

Naruto: Jinsei nanakorobi, ya'oki

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Your favorite pack of lovable, hard-headed ninjas in a new adventure!

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1 - A New Start, and the First Loss

"Man, how boring was that? It was so worthless! I'm going to be hokage, and all they're teaching me is how stupid other people are!" A familiar orange-clad ninja was talking the ears off his two companions as they walked out of the lecture hall. "I mean, come on! The idiots they talk about are nothing, I could've beaten them all! Believe it!" The orange ninja's friends had been tolerant, but that was gone. "Naruto, will you shut up? Loser." Naruto spun toward him. "What was that Sasuke, king of injuries? You take that back!" "Come on, Sasuke would destroy you, just like every time!" the girl of the group, a pretty, pink-haired girl said. "Aw, it's so sweet of you to worry for me Sakura, you must really love me, huh? Heh heh heh!" BAM! Sakura walloped Naruto on top of the head. "Owwwww. That hurt Sakura!" "Good! You pig!" The grounds were suddenly quieter. Everyone seemed to be looking towards the disturbance.

A new student? This one had his head in a book, obscuring his face. A ¾ length black trench coat had been tossed across his shoulders. He was wearing black gi pants, with a black shirt that had a white collar. On his feet were boots that looked heavy, but apparently weren't, since they didn't make a sound, even to all the trained ninja ears in the hallway. The new guy finally snapped his book shut, giving everyone a look at his head for the first time. A black headband had been tied hastily around it, it seemed, covering one eye. The rest of his face was covered in a black wrapping. One that appeared to be bloodstained. Around his neck was the point of interest. A leather pouch that usually contained an important message was occupying that spot.

The stranger stopped as an odd shadow had crossed his path. Sasuke and Sakura groaned. "I'm Naruto Uzumaki! Someday I'm going to be hogake! State your business!" he shouted. The stranger seemed somewhat amused. "I'm sorry I can't return proper courtesy and give you my name. My business is to deliver this to Kakashi Hatake. If you wouldn't mind telling me where I might find him." "Look no further." Kakashi was perched up on top of some telephone wires. "You must be the messenger. Glad you made it. We could have provided an escort."

The stranger looked up at the wires, then spied two buildings close together. He leapt between the two of them, jumping back and forth, then leaping onto the wire. He handed the packet to Kakashi, then knelt down. Kakashi's visible eye showed an amused surprise, something that most of the genin and chunin here could pick out. The two began to talk in serious, low tones.

"I wonder what they're saying?" Sakura said/asked. Sasuke showed his trademark indifference, while Naruto showed his trademark exuberance. He was inching closer and closer to the wires, trying to hear the conversation. He shook his, muttering "No luck" under his breath.

Finally, the two leapt off the wires. Kakashi jumped straight to the ground, while the stranger disappeared momentarily, then leapt down from a low tree to land near the road. "Hold on! How do I know I can trust you?" Naruto was questioning the messenger. "You haven't told us anything! Nothing! Do you even HAVE a name?" Kakashi cleared his throat. "That's enough. He has had a trying trip." Focus turned to his covered eye. "Sharingan?" was the common whisper.

Chakaro Takami waited with rapt...indefERENCE, it seemed, for his former instructor to come back. When he came up, that turned to rapt attention. "They'll have us." He said. Chakaro nodded. "Wait, are we sure this is smart?" A pretty blond girl, Kayla Donalds, questioned. The last member of the group, a pink-haired girl, raised her eyebrows. "What's life without risk? Besides, the more we know, the better chance we have of skipping natural selection." The group nodded as one. "This Kakashi man would like to meet with our leader." The stranger in the coat said. Everyone gaze shifted toward "Master Linda."

Linda was a master of an old-fashioned martial art. She purposely kept the name hidden to all but her closest confidants. She was good natured, but obviously deadly, though she chose to avoid killing. She looked over to who was easily her best friend, the guy in the trench coat. "Ekyt, I think you should go."

Ekyt looked back at her. "He said leader..." The pink-haired girl answered with a "Last I checked, YOU got us here...that makes you leader." Ekyt's hand immediately felt to his eye. "I guess this IS my fault."

Kayla had huddled up near Chakaro, obviously scared. Or, more likely, doing a great job of pretending it. **The helpless girl act...the one that was used on me for so long...I'll never fall for that again, not here...every girl here is as deadly as every guy here.** The single eye that was visible closed in a blink. "Alright, I'll speak with him. The rest of you, you're coming along for the ride and guarding the door."

Kakashi slowly lowered the book he had been reading. "Makeout Paradise" would have to wait, this was a tale that required his full attention. "Please, come in...You already know me as Kakashi..." Ekyt took that as a prompt. "I go by Ekyt." Kakashi indicated a cushion for Ekyt to kneel on. As he got down, Kakashi made his first observation. "Samuria, it would seem?" Ekyt turned his good eye toward Kakashi in a questioning look. "Most people don't knock an invisible hakama out of the way before kneeling." "Point taken." Ekyt returned, affirming Kakashi's answer in the same sentence. "So, you're the leader." "Well...I'm taking responsibility." Ekyt answered evasively. The older ninja leaned back, not looking particularly worried. "I see...So, please continue. I read the message, and you would be welcome here...but I must ask you to tell me more about this "attack." Ekyt nodded and began to speak.

"Geez, now I wish I WAS in there." Linda muttered. All these ninja staring her down were REALLY making her uneasy. By way of answer, Chakaro stepped in front of her, indicating that he would protect her. "I'm not the master here Chakaro, no need for the formal stuff." She said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Hey, look, more new people! Whoa!" Naruto was perched up high, peering over the edge of a building. "What?" Sakura asked, not sure she liked the sound of his voice. "Sakura...that girl could be you! How do I know you're not a fake, huh?" Naruto turned toward Sakura, who rolled her eyes. "Because I've been next to you this whole time, you moron." "Oh, yeah." Sasuke looked down over the edge. "Hmm..." He made a sound of indifference. "They don't have a village either." Sakura pointed out. "They probably came with that guy we saw earlier. I wonder what he needed with Kakashi-sensei?"

"So about...ten days ago, we were attacked. I couldn't tell you much, other than we were in over our head. Don't get me wrong, they've all got talent, but they've never seen these...chakra...before." "Very few here have mastered control of their chakra." Kakashi said. "And I don't think it's likely you were attacked by our village." Ekyt nodded his agreement. "I've been meaning to ask...since you know about this..." Ekyt reached for his headband, pulling it up. Kakashi's eye stared back.

"So, anyway..." Linda stopped talking. Reaching into her hidden supply, she threw two knives up, hitting the building just below Naruto's head. "HEY!" a voice called down. Seconds later, three new people jumped in front of them.

"HEY! WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO CHUCK KNIVES AT ME, HUH?" Naruto yelled. "You were spying on them, loser. THAT gives them the right." Sasuke muttered darkly. "Don't tell me what to do!" "Will you shut up?" "YOU GONNA MAKE ME?!?!" "If I have to." Sakura pushed her way between the two. "Hi, you must be new here! My name is Sakura, it's nice to meet you! The walking mouth in orange is Naruto, and the one with the dark hair is Sasuke. Welcome!" **She could be my double...almost...except for that ponytail...** Sakura thought.

Linda returned the bow from Sakura. "I'm Linda. This is Kayla Donalds and Chakaro Tamaki." "It's nice to meet you!" "You already met our fourth member, Ekyt." "Oh, yes, he's talking with Kakashi-sensei." It occurred to Sakura that the three looked beat up. "Do you have a place to stay?" Linda shook her head. "No, we just got here." "Well, come with us, get some ramen! It's really dangerous to be tired around here. And you look like you need to revitalize your chakra" "Pardon me? Cha-what?" Sakura and Sasuke exchanged glances. "You...don't know about chakra?" "No." "Well, we'll talk over some food."

"I didn't sense Sharingan on you... But I didn't expect this..." Kakashi murmured, not liking being surprised. "I'm sorry. When we were attacked. The Master of our school was in the line of fire from some damn pointy thing...so I did the only thing I could..." Ekyt stayed silent for a moment, digging into his pockets and pulling out his trademark toothpick, treading it through his face covering and putting it in his mouth. "Will it heal?" he asked in an even voice. Kakashi sighed. "It's not likely. If you could have focused your chakra at the right time...I'm sorry." Ekyt nodded and pulled the headband back down. "Sorry to copy your style." Kakashi got up and said "Let's go find my students. If I know them, they've already found your group. My kids are talented hard-heads, but good natured. And I'm pretty sure Naruto will have convinced them to eat"

"Ramen! Yes! Three squares a day!" Naruto started to inhale, prompting everyone to move a couple seats away. "So, tell us a little about yourselves then. How was your trip?" Linda gulped and made eye contact with her group. They looked uncomfortable themselves. "Well...it was..."

"I thought we'd find you here." Kakashi walked in, with Ekyt in tow. "Ekyt! Will it..." Linda's voice trailed off upon seeing him shake his head. "Oh...I'm so sorry..." "What happened? What happened? I gotta know!" Naruto leapt up. Ekyt shifted into a guard, then stopped. "I'm sorry..."

(FLASHBACK)

"Slow day...thank God we're almost there." Linda said to no one in particular.

"Hey, look at this Kankuro." Temari inclined her head toward the strangers. "Interesting...but we shouldn't bother with them, they don't seem like a threat." "I don't like them." Gaara said in his solemn voice. He stepped out in their way.

"Hey, heads up." Chakaro said. Linda stopped. She saw a strange young man holding his hand in a

weird position. "Sand Coffin." Chakaro and Kayla were suddenly enveloped in sand. "What the hell?" Chakaro struggled against it. "Hey, let them go!" Gaara watched the trapped two's companions run to the front. The male swung at him. His sand shield took care of every strike he threw. Deciding this was fun, he targeted the female. He found the male to be a problem, as he held Gaara's hand in place.

Ekyt watched as this read-haired freak moved his hand again. He didn't know what it did, but he decided to stop it. He grabbed Gaara's hand quickly, managing to break his thumb. He struck again, this time coming close to Gaara's face. Gaara leaned back, showing no emotion as strike after strike flew at him.

Gaara normally had no need for something as primitive as taijutsu, but this guy had gotten inside his defenses. "Sand Shuriken." He directed his attack toward the female.

Ekyt saw what was happening and darted in front of Linda. He had taken knives for her before, but this was a critical strike. Ekyt felt his left eye burn with pain, as thousands of small sand daggers tore at his face.

Then he felt nothing where his eye should have been. He would have taken the pain at this point...

(END FLASHBACK)

"Gaara? You met Gaara?!" Sakura couldn't believe it. "But your group isn't hurt! And you're not dead." "Someone called off his attack. Blond hair, big fan." "Temari!" "You poor thing! That was really brave of you! Is it okay if I take a look?" Sakura asked. "You might lose your ramen." Ekyt warned. "Trust us, Sakura's probably the best at this." Sasuke hadn't said anything in a while, but piped up now. For some reason, Ekyt turned away from the group. "Okay. I trust you. Go ahead."

Sakura approached shakily, gently prying his headband up. "My God...Can I see the rest?" Ekyt nodded. She pulled the covering on his face forward. "I'm...I'm so sorry..." she said, feeling tears in her eyes.

"Hey Sasuke, looks like he's homing in on your action! Heh! Well, he's a darn sight better than you!" Naruto taunted. Sasuke seemed to blush very slightly, but he snapped "Shut up" instead of saying anything else. "You're Kakashi-sensei, right?" Linda asked. Kakashi nodded. "And you must be Linda. Your name came up in my talk with Ekyt." Linda smiled. "Well, there's a story behind that one, to be sure."

"I can't believe Gaara would do this!" Sakura said as he replaced his headband and face covering. "This...chakra...I'm here to learn about it. I want to be better. I...I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. I really appreciate you trying to help me." Sakura blushed. "Oh, it's no problem!"

Ekyt walked outside for a minute. **Cute...whoa! No way! I gave up on that whole game. Besides, she's got eyes for that Sasuke guy...Forget it. You're a warrior, what do you need with attention? Focus. You had your eye destroyed...You're not good enough! And you never will be if you mope around, following Linda like a little lost puppy. You laid your cards on the table, and she was honest. You can't ask any more than that...**

Except maybe her saying "yes"...

NEXT ISSUE: MORE NINJA GROUPS TO MEET, AND TRAINING STARTS FOR OUR NEW HEROES!

2 - Shinri! (Truth!)

"Well, until we get the three of you permanent quarters, you might try here." Kakashi indicated with his head. It was a tall building, a hotel of some kind. It seemed to be made of adobe or something similar, giving it a sandy look. Ekyt's hand unconsciously felt for his eye. "Thank you." Linda said on behalf of the group. "Not a problem. When you're ready to start training, head to the Academy. For now, though, try to rest up. If you need a good book, might I suggest "Make-out Paradise?" Chakaro and Kayla exchanged glances. "Well, get some rest then. I think my ninja knuckleheads will be dropping by later." Kakashi said over his shoulder. "I think this calls for some hot spring relaxation." Linda announced, with the group readily agreeing. "You go ahead, I'm going to take a walk, maybe scout out some food." "At least get yourself cleaned up first Ekyt-sensei. No offense, but you've had a rough time too." Kayla said. Ekyt's eye narrowed briefly, but he nodded and found his room.

Upon walking in, Ekyt found the shades to be mostly drawn, giving the room a dark tint. It suited him just fine. He had bought some clothes similar to what he was used to. It took him a moment to tie the black headband back around his face. He pulled his mask over his mouth and nose. Now wearing black gi pants (like before), same black shirt, except it now had a white collar on it. Only a few beams of sun could get in through the blinds, giving the room a dismal look, matching Ekyt's mood. Maybe it was because he was alone, or maybe the fact that his eye wasn't going to heal, but whatever the reason, Ekyt sank down onto the bed in the dark, gloomily letting his head drop into his hands. He had hit his lowest point ever. His eye was damaged beyond conventional repair, he had been destroyed in a fight that never should have happened, Linda was... He stopped his thought process, feeling depression stabbing him in the stomach.

"I feel so bad for him!" Sakura had a hard time forgetting the state of Ekyt's eye. His face would heal, but the eye... **He sacrificed his eye for that girl...I wonder what was between them? There's no way that he dove in front of her just because she was his former master instructor. Now they barely talk...** "He shouldn't have written a check his butt couldn't cash! Messing with Gaara, that's suicide. Well, not for me, he couldn't handle hokage material, believe it!" Naruto exclaimed. "Don't be a moron. There's not too many people who would willingly fight Gaara." Sasuke pointed out. "Yeah, and besides that, he fought without using jutsus or chakra...I can't imagine that!" Sakura said, not liking the idea of being THAT defenseless. "Yeah, what can you do? Hey, let's go visit them! Kakashi-sensei told me where they're staying! Maybe I'll get to meet Linda, man she's hot!" Naruto exclaimed. "Loser. Shouldn't wouldn't bat an eye for you." Naruto fell over, the got up, yelling. "YOU SHOULD TALK! EVERY GIRL LIKES YOU, BUT LIL' SASUKE'S TOOK BRATTY TO ANSWER THEM!"

Kayla and Linda were sitting in the hot spring. "Ahh! This is great!" Kayla exclaimed, stretching out. "It's hard to worry about anything in here!" she said happily. Linda nodded absently. "Something on your mind?" Kayla asked. Linda looked blankly at the fence that separated the boys from the girls. "It's Ekyt...Kayla...at one point, he admitted something to me...something he could never tell anyone else, at least not yet." Kayla's eye widened and her washcloth slipped off her forehead. "What?" she asked. "Well, he said he" "Hey, Linda! Kayla!" Sakura joined them. "Oh, hi Sakura." Linda said. "Listen, Linda, I'm really worried about your friend. And I know there's another reason he took the sand shuriken attack for you, aside from you being an instructor. I don't know what, but there was something

else." Linda looked around. "Okay...I'll explain it."

Naruto and Sasuke were hanging out in the lobby when Ekyt walked down, muttering something to the clerk. "Hey Sasuke, you know, I didn't see his eye, did you?" "No." They had to stop there, because Ekyt was walking toward them. "Ekyt! Hey, over here!" Naruto waved him over. "What's going on?" Ekyt asked. "Well, we dropped by to see if you needed anything." Naruto answered. "Now that you mention it...is there a gym around here? And a good store to get supplies?" "A gym? You just got here, and you're going to train?! Are you crazy?!" Naruto almost shouted. "You should try training." Sasuke muttered darkly.

"Don't tell anyone, but at one point, we were almost boyfriend/girlfriend." A shocked silence hit the hot spring. "He told me he loved me, and then kissed me. That's huge for him, he's such a nervous guy. And he didn't hold the rejection against me. But the reason he took that attack was that he would have taken it for anyone. That's the way he is." "Insane?" said a new voice. Sakura's eyes narrowed. "What's up billboard brow?" Ino, a pretty, but airy, blond girl taunted. "Get out before you dye the water, you peroxide blond." Sakura replied. "Hey, are all of you decent?" another voice came, this time a male's. "Yeah Chakaro." Linda answered. "Who's Chakaro?" Ino asked. Sakura snapped at the chance. "My God, he's only the hottest thing this side of Sasuke Uchiha! But he's after me, sorry!" She said, sticking her tongue out and making an "L" shape on her forehead with her fingers. "We'll see about that! He hasn't met me yet Captain Forehead!"

"So, if I'm getting this, you were an instructor, but not a black belt? How does that work?" Naruto asked. "Experience. I was more or less a vigilante for nearly two years. All I did was train. I want to protect people. And now...When I'm ready, Gaara's going to get a visit from me." "Gaara isn't easy, but I can see why you'd want to go after him." Sasuke said. "Any idea who's going to instruct you?" he continued. "Kakashi-sensei, Asuma Sarutobi, and Might Guy." Ekyt said, trying to remember the names. "All of them? What cell are you going to be in?" Naruto asked. "No idea. I just know I'm supposed to get diverse training. I don't know why, but I'm not going to question it. I studied four, five martial arts before I came here. If I'm doing this, I want to be good at it." Sasuke seemed mildly impressed. "You've gotta meet a few people then! They're not cool, like me, (they're more like Sasuke, if ya know what I mean) but it's good know 'em. Hey, there's Shikamaru!"

Chakaro walked in cautiously. He found Kayla, Linda, Sakura, and some girl he didn't know staring at him. "Sorry to interrupt. But there's a problem here, with Ekyt-Sensei, er, Ekyt. Linda, there's more reason than" "We know. Join us Chakaro, I'll spill my guts...again." Chakaro sat down gingerly. He had never been around this many good-looking girls, especially ones only somewhat clothed. "Hey there, I'm Ino!" the blond girl zipped up to him. "Oh, look at you! You're adorable! That makes us a perfect match!" Sakura looked away, stifling her laughter at Chakaro's look of...either confusion or amusement, she couldn't tell which. "Well, like I just said, Ekyt admitted he loved me, and kissed me. That was big for him. But I guess I wasn't ready to have a boyfriend, so I said no. He never held the rejection against me." Ino had her head on Chakaro's shoulder. He either didn't notice or didn't mind. "I knew there was something there...he told me once..." He stopped. "Go on." Ino urged him. "He told me once that he threw himself into his training because that's who he is, and that I'm lucky I'll have something real to fall back on besides training. It sounded like he had just given up on something. Now I think I know what. It was the night after he took those three knives for you, Linda. When he was walking with the crutch. He mentioned that something had happened between you two, but that he wouldn't blame you, because you were honest with him. And he then he said that honesty was such a rare trait, he admired you."

After meeting Shikamaru, Ekyt got in some training time. For two hours, he punched, kick, elbowed, kneed, did squats, pushups, situps, everything, while talking with Naruto and Sasuke. "You really want this, don't you?" Sasuke asked suddenly. "I haven't seen anyone train that hard, ever, without some evidence of chakra." Ekyt stopped. "That's my biggest question. I know WHAT chakra is, but I don't know HOW to unlock it. What do I need to do? I'm at a huge disadvantage as it is with my eye...I don't need another handicap."

"He admires me for turning him down?" Linda couldn't believe her ears. "I guess and...who the hell is this?" Chakaro said, finally acknowledging Ino's presence. "I'm your dream come true!" she pepilly replied. "When did I dream about hell?" Chakaro asked. Sakura laughed out loud at that. "Ino, you really fell for that? Come on, I've only known this guy for one day!" Ino suddenly realized she was the butt of the joke. "Hmpph! You got lucky Sakura!" Ino stormed out of the hot spring, kicking the fence in rage. "Serves her right." Sakura murmured. "Linda, if you don't mind my asking...how do you think of him now?" Linda uttered the words every guy dreads hearing from a love interest: "He's just a friend."

"C'mon Sasuke, let me show him one jutsu!" Naruto urged. "Whatever. It's your head." Sasuke murmured, leaning against the wall to watch. Then he realized what jutsu Naruto was sure to pick. "Centerfold jutsu!" Naruto was suddenly- a girl? Ekyt looked at Naruto, then shot Sasuke a questioning look. Sasuke shrugged. Naruto popped back to himself, grinning broadly. "So, that's a jutsu. Whaddaya think, pretty sweet huh?!" Ekyt didn't know how to answer that. "They're not all worthless, some are deadly." Sasuke said in exasperation.

Sakura felt herself getting angry, but managed to keep it in check. "How does HE see all this? I mean, taking an attack like that..." she shook her head, trying to imagine Naruto or Sasuke doing that. They wouldn't, but they wouldn't need to. The only one she knew who would was Lee. "He was good with the whole thing, not blaming me, thanking me for my honesty. I'm just not ready for a boyfriend, I guess. It's not that he's a bad guy, he's loyal, an absolute sweetheart, and, I know you haven't seen his face without cuts and scratches, but actually pretty cute." She said thoughtfully. "I know where to find him." Chakaro piped up. "Going for a walk nothing. You know what he's doing Linda, he's done this at every town." "Oh, that's right! I forgot he does that! It's a bad habit he has on the road." Linda said, chewing on her finger. "What's that?" "He trains obsessively. I thought his...injury...might have slowed him down. I swear, he pulls this at every town, in the woods, on the road."

"Well, who do we have here? Sasuke, Naruto, care to introduce me to your friend?" Might Guy was standing near the group, grinning happily. Ekyt stopped beating the punching bag and turned around. "I'm Ekyt." "Might Guy. Aren't you one of my new students?" "I think so. I know I've got...Asuma Sarutobi tomorrow morning, it must be your name that's on my afternoon schedule." "It's somewhat unusual for a genin like you to have multiple sensei's. But if you can handle it, more power to you. Have you met my personal protégé?" "I don't think so." "Lee! Come over here!" Guy called to a...clone of himself? No, this kid was younger. "Yes Guy-Sensei?" "A new student, Lee." Lee seemed to just take notice of Ekyt. "Greetings. My name is Rock Lee, I usually go by Lee." Ekyt shook his hand. "I'm Ekyt." "I overheard you say you haven't learned about Chakra yet. Lee here can't use his, maybe you two would be good training partners. I'm worried Lee's gonna get soft without someone to work with."

As Ekyt was going to answer Lee, his group found him. Linda shook her head in mock anger. "Training AGAIN? Shame on you!" she said, wagging her finger. "Linda, Chakaro, Kayla, this is Might Guy,

tomorrow afternoon's sensei. And that's Lee." Ekyt said, ignoring the verbal jibe. "Pleased to meet you." Linda said on behalf of the group. "Likewise. Well, don't let me stop you from going about your business." "Pardon me a minute." Ekyt was talking with Lee. For a few moments. Then, without warning, the two broke back from each other, with loud "Kia's!" of effort.

At no point during the match did things become hostile. At one point, Lee walked on his hands while kicking at Ekyt. Ekyt's best shot came when he blocked the "Konoha Hurricane" kick and swept Lee's legs. Lee's counter was the beginning of the end. He ducked Ekyt's crescent kick, and returned with a kick of his own, to Ekyt's chest. It sent Ekyt into the air, letting Lee get in position for the "Forward Lotus" technique. Guy stopped the fight there, reminding Lee that technique was forbidden. Lee understood that, and said he never meant to actually do it. Ekyt and Lee didn't have a long fight, but long enough to leave both winded and with some fresh bruises popping up. Lee had been incredibly quick, and Ekyt couldn't keep up. But Ekyt could read his strategy, up until checkmate, when Lee had him trapped in position for his "Forward Lotus" (Can someone confirm the name?) attack. After quick bows to each other, they parted ways. "Very impressive." Guy said. "You've got potential." Ekyt thanked him, walking back to his group. "Everywhere we go." Linda said. "Pardon me. I haven't formally met you yet. I am Rock Lee..." Sakura had to smile; she liked Lee as a friend, though he was infatuated with her. Now he had a Sakura look-alike to talk to. Sakura could read Ekyt's mood, and she found a depression in him that started when Linda agreed to go get a drink with Lee. **Kind of like when Sasuke won't go out with me...Poor guy...If someone lost their eye for me, I'd definitely see them as something more than a friend.**

Chakaro and Kayla stood next to Ekyt, proud of him despite the loss. "I've never seen anyone move so quick." Chakaro pointed out. "Really! And it looks like Ekyt-Sensei is moving quick too." Kayla said, glancing at Ekyt. "What are you talking about?" Ekyt asked, seemingly perplexed. "Don't look now, but you've got that girl's attention." Kayla jabbed him in the ribs. "Who? Sakura? C'mon, she's outta my league." Ekyt said. "All of you are doing great, it seems." Kayla said, mockingly pouting. "Sakura's after Ekyt (Ekyt shot her a nasty look with his good eye), That blond cheerleader (Ino) is chasing Chakaro (Chakaro looked at the ceiling, rolling his eyes, cheeks turning red), and Master Linda is dating bush-brow (Both nod)." Shikamaru walked by, vaguely saying hi to Ekyt. Kayla raised her eyebrows and started after Shikamaru.

Shikamaru looked behind him, seeing the new girl following him. **Another girl? How bothersome. She hasn't yelled at me yet, so she's not totally like Ino. Whatever...**

(Picture huge anime sweatdrops here) Ekyt, Naruto, Sasuke, and Chakaro watched the whole thing. "Doesn't she know how Shikamaru is?" Naruto asked Ekyt. Ekyt shook his head. "Nope. I'd tell her, but it seems she'd rather take digs at my personality." They all got a chuckle out of that. "Hey, I'm hungry!" Naruto exclaimed suddenly. "Which one? Oriental flavored ramen or teriyaki chicken ramen? Oooh, maybe Wasabi steak! Yeah!" Sasuke looked away, arms crossed. "Oh, the bottomless ramen pit is hungry? What a surprise."

"Sasuke! I've gotta ask you something!" Sakura ran to catch up to Sasuke. "The answer is no." he said flatly. "Huh?" Sakura uttered in surprise. "You want to go out with me, right? The answer is no." Sakura reddened. "That wasn't my question! I wanted to ask you about the scroll that Kakashi-sensei lent us. Do you still have it?" Sasuke pulled the scroll out of his pocket. "Thanks, I want to work on my transformation jutsu. See you later!"

Naruto popped out from behind a fence, landing next to Sasuke. "Whoa, weird, she wants to work on her jutsu? She's, like, a master of her chakra, how better does she need to be? And what's up with her not asking you to go out with her? It's not like her to ignore the "Great and powerful Sasuke Uchiha!" It's like her mind was somewhere else..." "It was on her jutsus. The things YOU should be practicing. Unless you want to be a moron your whole life." Sasuke said with the smallest of sneers. "Laugh all you want Sasuke, go ahead! But I think you're threatened by these new guys!"

"Don't be Stupid."

NEXT ISSUE: Our newest ninja's start training, and the schedule is tough! Asuma in the morning, Guy in the afternoon, and at night, there first lesson with Kakashi! Not to mention the pressing question: How are things going on the love front for our intrepid heroes?

And now...my char's bios!

Name: Chakaro Tamaki

Age: 13

Gender: Male

Eyes: Blue

Hair: Black shoulder length

Height: 5'6

Build: Skinny/Athletic

Skin: Caucasian/non-Asian

Bio: Chakaro Tamaki is something of a martial-arts protégé. After his parents died by their own stupidity (He's never revealed the cause of their death, except for "I had nothing to do with it, those two idiots are to blame), he turned to martial arts. He has forsaken his American name (Charles Wright), instead going by his adopted name. He feels martial arts is the only thing he can count on always being there. He has no close friends, save for Ekyt, his instructor, who he thinks of as a mentor. His anti-social tendencies never get in the way of teamwork, and it's the guess of Ekyt that Chakaro is shy and self-conscious by nature.

Chakaro's personal choice of weapons are shuriken and a 30 inch, samurai-style katana. The katana was a congratulatory gift from Ekyt after he received his black belt in two arts simultaneously.

Chakaro has no hobbies other than training. His favorite food is vegetables prepared with wasabi. Typically, he can be found wearing white black gi pants, with a black gi top, which shows his dedication to the martial arts.

Name: Kayla Donalds

Age: 13

Gender: Female

Eyes: Dark Blue
Hair: Blond shoulder length
Height: 5'4
Build: female muscular
Skin: Caucasian/non-Asian

Kayla Donalds was something of a brat before her parents tricked her into trying martial arts. She fell in love with the physicality, the ability to be self-sufficient, and, some say, Chakaro Tamaki. She appears to be a cheerleader-type, but is far more dangerous. Her specialties are healing and espionage.

Kayla's closest friend is Linda, because Linda broke her out of her (as she puts it) "Shallow, princessy, self-centered shell". The two bonded almost instantly, thinking of each other as sisters. Kayla's weapons of choice are tonfas and her medical pack, though she is incredibly accurate with throwing stars.

Kayla's hobbies include reading romance novels and trying to catch Chakaro's eye in romance-novel situations. Her favorite food is chocolate. She can usually be found wearing white gi pants, with a matching white t-shirt.

Name: Linda (Adopted family name: Mawashi)

Age: 15

Gender: Female

Eyes: Emerald green

Hair: Pink hair w/ purple highlights, bangs over her left eye, short hair into ponytail

Height: 5'4 1/2

Build: Female Athletic

Skin: Caucasian/non-Asian

Linda adopted the family name "Mawashi" as a necessity when she took over Master Akira Sukuto's dojo. Her long-time master died after a long battle with hepatitis. As the top student, she took over at his request. Her specialty is combat, any kind of it. She's beautiful, but incredibly deadly, though she has never killed anyone.

Linda's closest friend is Ekyt. Even though she rejected him when he got up the guts to admit he loved her, she still respects him a great deal. She rejected him because she wasn't ready to have a boyfriend. She told him "When I AM ready, I hope it's a boy like you." Far from being a boy and clothes obsessed teenage girl, Linda already holds many responsibilities, and is in charge of her own life. Linda's weapons of choice are throwing knives and a bo.

Linda's hobbies are training and helping Ekyt. She found the young man to be troubled, and now sees him as a "project." Her favorite food is Kung Pao chicken. She can usually be found wearing black gi shorts, a white t-shirt, and a monogrammed (red) black vest.

Name: Ekyt (real name unknown, no adopted surname/ family name)

Age: 15 (He is 19 in my other fics)

Gender: Male

Eyes: Hazel (Brown)

Hair: Dark brown, short but bushy

Height: 5'9

Build: Sinewy muscular/ skinny

Skin: Caucasian/non-Asian

Not very much is known about Ekyt. He refuses to tell anyone his real name, and seems to be depressed, but friendly at the same time, by nature. His closest friend is Linda, though the two seem to be growing apart. Ekyt's parents are alive and well, but he refuses to put them in danger, so he doesn't associate with them much. He disowns most of the rest of his family. Training seems to be his life, and he tends to take responsibility for any tragedy that happens near him.

Ekyt lost the use of his left eye after leaping in front of Linda as a way of intercepting a brutal, unprovoked attack by Gaara of the Sand. His face has since healed, save for his eye, though he has embraced wearing a mask for his own reasons. He has become a mentor to Chakaro Tamaki, and a close confidant of Linda. Linda's rejection of his affections have led him to hate his emotions. Already stoic by nature, Ekyt now goes out of his way to be emotionless. Ekyt's weapons of choice are Kris blades, a 26 1/2 inch Katana (samurai katana), throwing stars, and (his primary weapon) at 6 foot tri-sectional staff.

Ekyt's hobbies are training, reading, and occasionally playing Go or *Chinese Checkers* if he can find a willing opponent. His favorite food (though he only eats one meal a day) is habachi steak. His attire is currently a black headband covering his left eye (The destroyed appendage), along with a mask to cover his cuts and regulate his breathing (He has a tendency to hyperventilate), unintentionally looking like Kakashi. He also wears a black T-Shirt with a white collar, a silver dragon pendant on a chain (a gift from his parents), and black gi pants, the ends of which are tucked into his short black boots.

3 - Awatidashii Tsuushin

"Oh yeah! I don't mind you kissing me Sakura! You've got ramen breath!" Naruto was smiling in his sleep. Unfortunately for him, Sakura, Sasuke, and Kakashi were standing over his bed. Sakura had taken on a look of unmistakeable rage. "GRR! WAKE UP YOU IDIOT! WAKE UP SO I CAN KILL YOU! I WANT YOU TO SEE IT COMING!" she yelled, pounding on him. "Hey, I'm awake, lay off! Geez, don't you knock? What if I was naked?! Then again, maybe that's what you wanted..." Naruto said, grinning. Sakura gave him a punch that raised a welt on his head and knocked him out of bed. "Get dressed, we have a mission." Kakashi said in a hushed tone. Naruto stared up dumbly for a second before feeling around for his clothes. "Not in front of me, you pig! I'm a lady!" "YOU'RE IN MY ROOM!" Naruto shouted back. Sakura blushed, an arm behind her head. "heh heh, I guess he's right." "Come on then, it's an information gathering mission." Kakashi said. "Stealth, and don't get separated."

Ekyt soaked in the hot spring as briefly as possible. He got out, then got back in, to think. He had a lot on his mind. Lee going out with Linda? He never had a rival for her affections before. Even though he had conceded defeat to himself, and hadn't attempted to date Linda (Or anyone else, for that matter) since she had said no to being something other than friends. Strangely, Ekyt didn't regret his eye's injury for her safety. He regretted the impairment, but not out of spite. He tried to focus in his training, tried meditating. But he couldn't settle down and concentrate.

Kakashi was at the North fence, Sasuke at the East fence, and Sakura at the West fence. Naruto was going to serve as the bait for this mission. Kakashi signaled to him to get in position. Sakura's face reddened as she realized their target, as well as the location. "Do we have a positive ID on subject Ekyt, in the setting of Hot Spring?" Kakashi asked Sasuke through a walkie-talkie. "ID affirmative." Sasuke muttered back. Sakura was blushing, wishing that, for this mission, it was Sasuke being the bait. **Two hot guys in a hot spring? Cha! I should be ashamed...** Sakura thought to herself, turning redder still.

Ekyt heard someone coming. He didn't budge just yet, save for pulling his clothes closer. He wasn't fool enough to be caught naked, especially without a weapon. He had his shirt off, but had exchanged his long gi pants for shorts. "Hey, Ekyt, how's it going?" Ekyt relaxed, it was just Naruto. "Alright. You?" Ekyt asked, his tone not giving any clear signs. "Me? I've never had a bad day in my life! Hokage can't have bad days!" Naruto said, laughing. "So, how're the injuries?" he asked. After a few more questions, and several stoic answers, Naruto went in for the kill with Sakura's question. "How do you feel about our group?" Ekyt closed his eye. "Well, you seem like a nice group. You're definitely going places, all of you. I can already tell that Kakashi-Sensei is going to be tough, but a great teacher too. Sasuke is a mystery, but I'm sure he wants it that way. Sakura is"

The fence creaked just as Ekyt was saying whatever it was. The sound blocked his answer. **Shoot!** Sakura said to herself. Kakashi made eye contact with her, indicating it was time to extract Naruto. She gave the signal, sighing after it's completion.

"So, what did we learn?" Kakashi asked. "That he respects you, thinks Sasuke and I have potential, and I'm not sure what he said about you, Sakura. I kind of slipped at that point and almost fell under water." "That's okay Naruto, thanks for trying." She said, distracted. Naruto leaned toward Sasuke.

"Man, she's got it BAD for him." "WHAT WAS THAT?!" "Nothing, geez, chill out!"

Kayla was following Shikamaru around. Shikamaru didn't seem to care, other than showing a slight annoyance.

"Sakura, it's best if you talk to her. Do you remember the questions?" "Yes sensei." "Good. We'll be nearby." Sakura nodded as her three teammates jumped away, concealing themselves.

"Kayla!" Linda called. "Oh, it's you Sakura. What's up?" Kayla answered brightly. Shikamaru took the opportunity to slink into an alley. "Shoot. Lost him." Kayla said, grinning despite her disappointed tone. "So you've met Shikamaru?" Sakura asked. "Wellll, not officially, I haven't gotten him to talk to me yet." Kayla admitted. "But I DO love a challenge. He's a lot like Chakaro. What is about these aloof boys?" Sakura had to laugh. She continued her questioning for a few minutes, then apologized and said she had to leave.

"Alright. We know her love interests, her birthday, her favorite color, her pet's name, and every emotion she's feeling right now." Kakashi read off. Sakura shrugged. "The only question mark is her ability, just how good is she?" "I know she's also their medic." Sakura offered. "Good work Sakura." Naruto had a beef, and, like always, wasn't shy about sharing it. "I don't see why this is important! Why does knowing she'll eat salmon but not perch help our mission, huh?!" Kakashi answered with his usual response: "No ninja should ever ignore any information, no matter how trivial."

Chakaro swung his practice bo around his waist, across his shoulders, down behind his back, and over his head. Pointless in battle, but it kept your fingers and wrists strong and limber.

"Sasuke, you handle this one." Kakashi said, indicating with his head. "Right. I'll be right back."

The mission turned out to be a little harder than he anticipated. "Chakaro right?" Sasuke asked, crossing his arms and leaning against a building. "Yup. You're Sasuke?" "Right." Neither one of them talked too much, making information hard to get. "How long have you been training?" Sasuke asked. "Today, or total?" "Total." "5 years, in two arts." "What ranks?" "Black, in both." Sasuke was apparently somewhat impressed. His next question was meant to throw Chakaro off. "I see you've met Ino, one of the village nutcases." "She's not so bad." "hell spit her back out." Sasuke muttered.

"Excellent work. Just one team member left to tackle. I'll take this one." Kakashi told them.

Linda was sitting with Lee, both drinking some green tea. "Great idea Lee. So, what was that technique you used?" "That was the "Primary Lotus" technique. I wouldn't have actually done it, I do not wish to kill Ekyt." Lee answered. "Not that he'll need the help. I don't know what to do with him Lee. We're just friends. But I feel guilty about his eye..." "There is no need to fell guilty Linda. He proved he is a true warrior by doing that. By being ready to forsake his own life for that of his comrades. It is admirable, and should be honored." "I guess...He didn't seem too happy tonight though. He used to train with me, but hasn't since we started the trip here. He's very strong, but something in his head messes with him. I'd like to fix that, he deserves better." Linda got up. "Thanks again Lee, I'd like to do this again some time. I buy next time. Catch you later." She kissed him on the cheek and got up. Lee stared dumbly after her.

Sakura's eyes widened. "Oh my God...This is bad." "What's the big deal? It was just a kiss on the cheek!" "How would you feel if your girl kissed another guy?" Naruto grimaced. "Wait, she's nobody's girl!" "You moron, there were still feelings between her and Ekyt!" she pointed out. "That's a kick to the ego." Sasuke murmured. "I hope he doesn't find out about this."

Ekyt, Linda, Chakaro, and Kayla all met at Asuma's training area at 8:00 am. Kayla rubbed her eyes sleepily; she was the late sleeper of the group. "I need some caffeine to wake up." she slurred, shoving a bar of chocolate into her mouth, seeming perkier instantly. Linda was studiously avoiding eye contact with Ekyt. He and Chakaro were leaning over a scroll, exchanging theories about it's contents. That's when they met Asuma.

"Welcome to your first day of training. I'm Asuma Sarutobi, "Asuma" is fine, formality won't make better fighters out of you. Now, who hear knows what chakra is and how to use it?" Everyone looked toward Linda. "Chakra is your physical and mental energies being tapped in order to attack." "Very good. You must be Linda. Now...let me see...You're Kayla...Chakaro Tamaki...okay....Ekyt. Ah yes. I need to speak with you." Ekyt stepped forward. "Kakashi told me about your injury. Is there anything that can be done for it? I'd hate for you to be injured at such a young age." Ekyt shook his head. "No. Apparently, it's beyond conventional healing." Ekyt said, indicating his eye. "Have you ever played Go?" Asuma asked. "No, but I'm familiar with the rules." "Well, drop by for a game sometime. I play with one of my students, Shikamaru, he mentioned you actually (not normal for him)." Ekyt flicked his toothpick away, replacing it with a fresh one. "I will, thank you."

"So, you know what chakra is. Now, HOW it's accessed and used...that's the hard part. You need to be able to concentrate. No matter where you are, if you're injured, in battle. If you can't summon your chakra, it's useless to you. Now, let's start simple. I want you to run, without concentrating. Just a quick dash to that rock. Ready? GO!" The four ran to the rock, then jogged back. "10 seconds. You're all in shape, very good. Now, I want you to focus. Focus your energy into your legs. It might take a couple tries. Now, run to the rock again." They all ran, three more times. Their time went from ten seconds to eight seconds, from eight seconds to six seconds, then from six seconds to three seconds. "That was definite improvement. Speed is an asset to any warriors arsenal. No matter how powerful an enemy is, if he can't catch you, he's useless. By the same token, you're useless if YOU can't catch HIM."

Three hours later, Asuma dismissed them. They had an hour for lunch/break, then a three hour class with Might Guy. They all chose the ramen place Naruto's group had shown them earlier. Habachi steak for Ekyt, Vegetable for Chakaro, Kung Pao Chicken for Linda, and Seafood for Kayla. The others talked, but Ekyt ate in silence. **If I could have controlled this...chakra...I could have saved my eye AND Linda's life. I swear, I will NEVER be the weakest link. NEVER. And I'm going to master this chakra stuff.** He set his bowl down and paid. "I'm going to talk to Guy-Sensei. See you later." he said as he walked out. "Geez, what peed in his cereal today?" Kayla asked, referring to Ekyt's mood. Linda blushed, wondering if he knew something he shouldn't...

"Sakura?" Naruto asked. "Hmmm? Oh, sorry. What is Naruto?" Sakura had been staring at the water. "Can you help me with this jutsu? I can't focus my chakra right." "Sure, what are you stuck on?" "The summoning jutsu. For something smaller than Akamaru. I can get the big things okay, but the smaller one's give me trouble." "Okay, let me see what you're doing." Naruto made a complex series of movements with his hand. Sakura stopped him. "Your index fingers should be in and together, not out and apart." She said, holding her own hands a certain way. "Oh man, THAT was all? Geez, I've been

working on this for days too!" "Well, the ramen you got on the scroll kind of obscures the pictures..."

"Guy-sensei?" Guy looked over his shoulder. "Ekyt, you're early! Good, that's an excellent quality! But you look like you've brought some mental baggage with you." Ekyt nodded his agreement. "I guess I'm just a little down over my eye." He said, not entirely sure it was true. "Well, anyone would be, don't beat yourself up. Speaking of that, Lee couldn't stop talking about the sparring match the other day. Quite an innovative block against his "Konoha hurricane" technique." He and Guy talked about a few different topics, mostly centering around hand to hand combat. The others all showed up, ready to go.

"Excellent you're all here! Now, I'm sure Asuma put you through your paces. I hope you're rested up for some more! We're going to focus on Taijutsu, something Ekyt here told me you all have down pretty well. Now we're going to add chakra into the mix. Let me see...Ekyt, why don't you demonstrate with Lee here, I asked him to help out." Linda blushed, hoping Ekyt didn't see. She didn't know why she cared, they weren't together, but somehow she didn't want him to know yet. "First of all, your regular kicks and punches are great. But now you're going to learn a few techniques. Once you've learned them, they'll become unique to you. Ekyt, I've set up a safe place for you to land. I want Lee to show everyone what I mean. I believe he almost worked this with you last night. So, brace yourself."

Ekyt nodded to Lee. Lee darted forward and kicked Ekyt under the chin, knocking him in the air. Ekyt was suddenly upside down, with Lee holding him in place. Ekyt realized that the bandages on Lee's arms had wound around his own. "Forward Lotus!" Lee shouted, spiraling to the ground, driving Ekyt's head into Guy's safe area.

"Dear God, that's the most brutal move I've ever seen." Kayla muttered to Linda. Linda didn't agree, but didn't mention it. Guy-Sensei was talking, so they all paid attention. "Now, I'm going to guess you've all taken physical arts, which is a great thing to know. However, with chakara at your disposal, you can, ah, cut corners somewhat with training. Not like Lee here. So, homework. I hate it as much as you do, but I'd like all of you to get together and spar, just a few rounds each, try some taijutsu. Lee, you meet with them, watch them, and let me know." Lee saluted. "Yes sir, Guy-sensei!"

"Good workout." Chakaro muttered to Ekyt. "Yeah." Ekyt seemed distracted. Likewise, so was Chakaro. "Listen...I don't know if you've noticed it too, but Linda seems off..." Chakaro said. "I think it's because I haven't been training with her so much. I just can't, not right now. I guess that rejection hit me harder than I thought...I'm just sensing something that I can't quite put my finger on." Ekyt looked at the grass. "I'm going to head to town and get my supplies."

"Lee, thanks for the help. That "Konoha Hurricane" looks like a killer." Linda was chatting with Lee as they grabbed some food. "I am not even sure how long it took to master it. It looked to easy when Guy-Sensei did it, but hitting the precise pressure point is very difficult. I was concerned I missed when Ekyt didn't show any pain." "He's like that. Stoic. I feel bad, I've tried to stay close to him, but I feel like it's a lie every time I do, but feel guilty when I don't. I'm not in love with him." "I think he'll understand if you are honest and open with him. There are other girls, and maybe he would try again if you explained to him what was going on." Lee suggested. Linda wasn't sure she could do that. But for his sake, she would try.

"So, our data had revealed that our target is a loner. Good. All the easier to pick off." Kabuto adjusted his glasses, conveying to his hidden team to move in. "Without any mastery of his chakra, he should be

easy..." Kabuto said to himself, smiling. "Oh really?" Kakashi dropped in behind Kabuto, followed by Naruto and Sasuke. "Easy pickings? NO ninja is easy pickings." Sasuke said firmly. Kabuto's grin faded. "No...Naruto proved that...but one without chakra...easy for someone WITH chakra." Kakashi looked at Naruto and Sasuke. "You guys find his team. I'll handle him. And Sasuke...be on your guard, you especially." Kakashi and Kabuto squared off.

Ekyt had two bags full of easy to make food. Ramen, soup, non-perishable stuff. If he wanted meat, he could always go into town. "Hey! Ekyt!" Sakura's voice said. "Hi Sakura." "Didja buy out the store?" Sakura asked, peering into the bags. "Yeah. More or less. I think Naruto's going to be disappointed." "What are you up to now?" "I'm going to get some books." Sakura reached up and pulled an orange book of the shelf. "Try this one, Kakashi-sensei is always reading this." Ekyt paid for the book without looking at it. "If you REALLY want to improve quickly, you should study the scrolls." "Scrolls?" "Yeah. Naruto has Kakashi-Sensei's, but Asuma-Sensei's are available. Since he's been teacher beginner's lately, they'd probably be a better place to start."

"That's them." Sasuke muttered, pointing with two fingers. "Let's move cautiously." "Right!" Naruto agreed. "AHHHH!" He jumped down from the tree he was in, kunai flashing out, slashing at- logs? "Substitution?" Sasuke murmured in surprise. Then where were the real ones? "Kakashi!"

Kabuto didn't look worried. "Your Sharingan eye doesn't scare me, copy ninja." Kakashi raised his headband, revealing the eye. Kabuto raised his hand to do a jutsu. "Huh?" he couldn't believe it. "You haven't even seen my jutsu yet! How can you copy it?!" Kakashi just kept concentrating. "Temple of Nirvana Jutsu? It won't do you any good if we're both asleep." Kakashi said evenly. Kabuto didn't seem surprised. "I've been compared to you. And now, I'll be the one to kill you. And I'm not alone, see for yourself.

Kakashi found himself surrounded.

4 - Now It's Personal: Dragon Ember Jutsu!

Sakura was chatting with Ekyt, building up to her point when Linda came over. "I'm really sorry to interrupt, but, Sakura, can you give us a second." Sakura nodded, wondering what was going on.

"Ekyt...I need to be honest." Ekyt's eye showed no emotion. "I trust you. Are you okay?" Ekyt asked her. "I'm...fine. I just...I think...I'm going to start dating." She waited for a shout of anger, a well-deserved yelling at. Neither happened. "Is that all? A nice girl like you alone?" Ekyt said. "Whoever you pick, unless it's Gaara, is fine with me." "Thanks so much Ekyt. You're a sweetheart. I deserve to be beaten for keeping you in limbo." "No you don't. You've been honest. If you just decided this, there's no reason to be upset. Now, I need to apologize for not training with you. I just wanted to spare us both the awkwardness." Ekyt looked up at the clouds. "I've got to go, I'll see you around." He said amiably. "Thanks again, you're the best. Bye!" she called.

Kakashi sensed Naruto and Sasuke leaping back into the fray. Kabuto looked panicked for an instant. "Waiting for these punks?" Naruto tossed two unconscious ninjas at Kabuto's feet. Moving quickly, he made hand signs at a rapid speed. Kakashi had been distracted until the very end, when he quickly countered it. Too late. Kabuto had used his "Nirvana Temple" jutsu, putting Naruto and Sasuke to sleep. "Tell your puppies "Good Night" Hatake. Their days are numbered, the same as yours..." Kabuto disappeared. Kakashi considered giving chase, but settled for waking his two students.

Chakaro heard someone coming. He judged that they weren't attempting to hide. "Chakaro Tamaki?" The voice asked. "Who's asking?" he muttered darkly, staring at a ninja he had never seen before. "I am called Fushouchi ("Fushouchi" means "Dissent" –NG). I am here to make you an offer. You want revenge, revenge for parents and their stupidity. You could call me a figure from your past...One that could give you everything you've ever wanted..."

Sakura watched Ekyt walk back. And he didn't look well. The skin that was visible had turned more pale than usual, and he walked with a stiffness, like he was in terrible pain. And she noticed he had his hand to his damaged eye. It didn't take a genius to see what had happened. "I'm so sorry Ekyt." Ekyt sighed before he replied. "It was for the best. She was honest, and we were never "together." I've always admired her honesty..." Sakura followed him back to his hotel room. He opened the orange book she had given him, reading the first couple of sentences absently. Sakura stifled a laugh. "What is this?! "Makeout Paradise? THIS is what Kakashi-sensei reads?" He shot Sakura a mock-nasty look. She burst out laughing. "I thought ALL boys read this!" Ekyt started to respond, but that changed to: "What the hell?!" he swore, looking around the destroyed room. A shuriken with a note was pinned to the wall. Hand shaking slightly, Ekyt pulled it off the wall. "Is everything okay?" Sakura asked. **Okay? That's the understatement of the century Sakura! You're not blond, that's Ino! Focus. What would you do if it were Sasuke? Offer help. That's it!** "Can I help at all?" Sakura asked. To her surprise, Ekyt nodded. "Get Kakashi-Sensei and your group. If you see mine on the way, please tell them I'll meet them in my room as soon as possible..." Whatever that note said had choked Ekyt up pretty good.

"What are we talking about... Fushouchi?" Chakaro asked. He was trying not to be tempted by the offer, but also thought it was best to hear what this clown had to say. "I know how much talent you posses. I

can help you master your chakra, make you stronger in a shorter time, since you'd be my only student. If you agree, I can give you information about who you are...Who you used to be...your parents, and what happened." "What's the catch?" Chakaro asked darkly. "Betray your team. The one they call Ekyt, he will be your greatest obstacle if you allow him to live..."

"Whoa, what happened here?!" Naruto exclaimed. "Man, you've really gotta work on your housekeeping, even I'M neater than this! What, did you practice a destruction jutsu on your furniture?" Naruto said. "You loser, don't you see this is trouble?" Sasuke shut Naruto up. "Let him talk." Kakashi's unusually somber attitude got everyone to settle down. Ekyt gestured around the room. "If you can find something to sit on, please go ahead. My team should be getting here" "Now. You wanna tell us what this is all about?" Kayla asked, jokingly sarcastic. "Please, continue." Ekyt didn't ask why Linda walked in with Lee. "Hey, where's Chakaro?" Linda asked suddenly. Sakura was sitting closest to Ekyt, looking somber.

"According to this note, I'm to meet Chakaro alone at the training field. To negotiate his return." A chorus of protests met his ears. "I've got to do it. I've never lost a student, and I'm not going to start now. It says me specifically. What I need...is a jutsu. And...I need my team protected." Ekyt was addressing Kakashi now. "I can have your team protected, I'm certain Lee is up to the challenge. As for a jutsu...What do you have in mind? They're not easy to teach." Kakashi asked. Ekyt met his gaze. "I know enough Taijutsu, I need something physical...and non-lethal in the best cases." Kakashi thought hard. "I think I have one in mind. Sasuke, Naruto, get them hidden. Sakura, you're with us. We might need your medical expertise."

It was time.

Ekyt pulled his trench coat on, hiding the staff folded across his back. His kunai were hidden high up on his right leg. "Okay. I'm ready." Kakashi and Sakura were still with him. "If you need help, send the flare." Kakashi said. "Right."

"Ekyt." Chakaro ran up to him. "Glad you're alright. What happened?" Chakaro grimaced. From behind, Ekyt heard the start of an attack. He leapt to the side, his chakra flowing through his body. "So, this is the famed Ekyt. The one who survived Gaara's assault, the one who trained an elite force. It's a shame you'd only be in the way. You have the honor of having trained my gem." "Who the hell are you, and what are you talking about?!" Ekyt demanded, shedding his coat. "My name is Fushouchi, family name Cheng. And what I'm talking about is Chakaro. You trained him well, but now you're holding him back." Ekyt felt a presence behind him. "Sorry "Sensei!"" Chakaro reached for Ekyt's neck. Ekyt ducked away, rolling forward, throwing a somewhat subconscious attack at Fushouchi. Time to signal Kakashi.

"Here we go. Sakura, stay behind me or Ekyt until it's safe." Kakashi instructed as they ran full-tilt toward the battle.

"Chakaro, care to demonstrate what you've learned in such a short time?" Kakashi and Sakura arrived just in time to see Chakaro make a couple hand seals. "Ninjutsu..." Kakashi uttered under his breath. "Full Jodan Blade!" Chakaro called, manipulating air into a humongous sword. It swung down at Ekyt. Ekyt dodged backward, skidding on the grass. His anger at betrayal had finally hit him. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" he called, making a simple hand seal, channeling his chakra perfectly. From the double

cross (Or quad cross, two fingers, middle and index, in front horizontally, the same two fingers on his other hand vertical.) came a flame. Ekyt could manipulate the flame with his chakra. The flame washed across the grass to Chakaro and Fushouchi, forcing both to do a handspring backward. The flame licked Chakaro's shoulder, burning a tattoo-looking mark onto his shoulder. When he tried to touch it, to see how bad the damage was, his Jodan blade swung wildly, cleaving Ekyt under his good eye.

