were tearing up the landscape around them. Rocks and trees were uprooted.

“And, c’mon! Don’t you want to live like a jonin? You want to belong, right? Well, you belong now! And once you’re one of us...Leaf’s take care of their own!”

For the first time in many years, Ekyt managed a full, real smile. His mind finally felt at peace, even as his chakra was fast dwindling.

When Naruto says it like that...why do I feel like I belong? He’s right, too. That’s the second time today someone has had to tell me how things should be. I’ve beaten my old problem- I belong.

“First seal: Water! Second Seal: Fire!”

What should my goal be now? A girl? A team? It all sounds good...

“Third seal: Heaven! Four Seal: Earth!”

I know...I’ll make it ‘to be the legend everyone else thinks I can be. And I can start right now!

“Fifth Seal: VOID!”

The last of Pain’s resistance failed. In the blank center of the scroll, Ekyt’s bloody handprint began to glow red. Then, as the power cooled, and the jutsu ended, the color changed to black.

“(huff huff)...It’s over...”

Ekyt felt dizzy, and light-headed, and more drained than he’d ever felt in his life. But it felt good. As Itachi helped him to his feet, while Kakashi and Yamato added seals to the scroll, and Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura all stood together; even as the village itself continued to fight against the (now retreating) Cloud jonin and Sound-nin, Ekyt finally felt a measure of peace. The same peace we all hunt for.

It was thanks to Naruto’s help. Everyone’s help, really. But it was Naruto’s last pep-talk that made things a certainty.

If you had told me, even a few months ago, that Itachi Uchiha would be something of a best friend; that Naruto would be the guy to end my depression after getting the girl I loved; that I would feel this good; that I belong...That doesn't sound realistic by any definition of the word. Then again, what in this world is?

--

Orochimaru let out an unearthly howl. He knew- from experience- there was no escape from the Shinigami. But he could take a last vindictive swipe at the Leaf village.

Serpents shot out and snared Tsunade and Jiraiya. To them, the Shinigami was now visible. They could feel Orochimaru pulling at their souls. Both were battle-worn and exhausted, with little left in reserve. Well, their REGULAR reserve.

“Genesis of Rebirth!”

The mark on Tsunade's forehead disappeared, and the concentration of chakra she kept behind her forehead seeped into her body, revitalizing her. She began to pull her soul back, not letting it exit her body.

“Ma, we've gotta give Jiraiya-boy our chakra, or he ain't gonna make it!”

“Right, Pa!”

Fukasaku and Shima, the elder toads, gave Jiraiya their chakra. Immediately, he straightened up and yanked back on his soul as well. Orochimaru was burning the candle at both ends.

“Face it, Orochimaru! You won't kill both of us!” Tsunade stated, feeling strangely calm as she fought for her life. “You couldn't even take ONE of us with you at this point.”

Jiraiya grimaced, fighting internally, but had to give his two cents: “She's right! If you just let yourself be sealed, no one will hold it against you! We were friends once. I couldn't make you listen to me the first time...I couldn't make you stay in the village...”

Jiraiya's head dropped a little as he remembered. But he snapped his head back up.

“But listen to me this time! For your own sake! There's no going back, but you can save your reputation! You can make yourself immortal in another way- by coming back to us and renouncing your evil!”

“NEVER!” Orochimaru roared, pulling harder, but fading fast. “If I must die, then I want the Leaf to perish with me! I'm not some misunderstood villain! We each believe ourselves to be the righteous ones! But who is TRULY righteous? It's the one who can accomplish what he wishes! The ends justify the means! The end IS righteousness defined! I...am...”

Orochimaru began to fall forward. He tugged with futility at Tsunade, trying to ensnare even one limb. He couldn't fail worse than the Third Hokage! But it was futile. He wasn't going to last. And Orochimaru, in his dying moment, knew it. He himself had committed himself to death.

“I...am...righ...teous...”

Slowly, Orochimaru's body fell forward. The Shinigami stabbed Orochimaru, and ate his soul.

A mortal enemy of the Leaf fell then. The three Sannin were together in his last moments. As he died, Orochimaru's only thought was of vengeance. But as Jiraiya leaned down to close his eyes, Orochimaru's last view was of his best friend.