Both jutsu's stopped, their owner's chakras tapped. Fushouchi moved in for the kill on Ekyt, swinging his weapons, sai, down. Ekyt's tri-sectional staff flashed up, in a blocking motion. "How is this possible? You shouldn't be able to move!" Ekyt was wondering the same thing, but decided to question it later. Pulling the ends in, Ekyt snapped his tri-sectional staff together into one long bo. He aimed low, then, in a surprise move, flipped the back end of the bow toward Fushouchi's head. Fushouchi laughed. "So, there IS something else to you...I see the cavalry is coming. That will have to be another day..." Ekyt ignored him. "Chakaro, you can't trust this guy!" Chakaro threw a single knife, one that cut Ekyt's hand. "You would have only held me back. Thanks for all you did for me. I hope to be the one to put you out of your misery." Fushouchi and Chakaro disappeared.

"Ekyt! Are you all right?!" Sakura raced over to check on him. There was a small cut under his good eye, and his hand was bleeding. "Let me see your hand." Sakura picked it up gently, seeing where the blade had sliced his palm. "Hold still." She told him. After she wrapped a bandage around it, Kakashi came over. "That was very impressive Ekyt." "I didn't save him! He went with that Fushouchi demon! I wasn't good enough..." After a few moments silence, Kakashi said "You were able to continue the fight despite your chakra being gone." "I noticed that too. Why?" Ekyt asked. "Because you have lived and trained for so long without using chakra, it would seem you can fight without it for a short period of time. That's an extremely rare trait. But enough of that. For now, let's get you back to your team, and find you all a place to live." Ekyt nodded numbly, looking back where his student had been standing.

"So this is who you've been seeing Linda!" Kayla exclaimed. "I told Ekyt. He took it pretty well." Linda said thoughtfully. Sasuke seemed indifferent, while Naruto was obviously trying not to say anything. Lee was meditating in a corner. Kakashi walked in, followed by Sakura and Ekyt. "How did it go?!" Linda asked anxiously. Ekyt made a sound as though to say something, then shook his head, looked at his hand, and went to stand by himself. Linda looked to Sakura and Kakashi. They told the entire crew the story.

Holding him back? Is it true? It can't be! I never forced him to stay with me! That Fushouchi guy...he offered Chakaro something he couldn't refuse...regardless...Chakaro, you're right behind Gaara now...you didn't cost me an eye, but I hold traitors in the same class as fungi. But now...I guess, for the first time, I'm completely alone. Linda has Lee now, Kayla and I were never close...It's what I've trained for...But am I ready? Ekyt bandaged his left hand to match his right, using black tape. He felt it was significant somehow.

"Since tonight was nightmare fodder for all of you, you do not have class with me until later tomorrow." Kakashi informed them. "If you need anything, find me or my group." Ekyt nodded. Linda said "Thank you" and Kayla bowed. "Alright. Good night then." He, Naruto, and Sasuke left. Sakura lingered back for a moment to give Ekyt a small smile, then left herself. "Hey." Linda put a hand on Ekyt's shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay." Ekyt looked at her, as if she was foreign. "I'm fine. I'm going to get some air."

"Listen, all of you. You have a mission, starting now." Kakashi said. "Watch this new group. Eventually, they'll be put in their respective groups ("Cells" is the term used from now on), but they are all in danger." "All right, a mission, finally! I've been bored! I mean, I can only eat so much in one sitting!" Naruto exclaimed.

Ekyt found his way to Asuma's home. "Come in!" he called at the sound of a knock. "Ekyt, what brings you here?" Ekyt saw that Asuma was in the middle of a game of Go with Shikamaru. "Sorry to disturb you Asuma. I wanted to ask to borrow a few scrolls." Asuma raised his eyebrows, but swept a few scrolls of a shelf. "Sure, these are basic jutsus, the best place to start. Is...is everything okay?" "Well, I'm not sure, I've never lost a student before." Ekyt admitted. Asuma's eyes widened. "Shikamaru, tea?" he asked. Shikamaru nodded. "And for you?" "I'd prefer green, but whatever you're already making." Ekyt said, trying to sound polite. "Have a seat, I'll be right back."

Asuma set the tea down. "Now, tell me what happened." Ekyt told him, somehow managing to keep his face hidden while drinking his tea. "...Then he attacked me. I used a jutsu I learned from Kakashi. At the end, I found out I can fight for a while after exhausting my chakra." Asuma shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear about Chakaro. He seems like a good kid. It wouldn't surprise me if he came back sooner rather than later. He seems desperate for answers now, maybe even power..."

"Goodnight Ekyt." Linda said. "Good night sensei." Kayla perkily added. "night." Ekyt said tersely, leaning over a scroll in the candle light, slowly copying the hand seal that belonged with one. The two girls exchanged glances, but shrugged and went to their new rooms. Ekyt was still sitting in the corner of his, huddled facing a corner. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura were still there, not speaking while he worked on a simple transformation jutsu. With a sigh, he rubbed his eye. "You guys go ahead." Sakura told Naruto and Sasuke. "I've got to check his hand."

"You okay?" she asked. "I will be." He answered, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He seemed to choke for a second, then turned and stood up. "Thanks for sticking with me Sakura. And for all the help you've given me, not to mention the support. I've never had a day like this. It's worse then when I lost the use of my eye. I've never lost a student..." Sakura didn't quite know what to say. "Well, I...I mean...You'll work things out. You're tough." He nodded, feeling the cut under his good eye. "Do you need anything?" Sakura asked. Ekyt shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm just going to get some rest. I've got an early day tomorrow." Sakura raised an eyebrow. "I'm working taijutsu with Lee in the morning, and I have a couple questions for Asuma." Linda smiled. "It's true what they say about you. You almost remind me of Sasuke in some ways...always by yourself, always training...good at your training." "Thanks. I wish I was that good. Anyway, have a good night." "You too..." Sakura answered.

Once Ekyt reached his room, he tucked the scrolls into a large pocket on his leg. Changing into his bed clothes, Ekyt spread his weapons around the room, concealing them. He kept his pouch of kunai on his leg. **Alone...Apparently, I still have people that care for me. But my team...I can't stay with them forever. What is I'm holding them back? I guess it's a decision they'll have to make. I tried to fix one life. I'm not trying a again until I fix my own...**

5 - Za suriru ichi nao satsu

"So the Sharingan is unique to the Uchiha bloodline. Would that make it...What's that term? Gennko Oraki?" Ekyt read. Sakura giggled at the name. "You're close. "Kekkei genkai". And you're right, the exception being Kakashi-sensei." "Which indicates that Sharingan can be transplanted." Ekyt finished. "Right! Great job! I can't believe how fast you're getting this!" Ekyt's only visible feature, his eye, seemed to smile in pleasure at the compliment. "Well, if something's worth doing, it's worth doing right. For example, I could have had Naruto tutor me..." Sakura laughed. "Yeah right! The only thing you'd learn is every kind of ramen known to man, and how to annoy me!" Ekyt laughed, but looked back down at a scroll. "So, there's Taijutsu, genjutsu, ninjutsu, healing jutsu, sealing jutsu...My old martial arts would be Taijutsu, and my Dragon ember would be ninjutsu. But what puzzles me is how I learned it. Kakashi-sensei said that jutsu's are unique to each person, and he had one in mind, but that it would be come mine...I don't understand how that works." Sakura couldn't help but smile. "It's kind of a mystery, like it's something you're born with, but it'll only awaken when your life is in danger." "I've been in danger plenty of times...Ah, forget it, I'm just giving myself a headache. Right now, whatever I don't need for that test tomorrow is surplus. I hear the proctor is difficult. Fair, but difficult." "Oh? Who do you have?" "Anko Mitarashi." Sakura winced. "She'll be tough on cheaters. But you've got all this down, you'll do fine!" She said, smiling.

Naruto suddenly barged in, finger arcing towards Ekyt. "I know what you're up to! I KNEW you couldn't be trusted!" Ekyt looked back at Naruto. "What, exactly, are you talking about?" "THIS!" Naruto held up a now-familiar orange book. Ekyt blushed. "You're trying to seduce Sakura! Well, you should know that she's got her sights set on Sasuke, and" "SHUT UP YOU IDIOT!" Sakura snatched the book away. "I TRICKED HIM INTO BUYING THIS! DON'T YOU EVER THINK BEFORE YOU BLURT OUT THE FIRST THING ON YOUR MIND!?" Naruto chanced a glance at Ekyt, who, from what Naruto could tell without seeing his mouth, was laughing. "This is the first time I've laughed since before my birthday!" Ekyt blurted out, then had an unmistakable "oh crap" look on his face. "When was your birthday?" Sakura asked. "I don't wanna say." Ekyt said. "Naruto..." Naruto darted forward. "August 25th." Ekyt muttered. "That was only four days ago! Why didn't you say anything!?" Sakura exclaimed. "I didn't want anyone to make a big deal, it's nothing. Besides, I had just lost...my...eye." Naruto grinned suddenly, arm behind his head, obviously embarrassed. "Uh, happy birthday. I'm, uh, sorry about accusing you of being a perv and all...uh...I know! My centerfold jutsu would cheer you up!" "WHO'S THE PERV?! BACK OFF, PIG!" Sakura yelled.

"Welcome. I am Anko Mitarashi, this exam's proctor. You, in the back. Don't make me kick you out before the test starts." An uneasiness was sensed through the entire exam hall. "The first portion will be written, the second a physical test of your abilities. No questions? Good. Wait...I need to see the three new students up here." Ekyt, Linda, and Kayla got up. Linda and Kayla looked nervous. Ekyt was nervous, but was determined not to show it.

"Your names?" Anko almost barked. "Linda Mawashi." "Kayla Donalds." "Ekyt." "Ekyt? Any surname?" "No sensei." "Hmph. Alright. Since you three are new, you will not have to take part in the physical part of the examination, therefore you will be excused from class tomorrow." The girls looked relieved but Ekyt put up his hand. "If I may, I would like to take the test, please." Anko looked at him,

grinning slightly. "Brave one, are we? I'll give you credit for having guts. You're likely to get killed, I'm not gonna lie." "Only one way to find out." Ekyt said, guessing (correctly) that Anko might be impressed. "Alright. I'll have your name submitted. For now, return to your seats." As soon as she left, Kayla and Linda grabbed him at the same time. "Have you lost your mind? You heard her, you could die!" "I could die without the training too. Besides, don't worry about me. You know I'm a little harder to kill than I look."

"Put your pencils down." Anko barked. "Good. You are excused. I will have your tests graded and returned to you and the physical portion of the test." Anko watched all the students file out. She spotted the new guy walking out, the two girls tailing him obviously berating him for wanting to take part in the exam. "Ekyt huh? Well, well, he'll be one to watch someday. If he survives that test. Let's just see what his paper looks like... Ekyt!" He came back up to the front of the hall. "Stay put for a minute, your entourage can stay too. Let me ask this: What's with your eye?" She had heard the stories, but rumors spread like wildfire, and often times they were just as destructive. "We were attacked on the trip here. That...demon kid...Gaara of the Desert, he used an attack. I didn't know how to use chakra and jutsus at the time, so I had to do something else." That was explanation enough for Anko. She had been absently checking his paper. "Huh?" the sound of surprise escaped her lips unconsciously. Then she smiled, eyes half-lidded, giving her an air of "impressed-but-not-willing-to-admit-it." Though she did just that. "Well, it looks like you've got yourself a ten out of ten."

"Ekyt, want to come with us? We're going to explore town." Kayla called. She sighed, seeing Ekyt crouch over more scrolls. "You go ahead. I'm gonna study for class." Kayla slapped her forehead in exasperation. "Ekyt, you haven't done anything that isn't training since you got here. Don't you ever relax?" Linda protested. Ekyt shrugged. "I AM relaxing." He answered. "Kayla, you go ahead, I'll catch up." Kayla sensed trouble brewing, so she left with a curt nod. "Ekyt...look, there are no hard feelings, right?" she asked, a note of desperation in her voice. "Everything's fine. I don't like being the weak link, that's all. Lee's already talked with me. Everything's cool." "Are you sure? You just haven't been yourself..." Ekyt straightened his headband. "Between Chakaro and my eye, I don't FEEL like myself. Give me time, I'll come around." Ekyt didn't mean the last part, but thought it might get him some peace. **I'm not coming around, there's nothing wrong. This is who I am, and the sooner I learn to live with that fact, the better.**

Ekyt stepped outside for the thirty seconds he allowed himself for each hour of studying. He was met by Sasuke. "Kakashi-Sensei wants to see you, he says it's urgent. He wants you to bring that scroll of yours, and that orange book." Ekyt felt his cheeks go slightly red at the mention of "that orange book." That had to mean "Makeout Paradise." "I haven't read the orange book yet." Ekyt said quickly. Sasuke grinned slightly. "I'm sure you haven't. Either way, follow me."

Kakashi didn't seem to notice Ekyt and Sasuke come in. "Kakashi-Sensei?" Sakura gave him a gentle shake. Still no reaction. "HEY! KAKASHI-SENSEI! WAKE-UP!" Naruto yelled. Kakashi looked up. "Oh, you're here. Good." He put the put away carefully. Sakura suppressed a giggle, thinking of before. "I called you hear for a great and terrible reason..." Kakashi began. "How did the test go?!" he said brightly. Naruto groaned. (I thought we might have a mission, silly me! We're glorified maintenance men!) Ekyt had forgotten about it. "Oh, sorry, here." He handed the paper to Kakashi, but Sakura snatched it up. "Wow! I knew you could do it!" Sakura said, handing the paper to Kakashi. "I had a good tutor. Thank you Sakura." He returned, thankfully. Sakura smiled, cheeks reddening in embarrassment. "This is very good. Now, my next question..."

"I'm glad you could meet us on such short notice Lee." Linda said, looking around, as if worried someone might overhear. "It is my pleasure Linda. How can I be of assistance?" Kayla groaned mockingly. "What a charmer you found Linda." Linda ignored the remark. "Do you see anything...different...about Ekyt?" She asked, cutting to the chase. "His skills have improved incredibly quick. But to answer the question you are getting at, he is fine with me, there is no grudge." Linda breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry Lee. I'm not interested in him, but he's still my friend, I worry for him. I'm sorry for questioning you like this." She hugged Lee, who took a moment before remembering he needed to hug back.

"My next question is this: WHY do you plan on participating in the physical exams, even with a high likelihood of injury, or death?" Sasuke perked up a little bit; this sounded all too familiar to him. "I don't see the possibility of saying no to a mission. It's also a good chance to see where my skills are in terms of the others." Kakashi leaned forward, reaching for his hatai ate, but stopped and leaned back. "I hope you don't mind if I bring the cheering section. And I'd guess that your team wants to be there." Kakashi handed him a small scroll. "The exam is tomorrow. Your opponent will be decided tomorrow. Do you have any questions?" Ekyt shook his head. "Good luck then."

"Sound familiar Kakashi?" Kakashi was clearly grinning behind his mask. "I'm an avenger." Sasuke said, but returned the grin, understanding the reference. Naruto had his hands on his head, shaking it in disbelief. "TWO of you? TWO Sasuke's? Nooo! Oh man, we're doomed! Sakura is in her glory, but we're doomed!" "Shut up Naruto." Sakura said, amused with him. And, she realized, the comparison. **Two Sasukes? Not a bad idea! Cha!**

The day of the exam, in a surprise, Sasuke was Ekyt's floor coach, of sorts. "Ekyt will face Kocihiro Gaminate in round one. Will the two combatants please step forward!" Ekyt did, with Sasuke next to him. On the other side of the giant cement room, a tall, but somewhat heavyset, boy stepped forward. He had a white bandage wrapped around his face, and was wearing a matching white gi. "Bow to each other." They did. The proctor, Anko, smiled sardonically. "Begin!"

Kakashi, Sakura, Linda, and Kayla found their seats. "Hey, where's Naruto?" Sakura asked. "He went to get something to eat." Kayla said. She was gazing intently at the floor. "I can't believe he's going through with this!" Linda muttered. Lee showed up, standing behind her. "He is talented. Even so, this may be too strong a test for him." Lee said, doing nothing to ease their worries. Kakashi seemed to be the only one unconcerned. "He's a capable fighter. Asuma and Guy are on the floor, watching, and Anko's proctoring. I doubt there's a safer place in the world than here." Linda was reassured somewhat, but then Anko's words floated through her head. **You're likely to get killed...**

As soon as the match began, Kocihiro drew a sword. Ekyt was forced to leap backward to avoid his first strike. "Ekyt! He's got a weapon, think of his weak point!" Sasuke called, not wanting to be too obvious. **Obviously not Taijutsu...genjutsu would be useless...leaving fighting fire with fire...after a couple tricks of my own...** The crowd was cheering for Ekyt, much to his surprise. He leapt back, going through a hand seal in his head. The sword swung down, cleaving him in the head. The crowd gasped and stood up. Sasuke leaned forward, intently for him. He grinned. "So that's his plan..."

Kocihiro pulled at his sword, but found it stuck in the corpse...corpse? "That's a log! Find him Kocihiro!" the bigger man's coach yelled. Kocihiro left the sword where it was, since it was in too far to pull out

without more time and effort than he could spare. "Where are ya, ya little punk?!" he yelled.

Ekyt made hand seals, hanging by his legs from the rafters. "Deominc Illsuion: False Surroundings Technique." He whispered.

"I'm right here!" Ekyt said. "Or am I here?" "Or Here?" "Maybe here?" Kocihiro was surrounded by Ekyts. "I'll just bash all of you, one of ya has to be real!" Ekyt dropped from the rafters. The illusions suddenly punched as one. Kocihiro ducked.

"What is he doing?" Linda asked. "Genjutsu, an illusions. Ekyt must have used the "false surroundings" technique. Good choice, since he's unarmed. The illusions look and feel very real to the receiver, but are unseen by anyone else." Kakashi's explanation gave Kayla and Linda reason to believe. Lee made a small sound of admiration.

Ekyt's foot suddenly slashed up, hitting four rapid-fire kicks. He hooked his opponent around the waist and neck. "Konoha Backward Snap Dragon!" Ekyt leapt into the air, flipping backwards, hodling his opponent below him. From an incredible height, they both crashed into the ground. Ekyt got up and leapt backward, keeping his guard up. Anko looked at Kocihiro. She signaled the end of the match. "Winner: Ekyt." There was a stunned silence, then cheers. Everyone loves the underdog. Ekyt didn't let Sasuke pull him away yet. He went over to his opponent, who was clearly in pain. "You alright?" Ekyt asked, and offered his hand. Kocihiro knocked it away. Ekyt shrugged and walked back to Sasuke and...Naruto? "Whoa, way to go! Man, you ripped that big idiot to shreds!" Sasuke even gave a rare grin. "Good choice. You must be more powerful than you seem...We'll have to have a match someday."

Linda, Lee, Kakashi, Guy, Asuma, Kayla, and Sakura were waiting for an exhausted Ekyt when he walked out. "That was very good. Where did you learn that jutsu?" Ekyt shrugged. "From studying." Ekyt replaced his toothpick, looking worn out for the first time. "I must've burned through my chakra and stamina. Probably nerves." Ekyt muttered. "Hold up!" Anko strode toward Ekyt, a small scroll in her hands. "Congratulations on winning your match. Very innovative. You'll have two more matches tomorrow, one against an academy student, and one against a more experienced student. Unless you wish to back out now." Somehow, Anko knew Ekyt's answer. "I'll be there." "Ekyt, I need to speak with you." Kakashi nodded him over.

He and Sakura were standing near a wall. Kakashi looked at her, as though he could read her very soul. "Ordinarily, I would advise against this, but I think you can handle it." "What's that Kakashi-Sensei?" "I want you, Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto to talk strategy. Right now, you're light years ahead of your team. And they are proud of you." Sakura excused herself suddenly. Kakashi watcher her go. "You know, I think Sakura's taking a liking to you." Ekyt shrugged. "Sakura's easy to get along with." Kakashi grinned, and decided to continue the joke Sakura had started earlier: "If you study this as hard as you study those scrolls, I think you'll be more successful." Kakashi handed him the orange book again. Make-Out Paradise. "Kakashi-sensei?" "Yes?" Kakashi had his eye closed, grinning, proud of himself. "Get your mind out of the gutter." He said.

"Well, that was an interesting mix of techniques." Asuma lit a cigarette up, exhaling a big puff of smoke. "That Taijutsu he's been working with Lee won the match." Guy added. "He's learning a lot about his chakra." Asuma said. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried." Asuma continued. "I am too." Kakashi announced. Guy hadn't spent as much time with Ekyt, so he didn't immediately understand. "What are

you talking about, what's there to worry about?" Kakashi answered his question: "Ekyt's team isn't as close as they were when they first arrived. Linda and Ekyt were close once. Ekyt genuinely doesn't seem to mind her dating someone else. But I think he's starting to question himself." Asuma leaned forward, lowering his voice. "He's not aware of" Kakashi shook his head. "No. He's so self-conscious about his emotions, he hasn't realized that emotion yet."

"Hey, Sakura!" Linda ran to catch up with Sakura. "Oh, Linda, hi!" "You've got feelings for Ekyt, don't you?" Linda got right to the point. "I hardly know him!" "So do I. He's got that charm, doesn't he? That air of mystery...and he reminds you of Sasuke." Linda helpfully pointed out. "He's a friend, Linda. Besides, I could ask you about Lee." "Go ahead, I've got nothing to hide. Look, I just don't want to see him hurt again...I feel bad enough I burned him, I'm worried about anyone else playing with his emotions." "WHO'S playing? I haven't done anything, except help him study!" Sakura protested. Both girls were laughing after that. "If you do go after him...Just make sure that YOU are sure." Linda said, a request as much as a statement.

NEXT ISSUE: EKYT HAS TWO MORE FIGHTS! IS HE LUCKY ENOUGH, AND SKILLED ENOUGH, TO WIN BOTH? AND THE TEAM'S REACTION TO EKYT!

6 - Sweet Victory: Who's Coming Out on Top?

"Kakashi-Sensei, do you think Ekyt has a chance?" Sakura asked anxiously. Kakashi chuckled in amusement. "Sakura, the master of statistics! You know he has a chance. The fact that you're asking for my reassurance tells me that you're not sure about something...care to tell me what it is?" Sakura almost said something, then shook her head. "No, thanks, Kakashi-Sensei." Kakashi reached behind him and pulled out that orange book. "You might read this Sakura, it might" "FOCUS SENSEI!" she shouted, storming out. "Something I said?" Kakashi muttered, going back to his book.

"That was an interesting choice." Sasuke said to Ekyt. "Thanks...I think. Interesting in a good way or a bad way?" Ekyt returned. "Geez Sasuke, you're so stupid! Can't you just say "good job?" He's not me, ya know! Ya don't have to treat him like dirt too!" "Maybe you're right, loser." Sasuke turned to Ekyt again. "Good job." Naruto gritted his teeth in anger. Lee and Linda marched up next. "I want to offer my congratulations on your victory." Lee said, bowing. Ekyt bowed back. "Well, you helped Lee. Thank you." Linda seemed subdued. "Congratulations. I guess we were wrong, you can handle it. But now..." she trailed off, then piped up again, her familiar grin back in place "Now you gotta win it all!" "I'll do my best." Ekyt answered.

Shikamaru and Asuma, Lee and Might Guy, Kakashi and Sakura. All of them were sitting, huddled quietly, students together, teachers together. "If he's going to get through this, he needs guidance." Kakashi said in a low voice. "Agreed. He's eaten through darn near every scroll he can find, and he keeps adding to that one he's been writing. Guy, did you catch the title? I thought it might interest you." Asuma asked, nodding toward Guy. "No, I didn't." "It's Sho-bu." "Sho-bu? As in "To win, but to lose?" Guy asked. "Why would that pertain to me?" "Apparently," Kakashi began "You aren't familiar with his old school's slogan. It's a rough western translation meaning "To win, but to lose if we don't train hard enough." Guy understood the meaning this time around.

"What's he training for? He never explained the eye to me." Shikamaru asked Sakura and Lee. Sakura sighed. "It's awful. You know Linda?" Shikamaru nodded. Obviously Lee knew. "Well, I'm not sure it's my place to tell. But Linda and he were close once. On the trip here, they met Gaara..." Shikamaru's left eye twitched slightly. "He didn't know about chakra, so he did the only thing he could: He dove in front of her, to save her." "And he lost his eye that way?" Shikamaru asked. "Indeed. But I am afraid things got worse. Linda told me that one of his group, one of his students from their old school, turned on him. He went with Kabuto and someone named "Fushouchi"..." "What a drag." Sakura nodded her agreement, then continued. "Since that happened, he's given up everything for training. No close friends, distanced from his own group. He doesn't think they understand, they didn't take all this as personally as he did." "He would be correct." Lee added. "They have all gone their separate ways, and the team is becoming a hazard. They must either pull together, or disband."

The next came all too soon, it seemed. Not that Ekyt wasn't ready. But he knew today would be a tougher fight. This time, he brought his staff and kunai with him. He wasn't going to go in unarmed again. If it came to it, he could put his weapons aside and fight empty-handed, if that's what his opponent was doing. He looked in a small, cracked mirror in his new "apartment". He thought he had an idea for a quick trick at the beginning of the match.

"Alright, this is it! Whatever you do, go out there and win!" Naruto's "Peptalk" actually eased Ekyt's nerves, forcing him to laugh. "No Sasuke today?" Naruto shrugged. "Kakashi needed him for some mission. So, I'm here." "I appreciate that Naruto. Do you know anything about who I'm fighting?" Ekyt asked, stretching his neck. "Just his name: Naofumii Kawadashi. Hey, maybe you should ask Sakura, the next time you two...you know...heh heh heh." Ekyt rolled his good eye. "Funny. I'm telling you, she's just helping me study." "Studying what? Anatomy?" Naruto laughed. Ekyt had to give him credit for originality. He had also realized they weren't so different. He had heard about Naruto's past. It wasn't that far from his own, he decided.

"Participants, please kneel." Anko ordered. When everyone was comfortable (Or as comfortable as you can get in seiza, lol, right A1?), she began. "So far, we've narrowed down the participants to the following: Kawadashi, Naofumii. Miokawa, Akira. Kiku, Fajita. And Ekyt." Excited whispers came among the students. "I'll reveal more to you after the winners of the next two battles have been announced. Will Ekyt and Naofumii Kawadashi step forward now." Ekyt stood up and walked to the front. Naofumii, he saw, was about his size, but more muscular. Naofumii was wearing non-descript black sweat pants, with charcoal gray shoes, a charcoal gray shirt, and even charcoal gray marks under his eyes, which seemed to be gray themselves. "Do either of you want to back down?" Anko's tone was almost challenging. Neither one made a move. "Alright. Go to your respective sides. At my signal, begin."

"Kakashi, will you put that book away?" Guy hissed. "Oh, sorry, have they started?" Kakashi pocketed his book. "This should be good. Our mystery kid against one of the most promising academy students. I hope Ekyt knows what he's in for." Asuma took a long drag off his cigarette, exhaling, looking relaxed. The only one showing any emotion was Guy. And he was, as per usual, confident. The other students, however, were worried.

"I don't know what he's trying to prove Lee! He's gonna get killed!" Linda protested. "Ekyt is a warrior, I am certain he will be fine. He has trained hard, as I can bare witness too." "Yeah, yer worrying over nothing girlie." Kayla added, wishing she was sure herself. Ino and Shikamaru were watching, interested in the match. Well, as interested as they ever got. Sakura was chewing her nails to shreds. **Come on, you can do this!**

"You can do this! Believe it!" Naruto yelled. "Ready...begin!" Anko's voice said. Ekyt didn't move. Naofumii was running full tilt, no weapons visible, hand seals in the opening stages. Ekyt reached for his headband. He put two fingers to it. "Sharingan!" he shouted. The whole stadium went quiet. Naofumii stopped running, just shy of Ekyt.

"Sharingan?" "Sharigan? He's an Uchiha?" Kakashi leaned forward, everyone waiting for something to happen.

The pause was just what Ekyt needed. His right hand connected under Naofumii's jaw, his teeth clicking together. He sailed backwards, landing hard on his back, then skidding a few feet. "Good trick. Too bad it's assured your death!" Naofumii called. Kunai drawn, he and Ekyt clashed, both blocking with one hand. A power struggle began, neither giving an inch. The kunai were both withdrawn, the *schiiiiinnnnggg* sound of metal meeting metal echoing in the still-silent building. Sparks flew toward each combatant. It seemed the two were evenly matched in terms of speed. Both stabbed at the leg, then at the chest, meeting each other's strikes.

Sakura joined Naruto on the sidelines. "Alright! What a move! Great trick!" Naruto shouted. The crowd understood what happened. Some were giving Ekyt dirty looks, but most were looking with admiration. "It was a trick! Wow!" Sakura couldn't believe it. It was lucky that Ekyt's opponent believed him. **I wish Sasuke could have seen this...**

Ekyt kicked low, feinted high, then truly kicked high. A low kick forced him to retract to block with his shin. He stepped down hard, trying to trap Naofumii's foot. Naofumii slid sideways, dodging backward at Ekyt's side-kick attempt. He kicked hard, aiming for the underside of the leg, missing narrowly, mostly due to Ekyt's left fist aiming for his stomach. Naofumii blocked down with his right forearm, then scored his first hit of the match by hitting Ekyt in the head with a punch. It wasn't an overly strong one, though, just enough to stun his opponent. But that was enough for Naofumii to get an opening. "Body Replacement Technique!" he called, disappearing with a puff of smoke, his place taken by a log. He landed behind Ekyt, landing a kick to the back of the head that made the populated arena wince in harmony. Ekyt softened the blow slightly.

"Clone technique!" Naofumii shouted. Four clones of himself came flying at Ekyt. Ekyt dodged backward, skidding momentarily. **That'll likely have sapped his chakra, but good...After that, I should have the advantage...soo...check and mate!** he thought. He wasn't really that confident, but had to give it a shot. The clones attacked rapid fire. Ekyt swept kicked, then fling his arm up, hitting a clone under the chin. Another one tried to tackle him, but he spun around and leaned to the side. That gave him momentum to run at the wall, and up it for a short time. But he put that time to good use. "Clone technique!" he leapt off the wall backward, a single clone following him. Before he could leap off the wall entirely, two clone's kunai struck his arm. He blocked out the pain, only to be hit in the leg. They weren't deep cuts, but they still hurt.

"Only one? What's he thinking?!" Ino asked. "He's wearing Naofumii down. Ekyt can fight without chakra, Naofumii can't...good plan, provided he isn't killed first." Shikamaru pointed out, not exactly helping the situation. "That's a human life! Don't you care?" Linda shouted. Shikamaru looked her way. "It's a drag."

Ekyt and his clone ran side by side. Ekyt had to pick out the real Naofumii, or wear him down so completely that he would give up. He knew which was more likely. With Naofumii already panting with the effort of keeping up his clones, Ekyt made a move that would use the last of his chakra. "Dragon Ember Jutsu: Clone instigation!" he called. "What?!"

"Clone instigation...I've never heard of that!" Asuma admitted. "Well, your training helped him with this one Asuma." Kakashi said, pointing to the floor.

Ekyt's clone used the Dragon Ember jutsu, while Ekyt stood next to him, apparently manipulating the clone with his chakra. One by one, all of Naofumii's clones were hit. Leaving one. The real one. "Ha! Too easy!" Naofumii taunted, stepping backward. The Dragon Ember could only reach so far, and Naofumii had done his homework on the mystery kid.

Out of the flame, a nearly-unscathed Ekyt came rushing out. While running, he leapt, getting speed. With some help from his chakra, he spun his foot around. His foot was the only part visible from inside the flame, but it struck home, on the side of the face, his heel breaking a couple small bones. Naofumii fell to

the ground in pain, holding his face. He tried to stand again, but his sensei rushed out onto the floor. "Stop the fight! Stop the fight!" He threw a white towel, which fluttered to Anko's feet. "Winner: Ekyt." She said.

Ekyt couldn't believe that had worked. Suddenly, the other sensei darted forward and attacked him, knocking him flying with multiple attacks. He knocked Ekyt down, then picked him up by the shirt lapels all in a matter of two seconds. "You like this punk? Ruining Naofumii? Huh? How about I break a few of your bones." Ekyt's chakra was gone, but he still had his regular stamina. Making eye contact, he noticed that this sensei seemed afraid. He was holding Ekyt out farther from his body. That left Ekyt the perfect amount of room. WHAM! OOOHHH! The two sounds were Ekyt's right leg hitting the sensei's groin, the OHHH! Was the crowd's reaction. Kakashi, Asuma, and Guy all were suddenly next to Ekyt. Asuma had grabbed the sensei off the floor. "Get up. You're a disgrace, attacking a student. He didn't cheat, he won fair and square. And if you're in pain right now, you deserve it for attacking him." Anko was over there in an instant. "Let go Asuma." Asuma dropped the man roughly. Anko looked down at him. "You're a disgrace to our village, you know that. I hate cowards. You know the rules of this fight, and the risks. Do NOT make the mistake of attempting this again. Or I will have to deal with you...personally." She turned away from the crying sensei. "WINNER: EKYT!"

Everyone flocked around Ekyt, not believing it. "Man, that jutsu was awesome! Clone instigation? Where'd you get that?!" Naruto exclaimed. "I just kind of...blurted it out." Ekyt asked, somewhat questioning. "I meant it as a bluff, but it actually worked." "Good idea, using that "Sharingan." Kakashi said, apparently pleased. "You gave me the idea, Kakashi-sensei. Since we have the same taste in headband style (Group laughs, with a few groans) I thought Naofumii might bite." "Move over, move OVER! One side!" Sakura pushed her way to the front. "Let's let Sakura tend to her patient." Kakashi said, as much an order as a suggestion.

"How are you feeling?" Sakura asked, silently asking to see Ekyt's wounds. His left arm and right leg taken a pounding. "I'm fine. A little bit of pain." Ekyt said, trying to lighten the mood. Sakura didn't buy it. "You're going to have to trust me on this, okay?" At Ekyt's nod, she made a series of hand seals. "Chakra Scalpel!" Using this technique, Sakura concentrated her chakra on Ekyt's wounds, helping his body speed up repairs on itself. "All done!" she said. "Thanks Sakura." She offered her hand to help him up. Without thinking, he took it. They both let go, blushing. "Oh, it's nothing!" Sakura added with a nervous laugh. "Attention!" Anko was calling everyone's attention to her.

"As a surprise, the next match, Ekyt vs. Akira Miokawa, is going to have a time limit of twenty minutes. If both survive, in tact, the match will be declared a time-limit draw, and there will be no winner. Weapons other than Kunai/throwing are illegal, and will be confiscated. Should they decide to, the respective sensei, or sensei's, and teammates of each combatant may accompany them to the floor. Any questions? No? Good. The match starts in one hour. Good luck to both of you."

7 - Saying Goodbye

Ekyt tossed a towel over his shoulder. "You can do this! Believe it! That big punk is just a noodle in the giant ramen bowl of life! So eat him up!" "...Right." Ekyt said, worried. This wasn't going to be an ordinary fight. He couldn't rely on wearing his opponent down like before, unless he did it quick. A tie, even a loss, for someone with his rank would be perfectly acceptable.

But not to him. I've come really far in a short period of time...but it's not enough. I've met so many Gaara's and Chakaro's...to fight just for payback would be wrong. Not a bad motivator though. I've got a lot of people to prove wrong...And some people to prove myself too...But what about my team? It's already becoming obvious...We're drifting apart...am I ready for that? Linda is dating Lee, and Kayla's chasing after Shikamaru. It used to be some much easier, back when I had to live with Linda rejecting me...Now, I've got friends, but I'm still the lone wolf somehow...how does that work?! I almost wish everything was easy again...then again, when have I ever done things the easy way? That's who I am...stupid!

It was time to go. "Last request kid?" Asuma's friendly voice joked. He was holding a cigarette and a blindfold, referencing an execution. Ekyt grinned at the humor, behind his mask anyway. He flicked his toothpick away. "Just remember, when your tricks fail, taijutsu will always be there." Guy offered. "I want to wish you the best of luck." Lee said. Linda nodded, putting a supportive hand on his shoulder, but saying nothing. "Go get 'em teach!" Kayla told him, clapping him on the back. "This is your fight, you can do it! Even if you can't, oh well. Just keep your options open. And seriously, reconsider the friendship with billboard brow." Ino said, striking a pose. Sakura elbowed Ino out of the way. "Don't listen to her. You're gonna win." She offered him a smile. "Good luck." Sasuke muttered. Kakashi was the last one in line. "I've got some great news for you...after the test. For now, just this: Don't be afraid to fight fire with water."

Naruto followed Ekyt out onto the floor. "You know Naruto...I think we're both going to tear our pasts to shreds someday." Naruto looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled broadly in agreement. Holding out his fist, he and Ekyt hit fists. "Believe it!"

Akira was a short, slender ninja. His black jumpsuit lent well to his style. With a short crop of brillo-pad black hair on his head, cut into a severe crew cut, and long legs, he wasn't as easy to beat as he looked. Ekyt didn't judge looks. How could he? He looked one giant bruise at this point.

"Twenty minute time limit. Begin- NOW!" Ekyt had thought about his strategy. He changed it after hearing Kakashi's words. "Don't be afraid to fight fire with water." Ekyt leapt backward as soon as the fight began, throwing a series of knives. As he expected, Akira retaliated. But he used a jutsu.

"Flower Technique: The District End!" A beam of...flower petals? Ekyt knew there had to be more to the jutsu than this. Sure enough, darkness started to set in. Ekyt couldn't see, but he could hear. And he heard Akira running. From several directions? **Clones...what do you do about them? You can't use a huge amount of chakra yet...** "Substitution Jutsu!" he whispered. A bag full of rocks took Ekyt's place. He himself jumped up, clinging to the rafters. As he thought, he could see the action from up here.

Four clones, plus the real deal, ran into the center of the fading darkness, hammering away on the bag of rocks. They quickly realized that it wasn't Ekyt they were hitting. Kunai suddenly flew near Ekyt, who was forced to leap down. Akira had gotten rid of his clones, hoping to save chakra. **Good idea at this point...thankfully, jumping around like this uses a negligible amount of chakra...** Ekyt thought, while free-falling.

Ekyt hit the floor. "Pretty good move!" Akira called. "Likewise!" Ekyt returned the greeting. "Disguise Jutsu." Ekyt whispered, making the hand seals under his shirt. He disappeared, putting himself up against the wall, unmoving. "Where'd you go?" Akira couldn't find Ekyt. "Clone jutsu." Ekyt said quietly. A clone of him sailed down from the rafters. Akira heard the sound of rushing air, but too late. "Ekyt's" foot slashed down, hitting the narrow ninja in the chest, driving him backward. Ekyt shed his Disguise jutsu as his clone delivered a series of punishing kicks, before grappling with Akira and lifting him into the air. Ekyt got a running start and leapt, grabbing the slender ninja around the waist and neck, just as his clone had done. "Konoha Backward Snap Dragon!" They called as one. Lifting Akira high, they both drove him into the ground.

"That had to have done it! Taijutsu never fails!" Guy yelled, striking his trademark "thumbs-up" pose. "Well done Ekyt!" Lee called. "That's the ticket kid!" Linda shouted. Ekyt dragged himself to his feet, exhausted, the bandages on his hands torn and unraveling, his cut from Chakaro's defection bleeding. He kept his eyes on his opponent. "Neat trick. But I can use substitution too." Akira said from behind Ekyt. Ekyt saw he had just split a log with his best taijutsu technique. He swung a backhand fist at Akira. Akira ducked and landed a hard knee to the midsection. Drawing his kunai, Akira made a cut. Ekyt dodged backwards, but felt his chest start to bleed. "Nice!" Ekyt called, grinning. "FIVE MINUTES LEFT! FIVE MINUTES!" Anko's magnified voice carried to the two combatants.

"He should take the tie, and just try to last." Linda said. "That's not his style. Besides, missions don't have "ties." Sasuke reminded her. No one else said anything, they were too intent on watching the two exhausted warriors go at it.

Ekyt and Akira circled, closing in on each other. Finally, they were in grappling range. Both lunged. Ekyt pulled back and shot in for a single leg take-down. That was thwarted with a spinning kick from Akira. The kick missed Ekyt and gave him an opportunity for a sweep kick. Akira dodged just out of his range. He stomped at Ekyt, who rolled forward. Akira hadn't been expecting a forward roll. Ekyt rolled right up onto his feet and pushed, driving Akira into a wall. Akira grabbed Ekyt's head and ran up the wall slightly, then leapt backward, trying to drive Ekyt's head down. Ekyt back-flipped and used his legs to push away, flipping Akira over. They both landed on their feet and continued the assault. Akira summoned up the last reserves of his chakra. "THIRTY SECONDS!"

"MILLION FLOWER PETALS BLOSSOMING JUTSU!" he yelled. A million, razor-sharp rose petals descended, falling toward Ekyt. Using the last of his chakra as well, Ekyt used two well-placed jutsus: "Clone Jutsu" and "Dragon Ember Jutsu!" He and two clones used the Dragon Ember Jutsu, setting the petals on fire. Using his chakra, Ekyt maneuvered them toward Akira, who had never had his best technique reversed. What felt like dozens of flaming needles struck his skin, turning his skin a charcoal color.

"Go for it! You've gotta strike now!" Naruto was yelling. "TEN SECONDS!" Anko's voice called. Ekyt and Akira were both on their feet. As one, they rushed forward. Ekyt swept low, while Akira jumped high.

Ekyt extended his leg upward, hoping to land a strike to the chin. "TIME!" Everything seemed to freeze. Ekyt's leg was an inch from its target. They were both still standing. Both had cuts, and both were breathing heavily. Ekyt and Akira bowed to each other and stepped toward their teams.

"This match is a draw." Anko announced. The crowd was too impressed to care that they hated ties. For Academy Students, this had been incredible.

Ekyt kept his face neutral, but it took effort. He wasn't happy with himself. He knew it had been an excellent match, and he had no right to expect more from himself. But he knew Chakaro was training as hard as he was, probably matching him move for move in terms of training.

"That was incredible! I've never seen any pre-genin do anything like this! You and that Akira guy have gotta have another match sometime!" Choji exclaimed around the remnants of the chips in his mouth. "It was indeed a spectacular effort. If you would like to do so, perhaps we could work on your taijutsu, which is already genin level." Lee offered. "I thought you had him at the Backward Snap Dragon, great effort! Looks like your stamina held up just fine!" Guy said. "Nice use of your chakra." Sasuke muttered, offering his fist. The entire group stopped its chatter. Ekyt's opponent was walking over.

"That was an excellent match." Akira had a surprisingly deep voice. "I look forward to us meeting again." Akira offered his hand. Ekyt took it, and nodded. "Likewise. Next time, we'll get a better outcome. Although, the crowd seems to have gotten its money's worth." Akira nodded, then started to walk away. "See you in class." He said.

As soon as Akira walked away, he suddenly pulled at his face. A much older ninja was under the mask, using some sort of genjutsu. He found the person he was supposed to meet. "All according to plan Kabuto." Kabuto adjusted his glasses. "Very good, Lord Orochimaru and his new protégé will be happy to hear it. Keep observing him, as well as the Uchiha boy. I'll make a report."

"Ekyt, please come with us." Kakashi and Asuma started to walk away. The others were discussing where to eat. "I'll catch up, you go ahead." Ekyt said over his shoulder. Shikamaru, Choji, Ino, Sasuke, Naruto, Sakura, Lee, Tenten, and Guy called one more round of congratulations to him, then left the arena.

In the middle of the arena, still marred from battle, in the light of a single spotlight, Anko was waiting for Kakashi, Asuma, and Ekyt. "We've been in contact with Anko. And we've noticed a couple things. Anko?" Anko was more intimidating one on one, despite being friendly. "For starters, you've trained harder than any other student since getting here. You're making a great crop of friends. Studying with Sakura, training with Lee, studying those scrolls. All good things. It's been decided you are to start training for the genin rank. Before we can classify you as an "apprentice," you have to get good reports from your senseis. That means, on their next C or D rank mission, you'll be accompanying first Asuma's team, then Kakashi's. You will be graded by them." Ekyt cheered inwardly, but was waiting for the other shoe to drop. He prompted it. "And my team..." he asked, his voice even. The three exchanged glances. "Your team...is very behind. Well, behind you. Linda and Kayla are very talented. Kayla will make a great medic, and Linda is certainly a warrior. But, at this point, they are a hazard to you." Ekyt bit his lip. "What happens to them?" he asked. "Nothing. They keep training, same as you. Except..." "Except?" "Except you would re-assigned to a cell that would help you improve." Ekyt looked from one sensei to the other. Normally, he could read expressions, but theirs were hidden. "Is this a

test? I would never desert my team." Ekyt said firmly. For the first time since Ekyt had known her, she looked nervous. "Apparently, they don't feel the same way..." she handed Ekyt a scroll, with Lord Hokage's seal on it. Ekyt took and read it quickly. "They agreed to this? I can only think of one reason they would do that...and it's my fault." Ekyt closed the scroll. "Just inform us of your decision when you're ready." Anko said.

The clatter of chopsticks stopped momentarily when Ekyt walked in. "Linda, Kayla, could I speak with you?" Ekyt asked. His tone was even, so Linda and Kayla got up cheerily. "You agreed to this?" he hissed, holding up the scroll. "Well...yeah. Listen, we're not close anymore, and we've all kind of got separate interests. I'm dating Lee, and Kayla's after Shikamaru. We're just getting in each other's way." "It's because of my insane training, isn't it?" Ekyt asked. "Of course not!" Linda said with a laugh. "We've always known you were that way, it's never been a problem before, and it's not now!" "And it's not like we'll never see each other, you know. We can still be friends..." Ekyt snapped the scroll shut. "Is this what we all want?" he asked. Linda and Kayla nodded. "It's just too hard, there are too many memories...Chakaro took most of the good with him." Kayla said. "It's my fault. I'm sorry I've been so distant." "Oh, that doesn't matter. I've been with Lee so much..." Linda winced, realizing just how that sounded. She had just flaunted her new boyfriend in front of her old (almost) boyfriend. "Did they put you up to this?" Ekyt asked seriously. "Of course not, we would have told you!" Kayla exclaimed. Ekyt nodded. "Alright. I guess we'll be seeing each other around then." His voice had gone hollow on the last couple of words.

Ekyt apologized to the others for being late. "I can't stay, I need to talk with Anko. But I really need to thank all of you for supporting me. If I can ever return the favor, I'd be honored to do so." He replaced his toothpick and paid the bill for the whole table. Then he bowed at the door and walked outside.

The crisp night air felt good against Ekyt's burning skin. He was in pain from the battle. But he was in more pain from his team. "They weren't put up to it, it wasn't a test, and they really want to go our separate ways. I can understand Linda's motivation. Kayla worships Linda...They'll stay together. If Chakaro was around, things would have been just fine." He clenched a fist, shaking it silently. Sakura joined him a moment later. "Hey, you okay Ekyt?" she asked, concerned. "Ahh...yeah, I'll be fine." He said, hoping he sounded convincing. He didn't, apparently, because Sakura continued. "I'm sorry about your team. They told me just after you left...they told you the truth." Ekyt nodded. "I can always count on them for that." "But it's upsetting you anyway." Sakura pointed out. "I know it's my fault, somehow. I saw this coming. Linda and I were close for a short time. Kayla worshipped Chakaro. Linda could talk with them easy. I never could, I was the odd man out. And it was my own fault, for being stoic, and putting so much time into training. But I guess there's no help for that. Linda doesn't need the added pressure of feeling guilty every time she sees me, now that she's dating Lee, I'd just be in the way. And Kayla will go with Linda...at least they'll be together. Maybe I need a fresh start." Sakura was surprised by his sudden admittance. "It's nice that you're thinking of them Ekyt. But...what do YOU want?" The question seemed to take Ekyt by surprise. "I want to be elite. To protect people I care about, and to teach others to do the same. And...to not hold my friends back..." Sakura held his hand gently, not thinking about it. "That is one thing they'll never accuse you of. You always think of them first. It's okay to think of yourself once in a while." "I know. But it's not easy for me." Sakura suddenly realized she was still holding his hand. "Eh heh heh, sorry." She said in embarrassment. "My fault." He muttered. "I'd better go catch up with Kakashi-Sensei." He sprinted off into the night. Sakura watched him go, feeling confused, but she wasn't sure why.

"He'll have checked with his team by now." Anko said, eating the last of her donga. "Yes. I WISH this was a test. But his team was right, they ARE a hazard to each other. What amazes me is that Rock Lee's actually dating a decent looking girl." Asuma said with a chuckle, exhaling smoke. "Kayla's still after Shikamaru. Maybe she can turn that slacker around." Asuma continued. "I've noticed that Sakura has something of an interest in Ekyt. What kind, I couldn't say. Even Sasuke and Naruto seem to like him. Which begs the question: What do we do with Ekyt after this? He needs team, but every three-man cell is full, not to mention there are no more available senseis." They both looked to Anko. "Don't look at me, I can't do it. That damn mark could act up at any time, and there's no way three genin could stop it." She said. "I wondered how you got out of training the kids." Asuma said with a grin. "Me saying no is the only reason YOU have a team." Anko returned, good-naturedly. They heard a knock on the door. "Enter!" Anko barked.

Ekyt slid the door open. "I accept. I'm sorry for the wait, but I wanted to talk with my team first. It's...only fair." He was trying hard to keep his emotions concealed, that much they could all tell. "Very good then! You have a mission tomorrow, beginning at 7:00 pm. You'll be with Asuma's team of Ino Yamanaka, Choji Akimichi, and Shikamaru Nara. You know all of them, correct." Ekyt nodded. "Very good." "Mission specifics?" Ekyt asked. The three senseis exchanged amused glances. "You will join the four of them on a reconnaissance mission. You are to go armed. The mission is D-Ranked. Everything else will be revealed to you tomorrow." Anko said, effectively ending the conversation. Ekyt had one more question. "Is there any way I can get a hold of a tape from the matches today?"

Linda and Kayla sighed as one. "We made the right move Kayla. There was too much tension there. Besides, Ekyt keeps reminding me of the past, just by looking at him. I want to move forward." "I hear ya teach. It was going to happen someday. Heck, we'll be back together! You know he's gonna be at least a Jonin!" Linda knew she was right. But still, saying goodbye was never easy...

NEXT ISSUE: THE ACADEMY'S NEWEST THREE STUDENTS ARE GOING THEIR SEPARATE WAYS. EKYT JOINS FORCES WITH ASUMA'S TEAM, MUCH TO SAKURA'S CHAGRIN. INO, FOR HER PART, PLANS ON USING EKYT TO TORTURE SAKURA. NOT TO MENTION THE MISSION THEY'RE ON!

8 - Poll

Quick Poll for the readers!

Q1: Which fan char is your favorite?

1. Ekyt
2. Linda
3. Kayla
4. Chakaro

Q2: What do you think of Chakaro's new role?

1. One kick-@\$\$ villain!
2. That traitorous jerk!
3. Good new rival
4. Orochimaru-serving scum!

Q3: Who's your overall fav male char? (Pick 3 at most)

1. Naruto
2. Sasuke
3. Kakashi
4. Shikamaru
5. Lee
6. Choji
7. Asuma
8. Neji
9. Kabuto
10. Orochimaru
11. Kiba (And Akamaru)
12. Shino
13. Iruka
14. Ekyt
15. Chakaro
16. Other char (Please specify)

Q4: Who's your fav female char?

1. Linda
2. Kayla
3. Temari
4. Tenten

5. Hinata
6. Sakura
7. Ino
8. Other (Please specify)

Q5: Who should Ekyt be paired with?

1. Sakura
2. Ino
3. Tenten
4. Hinata
5. Linda
6. Kayla
7. ...The guy's a freak, no one!

AND THE BIG ONE. Be honest everyone, you're not going to hurt my feelings.

Q6: Should Nextguardian continue writing this series?

1. Yes!
2. No, his keyboard should be destroyed
3. No, but he should stick to Sonic
4. Maybe

Thanks Everyone! Happy Reading!

Nextguardian

8 - Genjutsu: Night's only Friend!

Ekyt returned to his shabby apartment, if you could call it that. It had white walls that Ekyt had tried to paint, eventually giving up because of the multiple cracks in the plaster. Ekyt had nails all over the wall, some holding scrolls, some holding weapons. On the window, a Money Tree was growing, apparently blissfully unaware of its shabby surroundings. One wall had a fist hole in it, after one night of frustration. The bathroom was in tact (mercifully), and the small kitchen was stocked, mostly with three-minute ramen, since Ekyt spent more time training that cooking. Since he was almost never there, Ekyt didn't even think of the place as "Home," it was more of a hotel. **A crummy one...If I ever DO find a girl, I sure as heck won't bring her here! I can barely live here myself!** That was a lie, and Ekyt knew it. The place suited him at times. If he wrecked it in a fit of rage when he couldn't learn a technique, who cared. **Once I'm elite, I'll bring my parents here. I can't endanger them. Not until I can protect them.**

He changed out of his sweat-soaked and blood-stained clothes, pulling on a fresh pair of gi pants and a t-shirt. He kept his jacket and kunai with him at all times. He put in the tape of his latest fight, and unrolled his scroll, making notes on it as he watched the fights. He was proud of himself in some respect; he had two jutsu's that were unique to him. But he still hadn't won. He studied Akira's fighting style, not seeing any particular reason to be worried, aside from the fact that the match had ended in a tie.

I should have landed that kick sooner. I didn't follow up my jutsu's quick enough, even a half-second would have given me the win. That guy's jutsus were devastating...how could anyone pre-genin pull that off? Then again, I shouldn't be able to fight at all. But still...Wait, what was that? Ekyt re-wound the tape, his eyes widening in alarm. He saw someone in the crowd, a face he knew all too well. Then another one, right next to that one. "I've gotta tell Kakashi-sensei about this..." he muttered, getting up. He stored his staff under his light jacket, and put his kunai in a pouch that was holstered tightly high on his right leg. He heard a knock at the door. "Who is it?" he asked, keeping any emotion out of his voice. "It's just us!" Naruto's voice said. Ekyt opened the door, feeling relieved. Then he jumped back. Then he laughed. "Dang, Naruto, good one!" Naruto's Sexy Jutsu had greeted Ekyt. Naruto returned in a puff of smoke, grinning at his prank. "Good one Naruto." Sasuke said. Ekyt narrowed his good eye. "Some match tonight, huh? Man, when Hinata kissed me afterward!" Ekyt exclaimed. That never happened, but it worked to test his theory. "Yeah, that was something!" Naruto said. Sasuke smiled...smiled? **Oh boy...Fight or flee? I've got warn the others, I can salvage my pride later...No way this is the REAL Naruto and Sasuke...** "Guys, can you give me a minute?" Ekyt asked. "Sure thing!"

Ekyt ducked back inside, shutting the door. He looked around his room. Grabbing the leather pouch he had used when he was delivering the letter to Kakashi, he used a quick "Projectile Weapons Jutsu." He cursed when he remembered that it needed a small blood tribute to work with a summoning scroll. Grimacing, he found a small, slightly open cut and dug in with his fingers. The blood hit the scroll, unrolling it. Ekyt stuffed the tape, a few weapons, some clothes, and some water, then shut the scroll and rolled it up. The jutsu he used would allow him to carry all this at a normal scroll weight. He tucked the scroll away. Then he breathed out, calming down, and opened the door. "Sorry, I forgot I left the

water running. You wouldn't believe the mess." Ekyt said, in mock exasperation. "Naruto" reached out a hand. Ekyt's sweeping kunai met it. Poof! The illusion disappeared. A bandaged-faced ninja laughed. "So, you saw through that, did you?" Ekyt backed up a step, kunai at the ready. "I'm afraid your old friend, Jr. Lord Chakaro, doesn't want you alive." Ekyt gulped. "Chakaro, huh? Give him a message for me." Ekyt said. "You can tell him yourself, he wants the pleasure of killing you." The ninja that was disguised as Sasuke said. The ninja transformed back to his...her original state. "Daiko...leave us for a minute..." she said forcefully. The man bowed and stepped outside.

"Listen to me! There is no time to argue! You've got to come with me!" the girl urged. "Forget it." Ekyt said, backing up. "Please...please, you're in danger. You need me...and I need you." Ekyt narrowed his good eye. He watched in alarm as the girl, roughly eighteen, he guesses, shed her jacket, revealing a very short top. She was pretty, with long brown hair. She seemed so innocent... "Please...Protect me...Chakaro's forcing me to do this...he says he'll kill me...I almost married him, it was a mistake! Please...please...it's YOU I love!" Ekyt jerked out of her reach. "Sorry. But I don't trust you. Nothing you do or say is going to change that." The girl sobbed. "I'm so...lonely...I could use a man like you to keep me company at night..." she said suggestively. Ekyt shook his head. "Sorry, find someone dumber." The girl grabbed his wrist, still sobbing. "You don't understand." "And I never will." Ekyt said, getting up. "But I can show you so much..." she whispered, laying a hand on his chest. Ekyt put a hand on hers. "Okay, sit down. Think this through..." he said. She did, apparently calming down. "Now, let go of me." Ekyt said. The girl tightened her grip. "DAIKO!" she yelled. Ekyt winced. Using his free hand, he sliced the knife down, onto her wrist, lopping the hand off. Then he leapt out the window into the night.

Along the way, Ekyt saw Naruto and Sasuke. "Hey, what's the rush!" Naruto called. Ekyt almost answered, then shook his head. "I can't believe Tenten kissed me the other night! Awesome huh?! You were there Naruto!" Naruto looked confused. "When did she kiss you?" he asked. "Loser, you made that up." Sasuke muttered. Ekyt grinned behind his mask. "Please, come with me, I've got to speak with Kakashi-sensei, and" Ekyt's voice trailed off when three shuriken forced him to do a stupid sort of half-flip to avoid them. "Come on!" He channeled his chakra to his legs and ran, with Naruto and Sasuke next to him. "Why are they attacking?" Sasuke asked. "I'll explain later! It concerns both of you!" "We can't go straight to Kakashi, we've got to lose these other ninjas...can everyone do a transformation jutsu?" Naruto could, but Ekyt couldn't. "I've got an idea!" Naruto exclaimed. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Getting the idea, Ekyt used his clone jutsu as well. Four sets of clones, Ekyt, Naruto, and Sasuke, appeared and ran in four different directions. "Disappearing jutsu!" all three said as one, focusing on their own clothes as the targets. They ran as fast as they dared.

BAM! Kakashi looked up. "Who could that be?" he wondered, shutting his book irritably. When he opened the door, Naruto, Sasuke, and Ekyt tumbled inside, shutting the door quickly. "Kakashi-Sensei! We" Ekyt yelled over Naruto. "I took your advice Kakashi-Sensei! I used my Sharingan, and I read Make-Out paradise, and frenched Ino!" he called. Kakashi lifted up his headband. "You don't have Sharingan Ekyt. And you...frenched Ino? What are you" "Okay, it's him." Sasuke said. Kakashi looked around at the three tired ninjas. "Sorry Kakashi-Sensei. There are some bad...other ninjas around. I've got proof. Is there any way to get Anko-Sensei here? No, to Lord Hogake's? It's imperative!" "You'll have to show me why first." Kakashi said. Ekyt put the tape in, pointing to the crowd. Kakashi leaned forward, studying the screen. "Kabuto?" he said, surprised. "Chakaro's next to him." Ekyt pointed out. "Where Kabuto is, there's...Orochimaru." Kakashi said. "Okay, you three. Stay with me at all times. We're going to Lord Hokage. But we've got to round up the others, without alerting too much suspicion...and we've got to make sure it's really them...Sasuke, you lead Naruto and Ekyt to Lord

Hokagee. Use your Sharingan before speaking to anyone. I'll get the others. Go directly there, demand entry. DO NOT come look for me if I don't show up. Do you understand?" "Yes Sensei." The four leapt off.

(NOTE: THE THIRD HOKAGE IS USED IN THIS FIC)

"Orochimaru? Man, I never got a chance to kick his sorry butt! He better not come near me, I'll go ninja on his butt at the drop of a chopstick, believe it!" Naruto seemed to be relishing the whole situation.

"Ekyt, any idea why they're after you?" Sasuke asked. "Chakaro...he wants me dead." Ekyt said. "And Orochimaru wants me dead..." Sasuke muttered. "Dead or serving him...I'm going for the third choice." Sasuke added. They arrived at Lord Hokage's office, and were quickly ushered into a sitting room. The Third Hokage, looking wise, but deadly (Despite his obvious age) was sitting. "It is very late for students to be out." he said in a friendly but questioning tone. Naruto and Ekyt looked to Sasuke, who used his Sharingan. "It's him." Sasuke muttered. "You do not answer?" Naruto and Sasuke looked at Ekyt.

"Lord Hokage, I am new to the village, a student of Kakashi Hatake, Asuma Sarutobi, and Might Guy. I am called Ekyt, and I come bearing disturbing news." "Please, continue Ekyt. Your fight earlier was impressive for one so new to our art." Ekyt bowed at the compliment. "Lord Hokage, if you I may..." Ekyt unrolled his scroll and extracted the tape. "I was attacked by two ninja I don't know. They used some sort of genjutsu to disguise themselves as Naruto and Sasuke. I found a hole in their disguises. One of them, a woman, maybe eighteen, begged me to stay and protect her from..." Ekyt shook his head. "The tape from the exam earlier, I can show you better than explain." At Lord Hokage's nod, Ekyt put the tape in. He had stopped it at the spot he needed. "That is Kabuto, a known servant of Orochimaru." Sasuke piped in, speaking for the first time. Ekyt nodded in agreement. "And next to him is a student of mine from previous arts, before we arrived here. Chakaro Tamaki. He attacked me and aligned himself with Kabuto." The Third Hokage studied the screen. "Have you told anyone else?" he said. "Only Kakashi-Sensei. He's getting anyone who might be in imminent danger and bringing them, as well as Anko Mitarashi." Ekyt informed him. The Hokage sat back. "Very well. Let me see...Sasuke Uchiha, Naruto Uzumaki...and Ekyt, is it?" The three nodded, suddenly intimidated by the old man. "You three have done your village a great service." Ekyt looked over at Naruto. "Lord Hokage...Naruto is to thank." Naruto looked up in surprise. "His Shadow Clone Jutsu is what got us away safely. And Sasuke's Sharingan." Lord Hokage smiled at Ekyt's attempt to transfer credit off himself. "All three of you have shown bravery here tonight. You will all be commended. Now, please excuse me. You are welcome to stay here and talk."

Naruto and Sasuke looked over at Ekyt. "Why would you mention that?" Sasuke asked. "You two deserve the credit. All the extra work you've put in, helping me. I wouldn't have been alive to watch the video without your help." Ekyt shrugged. "Besides...we've all got pasts to conquer, and we're all going about doing it our own way." The doors opened. Sakura was the first one in, grabbing the three kneeling on the floor in a hug. "Oh Thank God, you guys are all right!" she exclaimed. (Picture inflated, red faces, since all three are choking.) "We-won't-be-if-you-don't-stop-choking-us!" Naruto gasped. "Eh heh heh, sorry!" she said sheepishly, with a laugh. (Arm behind her head in classic anime embarrassed pose.)

"If you're done strangling our witnesses Sakura, I'd like to ask them a few questions." Anko said, as per usual not leaving room for argument. "Whoa, ANBU!" Naruto exclaimed. "What?" Ekyt asked, now familiar with them. "Sort of ninja Black Ops." Sasuke said by way of explanation.

After questioning, the three young ninjas were left to rest. Sakura joined them for a while. "Oh, Sakura,

by the way, while we're all sure of who's who...The test to see if we're really who we say is me talking about who kissed me after my match. It never happened, so if anyone believes it, they're an imposter." Sakura giggled. "And whose names have you used?" she asked. "Tenten, Ino (Sakura looks ticked), and Hinata. I didn't use your name because I didn't know how you'd feel about it." "Ino will brag about it, Tenten will murder you, and Hinata will politely...kill you!" Sakura laughed. "It's okay, you can use my name, I won't kill you for it." She said amiably. "Like that would ever happen." Sasuke muttered.

Naruto looked at him and grinned. "Ah, whaddamatter wittle Sasuke? Feeling a little threatened are we? You know she'd kiss you in heartbeat! You just don't like the thought of her kissing the new guy." "Naruto, shut up, I swear..." Sasuke started. Ekyt couldn't help but laugh. "Rest assured, I'm sure I'm no threat to you Sasuke. (Laughs) How could I compare to the famous "Uchiha Heat?"" The three burst out laughing, with Sasuke looking furious. "And I used to like you..." he said, finally smirking.

Ekyt got up and pulled out the summoning scroll he used to conceal his important things. He knew his "home" would be trashed. He pulled out the scroll that said he and his team were disbanded. "I can't believe it actually happened." Naruto looked over his shoulder. "Whoa! You don't have a team anymore?! What are you gonna do?" "Well, it's alright, since I'm not Genin yet. After that...who knows. I don't know of any teams with available places. But that's alright, I'll figure something out. I'd like to train." "Yeah, I meant to ask you, why do you train so hard? I mean, I remember what you said, but there's more to it than that, isn't there?" Ekyt didn't answer right away, instead he made tea. "Calms the stomach." He explained. "Anyone?" he asked. "Sure." Sakura said. After the tea was made, Ekyt folded himself into tetaheiza (Samurai sitting position, basically). "To answer your question...I DO want revenge, but I want to protect people. And I'd love to train others someday. Too many people don't know how to defend themselves. And too many claim to know what they're doing, but really have no clue." "So, you want to be like Kakashi-Sensei?" Naruto asked. "Pretty good comparison. I could pick a worse roll model." The time for talk had ended shortly after that. All of them said their goodnights and curled up on some cots Lord Hokage had his servants bring in.

After a couple hours rest, Ekyt was awake. He looked at his sleeping comrades, deciding to take guard duty. **No need for them to know, since I'm not leaving the room.** he thought, walking over to sit near the silk screen. The hardwood floor wasn't overly comfortable, but it served it's purpose. Near dawn, the door slid open. Ekyt feigned sleep, watching the intruder. There was no mistaking the silver hair and glasses. "HEY!" Ekyt shouted. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura all woke up. "Kabuto!" Sasuke rolled off his cot. "Phoenix Immortal Flame Jutsu!" Kabuto wasn't compared with Kakashi for nothing. "Sakura, run, get Kakashi-Sensei and anyone else you can find! We'll hold four-eyes off!" Ekyt insisted. Naruto joined the fight, using Shadow Clone Jutsu. "Ekyt, you go with her! These guys never come alone!" he yelled, as clone after clone was thrown off by Kabuto. "You've gotten stronger Naruto. And you, Uchiha. I expect great things from both of you."

Ekyt and Sakura ran down the corridor. The first person they saw was Kakashi. "I kissed Sakura!" Ekyt called to him. "Really? Congratulations!" Ekyt stepped in front of Sakura. THAT didn't sound like Kakashi. "Hey, what's with you guys? You seem kind of strange tonight..." "Back off." Ekyt snarled. "You Do NOT talk to your sensei that way!" "You're right." Ekyt threw a kunai at Kakashi. "So you found me out, did you, you little punk? You and the pink-haired girl are done for!" the ninja rushed Ekyt. Ekyt only had enough time to kick skyward, using a move he learned from Lee. Throwing two kunai into the ceiling, Ekyt leapt up, following his attacker. He jumped, pulling the two kunai out of the ceiling and slashing an "X" mark across his attackers chest and arms. Hooking him in, Ekyt used the "Konoha Backward Snap Dragon" attack, putting his attacker deep into the ground. "Come on, we've got to

hurry!" Sakura called. She and Ekyt ran for it again, dodging down the corridor.

Kabuto threw the last Naruto clone away. Sasuke tried the Phoenix Immortal Flame Jutsu, but Kabuto dodged it. The two attacked, using all the taijutsu they could. "We've got to hold him off!" Sasuke called to Naruto. "Lion's Barrage!" Sasuke called. He landed two of the kicks, but missed on the third, allowing Kabuto a chance to sweep his legs while cracking Naruto in the nose with a backfist. "You two can do better than that, can't you? You realize that your friends are dead now, don't you?"

"What's going on?" Kakashi asked Ekyt. "I kissed Sakura!" Ekyt said proudly. "It's me." Kakashi said softly. "Thank God! In Lord Hokage's waiting room, Kabuto's attacking!" Sakura called. "You two, stay with me! We've got help them!"

9 - It's all About Loyalty

Ekyt raced ahead of Kakashi and Sakura. Now that Sakura was safe, Ekyt wanted to get back to the fight. He saw Naruto and Sasuke, mercifully, still fighting Kabuto, though they were getting the worst of it. Kabuto grabbed Sasuke's leg during his "Lion Barrage" and threw him, face down, onto the hardwood floor. Naruto was having a hard time too. Kabuto was just too fast and too good. "Now you're gonna get it! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" There were a dozen Naruto's in the tiny room. "Mind if I cut it?" Ekyt used his own clone jutsu. Kabuto straightened his glasses. "A Pre-genin isn't going to scare me off."

Out of the corner of his eye, Kabuto saw Sakura turn the corner. **Well...this is quite the opportunity, isn't it?** Kabuto whirled around and threw a series of five kunai at Sakura. She didn't even see them coming. Sasuke and Naruto attacked, not knowing Sakura was in the line of fire. Ekyt's clone joined the fray, joining the others in knocking Kabuto back. The real Ekyt, though, was sprinting across the room, trying to out run the five knives.

Sakura looked up in horror at the knives coming at her. She winced, waiting for the pain. It didn't come. She opened her eyes, just in time to see Ekyt fall to the floor. Two knives sticking out of his right leg, one in each arm, and one in the center of the back. "Ekyt!" she dragged his unconscious form out into the relative safety of the hallway. He woke up seconds later, shaking with pain. "I've got to get back in there! Where's Kakashi-Sensei?" Ekyt asked. "He got jumped back there! He told me to run ahead!" "Okay. Try to stay hidden, all of us are going to need medical attention after this." For some reason, that was ironic, coming from a guy with five knives sticking out of him. "Disappearing Jutsu!" Sakura covered herself with a blanket from one of the cots, disappearing behind it. Ekyt scurried back inside, joining Naruto and Sasuke.

"I only need you, Sasuke. I'll just have to make you go away." Kabuto said, raising his hands to perform a jutsu to do just that. "I don't think so." Naruto ran directly at Kakashi, kunai drawn. Kabuto cut him down, only to have the REAL Naruto grab him from behind. "Now Sasuke!" "Fire Release: Phoenix Immortal Fire Technique!" Kabuto appeared to be hit dead-on. "Yes! Wait, what?" Sasuke had just roasted a log. "I can see there's no point in continuing to fight. But Sasuke Uchiha, don't think you can dodge Lord Orochimaru forever." Kabuto dissapeared.

Sakura came out of hiding and started darting around, checking everyone's pulses. Sasuke's first, then Naruto's. Ekyt excused himself, something about "Clearing his head", and leapt out the window. "Oh Sasuke, I'm so glad you're alright! I don't know what I would do if you were to get killed!" She snatched Sasuke in a hug. "Okay...let go." Sasuke murmured. "Eh-heh-heh, sorry." Sakura let go. "And how are you feeling Naruto?" "Nothing some Ramen won't cure!" **Normal...for Naruto. And for Sasuke too...why can't he see I really care about him? Am I not good enough? *sigh* I'll win him over someday! But I wonder what was up with Ekyt?** Kakashi joined them, tuggins headband back down. "Sorry I'm late, you wouldn't believe how many ninjas were waiting for me. Is everyone alright?" "Sure thing Kakashi-sensei, believe it!" "Just fine." Sasuke said. "I'm alright, thanks." Sakura answered. "And where did Ekyt go?" Kakashi asked. "He went off to clear his head sensei. Oh! I never thanked him!" Sakura said suddenly. "Well, apparently he needs some time to think things over. For now, why

don't you tell me what happened?"

The crisp night air suited Ekyt, though it stung his wounds. He couldn't be bothered with them right now, aside from zipping his jacket up tighter and moving his kunai holster higher on his leg to stop the bloodflow. He shimmied up a tree, looking out over the dark landscape. **Taking those knives...brings back memories...not just my eye...but Linda...damnit, that girl is haunting me! What a waste of time it was, trying to earn her love...either it's there or it isn't. And Chakaro...I trained a villain, a turncoat. I KNOW how people are, they'll come back to haunt me if I get too close. No more of this touchy-feely crap until I'm sure, without a doubt, I can trust that person.** A sudden gust of wind knocked Ekyt off his perch. He free-fell, righting himself at the last second. "Bad timing." He said to the sound Ninja in front of him. "Why, I'm supposed to be scared of some barely puercent pre-genin with one eye?" the other ninja taunted with a laugh. Ekyt ignored him. "Think whatever you want. But get out of my village." **There's never just one of these guys, it seems...** Ekyt thought to himself. Sure enough, three more leapt down from various spots. "YOUR village? Hah! Where's your Hatai Ate if it's your village? Are you a wannabe leaf?" one taunted. "You mean like you're a wanna-be ninja?" Ekyt countered. "Guys, he's no wannabe." Ekyt recognized the voice. "Akira?"

"That's me." Akira looked different, wearing the blue and gray camo of the sound village, instead of the black jumpsuit that he had donned before. "You're in with them? No wonder that match was so hard. You're no pre-genin, are you?" "You've got me there. I'm a chunin from my village. Although, I will admit that you gave me more of a match than I expected." "I'm flattered." Ekyt said dryly. "So, what? You're a spy?" "More or less, though I prefer the term "Elite Information and Reconnaissance Specialist."" Ekyt looked around him. Surrounded. "Hmm. Let me guess, you were sent to watch Sasuke Uchiha, right?" "Wrong, though not a bad guess. Actually, YOU were the point of interest." Akira said in a friendly tone. "Really? I'm honored. And just what's so interesting about me?" Ekyt asked, trying to summon up his chakra for a fight. The multiple bleeding stab wounds were making that difficult. "What's so interesting is how good you got in such a short time. We want to know what makes you tick." "Loyalty, dedication, and training." Ekyt answered. "We mean...internally." Akira said in a less pleasant tone of voice. "Well, since you've got your friends here, I'm going to assume you're going to kidnap me and dissect me." "Right." Akira said brightly. Ekyt flipped one kunai to a reverse grip, leaving the other in a standard grip. "Well, then I hope you're up to fighting for me." "MORE than up to it. Get him!"

"Whoa! Mind if I jump in?" someone called. Ekyt turned in surprise. "I am Iruka Umino." "I'm Ekyt." "I've heard good things about you. But that can come later. Right now, let's remove the waste from our village. Sealed Bombs Square Release!" BLAM! Four exploding tags took out two of the ninjas. In their surprise, they dropped their guard. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt's fire attack hit Akira dead center. With a wave of his hand, he put out the fire that had started on his stomach. "You must have a guardian angel kid...Flower Technique: The District End!" "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!" Ekyt and a clone used twin jutsus, setting the petals on fire and blowing them back at Akira. Ekyt noticed a piece of paper on the ground behind Akira. **If that's what I think it is...I've just got to drive him back...** Ekyt leapt up high over the two attacks while his clone continued the attack. His foot struck down on Akira's chest, knocking the older ninja into Iruka's exploding tag. BLAM! Akira was down, holding his charred left leg. "Ugh! Impressive! Sound Ninja, retreat!" All four ninja's leapt away.

"Nice work!" Iruka offered his hand to Ekyt. "I'm lucky you came along when you did." Iruka smiled. "Do you eat ramen?" "Yes I do." "Well, how about a bowl, and you can tell me a little about yourself?"

"Sure, that'd be fine." As they walked into the lights of the Ichiraku Ramen Bar, even a seasoned ninja like Iruka had to flinch. "What happened to you? And you might want to think about pulling those out." Ekyt realized he still had kunai sticking out of him, making him look, no doubt, like some sadistic pin cushion. Ekyt reached down and pulled the one out of his leg, letting it clatter to the floor. Teuchi, the owner, turned around, handing them each a bowl of ramen. Or, he tried to. The bowls wound up flying as he yelled "Yow! What happened to you kid?!" "Just a little scratch." Ekyt mumbled as he pulled the last one out of his back.

"So he knocked us down. That's when Ekyt rushed in and siked a clone on him, then turned himself into a pincushion by leaping in front of Sakura." Kakashi sat back, his eye half-lidded. "I see. I'll report this to Lord Hokage. In the mean time, why don't you go get some rest? No training until noon tomorrow, seeing as you've had quite the workout the past two days." Sakura had something on her mind suddenly. "I'll catch you guys later, see you!"

Iruka sat back, his stomach satisfied, his brain disturbed. "You've got a very interesting tale. If I understand, you're group is broken up, you're new here, and you've studied day and night." "More or less." Iruka leaned forward, a look of cunning on his face. "Kakashi tells me you and Sakura seem to be bonding." The area under Ekyt's visible eye turned red. "Bonding? What do you mean by bonding? Iruka laughed good-naturedly. "Relax, I know you're friends. By "Bonding" I mean how much time you two have spent studying together." Ekyt thought about that. "No argument Iruka-Sensei. She's an exceptionally bright girl who genuinely seems to care about my well-being." "She just happens to be adorable as well." Iruka quipped. "Well...yeah. But I feel guilty about that as well." "Why would you feel guilty about that?" Iruka asked. "It's perfectly normal." "My team disbanded. My top student is now Orochimaru's disciple, and a girl I admitted my love for once...well, we've all gone our separate ways." Iruka already knew that Ekyt had taken the knife to the eye for her. "Well, from what you've told me, I can tell you've got potential. Maybe we can train some time?" "I'd like that. I need all the help I can get."

"Awww, Kakashi-Sensei, why do I have to deliver these?" "Because I said so. Besides, YOU wanted a mission." "I MEANT something hard!" Naruto was struggling with a large leather case, holding over 100 scrolls, to be delivered to the town of Nashisa. In a grave voice, Kakashi warned Naruto. "There WILL be danger Naruto. But I'm sure you can handle it." Kakashi said, nose in his book again. "Oh boy! What kind of danger?! Ninja attacks? Assassinations?" "No. Hernias and chronic back pain. Remember, lift with your knees, not your back."

Ekyt had to pick a new place to live, this time choosing a stand-alone cabin. It could have been nice if Ekyt put the money into it, but he didn't have any interest in that. He had no one to impress but himself. His money went to the necessities; food, weapons, clothes, etc. As he was setting up in the new spot, there was a knock on the door. "It's open." He called, hand reaching for his kunai. Maybe that attack had made him paranoid, but he was expecting the worst. "Hey, just wanted to see how you're doing." Ekyt straightened up, hand away from his kunai. "I'm doing a little better today Sakura, although I'm really starting to feel those knife wounds." "I'm not surprised. Listen, I...wanted to thank you for saving my life." Ekyt shrugged. "No problem, glad I could help." "Would you mind if I walked you to school?" she asked shyly. Ekyt let a small sound of surprise escape his lips. "I'd like that."

As bandaged up as Ekyt was, he could still enjoy a walk with Sakura. It was fall now, the time where you wore a light jacket. The cherry blossom's were falling. "Isn't it beautiful?" Sakura asked. Ekyt nodded,

finding his vocal cords in a knot. "I'm going to stick around today, Lee's going to be around." Sakura told him. "Lee? I haven't seen him in a while." The sudden look that crossed Ekyt's face told Sakura Linda had just crossed his mind. "I'm sorry. You know exactly what I was just thinking, and I'm sorry." "Oh, it's no problem. Mystery men like you and Sasuke...maybe you aren't always such of a mystery." "Girls are a mystery to me." Ekyt muttered. "Oh crap, that came out loud, didn't it?" Sakura laughed. "Well, you're likewise a mystery! Hopefully, it's one of those mysteries you can solve."

"Alright, listen up. We've got a number of guests today. First of all, Rock Lee. Iruka Umino is here as well. The reason being the Genin exams are in two weeks. They're here to supervise the tryouts. That being said, please come down here if you intend to try. Take a medical waiver, in the event of your death." Ekyt got up immediately. Linda and Kayla both grabbed him. "You can't be serious!" Linda said. "Dead serious. I'm going to try." "Like heck you are!" "If that's how you want to put it. I'm signing up." Ekyt said dryly. "C'mon teach, don't do that! You heard Anko-sensei, you could die!" "Kayla, I'd rather have the training. I'm likely to get killed without it. Chakaro is out there, gunning for me." Linda sat down suddenly. "Give it up Kayla. But Ekyt, you remember this: We tried to stop you, so our consciences will be clear. If you die, don't say we didn't warn you."

Ekyt was seething with rage when he finally reached Anko's desk. "I'm not surprised you're signing up. Sign here, and your sensei needs to sign here." "I don't have one." Ekyt reminded her. Then Ekyt looked over at Iruka. "I'll sign for him Anko." Anko looked surprised, then leaned back. "You, Iruka? Aren't you usually stopping the ones who aren't ready?" "He's ready. I have complete confidence he'll pass." Iruka jotted his name down, then passed the paper to Ekyt. "Thank you Iruka-Sensei." Iruka gave a thumbs up and a grin. "Maybe you'll be one of my students during training!" "I'd like that." "Alright. You're all set Ekyt. But you're going to have to face off against Lee for evaluation."

Sakura and Tenten were talking with Kayla and Linda. Their whispers grew to shouts, with Linda and Sakura knocking their chairs backward, standing face to face. Ekyt and Lee both ran over. "Hey, c'mon, take it easy!" Ekyt said. "Girls, please! There is no need to fight. Now, what started this?" "What she said! What kind of friend are you, telling Ekyt he can't do it!" Sakura shouted. "I'm watching out for his well-being! He's my friend!" "I'd hate to see how you treat your enemies!" Ekyt and Lee exchanged glances. "For the record Ekyt, I do not hold you at fault for this. However, do not expect me to pull my punches in combat." "I insist on the real thing Lee." Kayla was holding Linda back, while Tenten had Sakura around the waist.

The other students were looking forward to seeing Ekyt vs. Lee. The top Pre-genin against an accomplished Tai-justu prodigy. It looked like it would be a heck of a match.

Both running full speed, Lee and Ekyt punched high, then kicked low. Their strikes were flying at such speeds that no one wanted to blink. Ekyt swept his leg low, then did a back handspring as Lee's leg swung down. Lee's kicks started to flow, and all Ekyt could do was block them with his forearm.

"Yeah! Go Lee!" Linda called. Kayla and Sakura exchanged shocked glances. "C'mon Ekyt! You can do it!" The two girls gave each other hard looks. Tenten and Kayla stretched out, just in case they had to pry the two apart again.

Ekyt saw an opening when Lee kicked low. He leapt over it and swung his leg out with a crescent kick, knocking Lee's guard down. In the same motion, the same leg hit home against Lee's chest. The strike

knocked them both back. "Lee! Take them off!" Guy called to him. "But Sensei..." "He can handle it Lee." Lee took off his leg weights. All the students gaped. Ekyt realized just how quick and powerful Lee was. Especially when Lee ran at him, hitting him the cheek with a punch that knocked him across the practice field. Anko looked ready to stop the match, but Ekyt got up immediately.

"Nice one Lee! I hope you don't mind if I try out some other jutsus." "I do not mind at all. I look forward to the challenge." Lee suddenly disappeared, moving incredibly fast, landing a kick under Ekyt's chin. "Primary Lotus!" Lee yelled. "No you don't!" Before Lee's bandages could wind around him, Ekyt threw two kunai, pinning the bandages to the wall. Flipping forward, he kicked Lee with both legs, spinning to the ground.

"Whoa!" "Did you see that?" "He countered that!" Ekyt landed, crouching. "He countered my move..." Lee said to himself. He yanked his bandages hard, but the kunai wouldn't budge. So he cut himself free. "You had the opportunity to strike. Why did you not take advantage?" Ekyt gave a laugh. "We're friends of good standing Lee. Besides, if I'm going to fight you, I don't want any advantages. Of course, if it's an enemy, I would strike without hesitation. For now though...let's go!"

Their match continued, the crowd reacting to everything. Lee threw in a move that Ekyt always admired. He walked on his hands while kicking. The obvious choice would be to sweep Lee's arms, but he was so fast, he could give you the opening and then take it away. Instead, Ekyt stepped to the side and feigned a kick. As Lee flipped up-right, Ekyt's leg was there to meet him with a roundhouse, then a front kick that struck just below the solar plexus. This forced the body to bend over. Ekyt hooked Lee in. "Konoha Backward Snap Dragon!" Ekyt landed the move, which effectively put Lee into the ground. But it exhausted his stamina. He was on one knee, panting. Anko peered into the crater. "The match will continue!"

Lee leapt out of the hole. "That was an excellent move." For the duel, the two used blunted kunai, so they wouldn't actually kill each other. They could still cut you to ribbons, though. They charged again, leaping all over, every strike being blocked. Both were near exhaustion. The "Backward Konoha Snap Dragon" and the "Primary Lotus" took a lot out of you.

Naruto dropped the scrolls at the feet of a warrior monk. "Here ya go old man!" The monk looked curiously at Naruto. "You seem a little banged up. Are you okay? Were you attacked." "Huh? Attacked. Oh, yeah! Twenty ninja! But nothing a future Hokage can't handle, believe it!" **I can't tell him I really just tripped down a hill...**

"Are you serious! That guy lost an eye for you! And now you want him dead?! (let go Tenten!) Come on!" "He's my friend! If he can't move anymore, he won't fight, and won't get killed! I don't want him killed! (Kayla, let go of me!)" "You've got a funny way of showing support!" Sakura shouted back. "You wanna settle this? Once they're off the field, you and me!" "You're on!"

Pnating heavily, Ekyt and Lee looked at each other. Both using the last of their stamina, they rushed each other. Ekyt aimed low, while Lee aimed high. Everyone stood up to see who had won.

Ekyt's kunai was against Lee's neck. But Lee's Kunai was up against Ekyt's. Ekyt was crouching, while Lee was standing up straight. Slowly, they both pulled their kunai back. Adrenaline revitalized them

both, but Lee was a split second quicker. Ekyt managed to soften the blow, but it still struck home under his chin. He flew backwards, hitting a wall, then falling forward onto his face. He tried to get up, but Anko stopped the match. "Winner: Rock Lee."

Ekyt's face was burning with shame, but he was glad no one could see it under the mask. He couldn't get up, he was so exhausted. When some medical personnel tried to grab him, he asked them to leave. When they physically insisted, Ekyt snarled "Get away from me! I don't need your help!" Slowly, agonizingly, he pulled himself up to his feet, controlling his anger and shame.

Kakashi, Asuma, and Iruka made their way over to Ekyt after congratulating Lee. "That was quite a showing." Kakashi said. "But no jutsus? I'm surprised." Asuma said, questioning. "Lee's a friend, I thought I owed him a fair fight. I assure you, no enemy will get that luxury." Ekyt said, falling back down to one knee. "I guess I'll catch the Genin exams next time around." "You're not backing out, are you?" Iruka asked. "I just failed, didn't I?" "You weren't supposed to beat Lee, it was a test of your skills. And I'm certain you've passed." Kakashi said calmly. "And, here. This is from us, to wish you luck during the exams." "But you might want to open it later. It looks like the girls are about to fight." Ekyt raised his head to look at the field. He saw Linda and Sakura squaring off. "Oh no. It must be what Linda said to me...I've got to stop this!"

"Listen, I don't want to bang you up! But to say I don't care about Ekyt is an insult!" Linda said, pointing at Sakura. "Since when does caring mean wishing him paralyzed?" Sakura shot back. "Ekyt and Lee are friends, and we could be too! But I'm not letting you insult him! Maybe YOU aren't grateful he saved your life, but I am!" They rushed toward each other.

Lee blocked both their kicks. "Girls, please. That is your friend. I may have just defeated him, but I enjoyed the match! Should you not go to him instead?" Linda turned on her heel and leaned up against Lee. Lee lost track of his thought, he wasn't used to the affection. Sakura and Tenten nodded to each other, then went over to Ekyt, who was just getting up again.

"Sakura, what's the deal? You've got your sights on Sasuke, but your spending your time looking after Ekyt? If I didn't know better..." "Don't go there Tenten." "Don't try to fool me, Sakura-chan!" Tenten sang. "Admit the new guy's cute." "Well...sure! Can't I help out a cute guy without the notion of romance." "Nuh-uh Sakura!" Tenten said irritably. That's what friends did, though. "Okay, I admit, he's cute, he's got that mystery, and he actually pays attention to me! But you know Sasuke is the guy for me!" "You and everyone else. Who's to say this guy isn't the one who could make you happy?" "Come on Tenten!" Sakura said with a laugh. But Tenten's words had gotten her thinking...

NEXT ISSUE: THE GENIN EXAMS! CAN EKYT IGNORE ALL THE OUTSIDE PROBLEMS PLAGUING HIM AND GET THROUGH THE EXAMS? WHAT PART DO NARUTO AND SASUKE PLAY? DON'T FORGET- WHAT DID ASUMA, KAKASHI, AND IRUKA GET EKYT? AND GET READY- AN OLD RIVAL AND HIS NEW BLOOD CLASH WITH OUR FAVORITE PACK OF HARD-HEADED, BUT LOVABLE, NINJAS! DON'T MISS WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR ISSUE 10 SPECIAL:

FISTS FLYING: TRUTH REVEALED!

10 - A First Time for Everything...

Linda and Sakura were looking daggers at each other. Lee and Ekyt were in between them. "Come on, it's just words. Take it easy!" Tenten had Sakura around the waist, while Kayla was yanking on Linda's arm. The two girls stopped struggling, both spinning on their heel and walking away. "I'm sorry Ekyt-Sensei." Kayla said with a glance down. "It's okay Kayla, don't worry about it. She just needs time to cool down." **I hope...**

Ekyt got home and remembered her was still holding the package from his senseis. He opened it. Out fell a black vest, complete with makimono pouches. Ekyt put it on, finding it to be a perfect fit. "Not to mention a perfect match." Ekyt filled the pockets with select scrolls, including the white one he was making, and he filled the inside pocket with some toothpicks. It was time to go to school. The Genin exams were today, and he was as ready as he was going to be. He had a lot of people to prove wrong. And he knew that a lot of people would be rooting for him. Almost as many as the people who DIDN'T want him to succeed.

"Listen up." There were six Genin testing. Ekyt, Lily Korasu, and Utsuke Eiwo were the standouts. "First you will do a basic demonstration of various techniques." Iruka told them. "We will call you forward one at a time. Failure to perform two techniques will result in your failure in the exam. Any questions so far? No. Lastly, you must show two techniques you originated. Let's have...Ekyt up first."

With Linda's words still rattling around in his head, Ekyt walked forward, trying to forget every set of eyes was on him. "Perform a clone jutsu." "How many clones?" Ekyt asked. "Three will be sufficient."

The cavernous concrete room, with railings up on top for people to watch safely from, was packed. It seemed every Genin-hopeful had made some higher-ranked friends. Even Linda was watching, giving Ekyt a look of hatred. Naruto and Sasuke were standing with Lee and Isshin. Isshin was a new student, but he showed no shades of nervousness at being new.

"Clone jutsu!" Three Ekyt's landed next to the real one. They were crouched in battle positions. "Very good. Maintain the clones while fighting them." THAT was surprise. Ekyt's clones responded to the order, surrounding Ekyt. The real Ekyt responded by looking over his shoulder and throwing two kunai that way. His clone leapt aside, giving Ekyt opportunity to escape the circle they had formed around him. He stepped back and drew his sword, a custom-made 26 ½ inch samurai blade, from his old studies. It was well maintained, and certainly got the attention of most everyone watching.

Two clones leapt from opposite sides, feet flashing out. Ekyt lowered his stance and stabbed, taking care of one clone. The other one slashed down with two kris blades, a curved Phillipino fighting machete that Ekyt was fond of. This forced Ekyt to raise his sword in a sweeping block. That knocked the two blades aside, leaving Ekyt a chance for a kick. In the same motion, Ekyt stabbed down. His clone did something peculiar then, something Ekyt would never do. The clone nodded to Ekyt and drew his dagger. Everyone watched as the clone carved a plus sign in his stomach, not uttering a sound. Then his head fell forward. Ekyt raised his sword and cut down at an angle, then twisted the blade at the last second. The clone's head fell to the floor without rolling. In a shaking motion, Ekyt shook the blood from

his sword, then drew it. He took that opportunity to look for his other clone. **I was just my own Kaishaku-nin...wonder what Shihan would think of that?**

He saw him, in the opening stages of a jutsu. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!" it called. A flame shot at Ekyt, who leapt just above it, clinging to the railing in front of the people with his legs. He quickly made a hand sign himself. "Disappearing Jutsu!" Ekyt pulled his trench coat over himself, falling to the ground silently. And invisible. "Dragon Ember Jutsu!" He called suddenly. A flame burst from one place, then another. The third one struck the clone, ending the fight.

"Very impressive Ekyt. Full marks." After the other genin hopeful completed the test (The big surprise was Lily Korasu's failure of this part of the test), Iruka announced the next test. "You've all taken the written test, and whether you knew it or not, you have been evaluated for some time. What does this mean? Well, I" Iruka stopped as Isshin and one other student leapt down into the middle of the floor. "Who the hell are you?!" Iruka asked. "You don't know Iruka? Maybe the Uchiha boy does...or your new favorite."

Isshin tugged at his face. A pale white face revealed itself. "Orochimaru!" Kakashi, Asuma, Guy, Iruka, and Anko all leapt forward. Most everyone backed up. Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura leapt down from the balcony. Ekyt pulled off his trench coat. The other intruder yanked off his disguise, revealing a Sound Village headband. Ekyt narrowed his eyes stepped in front of the group. "Chakaro."

Chakaro, even more pale than before, his long black hair pulled into a ponytail, and his black jumpsuit replaced with a black hakama and an open black gi top. "Hello...sensei." Ekyt could FEEL the dirty looks. "I'm no longer your sensei...and I am ashamed I ever was. And I am disappointed Chakaro." Chakaro laughed cruelly. "Do I care? No. I never cared what others thought. Thanks to Lord Orochimaru, I've learned the truths of life...and death. I can create both. I can cause pain. I can manipulate it, twist it, make it consume you...eat you alive." "I don't know what got into you Chakaro..." "The same thing that's about to get into you!" Orochimaru said from behind Ekyt. He sank his teeth into Ekyt's neck.

Ekyt dropped to the floor in agony. Orochimaru laughed, then started coughing, holding his tongue out in front of him. "Splinter?!" He had just bitten a log. "A substitution?" WHAM! Sasuke foot cracked Orochimaru under the chin. "Lion Barrage!" Sasuke's brutal attack didn't seem to do much damage to Orochimaru.

Ekyt, meanwhile, popped out near Sakura and Naruto. "THIS thing is a student of yours?" Naruto asked. "WAS. I never knew...but...Heads up!" Naruto and Sakura ducked down as shuriken whizzed by their heads, just barely missing. "I'm gonna kill him!" "No. It's my fault, I'll handle him." Ekyt suddenly was thrown sideways. Chakaro appeared in front of Naruto and Sakura. His sword started to slash down. Naruto and Sakura braced themselves for the pain.

SHKIIINNGGG! Naruto opened one eye. "I'm not dead?" Ekyt had recovered and blocked with his sword. He and Chakaro were shaking with the effort. Sakura and Naruto rolled away. Ekyt dodged to the side, keeping his sword in contact with Chakaro's. He suddenly dropped it once he was out of range, thrusting toward Chakaro's midsection. Chakaro blocked down, then tried to cut Ekyt's thumb. Ekyt gave his blade a push forward, forcing Chakaro to back up. High, Low, High. Their swords flashed together, causing sparks to fly all over.

Orochimaru and Sasuke were dueling. It quickly became apparent that Sasuke was overmatched, so the sensei's swarmed over. Naruto ran over too, with Orochimaru using an incredible amount of jutsus. "How deep does his chakra run?" Iruka yelled in frustration. Finally, Orochimaru had to concede defeat. He had wounded almost every sensei in some way, shape, or form. "Chakaro! Time to go! We'll pick out enemies off one by one!"

Chakaro and Ekyt's swords had clattered to the floor long ago. Taijutsu took over. Chakaro was a natural at it, and he had the upper hand for a while. Ekyt fought back. "You've gotten stronger Ekyt! But you were right, I DID outdistance you, and quicker than I expected! I've been here long enough to know about you and Linda...Does this seem familiar? SAND SHURIKEN!" Ekyt watched in horror as the sandy blades sped toward Sakura. Ekyt leapt in front of her, several striking him, knocking him to the ground. "Ekyt!" she drew her kunai as she knelt near him. "I won't let you hurt him!" "Out of the way girl! No need for you to die too...I just want him..."

Ekyt dimly registered what was going on. His body went on auto-pilot, making hand signs as he lay on the floor, slowly bleeding to death. Chakaro was getting closer. "SAND SHURIKEN!" he shouted. Ekyt's voice cut him off. "DRAGON'S EMBER JUTSU!" The sand that was about to his Sakura was fused into glass. Ekyt pulled himself to his feet, stepping to the other side of the mirror. "Bra-vo." Chakaro taunted. "I thought so!" From behind him, Ekyt had struck, then snatched Chakaro into place for his backward Konoha Snap Dragon. But he was joined by his clone, doubling the effectiveness of the move. BLAAMMMMM!

Ekyt's clone disappeared as soon as he hit the ground, with it's controller unconscious. The sand shuriken dotting his body fell to the floor, with no chakra left to maintain it. Ekyt was totally vulnerable when Orochimaru suddenly made his move, going for the neck.

"Oh no, if that mark hits him..." Anko broke into a run, but fell to the ground herself, next to Sasuke. Their curse marks flared up. Orochimaru didn't want them interfering. As Orochimaru's body stayed still, his neck extended across the room, aiming for the defenseless Ekyt's neck.

"No you don't!" Sakura shouted. She leapt to her feet in front of Ekyt and slashed her blade, cutting Orochimaru's forehead. "You've already gotten one friend, you're not getting another!" She slashed again. Orochimaru's head snapped back to where it belonged. "You have just assured your fate, girl! Chakaro, come!" In a puff of smoke, they disappeared.

Ekyt, Sasuke, Anko, and Naruto were the wounded this time around. Ekyt's wounds were healed, largely thanks to Sakura. His only problem was a slightly sore right forearm. Sasuke and Anko were alright again, their marks sealed once again. Naruto, however, was another story...

"BROKEN LEG? I DON'T BELIEVE IT! WHAT AM I GONNA DO FOR FOUR WEEKS? WHAT ABOUT ME TEAM! I'M THE HEART AND SOUL, THEY CAN'T GO WITHOUT ME!" "Shut up loser." Kakashi said from the next bed. It was the one that Sasuke had vacated, and Kakashi took it up to read his book. "Someone will cover for you until you're well. Don't worry, you hyperactive knucklehead ninja, your spot is safe."

Sakura asked Ekyt to take a walk with her. She chose the rock path with the cherry blossoms. They

were falling to the ground in a slight breeze that was tossing her hair. For some reason, that got Ekyt's attention. "I just...wanted to thank you for saving me." Sakura blurted out, blushing. "Oh, no problem!" Ekyt managed to say. Sakura looked at his arm. "What happened there?" she asked, pointing at his bandaged right forearm. "Just a cut." Ekyt said evasively. Ekyt had his hands in his vest pockets, looking at the cherry blossoms. He was never much of a landscape person, but even he admitted that this was nice, calming. Then he felt Sakura's hand on his hurt forearm. Then he felt her other hand on his other forearm, one that wasn't bandaged. He hadn't put his coat on, it was still too early in fall for that, despite the breeze. Sakura was suddenly blushing. Ekyt wondered why. Then he figured it out. "I always dreamed of kissing a boy in the cherry blossoms. I guess every girl has that fantasy. Kind of like you guys have that fantasy about us in school uniforms." Ekyt blushed, chuckling. "That's not a fantasy I've ever had." Sakura still had her hands on his forearms. With a shaking hand, she reached up and plucked the toothpick out of his mouth. Then, making sure no one was looking, she slid the mask down around his neck. Gathering up her courage, she kissed him. It looked like Sakura had gotten her fantasy, kissing a boy under the cherry blossoms. She had always thought it would be Sasuke. She wasn't ready to give up on him yet. But she could hardly, in sound mind, ignore the boy who had saved her life twice. She replaced his mask, smiling sheepishly at his wide eye. "I had to say thanks." She managed to say, shrugging slightly. Ekyt, for his part, was standing up almost perfectly straight out of shock. "I-thanks-no problem." Sakura suddenly realized something. "That was my first kiss." "Same here. I mean, the first time I've been kissed." Ekyt said in amazement.

"You tramp!" Linda flew out of the bushes at Sakura. "What?! How dare you call me a tramp? You should talk!" "Girls, c'mon! You don't need to do this!" Linda snarled "She kissed you! She's after that other guy, Sasuke!" "I thanked him for saving my life, which is more than you ever did!" "How dare you? Are you saying I'm not thankful!" "Exactly!" "OKAY!" Ekyt shouted. The girls stopped their fight, looking at him in surprise. "We're going to settle this. Now. Linda, you can't accuse Sakura of anything, she hasn't done anything wrong. She's been a friend to me. You know what that means to me. I don't want two of my best friends fighting, there's no reason. You both seem to be watching out for my well-being. And I don't deny I need it. But this has got to stop. Linda, I don't pounce on Lee unless we're training. How about we put all this aside?" Sakura seemed ready to accept. Linda, however, snapped. "You don't know what's best for you, do you? Chakaro and Orochimaru could have killed you. All the sensei all the floor, and you fight Chakaro, the most promising student that ever came through the school." "You know that was personal Linda. You would have done the same thing." That seemed to trump Linda's argument. "Fine. But you keep your loose lips to yourself!" she shouted the last part at Sakura. "I'll make out with him if I want, don't you tell me what to do!" At Ekyt's stunned look, Sakura put her arm behind her head. "Okay, that might have been a little overboard..." **Oh boy, him and Sasuke! Who to choose...Why can't I have both?! Now THERE is a fantast, Cha!**

"I hope I'm not interrupting any thing." Iruka had snuck up on the two of them in confusion. "Of course not Iruka-Sensei!" exclaimed Sakura. "Well, if I might borrow Ekyt, he's got one more part of the genin test." "I thought I was done. What do I need to do?" Iruka indicated that Sakura and Ekyt should follow him.

In Naruto's hospital room, Asuma, Guy, Kakashi, Anko, and Iruka had gathered. "We've all had a hand in your training Ekyt. So, without further ado, the last part of your test..." Ekyt widened his stance into a guard. "Close your eyes." Iruka said. After a few seconds, he said "Okay, open them." Ekyt did, and saw the smiles everyone was sporting (He thought Kakashi was sporting one, at least). "The acceptance. You passed, Number 1 in the class. So...congratulations." Iruka and Ekyt bowed to each

other, with Ekyt taking the Hitai Ate offered to him. "You are now a Genin, and in effect, a citizen, of the Village Hidden in the Leaves."

The sensei's, Sasuke, Sakura, and Ekyt went for ramen afterward. Ekyt paid, partially out of respect, partially because he had a question for them. "I know genin are usually assigned to a three-man cell with others based on their grades. But I'm the only one who passed the test. So what happens to me?" Kakashi was the ranking member, so he spoke up. "In the long term, you'll get a sensei and a team of your own. For now, you've got your first assignment. You are to join me, Sasuke, and Sakura on a mission, maybe more than one, depending on how quickly Naruto heals." "And, until we find you a permanent sensei, you'll rotate between the four of us. When you're with Guy-Sensei, Asuma-Sensei, or Kakashi-Sense, you'll have missions, sometimes solo, sometimes on a team. When you're working with me, you'll be helping train others, or having solo missions, or helping me out." Ekyt couldn't help but feel like he was getting a great deal. **Three elite and one highly respected chunin...Then I'm part of all the Konoha elite teams...Sakura kissed me...I passed my exams...Sakura kissed me...Aside from getting my butt kicked, this was a great day.**

11 - Sakura's Dreams

Ekyt had decided to wear his shiny new hatai ate around his forehead. The rest of his look was the same, including the black headband covering his mangled eye. He left the shabby apartment.

His day had barely started when problems arose. Linda and Lee. "Ekyt, hello. Congratulations on your first mission." "Thank you Lee." Linda stepped forward hard, putting a finger in Ekyt's face. "I hope this mission cripples you, just so you don't get killed." She snarled. Lee was too shocked to say anything. "Linda, let's get this straight. You are NOT going to stop me from taking missions, you are NOT going to stop me from getting better, and you are NOT going to intimidate me. If you don't want my friendship, that's your business. All I ask is that you leave Sakura alone. She's innocent here. And another thing: I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but I hope you get over it quick. Because, frankly, you are being a dog." Lee started to strike forward, but stopped himself. He had to admit Ekyt was right. He loved Linda, he just wished she would stop torturing the poor guy.

Ekyt had been told to bring weapons. He had his kunai, his tri-sectional staff, and his sword. He went to the meeting spot. Of course, he was an hour early. He settled in with his white scroll to wait.

Sakura had a dream that night. She was with her cell, and they were on a mission. Sasuke's curse mark suddenly spread. In one swoop, he had killed Kakashi. "Please stop Sasuke!" Sakura begged. Naruto attacked Sasuke, attacking for all he was worth, the demon fox spirit lending him strength.

Next to her, Ekyt watching the fight, kunai drawn. "Sakura...you've got to run for it." Ekyt's voice stunned her. "I can't leave Sasuke!" she blurted out, not thinking about the boy protecting her. She clearly saw his face drop; his mask was gone in her dream. "Then I'll do what I can to end this." Naruto fell at his feet, dead from Sasuke's vicious attacks.

"You're going to stop me?" Sasuke sneered at Ekyt. "Sasuke, I know that's not you talking. I know the REAL Sasuke is in there somewhere. You have to control the curse mark." Sasuke struck hard, knocking Ekyt backward. "Sasuke!" was all Sakura could say. Sasuke thrust hard with a sword, hitting Ekyt's midsection, pinning the dying boy to a tree. For the minutes he was still living, Ekyt was hit mercilessly by Sasuke. "Sakura...run." Were his last words before the life left his eyes. Sasuke raised his sword. "Now you can die by your samurai customs."

Sakura flung herself up in bed, nearly hyperventilating. "No. That would NEVER happen. But this dream...it feels like it means something...but what?"

Sasuke was the next to arrive. "Morning Sasuke." Ekyt said. No response. Ekyt took that in stride, going back to his scrolls. Sakura strolled up next. "Good morning!" "Good Morning Sakura." Ekyt said brightly. "Morning." Sasuke muttered darkly. "Any sign of Kakashi-Sensei?" Sakura asked. "Fat chance." Sasuke said immediately.

Three hours later, Kakashi showed up. "Sorry I'm late guys, there was this cat and..." "Kakashi-Sensei, if you're going to lie, at least be creative!" Sakura protested. "Right. Sorry. So...our mission for today.

Let me see here..." Sasuke put a hand to his curse mark. "Ah!" Kakashi looked at the mark. "The mission for today has just changed. Ekyt and Sakura, you two head to Jinsei town's emporium, and pick up all the orders for our village." Ekyt and Sakura bowed and left. Kakashi turned back to a furious Sasuke. "Why wouldn't you let me go?!" "Sasuke, you know what that curse mark does. We can't wait any longer. It MUST be sealed, and there's only one Shinobi powerful enough to do it. But Sasuke, this kind of sealing needs your cooperation. You have to WANT the curse sealed."

"So...what exactly are we getting?" Ekyt asked. **Sakura seems distracted...it must be Sasuke...I'll have to see if I can help there. For now, though...** "Huh? Oh, sorry. It's probably weaponry, scrolls, stuff like that." Sakura answered, her mind clearly elsewhere.

"WHADDAYA MEAN, NO RAMEN?!" Naruto shouted at the nurse. "We don't serve it here, Mr. Uzumaki." "WHAT ABOUT TAKE-OUT! Ahhh, this sucks! Believe it!" With the cast on his leg, Naruto hopped over to the window, hoping there was something interesting out there.

"Sakura...you okay?" Ekyt asked carefully. **You don't piss off the kunoichi...** a sardonic corner of his mind thought. "I just...had this really disturbing dream last night." As soon as she said it, Sakura felt like an idiot. **Oh, what's he gonna think of me for this? Letting a dream bother me!** To her surprise, he stopped walking and asked her "Do you want to tell me about it? Maybe it'll help you calm down." Sakura found herself telling him about the dream, even his own violent death. "And Sasuke had lost it. He killed everyone. And the worst part is all I could do was say his name over and over." She finished. Ekyt put a gently wrapped hand on her shoulder. "That dream is enough to shake ANYONE up. You really care about Sasuke, and you're worried about him. We could hurry this mission up and get back, and check on him." Sakura felt so relieved she considered kissing him again. She settled for saying "I'd really appreciate that." Tenten's words (From last ish "Who's to say this boy couldn't make you happy?" ran through her head. She brushed them aside, not taking the idea seriously.

"Are you ready Sasuke?" "Ready." Lord Hokage made the complicated series of hand signs and read from the scroll. He placed his hand carefully on Sasuke's neck. When he removed his fingers, there were five marks around the curse mark. "Sasuke, it is going to be up to your will now. You have to WANT to resist Orochimaru. Do you understand?" "Yes."

Sakura and Ekyt picked up the order. About halfway back to the village, three ninjas jumped them, trying to take the goods. "Drop the goods kids, we don't need to hurt you." "Forget it!" Sakura shouted back. The other ninja gave a laugh. He was wearing a black gi, and a missing-nin hitai-ate from the Village Hidden in the Rocks. "You've got one last chance to give me what you've got and go." Sakura looked over at Ekyt. How could such a nervous young man be so confident in a life or death situation, she wondered. "You Rock Ninja rejects aren't getting our goods. So, pardon the pun, go crawl under a rock." Ekyt said flatly.

"How is Sasuke, Lord Hokage?" Kakashi asked, lowering his book. "Keep an eye on him Kakashi. You know of his personal mission...he might seek out the power Orochimaru offers...we can't allow that to happen." "I understand. Aside from me, the only one who could match him right now is Naruto, and Naruto's injured...he should be guarded. The rivalry both Sasuke and Orochimaru have with him are putting him in danger." "Where are you other students?" "They should be on their way back now. I wonder what's keeping them?" "Knowing your group...anything." Kakashi couldn't argue that point.

Sakura performed a clone jutsu. Ekyt followed her lead. "Okay, this is old! Get them!" the lead ninja called out his orders. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!" Ekyt's two clones used the jutsu, leaving Ekyt free to try a new jutsu. "Dragon's Path jutsu!" Ekyt leapt on top of the fire, riding its momentum (Picturing it like he's surfing) to the two enemies huddled up against the flame. Ekyt drop-kicked one, then bounced off his head into the leader. That left one other to Sakura. Thinking quickly, she used her "Full Bloom Jutsu." That allowed her to focus half of her chakra into a fight-ending attack, provided it hit. With Ekyt's clones giving her the time by continuing their jutsu's, she aimed for the solar plexus with a chakra-powered punch.