--
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Hundreds injured. Buildings destroyed. And more threats on the horizon. All the same, the Leaf felt like celebrating. This would later be counted as a great ninja war. It would be remembered for being the least bloody of all the wars (among other reasons):

The notable deaths:

Leaf:

Yuushi Akamadori

Okayu Akamadori

Mimizu

Okkuu Kazuki

40 nameless members of ANBU

15 genin

23 chunin

7 Jonin

Sand: (Ally with Leaf)

3 Jonin

5 Chunin

4 SAGU (Suna Advanced Guard Unit) Agents

Sound:

Orochimaru

12 Jonin

3 Chunin

14 Genin

100+ shinobi of Academy level or lower rank

(Many were taken prisoner, including Kabuto)

Cloud: (Ally with Orochimaru)

31 Jonin

29 Chunin

52 Genin

(40 of various rank were taken prisoner)

-

Orochimaru's eyes were given to Itachi Uchiha. He, in turn, gave one to his brother. Neither boy would be one hundred percent blind, and they would always retain the use of the Mangekyo Sharingan in their good eyes.

Lady Tsunade chose her successor-Naruto, of course- to take over for her should anything happen to her. Until then, he would continue to train with Jiraiya. Sakura would continue to train with Tsunade, of course. But there would be breaks in training to let the kids get together. They were adults in this dangerous world, and they should be allowed to meet the way they wanted to.

For Ekyt...he had to stand trial. But no one was going to denounce someone who had helped in the way he had. He began to assist in hiring carpenters to rebuild the village. Outside of work, he introduced his parents to Asuna. They were 'just friends', and it would likely stay that way. He and Azami agreed to fight again some day. As did he and Itachi.

Naruto was regaled as a legend in the making; the same with Sakura and Sasuke. Sasuke needed a new mentor. But his older brother would be perfect for that.

As for the Leaf... Construction would take a few months, but things went on mostly unchanged. Ekyt soon fell into a deep depression, and no one could shake him from it. He had reached his peak as a shinobi- he had no one else to learn from. His star student, Yuushi, was dead. It took Kakashi and the other jonin to realize that Ekyt needed a student or three. So Tsunade gave Ekyt his first team.

Hayato (name meaning: Hawk. The Naruto to Ekyt's Jiraiya.)

Kiyoko (name meaning: Pure Child. Female)

Minoru (name meaning: Truth. Sees things as 'good' and 'evil', nothing in between)

There was one last thing, though...

--

Ekyt stood by the memorial obelisk. He was alone, puffing on a cigarette, letting the rain hit him. Despite his new-found happiness, part of him hurt horribly. The deaths of Okayu, Mimizu, Okkuu, and especially Yuushi, had all hit Ekyt hard. He didn't sink into a huge depression. But he felt that he had to spend at least a little more time here now. He had lost his students, his former assistant, and the brother of his student who was also the fiancé of his former assistant. It was a lot of loss for a single person. Not to mention the old death of the Third Hokage came back to Ekyt.

"Oh? Sorry, hope I'm not disturbing you?"

Kakashi ambled into the clearing, taking up his spot near the obelisk.

"Not at all. You've got as much right to be here as I do." Ekyt replied, nodding to acknowledge Kakashi. "We got luck this time, didn't we?"

Kakashi bowed his head. "...Yes. We did. There are still five other 'Pains' out there. And it never feels good after a war. We may have won, but we destroyed two other villages in that victory. No matter what they did, it won't feel natural."

Ekyt gave Kakashi a sideways glance. "I would have felt more guilty if it wasn't self-defense. And everyone knows the Leaf is merciful in victory. Those nations won't go hungry, and they won't be defenseless."

"Huh? What are you guys doing here? Not that I'm surprised..."

Jiraiya joined Kakashi and Ekyt now. In his hand was a memorial tablet and a small cup of sake. It was for Orochimaru, no doubt. It was something everyone knew, but no one asked for confirmation about. They were all here for private reasons. No one felt the need to pry.

"The Leaf is strong," Ekyt muttered.

"Yes, it is," Kakashi agreed. "We've been a lucky nation."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. Tsunade IS our Hokage, after all!" Jiraiya joked, before turning serious again. "Luck is irrelevant. The Leaf persevere because of who makes up the village. Right now, we've got an all-star lineup."

The three nodded in agreement. The sun was setting, casting a beautiful palette of colors across the village. By tacit agreement, all three headed off in their separate directions. They had to prepare for the battles ahead.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

And that's the end! Almost a year and half later, I've finally brought Tides of Time to a close. It's been a blast writing it.

As a last request to my readers, in addition to your comment on this last chapter, please tell me what you thought of the story. Also, any questions you have would be appreciated.

See you next fic!

-Nextguardian