The leader swiped at Ekyt, who used a Body Transfer Jutsu, trading places with a log. The log was destroyed by the strike. Ekyt grabbed the ninja around the neck, a kunai to his neck. "Call off the attack. Right now." Ekyt said firmly. "Lay off!" the captured ninja called to his troops. "Good. Now, come with us. If you fight, we will attack. Make no mistake about it."

"Ah, here they...are...now." Kakashi put a hand to his forehead. "They aren't alone Kakashi. Do you know those ninjas?" Lord Hokage asked. "No, I'm afraid I don't." Ekyt and Sakura marched the ninjas up to their superiors. "These three attempted to rob us." Ekyt said after showing the proper respect. "Do you have the supplies?" Kakashi asked. Ekyt and Sakura produced the supplies. "Very well. Because you were attacked, this would be a C-rank mission. Congratulations on completing it. I'll need a report from each of you."

After the mission, Sakura found herself walking the same was as Ekyt. "Thanks for helping me out earlier." She said. "I know anxiety when I see. Besides, you're worried for your friend...that's a good thing." Sakura could tell Ekyt wanted to say more, but that he had settled for looking at the clouds. "You are a mix of so many people! You're mysterious like Kakashi, you're a thinker like Shikamaru, you're an avenger like Sasuke, but the one you remind me of most right now is Iruka-sensei?" "Oh? Why is that?" "Just the way you handled the situation, and how you calmed me down earlier...it just reminded me of Iruka-Sensei."

Sasuke felt the curse mark. It was almost hot to the touch. **You'll never defeat me unless you get much stronger, little brother.** Itachi's taunting voice was running through Sasuke's head again. He clenched a fist. "Strength, brother? You don't KNOW strength...I'll do whatever it takes, crush whatever gets in my way, to get to you. And we WILL have a finality to our battle. And I'll be the one standing...I can never forgive you for what you did...I'm going to make you pay..."

Sasuke was so wrapped up in his thoughts he didn't hear Sakura coming. "Sasuke...are you alright?" She watched in alarm as the curse mark spread. "Sakura...you've got to go...get Kakashi-sensei..." he said, holding his neck. "Hurry!"

"So they jumped us, we managed to capture them, and we delivered the goods, and them." Ekyt finished his report to Kakashi and Lord Hokage. "Kakashi-Sensei! Lord Hokage! Hurry, please! It's Sasuke! The curse mark!" Sakura called. "Lead the way." The Third Hokage said immediately. "Kakashi, you too. Ekyt...I'm assigning you to protect Naruto until we return." "Understood sir." Ekyt said crisply.

"Sasuke, it's us." The curse mark was spreading to Sasuke's face. "You have to focus Sasuke. Don't let it overcome you." "I...when I think about my brother...it just happens...ahhhh!" The mark had reached

his eyes. "Please Sasuke, fight it! You're stronger than that! Fight it!" Sakura encourage him. Slowly, the curse mark receeded.

Asuma and Shikamaru were already visiting Naruto when Ekyt came to replace Genko Hayate as the guard. "Thanks (koff koff)." "No problem Genko-sensei." **That guy always looks sick...** Ekyt thought to himself. Asuma and Shikamaru were in the middle of a game of Go, so Ekyt didn't disturb them. "How are you feeling Naruto?" "I need some decent food! Hey, how'd the mission go?" "Ah, it was just a supply mission. A couple of rogue's tried to jump Sakura and I, but" "Where was Sasuke?" Naruto asked. "The mark." Ekyt said simply. "What? Oh man, is he okay? He can't die, I haven't beat him yet!"

Sakura watched Lord Hokage and Kakashi talk about Sasuke. She closed her eyes for a minute. She had a dream (Maybe a vision?), this one as disturbing as the last. In this dream, Ekyt and Naruto were fighting Sasuke and...Chakaro? Sasuke looked different, wearing a hakama and an open gi top. He didn't have a hitai ate, and was using a sword. Chakaro was fighting Ekyt, and appeared to be winning. Naruto was losing to Sasuke. Sakura was on the sidelines, knowing she should be helping somehow, but not knowing what to do.

Things got worse when Ekyt and Naruto's chakra was exhausted. They both made brave last attempts to hold off Sasuke and Chakaro. It was then Sakura realized that there were a thousand ninja, wearing the Sound Village's hitai ate. Behind Ekyt and Naruto was the Leaf Village. They were holding off an invasion while everyone else was being evacuated. They were the last line of defense.

Then they were killed.

Sakura stifled a scream. "I'm going to check in on Naruto." She said, trying to keep her voice steady. For some reason, she didn't want Sasuke to know about the dream. That left Ekyt.

12 - Updated Char Bios

Name: Tamaki, Chakaro

Age: 13

Association: Former Leaf Village, now Sound Village

Associates: Orochimaru, Itachi Uchiha, Fushouchi Cheng, Kabuto Yakushi

Rank: Unknown

Appearance: shoulder-length black hair, pale skin, earrings in both ears. Wears a black open gi top, along with a black hakama. His hitai ate is tied around his shoulder. He is tall with sinewy muscle.

Sensei: Orochimaru

Team mates: None currently known

Personal Jutsu: "Full Jodan Blade" – Using his samurai training, his sword, and his chakra, Chakaro creates a blade out of the wind that slices down at an enemy in an overhead cut.

History: Once a dedicated student of Ekyt, Chakaro's thirst for power led him to Orochimaru. His past is largely unknown, only that "Chakaro Tamaki" is his chosen name, not his birth name, and that his parents are dead. He feels no remorse for his parents fate, and he refuses to say what happened to them other than claim that they died by their own stupidity.

After Fushouchi told him that Ekyt would be his greatest obstacle, Chakaro has sought to kill Ekyt. The two are evenly matched for the moment, but Chakaro is a prodigy in the martial arts, and Ekyt is not...

Name: Cheng, Fushouchi

Age: 27

Association: Sound village

Associates: Chakaro Tamaki, Orochimaru, Kabuto Yakushi

Rank: N/A, he's not technically a ninja

Appearance: A short, somewhat fat man with greasy blond hair and tiny glasses. He wears a pinstriped

gi, giving him a comical appearance.

Sensei: N/A

Team Mates: None, he recruits for Orochimaru rather than training himself.

Personal Jutsu: "Dissent Provocation" This jutsu can turn team mates against each other. However, since Fushouchi is very weak, so is the jutsu.

History: Fushouchi Cheng is something of a petty criminal, trying to make the big time. His mother is a strong woman who feels he is always a disappointment, usually making her point with a set of chopsticks across the face. Not much else is known, except his gift for spreading dissent is great.

Name: Miokawa, Akira

Age: 19

Association: Sound village

Associates: Chakaro Tamaki, Orochimaru, Kabuto Yakushi

Rank: Chunin

Appearance: He has a crop of brillo-pad-ish black hair. He typically wears a charcoal gray jumpsuit, with matching marks under his eyes. He looks very young for his age, making him ideal to spy on budding talent for Orochimaru.

Sensei: Orochimaru. He is being personally trained by Orochimaru to be his bodyguard.

Team Mate: Kabuto Yakushi

Personal Jutsu: "Million Flower Petals Blossoming" This jutsu creates a storm of flower petals, all razor sharp. If the attack is successful, the opponent is also engulfed in a genjutsu-feuded darkness.

History: Akira Miokawa is a confused young man who is proud of having such an elite sensei. He has respect for some of the people he kills, usually telling them so before attacking. When he was scouting Ekyt, despite using full power, Ekyt managed a tie. Akira hasn't forgotten that, and seems to admire Ekyt.

Name: Donalds, Kayla

Age: 14

Association: Leaf village

Associates: Rock Lee, Linda Mawashi, Ino Yamanaka, Ekyt

Rank: Student

Appearance: A slightly heavy, but somehow pretty blonde girl. She typically wears white short gi pants, with a white and black top.

Sensei: N/A- is taught by Iruka Umino and Anko Mitarashi

Team Mates: Formerly Chakaro Tamaki, Ekyt, and Linda Mawashi. Now she has no team.

Personal Jutsu: None- as a student, she hasn't honed any particular jutsu outside of the basics.

History: Kayla Donalds is, at first glance, a teenage girl. She has clothes and boys on her mind, and is very interested in her next meal. She's also very kindhearted and surprisingly talented. Her interest is in healing. After Ekyt and Linda start feuding, Kayla mostly stays with Linda, but does not abandon Ekyt totally. She is often torn, as she does not want her best friends fighting. When Chakaro left, Kayla was heartbroken at first, as she had a crush on him. She now follows Shikamaru around, though it is not known whether it is just to annoy him, or actually a case of puppy love.

Name: Mawashi, Linda

Age: 15

Association: Leaf village

Associates: Rock Lee, Kayla Donalds, Ino Yamanaka

Rank: Student

Appearance: A pretty, athletic pink-haired girl who could be mistaken for Sakura Haruno, Linda has pink hair with purple highlights pulled into a ponytail. She has one set of bangs covering her right eye. She wears white gi pants with a matching white shirt, covered with a red vest.

Sensei: N/A- is taught by Iruka Umino and Anko Mitarashi

Team Mates: Formerly Chakaro Tamaki, Ekyt, and Kayla Donalds. Linda now associates only with Kayla Donalds (Since Rock Lee is already assigned to a team)

Personal Jutsu: None- as a student, she hasn't honed any particular jutsu outside of the basics.

History: At one time, Linda Mawashi and Ekyt were great friends. Ekyt even admitted to loving her. Linda, at the time, wasn't ready for a boyfriend, so she turned him down. They split amiably. At first. Linda met Rock Lee and is currently dating him. Lee and Ekyt are often training partners. But ever since Sakura has started treating Ekyt like a friend, Linda seems to resent him more and more. She claims that he needs to stop taking missions and slow down, and that she hopes he gets crippled, so he can't take anymore missions and get killed. Now she has made an enemy (rival) of him. Her former training areas include sword, empty hand, throwing, bo, tonfa, and sai.

Name: Ekyt (No surname, he has yet to adopt one)

Age: 15

Association: Leaf village

Associates: Rock Lee, Naruto Uzumaki, Sasuke Uchiha, Sakura Haruno, Kakashi Hatake, Asuma Sarutobi, Shikamaru Nara, Ino Yamanaka, Might Guy, Tenten, Third Hokage, Iruka Umino, Anko Mitarashi, Hayate Gekko

Rank: Genin

Appearance: Short, but bush dark brown hair, pale (caucasion, non-Asian, non-Hispanic) skin. His right eye is hazel, and it is assumed his destroyed left eye was hazel as well. He is usually wearing black gi pants, a black t-shirt with a white collar, and a black vest with makimono pouches.

Sensei: N/A- he has not been assigned one yet. He rotates between Asuma Sarutobi, Might Guy, Kakashi Hatake, and Iruka Umino, in addition to training privately with Anko Mitarashi

Team Mates: Varies by mission, or none.

Personal Jutsu: "Dragon's Ember Jutsu" and "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation. In the "Dragon Ember" jutsu, Ekyt sends a rotating blast of fire at his opponent, manipulating it's path with his chakra. In "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation" Ekyt's clones use the attack, allowing Ekyt time to plan or attack.

History: At one time, Linda Mawashi and Ekyt were great friends. Ekyt even admitted to loving her. Linda, at the time, wasn't ready for a boyfriend, so she turned him down. They split amiably. At first. Ekyt lost his eye saving Linda Mawashi from an unprovoked attack by Gaara. The eye was beyond repair. Ekyt felt too many emotions, and decided he could not show them. He adopted a style similar to Kakashi's in terms of outward appearing. He uses a black headband to cover his eye, while his Hitai ate is tied around his forehead, and a mask covers his face except his right eye. Ekyt has trained non-stop, even writing his own scroll. He achieved the rank of genin in two months and is waiting to be assigned to a sensei and a team. He feels that he has to prove everyone who ever doubted him wrong. He seems to be bonding with Naruto Uzumaki and Rock Lee especially, in addition to most every sensei he meets. Lately, his mission has been to protect Sakura Haruno after she experiences some very frightening dreams that may be telling of future events. He seems fond of her, though in what was is unknown. His

past training includes some samurai training (He hasn't revealed which art), sai, tri-sectional staff, bo, tonfa, empty hand, flexible weapons, stick, machette, dagger.

12 - Behind the Dreams (And the Fan char personality quiz!)

Sakura found Ekyt talking with Naruto. "Ekyt...I really need to talk to you..." she looked around nervously. "I'll be right back Naruto." Ekyt said immediately. Sakura led him out of the small hospital room into the hallway. "What happened?" Ekyt asked immediately. "I had another dream...this one was really bad..." She told him about everything; his death, the village, and Chakaro. She expected some reaction. She got one, but not the one she expected. "Alright. All these dreams have had one thing in common: Sasuke. That, and Naruto and I die. For now...for now I think it's best if you get some REAL rest. Gemma Shiranui is going to relieve me. That leaves me free to guard the door." "Huh? Guard the door?" "Sakura, if you think you're having these dreams for a reason...it might be best not to take chances."

Sakura went to her room and locked the doors and windows. Ekyt was sitting outside the door, just in case. Sakura changed quickly into her pink, two-piece short pajamas and laid down to get some sleep. Those dreams HAD kept her up, and she knew she should take the chance to sleep while she could. Almost as soon as her head hit the pillow, the next troubling dream began.

Ekyt and Sasuke were fighting. Sasuke hit Ekyt in the face with a punch that knocked them both back. Ekyt hit a tree feet-first and pushed off, his Dragon Ember Jutsu forcing Sasuke to move. "Pathetic." Sasuke said as he swatted Ekyt out of the air. He seemed to effortlessly block every strike Ekyt threw at him. Another ninja, this one she knew as Hayate Gekko used a jutsu called the "Crescent Moon Dance." Sasuke tore through it and attacked Hayate, shuriken stabbing for his eye. Sakura seemed to go inside Ekyt's mind as he rushed to help Hayate. "Voluntary Pain Acceptance Jutsu!" he shouted. Sakura was then a bystander again. She had never seen this jutsu, but she guess what it did. As Sasuke's shuriken stabbed down into Hayate's eye, it wasn't Hayate who's eye started to bleed. It was Ekyt. "AGGH!" he folded to his knees, head down, hand clutching his eye. It was the already mangled eye, but the amount of blood coming from it suggested that the knife had penetrated deeply. "Sasuke, no! Fight it!" Sakura yelled. He looked over at her. "Shut up. Stupid girl. You're no match for me. Now, be quiet while I kill him." Sasuke's Phoenix Immortal Flame Jutsu singed Ekyt's body. He was already shaking with pain. Hayate shouted for more help, then attacked himself.

Sakura bolted upright, her hand grabbing for her kunai. She stabbed at the first thing she saw in the partially darkened room. Her lamp shattered.

Ekyt was studying his scroll when he heard the crash. "Sakura!" he pressed himself against the door. Praying she wouldn't kill him for it, he picked the lock and went inside.

Sakura was standing over the destroyed lamp, her hand bloody from a piece of porcelain hitting hit. She was breathing so heavy her body was rising and falling in tune with it. "Sakura, it's just me. Are you okay?" Ekyt asked. Sakura seemed to just register his presence. She let the kunai drop from her hand and threw herself at him. "Ooh!" he managed to catch her as she was sobbing, hanging onto him around his neck. Gently, he led her over to her bed, sitting her down. She was gripping his hand so hard her knuckles were turning red. "Tell me about it." Ekyt said simply, knowing what had caused the problem.

“...And you used a jutsu...Voluntary Pain Acceptance. But you didn’t die...” After she recited the dream, she calmed down enough to look over at Ekyt. She loosened her grip on his hand, but she wasn’t willing to let go entirely. She noticed that he had pulled his mask off and tied it around her bleeding hand. “That means all the dreams have one thing in common now...Sasuke...” Ekyt muttered, talking mostly to himself. “No. They also had you in all of them.” Sakura said, finding her voice stronger now. “Sakura, you have to talk to somebody about this...Kakashi-Sensei, maybe.” Sakura realized he was right. “Hold on...” she got up and went over to her dresser, removing a red handkerchief. “Here, put this on, until you can replace your mask.” She tied it around his face, tucking the loose end into his shirt. “Thanks. Come on, we should really see Kakashi-sensei about this.”

Kakashi listened patiently. “You might just be overly worried about Sasuke. Or this means something... For now, there’s not much we can do, aside from look for a pattern. Sasuke and Naruto won’t be available for missions for a while. And since we can’t shut down just because we’re missing some ninja...Ekyt, Sakura...let me see, you’ll need another member to with your group...Hayate Gekko will do it.” Sakura gasped. “Kakashi-sensei, I forgot! He was in my dream too! He was almost killed!” Kakashi gave the situation some more though. “Iruka is to be the squad leader. Sasuke needs to be monitored, and right now that’s me. Ekyt...since all these dreams include you, I think it’s best if you stay with Sakura.”

Iruka looked at his squad. He had a brand-new, baby-faced genin (Ekyt), a relatively new medic (Sakura), and a seasoned exam proctor (Hayate). “This mission shouldn’t be too difficult. Our mission is observation and guarding. A group of rogue ninja, one each from the rock, grass, and sand village, are rumored to be planning an attack on the village warehouse. The warehouse holds top-secret materials, so we are not informed as to what it is we’re guarding. It’s not likely three ninja are going to try to attack a warehouse in the middle of the village, but we’re the insurance policy.” “Iruka-Sensei, I’ve been instructed by Kakashi-Sensei not to leave Sakura’s side for this mission.” Iruka nodded. “Kakashi mentioned that. For this mission, we’re staying together, except for one part, and we’ll be in pairs at that point, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Sasuke felt the curse mark, noticing that the burning sensation was picking up again. “Kakashi-sensei...the mark...” he said through gritted teeth. The pain was nearly unbearable.

At the same time, Sakura suddenly uttered a small scream. Iruka and Hayate spun around. Sakura’s eyes had rolled into the back of her head. “The curse...it’s beckoning Sasuke...he won’t hold out much longer.” Sakura said, but the voice wasn’t hers. “The boy...he knows...kill him, my slave.” Sakura suddenly threw two kunai at Ekyt.

Sasuke threw two kunai at Kakashi. “I can’t help it!” Sasuke shouted. Kakashi was clearly trying to figure out a way to stop this without injuring Sasuke. “I feel...so powerful...”

“...So powerful...die!” Sakura leapt at Ekyt, who leapt aside. When Sakura rebounded, he used a substitution jutsu, replacing himself with a tree branch. He was up in a tree, trying to sort everything out. Carefully, he peered around the edge. Iruka and Hayate were trying to stop “Sakura’s” rampage. But they couldn’t figure out how to do it without hurting her. Hanging onto the tree with his legs, Ekyt used a clone jutsu.

Kakashi blocked every attack "Sasuke" threw at him. "Sasuke, you've got to get control of yourself! Focus your chakra on fighting this off! I think I know what's going on, and how to stop it. But you've got to fight!"

Sakura saw Ekyt leap from the bushes, in the opening stages of an attack. As she turned to deal with that, the real Ekyt landed silently behind her. Clasping his hands together and praying that he could do this right, he brought his hands down on the back of her neck, where her spine began. She was unconscious immediately. Iruka and Hayate gathered around her. "Iruka-Sensei...I think we need to help Kakashi-sensei...I'm not sure, but if I'm right, he's in trouble."

Iruka and Ekyt ran to where Sasuke was being kept. Hayate had taken Sakura to the hospital, where there was a team of specialists sealing the curse that was inhabiting her. It was a temporary fix, but it bought them all some time. "Ekyt, can you do that hold to Sasuke?" Iruka whispered. "Yes. Between you, Kakashi, and a clone, that should be enough distraction." Iruka and Ekyt waited for the right moment. Kakashi was talking down Sasuke, and it seemed to be having some effect. "You've really gotten better in the past couple of days. You seemed so nervous at that exam." "I was sensei. I had...some problems...with a friend. Before the exam started." Iruka looked sympathetic, then looked around the corner again. Whatever was controlling Sasuke had thrown off Kakashi's words and was attacking again.

A brief, but fierce fight ensued. Kakashi was the only one unscathed. Ekyt and Iruka had shuriken, stars, and kunai sticking out of them. Ekyt clamped down on his hold. He was thrown off, only to have his clone punch Sasuke in the jaw hard enough to knock him out. "We'll deal with Sasuke. You have your orders." Kakashi said. He knew he was being hard on the young ninja, but it was part of learning. Ekyt bowed to them and raced off.

Sakura woke up, not feeling a whole lot of pain. "What...happened?" She saw Hayate Gekko talking with a couple of nurses. Ekyt was reading his scroll. "Oh, you're awake." He got up and came over to her bedside. "How are you feeling?" he asked. "That was awful! I don't want that to happen to me again!" Sakura exclaimed. "There is a way to stop it, now that we've diagnosed the problem." A doctor had come in the room. "Sakura, you are connected, via a mind link, with Orochimaru. He is connected with Sasuke, and somehow your strong emotions for Sasuke have roped you in on the ordeal. However, because it's third-hand contact, we can help you. There's a surgery...but it carries the risk of permanent injury..." Sakura looked over at Ekyt. She couldn't see his face, but she could read his reassuring personality. "I'll do it." "We can bring you in as soon as you're ready."

"You okay Sakura?" Ekyt had asked this so much, he was waiting for her normal response. It didn't come. "I'm scared out of my mind...the surgery...and Sasuke..." "I doubt it'll be much comfort, but I'll be around." Sakura gave his hand a squeeze. "Thanks. You're really a loyal friend." She couldn't see his face, but his good eye was sporting a grin. "It's what I do. And don't worry, everything is going to be fine." Ekyt had gotten a new mask put on, but kept Sakura's handkerchief. Currently, it was binding a particular nasty wound high up on his arm shut. "Alright, I'm ready." Sakura told the doctors.

"The curse sealing method alone won't work." Kakashi said in a low voice. "What about strengthening it with the forbidden jutsu Orochimaru used on Naruto?" "The Five Elements seal? Sasuke wouldn't be able to control his chakra...unless we used an "even" seal. Five would cause an imbalance, but six...a six-pronged seal would hold it." Kakashi said thoughtfully. "But" he added, "It will exhaust my chakra

allotment for two days." "I think it's worth the risk Kakashi-Sensei." Iruka said, being completely honest.

Ekyt was incredibly nervous for Sakura. He kept tugging at the handkerchief she had given him. **I wonder how she sees me...It's no secret her heart is set on Sasuke...so that makes me the loyal friend. Cool. And Linda...something's really eating her alive...but she's in good hands with Lee. Once this surgery is done, I can relax.** Ekyt knew it wasn't true. He really liked Sakura, but he couldn't tell in what context. Most everyone here was friendly to him, despite him being so different.

The doctor came out, Sakura walking behind him. She looked unscathed. "You're her...associate?" The doctor asked Ekyt. "I'm her bodyguard, more or less." "Well, you'll be happy to know she's perfectly fine. We severed the link, and she's perfectly healthy. These dreams should have ended." "That's great to hear. Thanks doctor." The doctor did a double-take. "What happened to your eye?" "It was mangled by an attack." "Let me take a look." Ekyt showed the doctor his eye. "There's not too much that can be done for that." "It's alright, it died a hero's death." Ekyt said, hoping that would end the conversation.

Kakashi pressed all the fingers on one hand and the thumb from his other hand in a circle around Sasuke's curse mark. "That should hold it." "Damn that Orochimaru..." Iruka said angrily. "He will be stopped someday Iruka. He's got a few powerful followers, but even more powerful enemies." Their gaze shifted to the unconscious Sasuke. "I hope this is one who won't be a follower. Kakashi, you know how concerned he is about power..." "I know Iruka. But we can't do anything else. If he makes that decision, he'll make it of his own free will, not because of the curse mark." "That's not overly reassuring Kakashi."

"Ekyt...I had another dream while I was in surgery." Ekyt looked alarmed. Sakura, however, was calm. "It's Sasuke...his curse mark is sealed."

That night, Kakashi informed Ekyt he could get some rest. To Ekyt, that meant studying on his own. He chose the hot spring, hoping it would soothe his aching body. As the hot water washed over his countless cuts, Ekyt's mind wandered back to Sakura. **It was kind of...nice. In a time of desperation, she chose me as her security blanket. Was it because Sasuke wasn't available, or because I was the best choice? I wish I knew what she was thinking; well, how she thinks of me anyway. I'd be a better friend if I knew what context she had in mind. Heck, maybe I'd better focus on my own emotions first. I don't know how I feel about her. (laughs) Man, that's kind of pathetic. What, do I have a crush on her?** Ekyt stopped thinking about that subject. Partially because he was worried he was right.

NEXT ISSUE: EKYT'S GETTING THE CHANCE TO IMPROVE EVEN MORE: HE'S GOING TO FIGHT EVERY SENSEI'S TOP STUDENT. DON'T YOU WISH **YOUR** DAY WAS LIKE THAT?! PLUS, SAKURA AND TENTEN VS. LINDA AND KAYLA? UH OH! THAT INVOLVED EKYT, SASUKE, AND LEE. HOW LONG CAN THE FRIENDSHIPS LAST WITH FEUDING FRIENDS?

Hey, don't stop reading yet! How about taking a quick quiz? Don't worry, there's no wrong answers. The ultimate question is "Which NG fan char are you?"

Question 1: A girl is being brutalized by a guy. What do you do?

1. Leave the situation alone
2. Find help
3. Warn the guy, then attack if he doesn't listen
4. This really doesn't concern you, but you're mad anyway. Go stop it!

Question 2: You have a night off from training. What do you do with it?

1. Go be alone
2. Visit your gf/bf
3. No such thing as a night off. Study!
4. Study with your friends

Question 3: A girl (Or boy, if you are a girl) you like starts talking to you. How do you handle it?

1. Ignore them; what does a warrior need with love?
2. Drool at their looks
3. Be surprised, but appreciate, of the attention, then freak out privately.
4. Notice how shy the person is and tease them good-naturedly.

Question 4: It's time to eat. What'll ya have?

1. Vegetables with Wasabi
2. Chocolate, duh!
3. Maybe I'll eat, maybe I won't. Likely ramen and water.
4. Something healthy mainly, with a good desert.

Question 5: You just realized that you have a rival over your crush. What do you do?

1. I don't have crushes.
2. WHAT?! I'm the better choice!
3. Maybe I'm not good enough...
4. A rival, great! I'm gonna win!

Question 6: What do you look for in terms of love?

1. I don't need love, stop asking me.
2. Well, hotness! Duh! Brains are cool too!
3. A cute warrior who can think for her/him self, and is confident, but shy.
4. The goofy kid. You are a sucker for underdogs.

Question 7: You admire a bad guy (Everyone does, admit it!). Who is it?

1. Orochimaru. Nothing stands in his way.

2. Chakaro! He's so cool!
3. Kabuto. At least he has talent. But I seriously hate evil
4. My ex-boyfriend/ girlfriend. He's not evil, I just hate his guts.

Question 8: You see a huge fight. There are innocents being hurt. What do you do?

1. I don't pick a side, and if the innocents get in my way, they die.
2. I get the innocents out and give them medical attention.
3. I get the innocents out, then help the "good" side.
4. I'll do anything to reach the innocents, so I'll trample both sides.

Question 9: If you were a sensei/jonin/master, who would you be?

1. Orochimaru
2. Kurenai or Tsunade
3. Kakashi, Asuma, or Iruka.
4. I'm already one.

Question 10: Who are your closest friends?

1. I have none, except power.
2. Linda and Hinata
3. All the senseis I like and their respective cells.
4. Lee, Kayla, and Guy

Question 11: What drives your training?

1. To be the most powerful.
2. To get the hot guy/girl and to help people.
3. To protect myself and others, to be the best and to force people to take me seriously.
4. To protect myself and others.

ANSWERS BELOW

SCORES:

If you answered "1" to 7 or more questions, then you are Chakaro Tamaki. You disdain anyone and

anything that holds even a hint of weakness. You will follow the power, and you have a natural gift for them martial arts. You couldn't care less what people think, they're probably all dead in the end anyway.

If you answered "2" to 7 or more questions, you are Kayla Donalds. You're a perky girl who appears shallow, but actually cares very deeply for your friends. You've got a thing for guys that want nothing to do with you. You're going to pester them until they like you!

If you answered "3" to 7 or more questions, you are Ekyt. You're very concerned with justice, and you're somewhat dark and brooding. Even though you disdain emotions, you still get them. And you might have a thing for pink-haired warrior girls. You are 100% a good guy.

If you answered "4" to 7 or more questions, you are Linda Mawashi. You've got a thing for goofy boys that are clueless when it comes to romance (Or so they seem to be clueless). You've recently dumped your old boyfriend on good terms, but you suddenly decided to hate him for some strange reason. You're an excellent fighter.

If you don't fit in the above, leave a comment asking NG which char you are!

13 - The Blue Flame Chakra

"Up and at 'em!" Kakashi said brightly. Naruto leapt out of bed, thrashing wildly. Sasuke shook his head, while Sakura contained a laugh. "Good to see you're awake Naruto." Kakashi said mildly. "Don't you ever knock Kakashi-sensei?!" Naruto exclaimed. He grumbled as he sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "What's with the wake-up call anyway?" "Iruka requested the three of you specially. He's giving a lecture today, and since you all specialize in different areas, you're a perfect fit." Naruto grinned as he stripped off his pajamas. "Makes sense to me! I'm gonna be the next Hokage, believe it!" "I didn't know the next Hokage wore boxers." Sakura pointed out dryly. "Sakura, I didn't know you were a pervert! (I mean, you coulda asked...)" Sakura got an unmistakable look of rage in her eyes. Kakashi went back to his book while Sasuke looked away. Naruto's day was off to a painful start.

Someone...someones in the room. Ekyt thought, waking up like he had never been asleep at all. He kept still, trying to keep his breathing normal, while sensing something about his attackers. They were definitely ninja; he hadn't heard anything since that first small clatter. There was at least two. And they were close. Ekyt heard a breath that wasn't entirely concealed. Slowly, his hand reached for his dagger, which he always kept in a hidden pouch in his blanket. He slashed his hand, to find his dagger blocked. "That," a voice said, "Is the way a ninja wakes up!" Ekyt recognized the voice. "Kakashi-Sensei, good morning." Ekyt pushed all the scrolls he had been studying off his legs. He stayed covered up, especially since Sakura was in the room. "Good morning to you to." Kakashi had blocked Ekyt's dagger with his own kunai. Ekyt's aim had been true, he would have hit Kakashi high up on his left leg. "You and these three are needed at the academy. Iruka asked for all of you." "Alright, I'll be ready in two minutes." "SEE?! HE'S NOT A PIG LIKE YOU! HE'S WAITING UNTIL I LEAVE THE ROOM BEFORE HE" "Okay Sakura, that will do." Kakashi said in a bored tone.

In record time, Ekyt had gotten himself cleaned up and dressed. He walked out the door, tucking his white scroll into the far right makimono pouch. "How do you get your hair to just stay in one place like that?" Sakura couldn't help asking. Ekyt shrugged. "It just happens." He put his toothpick in his mouth, looking ready to go. "Kakashi-sensei, if I might ask...why does Iruka-sensei need me? I know these three all specialize in different areas, but I don't know about me." "That's something you'll have to ask Iruka. But he'll have a good reason."

On the way there, Kakashi and his group met Lee, Linda, Guy, Tenten, and Neji. "Morning Kakashi!" Guy said enthusiastically. "Good morning Guy." Kakashi answered, lowering his book. "Good morning to all of you." Lee said respectfully. "mornin' Bushy Brow!" Naruto retruned. "I've asked you to stop calling me that Naruto!" "Good morning Lee. You too, Tenten...I don't think I've met you yet." Ekyt pointed to Neji. "Neji Hyuga." The boy (Ekyt could have sworn it was a girl) said in a distant sort of voice. "Ekyt." "What's your clan?" Neji asked. "I don't have one." "The heavens disagree." Neji answered immediately. Ekyt's good eye narrowed. "Well, that's up to the heavens then." He said brightly. **I really don't like this guy.** Ekyt shifted his gaze to Linda, who was hanging on Lee's arm. **Does she think I'm jealous? Maybe for a relationship in general, but not with her! That she-demon.** "I don't suppose you've given up yet." Linda said in a bored drawl. "Nope. And I'm not going to." Ekyt said back.

Linda stepped away from Lee. "Maybe not yet, but you will." She gave him a hard poke in the chest. Sakura took a hard stride forward, but said nothing. "I don't quit very easy Linda. Certainly losing your friendship won't be enough. For the record, the jealous ploy isn't working." Everyone winced at that. "Good thing too." Just to annoy her, Ekyt called "No hard feelings Lee!" Lee had to force himself not to chuckle. "Ekyt, you can play with your little friend later. Iruka's waiting." Kakashi reminded him.

"So you're all vying for the rank of genin. Just be warned, not all of you will make it the first time around." Iruka's words echoed throughout the silent hall. Iruka was well-respected (except by Naruto, of course) as a teacher, and a pillar of society in the Leaf Village. "I've asked some of my recent graduates to come by and talk about their respective fields. Ah, here they are now!" Iruka said happily as his group walked in. With the exception of Naruto, who hugged Iruka. "It's good to see you too, Naruto. Now, where do we begin? Ah, Sakura, how about you first?"

Sakura stepped to the front of the class. "My name is Sakura Haruno, and the field I've chosen is medical. Unlike regular first aid, this kind of medication involves manipulating your chakra to heal normally deadly injuries. I'd show you, but I don't see any injuries." Kakashi gave Ekyt a shove forward. "Um, well, I have this cut from a kunai on my arm..." Ekyt stifled the dirty look he almost threw to Kakashi, who seemed pleased with himself. "Perfect! Hold still!" Sakura said. "Chakra Scalpel Jutsu!" Everyone watched as Sakura gently touched Ekyt's arm. Immediately the deep cut turned to nothing but a red line on his skin. Everyone clapped at the end.

"Thank you Sakura. Now let me see...Naruto. Waiting was never your strong suit..." Iruka said, clapping him on the shoulder. Naruto leapt up onto the front row of desks. "I'm Naruto Uzumaki! I like ramen, lot's of kinds! My specialty is combat, and I'm the next Hokage, believe it!" The students looked scared and impressed. "Naruto, why don't you show them a jutsu?" Iruka said. **Oh no...** "Wait, Naruto, not"

Too late. "Sexy Jutsu!" Naruto called. He was suddenly a beautiful naked girl. "Pretty hot, huh everyone?!" the girl Naruto said happily, barring nothing. Several boys in the class responded with nose bleeds. The girls responded with a mix of disgust and admiration. The students who had been eye level had just learned a lesson in anatomy.

Iruka let his head hang. "I should've guessed...moving on...Ekyt, how about you?!" Iruka grabbed Naruto by the hair. He/She was posing for the crowd now, blowing kisses and whatnot. Ekyt stepped forward. Some of the students knew him, but not very well. He must have looked ill, with the dark circles under his eye, and the headband tied crooked across his eye.

"I'm Ekyt, I don't have a surname." That sentence alone got attention. "I'm a new genin, promoted three weeks ago. I don't have a cell or a sensei." "Hey, you were in class with us! How'd you pass?" Ekyt looked at the questioning student. It wasn't a kid he remembered. "By studying...day and night...for two monthes straight. Well, two monthes and three weeks, if you count the past three weeks." Ekyt answered. "Come on, no can study that good!" Ekyt reached for his white scroll. Dramatically, he pierced his thumb with a kunai, ready to show off a new trick he had learned just two days ago. "Summoning Jutsu!" he called. At his feet, a dog popped up, sitting obediently. "This is Holly. She's a Keeshonden (pronounced "Kays-hond), and what I summon with that particular jutsu." "How do we know that's not some genjutsu you pulled off?!" the same kid called. Ekyt produced another scroll, this one very small. He handed it to Holly, who took it in her mouth. Ekyt pointed to the kid. The dog ran up to him and leapt onto the desk. She dropped the scroll near his hands and sat down. The boy opened

the scroll. "Study hard?" he said, reading the contents. "That's right. I'm surprised you can read." To everyone's surprise, the dog had said that. "Y-you can ta-talk?" the students stammered. "Better than you apparently." The dog said in a deep female voice. "Holly, that'll do." Ekyt said quietly. Holly disappeared with a pop as Ekyt put the scroll away.

When did he learn that? Impressive for a new genin...for anyone. Kakashi thought to himself, smiling at the trick. Sakura was cooing over how cute the dog was. Ekyt was standing in the center of the room, hands in the pockets of his vests. "I don't have a specialty, like I said. But I wouldn't mind teaching, in addition to fighting. My goal is to be an elite Jonin, so I can protect myself and others." The same kid still hadn't given up on trying to make a fool out of Ekyt. Although Ekyt's patience was wearing thin, he bit his tongue at the next comment. "What happened to your eye?!" Ekyt slowly looked over to Iruka, who nodded gravely. "They need to know Ekyt. But just show him, I know you'd rather keep this private." Ekyt nodded slowly, then climbed up the steps. Every head turned towards him as he walked up slowly.

Okkuu Imaimashii wondered if he had finally pushed Ekyt too far. As he got closer, Okkuu was actually scarred. "You don't have to show me!" he said quickly. "No...you asked...and it's something you need to know...Hope you didn't just eat." Ekyt warned. "I did, so I'll just" "Kindly vomit the other way, then." Ekyt said, leaning close and lifting his headband. Okkuu looked okay for a second, then turned green and dashed from the hall, a hand over his mouth. Ekyt replaced his headband. Iruka snickered. He didn't usually enjoy torturing his students, but Okkuu was a hard one to like.

"Sasuke, if you please." Sasuke **didn't** please, but did as he was told. "I'm Sasuke Uchiha. I'm the last member of the Uchiha clan (He doesn't mention his brother, Itachi). I possess the Sharingan eye. I'm an avenger, with a mission to kill someone." Sasuke said all this in such a dry tone, but it kept the rapt attention of everyone.

"Before we get to the last guest, perhaps Sasuke could give us a demonstration of his fighting abilities. Naruto, you just got out of the hospital...Ekyt." All eyes turned toward Ekyt. Ekyt was scared to death, but smiled in anticipation at the same time. Sasuke looked the cat who swallowed the canary. "Don't worry, you'll live, Sakura's here." Sasuke said, taking a guard. Ekyt realized that was Sasuke's attempt at being friendly. "Well Sasuke...looks like you're getting your wish. You said you wanted to fight me. I'll give you a match, then."

"Iruka...are you serious?! He can't handle Sasuke!" Naruto shouted. "He's right Iruka-Sensei..." Sakura agreed sadly, hoping Ekyt didn't hear that. "Iruka knows what he's doing." Kakashi said forcefully. "That boy has surprised us before...I don't know if he can beat Sasuke...but you can bet he'll have a trick or two up his sleeve."

Sasuke and Ekyt got right into it. No weapons yet, but fists and legs seemed to be enough. Ekyt landed a couple shots, though Sasuke was easily winning. He managed to land a hard shot to Ekyt, knocking him backward into the first row of students. Sasuke looked indifferent. "Is that it?" he said aloud. "Not quite!" a voice said from behind him. Ekyt hit Sasuke in the side of the head with a punch. Sasuke grinned slightly and used his "Lion Barrage" combo on Ekyt. That put Ekyt down, but good. Or so he thought.

"That poor clone will never be the same." Ekyt said, standing on the other side of the room. Sasuke

whipped around. "Good trick. Now let me show you one of mine..." Before Sasuke could do anything, Ekyt attacked with "Dragon's Ember Jutsu." Sasuke dodged them skillfully. "Sharingan!" he called. His eyes turned red, showing three marks shaped like comma's. That would reveal any genjutsu or ninjutsu Ekyt used. Sasuke narrowed his eyes. He was staring at a clone.

Ekyt got up quietly, cursing the splinters in his back. Leaping high, he brought his foot down on Sasuke. He hit...a log. As soon as he landed, Ekyt knew he had made a mistake. He kicked backward. It would have hit a normal person, but Sasuke was too quick. He blocked Ekyt's kick with his forearm. Ekyt thrust an elbow backward. Sasuke simply leaned backward himself and swept at Ekyt's legs. "Do you give up?" he asked as Ekyt lay on the ground. Ekyt landed both feet to Sasuke's chest, knocking him backward, while springing to his feet and across the room. "You're persistent, I'll give you that." Sasuke said. He made the necessary hand sign. "Phoenix Immortal Flame Jutsu!"

Three balls of fire shot at Ekyt in rapid-fire succession. He dodged them all, returning fire. "Shadow clone jutsu! Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!" he said in one sentence. Two clones joined him. Sasuke could pick them out, but he couldn't stop their jutsus. Blasts of fire aimed at Sasuke forced the students to cover their eyes as it blazed by. Sasuke dodged the continuous attacks. It suddenly hit him what Ekyt was doing. **He wants to exhaust my chakra. I need chakra to fight...he doesn't...This is getting interesting...**

Ekyt let his clones continue their attack. **Sasuke must know what I'm doing...or thinks he does...I've got to end this now. Taijutsu is the only option left...** He darted across the room, silently thanking Lee for being his training partner. In a blur, Ekyt struck. Spin back kick, roundhouse, front kick, side kick, flying spinning side kick. He landed behind Sasuke and grabbed him. "Konoha Backward Snap Dragon: Modified!" he called. "Modified?" Iruka said questioningly. Kakashi shrugged. "He's more than a one-trick pony." Sakura was chewing on her nails, praying neither boy got hurt seriously.

Ekyt had grabbed Sasuke in tight. In the other version of the Backward Konoha Snap Dragon, Ekyt leapt high into the air, cradling the neck and waist. In this version, it started the same, except Ekyt grabbed both Sasuke's arms and pulled up while standing on his chest. All while soaring down toward the ground. BLAMMM!!!!

Every student stood up as one, looking into the crater created by Sasuke and Ekyt's bodies. Ekyt crawled out of the hole, clearly exhausted. He forced himself upright, breathing hard. Sasuke lay still for a few moments. Kakashi knew something was up. Apparently, Ekyt guess that too, because he leapt backward. Good thing too.

Sasuke suddenly used his flame jutsu three times. Ekyt dodged them all. But Sasuke's smirk looked too genuine. Ekyt tried to move, then realized what happened. "Strings?" he said. Sasuke had strings attached to his arms, and one attached to his mouth. Ekyt had been forced into a pillar, and was now bound to it. He couldn't make any hand signs, and he couldn't defend himself. "Do you give up?" Sasuke asked. Ekyt looked up, his good eye blackened and his lower left arm singed. He spat out blood. "No."

"You can't move, you can't defend yourself, and you're exhausted...why won't you give up?" Sasuke asked in surprise. "What happens if you quit on a mission?" Ekyt said quietly. He shook his head. He couldn't move his arms, but he could just reach his kunai pouch with his right fingertips. He kept talking,

hoping to distract Sasuke. "You die if you quit. And you die in shame. I'd rather die with honor Sasuke...there's no shame in losing to you." Ekyt said with a grin, hit teeth a shade of pink from the blood. "An honorable death is preferable to a dishonorable life." Ekyt said. **C'mon...c'mon...just a quarter inch more...almost got it...** Sasuke shrugged. "Have it your way." Sasuke ran in for the kill.

"Rope Escape Jutsu!" Ekyt called. He still couldn't move. "Nice try. But that's not ordinary string!" Sasuke called. Everyone winced, seeing what was going to happen next. Ekyt had one more surprise for them. He reached his kunai pouch and opened it. He threw a kunai at Sasuke's feet. "Good try, but you missed." Sasuke said. "Did I?" Ekyt said. BOOM! An exploding tag!

The explosion broke Ekyt's bindings. He was still too tired to do much but play defense. But he had to take advantage of this opportunity. Except Sasuke could see through the smoke and he couldn't. All Ekyt could think of was to throw more exploding tags at his feet. They would be triggered by Sasuke's approach. He squatted down, hopping he could see better down there since the smoke was lifting. He didn't see anything. Sasuke did.

Sasuke snatched the exhausted Ekyt up. "Peregrine Falcon Drop!" Sasuke called. One high impact move later, and the fight was over. Ekyt was half-buried under a foot of floor, and only semi-conscious. The students looked on in awe. "I hope you enjoyed that. Class dismissed!" Iruka said, a little too quickly. Sakura was already kneeling near Ekyt. "He's not dead." Sasuke said darkly. "What?" Sakura said, blinking. "I said he's not dead. I COULD have killed him. But he's alive." Sasuke leapt down into the hole, grabbing the now-unconscious Ekyt's body and heaving it up to the level ground. "He should have quit." Sasuke murmured. "I wish he had..." Iruka said sadly. "No." Kakashi had two fingers extended, probing Ekyt's bones for breaks. "He acted as a true Shinobi should. You know that you can't quit on a mission." "This was practice!" Iruka argued vehemently. "You get out what you put in Iruka."

"Then I hope he got a lot!" Sakura pushed to the front. "No breaks...minor burns...he must have blacked out from having no stamina or chakra left..." Her announcement was met with sighs of relief. "We'd better get him to the hospital."

Something strange happened then. Ekyt suddenly leapt to his feet, eye still closed. He grabbed a kunai and stabbed it violently into his own leg. His eyes flashed open suddenly, panic etched on his now-visible (Sakura removed his mask) face. "You've got to stop him! Not me, never mind me! Him!" Ekyt shouted, pointing to Sasuke. He had a hand to his curse mark, and his eyes were starting to turn red. Everyone but Sakura rushed over. "Stay with Ekyt!" Kakashi told her. Ekyt had his eyes closed in pain, his body wracked with violent shudders. "I...saw my own death...and everyone else's..." Ekyt stammered. "I had no way to come out of it...It was genjutsu, it had to be...but I didn't see Sasuke's hands move." Ekyt took a deeper breath than usual, but continued shaking. "Come here." Sakura forced him to lay down. She sat near his head, holding it, absently stroking his blood-matted hair. Ekyt didn't want to stay laying down after he heard Sasuke talk. Or, rather, it SOUNDED like Sasuke.

"Fool. A great ninja doesn't NEED hand signs to torture his targets..." Sasuke laughed, but everyone could tell it wasn't him speaking. Ekyt staggered to his feet. There was a fire in his eyes. "A great ninja doesn't need torture period!" The fire from Ekyt's eyes seemed to draw on some strange chakra. It was light blue...and it was surrounding Ekyt's fist. His hand was open in front of his chest. A blue flame had sprung up, with purple sparks dancing from it. Ekyt ran forward incredibly fast and shouted the

strange jutsu's name: "Transparent Hand Jutsu: Blue Flame Protection Seal!" Rearing back, he jammed his hand into and through (Through?) Sasuke's stomach. It looked vaguely like the Chidori jutsu Sasuke himself used. Ekyt clenched his fist, wincing as it must have hurt him. When Ekyt pulled his hand out, a mark appeared on Sasuke's curse. It turned blue, then red, then purple. Ekyt stood up straight, with a distinct "What the hell did I just do?" look on his face. He was suddenly blown backward, landing hard on the other side of the room. "It's a shame I don't possess Sharingan." The voice said. "Had a stronger ninja used that technique, it might have worked." "You're in luck Orochimaru!" Kakashi said. He had his headband pulled down. He had seen Ekyt's technique. He copied it and used it.

This time Sasuke's curse mark glowed blue, then faded to an outline. "Kakashi, I will make you pay! I will have the Uchiha boy yet!" Orochimaru's voice shouted. Sasuke's curse mark remained an outline. "It will come back." Kakashi said gravely. "Sakura." He only needed to say her name. She broke toward Ekyt at a run. "Did that...whatever it was...really do it Kakashi?" Iruka asked, looking worriedly at Sasuke. "It was performed imperfectly, I might have copied it imperfectly..." Kakashi admitted. He could tell Iruka didn't like the thought any more than he did.

Ekyt looked weak in the knees as he clambered to one knee. After pausing there for a few seconds, he got up all the way. "Ekyt...you're alright!" Sakura breathed a sigh of relief. Ekyt coughed out blood in reply. "Come here." Sakura said. But it was she who moved. She snatched Ekyt up in an embrace. Sliding his Hitai-ate up, she kissed his forehead, the only clean spot on his face. "Thank you...you're a very brave warrior." Ekyt forced a smile, but even that hurt. Then he fell forward, his secondary reserve of mystery chakra and stamina exhausted.

NEXT ISSUE: WHAT THE HECK HAPPENED? EKYT AND SASUKE HAVE SOME ANSWERING TO DO- TO LORD HOKAGE! EKYT IS ASSIGNED A MISSION WITH HAYATE GEKKO TO FIND OUT ABOUT SASUKE'S CURSE. IT'S EKYT'S FIRST REAL MISSION, HOW IS HE GONNA DO?

SAKURA HAS TO DEAL WITH SASUKE AND NARUTO ON A REGULAR BASIS. BUT NOW THEY'VE GOT A MISSION- LINDA, ROCK LEE, AND TENTEN. WITH LINDA AND SAKURA AT ODDS, HOW ARE THEY GONNA PULL THIS OFF?

14 - First Impressions

The Third Hokage rubbed his tired brow. "The Uchiha boy's case is getting stranger." "It is sir." Answered Gemma Shiranui. Hokage looked over Kakashi's report again. "If possible, it's even stranger how this new boy is connected... Ekyt... hmm... he was the one who tipped us off about the Sound Village's attack... interesting how fate works..." Hokage leaned back, puffing on his pipe. "Gemma, please summon Sasuke Uchiha, Sakura Haruno, and Ekyt..." "Yes sir, right away." Gemma vanished in a cloud of smoke. "Ah, to be young. Gemma has no idea how fast he's already grown up." Hokage pulled the pipe from his mouth, holding it, studying the smoke rising from it. "I can see great things for most of the Konoha ninjas... Even you Naruto. Sasuke... you must never give up. Sakura, someday you'll be the finest medic we've ever seen. And our newest... Ekyt... you're as much a mystery to me as you are to everyone else. Interesting how far you've come..."

Hokage heard the knock on the door some times later. "Here they are sir." Gemma told him. "Thank you Gemma. Please, give us a few minutes." Gemma bowed and exited. The large room seemed to be mostly painted white, with various weapons and pictures decorating the walls. Hokage was sitting in a chair that was carved as a gift from a local shopkeeper. Three cushions were scattered in front of Hokage. "Please, make yourselves comfortable! This is no interrogation!" Hokage offered. One of his servants brought in a tray of tea and rice balls. **The Haruno girl... she's so tense. Of course, she's sitting next to Sasuke... no secrets there. Sasuke would rather not be here... also expected... and what of the other young man? I've seen him in combat situations, but one on one, he seems... nervous. Very interesting, all of them...**

Ekyt and Sasuke had already discussed the fight, and there were no hard feelings. Sasuke had walked away mildly impressed, even almost thankful for Ekyt's help in sealing that curse. Ekyt had walked away... well, literally speaking, he had been helped away on a stretcher. But he had even more contents for his scroll, including a new jutsu. Sakura was relieved, both of her friends had lived, and they didn't hate each other! She thought back to the other night. **Thank you... you're a very brave warrior. She lifted his hitai ate and kissed his forehead, the last clean spot on his face. Ekyt managed as smile, then fell forward, his mysterious chakra and stamina gone** Sakura blushed at the memory. After that, she had tended to Sasuke, who's injuries were minor.

"I DO have questions for all of you. All I ask is honesty... if you can't answer, I understand. This has been a traumatic experience for you three." Hokage grinned at the rapt attention the three students were displaying. "Now, let's begin with you, Ms. Haruno." Sakura's eyes widened at her name. "O-Okay." She stammered, nervously brushing her pink hair aside. "You were the first to experience those dreams... I must ask you to relieve them once more... tell me about them. And any similarities between them."

Sakura looked horribly shaken. "Lord Hokage, if I may..." Ekyt said respectfully, bowing. "Yes?" Ekyt turned to Sakura. "It's okay. You're the strongest kunoichi around. Those dreams... they were from hell... but Sasuke and I are both here. You've got my support Sakura. Remember, this will help you AND Sasuke." Sakura looked over, a small sound of surprise escaping her lips. **He's... helping me? To get Sasuke's attention? But... I thought...** He gave her hand a brief squeeze. When she held on, he gave

her a nod.

"Lord Hokage, all the dreams had two things in common: Ekyt and Naruto were fighting Sasuke. But it felt like there was...evil. The only constant in all three was Ekyt dying. And..." she hesitated. She looked over at Sasuke, who looked almost...encouraging. "And they all involved Orochimaru's group. The Sound Village." Sakura closed her eye for a moment, breathing through her nose, calming herself.

Interesting...Hokage thought. But not entirely unexpected. The Uchiha boy, Sasuke...her dreams may have been referencing his curse mark, not to mention her emotions for him...And I might be mistaken, but it seems she's quite fond of this Ekyt boy as well...He's a support beam to her, which she needs. But how can someone so anxious himself offer support to anyone else? "Ekyt, let's hear from you next."

"Focus Naruto." "I'm trying Kakashi-sensei! I'm trying!" Naruto made sure of his aim, and struck. Crack, crack, crack! Three punches, three clean breaks. Naruto pulled his hitai-ate back up, out of the way of his eyes. "That was very good Naruto. I know you've been clamoring for a mission. Well, you're getting one." Naruto cheered. "Yessss! One more step toward Hokage!" As he watched Naruto dance around Kakashi smiled to himself, thinking **He really has come a long way...he's still the number-one, hyperactive, maverick ninja knucklehead...but he's also a hard worker...his control has gotten better...and none too soon...this next mission is going to take some work...**

"Linda-chan!" Linda looked up from the scroll she had been reading for the last twenty minutes. "Oh, hi Lee!" she said brightly, getting up to hug him. "We have a mission!" "Huh? Me?" "Yes! You, myself, and Tenten. We must go to Guy-Sensei and get the mission specifics. He is at Lone Pine Hill." Linda was brimming with excitement. She couldn't wait. **I'll show Ekyt...and that Sakura...I'm just as capable as they are!**

The Hokage waited for Ekyt to start. "I only experienced (cough) the dreams once. That was yesterday. Sasuke and I put on a demonstration for Iruka-Sensei's class. After the match, I was unconscious, when I suddenly saw a vision, like it was happening inside my eye lids...I saw Sasuke, except his curse mark had spread, all throughout his body. He was threatening to kill everyone. They were all injured...maybe dead. So I leapt up, trying to defend them. But I was killed. My hands...moved on their own. I thrust a kunai into my stomach and cut everything inside. Sasuke had my sword...he acted as a kaishaku-nin, and cut my head off...I was dead, but I could still see everything...and everyone was dead, or being killed." Ekyt paused as Hokage raised a hand. "The vision was certainly genjutsu, one that Orochimaru uses. You must all be on your guard now. Please, continue." Ekyt nodded. "I saw all this happening, and I suddenly felt a new chakra forming. I'd never seen or felt it before, but I knew the hand sings to make, and even the name of the jutsu I was about to use." "And what was it's name?" Hokage asked in interest. "It was called the "Transparent Hand Jutsu: Blue Flame Protection Seal."

Hokage sat back, hard. "Can you demonstrate it?" he asked, thinking he already knew. Ekyt shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I can't sense that chakra anymore...I can explain it better, however." "Please do." "I held a hand in front of my chest, where it burst into a blue flame, with purple sparks. I could see through my own hand. I jammed it into Sasuke's stomach and clenched my fist. The mark...it glowed, faded, then came back. I was too weak to finish the jutsu. Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei had seen it and copied it. But...But the seal won't hold for long. Not without the technique being perfected. If Kakashi-Sensei could see it when I have my full chakra and stamina, I'm sure it would work."

"That's an option Ekyt. However, we cannot divert our resources to a "maybe" until that's our only option." "I understand sir. (cough)." "Are you not well?" Hokage asked. "The cough sir? Well, Sasuke and I gave a rather physical demonstration." Ekyt said with a slight grin. "I see. Ekyt...you are dismissed. Report to Asuma Sarutobi. You have a mission. Upon completion, whatever the cost, I need a report from you." Ekyt looked surprised, but stood up. "Understood Lord Hokage." Ekyt walked to the door. Sakura tugged on his pant leg and whispered something to him. Ekyt gave a grin and patted his arm, where there was a bulge. Hokage couldn't help but smile. "Sakura, you and Sasuke are almost through here. Sasuke...I need to know everything you can tell me..."

"Kakashi, do you really think this is wise?" Guy questioned. "Sakura is an excellent medic, Lee's a taijutsu prodigy, Sasuke is a natural, Tenten excels with weapons, Linda needs mission experience to graduate eventually, and Naruto is...Naruto. They all compliment each other." "Not Linda and Sakura. They're near blows with each other." Guy argued, jabbing his finger for emphasis. "They need to learn to put them aside. Besides, Sasuke will be around. Sakura will be occupied." Asuma Sarutobi chose that moment to appear. "Sorry I'm late. I heard about your missions...but I think mine is going to take the cake for now." "What do you mean Asuma?" Guy asked. "It seems Hayate Gekko and Ekyt have a mission to learn more about Sasuke's curse mark." That was news to Sasuke and Guy. "Hayate? Isn't he an exam proctor?" "Lord Hokage chose him personally. Same with Ekyt. I recommended Shikamaru, since Ekyt doesn't have the experience to lead yet, and Hayate doesn't seem the type. But Shikamaru is supposed to stay here. I think they've got something in mind for him. I just wish I knew what. That slacker might be in over his head, no matter how smart he is."

"When I first got bitten, I couldn't use my chakra without it hurting. Kakashi-Sensei sealed the curse mark so I could use my chakra again. The curse started acting up again after Orochimaru's attack. I couldn't control my body at times. The last time was after Ekyt and I sparred...he was unconscious after he lost. Then my curse started to burn, and I heard Orochimaru's voice in my head...it forced me to talk...Ekyt used that Jutsu and stuck his hand inside my stomach. He clenched his fist, and I felt Orochimaru fade. But Ekyt was too weak, Orochimaru came back. Then Kakashi used his Sharingan and copied Ekyt's jutsu." Sasuke finished his story. Sakura had moved closer to him, much to his complete indifference.

Hayate Gekko coughed again. **What's the deal here? I haven't been assigned a mission in ages, let alone a B rank. I've got a genin with me who's never had a real mission, not like this.** Hayate coughed, then straightened his hitai-ate. He wore his as a head covering, leaving only one long bang of hair and his sideburns visible. He had bags under his eyes and a habitual cough. He heard someone approaching. "Flash." The voice said. "(koff) Thunder." Hayate answered. Ekyt walked up to him. Hayate's first evaluating glance of Ekyt wasn't exactly favorable, but he didn't judge.

Ekyt had to change his look. His head had been hurt with in his match with Sasuke, and the blood had matted so much that his haircut looked retarded. So he had taken to wearing his hitai-ate as a head covering, at least for a while. Couple that with the black headband across his eye, the black mask across his face, and the toothpick jutting from his covered mouth, and he definitely didn't look like you're average guy. Ekyt smiled fondly, though, thinking of how the look had come about. Sakura had been the one to suggest it, actually helping him tie the thing on tight enough. **The look on her face when I mentioned Sasuke...she's worried about hurting my feelings...And Sasuke's...what would give her that kind of worry?** Ekyt thought he knew, but he honestly wasn't sure. Hayate's cough brought him

back to reality.

“(koff) Ekyt, right?” “That’s me. You’re...Hayate?” “Um, yeah.” Hayate talked like he had zero confidence, despite being an accomplished chunin at the age of 23. “Any idea what our mission is about?” Ekyt asked. “Recon. That Sasuke guy’s curse mark...I remember seeing it at the chunin exams. Now we’re researching it. (koff koff).” “Have you been briefed on why I’m included in this?” Ekyt questioned. “Yeah. (Koff) Interesting jutsu. It just happened?” Hayate asked curiously. “Yeah.” Ekyt said, wondering himself how that had happened.

“Alright! Ah, youth! Your mission is to find and recover a scroll that was lost during the chunin exams.” Guy exclaimed. None of the genin wanted to go back to the Forest of Death. Linda and Kayla knew enough to understand that this place was bad news.

Kayla had been added at the last minute, because of her sharp observational skills. Guy continued. “So, let’s pair up. Naruto, you’re with Lee. (Lee’s face turned slightly downcast at this news). Tenten, you’re with Kayla. Sakura, you’re with Linda. Any Objec” “This witch? You’re kidding?!” Linda shouted, pointed at Sakura. “I’M the witch?! At least I don’t abandon my friend, you cheap knock-off!” “What was that?!” “You heard me!”

“Hold on Guy. Kakashi, it seems we have an odd number. So my three are joining the mission too.” Asuma said, gesturing to Ino, Choji, and Shikamaru. “Kurenai’s group is helping Iruka, or they would have come too.” Asuma added. “Ino, you join Sakura and Linda. Choji, you and Shikamaru stick together. Sasuke, you’re with me.” Kakashi said.

Sakura was mortified. Ino AND Linda. But something strange happened. Ino came up to her. “Listen Sakura. I know you don’t like Linda. Right now, I don’t either. For now, let’s just put aside our differences (well similarities, it IS Sasuke after all...). Right now, that poor kid deserves a break...so let’s just lay off each other until we’re done working with Linda. That pink-haired dog, clinging on Lee in front of Ekyt. Whaddaya say?” Sakura thought about Ekyt and Sasuke.

“I’m in Ino.”

“Alright, um (koff) we’ve got to keep this as quiet as possible. If we’re attacked, we’ve got to get out of there. (koff koff). Expect genjutsu. If anything goes wrong, one person gets captured or (koff) killed, the other reports back here. Alright?” Ekyt nodded. “Got it.” **First thing Kakashi-sensei taught me: Abandoning a mission is bad, but abandoning a team mate, that’s just being scum. Hope I don’t have to make that choice.**

NEXT ISSUE: THE MISSIONS BEGIN!

15 - Kabuto's Intentions

Groups:

Ino, Sakura, and Linda
Tenten and Kayla
Lee and Naruto
Choji and Shikamaru
Kakashi and Sasuke

On a separate mission, Ekyt and Hayate Gekko

"Kabuto, you look like you have news." Orochimaru's pale face grinned in anticipation; Kabuto rarely let him down. Kabuto pushed up his glasses. Far from being a helpless nerd (He just looks that way), the silver-haired Kabuto was actually a ninja, sometimes compared to Kakashi, though he never achieved the rank of chunin. "I do. The Uchiha boy, Sasuke, is on a mission in the forest of death." "That IS excellent news." Orochimaru's incredibly long tongue licked his almost non-existent lips. "However" continued Kabuto, "He is the company of Kakashi, as well as with 9 other team mates. Their Hokage is watching closely for signs of movement from us." Orochimaru's smile vanished. "Any information on that jutsu? It could have been dangerous, had it been performed properly. I should be able to manipulate the Uchiha boy again soon, that much I know. But what else is there?" Kabuto shrugged mildly. "This particular jutsu has never been used before, and never in full effectiveness. There's a negligible chance that it's a tripwire, however. Trying to forcibly take over Sasuke's body might be a mistake..." "Time will tell. Well done Kabuto."

"Alright, um (koff), let's start by arming ourselves. I've got my sword and kunai. Go for a long range and a short range (koff) if you've got experience with one of each." Hayate advised Ekyt. Ekyt chose kunai for the short range. Long range, he decided to bring along his sword. "Better for survival. I can always cut a tree limb for a bo." Ekyt said by way of explanation. Hayate wore his sword across his back. Ekyt wore his like a samurai, inside his belt. He used the kurigata ("Cord) to fasten the scabbard (case) to his belt. "Good. (Koff koff). We're heading to the Sound Village's outskirts." Ekyt finished taping his hands while Hayate talked. "Climate?" Ekyt asked. "Mild, some wind, um, not a lot of rain." **Why does Lord Hokage want me to observe this kid? He'll have his reasons, I guess...** "Whenevers you're (koff) set." "I'm good."

"Don't get any ideas." Linda warned the Sakura and Ino. Sakura bit her tongue. Ino, however. "WHAT ideas? At least he's a REAL ninja, not some cheap knockoff like you! The emphasis being on cheap!" Sakura had to stifle a laugh. THAT was going a bit far. That didn't mean it wasn't funny. "You little blond tramp! I'd chew you up!" Linda snarled. Ino laughed outright. "You couldn't even get near me!" "C'mon, let's just find that scroll. Then we can all go our separate ways." Sakura said, minus her usual perkiness.

"That mark bothering you yet?" Kakashi said over his shoulder to Sasuke. "No. Well, not like before.

This time, I don't feel the evil..." "The jutsu is doing its job then." Kakashi said, sounding pleased. "Huh?" Sasuke didn't know about THIS part. "That jutsu creates a tripwire. If Orochimaru tries to inhabit your body again, he's in for a surprise. But Sasuke, you have to understand, this is NOT sealing the curse. It's preventing possession, but the curse mark can still act up. It's a matter of will power, just like before." Sasuke seemed like he wanted to ask a question, but settled for nodding instead.

Ekyt and Hayate arrived at the outskirts of the Village Hidden in the Sound. They crouched in the barren underbrush. The place wasn't brimming with life, but it wasn't exactly a desert either. "Getting in...(koff) Any ideas?" Hayate asked Ekyt. "Maybe some recon first." Ekyt said, pulling out a scroll. Making a small cut on his left thumb with his kunai, Ekyt dragged his thumb across the scroll. "Summoning Jutsu!" Poof! A Keeshonden, named Holly, appeared. "Ekyt? Again? Not for those pests again, I hope?" the dog said in a husky female voice. "Not this time Holly. I need you to check the town, a general layout." The dog sighed as Hayate watched on in amazement (Summoning like that...that's not genin level work...Hokage must know something...). "Alright. But take this collar off me, it's a dead giveaway." Ekyt undid her collar, which turned out to be a Leaf Village Hitai-Ate. "Alright. If I'm in trouble, I'm splitting." The dog said. "Right. See you in...fifteen minutes."

Hayate looked over at Ekyt. "A dog summoning jutsu? (koff) Who taught you?" "Self-taught." Ekyt replied, distracted. "Can she really help?" "She's going to scout for Shinobi of this village. Specifically, Akira and Chakaro." Fifteen minutes passed. Holly came trotting back. "They're not heavily guarded. But probably more than you two could stand. Hey, don't you ever sleep? You look like you've been up for two years!" the dog said to Hayate. He coughed in reply. "Geez Ekyt, couldn't they pair you with someone who looks like he's not gonna kick the bucket?" "Thank you Holly." Ekyt said, closing the scroll. "Sorry. She's kind of a...dog." Hayate ignored that. "Not a lot of guards...that means that the ones that are left are the best. Um (koff) okay. Transformation jutsu." Hayate said off hand. He changed into a smaller, younger, healthier-looking person, with short cropped blond hair. "Disappearing Jutsu." Ekyt said, focusing on his clothes. The chakra flowed through them, hiding him from view. "Let's go. An hour tops. If one of us is caught, the other reports to Lord (koff) Hokage." Ekyt didn't argue, but he clearly didn't like the order from the senior ninja.

"This is such a drag." Shikamaru said, looking at the clouds, instead of looking for the scroll. "I know man, really. I'm down to my last three bags of chips!" Choji replied around a mouthful of food. "This scroll must be pretty important to have all of us out here." Shikamaru muttered thoughtfully. "I heard it's something left from the tournament. Maybe we oughta head toward the tower." Choji said, pointing to the ominous structure in the distance. "Good idea, someone needs to check there. Let's just get there, this is really bothersome."

"Naruto, please keep your voice down." Lee said respectfully. "Aw, take it easy Bushy Brow! Who cares if we're heard, this isn't a recon mission!" Naruto said back, grinning mischievously. "Y'know, you're way to serious." Naruto said, stretching his arms behind his head. "I am not naturally gifted Naruto. I must train to become a better ninja." "That doesn't mean ya can't slack off once in a while." Naruto stated. Then he challenged Lee. "I'll bet I can crack you before the end of this mission." "I do not believe you can." Lee answered, starting to get irritated. "It's a bet then!" Naruto said gleefully. **This mission just got interesting, I'll crack dog-brow easy!**

Sasuke grabbed his neck. Kakashi turned around, making a small hm sound. "It doesn't hurt...it just kind of...tingles." Sasuke grunted again. "Let me take a look." Kakashi looked at his neck. The curse mark,

which had been a purple outline before (after the Sealing Jutsu), was now filling in again. One of the commas had turned black, and another was halfway there. "Sasuke, you have to be on your guard. Right now, the jutsu is holding off Orochimaru. I can't perform the jutsu again, not yet. So it's really up to you." Sasuke nodded once, wincing.

Hayate and Ekyt made their way through the nearly empty village. A couple of Shinobi glanced at Hayate suspiciously, but apparently his disguise checked out. Ekyt, invisible and silent, took note of strategic points, sketching them the best he could on a small notepad. Useful information, even if Lord Hokage hadn't ordered it. Ekyt had to force himself to stay still. There was Kabuto and Chakaro. And from the way Chakaro was grinning, something he almost NEVER did, something was about to happen... Ekyt nudged Hayate. "They know something..." Ekyt said as low as he could. Hayate looked straight ahead and kept his pace. Ekyt knew he couldn't answer; talking to nothing would be suspicious. Hayate's path, unfortunately, let to a guard. "Papers, traveler." He demanded. Hayate gulped inwardly.

Ino, Sakura, and Linda were still arguing. "What do you have against him anyway?!" Linda finally blurted out. Linda was silent for a few seconds. "I'm worried about him. He'd die for anyone here. I don't want that to happen. Just because I'm not in love with him...that doesn't mean he's not my friend...I'd rather he was crippled than killed." Ino and Sakura exchanged glances. "But at the same time...I hate him. How could he keep being nice to me after I dumped him and picked another guy in a matter of days? I wish he HAD yelled...then I could kick his @\$\$! And when I get back, I'm gonna!" Linda had admitted part of why she now hated someone who had been so close to her. But she DIDN'T mention that she was partially jealous of his how quick he had picked up the skills that she had trouble with. She had always been the master, all of a sudden he had found his niche and she had found her stumbling point. But she would never tell that to anyone. She hoped her response would ward off Ino and Sakura. She didn't want to make enemies of them. Ekyt was her only target right now. She knew her mindset wouldn't make sense to anyone but her. She wondered briefly if that should disturb her.

"Papers?" Hayate repeated. He looked around; no one was looking. He gave the guard a hard shove, covering his mouth, hoping Ekyt would take the cue. Apparently, he did, because the guard suddenly slumped backward, unconscious. "(Koff)Good move." "Indeed." A familiar, but unwelcome voice said behind them.

In the forest, Sasuke suddenly gripped his curse mark again. "Kakashi-sensei...we've got to...I'm not sure why...but we have to go to Otogakure...it's not Orochimaru...Ahhh!" Kakashi didn't like the sound of this. "Sasuke, we need a plan first." "Forget the plan! I'm going!" Sasuke took off at a run, tearing through the forest. Kakashi shook his head sadly, but followed. **Could it be the curse mark acting up? Orochimaru summoning him? No...he seems too in-control...but why would he want to go to the Sound Village otherwise?**

"Lose the disappearing jutsu." Kabuto said, pointing at Ekyt. Ekyt ended the jutsu. He was staring with intense hatred at Kabuto and his companion. "We meet again...sensei." Chakaro Tamaki grinned. "The pleasure is yours Chakaro." Ekyt muttered. "Ah, manners! You're in OUR village, without papers! Hardly the proper way for a guest to act." Ekyt sighed. "Fine. You've got me. But please, let the kid go. He followed me here." Ekyt was referring to the still-disguised Hayate. "He's seen nothing but the outside of your buildings. I couldn't leave him in the woods, all by himself. Just...let him go home." Ekyt said, looking his captors square in the eye. Kabuto wasn't cold-hearted by nature. "Fine. Scram kid." Ekyt had already passed off his notebook. "Be careful." Ekyt bade the disguised Hayate. "Hayate"

nodded slowly, then ran off. All three watched him go. Chakaro and Kabuto turned back to Ekyt.

"What, pray tell, could a young Leaf Villager like yourself be doing here?" Kabuto asked. "I'm afraid I don't know the area very well, I was hoping for directions home." Ekyt said innocently. It was more to amuse himself than actually be effective. Chakaro snorted. "Clever sensei...it's a shame, really. I know you'd never join us. So I'll have to kill you. Kabuto, you stay out of this." Ekyt couldn't help but notice the slightest twinge at the corners of Kabuto's mouth. "You're the boss." Kabuto said.

"Ekyt...sensei...I've waited a long time to kill you." "The wait is going to be longer than you think Chakaro." Ekyt said, flicking his toothpick at his former student.

As soon as he was out of site, Hayate lost the disguise. **So he can follow orders, improvise...and he knows that guy...I've got to get these papers to Lord Hokage...but he needs help...I can't go back alone...hang in there Ekyt...** Hayate saw someone on the path. "Kakashi-Sensei! (koff)"

Kakashi looked up at his name. "Hayate? What" "No time. Ekyt's back there, he told me to deliver these papers. (koff koff) Um...he needs help." Kakashi looked down at Sasuke. "Alright. Hayate, you've done very well, not deserting your comrade. You can head back." "Sensei, (Koff) I'd rather, um, help." Kakashi looked amused. "Well, let's hurry then. Ekyt's got potential, but he's still in over his head."

Ekyt and Chakaro had already traded attacks with kunai. Now they both had their swords out. They were deadlocked. "You can't win! I'm the genius!" Chakaro taunted. "You've lost your focus Chakaro. You've already lost." Chakaro pulled back, aiming for a "Swallow" strike. Ekyt had taught him that strike, and knew it was coming. As he dodged back from the first blow, Ekyt was ready for the sword's return (The Swallow technique is a feign first cut, then reverse blade attack). He stepped to the side and, instead of meeting Chakaro's blade, he followed it, spiking it blade-first into the ground. He held it there and shuffled forward, cutting Chakaro's thumb. CLANG! He dropped his sword before Ekyt could finish the cut. Ekyt held his for a moment, then carefully put it away, taking the scabbard out of his belt. Chakaro backed up. "Forbidden Jutsu: Hell's gate's release!" Ekyt had read about that jutsu. But he really didn't know how to counter it. It fed on the fears of one's souls, fears that may or may not be apparent to the conscious mind. A swarm of demons, all shaped like little Chakaro heads, floated toward Ekyt. "Shadow clone jutsu!" He called, leaping away from the heads. His clones were hit. But since they weren't Ekyt, the bites the demons used as an attack had no effect. Chakaro was cursing that when Ekyt leapt down behind him. Chakaro swung a backfist around. Ekyt blocked it and yanked, knocking Chakaro off balance. He struck himself, his right fist hitting Chakaro in the side of the face. Chakaro suddenly clamped down. "Forced Pain Acceptance jutsu!" he called. He had grabbed Ekyt's hand and made hand signs. Ekyt suddenly felt like thousands of kunai were piercing him at once. He started to shake with pain. Small cuts formed all over his body, blood running from them. He had to end this somehow...just before he would have lost consciousness, Ekyt felt that second chakra again. He fell to a crouch suddenly, using Lee's kick to break Chakaro's hold. "Backward Konoha Snap Dragon!" He grabbed Chakaro in the hold by gripping his neck and legs. They both drove toward the earth at top speed. Chakaro's head hit the ground hard. He lay still as a ...block of wood. Ekyt spun around. Chakaro's grinning face met him. "Fool. I know what that does to your stamina!" Chakaro started throwing kicks at Ekyt, forcing his former instructor to back pedal.

"They were (koff) right there." Hayate pointed. "Let's go." Sasuke rushed ahead. Hayate and Kakashi followed him. They were seeing the end of Ekyt and Chakaro's fight. Kabuto looked over at them, not looking worried.

Ekyt felt that mysterious chakra again. He brought his leg up in a deliberate slow kick. As soon as Chakaro grabbed it, Ekyt did a corkscrew, kicking him in the back of the head. He did a forward handspring into a two-footed axe kick. When he landed, he did a sweep kick, then jumped and landed on Chakaro's stomach. "Time to end this! Unlike you Chakaro, I have a soul. So you're not going to die. You'd better count your blessings, because they're about to get fried!"

SHADOW CLONE JUTSU! DRAGON'S EMBER JUTSU! DRAGON'S EMBER JUTSU: CLONE INSTIGATION!

In one sentence, Ekyt had ended the fight. Chakaro had been burned, his skin flaking and peeling. Ekyt stopped the attack, exhausted from the attack and blood loss. Kabuto approached him. "Go on." Kabuto said.

"Go on." **Stay out of it? Orochimaru found himself a new right-hand man, did he? Well then Chakaro, just prove you deserve MY spot.** Ekyt looked at Kabuto with a strange expression. "Thanks." Ekyt joined Kakashi, Hayate, and Sasuke. "Let's get out of here." Sasuke said. "The mission..." Ekyt said. "The mission was completed. You obtained valuable (koff koff) information. Kakashi figured out the curse mark. (koff). Nice job." Coming from Hayate, that was a victory speech. "Nice move at the end." Sasuke said, offering his fist. Ekyt gave Sasuke's fist a greeting punch. "Let's go home. You need medical attention." "That's nothing new." Ekyt muttered, feeling dizzy from the blood loss.

Deep in the forest, Naruto was snickering. "Harem jutsu." He whispered, sneaking up behind Lee. He and his clones were all centerfold-beautiful nude women. They all grabbed onto Lee's legs and arms, cooing "Oh Lee-eeee." Lee turned around. "Oh!" A bloody nose with the power of a rocket sent Lee backward into a tree. Naruto grinned happily. "Toldja I could crack you."

NEXT ISSUE: WHO FOUND THE MISSING SCROLL? WHAT'S IN IT? AND, WAIT...KABUTO LET EKYT GO? WHAT'S THE DEAL HERE? AND HAYATE GIVES HIS REPORT TO THE THIRD HOKAGE!

16 - Disturbed, Destroyed, and Dumbfounded

Ekyt said his goodbyes to the Hayate, Kakashi, and Sasuke, hoping his voice wouldn't be a dead giveaway to his emotions. As soon as he was out of site, he pressed his bandaged fingers to his temples. Chakaro had really given him a run for his money. It was a safe bet that Chakaro was studying just as hard as Ekyt. **But that's not enough...it never is...I've got to heal quick and get back at it. But it's just getting harder...I have no clan to turn to, not to mention no natural abilities whatsoever. It's not like I don't get support, there's just...something missing...**

Ekyt found his way home, doing his best not to be seen. Those thousand little cuts made every move hurt; it was like getting stabbed all over again every time he moved, or even breathed. He decided to make it a point to learn more of the medical arts. **Especially since I'm getting stabbed on a regular basis. If I was in a squad, with some kunoichi medic, then I wouldn't worry as much. But right now, I've only got myself to rely on.** While he was thinking, he managed to fit the key into the lock on his door, opening up his standalone apartment. The site didn't exactly cheer him up. There was the tiny kitchen, stocked with food (Mostly instant ramen) and a rough wooden table, which had definitely seen better days. The Venetian blinds had been drawn across the windows, allowing on the smallest slits of light into the room, crisscrossing on the wall and make eerie shadows. The place suited Ekyt. With a start, he realized he had to give Lord Hokage a report. Quickly changing his clothes and cleaning his cuts, he ran back out the door.

"Your report Hayate?" Hokage asked, his tone and eyes friendly. **Certainly an interesting mission from what Kakashi was able to tell me.**

"Um (koff), here, Lord Hokage." Hayate handed over the sketches Ekyt had made before continuing. "(koff) I'm, um, happy to report that Ekyt shows all the qualities desired in (koff) Shinobi. I did as instructed (koff) and let him take over lead at the points necessary."

Hokage looked over the papers, a small smile of satisfaction crawling over his face, making the old man look younger. "More than I had a right to expect, even from a promising Genin and a Tokubetsu Jonin. Kakashi deciphered Sasuke's curse mark, so the mission is definitely a success. Tell me Hayate...what happened?"

"Naruto! Please leave your childish jutsus out of this mission!" Lee said, angrily putting a hand to his still-dripping nose. **That harem jutsu...I am ashamed to have fallen prey to it...When we return, I will do 500 laps around the practice field**

Grinning broadly, Naruto stretched his arms behind his head. "You're way to uptight Bushy Brow. I HAD to do something. If I didn't, this mission was going to be more boring than Iruka-Sensei's lectures! Besides, nothing wrong with a little fun!"

"'Fun' is for those with skills Naruto. Neither you nor I fall into that category."

"WHAT?! I'm gonna be the next Hokage, believe it! Don't you d-hey, what's that?" Naruto looked down into the river they had been by. He and Lee were up on the lip of what looked like a canyon. Inexplicably, Naruto leapt off the canyon with a shout of excitement.

"Naruto!" Lee called. He looked down after Naruto, hoping he would bob back up to the surface anytime now...

The tension between Ino, Linda, and Sakura had grown- big time! It was no secret that Sakura had a soft spot for Ekyt (Even though she isn't sure of what context the soft spot falls into), and even Ino had taken a liking to him. Even two feuding friends like Ino and Sakura could agree the young man was friendly and respectful to them, a rarity among the boys in the village. But then there was Linda, who had come to the village with him. Now it sounded as though she would do anything to stop his progression through the ranks, even if it meant crippling him to stop him from getting killed.

"You just don't understand...he's ALWAYS doing stuff like that, sacrificing himself. He would do it for anyone, people he didn't know, hell, even his worst enemy! He's going to get himself killed. We might not be in love, but he's still my friend, and I don't want him dead, no matter how much I hate him," Linda said suddenly.

The three had been resting in the forest, each sitting on a rock, a small fire going in the middle of it. The smoke curled and twisted happily toward the sky, where it eventually disbanded and spread out. Just like the team of Ekyt, Linda, Chakaro, and Kayla.

This was the chosen meeting place for all the teams. The three girls in this group had covered their ground quickly, not finding any sign of the scroll. Now they could relax until the others showed up, or they received new orders. Or they COULD have relaxed, except they were at each other's throats so much.

Sakura and Ino exchanged glances. This was the most vulnerable they had ever seen Linda look. She was lying on her side, her fingers playing with her long pink hair most of the time. Occasionally she fingered a pendant around her neck, most of which was hidden from sight.

All the girls were different, as different as possible, it seemed. But they all worried for their friends. Sakura took a brave stab at conversation. "Ekyt is a nice guy Linda. So is Lee, and you two seem so perfect together! I remember you telling me about dating him, and how you told Ekyt about it. How he just took it in stride...some part of you...it needs to protect him, right? Linda...you might want to protect him, but that doesn't mean you can hold him back. He's his own person. And, it might not be easy, but you've got to let him live. And, please...don't leap down my throat for treating him like a friend." **Let's see what kind of reaction this gets...**

"Honored Grandson, you must reconsider your carousing with that...that...hoodlum! It is NOT good for you, least of all if you want to become Hokage! I can teach you the skills necessary, and I can show you all the shortcuts!" **Naruto! You showed the Honored Grandson his first jutsu; that honor should have been mine! Not only that, you teach him a useless, perverted jutsu! I will NOT allow you to ruin my greatest assignment yet! Maybe Iruka can't see through you, but I most certainly do, nine-tailed fox!** Ebisu pushed up his glasses, irritated at the very thought of Naruto. His young apprentice, the grandson of the Third Hokage, disagreed, it seemed. He was still doing his best to train the boy, today in the Hokage's garden. The garden was a beautiful mixture of flowers, tree, bushes, and rocks, arranged just so by a Tai Chi expert. It was an excellent place to train due to it's size, not to mention that the high hedges offered privacy.

"Aw, you just don't like him because he knocked you on your butt with that jutsu! And my name is "Konohamaru", not "Honored Grandson!" Why won't you call me by my name?! Ebisu," the young boy with the long blue scarf and goofy-looking headgear shot at his private trainer. **Man, this guy is a stiff! I can't wait to give him the slip! Naruto's way cooler!**

Ekyt was walking by this scene when Ebisu suddenly jumped in front of him. "State your business!" Ebisu yelled to Ekyt. **I hope this young man attacks, that was I can show the honored grandson respect for my abilities.**

Ekyt stopped to look over at Ebisu. With the slightest bow, Ekyt said "I'm on my way to speak with Lord

Hokage." **What's with this guy?**

"I don't recall seeing you around the Leaf Village before. I'm afraid I'm going to ask you the nature of your visit, as well as for identification. I believe you are a sound ninja in disguise! I warn you, I am a Jonin of the highest rank!" Ebisu called, taking a defensive stance. Apparently, the young Genin in front of him wasn't impressed.

"My business...is NONE of YOUR business. I've got a report to give to Lord Hokage, and it's private. So, please step aside." Ekyt responded crisply. Ekyt knew full well that this was a Tokubetsu Jonin, but his patience was gone.

"I will not, Sound ninja! You will have to go through me to get to Lord Hokage!" Ebisu started making complex taijutsu moves around Ekyt, while making ridiculous, exaggerated battle cries. He did all this while spouting off all his accomplishments to Konohamaru. Ekyt looked mildly annoyed.

THIS is a Tokubetsu Jonin? Hayate was a better example...I really don't have time for this. Body Replacement Jutsu! Ekyt stood about thirty feet away, (Picture huge anime-style sweat drop here) watching Ebisu viciously attacking the log Ekyt had chosen as a replacement. **That's just sad...**

"Interesting, isn't it?" Kakashi remarked to Sasuke, referring to Kabuto?

"There must be more to it. Scum like him doesn't just change," came Sasuke's familiar dark voice.

"He feels threatened by Chakaro's growing power," Kakashi said matter-of-factly.

"Threatened?" There was a tone of questioning in Sasuke's voice. **That guy doesn't need to be threatened by anyone, I know how tough he is...**

"Yes, threatened. A young ninja already on his way to replacing a still-young Kabuto as Orochimaru's right-hand man...he's a threat to his power."

"What will Kabuto do? He can't come here..." Again, Sasuke's voice held question.

"Afraid so. A ninja of his caliber would be welcomed back. Not that his actions would be forgiven, by any means. Not right away."

Shikamaru and Choji were the next to arrive at the meeting spot. "That was such a waste of time. What a drag," Shikamaru complained. Next to him, Choji chomped loudly on whatever snack he was gorging at the time.

"(chew, munch) Well, (crunch) it was worth a shot. Too bad. Hey girls! Any luck?"

Linda still hadn't answered Sakura. She seemed to really be thinking about her words. Ino was marveling that Sakura had said all that.

Ino couldn't help but smile to herself as she started her own though process. **It looks like Sakura DID blossom. I wonder how things will be now? I mean, it's soooo obvious she's got a crush on this Ekyt guy. Hell, so do I! But maybe she'll be so distracted I can move in on Sasuke! Yeah!**

Sakura was the only one paying attention to Shikamaru and Choji's arrival. "No luck here either guys." "How bothersome...who are we missing?", Shikamaru wondered aloud, looking up at the cumulonimbus clouds drifting lazily through the pale blue sky.

"Tenten and Kayla, Naruto and Lee, and Kakashi-Sensei and Sasuke." Sakura rattled off.

About thirty seconds later, Tenten and Kayla returned, also reporting no luck. Most of the group was bushed from the day's travels, considering how big the Forest of Death was. They decided without speaking to get some sleep, as night had fallen some time ago.

Naruto swam through the water, seeing a glow that attracted his attention. **What is it? Gold?** He reached out a hand to grab the object, finding it to be- a scroll? **Hey! HEY, this is it! The missing**

scroll! This is the one! Oh yeah, they'll remember this one! Found by the next Hokage! Naruto tucked the scroll into his mouth and swam vigorously toward the surface, seeing Lee's concerned face, distorted by the ripples in the water, waiting for him. Naruto burst up for air, breathing heavily, gulping in the fresh air gratefully. Lee started to scold him, but Naruto just held up the scroll. "Let's get back. After THAT swim, I hear some ramen calling my name!"

Hayate was in the middle of his report when he stopped. "Uh (koff), Lord Hokage, I don't think I should proceed about (koff koff) mission details. Not without my partner. I've already given my thoughts on him."

Hokage replaced his pipe. "Understood Hayate. I will have Gemma retrieve him." "No need sir." Hokage looked up to see Gemma escorting Ekyt in. "Impeccable timing Ekyt." Hokage said, smiling for a brief moment, then turning grave again. "Your report?"

Ekyt gave his report. He and Hayate had worked well together. In the process, Ekyt had learned that Hayate had no intention of taking on a full-time partner. His job title was examiner, and it was to stay that way. After Hayate had bowed and left, Ekyt relaxed a little more, despite his audience being the most powerful Shinobi in the village. Hokage, who could read people as well, if not better, than anyone in the village, immediately picked up on Ekyt's mood.

The Third Hokage was rare in the way that he showed emotion, and encouraged others to do the same.

Hokage: Something is bothering you Ekyt.

Ekyt: (Looking up in surprise) Yes Lord Hokage, there is something...

Hokage: Perhaps I can help. What's bothering you?

Ekyt: Well, Lord Hokage...I'm starting to feel out of place.

Hokage: (Puffing on his pipe thoughtfully) Out of place? Please, explain what you mean.

Ekyt: Well...every other Genin has a team. Not to mention a surname.

Hokage: I daresay that isn't ALL that's bothering you...

Ekyt: No sir. My battle...with my old student...I had always told him he would surpass me. Because he's naturally gifted, and he's always worked hard. He's already surpassed me, he would have won if his judgment hadn't been clouded. I'm concerned because he's a very real threat to the village...I've come to see as my home.

Hokage gave an understanding smile to Ekyt's somewhat lengthy speech.

Hokage: It's not unnatural...tell me, are your parents still alive?

Ekyt: Yes...I just can't associate with them anymore...

Hokage: Personal?

Ekyt: No sir. I've just made too many enemies...they'd be in danger. And I'm not good enough to protect them.

Hokage: A surname...or clan name, is usually taken from the parents.

Ekyt: They aren't very fond of the name Lord Hokage. That's why I don't use it, and neither do they.

Hokage: The clan you choose to adopt will be your decision ultimately, though I daresay there are few here who would object to having you as a member of their respective clans. As for a squad...What brought this on?

Ekyt: ...The Chunin Exams.

Hokage: (laughs good naturedly) You are determined, that much I can tell. But aren't you thinking ahead quite a bit?

Ekyt: I am, I know. But I'd like to have time to get to know my team.

Hokage: The time will come when you will have a team, and I have no doubt someday you will be chunin...and beyond. Have you any other ambitions in the mean time?

Ekyt: Well sir...I'd like to help Iruka-Sensei, I guess. I don't know anything else I'm qualified to do, and he could probably use the help.

Hokage: In six monthes, I will allow you to join him, if you still desire. For now...enjoy your youth. You never knew when you will be forced to abandon being a boy...and become a man. Becoming a man isn't distinguished by age, or by features. It's distinguished by actions and words, by love and compassion, by life and death. I hope you understand.

Ekyt: Not entirely sir, but I suspect that's the purpose.

Hokage: (Grins) Indeed it is. For now, there are many things a genin can do, aside from training, to help his village. Oh, speaking of that...you passed your last mission, and It is "A" ranked.

Ekyt: "A" ranked? Sir?

Hokage: You fought well, used jutsus at a jonin level, including the particularly difficult summoning jutsu. Not to mention a jutsu unique to you. You took control of the situation, put your teammate before yourself, and earned his respect. All while completing the mission.

Ekyt could only stare blindly at Lord Hokage. The old man was jotting down the report in Ekyt's personal file. "You have done your village an excellent service, and I know you will continue to do so. For now...I can see there are a few very concerned for your safety. You are dismissed." Ekyt bowed and left the room. Hokage put his pipe down and tried to mediate. Before he reached a state of homeostasis, Hokage thought about all the genin and how rapidly they were progressing.

NEXT ISSUE: WHY'S THAT SCROLL SO IMPORTANT ANYWAY?! AND WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH KABUTO AND CHAKARO? WAIT, WHAT WAS HOKAGE TALKING ABOUT ANYWAY? "THERE ARE

MANY THINGS A GENIN CAN DO, BESIDES TRAINING, TO HELP HIS VILLAGE?" WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? FIND OUT NEXT TIME!

PLUS: NEJI AND HINATA'S DIFFERENCES FLARE UP AGAIN! NEJI'S DESTRUCTIVE POWER LEAVES MOST TOO SCARED TO FACE HIM. SOMEONE HAS TO STEP UP...BUT WHO?

17 - A Nice Surprise

Hokage marked off another stack of genin rank papers. One caught his eye. **I shouldn't be surprised THIS one caught my eye...He's the odd man out.** Hokage was holding Ekyt's bio in his liver-spot dotted hands. "Very interesting indeed...No complaints at all about him from his superiors...Two mission, one C rank, one A rank...both successful completion," Hokage muttered to himself, standing up and walking to the bay window, which afforded him an excellent view of the Leaf Village. "He reminds me a lot of Naruto, in some ways. No matter how grim things look, he refuses to throw in the towel...Perhaps I can throw him a bone..."

Ekyt stretched himself out, warming up his body to prevent injury. He ached horribly from that fight with Chakaro, but he had to train. In the back of his mind, he wondered where everyone else was, but guessed that if it was his business he would have been told. He had just finished his stretching, so it was time to get to work. He pulled the tape off his hands, and pulled his shoes off. Staring at the huge tree stump, one that was taller and wider than he was, Ekyt reared back and started attacking it. Punches, kicks, elbow, blocks, every Taijutsu move he could think of. When he was done, his hands and arm were red from the effort, and they stung considerably more. But he really needed to toughen up his skin, mostly his knuckles. As he was winding fresh tape around his hands, Ekyt heard movement behind him. He spun around, hand reaching for his kunai. Something told him to hold his fire, and he did. Thank God. Lord Hokage and Ebisu-Sensei were waiting for him.

Back in the Forest of Death, everyone gathered around Naruto as he started to open the scroll. They were shocked when the shout out of Naruto's hand and into the sky like a Bottle Rocket. It burst into flames high above their heads, spelling out the names of most of the students. In a starry display, following the list of names (Kayla, Linda, Kakashi, and Shikamaru's names were absent. "Congratulations." A familiar young woman leapt out of the bushes, stunning the genin. "If your name was up there, you and your squad have been cleared to take, or re-take, the Chunin exams." Anko Mitarashi stood before the still-shocked group. "You have two days to decide. Oh, and...the exams are in two months! Happy training!"

Ekyt stopped his workout. "Good Afternoon Lord Hokage." Ekyt said, bowing politely. "And to you too, Ebisu-Sensei." Ekyt added. He had been doing his best to ignore the "trainer of the best" because, no doubt, Ebisu was fuming about the log incident (That happened last chapter).

"Good Afternoon to you, too. Training I see?"

"Yes sir."

"I have a mission for you. It is, however, A-ranked." Hokage warned.

"I'll take it Lord Hokage." Ekyt said immediately.

"I thought you would. Your mission is to act as one of my bodyguards, en route and at a tournament we are headed to. You partner will be Ebisu. I see you've met, so there isn't any need for introduction. We leave right now."

"Asuma-sensei." Asuma looked up, surprised to see Shikamaru. Without being asked, Shikamaru continued. "The Chunin exams...since I'm already a chunin, I don't need to take them...but what about

Ino and Choji?"

Asuma picked a fresh cigarette out of the box. "Well, they'll need to find someone to stand in for them. Well, YOU will need to find someone to stand in for you. You can't take the test again, so you'll have to find a genin who CAN. When you've found one, bring him or her to me, and I'll discuss it with the others."

"I'll do it...but it's still a drag..." Shikamaru mumbled as he slouched out of the room.

The trip to the tournament was uneventful. However, when they arrived at the tournament, problems sprang up immediately. Two students were fighting, and one was barely standing. Ekyt looked over at Lord Hokage. At his nod, Ekyt leapt toward the battle.

Hinata coughed up more blood. Her cousin, Neji, was coming in for the kill. **Naruto...thank you...you've taught me so much...I wish you could be here...**

Neji had reached top speed, getting ready to destroy Hinata's heart. "It was fate Hinata. You were destined to be a loser. The skies predicted it! And they also predicted you would perish at my hand," Neji crowed as he moved in for the kill. He stopped as there was suddenly someone else in the way. "The skies were wrong then." Ekyt said flatly, standing in front of Hinata. Turning to the medical-nin, Ekyt said "Please take care of her, I'll have Kurenai informed." Ekyt's gaze was fixed on Neji again. "I don't know what kind of scum you are, attacking a critically injured girl. But I'm telling you now: Back off."

Neji looked at the kid in his way. "You have interrupted fate's work...not an intelligent move if you prefer life to death. It was her time to die. Now...perhaps it is yours."

Ekyt gave a derisive laugh. "Keep talking like that and you're assuring your own. I think you're a jerk for hitting that girl like that. Then trying for a coup de grace....it's disgusting."

"What do you make of this Ebisu?" Hokage asked his companion. Ebisu just shrugged. **He doesn't like Ekyt...but apparently he respects his abilities...or his attitude...Ebisu will be enough to guard me...perhaps it's time to throw a variable in the mission.** "Ekyt!"

Ekyt broke off his staredown with Neji. "Yes Lord Hokage?"

"There has been a change in plans. I want you to enter this tournament. That was a Leaf Villager they carried off, and we need a replacement."

"Yes Lord Hokage!"

"Chunin exams already? Bring it on! I'm gonna pass for sure this time, believe it!" Naruto's enthusiastic shout forced a smile to form on most members of the group. "We've got to start training! I can't believe we didn't make it last time!" Naruto was so excited to get back to the Leaf Village that he "happied" himself right into a tree. Sasuke and Sakura shook their heads. The three went their separate ways.

I'm getting stronger big brother...you won't be able to ignore it much longer...make your move...Life means nothing...Death means everything. Sasuke's though always ran along this track.

However depressing, it kept him going.

Sakura took the long route home, the one with the cherry trees. They were so beautiful in fall. A light breeze tossed her pink hair around. **The chunin exams...I failed last time...what's to say I won't fail this time? I've got to talk to someone about this...I wish Sasuke paid attention to me...Ekyt, of course!**

Naruto spied Sakura. "Sakura, hey! Sakura!" he shouted, running to catch up. "Oh, Naruto. What's up?" She asked, lost in thought.

"There's a tournament in Tanuza town! Wanna go?"

"No thanks..." Sakura said sadly.

"Bet I can change your mi-iiiiind..." Naruto said tauntingly.

"Naruto"

"Ekyt is there as Lord Hokage's bodyguard!" Naruto exclaimed.

"Let's go then! What're we waiting for?!"

Hayate was surprised to see Ekyt among participants. But it wasn't his place to question it. "Let's begin (koff). Um, first match: Kiba Inuzuka vs. Hinata Hyuga. Participants..." Hayate stopped as Lord Hokage marched up to the front. "There has been a last minute substitution. Due to her inability to participate, Hinata Hyuga has been replaced with Ekyt. Hayate, you may proceed." Hayate looked questioningly at Lord Hokage and Ekyt, but shrugged it off. "First match: Kiba Inuzuma vs. Ekyt. Participants, to the center."

Ekyt had never faced Kiba. He knew that he was a teammate of Hinata's, but had never met him. He took the time to extend a greeting before the fight began. "Kiba, right? My name is Ekyt. It's nice to meet you." Kiba took the hand reluctantly. "Likewise...I hope this isn't begging for mercy..." Kiba had a tendency to be overconfident. Ekyt understood that this was his attempt at being friendly. "No. Mercy isn't a word that I use often. Good luck to you. Win or lose, at least a Leaf Villager will be advancing." Kiba gave a wolfish grin at that. "Well, let's go to it then!"

"Begin!"

Kiba and Akamaru stood across from Ekyt. "Two on one? Okay, let me see..." Ekyt whipped out his scroll, pierced his thumb, and hit the ground with his right hand. "Summoning Jutsu!" POOF! Ekyt's summon, a Keeshonden dog named Holly, appeared at his side. "Kid, you're getting to be a pest!" Holly said in a husky female voice. "Come on Holly, cut me some slack. Everyone likes you." "Can you blame them? I'm only the cutest thing on four legs!" Holly looked around, snout in the air. She suddenly spotted Akamaru. "Except for maybe that thing! Hey, c'mere sexy!"

Kiba's jaw dropped as Akamaru sprinted over to Holly. "C'mon tough guy, let's go find some vittles. You can tell me a little about yourself." Holly urged, giving Akamaru a wink before trotting away with her tail in the air, earning Akamaru's attention.

"Did he just...use his dog to get rid of Akamaru?" Linda, Sakura, Sasuke, Naruto, and Lee were in the stands. "That was an excellent move. He knows how much Kiba relies on Akamaru. Ekyt just took away half of Kiba's advantage," Lee was leaning forward intently, not taking his eyes off the match. Sakura

stood up and shouted "That's the way Ekyt, beat that flea bag!"

Lord Hokage was sitting with Kurenai. "You've got to give the young man credit for being perceptive." Hokage said with a laugh. Kurenai smiled, despite the fact that her student had lost a disadvantage. "He's certainly an interesting one. But...why did he come to Hinata's defense?", Kurenai asked. "He has a very strong sense of right and wrong, with no gray area. Have you heard the story of his eye..."

"No! Akamaru!" Kiba growled. "You'll pay for that! All-Fours Jutsu!" Kiba's blinding speed caught Ekyt by surprise. He rammed Ekyt full speed, knocking the young ninja backward. Ekyt stayed on his feet, but skidded quite a distance. He sensed a presence behind him. He shot a glance over his shoulder while jumping. He was above Kiba's range now. He swung his leg down, cleaving Kiba on the shoulder with his heel. Kiba growled and leapt back, ready to charge again.

Kiba leapt high this time, extending his claws and cutting across Ekyt's chest. The claws dug into Ekyt's flesh, but only superficially. Kiba kept attacking, clawing as fast as he could. Ekyt was forced to leap backward, clinging to the wall, earning the wrath of the crowd.

Gotta think this out...that jutsu makes him so fast, I can barely follow with my eyes. Never mind the fact he's been training his whole life! How can I stop his speed? Or this particular jutsu? I've got to take away that speed advantage somehow...

Ekyt had an idea. He threw four exploding tag-laced Kunai into the ground. "Exploding Tag: Remote Detonation Jutsu!" Ekyt called out. BLAM! A series of craters appeared in the ground in front of Ekyt. "You missed!" Kiba shouted. He charged forward again. Ekyt threw two kunai, forcing Kiba to dodge to the side. "Bad aim!" Kiba shouted. "Think so?" Ekyt replied. "Huh? How can you be so calm?! I'm going to destroy you!" Kiba yelled, annoyed at Ekyt's serene expression. His speed grew. Ekyt still hadn't moved.

Kiba suddenly tripped. With panic, he suddenly realized what happened as he grasped his ankle in pain. **That was his plan...those exploding tags created holes, and he drove me right into them. Now I can barely stand...But I'm not giving up yet!** Kiba pulled himself up. He suddenly heard a bark.

"Akamaru!" he called to his dog, who sat at Kiba's heels.. "Good boy! Let's get him! Hey, where'd he go?" Kiba didn't see Ekyt anywhere.

With a poof, Akamaru turned into a crouch Ekyt. "Woof." Ekyt said sarcastically, kicking low, hitting Kiba's arm. "Gahh!" Kiba heard the sound of small bones in his forearm breaking. "It's gonna take more than a cheap trick like that to put ME down!" Kiba was blowing smoke, but it was better than admitting defeat.

"Hey, kid! Heads up, behind you!" Holly came running back, warning Ekyt of the REAL Akamaru's attack from behind. "Thanks Holly! How about taking a bite outta Kiba?" Ekyt knocked Akamaru aside, careful not to injure him seriously. Holly ran up to the still-hurting Kiba and dug in to his ankle. "All your's boss!" Holly called. Akamaru whined. "WAIT!" Kiba shouted. "I FORFEIT! STOP THE MATCH!"

The crowd murmured in surprise. Kiba rushed to Akamaru's side. The little dog had hurt himself in one

of the holes Ekyt had created. Kiba picked the dog up, stroking its white fur, then placing it on his head. "Good job Holly, thank you." Holly scratched at the hitai-ate around her neck, serving as a collar. "No problem kiddo...but help out the competition, will ya? That dog's got a hurt ankle." Ekyt nodded, then ended the summoning jutsu. He walked over to Kiba. "May I?" he asked, gesturing to Akamaru. Taking some gauze out of his first aid pouch, Ekyt wound it around Akamaru's hurt left front leg. "That should do it." Ekyt said, patting Akamaru on the head. Kiba didn't quite meet Ekyt's eyes.

"Thanks...it was a good match...good luck..." he said, not liking losing, but appreciating the help. "Thanks for a good match Kiba." Ekyt answered.

Hayate grinned slightly. **I shouldn't be surprised, I've seen what he can do...Good for him.** "Winner: Ekyt!" Hayate indicating Ekyt's side of the field. The crowd roared its approval.

Hayate continued. "Next match: Shino Aburame vs. Temari!"

Temari looked up at her name. She had to pass Ekyt to get on the field. "Pardon me, Temari?" Ekyt said.

Temari: It's you? You're still fighting?

Ekyt: Yes...listen...thank you?

Temari: Thank you for what?

Ekyt: For stopping Gaara from killing my friends.

Temari: He mangled you though

Ekyt: Doesn't matter so much. All it did was make me train harder...for revenge. But...I felt like I should thank you for helping my friends. Good luck in your match.

Temari thought back to that day. She hadn't done much to stop the fight...wait, she had! Ekyt had broken Gaara's thumb, trying to stop his senseless attacks on his comrades. Gaara had responded by launching a deadly attack at who he (correctly) guesses was the center of Ekyt's affection.

He had used the Sand Shuriken attack, aiming for Linda. But this guy...Ekyt...he had dove in the way. The shuriken had destroyed his eye and pierced a lot of his body. As he tried to struggle to his feet, Temari had begged Gaara to stop attacking. "Please, stop! Do it for your big sis!" she had said. She remembered, all too well, feeling sure that Gaara was going to attack her. But, remarkably, he had done what she had asked.

Temari suddenly snapped back to reality. "Well, you needed the help kid." She said, messing up his hitai-ate. That was Temari's nature, she ticked other people off. Ekyt didn't seem bothered. "Have a good match." He took a running leap up into the stands to watch.

"Well done Ekyt!" Lee was the first to offer his thoughts on the match. Beside him, Linda stood, staring. She didn't seem as angry as before, as if she was lost in thought.

"Nice moves! You won a lot more gracefully against Kiba than Naruto did!"

"How did Naruto do it?" Ekyt wished he had known ahead of time. He looked from Sakura to Naruto,

looking for an answer.

"Well, actually, he heightened his sense of smell with some jutsu, and I had to fart..." Naruto said with a big grin. The grin got bigger at the look of surprise on Ekyt's face. "What can I say, my farts are as deadly as some people's kunai!"

Out on the field, the two of the three dark horses were meeting. The favorite, by far, was Yuzo Kozimatsu, a highly-skilled genin from the Village Hidden in the Grass. But right now, everyone was focused on Temari vs. Shino Aburami.

They started the fight, both of them playing carefully, using tactics over brute force. The anticipation of every move grew to the point where the crowd stopped shouting and started just...staring...

NEXT ISSUE: TEMARI VS. SHINO- WHO'S GONNA WIN? EKYT TAKES ON THE TOURNAMENT FAVORITE, A DEADLY GRASS SHINOBI; YUZO KOZIMATSU. AND WHO WILL SHIKAMARU FIND TO REPLACE HIM?

18 - All that Remains

Shino and Temari stared each other down. Temari, placid not being her nature, started ripping into Shino.

"C'mon bug boy, what can you do? You're boring me right now. And when I'm bored, I tend to get...violent." Temari smiled at her own words. Some boos rained from the stands. The group she knew, though, remained silent, just watching and evaluation. **Geez, that Ekyt guy...thanking me...now I'd prefer the boos...It's my own fault...if I had let Gaara kill him, he wouldn't be distracting me. Not that he's aware he is. Oh well. He'll wind up facing me, so he'll die anyway. Pity...he's kinda cute. Kinda like that doofy Shikamaru...**

Shino didn't answer right away. He raised his hand, but nothing happened. Finally, he spoke. "Did you know that insects will someday be the only surviving species? That means that only the Aburame clan will survive. Sun and wind, and your sand, it will mean nothing. It hardly matters now."

"Man...he's so creepy!" Sakura exclaimed.

"He is also talented, and Temari is a fool to underestimate him," Lee said while staring intently at the stare down.

Sasuke was indifferent, and Naruto wasn't really paying attention. He was talking animatedly with Ekyt about something, and he seemed really excited. Sakura leaned closer, worried about Naruto's excitement.

"C'mon, it won't hurt!" Naruto urged.

"Naruto, you can get away with it. You're you. But it's still...perverted."

"Oh come on, like you've never been to a harem before! It's just the jutsu version!"

"I HAVEN'T." Ekyt replied, his eyebrows up. "How old are you again?"

"Old enough to know, and young enough for it to be mischief instead of crime!"

"NARUTO! Don't teach him that! That harem jutsu is perverted and disgraceful! It suits YOU, but not him!" Sakura shouted.

Temari looked down, panicking suddenly. Bugs. All over her. She slapped at her neck as one bit down.

"The one that bit you...he's poisonous. You'd better quit and have it checked out. Since you'll pass out in ten seconds anyway." Shino said in a bored tone of voice.

"Oh yeah? If I'm going down, you're coming with me!" Temari was fading fast, so she used her fight-ending jutsu. "Great Cutting Whirlwind Jutsu!" She swung giant warfan, sending a gust of wind at Shino.

Shino was lifted off his feet and flung into a wall. As he landed, Temari crumpled to the ground, her bite

wound turning an angry red. Hayate stepped in. "I declare this match is a draw! (koff koff) Medical-nin, to the field." As the white-clad medical-nin took away Temari and Shino on stretchers, Hayate announced the next match. "Ekyt vs Yuzo Kozimatsu!"

Ekyt took his first look at his opponent. He thanked God his face was hidden, because he was sure his jaw just dropped.

Lord Hokage walked down to where Ekyt's cheering section was sitting. "Ms. Haruno...you and Mr. Uzumaki, along with Mr. Lee, might find it better to head down to the field..." His words spoke an urgent message that he couldn't convey directly. The three mentioned nodded as one, then made their way down to the field.

Yuzo was a strange one, to say the least. He wore a bright yellow gi with a matching straw hat that was native to the Grass Village. What was strange was his legs appeared to be in the ground. "I hope you don't take offense, but I find Konoha soil to be rather...unfertile."

Ekyt narrowed his eyes. "Fertile? I'm, uh, sorry it's not to your liking?" Ekyt didn't know what to say. Yuzo, however, gave him some material.

"I hope the soil is to YOUR liking. Because you will be buried under six feet of it as a permanent residence."

Shikamaru wandered up to the stands. His eyes widened slightly as he saw the answer to his problem on the field below. "Asuma-Sensei." He said, tapping him on the shoulder, breaking Asuma's concentration on Kurenai. "How about him?" Asuma followed Shikamaru's finger to Ekyt.

"That was a good verbal shot. Too bad it won't have any teeth. You're not gonna win," Ekyt said, apparently bored.

"HAJIME!"

Yuzo dug into the ground in the center of the stadium, up to his ankles. With a huge mock sigh, he called "I'm afraid you'll have to come to me. I can't move my legs, you see. So, whenever you feel ready...to die."

"Alright. If you say so. Hope you don't mind, I don't travel alone. Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Four Ekyt popped up. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!" The four clones shouted. The real Ekyt disappeared into the fire. **Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!** Ekyt thought to himself, safely hidden by the fire, giving him time to make the hand sign.

"AHHH! NOOOO! FATHER! MOTHER! PLEASE! THE GRASS! NO! NO! NO! PLEASE! BURNING! ALL OF IT! BURNING! GONE! STOP IT! STOP IT! PLEASE!" Yuzo was screaming. Meanwhile, Ekyt's clones had burned the grass ninja to a crisp. Yuzo fell forward, a charred mess.

Hayate stepped in, checked briefly, then signaled the medical-nin. "Winner: Ekyt!" The crowd cheered

Ekyt, though they were disappointed with how poorly Yuzo had done. But then, as one, it seemed, the crowd remembered there was one more match to watch.

"Ekyt vs. Neji Hyuga will begin after an hour's recess." Hayate announced. Ekyt walked off the field, over to where everyone had gathered. Shikamaru, Asuma, Kurenai, Kakashi, and Guy were in the stands, heads together, seriously discussing something.

Ekyt glared at Neji, despite having zero confidence.

"What's all that about?!" Naruto asked, clearly annoyed with being left out.

Ekyt didn't break his gaze. "He attacked some girl...Hinata...before the tournament and nearly killed her."

"WHAT?! YOU'D BETTER BEAT THAT JERK! IF YOU DON'T WIN, I'M GONNA KILL HIM! BELIEVE IT!"

"Are you certain about this? He's not qualified, and you can't be sure he'll agree, with the limitation such as they are..." Kurenai's words rang true with the group. Except for Lord Hokage.

"He will accept. You can be sure. Despite his ineligibility, and the face he personally has nothing to gain from this test, not being able to attain the rank of chunin due to lack of missions, he won't let down his friends."

"Lord Hokage is right. But the question is- Is he skilled enough? All of us know how dangerous the chunin exams are...and without having trained with Ino and Choji, not to mention being so new himself, and having nothing to gain, and everything to lose."

Asuma lit a new cigarette. "Why don't we ask him?"

Guy nodded enthusiastically. "Asuma's right. We can discuss all we want, but it's approved by all of us. Except him, and that's who it's all gonna come down to."

"Pardon me." A cute, but somehow deadly-sounding female voice reached Ekyt's ears. That was followed with a tap on the shoulder. He turned around to see a familiar, brown-haired girl twirling a kunai. The girl continued. "I don't believe we've met. My name is Tenten."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ekyt."

"Good to know. Listen, you're facing my teammate next. I don't know if Lee has mentioned it- but Neji will kill you."

Everyone's gaze shifted from Tenten to Ekyt, then back.

"Tenten, you know Neji is" Lee started.

But his words were falling on deaf ears.

"I get the feeling you dislike me." Ekyt said politely.

"Not at all," Tenten replied.

"Neji IS good, I've seen him fight. But, and I know the kunoichi here are just as deadly as the guys (He had been warned that Tenten would kill him if he insinuated that boys were better than girls. He was actually speaking the truth.), I can't just sit here and let an injured girl get attacked by some punk like that."

Tenten wasn't sure what to say. **How did he say all that, defy my words, and manage to make it sound like he was agreeing with me? Neat trick kid.** she thought, maybe warming to him just slightly.

"Ekyt." Sasuke motioned with his head for Ekyt to follow him.

Once they were away from the group, Sasuke gave Ekyt a warning. "Neji is going to be tough. Pace yourself, and don't put everything you have into one strike, he'll block it. Then you're screwed."

Ekyt thanked Sasuke for the advice. "Sasuke...is Sakura okay?" Ekyt asked suddenly. "Hmn?" Sasuke apparently had no idea what he was talking about. "She seems...different. And I don't mean the gloves and skirt (She's got the look from after the time skip). Something's bothering her..." Ekyt looked hard at Sasuke. For his part, Sasuke just shrugged.

Suddenly something was bothering Ekyt too. He had, in his mind, seen Hinata laying on that stretcher, unconscious and nearly dead. He saw himself, his eye destroyed, his body wracked with pain. He saw Chakaro. He saw Gaara. He saw RED!

It was time for the match. Ekyt didn't even hear Neji's taunts. He didn't hear the crowd. He only heard his mind, telling him it was time for retribution. **They haven't taken me or my work seriously...Now it's time to pay the price. I'm not worth your time. Gaara, Chakaro...someday, you'll both pay.**

As soon as Hayate shouted "Hajime!" Ekyt tore toward Neji...

19 - Return of the Transparent Hand Jutsu!

Neji sidestepped Ekyt and made a move as though to slap Ekyt's side. Ekyt twisted away, evading the strike, while winding up for a spinning side kick. Neji stepped backward to avoid the strike, hitting Ekyt's leg with an open-hand strike. Ekyt felt a strange sensation in his leg, but shook it off. He continued his attacks, testing Neji's speed. He was easily as good as everyone said.

"Since you seem to be uninformed, I will explain to you my clan's specialty." Neji's voice ALWAYS grated everyone's nerves, but the smug superiority was beyond annoying. "You are new here, and have not yet heard of the Hyuga clan's kekkai gennkai. It is called the Byakugan eye. It allows me to see all the chakra points in your body. And I can do much more than just SEE them, I can attack them. I can halt your chakra flow, or I can force more chakra to flow. Either way...destiny has assured me victory. So perhaps it would be best for you to withdraw...The skies have"

"The skies can bite me." Ekyt was crouching, smiling slightly. "I don't believe in that fate crap. I believe I'm the captain of my own destiny. And your special eye...it's a great ability, to be sure...but I AM aware of it's weaknesses...and yours." Ekyt's speech put Neji on the defensive.

"You can be sure the skies are correct! They have assured my victory!"

"They seemed to insure that girl's (Hinata) death, yet she's still living."

"Thanks to intervention!," Neji furiously replied, nearly shaking with anger.

"And the skies didn't plan for that? You do your best to SOUND smart, but it's becoming obvious you aren't. You were given a gift, and you've wasted it."

"Don't tell me how to"

"And another thing- fate is a real easy scapegoat, isn't it. You go on and on "Oh, the heavens this" and "The heavens that!" Well...what about you?"

"Making Neji mad, that's suicide!" Tenten's protest earned a grunt of agreement from the majority of her friends. Lee disagreed.

"I have been present during Ekyt's training. Even though he does not possess any kekkai genkai that he is aware of, he has made a conscious effort to study them and find counters," Lee said, fixated on Ekyt and Neji's stare down.

"What do you mean Lee? This eye thing has a counter? I mean, Naruto beat Neji, but that was because of his fox chakra. Ekyt doesn't have that!" Sakura sounded worried, and rightfully so. Before Lee could answer, Naruto pointed out Ekyt's strategy.

"I see what he's doing! He's making Neji mad, and distracting him...but what's he gonna do? That eye is a pain, believe it! It nearly did ME in, and I'm Hokage material! (I mean, Ekyt's okay, but no way, not Hokage)"

Sasuke ducked behind a pillar, clutching his curse mark. "D-damnit! I've gotta tell Kakashi...agh!" Sasuke's voice changed, becoming deeper, and more evil sounding. "That's better...you couldn't resist forever Uchiha!" Out of Sasuke's mouth came Orochimaru's voice. Sasuke was helpless as

Orochimaru picked out his target. "I think the Haruno girl did enough damage to me to warrant death...But let's give her a last request..."

Neji attacked in a rage, hitting Ekyt with everything he had. Ekyt blocked the first few strikes. Then Neji went straight for the kill. An open-hand shot to the heart that would stop the central chakra flow flowing. It would be like a dam bursting. "It is over!" Neji declared. He waited for Hayate Gekko to signal the matches end. But it never came.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu! Clone Instigation!"

All around Neji, fire sprang up. Ekyt and his clones were using a fire jutsu. Neji realized, in controlled terror, what Ekyt had planned. **He used that clone as a distraction...he DOES know the Byakugan's weakness...if everything in it's (nearly 360 degree) field of vision is at an abnormally high or abnormally low temperature, then the eye is clouded. That would also mean he knows the other weak point...the back of the neck...that's where he'll strike...**

Ekyt knew the Byakugan's weakness. **Should I attack it? He's got to know...he might be so distracted by my clones, he won't notice it...I've got to take the chance, I might not get another opening...**

"Incredible! He's blinded Neji's eye...but he might be rushing in for the attack too soon." Lee sounded thoughtful, and worried. Something that caught Linda's attention.

"You mean...Neji might know this is coming?! He'll kill Ekyt!" Even as she talked, Linda moved closer to the railing.

Meanwhile, Sasuke sat next to Sakura. "Sakura...I have a question for you...If you're not busy after...maybe we could go do something...together?"

Sakura nearly fainted. "I'm sorry Sasuke, I just...thought I heard you ask me out?"

"Well, what do you say? How about it?" 'Sasuke' offered her a grin.

"I'd love to!"

Neji spun around, landing a Gentle Fist strike to Ekyt's incoming right arm. He leapt backward, not liking the feeling in his arm. **C'mon, move!** he thought desperately upon realizing his arm wasn't working right. "OOF!" He was slammed backwards as Neji's palm met his chin. Ekyt lay still after the strike, face down. He looked over at Hayate and shook his head. "I'm not quitting."

"It is foolish to persist! Even WITH your clones clouding my eye, YOU cannot attack me! It would be stupid for you to continue."

"And even stupider of me to quit," Ekyt spat.

There's got to be some way to beat him...something I haven't done...but what's his weakness? I tried the more obvious weakness...but there must be another weakness...wait, wait, what was he fighting with that girl (Hinata) over? Something about clans...but how can that help me? My

chakra is almost gone...wait...wait...that's it! His chakra can't keep up forever...I can fight without it...he can't...I've just got to outlast him...force him to use his chakra...Burn up his stamina...get him angry...

"TRANSFORM!" Ekyt's shout made every head turn toward him. The form he took surprised everyone...himself included! He had become- Hinata?

"Hinata...but why would he...Ah! Let's see where he goes with this..." Kakashi lifted his headband to use his Sharingan.

Shikamaru and Asuma turned to watch this spectacle too. Next to them, Kurenai couldn't help but smile. "Taking the form of Hinata? That's a first I'd bet! She's a changed girl, Hinata. She fought Neji to prove a point...I'm going to check on her after this match...she'll want to know how this went..."

Ekyt found himself speaking in Hinata's quavering, quite voice. But he had his own sarcastic edge in it as well.

"What's wrong cousin? Is it getting too hot for you? You're nothing without that eye. Nothing but a servant to the skies...how sad for you."

Neji had initiated his rotation jutsu, continuously using it to block the increasingly problematic fire attacks. But this forced him out of it. "How dare you mock the fates? They will never smile upon you!"

"Oh no, what will I do? Your imaginary friends don't like me!" Hinata/Ekyt exclaimed, knees shaking in mock fear.

"AGGGGHHHH!" Neji yelled, putting all his chakra into one strike. Ekyt transformed back.

"Gotcha." He said quietly. Neji was getting closer, paying no attention to the fact that Ekyt was making no attempt to get away.

"Run! Fight back! Why are you letting me attack!" Neji was shouting in frustration, disbelieving the bored look on Ekyt's face.

Ekyt didn't answer. Instead, he suddenly sidestepped Neji's attack and shoved his arm aside with his forearm. Immediately, Ekyt followed up with a punch to the jaw. Neji saw it coming and struck toward Ekyt's temple.

The fight was over. Ekyt was crouching, his hand still extended from his strike. Neji was laying in a heap, conscious but unable to move.

"YES! HE DID IT!" Ekyt's cheering section shouted as one. They leapt down over the barricade, all wanting to shake Ekyt's hand. He was stoic about the whole thing. Conspicuous by their absence were Sakura and Sasuke.

"(koff) Good job. Um, you win. Congratulations." Hayate offered his hand. Ekyt shook it, adding a bow at the end.

"It was indeed a memorable victory..." Lord Hokage looked at Neji, who was being carried off on a

stretcher. "Very interesting tactic. And you can consider this assignment completed. I believe that makes two A ranks for you..."

Ekyt thanked him, bowing. The Ekyt called Naruto aside. "Naruto...did Sasuke and Sakura say anything before they left?"

"It was really weird...I heard Sasuke ask her on a date."

"Good for- wait, what?"

"He asked her on a date. I thought it was really weird, but"

"Naruto...I hope I'm wrong...but just in case...if I'm not back here in ten minutes, come after me with Kakashi-sensei and anyone else you can get, Lord Hokage for sure. Here...this might use up my chakra, but this is more important..."

SUMMONING JUTSU!

Holly appeared. "Trouble boss?" she asked, her husky female voice sounding bored.

"Maybe Holly. Listen, I need you to be able to track me. Stay with Naruto and the others, okay?"

"Sure kid. Just give me something to follow, I need a scent."

Ekyt pierced his thumb with a kunai, wiping the small drops of blood on Holly's collar. "Will that do it?"

"I suppose so. I REALLY detest the scent of a human..."

Ekyt ignored it and ran off, forcing his chakra to his feet.

"Sasuke, you've picked such a wonderful spot!" Sakura was in awe. She and Sasuke Uchiha were out, together, on an honest-to-God date. And Sasuke had picked a secluded area in the cherry trees, their blossoms just adding to the perfect effect. They were sitting on a log, neither one seeming to mind the rough texture.

"Well, I wanted this to be special Sakura," Sasuke answered.

Oh...God, he's so hot! Cha!

"It is Sasuke! But...why the sudden interest in me?" Sakura asked.

"Can't a shy guy notice a beautiful girl?" Sasuke replied innocently.

"Sh-shy?" Sakura stammered, not believing the steadfast Uchiha boy had a shy bone in his body. **Waitaminute here....something's wrong...he would never ask me out...but I can't go anywhere...I've got trick him...if it's really Sasuke, he'll hate me...but if it's not him...**

"Sasuke...Do you think you'll ever be able to kill your brother...what's his name..."

"That's not important. YOU are."

Sasuke's answer sent chills up Sakura's spine. She saw his curse mark. It was black again.

"Kiss me Sakura. I've waited a long time to feel your lips touch mine." Sasuke leaned forward to kiss Sakura. Sakura, however, leaned back.

SWISH! THUNK!

A kunai landed near Sasuke's head. A worn-out, bleeding Ekyt was standing at the edge of the clearing.

"You're not getting her Orochimaru (pant, pant)."

Sasuke's lips curled into a sneer. "Oh, and you'll stop me?"

Ekyt was living on something other than chakra right now. "Yes. I will. You've ruined too many lives...not

hers...she's innocent..."

Orochimaru/Sasuke grabbed Sakura, holding a kunai to her neck. "Get on the ground. You're going to become my next sacrifice. I'll kill her."

Ekyt knelt down, laying still. **Substitution Jutsu! And, please let this work...**

Poof!

Sakura was suddenly at the edge of the clearing, where Ekyt had been. "Substitution?" she said out loud. She realized what happened.

Ekyt was the one with a kunai at his neck. He was panting heavily, his chakra almost gone. "An excellent move...you mean to save the girl...whatever the cost to yourself...well, Chakaro will be happy to know I've killed you..."

"He's been gone too long! That's it! I've got to tell them!" Naruto ran over to the group. "Guys! Ekyt went after Sasuke and Sakura. We've got to go after him! I can't explain now, but he left his dog! She can track his scent!"

"Naruto, why"

"Please, there's no time! I can explain later! We've got to go! Even Lord Hokage, please!"
Hokage drew himself up. "Lead the way Naruto."

Ekyt sat still, letting Orochimaru talk. Letting himself build up his chakra again. Once he felt enough to fight, he darted to the side and grabbed the knife away from his neck. But he could do little else; it might have been Orochimaru talking, but it was still Sasuke's body. If it was hurt, he was hurt. So he settled for leaping backward, in front of Sakura. "Go, run. Find the others." He said desperately.

"I can't leave you!"

"Don't worry! You've got to, or there will be two death, instead of one! If you go...Sasuke might have a chance. I've just got to hold Orochimaru long enough..."

"Don't talk like that! You'll do it! I know it! But...I'll get the others! Just...hang on!"

Sakura ran as fast as she could, tears blinding her, stinging her eyes. She had to find the others, FAST!

Ekyt...I don't care HOW good he is, that's Sasuke's body with Orochimaru in control!

Kakashi-sensei couldn't handle that easily! Oh man, I've got to hurry!

Luckily, the others found her. Panting, she pointed them in the right direction, then followed them, the landscape becoming a blur.

Ekyt leapt to the right, then to the left, landing on all fours. He leapt upward, avoiding attacking the best he could. But he was tiring fast. Three kunai had struck his ribs, tearing his clothes and scratching his skin. Nothing was broken, but it was wearing him down. Another kunai dug into his leg, grounding him long enough for Orochimaru/Sasuke to punch him in the face.

This was the scene the others walked in on. Ekyt was finally unconscious; he had no chakra and no

stamina left. Sakura immediately went to his side, checking his wounds, healing him the best she could. To her surprise, he gently pushed her hands away. “I’m fine...I just need to...got it! Sakura, can you tell Kakashi-sensei...” Ekyt mumbled something to Sakura. She looked worried, but nodded, and passed his words along to Kakashi. Kakashi passed it to Lord Hokage.

Ekyt got up, lining up with Kakashi and Hokage. “TRANSPARENT HAND JUTSU: BLUE FLAME PROTECTION SEAL!”

Ekyt gathered his mysterious blue and purple chakra. Kakashi had used a duplicate of Shikamaru’s Shadow Possession Jutsu, trapping Sasuke/Orochimaru in a perfect position. And Lord Hokage was ready to make a powerful attempt to force Orochimaru from Sasuke’s body, once and for all. It had never been tried, but it was the best shot they had at the moment.

Ekyt rammed his hand into Sasuke’s stomach, clenching his fist. Lord Hokage followed with his own attack, a sealing jutsu that required no handsigns, and a name he didn’t shout out.

They all watched as the curse mark lifted off Sasuke’s neck. They had done it. “You’ll all pay! Especially you, young one! We’ll have a fight someday, even if it’s a rematch in hell!” Orochimaru’s voice left, leaving Sasuke himself.

Sakura could help herself anymore. She jumped at Ekyt and Sasuke, hugging both of them. Inadvertently choking them too. She backed up, apologizing. Ekyt was in admittedly rough shape, and still bleeding. He turned to leave Sasuke with Sakura. But he felt a gentle hand on his aching shoulder.

“Thank you. And congratulations.” Sakura gave him a hug (This time avoiding choking him) and even a kiss on the cheek.

MORE TO COME EVERYONE! STAY TUNED!

20 - Searching for a Purpose

"I'm afraid, the circumstances being what they are, I cannot allow him to participate in the chunin exams." Lord Hokage's voice sounded weary. And well it should, he had been up all night. "The Uchiha boy, he cannot be stopped, only monitored. He and his cell will be allowed to participate. I'm sorry Shikamaru, but you'll have to re-take the exams. You're in no danger of losing the rank of Chunin, and you can withdraw at the tournament portion of the fight, without penalty."

Asuma, Kakashi, Guy, Skikamaru, Iruka, and Kurenai all nodded their understanding.

Asuma and Shikamaru left Hokage's sitting room. Asuma was clearly unhappy with how that went. He lit a cigarette while grumbling "What good is it to protect him? How's he going to learn that way?" "It's a drag. But...if Ino and Choji need me...Ekyt WOULD go and piss of Orochimaru." "I'm sure it wasn't his idea Shikamaru. Just like it wasn't Naruto and Sasuke's idea. Well...with those two, I couldn't be sure, to be fair," Asuma said thoughtfully, holding his cigarette between two fingers, watching the smoke curl and rise happily to the sky.

"Alright. Since the Chunin exams are coming up, we're going to have a little practice, right now." Kakashi's announcement seemed to wake up Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "What KIND of practice?" Kakashi gave him an amused look. "I know you're all familiar with the drill. Take the bells from me or no lunch." The group groaned as one, but only Naruto protested. "Kakashi-sensei, we've already DONE this! Come on, don't you think we can do it?" Naruto protested, his finger pointing at Kakashi. "As I recall, you all failed this test last time..." Kakashi's reminder (Insert sweat drops on the three) quelled any argument that Team 7 might have been able to raise. "If there's no questions...we'll get started. And, I hope you remember how to function as a team. That never WAS your strong suit..."

"Alright, listen up! You're all ready to become chunin this time! Let's do what we did a year ago...WHY do you want to become chunin?" **Ah, the springtime of youth! Let's see what's changed since I last asked them!** "Alright- Tenten, let's start with you! Why do YOU want to be a Chunin?" "I want to be as great a ninja as Tsunade. I want to show everyone that Kunoichi are as deadly as male Shinobi!" "Alright! Neji, you're up!" Guy aimed his finger toward Neji. Neji, however, was particularly glum. "I am...not certain. The fates...don't seem to be behind me anymore...I want to be a Chunin because...I want to beat Hinata! I want to beat Ekyt, to get revenge for him defeating me! I want to pay back Naruto! THAT is my new destiny! To defeat Ekyt, to regain my lost reputation against Naruto, and to prove that Hinata is no worth heiress!" Guy looked a little worried. "Alright...good answer...(cough cough) Lee! What about you?!" Lee leapt upright, bubbling over with enthusiasm. "I want to become a splendid ninja, even if taijutsu is

the only jutsu at my disposal! I want to prove I can be a solid, reliable ninja, even though I have no given talent except hard work! All because THAT is MY Shinobi way!" Lee struck his thumbs-up, tooth-gleaming pose.

"Alright. All of you are ready. So...start training! Focus your chakra. Shikamaru, you too!" Asuma's orders were met with groans, but obedience. Choji leaned over to Shikamaru.

"So, you couldn't get a replacement, huh?"

"Lord Hokage vetoed the only one who could have handled it," Shikamaru said in response to his friend's question.

"Oh? Who was that?" Ino questioned.

"That Ekyt guy," Shikamaru replied.

"Ah! He's no Sasuke, but still...too bad, I could have rubbed him in Sakura's face!"

Hinata woke up in the familiar, sterile hospital room. "Ah, good, you're awake! How are you feeling?" (Whine whine, Akamaru added)

"I'm feeling much better Kiba, thank you. How are you and Shino doing?" Hinata asked shyly, looking around for Shino. He was standing near the window, staring outside.

"We've healed. Kurenai-sensei has been worried about you. Naruto has been by, and right now Kurenai-sensei is talking to the guy who helped you."

"Oh, really? I should thank him..." By the tone of her voice, Kiba judged that Hinata was going to have a hard time with that.

"He, uh, won that tournament. By beating Neji," Kiba said, smiling with his fangs out.

"Oh, that's wonderful!"

"You shoulda seen HOW he won, THAT was hilarious! Kurenai-sensei should tell it, she can never do it with a straight face!"

Just outside the room, Kurenai was talking with Ekyt about the tournament.

"Thank you for stepping in between Neji and Hinata."

"Glad I could help," Ekyt answered amiably.

"I don't know what would have happened to Hinata if you hadn't...she's got a big heart, but no self esteem...and Neji just..."

"Neji was being Neji. He irritates everyone; I hardly blame Hinata for wanting a piece of him."

"By the way...just what possessed you to do a transformation jutsu against Neji?" Kurenai asked with a smile.

Ekyt grinned sheepishly behind his mask. His voice sounded more like Hayate Gekko's though. "Well, Neji is good. I couldn't attack him physically, and I figured that if he would attack her with such anger, what would he do to me?"

Kurenai peeked in the room. "It looks like she's awake. How about stopping inside for a minute?"

"Will that be okay with Hinata? I mean, I can read anxiety pretty well, I've got a severe case myself."

"Really? But you seem so confident! How do you"

"Trust me. When I'm defending someone, I can push it aside...but if I'm just talking...it gets kind of brutal. Poor Hinata. She has it worse than I do. But she also handles it better than I do."

Ekyt wound up going inside the room. "I apologize, I never really introduced myself. I'm Ekyt."

"M-my name is H-Hinata Hyuga."

"Nice to meet you. Are you feeling better?"

"Y-yes I am. Thank you...um...if it wouldn't be asking too much...would you tell me how you beat Neji?"
Hinata stammered hopefully.

Ekyt's visible eye closed when he smiled. "Sure, I'd be glad to. I don't know how funny you'll find it, but everyone else seemed to..."

It was twenty minutes until the deadline, and no one had managed to grab the bells from Kakashi. "You need to work together more than that, if you want to eat anyway. Of course, this could be part of your plan to lull me to sleep and THEN steal the bells."

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" All three of Kakashi students used the attack from different sides.

"Fireball jutsu!"

"Uzumaki Barrage!"

"Cherry Blossoms Rage!"

The three attacks lent themselves well to each other. The fireball jutsu set the cherry blossoms on fire, which gave Naruto's clones a chance to attack with their taijutsu. Just as the attack would have struck, the timer went off. To their surprise, Kakashi handed them all food.

"You did well today. Your teamwork was the best I've ever seen it, and your jutsus went well together. Excellent job."

"So, Sasuke, are you feeling better?" Sakura asked sweetly.

"Hm." Sasuke grunted in response.

He was better when he was possessed by Orochimaru! What does it take to get his guy's attention, huh?! I'm not the most pretty one, but even I deserve some attention! Come on, what does it take to impress you?! Cha! Inner Sakura was having a fit, punching wildly and muttering curses.

"Glad to hear that!" Sakura answer brightly, ignoring her inner self.

"Kakashi-Sensei, what's up? Is Shikamaru going to test or not?" Naruto wanted to know.

"He has to. There's no replacement for him." Kakashi replied quickly.

"Ekyt would have done it! He might have been able to make those two (Ino and Choji) pass, believe it."

"Do NOT mention anything of this to him. Lord Hokage's orders. He is not to know that he was considered for the Chunin Exams."

"But why not? Wouldn't it be a good thing," Sakura asked, confused.

"He's a target for Orochimaru right now."

"So is Sasuke!"

"Sasuke is from a powerful clan, he"

"Clan's don't matter!"

"I mean bloodline"

"Oh come on, that's weak, blood doesn't mean anything!"

"Naruto, stop being difficult! It's for his own good, and everyone else's!" **Leave it to the number one, hyperactive, knucklehead ninja to question Lord Hokage's latest orders. It doesn't make sense to me either Naruto, but Lord Hokage knows better than us.**

"Iruka-Sensei?"

Iruka looked over his shoulder. "Ekyt? What's up?"

"Can I sit in with your class today? With all the others off, training for the Chunin exams, I've really got no way of training physically," Ekyt said.

"Sure, in fact...I could use some help...are you up to it?" Iruka asked, knowing full well what Ekyt would say.

"Sure, I'd be glad to help. Just tell me what I need to do."

"Okay class, let's pay attention. I've asked Ekyt here to show us a personalized jutsu. He's going to demonstrate, THEN we'll work on your own. Whenever you're ready Ekyt."

Ekyt was standing in front of the class. "Clone jutsu!" POOF! A clone of Ekyt popped up beside him. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!" The class watched as Ekyt's clone used Ekyt's personal jutsu. Then, Ekyt used another one: "Dragon's Path Jutsu!" He leapt on top of the fire, chakra protecting his feet, and slid down its path, landing crouched on the front row of desks. "Yame!" He called, ending the jutsu ("Yame" means "Stop").

"Now, who would like to demonstrate a jutsu for us?"

(Man, this is bogus!) Konohamaru whispered.

"I think I heard a volunteer Iruka-Sensei." Ekyt indicated with his head who he meant.

"Konohamaru? KONOHAMARU!" Iruka shouted.

"Huh? Wha?"

"Demonstrate a jutsu!"

"Okay!"

Ekyt and Iruka watched as Konohamaru made a series of hand signs. "Sexy Jutsu!" BLAM! Konohamaru was suddenly a beautiful brunette! One catch- She (Formerly Kononahamaru) was naked! "Whaddya think boys, ya like what you see?! Such naughty boys, aren't you? M-wah!" Blowing kisses at the end? That was too much for even the seasoned Iruka-sensei, and the stoic Ekyt. Two nosebleeds, two older ninjas flying through the air, and two ninjas landing hard. Konohamaru was clearly pleased to take after his idol. He got another chance to take after Naruto when Iruka and Ekyt got up.

"CUT THE STUPID TRICKS! THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!" Iruka shouted.

After class, Ekyt and Iruka were cleaning up the classroom and talking. "I'm sorry about that Ekyt. I should have known he would pull that...ugh..." Iruka said, disgusted.

"Don't be too hard on him Iruka-sensei. It's not the most...useful...jutsu, but the way he pulled it off...he'll be powerful some day."

"I got the same impression. Just like Naruto," Iruka added.

"Yeah..." Ekyt couldn't entirely hide his depression, not from a seasoned ninja veteran like Iruka.

"Something wrong?"

"I had hoped to be ready for the chunin exams...I thought I'd have a squad by now...and not having a family name doesn't help. It's a disadvantage, which I don't mind. But it also prevents me from going further, which I DO mind. It seemed like I would have been considered too..."

Iruka coughed suddenly. "I'm sorry about that. I understand your frustration. I don't have a clan

anymore, just a name. Same with Naruto, and even Sasuke."

"I have family...I just can't stand most of them...and the name...NONE of my family likes the name."

"You never know, someone might ask you to take their family name someday. Like the Haruno's for example." Iruka couldn't resist the jab. Ekyt rolled his good eye.

"Thanks for letting me help out today Iruka-sensei. If you need me again, let me know."

"Thank you Ekyt. I'll make sure you get credit for a D-Rank mission, at least. As soon as some suitable students are ready, we'll get you a team."

Kayla spotted Ekyt, sitting by himself, like usual. But he didn't have a scroll in front of him, which was unusually. He was on a building about fifteen feet tall. "Easy!" Kayla made the leap, landing next to Ekyt, who had barely flinched. "Heya teach! Haven't see ya around!"

"Oh, Kayla, hi. Yeah, I've been distracted."

"Re-allly. I couldn't tell just now! Why dontcha tell me all about it," Kayla said in a needling voice, knowing it would get under her old sensei's skin.

"Sorry. It's just...well...you weren't there...I fought Chakaro and his new master a couple times...it's really weird...not to mention the no clan and no team thing."

"No, really, there's got to be more than that bothering you," Kayla joked. Then, she turned serious.

"And how long have you been holding this in."

"Since this morning."

"Too long, ol' bean. Gotta be open."

"I know, I should talk to you more. I'm sorry, things between Linda and I are almost violent, I just don't want you caught in the middle." Ekyt's worry was valid, because Linda was striding up to them now...

"Kayla, stay away from him. I don't think it is, but his retardation might be catch."

Ekyt had heard enough. Already frustrated, he shot back with "If you paid attention in class, you would know the answer to that. Good to know Kunoichi like you are defending this village."

"WHAT?! How about you? I'm so happy having a damned cyclops watching over us!"

Ekyt wanted to shout something back, but bit his tongue. "Forget it. I don't have time to waste, listening to you go on about my condition...You know I've always done what was necessary...you of all people should know..."

Turning to Kayla, Ekyt gave a wry grin behind his mask. "Well, I've got to go train. Thanks for the help Kayla!" Ekyt leapt off, only a vague wave over his shoulder acknowledging his former team.

Naruto and Sasuke went home, both to empty houses. Naruto had personalized his home (He HAD lived alone for twelve years, so why not?), unlike Sasuke. Sasuke's room was an all black box, with only the Uchiha clan symbol breaking up the monotony of the walls, marking where his door was.

Iruka too went home to an empty house. Sometimes he wondered what kept him alive...one day Lord Hokage had told him. He recited the words, while an image of the Third Hokage ran through his head, saying the same words.

"You're a pillar of this town Iruka. All these people...they are my family, you are my family. Therefore, they are YOUR family, should you choose to accept them. They all love you Iruka. You're a pillar of this village."

Iruka smiled as he leaned back on his pillow, finally letting his body go through its paces to go to sleep.

Ekyt was alone too. His home was an apartment of sorts, much like the others had. Except just about every inch of three walls was covered with scrolls and posters. The posters showed how Chakra flowed, the Eight Inner Gates, pressure points, and the like. Next to his bed was a low wooden bookcase, which doubled as his nightstand. Books and scrolls of all kinds inhabited it.

Tonight, sleep didn't come. "Why am I here? What am I doing to help? I don't like not having a purpose, and there isn't anyone to train with anymore! I need to think of something...but what? I'll have to talk with Iruka-Sensei, maybe he can suggest something," Ekyt said. **Talking to yourself...not good.** Unconsciously, he shifted the red handkerchief that Sakura had given him to a higher position on his left arm.

For now, it's time to get some rest. Purpose can wait until tomorrow morning. I don't imagine Iruka-Sensei would be thrilled if I were to bother him at three am with a question that might not even have an answer.

21 - Death or Life: A Matter of Honor!

Kabuto was rapidly tiring of Orochimaru's new favorite. This Chakaro kid was really a problem. Not to mention that Kabuto didn't feel any real loyalty to Orochimaru to begin with. If the power was gone, so was he...Of course, being a know traitor, his options were limited. He'd have to think out his departure carefully.

Not all the genin were too busy to train with Ekyt. Lee and Ekyt in particular had some entertaining matches. Ekyt never won, but it was clear he and Lee were both getting stronger, and very rapidly progressing. From the match with Lee, Ekyt worked with Tenten on weapons. Throwing weapons were admittedly a weak spot for him. Tenten was an excellent teacher. She started out harassing him, but once she realized he had respect for kunoichi, she settled down and trained him right.

"Naruto, you'll be surprised to hear this, but you're ahead of the group, so you can relax today." These words were rare indeed; especially coming from Kakashi!

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked in confusion.

"You've already had experience training a student. Sasuke and Sakura haven't."

"All right! I beat Sasuke! Believe it! I'm gonna be Hokage, I'm gonna be Hokage! Yeah!"

"Sasuke?"

Sakura's shy voice hit Sasuke's ears.

"Hmn?"

"S-since Kakashi-Sensei says we all need to train someone...well...I was hoping you would train me." Sasuke looked up in surprise. He said nothing, which gave Sakura a chance to continue.

"I want to get stronger. And you're one of the strongest Shinobi around." Sakura's words were spoken truthfully, without even a hint of the rabid fangirl that usually occupied her body. To her surprise, Sasuke grinned wryly.

"Fine. Let's get started..."

Chakaro Tamaki looked sideways at Kabuto. His evil voice sounded like a hiss.

"Reconnaissance? On the Hidden Leaf Village? Of course Kabuto, we can always use that. If the chance arises, kill our usual targets. Not the Uchiha boy, he is to be given to Lord Orochimaru alive. Do you understand?"

"Yes Chakaro. I'll have date for you quickly. In the mean time, Orochimaru wants me to remind you about your lesson with him today."

"Understood. Dismised." Chakaro made a vague waving motion, returning to the scroll he was reading. Kabuto clearly didn't appreciate the blow-off, but shrugged and adjusted his glasses.

Ekyt's depression had been consuming him. He had reasons to be depressed, and his anxious nature magnified them. He took a deep, sharp breath, because his anxiety suddenly hit a peak. Suddenly, he felt something. That chakra...the one he had used to seal Sasuke's curse mark...it had returned. He leapt up and sprinted to Kakashi, who had asked Ekyt to meet him on Lone Pine Hill if anything went wrong in

the village.

"Kakashi-sensei! That chakra, it's back!"

"Can you demonstrate it?"

"Yes sensei."

Ekyt focused himself and his chakra. He could *feel* this strange chakra bypassing his regular chakra without bothering it. Next, the chakra formed in his hand, turning his hand a transparent blue. Kakashi looked closely at the chakra.

"The color of the chakra is associated with the emotional part of your chakra. What does that tell us?" Kakashi resisted the urge to poke at Ekyt's hand. Instead, he lifted his headband. With his Sharingan, he could see that the chakra's energy flow was in a counter-clockwise pattern. Normally, chakra flowed in a clockwise pattern.

"Emotion...My anxiety...every time I've been able to access this chakra, I've been attacked emotionally, or defending someone in desperation. Afterwards, the chakra exhausts me...but only for a bout fifteen minutes. During that time, though, I have my stamina, but no regular chakra."

This was troubling, in a way. But useful.

Sakura was nearly panicking. "I need a student!"

If there was such a thing as fate, it was smiling on her that day. Kayla Donalds happened to be in need of a teacher.

"Sakura...do you think you could help me out? I'm having a hard time with the chakra scalpel..."

Ekyt walked toward Tanuza town. He needed to clear his head, to think. He didn't have long. The other thing he needed was about to present itself: A fight.

Two tough-looking ninja were blocking the way. "You're coming with us." One of them spoke forcefully, grabbing Ekyt by the arm. Ekyt yanked away.

"You don't want to do that," Ekyt said in a warning voice.

"And why not, little man? You gonna beat us? We're chunin, and we can kick your genin @\$\$!"

"Go ahead then. Something tells me that your vocal chords are the biggest threat you have," Ekyt replied. He was feeling vicious today, and he didn't know why. And right now, he knew he should be worried for his life. But he was too frustrated, too angry to care.

The first ninja ordered his comrade back. "I'll handle this!" The ninja who spoke looked about thirty years old, though it was hard to tell because his body was so covered with tattoos you couldn't judge the skin. He spoke in a low pitched voice, and he muttered constantly.

With a yell, he rushed at Ekyt. Ekyt guessed that this guy was going to try taijutsu. That worked for him. The older ninja, clad in white, struck at Ekyt with a punch that was clearly meant to be a killing strike. Ekyt leapt backward onto a rock, then was forced to hop backward again as a thick leg snapped upward toward his chest.

Ekyt landed, then pushed forward, extending his leg, meeting his opponents chest. He pushed with the foot, knocking his opponent back. With a small leap, Ekyt launched a roundhouse kick, followed by a crescent kick, which became an axe kick halfway through the motion. Ekyt's kick hit the top of the

enemy's head. He swung his foot back up in a return strike, cracking his opponent under the chin, knocking him backwards.

"Haito!"

The ninja who had been ordered aside leaned over his comrade.

"He's not dead. But you should prop his head up, and put some gauze on the top of his head."

The one tending to his friend looked up in surprise. It wasn't every day an enemy (not to mention one that had gotten jumped) offered help. Hibiki stood up. "I'll make you pay for what you did to Haito!"

THIS opponent was a wiry little guy, although not that quick, despite having the build for it. He had big, protruding lips, and a sloping forehead. His skin was a strange yellow color, making him look as though he was one giant bruise. His thin fingers suddenly began to interweave, making hand signs for a jutsu. Ekyt leapt in close, and very quickly. He snap-kicked at Hibiki's fingers, hearing a crunch sound. That would have ended the fight, except Hibiki was so angry he decided to stab at Ekyt, holding a kunai with his thumb and one finger that wasn't broken.

Ekyt's kunai met his to sweep it aside, leaving Hibiki open for an attack. Ekyt kicked hard to the solar plexus with his front leg, knocking Hibiki backward into a narrow creek.

From behind, Ekyt heard a third ninja coming. He spun around and raised his shin to block a low kick. He struck with an elbow while stepping forward into a crane stance. When his elbow was blocked, he brought his foot straight forward from a standing position, trying to use the inside edge to kick to the knee. That failed as Ekyt had to block his head and duck low. He left himself open for a fraction of a second, earning a hard jab to the mid section for the mistake.

This was Ekyt's first opportunity to really look at his opponent. The man was roughly seven feet tall, and about 300 lbs of muscle. His white Gi top didn't quite fit, leaving a few inches of stomach showing, with the chest mostly open. His gi pants were too short as well. They matched those of his comrades.

Shoulda known...ninjas travel in threes...so what delayed fat boy here? Ekyt wondered. He didn't have time to wonder for long, another first caught him in the cheek. He hit the ground, feeling a scrape forming on his face.

"Ya little punk! I oughta hang ya by yer thumbs for whut ya done ta them!" The big man was yelling and pointed animatedly at his two unconscious friends.

"THEY attacked ME! Same as you! And you just keep on threatening me. Unless your plan is to bore me to death, you're wasting your breath."

The big man attacked again. Ekyt deflected his fist and rolled to the side, leaping up over a sweep kick, then ducking under a wild punch. He stepped down on the big man's foot, then rammed his knee into the inside of his adversary's leg. When the bigger Shinobi bent down, Ekyt gave him a palm-thrust to the chin.

By then, Hibiki and Haito were up. They both tried to flying-tackle Ekyt, who threw one of them with a hip toss. He launched a side-kick at Hibiki, hitting him full in the stomach. "Come on Hikaro! Help us!" he called.

Apparently, the big guy deferred to Hibiki. His ham-sized hand caught Ekyt between the shoulder blades, knocking him down. Ekyt rolled quickly, and heard the tell-tale *whoosh* sound on kunai hitting the ground where he had been. He swept-kicked the recovered Haito, knocking him back down. In the same motion he rolled to his feet, landing behind a shuriken- riddled tree. **Time to even the odds...** He made the hand signs. Boar...horse...snake...tiger...dragon...monkey.

"Okay Sakura. Try it one more time," Sasuke ordered dryly.

"Right!" Sakura focused her chakra as hard as she could. "Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings technique!"

Sasuke watched as four trees nearby burst into flames and fell toward him.

"Kai! (Release!)" Sakura called, ending the genjutsu. **I did it! Yes! And I made time with Sasuke! I'm on a role, I can take on the world! Cha!** Calmly, she asked "Did it work alright Sasuke?"

"If I hadn't known it was coming, it would have."

Sakura didn't push her luck. Coming from Sasuke, that was a victory speech!

Ekyt's clones popped out from behind the tree. They attacked, two of them using the "Backward Snap Dragon!" technique. Both clones disappeared after the executing the attack; their share of chakra drained. Ekyt, still behind the tree, finished a second hand sign. "Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!"

Hibiki, the last one left standing, suddenly saw his home village. His heart leapt with joy! He had been banished from the Village Hidden in the Mist for a crime he didn't commit. He hadn't murdered the town's hero, a hard working family man named Jiro. But the town had blamed him. He was just about to run to his mother (Hibiki is still young), when she burst into flames. His house was burning down! He tried to put out the flames, but they kept growing, and started to lick his skin.

Hibiki screamed. Ekyt felt bad, but told himself that Hibiki and his friends would have killed him and forgotten about him. Ekyt had no intention of killing whatsoever. But Hibiki was proving tough. Ekyt's chakra was nearly exhausted. Ekyt ended the jutsu, hoping for a compromise.

Iruka and Naruto were heading out side the village. Iruka was on an errand for Lord Hokage, and Naruto was tagging along, with the understanding that if he did (and behaved himself), he and Iruka would go get ramen. That sounded like a heckuva deal to him! Iruka was in the middle of a sentence when he heard the sounds of battle.

"Let's check it out Iruka-sensei! Come on!" Naruto sprinted off.

"Naruto, hold on! Don't just go charging in! (sigh)" Even as he said it, Iruka knew his words were a waste.

"Oof!" The last shot sent Ekyt reeling. His chakra was exhausted. Thankfully, he had his reserves of stamina that were unique to him. Still, this was a strain. CLANG! The kunai clashed, each one's owner pushing hard, trying to gain the advantage. It was a dead-lock. Except, of course, Hibiki wasn't alone, and Ekyt was. And now, Ekyt only had one free hand, so jutsus were out. But so was letting go of the kunai, because he was inches away from getting gutted.

"Give it up! We only wanted you as a hostage! Now, we're just going to kill you!" Hibiki laughed, even as he was straining against Ekyt's kunai.

"(Huff-puff) I (cough) don't quit," Ekyt managed to cough out. **My stamina is almost gone...he's got to be warn out too, though...**

"You have one last chance. My friends are stirring, and they're going to aim for you. And they're going to kill you. I don't know how a fresh-faced genin like you hung on against three chunin like a for so long, but you can't hold on forever! So, accept life while you can!"

"An honorable death is preferable to a dishonorable life," Ekyt commented dryly. He drew his kunai back and flipped it to a reverse grip. His sweeping motion came just in time to block Hibiki's initial strike.

But Hibiki's follow-up kick to the chest knocked Ekyt into a tree. His kunai went sailing into the distance. His stamina and chakra were both exhausted by now, and he was bleeding from the mouth. He had numerous small cuts on his arm, but they meant nothing.

"End of the road." Hibiki, Haito, and Hikaro were all up, staring at Ekyt.

"You put up a good fight. But you exhausted your chakra...and our mercy."

As they drew back to strike, they heard a whoosh sound.

"You chumps can forget about killing him! Write it down, it'll mean something: I'm Naruto Uzumaki, future Hokage of the Village Hidden in the Leaves! Believe it!"

MORE TO COME!

NARUTO AND IRUKA ARE COMING TO EKYT'S RESCUE AGAINST THE THREE ROGUES FROM THE VILLAGE HIDDEN IN THE MIST! MEANWHILE, SASUKE AND SAKURA ARE TRAINING TOGETHER! A BIG "CHA!" FOR SAKURA! HOW ARE THE OTHER TEAM'S DOING? AND WHAT ABOUT KABUTO? WHAT'S HE PLANNING? FIND OUT NEXT TIME!

22 - A Lot to Consider: Chunin Exams on Deck!

Ekyt was stunned by Naruto's grand entrance, but could have laughed with relief. He didn't fear death, but he sure as hell didn't want his to come now! Not by these three idiots! Though they outranked him, Ekyt couldn't help but look down on them. They hadn't followed the Shinobi way. Attacking like that was ridiculous.

Hibiki, Haito, and Hikaro exchanged amused glances, before laughing out right.

"Ha! Lookit this kid!"

"Yeah!"

"He looks reaallll scary!"

Ekyt smiled, closing his eyes for a few seconds.

"You guys...are idiots. Don't you know better than to underestimate someone like that? I've watched him beat tougher opponents than you three jokers! If I'm a rank genin and I held my own...what do you think *he's* gonna do to you?" **Go for it Naruto...they're not paying any attention...just buy me a little time, I'm not gonna leave you drowning here!**

Naruto must have understood, because he used a silent "Shadow Clone" jutsu. A total of three Naruto's were inhabiting the formerly-peaceful little clearing. It was strange that such an intense battle could take place near a peacefully-flowing brook, dotted with moss-covered rocks and trees. The path wasn't a formal one, it was paved only with the sandals and boots of various Shinobi walking through the dirt and roots.

"Hee-yaah!"

Hibiki turned around, finding a blue sandal kicking his teeth in! He fell, followed closely by Haito and Hikaro. Hibiki got up and wiped the blood from his mouth.

"Little blister!" He sent a kunai sailing at Naruto.

Another kunai flew in and knocked that one down. Its owner leapt out from the bushes.

"Naruto, this is NOT behaving! Wait for me next time," a flustered Iruka called.

"Iruka-Sensei, if I had been any later, Ekyt would've been dead!"

From the ground, Ekyt called "He makes a good point Iruka-Sensei!"

My chakra...it's back! That makes it three on three now! I don't make it a habit to attack like this, but I REALLY don't appreciate the threat... Ekyt's thoughts put a gleam in his eye as he leapt to his feet to join Iruka-Sensei and Naruto.

"Thanks for the save Naruto! You too Iruka-Sensei!" Ekyt's normally moderate-pitched, low-as-a-whisper voice had taken on some emotion.

Looking at the enemies, Ekyt took a page out of Kakashi-Sensei's book. (No, Not "Make-out Paradise!" I don't mean THAT book!)

"Look, I'm busy...you're busy...since you started this whole thing, after all...how about we end this? Right now. I've got things to do." Ekyt leapt backward out of their range and made a rapid series of hand signs, giving Iruka-Sensei time to make his move.

"Hey, that's not a hand sign!" Hibiki yelled when Ekyt covered his head.

BLAMMM!!!!

Iruka's exploding-tag shuriken went off, burying their opponents under broken tree branches. They lay moaning, complaining about their pain, before they fell silent, their injuries knocking them out.

"Wait a second..." Iruka reached for their Hitai-Ate's and gave a firm tug. The "Mist Village" headbands came off...replaced with Sound Village Headbands. Iruka gulped and reached into their vest pockets. With a sound of surprise, he read the contents of a small black scroll, with only the Sound Village's logo on the outside.

"It's an arrest warrant...Uchiha Sasuke...and this is a death warrant! Haruno Sakura, Hatake Kakashi, Uzumaki Naruto...and Ekyt." Iruka looked at Naruto and Ekyt, who both were shocked at this point. Naruto narrowed his eyes, his mouth slightly open in surprise. He heard Ekyt walk by him. Ekyt walked over to the unconscious forms of his attackers. He bent down and took their kunai pouches off them. "They won't be needing these...I'll feel better if they're not armed."

CHA! What a day! I made time with Sasuke, learned a jutsu, and didn't get attacked! ...I wonder though...Sasuke, what are you thinking...about me? About Orochimaru? The pretty pink-haired Sakura felt the breeze pick up, tossing her hair around. With a small smile still playing on her lips from thinking about Sasuke, she spared a thought for Naruto and Kakashi. And even for another boy who had his work cut out for him.

Naruto and Ekyt sat quietly while Iruka gave his report to Lord Hokage.

Iruka had managed to keep the shakiness out of his voice, amazingly. It was no secret he thought of Naruto as a brother, or maybe a son...certainly a friend. It worried him that his former student was hunted by the single most dangerous villain alive.

Lord Hokage's thoughts were different. **I knew this would happen...Orochimaru needs to eliminate all those close to Sasuke...and Ekyt got on his bad side. But what to do about it...Naruto...I don't worry about him so much. If anyone's a match for Orochimaru, it's Kakashi. Ekyt...he has no one but himself. He might be good for a Genin, but Orochimaru and his henchmen are always high-quality...** "Iruka...please inform Kakashi and the usual contacts. Naruto, you stay out of trouble...Ekyt...come with me..."

Lord Hokage and Ekyt looked at the stone monument. The sunlight bounced happily off the dark stone; it did not know the dark history the stone served as tribute to.

"Ekyt, this is a tribute to some of the greatest Shinobi the Leaf Village has ever seen. They all died in combat, most against the nine-tailed fox..."

Ekyt knew about the nine-tailed fox. Various people had warned him against his friendship with Naruto. Ekyt had paid no attention to it. Naruto was a citizen. And besides, we all have demons in us. Even if they weren't all physical beings at one point. **But why is Lord Hokage bringing this up...**

Hokage continued after his moment's pause, becoming the kindly, grandfatherly figure the village knew and loved.

"I don't know if you've been asked this yet...but what is your goal? And your Shinobi way?"

Ekyt looked at the stone, putting a bandaged hand on it.

"My goal...I want to be a Tokubetsu Jonin, but a jack of all trades. I want to be an instructor, and a warrior. This village...it's the first place to accept me. The first people to accept me...I would give every breath in my body...every drop of my blood...to protect them. Even the ones that shun me, and don't want me to succeed...I need them too..."

Lord Hokage didn't answer, he simply smiled kindly at the words. He folded his hands behind his back and looked up to the sky. "You are an interesting case...I've never seen someone work so hard...well, maybe there was one other. But that was out of necessity. You and Lee, You and Naruto, You and Sasuke, You and Kakashi, You and Asuma, You and Guy...you're making a good group of friends. And Iruka, Hayate, and even Hayate have said nothing but good things about you. You've done all that's been asked of you, and more."

At this point, Lord Hokage's smile vanished. He turned to face Ekyt.

"But I warn you now...you are embarking on a dangerous path. Orochimaru will not be an easy foe...and you may still dodge his wrath."

"No Sir."

Ekyt had put a hand on the stone again, his good eye more alive than it had been in a long time.

"I meant what I said. I would die for this village, and the people in it. If Orochimaru wants my friends, he'll have to kill me to get to this village."

Despite the severe nature of Ekyt's words, Hokage managed a smile. **This boy as well...it seems the crop of genin is very sturdy...but how long can I let him go like this...such an attentive student would benefit from an instructor and a group of his own.**

"That's good Sakura. Enough for today. Good job."

Sasuke muttered this to Sakura and turned to leave. Sakura had learned some restraint with Sasuke. She wanted to ask him out in the worst way, but knew that rapid fan-girl-ism wouldn't be the way to do it. So she was going to bide her time, wait for just the perfect moment. She had matured a lot since the last chunin exams. She wasn't a scared little girl, she was a solid kunoichi with a knack for healing and genjutsu.

"Alright Lee, one more time," Guy called. It was clear Lee was near exhaustion, but he wasn't one to quit.

"Konoha Hurricane!" Lee's spinning heel kick was devastating. Neji only barely managed to get out of the way as Lee's foot cut the air dangerously close to his head. As he backed up, Ekyt happened to be walking by. **You! I will show you what fate has in store for you! It is your destiny to be bested by me in combat. Someday...** Lee's foot suddenly connected with Neji's face, knocking Neji backward. Neji was nearly shaking with anger now, but swore to reserve it for the correct target.

Linda saw Ekyt walk by afterward, as she was out with Lee. She didn't say anything; his words last time had hit home somewhat. She and Lee had grown close, despite the fact that he and Ekyt were friends at the same time.

Sakura asked Sasuke a few questions on the way back to their respective homes. Ekyt shuffled by at one point, so lost in a scroll he didn't notice them until Sasuke muttered a greeting. Sakura called out a hello afterward; she hadn't noticed Ekyt either. Ekyt gave them a general, if distracted, greeting.

"How's it going? I mean, the chunin exam thing." Ekyt wasn't sure why he asked that particular

question.

"Hm. Just fine," came Sasuke's reply.

"It's going great! We'll make it this time!" Sakura's reply was so radically different from Sasuke's that it put a smile on Ekyt's face. No one could see it under his mask, but it was there.

"I have no doubt you will. By any chance, are genin not testing allowed to watch?"
Sasuke piped up. "Not normally."

At that point, Hayate Gekko landed next to them.

"(koff) Lord Hokage wants to see you." Hayate pointed to Ekyt, who looked over at Sasuke and Sakura.

"See you later then. Good luck, if I miss you before the exams."

"Thanks! See you later!" Sakura called happily.

Inner-Sakura: "Cha! I've got Sasuke at my side, and a supporter behind the scenes! I'm gonna do it this time! Bring it on chunin exams!!!"

Ekyt ran through a mental rolodex of problems. Attitude? Broken rules? What had he done? Lord Hokage had taken an interest in Ekyt's case, to be sure, but still...

"Relax," came Hayate's hoarse whisper. At Ekyt's questioning look, Hayate finished his thought.

"You're not in trouble."

(I'm gonna do the dialogue this way for now, because quotation marks are driving me crazy tonight! Lol, not sure why, but they are!)

Hokage: As you know, the chunin exams take place in a week's time...

Ekyt: ...Yes

Hokage: If it's to your liking, I have given the okay for you to observe. By all rights, you should be allowed to participate. But, the circumstances being what they are...

Ekyt: I understand, and I appreciate the offer. I'd be honored to watch.

Hokage: Glad to hear it. That being said, a friend of mine is in town, and I think he might be of some help to you. I've got to warn you, he's an excellent ninja, but a little...unorthodox. You might ask Naruto about him.

Ekyt: I will Lord Hokage. (leaves the room)

Hokage (To Hayate): He wanted to ask me about getting his own cell...I know he held back. He's disappointed, and as well he should be. (sigh) I'll have to work this out for him, it's just not right to hold someone like that back.

Hayate: I could sense he was holding something in (koff). Um, also sir, ANBU has spotted Kabuto Yakushi. He's negotiating with them right now.

"So you know this guy?" Ekyt couldn't help but be worried at Naruto's expression.

"Yeah, I know him! He Pervy Sage!"

Ekyt narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"NARUTO! DIDN'T I SAY NOT TO CALL ME THAT?!" a voice bellowed.

"Don't deny it, you're a pervert!" Naruto answered indignantly.

"I'm not just a pervert...I'm a MEGA-PERVERT!"

"That's not something to be proud of! You're sick!"

Ekyt (accompanied by an enormous sweat drop) stepped between the two. "Pardon me. Before you fight him, would you mind introducing me Naruto?"

"This is the Pervy Sage." Naruto said, by way of explanation.

Ekyt turned to the white-haired man, hoping to get a name, at least.

"I am Jiraiya, the Toad Sage, and the author of the most popular series of books in the world!"

"What books are those?" Ekyt asked, trying to make conversation.

"The *Make out Paradise* series."

THIS OUGHTA BE GOOD! STRAIGHT-AS-AN-ARROW EKYT IS GOING TO LEARN FROM THE "PERVY SAGE" JIRAIYA! NOT TO MENTION HE GETS TO WATCH THE CHUNIN EXAMS! SAKURA IS SCORING POINTS WITH SASUKE!

TO COME: THE CHUNIN EXAMS! KURENAI, ASUMA, KAKASHI, AND GUY ALL COMPARE NOTES ON THEIR GROUPS, AND EKYT IS TO SIT IN WITH THEM- TO OFFER ADVICE? WHAT DOES LORD HOKAGE KNOW ABOUT EKYT THAT EVEN EKYT DOESN'T KNOW? PLUS, SOME UNORTHODOX TRAINING METHODS!

23 - Kabuto on the Run

"I want the Uchiha boy...I want his friends dead...and I want anyone else who might be a threat killed. Now, my Sound Ninja's, we have another enemy to add to this list: Kabuto Yakushi. He didn't find our newest talent, Chakaro Tamaki, to his liking. He must be killed before he can tell out secrets. Kimimaro, I know you are up to the challenge...go!"

Orochimaru's speech had the desired effect. His troops were rallied, and Kimimaro, one of his most dangerous minions, was ready to kill.

Kabuto ran through the rain, using a genjutsu to confuse those he knew was tracking him. He knew the risks he was taking, but he couldn't serve Orochimaru in a lesser position. He needed to act. The Leaf Village would protect him, he knew. Forgiveness was in their nature.

"He he he...little more to the left...that's it...work with me..."

Jiraiya was sitting near the hot springs, listening and watching the women talk and bathe. Ekyt stood about twenty feet behind him, not sure if it was okay to say something. He was SURE it wasn't okay to say the first thing that came to his mind. Jiraiya seemed to be taking fervent notes. Ekyt (Complete with big sweatdrop) mustered up the guys to ask Jiraiya a question.

"Jiraiya-Sensei...how exactly is this helpful?"

With a big grin, Jiraiya turned around. "Haven't you ever done research kid?"

"Not like this, I haven't," Ekyt admitted. **This is...awkward. He's a blatant pervert, and I'm supposed to learn from him. What am I supposed to be learning here? How to peep on women?**

"EXCUSE ME! CAN I HELP YOU?!" A shrill female voice came from behind Ekyt. He turned to find a ticked-off group of towel-clad women, all still wet from the springs. And all violent looking.

Ekyt looked around, to explain Jiraiya was the one who brought him here. Jiraiya, however, had disappeared.

WHAP!

Ekyt was laying in a heap, the victim of multiple purses across the head.

"Mmm...you know, if you could focus your chakra better, that would have hurt less," Jiraiya said thoughtfully, "That's a good place to start then."

Jiraiya had Ekyt focus his chakra as he attacked, with Ekyt softening each blow. After a short while Jiraiya tossed Ekyt a book. Makeout Pardise?

"I hope I just have to balance this or something..." Ekyt sais hopefully.

"Nope! Haha, it's a chance to read my masterpiece! You read that while I attack. You'll learn to focus your chakra, even when you're distracted. Someday, it'll just happen. Oooh, hold on, my (cough) research needs me! Just a minute!"

Ekyt tried reading the book, but he felt like a complete pervert. He was as human as anyone, and curious to a degree...but this?! This was blatantly stating "Hi, I'm a pervert!"

Of course, no situation is so bad it can't get worse.

Sakura saw Ekyt with his head in the orange book that Kakashi-sensei was always reading. When he looked up, his good eye had an "oh, crap" look in it.

"So, you're taking after Kakashi-Sensei," Sakura asked brightly, trying to hide her disappointment.

"I wish," Ekyt grumbled, embarrassed about the whole thing, "It's homework from Jiraiya-Sensei. I'm supposed to be able to focus my chakra while I'm distracted. Why do I have to read a perv book? That's really not...comfortable..."

Sakura breathed a sigh of relief. **Of Course he's not reading it on his own! He's too good a guy for that! Heh heh, and to think I was going to jump down his throat...**

Ekyt finished the book, actually blushing about it, even though he was by himself.

But the week of training had paid off. Jiraiya-Sensei was going to meet with Kakashi, Asuma, and Kurenai. The strange thing was that he insisted on bringing Ekyt. What could he, a genin, teach jonin? Maybe it was just a chance to learn? But it was interesting, at any rate. Before he went, though, he went to wish all his friends luck.

"I don't need luck, I'm gonna blow right through this, easy! Believe it!" That was Naruto's reaction, as to be expected.

"Hmph." Sasuke's reaction...no shock there.

"I will do my best. This will be a difficult test, but, with the power of youth and hard work, nothing is beyond hope!" Lee's spirited reaction forced a smile out of Ekyt, despite his growing depression.

"Oh, thank y-you! I-I'll t-try hard!" Hinata seemed truly thankful that Ekyt stopped by to offer support.

"Offer your luck to someone who needs it! Me and Akamaru can handle anything! Right Akamaru?"

"Ruff!" Akamaru and Kiba weren't lacking confidence, to be sure.

"No need to worry. I don't miss!" Tenten's perky reply was something short of cocky, with just the right amount of confidence.

"My bugs and I will serve each other." Shino was quiet, but didn't seem worried.

"This is a drag. I'm already a chunin. How troublesome." Typical Shikamaru.

"Thanks! Not that I need it, of course, heh heh! Sakura better hope I don't find her before she finds me..." Ekyt sighed at Ino's reply, somehow not surprised.

"(chomp chomp) Thanks man, I hope it's quick, I can't carry too much food with me." Choji had stopped eating long enough to answer Ekyt, which was a surprise.

Sakura was standing by herself, reading over a scroll, looking anxious. Ekyt didn't want to disturb her, but she looked like she could use someone to talk to right now.

"Sakura? You alright?"

Sakura's head snapped up at Ekyt's deep whisper.

"I'm sorry Ekyt, I was just distracted. What was that?"

"Are you alright?"

Sakura gave a nervous chuckle. "I'll be fine. I just don't want to fail again."

"You're sharp Sakura, I know you'll do good. You've gotta have confidence."

Sakura snorted back a laugh. "YOU should talk."

"Point taken," Ekyt admitted, "But still, you're not me. I live off depression, I guess."

"Ahh, don't say that! Things will come together for you, I'm sure of it," Sakura exclaimed, leaping up.

"Likewise for you. Anyway, good luck." Ekyt gave a small wave and walked away.

Sakura couldn't help but notice there was some dejection in the way he carried himself.

Ekyt was on his way to meet Jiraiya at the hot springs. **Boy, this makes me feel like a perv...is he trying to make me one or something?!** Ekyt shook his head. To his surprise, he recognized the girl in front of him.

“Temari?”

Temari turned around.

“Well well, if it isn’t the tough little leafer.”

“Good luck in the exams,” Ekyt said, ignoring the crack.

Temari had her cocky half-smile (Which, Ekyt had to admit, was attractive) on her face. “Good luck...I’m not from here. Besides, the sand village doesn’t need luck. Thanks anyway kid. But I do need to know: Why are you nice to me? By all means, you should hate my guys.” This was something that Temari couldn’t help but be curious about.

“You haven’t given me any reason to hate you. You’re not your brother. I can sense something a little more innocent about you...”

Temari laughed. “Well, if you watch the chunin exams, I’ll destroy THAT notion easy!”

“Whatever you say,” Ekyt said, knowing his tone would needle her.

Jiraiya looked over Ekyt. “Okay kid, you can control your chakra. Now, unless you’ve got a second chakra”

“I do.”

“You...do?” Jiraiya sounded surprised. **I shouldn’t be...not after what this kid has told me...**

“Yeah. But I can only access it when extreme emotions are involved. And I only know two jutsus to use with it.”

“And what are those,” Jiraiya questioned.

“There’s the “Voluntary Pain Acceptance Jutsu”, which allows me to take a given amount of pain from someone else. Say someone was breaking your arm. I could absorb the pain, and even the injury.

Then there’s the Transparent Hand Jutsu: Blue Flame Protection Seal. I know it can seal Orochimaru’s curse marks, but that’s all I know about it.”

Jiraiya nodded sagely. “I’ve heard you can do a summoning jutsu...very impressive...so I’ll just have to teach you how to do it bigger and better! But, for now, you need to be in a meeting. Let’s go!”

Asuma, Kurenai, Kakashi, and Guy were sitting up in the penthouse of a hotel, where they usually sat for the first part of the chunin exams.

Asuma: Well, I know they can all survive the exam. I’m not sure about them being chunin material. Ino’s a loud-mouth, but she might be able to do it. Choji, though, he worries me.

Kurenai: I’m worried about Hinata. She tries so hard...she’s going in with a good chance of internal bleeding, if she takes another hard hit. And Neji is after her...I’m sure Kiba and Shino can take care of themselves, it’s just Hinata I really worry for...

Guy: ALL of mine are going to pass, especially Lee. (Now crying, fist in the air) That boy is so special! I can’t believe how much he’s grown! Ah, youth!

Kakashi: Try to contain yourself Guy. My team wants it enough, but I can't see Naruto leading. And Sasuke would rather be by himself. But they're all talented, all of them could pass.

Asuma: Shikamaru was hemming and hawing about taking the test again. Not that I blame him. I wish Lord Hokage had let me put a sub in.

Guy: We all know who you have in mind Asuma. But he's never worked with your team before.

Kurenai: I wanted him to go in place of Hinata. But both Lord Hokage and Hinata said no.

Kakashi: From what I can tell, Ekyt would be one to pass for sure, if he had a team. Iruka, Hayate, even Lord Hokage, they all say he's talented.

Guy: He's a hard worker too.

Asuma: I've talked with him privately. I got him to take an IQ test. He didn't want to know the results. I was surprised.

Kurenai: How did he do?

Asuma: He's not Shikamaru, but his IQ in different subjects averaged out to 175.

Kakashi: I'm not surprised. His team took my "bell" test, and nearly beat me on the first try. He orchestrated the whole thing. He's already created four jutsus unique to him.

Asuma: Not to mention his other training...

Guy: What training is that?

Asuma: (Lights a cigarette, smiling knowingly) Well, it seems our new genin here was once a complete opposite. Not only did he train in Karate and the Philipino art of Machete Fighting, he's a samurai.

All: gasps!

Kurenai: A samurai?! Does Lord Hokage know?

Asuma: Of course. He knows just what effect that would have if everyone knew. He wants Ekyt to prove himself first. Rumor has it that he's to teach some of our elite ninja in the way of the samurai.

Kakashi: All of us here, we know where his loyalties lie. But if this were to get out before he's proven himself...

Guy: It would ruin him, if they knew too soon...samurai and ninja haven't always gotten along...hell, they still don't!

Asuma: But still...an entire village full of ninja that have samurai skills...

The written test portion of the chunin exams was over. There was nothing new to the ones who had taken it last year. All of them were dreading the Forest of Death part of the exam, though. As the name suggested, death was possible, even likely. Not to mention this was easily the hardest of the tests. You had to work as a team, follow a strict mission objective, and not allow yourself to drop your guard. It was torture, in a word. The exam proctor, Anko Mitarashi, liked to add to that torture.

Ekyt was pushed into the conference room by Jiraiya. Ekyt turned to say something to him, only to find that Jiraiya was gone, and Ekyt had four sensei staring at him. Thankfully, they were friendly.

Kurenai: Ekyt, good to see you. Hinata says "Thank you."

Ekyt: She's going to do great, she wants it.

Asuma: I thought you should know, all of us thought you were ready for the chunin exams.

Ekyt: Really? Thank you, I appreciate that. I'm glad and I can go and watch, never hurts to do recon. Besides, after this, I'll get my training partners back.

Kakashi: Let me ask you this: If the Sound Village were to attack the five of us, right now, in an attempt to get us out of the way so they could take over the village, what would you do, if you were in charge?

Everyone looked at Kakashi questioningly, but admitted they wanted to know what he would say too.

NEXT ISSUE: THE FOREST OF DEATH! NEED I SAY MORE?!

24 - Unstable Emotions

Ekyt explained his ideas to the room full of jonin. He had never been more thankful that these people were accepting. His ideas weren't your standard answer, at least not among genin.

"I would assess their likely objective. In the case of the Sound Ninja, it would be "Kill Lord Hokage" and "Kidnap Sasuke Uchiha," most likely. Then I'd take action to make sure neither of those became reality. I would let Lord Hokage know first, since he is the one who would have to handle Orochimaru. Then I'd follow his orders, if he gave me any. If not, I'd act on my own and defend the Village, or try to intercept Sasuke's attackers."

Asuma raised his eyebrows.

"Not exactly the usual response, is it Kakashi?"

Kakashi shook his head.

"Not at all the usual response. This one makes sense."

Ekyt brightened at that, but was curious as to what everyone else said.

"How is my answer different?" Ekyt asked.

"Normally, it's "I'll kick their asses!", not "Mission first", " Asuma answered.

Ekyt looked out the window, partially out of anxiety, partially out of embarrassment at the praise. It was a nice day. The sun was high up in a light blue sky dotted with big, fluffy-white pillows of clouds. The temperature was pleasant, at least by Ekyt's standards. He liked it colder outside, like an early fall temperature. He turned his attention back to the senseis. They were pondering the fate of their various charges. Guy was pushing Lee as the top. Asuma was talking about Shikamaru's genius. Kurenai was fretting a little bit about Hinata, even though she was saying how much she had changed and grown. Kakashi talked about his whole team very briefly, calling them "incredibly sharp and vastly improved" (Sakura), "The most naturally talented ninja since the fourth Hokage" (Sasuke) and "The number one Loud, Hyperactive, Knucklehead Ninja, who had actually improved" (Naruto). All the talk about the teams and their personal guesses for who would be best brought Ekyt back to his team...

(FLASHBACK!)

Ekyt: Okay Chakaro, good job. Just remember, don't drop your guard after you've drawn the sword. No need to bring the tip past the enemy's eyes when drawing upward across the chest and face, or doing a one-handed *jodan* cut to the head.

Chakaro: Alright. Thanks Sensei.

Ekyt looked over at Linda. She gave him a brief smile. These days, things were too awkward between them to do much of anything.

Why did I do it? Why did I go and kiss her? I knew she was out of my league...How can we just be "friends" ? I've never loved anyone, not in this context...she's so beautiful...and she's a warrior...I should have remembered that she's a Master and I'm not even a real sensei...it's my

fault...it always is... Ekyt's thoughts weren't new, he always had them. They were just as disturbing as ever.

(END OF FLASHBACK)

"Alright, back to transformation jutsus. Emotions can fuel your chakra use. So, I want you to transform into someone you hate. Let's have...Linda Mawashi up first," Iruka said kindly. He noticed how she had become careful of her dress since she had started dating Lee. **But a school uniform? Who knew Lee had it in him?** "Alright Linda, whenever you're ready- become an enemy."

Linda took the necessary position and called out "transform!" When the smoke cleared, she had transformed into Ekyt. The class muttered, not especially liking her choice, but admitting it was a good transformation.

"Very...very good Linda. You can have a seat now," Iruka said, as kindly as possible. He didn't appreciate her picking Ekyt as the target, but that was the way it was.

(FLASHBACK)

Linda's thoughts were a bit different. **He's such a nice boy...and talented. He knows more than most of my senseis, even though he's no black belt by traditional terms. He kissed me...He's a sweetheart, I'm just not ready for a boyfriend...I hope he knows that when I AM ready, I want a boy like him...(giggle) Now he's all awkward around me...goofy kid...cute though...**

Linda shook herself out of her thoughts to look at her apprentice. Kayla Donalds was, as usual, staring at Chakaro with a keen interest when she wasn't being instructed. Linda shook her head, smiling tolerantly.

(END FLASHBACK)

"Okay, up next...Kayla Donalds," Iruka called out. **She's got potential...but she's a dreamer...let's see how she does.**

"Iruka-sensei, I don't really have any enemies...maybe this will do. Transform!" Kayla had taken the form of Chakaro, complete with a scowl and his sound-ninja hitai-ate around his waist.

(FLASHBACK)

Kayla adjusted her gi, vaguely listening to Linda-sensei talk. She was talented enough to get away with daydreaming during class. Not that she could help it, she reasoned.

Oh yeah...he's hot! That guy is gonna be mine! Watch yourself Chakaro Tamaki, once Kayla Donalds spots HER guy, he doesn't get away!

(END FLASHBACK)

“...Doesn’t get away...I’ve got to talk to someone about this...I feel like leaving, and joining Chakaro...Ekyt, of course! I have to tell him!” Kayla exclaimed, running off, knowing exactly where to find him. He would show up there eventually...

“If it’s alright to ask...was I ever considered for the chunin exams?” Ekyt’s question caught the jonin offguard. Kakashi, who was kind of in charge of Ekyt’s case, gave the others a certain look before speaking himself.

“You were, yes. Lord Hokage had approved it, but then Orochimaru managed to possess Sasuke, and now he’s after you for halting his scheme.”

Ekyt looked up slowly. It was clear he was frustrated. Asuma spoke up next.

“I know it’s not much in the way of consolation, but Shikamaru wanted you to replace him at the chunin exams.”

Ekyt was glad the instructors couldn’t see his face, he was sure it was burning with anger. He didn’t say that, though. Instead, he said “Excuse me, but I’d better go. I promised Iruka I would come to class today.” With a bow and a word of thanks, Ekyt walked out the door.

As soon as the door shut, the collective jonin shook their heads. “After talking to him...he would have been a chunin for sure. ‘Assess their real goals’? That’s not a genin thinking. And we all know where his skills are. They’re at a high level for a genin. The only thing holding him back is something out of his control.” Asuma’s words got a nod of general approval. As one, the jonin got up to watch the exams.

Lord Hokage felt all of his sixty-plus years. Sitting in front of him were two Sound village fugitives. One was Kabuto Yakushi, who everyone knew as a traitor. The other was a kunoichi, Akuhei Fujoshi, who claimed (and, to be fair) had proof that she was a genin from the Sound village.

“Explain your situation one more time Kabuto.”

Kabuto adjusted his glasses. For once, he didn’t have his cocky demeanor about him.

“Akuhei and I left because Orochimaru doesn’t see us as his top servants anymore. For some reason, knowing this gave us a jolt of common sense. Now, all we want is to have normal training. And, to be honest, protection until we get settled.”

“And you plan to continue training...you are both genin?”

“Yes Lord Hokage.”

Hokage had an idea of what to do with these two now. But he needed two more people’s approval first.

Ekyt wandered to an abandoned training area. His frustration was eating at him, so he quickly stretched and warmed up. He did his punches and kicks, but he could feel his extra chakra (Blue Flame Chakra) welling up. He let it flow to his right leg. He let loose with a side kick against the tree stump he was using as a training partner. CRACK! It cracked, then fell to the side.

So I WAS going to be allowed to test...and it didn’t happen because of things I had no control over. It’s frustrating...so incredibly frustrating...

"Alright, listen up! I'm Anko Mitarashi, the exam proctor for the second test in the chunin exams. I'm only going to give these instructions once, so pay attention. Your objective is to enter the Forest of Death. While this is mostly a survival drill, you will also be required to obtain two scrolls. One that is labeled "heaven" and one that is labeled "earth". There are twenty teams, but only ten sets of scrolls. That means that half of you will have been eliminated at the close of this exam. Now, before we begin, please come up and get a medical waver. One member from each of your three-person cells will also get your team's scroll. This means that you start with either a heaven or an earth scroll. You must then obtain the type of scroll you don't already have. Any questions? No? Good. The exam begins in two hours time."

"Ekyt?"

Ekyt controlled his chakra again, turning to find Kayla looking at him nervously from the edge of the clearing.

"Kayla, what's up?" **Something's wrong...she's never quiet like this...**

Kayla was playing with her kunai holster, nervously opening and closing it.

"Ekyt...I miss Chakaro. I- I'm going to go to him."

That was just about the last thing that Ekyt wanted to hear.

"You know what he's become Kayla. I know you like him, but there must be someone else."

"No! Chakaro Tamaki and I were meant to be!" Kayla couldn't explain why she was arguing so vehemently.

"Are you prepared to kill?" Ekyt asked, his voice deadly-calm/

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Chakaro is going to ask you to kill for him. And he has no mercy in him. I can't stop you Kayla. All I ask is that you REALLY think this through. And...whatever you decide...provided you're not in the service of Chakaro...you can talk to me. Okay?"

Kayla brightened, feeling a little perkier. "Thanks so much Ekyt. I knew I could count on you!"

NEXT ISSUE: EKYT GETS A VISIT FROM LORD HOKAGE! AND WHAT'S UP WITH KAYLA?! PLUS- THE START OF THE CHUNIN EXAMS! FIND OUT NEXT TIME!

25 - The First Team: Chunin Exam Mayhem!

Ekyt stood with the senseis near one of the entrances to the Forest of Death. He heard his name shouted frantically from behind. With a grimace, he turned around, seeing Linda. She didn't offer a greeting, or her usual verbal jibe. She handed him a kunai with a note attached.

"Read it! I can't believe this!" Linda was hyperventilating, and she didn't seem to know what to do with her arms. Kurenai and Asuma tried to calm her down. Guy wasn't with them at the moment; he had run off to give Lee some last-minute instructions.

That left Kakashi. The contents of the note startled even him.

"Damnit!" Ekyt snarled, throwing the kunai to the ground. He whipped around, back toward Linda. "When did you find this?!" he asked, more harshly than he meant to.

"This morning! But...before she went to sleep, she stopped up to see me. She told me she had talked to you about this..." Linda gave Ekyt an accusatory look.

"She did! I told her to think this out, is this what she really wants?! I guess it was! But picking that traitorous scumbag! I never thought Kayla would...actually leave...No...I had an idea...she loved Chakaro, and she's no quitter."

Ekyt looked up to the sky, as if to ask "Why is this happening?". Apparently, he didn't get an answer. He let his head drop slowly. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"There's nothing you can do. You told her all the right things, and offered her a friendly ear. This is a choice she has to make herself...and you are NOT to blame." Kakashi could tell he was only partially getting through to the genin in front of him.

"Lord Chakaro, there is a girl here to see you."

Chakaro shoved his dark bangs roughly out of his pale face. His eyes had narrowed to slits, giving him the appearance of a snake. His enemies would agree.

"A girl? By all means Uesugi, send her in," Chakaro said, an interested air in his voice.

"Yes sir! Girl! Lord Chakaro has agreed to see you."

Chakaro heard a familiar voice say a timid "thank you." **Could it be? Did she follow me here?**

His suspicions were confirmed. Kayla Donalds walked in, the tell-tale grin on her face belying her obvious anxiety. Chakaro dropped his usual aloofness in surprise.

"Kayla?"

"Yes Chakaro. I...I've missed you...and...and I'm here to..." Kayla appeared to be having some difficulty in finishing her sentence. But she managed to choke out the last few words.

"I-I'm here to swear allegiance to you and your village."

"Alright Kabuto, you and Akuhei have convinced me. I need to talk with the two of them before hand."

"Of course Lord Hokage," Kabuto said, regaining some of his old confidence. Beside him, Akuhei wore a look of tremendous relief.

"Hayate!" Hokage called out.

"(koff) Sir?" Answer Hayate.

"Send Ekyt to me, with an escort, preferably Kakashi, and delay the chunin exams. This is a matter of great importance." Lord Hokage's tone was unnaturally serious. Hayate offered a question look, but disappeared to do as Hokage said.

Anko looked over her shoulder, surprised at Hayate's appearance. He whispered something to her. Whatever it was must have been big, because even SHE seemed surprised.

"You're sure?" She asked, not really believing it.

"(koff) From Lord Hokage himself."

"Alright- but let's keep this quick."

"Listen up! The chunin exams are going to be delayed for one hour's time. During that time, you are to stay put. Your senseis will be provided with an explanation. And, no fighting. If anyone is caught fighting, their entire team will be barred from the match. Do NOT test me on this."

"Huh? Delayed? Has that ever happened before?" Sakura wondered.

"AHHHH! NOW I'VE GOT TO WAIT EVEN LONGER?!" Naruto shouted. Sasuke was indifferent, though he gave Naruto a glare that plainly said "Don't shout in my ear, Loser."

"Guys...I have to go with Hayate...stay here and think about the exam. You've taken it once before, talk strategy," Kakashi told them, quickly disappearing with a puff of smoke.

"I want you to think this through. For once, you can say no to this mission. Understand, it is beyond A rank. And the likelihood for injury...even death...is very high." Inwardly, Lord Hokage sighed deeply. **I already know his answer...but I wish he would refuse...It would be hard to swallow if I knew that I sent him to death. No matter how good he is...**

Ekyt raised his head. He had been looking at the floor while Lord Hokage was talking. **This is my chance to take the chunin exams...even in the context of a mission...There is no refusing a mission to me, even when the option is available to others.**

"I accept it Lord Hokage. My mission parameters?"

Hokage bowed his head and took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Monitor Kabuto and Akuhei. Prevent them from attaining their likely targets...at all costs. But...be careful. You have shown loyalty to this village, an in return I feel I owe you honesty: Kabuto could very well kill you. No matter how good you are, Kabuto has experience to draw from. If things go horribly wrong, get Team 7 and run. You are just as much a target of Orochimaru as Naruto and Sasuke." Lord Hokage hoped he was getting through to the boy.

"Understood Sir. Monitor Kabuto and Akuhei, and protect Team 7 until the jonin can arrive. Sir, I DO have a question, if I might speak freely..."

"Of course, go ahead," Lord Hokage replied, intrigued.

"Why did you pick me Sir? Why not have him monitored by a jonin from the start?"

Lord Hokage smiled widely. "There are two reasons: Number one, Kabuto won't suspect that I sent a genin to watch him. Number two: You don't want to miss the chunin exams, do you? Now, it's time to meet with your team and your sensei. Hayate, it seems, has taken a personal interest in your case. You have a way of charming instructors, it seems."

Linda saw Ekyt coming. Upon seeing who he was with, she gave Lee a vigorous shake. Lee turned to see the commotion. Instantly, he leapt next to Ekyt.

"Kabuto! You will not harm anyone!"

"Lee!" Ekyt called, putting a hand on his shoulder. "This is my team. Kabuto, Akuhei, and Hayate-sensei. They aren't going to hurt anyone..." Ekyt said, while giving Lee a look he hoped that he could decipher. Apparently, Lee got the hint, because he wished them luck and backed off.

Linda gave Ekyt a hard look. Her words were even harder, spoken in a tone she usually reserved for criminals.

"So this is how you're dealing with Linda's defection...taking an exam that is likely to kill you. You're an idiot. I don't know what I ever saw in you to even consider you a friend."

Ekyt made no reaction to her snide remarks, except to retort with one of his own.

"And how are you dealing with this? You're cheering on your boyfriend. You're not doing anything. Kayla is old enough to make a decision like that...I trained with her as much as you did...and why do you think she came to me for advice, instead of going to you like usual? She knew what would happen. You would baby her, make decisions for her, and then ridicule her if she didn't agree. She's seen how you treat me."

Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, and Kakashi were the next group. They had all been warned about this, and they knew Ekyt's mission. Even Naruto didn't believe it.

"Well, you've got a team! Good for you Ekyt! The best of luck to you and your team then!" Kakashi said, before handing Ekyt a red kunai. "Just a good luck charm," he said by way of explanation.

This, too, was part of the plan. If there was trouble, Ekyt was to stab Kabuto with the red kunai. That would somehow summon the jonin to their position.

"So you're taking the exams, huh? You'll do great, as long as you avoid us!" Naruto exclaimed, chuckling gleefully.

Sasuke gave Ekyt an unreadable look. Could it have been Sasuke's way of saying "Good luck?" Ekyt offered his fist, which Sasuke punched.

Sakura was looking daggers at Kabuto, and with good reason. She shifted her gaze to Ekyt.

"I'm really happy for you! You deserve to be here. Even though we're opponents, good luck!"

Ekyt returned the good luck wishes, knowing his eye was giving away the fact he was smiling, despite the danger he was in.

"Alright, we're all here now. You three (Ekyt's team) need to sign the wavers and pick up a scroll. The exam starts as soon as they've signed."

"Kabuto, you've taken this exam before. What do you think is the best course of action?"

Kabuto adjusted his glasses. "Let's take a look at the combatants first. Anyone in particular that interests you?"

Ekyt shook his head. "No. I think everyone is more or less equally dangerous, there's not too much mystery. Let me rephrase my question: We have one scroll, how should we go about getting the other one? Lie in wait near the tower and ambush? Go hunting for other teams? Let the other teams find us?" Kabuto put on a thoughtful look, running a hand through his silver hair. "I think we should hunt. The

quicker we get both scrolls, the quicker we can get to the tower. Once we get there, we've passed." Ekyt nodded in agreement, then turned to their female companion, the demolition expert Akuhei. "What do you think?" Ekyt asked kindly. "It's always good to get another point of view involved." Akuhei could have been a model. She had a knock-out figure, with long purple hair falling to her waist. She had a face that made it look like she was everyone's friend, something comforting and easy-going. Finally, her purple eyes were almost entrancing; Ekyt found he couldn't make eye contact with her without becoming sleepy. Her voice matched her look.

"Well," she said in an equally-entrancing voice (think Rouge the Bat from Sonic) "I think ol' Kabuto has a point. The longer we wait, the more fatigued we'll be. If we strike quick and hard, then head straight for the tower, we'll have that much more energy when we get there to try to comprehend the contents."

The exams began. The forest of death, at first glance, was a lush green paradise. Tree grew tall and straight, and the landscape was dotted with rocks and small ponds. However, appearances were deceiving. This "paradise" was home to many dangers. Poisonous plants and animals, dangerous wildlife, and now, the ninja inhabiting it all made for a very grueling exam.

The object of the exam was simple: Get a Heaven Scroll and an Earth Scroll, then go to the tower. Sounds simple enough. There aren't enough scroll for everyone. There are twenty teams, but only ten sets of scrolls. That meant that half the teams would be eliminated during this exam. Not that that was the worst thing that could happen. This place wasn't called "The Forest of Death" for no reason. Ninja had died here, taking this very exam.

As soon as they were deep into the forest, Kabuto and Akuhei put their heads together momentarily. Dramatically, Akuhei turned around, grabbing Ekyt's head.

"What the hell?! Get off of..." Too late. Ekyt had looked into her eyes.

"Do you like my kekkai genkai? It's called the "Namamekashii eye." It only works on boys...but it certainly serves its purpose...You'll notice that you can't look away. As long as my gaze is locked on you, you're not going anywhere... Kabuto, you know what to do..."

For a moment, Ekyt thought Kabuto was going to kill him. Then he realized that he was after someone else: Sasuke!

"Good job with that genjutsu Sakura. How much longer can you keep it up?" Sasuke questioned.

"Only another two minutes or so," an out-of-breath Sakura panted.

"Okay, that'll have to do," Sasuke replied, revealing nothing.

"So, what's the plan already?! Are we just gonna hide behind some genjutsu until the end of the exam?! We need the Earth scroll! Come on, let's get one!" Naruto was getting antsy with just walking around the forest.

All of a sudden, Sasuke pushed the two out of the way. Seconds later, kunai rained down where they had been standing.

"What the- sound ninja!" Sakura had exhausted her chakra by performing that continuous genjutsu.

"What do you sound freaks want? You're messing with the next Hokage! I'm Naruto Uzumaki, remember that!"

"Oh please, you little orange daisy, you don't scare us. Besides, we're after your friend here."

"Really. I think you'll find I have a problem with that." Sasuke said dryly, smirking. "Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke's fireballs struck home- or they appeared too.

"Huh? I missed?"

The three sound ninjas were standing behind him. "Fireball Jutsu!" Sasuke called again. Again the sound ninjas weren't there when the jutsu struck.

"Enough of this! Sharingan!" Sasuke used his bloodline trait, finally noticing that there were no ninjas nearby. "It's a long range genjutsu. Naruto, you've got the chakra for it. End it."

"Right! Kai! (Release)" Naruto called. This wiped out his normal chakra, but it ended the long range genjutsu.

Ekyt was still trapped in Akuhei's gaze. I've got to divert her attention and break her hold on me...let's try talking this out first, I don't want to have to attack her, I'm going to need all my chakra to fight Kabuto.

"I should have realized it sooner," Ekyt said aloud, "Your name means "evil". Very interesting. Would I be correct to say that it's not your birth name?"

Akuhei giggled. "Well, you ARE a resourceful one, aren't you? Trying to distract me. Don't think I don't know. Just keep in mind, no male has ever broken my gaze. And even if they could...with looks like mine, they're STILL my slaves..."

"You've got an ego as big as your stomach!" Ekyt said, trying to use her ego against her. Apparently, she wasn't as vain and shallow as she appeared.

"Nice of you to notice kid."

In his mind, Ekyt had gone through all the signs for his favorite genjutsu; the Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique was a horrible thing to do, but it didn't do any lasting damage, and it was a fight ender for sure.

When Akuhei screamed, dropped to her knees, and closed her eyes, Ekyt knew the genjutsu had worked. He sprinted in the direction Kabuto had headed, praying that he hadn't been too late.

Sasuke heard movement behind him and threw a series of kunai. Kabuto caught the first one and used it to block the rest.

"Come on, Orochimaru's waiting...what?"

The kunai had strings attached. Sasuke yanked on the ends, binding Kabuto to a tree.

"Fool. You couldn't slip by my Sharingan. Now you're going to see another power of mine, up close and personal."

Kabuto heard birds chirping. Sasuke was molding chakra in his hand.

"Chidori?" Kabuto struggled fruitlessly against the strings.

Sasuke broke into a run, his arm behind him. He thrust his arm at Kabuto. The chidori was an assassination move, and Sasuke had hit home...on a log. **Damnit! That ate up all my chakra! I missed...Kabuto is as good as everyone says...Not that THAT does me much good now...**

"You don't disappoint Sasuke Uchiha, I'll give you that. Now, since you can't fight, you'll have to come with me..."

Ekyt let a kunai fly. Kabuto spun away at the last second.

"Back off. I know what's going on. You're still Orochimaru's dog! I'm surprised at you Kabuto...a good brain in your head, and you're doing someone else's bidding. I didn't want this to happen, and I know I'm the underdog, but I'm not letting you near them."

Ekyt took a fighting stance, not bowing since there was no respect here.

"This is your mistake kid." Kabuto charged, forcing Ekyt to leap out of the way and up into a tree.

He and Kabuto wasted no time. Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke couldn't believe it...Ekyt could fight Kabuto? How was he keeping up?

26 - The Old Way of Life

"You ARE strong...The rumors were true then..." Kabuto said mildly, blocking a vicious roundhouse from Ekyt, then returning with a punch that Ekyt parried, aiming for an uppercut, then walking forward into a crane stance, snapkicking at the knee, then leaping back as Kabuto took a full cut at his head.

"There are times when strength is forced from you. Letting your comrades die...even at the hands of your own "team", makes me scum. I don't care what your goal is Kabuto. It's thankful that Lord Hokage saw through you."

"What?! He would never assign a Genin to monitor me, he knows my skills!" Kabuto had lost his placidness. It was replaced with a feeling of anger.

"Yes he would. You would know if a jonin was following you. But a clueless genin wouldn't show up on your radar!"

Ekyt leapt up, catching Kabuto's jaw on the way up with a front kick, then elbowing his head on the way down. He rolled through and aimed for a leg sweep, which Kabuto leapt deftly over, and followed up immediately with a kick to the chest. He threw three kunai as Ekyt was flying backwards. For his part, Ekyt only had time to put up a forearm to shield the kunai. They stuck in him, but only did superficial damage. Ekyt leapt over the next barrage, throwing two of his own, pausing, then throwing a third. He guessed, correctly, that the change in timing might throw Kabuto off. Kabuto blocked the third one too soon. Ekyt landed in a front hand-spring and narrowly missed Kabuto's face with an axe kick as he was landing. Kabuto straight-punched, following up immediately with a side kick. He took a page from Ekyt's book and changed his timing, stopping the kick, then using his foot to push Ekyt backward. At the same time, Ekyt and Kabuto went for punches, and the matched kicks, followed by each attacking with their forearms, which brought on a deadlock. Ekyt broke the deadlock with the red kunai, stabbing it into Kabuto's quadriceps.

Kakashi sensed the red kunai's useage. It had been laced with his chakra, so he could tell when it was used. He silently hoped he wouldn't be too late. **There's no way a genin could hold off Kabuto for long...and Ekyt isn't going to run if he can help it...**

Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke were all desperately trying to force some chakra out of themselves. Naruto was fighting with himself, trying to unlock the chakra of the nine-tailed fox. But he suddenly saw something that destroyed his focus.

Just then, Kabuto made a strike that Ekyt KNEW did damage, although he couldn't tell what it did. He felt like something had reached inside him and squeezed, hard. **My chakra...I can't sense my normal chakra...but my emotional chakra is there...The others can't run yet...there's no other choice. I don't know what Kabuto did to me...but the mission comes first...I just need to bide a little time to well that chakra up...Please (begging himself)...just let me get this one right...**

"I knew you couldn't be trusted. You're not getting them. Not Sasuke. Not Naruto. Not Sakura. If I'm going down, I'm taking you with me!" Ekyt was shaking, partially from pain, partially from his own, reverse-flowing pure-emotion chakra building up. His voice took on a deeper, more strained tone. That

was because every ounce of chakra, including the smaller build-up in his throat, was being summoned to his chest, then to his hands. He made a series of hand signs so rapidly that even the newly-arrived Kakashi had a rough time keeping up.

“BLUE FLAME CHAKRA: SWALLOW STRIKE FINALITY JUTSU!”

“What is this?!” Kabuto was actually afraid. He had never seen anything like this. **His chakra...it's solidifying around his fist...but I closed it off! I destroyed his chakra coils, didn't I? How is this possible?! Unless...he has a secondary chakra...either way...this attack is bad news!**

Ekyt launched into a full-throttle punch, aiming to take Kabuto’s head off. Kabuto easily dodged the attack.

“It’s a shame, I was curious as to what this jutsu did...” Kabuto gave a smirk. The smirk flickered, because he didn’t see Ekyt anywhere.

“YOU’RE GONNA FIND OUT SMARTASS!”

Ekyt materialized at his feet in a crouching position. He threw the back of his hand upward, hitting Kabuto under the jaw, launching the silver-haired turncoat backward into a tree. Kabuto slid down it, gasping for air on his hands and knees. All of Kabuto’s veins suddenly glowed a vibrant red, every blood cell was close to rupturing. Slash marks appeared all over his body, and his eyes blackened.

“W-what is...is this...this hell...what did you do to me?” Kabuto coughed out, then vomited blood.

Ekyt managed a smile, despite his leg aching and his arm bleeding. “You thought I missed, didn’t you? It’s a samurai thing (koff): In the swallow form, the first strike is a decoy. The second strike...well, you’re feeling it now... (koff) Your blood is boiling...every emotion I feel, all the pain I feel...that I’ve EVER felt...you’re about to get hit with it...”

Kabuto screamed; he had never *FELT* so much PAIN. His brain was sending messages to all of his body. He hyperventilated, his heart raced, his muscles spasmed. His throat tightened up. He fell to his knees, vomiting violently, though there was no blood in it this time. However, he WANTED to die, ANYTHING to end the pain. It ended only when Kabuto blacked out. His arms and legs were broken in a total of twenty places, and he had a major concussion.

Ekyt was panting, on all fours. That jutsu had destroyed him. “Damn you! I’ll see you to hell for what you’ve done to Kabuto!”

Akuhei had lost her control. She hefted Kabuto’s body onto her shoulder, silently cheering that he was still alive. She hurled five kunai at Ekyt, all of them striking him in the back. She wanted to kill him, to slit his throat, but she had to leave, there were too many people, too many witnesses...a few rank genin, she could have handled that. But Kakashi, the copy ninja? She was good, but not THAT good.

Kakashi saw the entire attack in slow motion, thanks to his Sharingan. **Another jutsu he's created...but what damage did Kabuto do to him? He shouldn't have been able to access that blue chakra until his regular chakra was gone. Wait...I couldn't sense any...does this mean...**

“Kakashi-sensei...don’t tell anyone (koff) who doesn’t need to (koff koff) know.” Ekyt gave Kakashi a hard look before he slumped to the ground.

Sakura leapt down next to Ekyt, feeling his pulse and his breath.

"What happened to him Kakashi-sensei?" she asked, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. The vibrant green color was dotted with glistening tears within seconds. A few trickled down onto their fallen comrades vest.

Kakashi shook his head sadly. "He's not dead Sakura. And he will live...but that particular jutsu, after Kabuto's attacks...it might have cost him a lot more than a hospital visit."

"What happened?!" Sakura demanded.

"His chakra coils...they're destroyed. Beyond all conventional repair. Like Lee, he will be unable to use Genjutsu or Ninjutsu...unlike Lee, he has no sensei, no role model, and no one...but himself."

Kakashi drew himself up. "Summon the medical-nin. You three are sworn to secrecy. The other senseis will know, and Lee will be informed. Other than that, no one is to find out. Understood?"

Ekyt woke up, not feeling the usual warmth of his chakra. He knew what had happened. He got up out of bed, his feet touching the cold floor. He looked around the hospital room. None of it felt familiar. He didn't know how long he had been out, only that it had been a while. He felt...empty.

"Empty...sounds familiar...I guess this is the price I've paid...it was worth it." Ekyt clenched a fist at the last words. He knew that a nurse would come bustling in any second, telling him to get back in bed. Before that happened, he had to confirm his suspicion.

"Substitution jutsu!"

Nothing.

This is it? All that work...the insane training...all to end. So much...hasn't happened yet...Gaara and Chakaro haven't gotten their comeuppance...Kayla left...Linda's still a dog...and it ends with me, protecting people I care about to the last...just like I thought. I could always go back to traditional martial arts...but there's no place for a ronin (master-less samurai) in a ninja village. And my other arts are dead around here. I'm not Lee, I'm no master of hard work...I can't see a bright side to this...I wish...this was all a lie...That this hadn't happened...not like this.

The realization finally hit Ekyt. He let himself slink onto the bed again, not even minding the fact that he was silently crying. The cold reality had hit him hard.

It's over...

Lord Hokage listened as Kakashi gave his report.

"I should never have over-matched the boy, no matter how important the mission," Hokage said with a sigh. His position required him to remain stoic, but inside he was torn apart. **All that promise...and I condemned it to death...Even in the name of duty, this feels wrong.**

"Kakashi, I'm going to give Ekyt time. I think three days will do it. Then I will visit him. I just pray he can forgive me for this."

"I think he will Lord Hokage, and I doubt he holds you responsible, even now. He would have been upset if he HADN'T gotten the mission."

Ekyt forced himself up. He was determined to put on a normal appearance, at least until he could

disappear for a while, think things out. For once, he didn't know if he had it in him to continue. Things were pretty much hopeless, as far as he was concerned. He had passed his last mission. The only hitch was that it wasn't supposed to be his last mission, it was just supposed to be another mission. Famous last words. He got up and left the room, ignoring the protesting doctors and nurses. Finally, he turned around and sadly asked them "Can you cure me?" When they all shook their heads, and tried to explain it, Ekyt put up a hand to stop them.

"Don't depress me any more. I appreciate you trying. But if there's nothing you can do for me, I'd rather just go home."

Ekyt pushed past the medical-nin and headed for home. On the way, he forced a smile and a few words to people he knew. But when he got home, he drew the blinds, pushed the bed against the door, pulled off his vest and shirt, and sat down on the wooden floor.

The chunin exams had been canceled for the time being. With Kabuto and Orochimaru in the area, everyone agreed it was for the best. Jonin and Chunin guards roamed the streets at night. It was easily a horrid time of anticipation for everyone.

Some, however, were nervous for other reasons.

"There has been no sign of him?"

The small group that had been watching Ekyt's house collectively shook their heads at Lee's question. Sakura was the one on duty right now, although Naruto and Shikamaru were keeping her company. "If we could only talk to him, I am sure that we could fix this..." Lee hadn't told anyone WHY he had taken such an interest in Ekyt's case. Besides being a concerned friend, Lee was going through the same thing. Taijutsu was Lee's only weapon, and now it was Ekyt's only weapon as well. Except for one key difference: It seemed Ekyt had no drive left in him. His emotion chakra that had put Kabuto out of action had eaten him alive.

For a full day, Ekyt sat almost perfectly still. Aside from occasionally taking a bite of food or going to the bathroom to relieve himself or get cleaned up, he had sat still. No matter how he sliced it, things were over for him. All he could do was put his swords up for sale. Ronin did that...but it was hard for him to think of himself that way...it was like being a samurai prostitute, available for anyone who could pay the right price. **No...I'll never whore my sword out that way. There must be some option I'm not thinking of...Maybe I'll think more clearly when my house isn't under surveillance. I can't face them, not just yet...But I DO understand...I can't be defenseless in this village...that means it's time to review every martial art I've ever done. And I'm going to perfect them.**

Day three came. Ekyt still had no will to live, but he had polished his old martial arts so much that he would have been deadly against an opponent...well, one that didn't have chakra. He knew that, but he kept training. Training meant life, even though it was a pitiful half-existence.

"We'll need to do this carefully. Lee...Sakura...Naruto...and Hinata. I need all of you to come with me. You all know your respective roles." Lord Hokage had formed a plan to save Ekyt's life as a Shinobi, and all the pieces needed to be in place.

The dark, Hayate-like circles under Ekyt's eyes were even more pronounced than before. The stress was really taking a toll on him. He had just taken a break from his workout when he heard a knock at his door. He dragged the bed out of the way and answered it after pulling on his vest.

Ekyt sat down to listen to the "Sales pitch." He pulled out his dagger at one point, and had several pairs

of hands wrestle it away from him. (I was just gonna peel this apple, I dropped my knife, damnit!)

“There’s no help for me. I’ve got no regrets about that last fight. Mission comes first, always has.”
“But there’s no reason that your Shinobi path has to be a dead end. You showed so much promise...it would be a true shame to throw all that away,” Lord Hokage began, with all the cunning age had brought him.

“There’s nothing to throw away Lord Hokage!” Ekyt protested, sticking his dagger into the table, then pushing away from the table, muttering and pacing.

“Lee, as you are aware, is in the same boat as you and”

“Lee has been training like this his whole life! Ninjutsu and Genjutsu were the only things keeping me alive at times! I’m in no shape for taijutsu, no matter how much of it I’ve studied! Study and application are two different things! And besides, he has had a mentor and a team! I’ve lived alone, and I’ll bet I die alone too!”

Naruto finally grabbed Ekyt by his vest.

“NEVER give up! If I had quit every time the going got tough, I’d still be at the academy! YOU NEVER QUIT! Once you quit, it’s over! You’ll be a loser!”

“Naruto, that eno” Lord Hokage began, but Naruto plowed forward.

“And another thing! The Jutsus didn’t save your life, YOU saved your own life, and I’m not gonna let you throw all this away! This are gonna work, you’ll get back on your feet! Believe it!”

Ekyt looked mildly at Naruto.

“Are you done? Because if this is it, this is all you can tell me, there’s nothing to discuss. And it’s not “quitting” if it’s forced on you. I sure as hell would rather be an active Shinobi, than some mangled, gimped, one-eyed moron who threw everything away!”

Sakura spoke up softly, knowing that it was now or never. It was time to speak from the heart. It wasn’t a gift many ninja had, but Sakura did: A genuine personality.

“That’s not how you’ll be remembered.”

Ekyt stopped pacing, but didn’t turn around. Sakura continued in the same sincere voice.

“You’ll be remembered as the genin who fought against a powerful enemy, and who gave every last drop of chakra in himself to complete his mission and save his friends.”

Ekyt’s hands relaxed as Sakura’s words continued. Her soft voice was soothing somehow, even though she was just saying what everyone else had said.

“And there’s no reason people have to stop remembering you at that point. I know you’re not in it for the notoriety. Why stop when you can save people? Letting yourself fade away...that’s the only wrong thing to do. So pull yourself up, one more time. Remember? Jinsei nanakorobi, ya’oki. Life is falling down seven times, and getting up eight.”

She grabbed Ekyt’s hand, the same as he had done for her so many times when SHE had been the one near tears. She felt his hand tighten around hers slightly. She had always wished this would have been Sasuke. But at this moment, her thoughts were truly with Ekyt.

“We will not let you throw everything away. To do so would be a violation of our Shinobi ways, and yours.” (Lee’s words)

“You’re gonna get over this! You’re gonna get stronger, and you’re not gonna give up! Believe it!” (Naruto’s words)

“This means altering your training. Lee, Hinata, are you up to it?” Lord Hokage asked, already knowing their answer.

Lee gave a crisp salute. Hinata nodded shyly, looking at the ground and playing with her fingers.

“I guess this ends my teaching career.” Ekyt said sadly.

"What do you mean?"

"I could only instruct in taijutsu. Tomorrow was the day I could start helping Iruka-sensei with demonstrating jutsus, among other things. Now...Lord Hokage, with your permission, I'd like to start training."

27 - The Surgery

"How is he doing Kakashi?"

Kakashi looked over at Jiraiya. "Not very well, not by his normal standards anyway. He's trying, but it's not coming as naturally as the jutsus did."

Both watched Ekyt's training for a few minutes. He was struggling through the exercises, his frustration clearly building as he came closer and closer, but always seemed to be missing one part or another of the series of taijutsu attacks..

"Kakashi...I wonder...do you think the other could help him?"

Jiraiya had an unusually thoughtful expression on his face.

"The other...you mean...her?" Kakashi questioned, his visible eye narrowed in surprise.

"I mean her. If anyone can fix him, it's her," Jiraiya said in a thoughtful, but convinced, tone. "She fixed that damage to Lee after his match with Gaara."

"We have no idea where she is," Kakashi replied..

"I can find her. I'll take Ekyt with me. But I need you to talk with Lord Hokage. I need you and your team, if she is where I think she is."

Kakashi gave a grave nod. "I don't think Lord Hokage will object."

"Not quite. You are very close, but" Lee's word were cut off with a sharp curse from his new student.

"DAMNIT!"

Ekyt cracked, not for the first time. Without chakra, his kicks and punches were worthless. He didn't have Lee's strength and stamina, so he tired quickly. This wasn't the first time he had cracked. He side-kicked the block of wood he had been practicing on, but only chipped the bark. That made things worse. He drew his sword and cut through the wood, then kicked the remains off.

"You only need to"

"It's worthless Lee. I'm wasting your time. This is hopeless. Thanks for trying."

Lee could only shake his head sadly as Ekyt walked away, putting his sword in his belt, not caring if anyone knew of his samurai heritage.

Ekyt turned around and pulled the sword out of his belt.

"I'm sorry Lee...I'm just very tense...if you're willing to give me another shot..."

"Certainly I am! Guy-Sensei never gave up on me! As long as you are willing to try, I am willing to try as well!"

They went back at it.

Ekyt wandered the village. By now, the story had gotten out. Ekyt hated the looks of pity, and the feeling of avoidance. He had to stifle a snarl every time someone showed any pity for him. He wanted to be the *protector* rather than the *protected*

Hinata's lessons went a little better. But the Gentle Fist style was more or less useless with a Byugakan eye. It would require Ekyt to memorize very precise points on the body. With his temper so close to the surface, this was worse for him. He thanked Hinata for her patience, and kept on trying. He was close every time, and, as with everything else, he practiced endlessly.

"Kayla...you wish to be part of the sound village?" Chakaro asked, surprised and unsurprised at the same time.

Kayla felt herself blush. "I do Chakaro. I've missed you. Things are just falling apart. Linda-Sensei and Ekyt-Sensei are fighting. Linda is dating, Ekyt is studying. I feel bad for them, but my place is with you." Chakaro didn't have it in him to smile, though he had to admit that it felt good to have someone care. "Let's talk to Lord Orochimaru. I need an update on Kabuto and Akuhei's mission anyway. You may not need to worry about Ekyt anymore..."

"Sakura, you remember seeing my brother that one time?" Sasuke's question came out of the blue. "I think so...he's scary."

Sasuke nodded. "Naruto, you need to hear this, too."

Naruto scurried up, happy to be included for once. "What's up?"

"I can feel it...my brother is going to make a move. I can sense him closing in. But he's holding back, as if he's watching something..."

Sakura looked around rapidly. "Do we tell the others? Do we tell Ekyt?"

Sasuke shook his head firmly. "No. Not yet. Itachi wants something...and I want to handle him myself, if he comes. I get this feeling a lot, it might mean nothing..."

Sakura kept her face neutral, but in her mind, she thought otherwise. **Oh Sasuke...why can't you just accept the help? Why can't you be honest. Why are you so hot? Cha!**

"Ah, damnit! Deal 'em again!"

"Sure thing Miss!" The dealer in the shady casino dealt a hand of blackjack. He was enjoying himself. The woman in front of him was not only a total babe, she was drinking heavily and losing heavily. **Can't get much better than that!**

The woman looked at her hand, determined despite enormous losses. "Hit me!" she practically shouted, slamming her hand on the table for emphasis. **C'mon...gimme a nine, gimme a nine...** she thought, grinning at the prospect of winning.

Ten.

"TEN! OH DAMMIT!" she shouted as she tossed her cards on the table.

"Nother round Miss, or do you just want to settle?" the dealer asked merrily.

The woman smiled. "I've got to use the little girl's room. I'll try my luck again after that." The woman gave a smile and a wink, then sauntered off.

Once she was in the bathroom, the woman dropped the act. **Damn, running low on money...alright, time to skip outta here...just gotta focus my chakra...** The young woman suddenly looked even younger, her blonde hair lengthening, and her legs elongating. She walked out of the bathroom and past everyone unnoticed. Well, not unnoticed. Two waiters collided, pitchers of beer flying as they both turned to stare at her at the same time.

"So, where are you taking me?" Ekyt asked during the trip. No one gave him a straight answer. Not that he cared, he knew he was beyond help. He looked across the street, hoping to find something to distract him. Things had been so awkward. Naruto was questioning Kakashi about using the Rasengan, while Jiraiya seemed to be looking for someone (though he didn't seem to forget about his pervy side). Sakura was thrilled that Sasuke had something to her, while Sasuke seemed to be more on his guard

than usual.

"HELP! MY PURSE!"

A samurai, clad in a purple Hakama and dark blue Kekko Gei (Hakama top, not sure I'm spelling that right), tried to make off with her purse. His topknot was overgrown, as if it had been a long time since he had had a master. His teeth weren't blackened out, so Ekyt could pick him out as a ronin.

Before anyone else could move, Ekyt walked across the street, his sword in his belt, turning his blade edge-outward, a sign of aggression.

"Put it back." Ekyt said tonelessly. His thumb was on the top of the blade's copper hilt, ready to be drawn at a moment's notice. Ekyt was so absorbed in the battle he didn't notice the others staring at him.

"I knew he trained as a samurai...but still...Shinobi and samurai don't get along, Sakura pointed out. Naruto, on the other hand, had become a one-man cheering section. "Slice him! Dice him! Make him in to -HEY!"

Sasuke and Sakura had nailed him in the head in unison, holding his face into the ground with their feet.

The samurai turned around. "Oh, some ninja punk is gonna stop me?"

Ekyt indicated his belt. "No...some ninja and samurai punk is gonna stop you. But I'll forget the ninja part for now. This concerns Bushido."

Ekyt drew his sword, holding it with two hands in an aggressive guard.

"Kakashi, there's no time for this. Leave your kids with him, we've got to find her."

"Right. Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura! Stay with Ekyt!" he called, leaping off with Jiraiya.

Clang Clang Clang! High, low, high! The three ninjas had never seen two samurai clash before. The fighting style seemed so stiff, but elegant somehow.

The swords clashed one more time. Ekyt shifted his weight forward while the two swords were deadlocked, knocking the other samurai off-balance. Keeping the sword trapped, Ekyt trapped his opponent's hakama with his foot, keeping a wary eye out for the companion sword he knew was coming. When he saw it arching toward him, he thrust his case in the way, bringing the heavy wood down onto his opponent's hand, not breaking the deadlock with the swords. Ekyt's opponent used his case to hit Ekyt's hand aside, trying to stab again. Ekyt dodged backward, dropping his sword down in a block, parrying the blade downward. He maintained contact with the other sword, pushing it to the side and stepping in on the samurai, trapping his hakama again and pushing, knocking him to the ground. The enemy rolled, striking at the legs while bringing his companion sword up for a head block. Ekyt anticipated this and leapt over the strike, stepping down hard on the blade and pinning it to the ground. He brought his sword down in a single-hand jodan cut, cleaving the samurai's shoulder. In the same motion, he drew the blade across the samurai's face. It dug into his flesh, tearing a cut diagonally from under the left eye to the right cheek bone.

Ekyt stepped back into a wide stance, his sword held over his head, the blood glistening off it. He was giving the other samurai a chance to back off, showing that he didn't want to fight anymore.

"You are no enemy of mine...what is your name?" Ekyt asked in the same icy tone he had used since his injury.

"Togatta of the Yaiba clan. My father's master was Yori Harukeda," answered the samurai.

"The Harukeda clan was destroyed...did you survive the war, or were you born after?" Ekyt asked, furrowing his brow.

"I survived the war. But I did not die with my master, as I should have. Instead, I became a ronin and a robber. I wish to commit seppuku..."

"To do so would be against our codes of honor. Your honor is already tainted, do not destroy it further. You know what must be done..." Ekyt handed the man the companion sword. The samurai took it, and in one sweeping motion, cut off his topknot.

"My dishonor is almost complete..." Suddenly, breaking all codes of honor, Togatta stabbed Ekyt in the stomach, then dropped his sword and ran for it.

"Damn it!" Ekyt cursed. That sword had done damage, big time. He was sure nothing important had been hit, but stab wounds weren't something to play with.

Sakura leapt forward. "Lay down! And trust me!"

She opened his vest and looked at the wound. Narrow, but deep.

"Chakra scalpel!" Using her chakra, Sakura closed Ekyt's wound. "All set. You'll be fine." She said brightly.

"THAT is a matter of opinion." Ekyt walked over to the sword that the samurai had dropped in his haste to get away.

"Bastard." He muttered. He picked up the man's long sword, flicked the blood off, then sheathed the sword, tucking it into his belt next to his other sword.

The blond woman let her appearance change again, going back to her de facto appearance, which was an outwardly more pleasing experience.

"Ye-ah! Still a perfect ten!" Jirayai shouted, holding up a sign with "Ten" written on it.

The woman whipped around in surprise.

"You? What do you want, pervert?" she crossed her arms moodily, staring into her sake cup.

"Aside from the usual...well, maybe Kakashi had better explain."

The woman got up. "Kakashi...Hatake? The copy Ninja? I remember him! I'll speak with him. If Kakashi is involved, I know this is legitimate."

Kakashi walked up, not seeming to care, keeping his usual demeanor in place.

"It's been a while, Lady Tsunade," he said cheerfully to the blond woman.

"It has indeed Kakashi. Now, the pervert here (Jiraiya protested: "I'm not a pervert, I'm a MEGA pervert!) tells me you need something. Obviously it's important."

"It is...one of the genin in the village, he fought Kabuto Yakushi in an effort to defend his friends. This young man has shown incredible promise. He has no team and no instructor, and no family name. He has trained non-stop for six months. But Kabuto's attack mangled his chakra coils, and now he's lost the ability to use ninjutsu and genjutsu, and, more importantly, his will to fight."

Tsunade muttered to herself, and appeared to be drawing in the air.

"I can try one thing Kakashi. But, as with Lee, the surgery could kill him. If he's still walking and breathing, I don't think I should do it."

Kakashi sighed. "I think you should talk to him. It's his decision in the end."

"What the hell was that?!" Naruto exclaimed, pointing and jumping (Picture the all-white eyes and the huge mouth).

"What? Oh, sorry, I forgot. That was a samurai duel. That's why I jumped in. Sort of an honor thing," Ekyt explained.

"He wanted me to be his Kaishaku-nin," Ekyt whispered bitterly.

"Kaishaku-nin? You mean, his second?" Sakura had read about this, but hearing it first hand was a new one.

"Yeah. Normally, it's a friend or older samurai. You take your companion sword and basically make a plus sign in your stomach. The kaishaku-nin is supposed to cut the head off to end the suffering. One catch: If his head rolls, you have to kill yourself."

"Oh My God! That's horrible!" Sakura exclaimed. "And he wanted you to help him?"

"Yeah. But, because he was a robber, and a member of an enemy family, it would have been dishonorable to assist him. A common thief shouldn't take an honorable way out like that. That's why his head is still on his shoulders...No, I wouldn't do this anyway. I don't agree with this, I think it's a senseless tradition, one that you won't find me following. And (Ekyt looks around), please keep this to yourself. I don't need everyone knowing I was...am...a samurai."

"Which one?" Tsunade asked. Kakashi pointed. Jiraiya was staring eagerly at her chest, making sketches. Tsunade gave him a smart crack in the head.

"I like 'em feisty!" Jiraiya declared, not entirely conscious.

Tsuande took Ekyt aside and explained the risks to him.

"If you're walking and breathing now, then you shouldn't bother. The chance that this treatment might kill you is high." Tsuande warned.

Ekyt shook his head. "I might be alive, but there's no quality of life. I signed on to be a true Shinobi. Unlike a few ninja I know, I can't do it with only taijutsu. Lady Tsuande, I'd like to take the chance."

Tsunade looked at Ekyt for a long moment. **He reminds me of the boy I operated on, Lee. And I'm sure that's who he was referring to. His chakra coils are fully and properly formed, that's why this operation will work on him, but not Lee. All I can do is try...Brave kid...**

Aloud, she said "Alright. Let's get to the nearest hospital then. This won't take long, and the surgery itself won't be painful at all. But, kid, the recovery is hell."

On the way to the hospital, while Kakashi, Jiraiya, and Tsunade were talking, Team 7 pulled Ekyt next to them on the way. He had been walking behind them, obviously apprehensive about the surgery, and even feeling a little dejected.

"Hey...listen, thanks for the save back there," Naruto said apparently at a loss for words.

Sasuke was just the opposite. He said more than usual. "You're not enjoying this, are you? You made a sacrifice that most couldn't comprehend. I just wanted to say...watch your back. Picking us as friends...that's made you a lot of enemies."

"I know I can trust all of you. And I know you could understand my reasoning for making the sacrifice. There is no refusing a mission. Especially when the mission gets personal."

"I'm going to assist Tsunade-Sensei. But...before all this gets going...I just wanted to say how brave you've been, and what a true friend you are." Sakura's blushing face took on a look of determination, as though she was the one who was going to have the surgery. "If I can ask...why don't you seem afraid? I mean..."

"I could die? When a loner dies, who notices? Besides, there is no quality of life anymore. If I can't be

saving people, I'm worthless."

"Don't say that!" Sakura protested. "You're not worthless!"

"That's nice of you to say." Ekyt said, letting a little emotion creep into his voice.

"Alright kid. Since you're sure, here's the deal. The surgery won't hurt. Recovery, though, is gonna be hell. You won't be able to use your chakra for another two weeks, at the least. And I'm not gonna lie, it's gonna hurt. So, before we get going...are you sure about this?"

Ekyt laid down on the table, shirt off as instructed. "I'm sure."

"Alright. The first part involved Genjutsu. You're going to be in your own world. It's not gonna be awful during the surgery.

The surgery began. Everyone felt a little twinge of anxiety for their friend. There was no doubt that he was special; how many people would have taken such a chance to save people he barely knew? How many would have taken a mission, knowing that they were more than likely going to die? Especially someone who had been a ninja for less than six months.

NEXT ISH: EKYT STARTS HIS RECOVERY! WITH ALL THE VILLAGES PRESENT FOR THE CHUNIN EXAMS, THERE'S TONS OF TENSION IN THE LEAF VILLAGE! SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE!

28 - Ekyt meets Itachi

As Sakura and Tsunade worked on Ekyt (And Jiraiya had skipped out to a make-out bar), Kakashi, Naruto and Sasuke pondered not only his fate, but the fate of the Leaf Village. The chunin exams had been postponed due to the attack on Sasuke, Naruto, Sakura, and Ekyt. That meant that ninja from all the other villages were roaming around the Leaf Village. With tension as high as it was, that seemed to be a recipe for disaster.

Sasuke suddenly tensed up. It seemed Kakashi too had sensed something. Naruto could sense danger, but he couldn't read **WHAT** it was. Sasuke spoke two words:

"He's here."

"Okay Ekyt, here we go. Don't resist the genjutsu."

Ekyt nodded at Tsunade's words, closing his eyes and relaxing. It felt like his heart was going to beat itself out of his chest, and he had never **BEEN** so tense. Maybe it was the potentially deadly surgery, or maybe it was the presence of two girls (Ekyt was horribly awkward with girls), but Ekyt found it hard to relax, lying shirtless on the cold metal table.

Tsunade made a complicated series of hand signs, calling out the jutsu in her head. **Healing Jutsu: Assisting Anesthetic Environment.** This jutsu put the receiver in his/her own world until the completion of the surgery, barring death or the jutsu being stopped. The "world" had no pain in it. However, injuries sustained in this "Jutsu world" would become real upon the target's re-entry to the real world.

"Okay (deep breathe), here we go. Sakura, you maintain the genjutsu, I'm going straight for the chakra coils," Tsunade told Sakura. Sakura nodded and started to use her chakra.

Ekyt shook himself awake. He had been napping under a pine tree. Looking around, he saw he was laying on the edge of a field, with his head and torso in the shade of the adjacent woods. The grass was the greenest he had ever seen; the sky a vibrant, unmarred blue. He could hear a brook in the distance, babbling over the rocks and sloshing off the banks. Relaxing.

He got up and stretched, feeling refreshed from his nap. Even though in the back of his mind he knew it wasn't real. With a grin, he decided to enjoy it. He ran off at top speed, occasionally leaping over rocks and small animals. He felt faster than usual. And he felt...strange. In a good way. No anxiety. There wasn't that pang he felt whenever he did something. He was completely care-free.

Towards the end of the big grassy field, Ekyt saw a giant gold ring. For some reason, he HAD to jump through it.

(ANY GUESSES WHAT GAME I'M REFERRING TO HERE, LOL! SEGA!)

He tucked and rolled, landing on his feet.

"Temari... TEMARI! Hey, you with us or what?!"

"Huh?" Temari had been staring off into space. Kankuro was bringing her back to reality.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just....strategizing," she managed.

"Strategizing?" Kankuro echoed her with tones of disbelief. "Strategizing? What for? Our strategy is

one word: Gaara!" Kankuro exclaimed.

"I don't know about you, but I actually want to improve. I WANT to be a chunin, and I don't want to rely on Gaara!" Temari didn't know why she had snapped at Kankuro like that, but it felt right. She was the oldest, she could make her own decisions.

Kakashi and Sasuke were instantly on their guard.

"Naruto, go in and warn Tsunade and Sakura! Get them and Ekyt out if you have to."

"Kakashi-sensei, what's going on?!" Naruto complained. He HATED being left out. It always seemed to be him that was left out. He was too young, or he had a demon sealed inside him, or some other reason.

"My brother," Sasuke spat darkly, giving Naruto a dark glare. "Don't argue loser, just go!"

Itachi Uchiha was a name that was easily one of the most feared, but respected names not only in the Leaf Village, but all over. He was a member of the Akatsuki; an organization of S-rank criminals that banded together for varying, equally nefarious reasons.

In one night, Itachi had all but destroyed his own clan. That was bad enough. But the Uchiha clan was legendary for it's nearly unparalleled skills. To go through the Uchiha clan relatively unscathed meant that Itachi had easily earned the right to be called one of the greatest ninja of his time.

For reasons only he knew, Itachi had left his brother, Sasuke, alive. Sasuke had made it his life's mission to avenge his family and to kill his brother. Itachi had repeatedly told Sasuke he was too weak. Now Sasuke would have another chance.

With Itachi was his partner, Kisame. Kisame wielded a shark's hide sword that was over six feet in length. The shark's hide meant that this sword was for tearing, rather than cutting.

"Itachi...big brother...it's time we had our closure! CHIDORI!"

Kakashi squared off against Kisame, knowing it would be useless to talk Sasuke out of attacking. At least he would be here to protect Sasuke if anything went wrong.

"This...is a drag," Shikamaru complained. From the looks from his comrades, this wasn't the first time he had complained.

"Enough already Shikamaru (chomp chomp), we know you don't want to do this!" Choji had heard enough of his best friend's complaining. But he had heard MORE than enough of their teammate's complaining.

"We could have done it, now we've got to start all over again! Oh well, that just means getting to see Sasuke more! Sakura will give it up eventually, and Sasuke will be all mine!" Ino said in a fan-girl squeal.

"We're almost done, so far, so good," Tsuande said happily. She just had one more part of the coil to mend.

"And Ekyt will be okay?" Sakura asked anxiously.

"Barring any sudden changes, yes," Tsuande said with a smile.

Of course, at that point, Naruto burst in, true to form.

"Guys! We've gotta go! Itachi is here! We've got to get out of here!" Naruto shouted.

"What?! Is he after MY SASUKE?!"

Sakura clenched her fist. **All this stress...I know it makes no sense...but I need to be out there with Sasuke...I'm not holding back anymore! It's time this flower blossomed!**

Tsunade made the last mend to Ekyt's chakra coils.

Before she could end the genjutsu, an unwelcome visitor came in.

Outside, Kakashi stopped Sasuke from attacking.

"That's not your brother. It's an illusion. We need to get inside. I hope I'm wrong, but he might be targeting Ekyt this time..."

"Huh? Why him?" Sasuke wondered, annoyed about the fact that his brother didn't think he was a threat.

"Because of his second chakra. The Akatsuki will have heard of it. Just like Naruto, they'll be after him because of it."

Back in the Leaf Village, Neji, Lee and Tenten were waiting patiently for the exams to resume. They were probably the most well-rounded group in the exam. Lee had the raw strength and drive, Neji had the advanced abilities, and Tenten was the weapon's master, not to mention more or less the babysitter of Neji and Lee.

Right now, Lee was doing endless free-squats. "I cannot wait for the exams to be resumed! This time we will emerge as chunin!" he declared.

"It is in the fates that I will be victorious. Cousin, you will not have a guardian angel this time," Neji murmured. He hadn't forgotten about his scathing defeat and embarrassment at Ekyt's hands.

Tenten was mildly flipping a kunai from a standard grip to a reverse grip, and then back again. "I guess everyone knows why the exam was stopped. Damn that Kabuto. I hope they were able to find a healer for Ekyt."

"Tenten, is this motherly concern as usual, or is it something more?" Lee asked. His time with Naruto had given him a small sense of humor.

"Shut up Lee! Can't I be concerned for a comrade?" Tenten shouted indignantly.

Tenten was so scary at that point that even Neji inched away from her. Underneath that cute little exterior beat the heart of a warrior.

"If Tsunada-hime cannot cure him, there is no one who can! She healed me, and I am certain she will heal Ekyt as well." Lee said confidently, striking his "nice guy" pose.

Before she could turn and fight, a hard blow from Itachi's chakra-enhanced hand dropped Tsunade in a stunning blow. She could only watch helplessly as Itachi knocked Naruto unconscious and walked over to Ekyt. Sakura had raced outside. Now that seemed a grave error.

Ekyt felt a disturbance in the field. He sensed someone behind him, and somehow he was SURE it wasn't a friendly someone. He threw two kunai, whipping around to follow up with a kick. He gaped at who he saw.

"Itachi...Uchiha."

Itachi looked mildly at Ekyt, no Sharingan yet visible in his eyes.

"We're still in your subconscious...where I do my best work. Unless you decide to help me instead."

"And what exactly is it you need help with?" Ekyt snarled.

"Our leader is fascinated by your second chakra. Yes, we know about it. And we want to know how it works."

"Well, good luck. Even I don't know," Ekyt replied dryly.

Itachi gave Ekyt a hard look. It was too late when Ekyt realized what he was doing.

Itachi had snared Ekyt in his Mangekyo Sharingan.

"Kurenai-Sensei...d-do you t-think Ekyt is okay?" Hinata stammered.

Kurenai smiled at her concern. "I'm sure he will be Hinata. Besides, Naruto's group is with him. You just keep focusing on your training, okay? There's no need to worry about things you can't change, right?" Kurenai gave Hinata a knowing smile. **This girl had changed so much...all thanks to you, Naruto. You don't know it, but you've been quite the inspiration for Hinata...maybe something more...**

"He'll be fine Hinata. I've still got beat him after last time! Right Akamaru?" "Arf!" Kiba and Akamaru said. Beside them, Shino hadn't moved for an hour. Finally, he spoke.

"The tracking beetle I placed on Naruto will tip us off when they are returning."

This was a genjutsu from hell. Ekyt and Itachi were in a private world. The world was dark, an ashen gray, with fires dotting the landscape. Ekyt found himself bound to a stake at the waist, chest, upper legs, and ankles, with his arms tied behind his back. Standing before him was Itachi.

"I control space and time in this world. For the next three days, I'm going to throw these kunai at you." Itachi threw the first one, hard and accurate. It hit Ekyt in the stomach. Nowhere vital, but it hurt. Ekyt had just come out of surgery, and he was in pain from that. The added pain was putting stress on his mind.

"This hurts, I'm sure." (Throws another) "You have a high tolerance for pain. This is taking far too long...I'm going to speed up the process. No matter how strong you are, you have to give in eventually," Itachi said in his normal, menacing voice.

With just a glance, the Fireball Jutsu that Ekyt seen Sasuke use so often lit the ground at his feet.

Two days had passed in "Itachi's World." Ekyt was panting and bleeding, still bound to the stake, kunai sticking out of all parts of him. His brain was near overload; he could FEEL insanity coming. He had to do something. But he couldn't call on his chakra...but that was the answer.

Without his regular chakra, Ekyt would be free to access his special Emotional Chakra. Without knowing how, Ekyt could sense it would be highly advanced in this world Itachi had created. He let the chakra flow, finally concentrating on it.

Itachi narrowed his eyes. He couldn't be sensing this correctly. He felt as though he was losing control of his world.

Ekyt broke free of the ropes that bound him to the stake. This time, he refused to look Itachi in the eyes.

"I know I'm no match for you Itachi...but I can at least end this... KAI!"

Itachi didn't show any surprise. Ekyt's blue chakra washed over the landscape. Itachi put a cloaked arm in front of his face, but that was the only move he made.

Both were back in reality. But Itachi's chakra was very low. He didn't have a personal vendetta against Ekyt; he already knew the young ninja was no match for him, and no threat to his power. Itachi hadn't killed in cold blood (in his mind), only to test his strength. He had already shown his brother that he was

too weak. He decided it was time for he and Kisame to leave.

Kakashi, Sasuke, and Sakura burst into the room, finding a barely-conscious Ekyt leaning on a table, staring at Itachi's feet, a kunai in his hand. The genjutsu-laced strikes on Tsunade and Naruto were released upon Ekyt's "Kai!" command. They were stirring too. The only one who seemed to be in the mood to fight was Sasuke.

Itachi and Sasuke stared off. It was a rarity when the two Uchiha brothers met. Sasuke knew that; he didn't waste any time.

"Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!" he called, taking a deep breath, then releasing the flame.

Itachi only put his hand up; that waved out Sasuke's powerful flame.

"Listen to me little brother. You are not strong enough yet. We'll both live to fight another day."

"That's not how it's going to work Itachi! I'm going to kill you!" Sasuke had become unglued. He rushed forward to attack, but only dust remained from where Kisame and Itachi had stood.

"Dammit! Damn you Itachi!" In disgust, Sasuke threw a kunai into the ground.

Ekyt helped Tsunade up, thanking her for healing him and apologizing for the trouble all this had caused. She waved off the apology and the thanks.

"I hate to see a good kid with talent go to waste. It's incredible that you can even walk or stand right now, you should be in nearly unbearable pain," Tsunade's voice held tones of questioning.

"I AM in pain. But I know I'll live, so it's not freaking me out," Ekyt explained. It was a strange pain. Kind of like someone had a hold of his stomach and was yanking it up and down. It wasn't as painful as Ekyt thought. Of course, that could be because of Itachi's attack.

"Either way," Ekyt said allowed, "Any recommendations for the pain?"

"Sake."

"I'm underage," Ekyt protested with a small grin.

"Doctor's orders. For all of you." Tsunade seemed to be in high spirits, and that was rare, so everyone wanted to take advantage.

Ekyt inched his way to the far end of the bar after a short time with the others. Jiraiya had rejoined them. It was quite the sight when he made a rather lewd comment to Tsunade. It seemed her healing prowess would come in handy- IF she decided to forgive him.

I should be thrilled...I'm alive after Itachi Uchiha attacked me...how many people can say that? Not to mention the surgery was a success...still...I can't help wondering what would have happened if I had just picked a normal life. Not that I had a choice, in retrospect. But what if I was the type to find a girl and settle down? Aw hell, it would take a special girl to put up with me. The kunoichi around here seem to be my type, but who can tell?

And what about my training? I should be happy with where I am...but I'm not. I feel like I'm wasting any potential I have. I'm drawing A-rank missions, and I'm passing them...but there's no rhyme or reason to them, I don't have a specialty. That's not bad normally, but everyone wants a place, I guess... Ekyt decided not to think about it any more. Still, he couldn't enjoy the night like the others.

Kakashi looked over his shoulder briefly at Ekyt. **Depressed...it seems Sasuke has a rival in the regard of top loner. Of course, I have my suspicion that he acts that way because of Sakura's attention...This one is driven by something else...from what I can tell, wanting to belong...join the**

club Ekyt. You're not alone... Kakashi thought, looking at his own team. Naruto knew what it meant to be alone, as did Sasuke. Sakura, however, could probably relate to him the most. They both saw what they wanted, but neither could reach their goal very easily.

Very quietly, Ekyt paid for the round (Somehow Tsunade had managed to convince the bartender to let everyone have a cup of sake), drank his cup quickly, and got up to clear his head.

NEXT ISSUE: MOUNTING TENSION IN THE LEAF VILLAGE LEADS TO SOME INTERESTING SITUATIONS! EKYT HAS A GIFT FOR LORD HOKAGE, AND AFTER THAT, BACK TO TRAINING! THE CHUNIN EXAMS ARE STILL ON THE HORIZON FOR THE INTREPID GENIN!

29 - A Big Surprise

“Lord Hokage?”

Lord Hokage looked over from his painting, finding an annoyed Ebisu wanting his attention?

“Yes Ebisu? And don’t tell me it’s Naruto!”

Ebisu stood up even straighter at the mention of Naruto’s name.

“No Lord Hokage, not this time. This one I rather dislike as well, I must say, he”

Behind him, Ekyt poked him in the butt with his kunai. As Ebisu leapt aside, Ekyt walked in, calmly shutting the door in the ticked-off Tokubetsu Jonin’s face.

Lord Hokage couldn’t help but laugh. **Ebisu brought that one upon himself...seems this young man has a mind of his own, he’s no blind follower** Before Lord Hokage could speak, Ekyt knelt before him and was handing him a sword.

“I know this isn’t quite the normal custom,” Ekyt began, wearing a strange expression of embarrassment and stoicism on his face, “but I wanted to thank you for trusting me with that mission. I, er, won this. And I thought you should have it.”

Ekyt bowed and handed Lord Hokage the sword he had won from his battle with Togatta Yaiba. It was a beautiful longsword. It’s black wooden saya had been polished, and it’s purple sageyo (cord) had been smoothed and tied neatly across it. Ekyt handed the sword over with the edge inward, keeping samurai customs in the back of his mind. The hilt was blackened copper, with a Musashi-styled guard. The handle had a sharkskin coating, with naugaheide grip wrappings. The blade itself was thirty inches long, forged steel. It was curved, meant for cutting rather than stabbing, and sharpened to a razor’s edge. Lord Hokage took the sword, examining it top to bottom. He was genuinely surprised by the gift, and equally grateful.

“Thank you very much. How did you come across such a beautiful weapon?”

“I won it in a duel Lord Hokage. Well, more accurately, I won the duel, the man threw it down and ran.”

“And your surgery? Kakashi told me that it went well, but also said that you met someone worth mentioning. If Kakashi thinks so...”

“He...he didn’t tell you, Sir?” Ekyt asked, surprised.

“He seemed to think it best left to you,” Hokage replied.

“Well, I met...Itachi Uchiha.”

Hokage stifled a gasp and narrowed his eyes. “Did he attack you?”

“Yes Lord Hokage. With his Mangekyo Sharingan. My second chakra enabled me to break free. He’s as talented as everyone says,” Ekyt said with certainty.

Lord Hokage dismissed Ekyt after a few more minutes. **To think I wasn’t going to let him in the chunin exams because of Orochimaru...if he survived Itachi, then he’ll survive the chunin exams.**

Kakashi settled down while his team was doing drills. Their teamwork was improving. While Kakashi was looking it was; when he turned away, Sakura was thumping Naruto on the head for doing something stupid. Apparently, Naruto had to go to the bathroom and started to unzip right there in front of her.

“NOT IN FRONT OF ME, YOU PIG!!! I’M A LADY, GO FIND A TREE OR SOMETHING!”

Kakashi sighed and tried to go back to his book. He found someone blocking his light.

“Well, hello Tenten. What brings you here?” Kakashi asked mildly. It was strange that Tenten would come around.

"I-I was just wonder how Ekyt was doing. Lee told me about the surgery, and I was curious..." Kakashi stifled a look of surprise. "He's doing well. Aside from some minor depression, that's the norm for him."

"Thank you Kakashi-sensei!" Tenten made a hasty retreat.

Ekyt stopped by the academy to tell Iruka about what happened. Iruka had already heard. But he looked terrible.

"I think I caught something from the kids Ekyt. I hate to ask this, but can you handle the class today?"

"Oh, um, sure Iruka-sensei, I'd be glad to. What are they working on?"

"Teamwork and Chakra control," Iruka replied with a cough. He DID look terrible, like he hadn't eaten or slept in three days

"Alright, I'll give it a shot." Ekyt said, trying to hide how happy he was to be drawing such an assignment.

As soon as Ekyt had left, Iruka straightened up and stopped coughing.

"Let's see how he does...Although I think I already know...but why would Lord Hokage order such a test?" Iruka wondered aloud.

The classroom was buzzing with anticipation and gossip. That all stopped when Ekyt walked in and stood at the bottom of the auditorium-styled room.

"Hey, who're you?! Where's Iruka-sensei?!" One student had wasted no time.

"My name is Ekyt, I'm going to be your instructor today. Rest assured, Iruka-sensei will be fine, just a little bug. Now, he tells me you're working on chakra control. I assume you all know what chakra is. So let's talk about what it does."

"DUH! It makes you stronger!" One student yelled.

Ekyt smiled beneath his mask. "It can. But it does more for you than that. It can save your life."

"How do we know you're not some fake?! Why don't you prove it?!" the same wise-guy in the back asked.

Ekyt started to walk away. He walked to the wall, then up it, and then hung from the ceiling, staring down at the class.

"Chakra has saved my life countless times. Unfortunately, I can't tell you the good stories, I'm sworn to secrecy. But I CAN demonstrate. So, you, the one who thinks I'm a fake. Come on down to the front. Don't worry, I know you can handle this."

Ekyt leapt down, landing in front of the room. "Now, I want you to go ahead and throw a few kunai at me. Aim for me, don't hold back."

The student reared back and threw the knives. Ekyt focused his chakra to his feet and leapt! He sailed over the barrage of kunai. He made sure he landed in time to have the second barrage hit him. He fell to the ground, bleeding.

"Hmm...I think you missed." Ekyt was standing behind the student. His "riddled body" was a log! Apparently, this student didn't take kindly to being humbled. He stabbed backward, knifing Ekyt in the stomach.

"You really need to keep that temper in check." Ekyt said from above. He was standing on the ceiling. It was a clone that had just been disemboweled.

"Do you see how chakra can save your life when controlled properly?" Ekyt asked kindly. The student nodded and returned to his seat, dejected.

"Alright, let's make a line and try transformation jutsus."

"Hey guys, watch this!" Konohamaru and Naruto were huddled together in the back of the room. Ekyt was too busy observing the transformations to notice both of them use a transformation jutsu to become two completely different students. Eventually, they were ushered to the front of the line.

At the same time, they both used the art of transformation- the twist being it became the Sexy Jutsu!

Well, Naruto used the Ninja Harem Jutsu.

Poor Ekyt never stood a chance!

"Ohhhhh Ekyt-Kun, you're soooo smart!!!" cooed the female "Narutos", all of them clinging to Ekyt.

"You could teach us soooooo much! How about a demonstration cutie?" pleaded the female "Konohamaru".

Between the ten Naruto's girls hanging on his arms and legs, and the one around his neck, Ekyt's eye widened involuntarily. Then his nosebleed rocketed him backward in a flipping pattern, where he hit the wall, sliding down it in complete shock.

The two pranksters changed back to their normal forms, laughing hysterically at their prank.

"Y-you should've seen y-your face!" Naruto exclaimed, pointing a finger at Ekyt, then falling over on the floor.

"I never knew you were a closet perv like Iruka sensei!" Konohamaru declared, leaning on Naruto for support.

"WHAT?!" Ekyt exclaimed. He wasn't alone. Iruka, who was miraculously well suddenly, both chased the two jesters around the room, using the "Body Flicker Jutsu" to finally catch them. At the same time, Iruka and Ekyt backhanded them, knocking them out the windows. Iruka and Ekyt's faces were twitching from anger and disgrace.

"Okay, class dismissed!" Iruka declared, waving merrily.

"Damn it, those two did it again!" Ekyt said, shaking his head, even managing to chuckle at the trick.

"One of these days Naruto...It's bad enough HE pulls that, but now he's got Lord Hokage's grandson pulling it!" Iruka couldn't help but grin himself. It WAS just a harmless prank after all.

"The chunin exams are going to be changed, out of necessity. The Forest of Death's integrity has been compromised, at least for now. We need another test to determine which genin are to become chunin. So I bring the question before all of you jonin: What should the test be?"

Kakashi spoke up after a moment's thought.

"The old test was to foster teamwork and survival...why not pit the students against the senseis? All the senseis carry the heaven and earth scrolls on them. Once they're defeated, they hand over the one necessary to the team that defeated them. Obviously, this means the sensei's won't kill. But suppose one team got two of the same scroll? THEN they fight each other for the correct scrolls. It would do everything the old test did, which I'm assuming is the point."

The old Hokage smiled, closing his eyes.

"All in favor of Kakashi's idea?"

Every hand was in the air.

"Alright. Kakashi's test is officially instated in the chunin exams. You are all dismissed. Asuma, I need to speak with you."

Asuma cocked an eyebrow, but marched up the Third Hokage.

“Yes Lord Hokage?”

“I have reconsidered Shikamaru’s proposal. After surviving the surgery and Itachi Uchiha’s attacks, Ekyt will be allowed to substitute for Shikamaru. However, his eligibility for the rank of chunin, should he pass, will be withheld until the proper number of missions have been completed.”

Asuma grinned widely before answering.

“Shikamaru will be relieved. I’ve never heard someone complain so much, aside from Ino Yamanaka. I’m sure Ekyt will agree to it. How long does he have to prepare?”

“Three days,” Hokage replied.

“Short notice...of course, he doesn’t ever take the easy route. This’ll probably suit him just fine.”

The genin were called together for a meeting at the center of the village. Many considered it to be the most beautiful spot in the whole village. Cherry trees and Japanese maples were arranged in an ornate, leaf-shaped pattern. Since it was fall, the changing leaves made the scene even more beautiful, as they littered the cobblestone street.

Beauty was the last thing on the minds of the genin called together. Ekyt stood among them, not really understanding why he had been told to attend. But he listened along with the others as they were told about the next test.

“...Proctoring the exam: Anko Mitarashi, Kakashi Hatake, Asuma Sarutobi, Might Guy (Guy struck his “good guy” pose, causing Lee to cheer), and Shikamaru Nara.”

The last name caused heads to turn toward Asuma’s cell. Ino and Choji were indeed alone, and they looked just as confused as everyone else. Hayate’s voice called everyone back to attention.

“(koff) The test will start in three days. Anyone who has questions should go to your respective jonin (koff) sensei.”

Ekyt, Choji, and Ino immediately stepped forward. They listened in stunned silence as Asuma explained to them that Ekyt was in their group for the test, since it would be unfair for a chunin like Shikamaru to take the exams again. Choji was alright with the idea. Ino, of course, had to take a shot at Sakura.

“Hey! Billboard brow! Guess what?!” Ino yelled, charging after team seven.

After a moment’s reluctance, Choji and Ekyt chased after her.

Sakura turned around furiously.

“Didn’t I say not to call me that?!”

Ino giggled. “Right, sorry! Anyway, you’re not going to believe this!” Ino reached over and pulled Ekyt next to her. (Ekyt winced at the touch; he didn’t like where this was going)

“We get hottie number 2! Maybe he’s not Sasuke (Ekyt and Naruto roll their eyes), but still, quite the catch!” Ino called, laughing. She gave Ekyt a swat on the butt, causing him to jump slightly, then blush furiously.

“Good for you, Ino-Pig. Now you’ve got some REAL talent on your team! No offense to Choji and Shikamaru of course, but they couldn’t carry you forever!”

Everyone but Ino burst into laughter. Ekyt was already over with Naruto and Sasuke, making sure there was no hard feelings. There was no jealousy, mercifully, but Sasuke was eager for a match with Ekyt, as was Naruto.

Ino grabbed Ekyt and Choji and dragged them away, saying “C’mom guys, we’ve got practicing to do! We’ll teach them to mess with us! And Ekyt, don’t get any ideas! I HAD to flaunt you in front of Sakura,

it doesn't mean anything, so don't waste your time thinking it!"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Ekyt smirked.

On his own, after a few hours of practice, Ekyt opened the one scroll that had eluded him. It was the Chakra Gates scroll. **This is how Lee almost defeated Gaara...he's in the tournament...and with Chakaro, Orochimaru, and Itachi on the loose...maybe I'd better learn how to do this...**

That translated to another long night for Ekyt.

Elsewhere, Itachi outlined his battle with Ekyt to Pein.

"He'll be strong someday. His second chakra is well developed, although he's not aware of how to access it freely. It has to be forced out of him," Itachi explained tonelessly.

"I see. Is he worth our time?" came the reply.

"He will be someday. He threw off my genjutsu. His chakra coils will have healed by now as well."

"Well then...we'll monitor the boy. When the time comes, we'll make our move."

30 - Chunin Exams Resume

PLEASE NOTE THAT HYOUJON, NAOKI, AND MIKE BELONG TO SHARINGANKAKASHI. RYU (AND HIS ALIASES) BELONG TO ALCHEMEST1.

The next two days went quickly. Ekyt didn't tell anyone about his new ability. He could open the first chakra gate. He had some trouble closing it at first, but worked that out eventually (Not before passing out the first time and cracking his head on the floor).

The strangest thing was that it seems the kunoichi around the Leaf Village had taken notice of him. When he heard the "Why" part, Ekyt shook his head sadly. **Now I'm hot stuff because I met and survived Itachi Uchiha? Come on! I'm going to wait for a kunoichi that likes me for me. Itachi and his damn fan girls...I guess I'm the milk-drinking dork that fights hard. I just don't have that "edge." Oh well. I'm not going to become someone else to please a shallow bunch.**

A couple of the girls, however, surprised him. The first was Tenten. Ekyt actually envied her in a way. She was self-assured without being cocky, and her ability to throw kunai amazed Ekyt. Back when they had been close, Linda had taught him how to throw kunai, but it was a hard thing for Ekyt to grasp, even now.

"Ekyt, hi. I was just wondering how your surgery went," Tenten told him. Ekyt noticed a little pink on her cheeks, and was glad his face was covered, as he was sure his face would be next.

"Oh, it went okay. Aside from being attacked. That kind of hurt," he said mildly.

To his relief, Tenten didn't go on a fan girl rant about Itachi.

"I'm glad you're better. The Leaf Village would have lost some talent if you hadn't. Anyway, I'd better get back to my group."

Ekyt watched her go, all the while wondering just what the hell had brought that on.

It didn't end there, however. His next visitors had Ekyt on his guard. In fact, a number of people suddenly leapt to his side.

"Hey kid. Heard ya got stitched up."

Ekyt nodded slowly, surprised that Temari knew. Next to her was Kankuro, who Ekyt didn't trust. In a flash of sand, Gaara appeared next to them.

"So you're not dead."

Whenever Gaara spoke, people listened. This time was no different.

Ekyt glared back at Gaara, his mind going back to the day Gaara had ruined his eye. **For an unrequited love...you sand bastard.**

"No. I'm not dead. The same as you aren't alive," Ekyt replied mildly.

Gasps came from the crowd. NO ONE talked to Gaara like that. Especially not some fresh-faced genin. Gaara smiled; not a reassuring gesture.

"Maybe I'll decide to finish what I started with your eye...I already know your weakness..."

"That I care too much. No kidding. And I know yours Gaara: You DON'T care. Insulting you won't work, taunts are meaningless, the only thing you understand is pain and misery. I pity you."

The two exchanged glares of death. Gaara used his chakra to form a sand eye, grinning nastily. Ekyt's hand unconsciously went to his mutilated left eye. His hands balled into fists, but he didn't move.

Temari leapt between them, pushing them both away.

"Leave him alone Gaara. Please, for your big sister." Temari pleaded with a sheepish grin.

"I want to kill him...but he won't make me feel alive..."

"Right! So, why waste your energy!" Temari exclaimed. Gaara disappeared in another brilliant flash of sand and light.

Temari breathed a sigh of relief.

"Why the hell did you egg him on?!" she demanded. Sakura and Tenten had shouted the same thing.

"I just gave him some food for thought," Ekyt said innocently.

The test was explained to the intrepid genin, who stared on wide-eyed. Such an arrangement gave Ekyt an advantage; he had already sparred with most of the senseis. At the same time, he had never worked with Ino and Choji before. Not to mention that they had always worked with Shikamaru and his Shadow Possession Jutsu. Without that, Ino's technique, the Mind Transfer Jutsu, was next to useless. That being said, the day was interesting anyway. A new group and their sensei had shown up.

"Huh? Who are they?!" Ino was pointing at the new group.

"I don't recognize their headbands, not any village I'm familiar with," Choji said thoughtfully.

In the lead was the one Ekyt could somehow pick out as their sensei. He was tall, roughly the same height as Kakashi-sensei. He had a number of similarities to Kakashi sensei (lol, sorry, inside joke. Right Kiba? :p) upon further inspection, including a mask that covered his face, save for his eyes. The eyes were a point of interest as well, as they were two different colors. He was clothed in all black, adding to the intimidating look. No doubt, that was his intention.

The next member was a girl, short in stature, with black hair, and clothing to match, save for a pink belt, giving her a feminine touch.

The third part of the group was another tall one, though not as muscular as the one that Ino, Choji, and Ekyt had picked out as their leader. This one had a sword across his back, as big as Zabuza's, but shaped more like a meat cleaver.

The last member of their group stood out the most. He had on a black jacket like the rest of his group (Save for the sensei), but had coupled that with jeans, a rarity in the ninja world.

The sensei broke into a grin.

"Hope we're not late."

To Ekyt's surprise, Lord Hokage returned the grin.

"Of course not, Tatakikoulasu Kako Shinobi, I'm looking forward to seeing your students in action."

Ino had immediately cozied up to the new guy.

Ekyt and Choji (Complete with huge sweatdrops) watched her make her move.

"You know...I think I hate her." Ekyt muttered, remembering how she had been flaunting him two seconds ago.

"I know man. Try being on her team permanently!" replied Choji, disgusted as well.

"Ino...Ino...INO!" Ekyt was getting angry now. Choji finally spoke up.

"Dammit Ino, let's GO! We've got practicing to do! Get your head in the game!"

"In a minute, I'm just talking with...well, the guy with the long name!" Ino replied with a slight squeal.

"Choji, let's just forget her for now. You and I can handle this...but it's a shame she'll lose Sasuke to

Sakura..." Ekyt said casually, hoping Choji would take the bait. He did.

"You're right man. Ino's just the fifth wheel. Besides, Sasuke's smart to stay away from her. I heard she has lice..."

Ino's head turned slowly. "WHAT!?" She backhanded both Shinobi, sending them crashing into the trees.

"Violent dog..." Choji muttered.

Ekyt pulled himself up, thinking it a good idea to go introduce himself to the new guys.

"I'm afraid I didn't catch your name over the sound of my back hitting the bark..." Ekyt muttered, shooting a glance at Ino, who was still hanging on Ryu's shoulder.

"It's Ryu."

"Well, welcome to the Leaf Village. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with your headband," Ekyt said politely.

"My team and I are from the Village Hidden in the Shine."

"Hm. I noticed you know Lord Hokage."

"I'm a Kage as well."

Ekyt did his best to stifle his surprise. **Looks young...then again, who can tell?**

"And who's your team here? I GUESS you've already met Ino. I'm Ekyt, and that (Points at Choji) is Choji."

Ryu indicated the team with his head. "The girl in front is Naoki. Behind her, my knucklehead ("HEY!" 'Knucklehead' protested), Hyoujon. Next to him is Mike."

Hyoujon marched over, staring Ekyt down.

"Hey, who's the skinny guy, sensei? He looks like a punk!" declared Hyoujon.

The girl, Naoki, marched over and gave Hyoujon a smart crack in the head.

"Don't do that, tard! You're picking a fight you might not win!" Naoki snarled at him.

"Alright, alright, you violent tomboy! Geez!" Hyoujon exclaimed.

Mike shook his head.

"She's gonna kill you for that. You might as well have called her short." Mike took on an "Oh, Crap!" look.

Naoki punched both of them.

"Idiots!"

"Ino, if your head is back on your shoulders, I have an idea, one that will work with Shikamaru..." Ekyt muttered.

"I'm listening! Geez, can't a girl give a guy a"

"No." Ekyt said flatly.

The test began. Thirty minutes later, Hyoujon, Mike, and Naoki walked out, holding two scrolls. There wasn't a scratch on them.

"So you created this clan? Impressive Ryu. Or, Shattered Past Shinobi. It's been quite some time. You're not the fresh-faced genin that I helped train," Lord Hokage told Ryu, a smile playing on his age lips.

"Only out of necessity Sarutobi-sama. Besides, those three are sharp kids. They'll do fine. Well, two of

them are sharp, Hyoujon...not so much," Ryu added with a laugh.

Ekyt saw Shikamaru coming. He signaled for Ino to hide. He used a transformation jutsu to become her.

"Hey, Shikamaru!" Ekyt/Ino called.

"Come on Ino, even you shouldn't be this dumb," Shikamaru said in a bored voice. He used his shadow possession jutsu to trap her.

Ino/Ekyt called "Now!"

The real Ino used her "Mind Transfer" Jutsu. Did it work? They found out when Shikamaru walked forward and handed Ekyt/Ino a scroll.

"Very good. But let Ino flirt with Ryu," Ino said in Shikamaru's body.

Ekyt snatched the scroll away and shook his head.

"Let's just get out of here with this. It's enough to pass." Ekyt found himself thankful that he didn't have to spend a lot of time with Ino.

Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura had passed easily as well. Lee, Tenten, and Neji had also passed. But that was it. It looked like only a handful of genin could handle the pressure.

With the end of this exam, it was time for the Genin to get ready for the tournament. The teamwork portion was over. Now it was the out and out fighting.

FIRST MATCH: NAOKI vs. TENTEN

This match was over almost as soon as it began. Naoki, as it turned out, was a pro with genjutsu. That much became apparent when Tenten fell over in a crying heap before they had even moved.

Ekyt leapt down, managing to not shoot a dirt look. Lee landed beside him. When Ekyt realized Tenten was still suffering, he whipped around to Naoki.

"At least have the decency to end the jutsu! Kai!" he called, ending the jutsu himself, glaring at Naoki.

"Sorry," Naoki said without emotion.

Hyoujon gave Ekyt a rough shove. Ekyt gave him a push back. Lee forced himself in between them.

"Ekyt, let it go! Let it go!" Lee pleaded. "Do not get yourself disqualified!"

Ekyt continued to glare at Hyoujon, but dropped it. He DID stand in the way while Lee took care of Tenten.

"I really didn't mean to clamp on that hard," Naoki said gently to Lee, who was doing his best not to glare at her.

"She will be fine," Lee replied tersely, doing his best not to chew the girl's head off. Tenten was so important to his team. She was, more or less was the common sense of the team.

Mike walked over at that point. He was being careful not to stir anymore bad blood. He had picked out Ekyt as the easiest to talk to. Good guess, because Lee was feeling murderous right now.

"Will she be okay?" he asked carefully.

"I think so. Tenten's tough," Ekyt replied, keeping the edge out of his voice.

The next match popped up on the screen. Everyone gaped at it. It was the forbidden fruit. Anyone who knew Ekyt's story knew what this meant:

Ekyt
Vs.
Gaara.

TO BE CONTINUED...

31 - Kankuro's Mistake

"We will have two matches today. The participants names will be on the board momentarily (koff)." Hayate's words turned the crowd's attention to the big scoreboard on the wall.

Ekyt vs. Gaara
Rock Lee vs. Chakaro Tamaki

Everyone in the crowd knew the story behind Ekyt and Gaara. Ekyt could feel every head turn toward him. For his part, he straightened his vest, then looked at his friends.

"Some guys have all the luck...I wanted to draw Gaara! Oh well, someone has to beat him and it's gonna be you! Believe it!" Naruto shouted.

Ekyt couldn't help but feel a little more confident after Naruto's display.

"I believe it." He and Naruto hit fists. With a quick look at his support group, Ekyt leapt to the floor.

Gaara appeared in a flurry of sand. In his hand, he was holding a sand eye. He crushed it. The crowd looked over at Ekyt for a response.

Ekyt felt his ruined eye, clenching his fist in anger. **So it's finally happened...Gaara, it's time for you to pay...**

Begin!

Ekyt ran straight at Gaara, throwing a hard right hand. He followed with a left elbow, a sweep kick, a crescent kick, a side kick, then a low roundhouse, followed by a high roundhouse.

Gaara's sand had blocked it all. He hadn't moved at all. His sand leapt toward Ekyt in a wave, forcing him backward. Ekyt slid backward, dodging to the side of the sand, aiming an elbow at Gaara's face. The sand blocked easily.

Time for a change in strategy... Ekyt thought. When you do a jutsu often enough, the hand signs can be skipped over. **Shadow Clone Jutsu!**

Four Ekyt's leapt at Gaara from different angles. Two went high, two went low. Gaara's sand blocked their attacks, knocking them all backward. This time, Ekyt's handsigns were visible.

"Dragon's ember jutsu: Clone Instigation!"

The four clones used the Dragon's Ember Jutsu. As Ekyt thought, the sand became a solid as the heat reached it. Ekyt himself leapt up, bringing his leg into an axe kick, shattering the solid material. His foot tagged Gaara on top of the head. Ekyt leapt backward. Unfortunately, the sand caught him. Four clones and their jutsus took A LOT of chakra to maintain...Gaara had caught his leg with a second surge of sand. Ekyt felt a sharp pain, but kept his focus.

"It's almost over now..."

The chunin exams. For Ekyt, they were. No matter how much he trained, or what little bit of luck he

caught, something always caught him. This time, it was Gaara's sand. The sand's stench of blood had increased, every time Gaara felt "alive." Now, it was holding Ekyt by his leg.

"Desert Coffin." Summoning the last dregs of his strength, Ekyt flipped backward, breaking the sand's grip. Upon landing, he back flipped away, trying to ignore the stabbing pain in his leg. His own sweat and blood was stinging his good eye, making vision nearly impossible. Ekyt had only one more trick he could think of.

He disappeared.

"Where'd he go?! Did he quit?!" Naruto was shouting all this in Shikamaru's ear. Shikamaru's mouth dropped open in surprise.

"No way...man, that takes guts!" he said, showing more enthusiasm than normal for him.

Sakura had eaten through every nail on her hand. **He's got to survive...Ekyt...be careful...**

Slowly, everyone figured out what he was talking about.

Gaara's gourd was on the floor where Ekyt had been. Behind Gaara's back was Ekyt!

The sand couldn't reach Ekyt's first strike, a vicious kick to the knee. Next, Ekyt threw off his vest...revealing another one!

"I'm sorry to steal this from you Lee!" Ekyt shouted down.

The vest hit the ground with impact, creating a small crater.

"How much did that thing weigh?!" Choji exclaimed.

The big surprise was Ekyt's leap from the crater. Another body replacement jutsu! His Konoha Whirlwind kick hit Gaara in the temple, knocking the sand ninja backward. Gaara's expression hadn't changed at all.

Ekyt grabbed his vest again and threw it high in the air above Gaara. The sand crashed down on Ekyt a millisecond later.

Hayate looked closely, sure that the match, if not the boy's life, was over. He gasped as he saw Ekyt's vest under the sand. That meant...

Ekyt sailed down through the air, bring his elbow down on Gaara's head, then kicking at his leg again, before using the Body Flicker Jutsu to evade Gaara's sand one more time.

"Ekyt! It is time to use it!" Lee shouted to him.

Ekyt's gaze reached Lee. He nodded slowly.

"GATE OF OPENING!" Ekyt shouted, opening the first chakra gate. His pupils disappeared, leaving only an eerie whiteness in his eye. A red aura surrounded him as a wind that had no source blew his hair and clothes around, adding to the menacing image.

"Guy, did you teach him that?" Kurenai asked in surprise.

"I'd love to take credit, but it was actually Lee here who taught him. You see, Lee wants Gaara to be beaten, and he knows Ekyt's vendetta against Gaara. So, Lee decided to help him out. He had my approval."

"Yes...but is Ekyt aware of the risks? You know what this can do Guy, and Ekyt isn't Lee, he hasn't trained like him. Maybe as fervently, but not in the same way..." Kakashi spoke while lifting his headband. He wanted to see this.

"Ekyt took the oath, and he's aware of the risks, trust me. He questioned me about everything...looks like he made his decision."

"Damnit! Gaara might be beaten! Time to take matters into my own hands!" Kankuro muttered to Temari.

"Stay out of it Kankuro...Kankuro?"

Temari had wasted her words on a puppet. In panic, she looked up to the stands.

Kankuro grabbed Sakura and Ino roughly from behind.

"HEY!" Kankuro shouted to the floor.

Ekyt, in the process of opening the first gate, turned to look.

"You bastard! Leave them out of this!" Ekyt snarled.

Kankuro smiled and pulled on Sakura's hair. "Unless you like your kunoichi dead, you'll surrender the match now!" He moved his kunai closer to Ino's throat.

"Anyone else who thinks of interfering: If you do, I'll kill them!" Kankuro warned.

Ekyt finished opening the gate, but looked at Hayate.

"I forfeit the match," he said hurriedly (though very sadly).

Hayate had no choice but announce it. "The winner of the match is Gaara, by forfeit."

Bastard...Wait, where'd Ekyt go?

Kankuro smiled; Gaara had advanced. He had done his job. Still, he had hostages to pay attention to.

"Damn you!" Sakura shouted at him. He jerked her hair hard, smiling widely.

"Nothing personal," Kankuro replied.

"I hope you rot in hell!" Ino added, but could do no more.

Someone else could do more, however.

Opening ANY of the gates required an oath...to preserve your Shinobi way, to protect yourself, or to protect those precious to you. Those were the three conditions that warranted opening the chakra gates. All three pertained to Ekyt right now, so he didn't close the gate. He intended to use the power he had just unlocked...

WHAM!

Ekyt landed in front of Kankuro. Before he could move, Ekyt had stabbed his arms. Kankuro let go of his hostages in shock. In the same motion after stabbing, Ekyt kicked Kankuro with a series of five sidekicks. Low, low, high, high, low, followed by a Konoha Whirlwind to the jaw. As soon as his heel connected, Ekyt re-appeared behind Kankuro. Grabbing him around the leg and neck, trapping his arms in the process, Ekyt leapt backwards off the balcony. With the extra height, it was easily a sixty foot drop.

BLAM!

The stone floor shattered when Kankuro's back hit the ground. Ekyt had let go some ten feet ago, leaping high, then falling back down, planting both feet in Kankuro's chest just before he landed, adding more power to the already devastating move. As he landed, he picked Kankuro up again and threw him

in the air, leaping up to follow him. He scissored Kankuro's head between his legs, then rolled sideways. He drove Kankuro's head into the ground. He did everything but kill or cripple him with that strike.

Ekyt sensed Gaara's sand coming.

"From the back? Alright!" Ekyt was long gone by the time the sand arrived. He was standing behind Gaara. So was Ekyt's clone. Together, they hooked Gaara in and picked him up. Shouldering him and running so quickly the sand was trailing uselessly behind, Ekyt and his clone threw Gaara into Kankuro. Their skulls cracked together, leaving two of the sand ninja lying.

Ekyt leapt up next to the two kunoichi.

"Everyone okay?" he asked.

As the two stunned kunoichi nodded, Ekyt closed the gate, returning to his normal self. He tensed up, apparently in pain. He slid down the wall next to them, a hand on his quadriceps.

"Just a pulled muscle," he said to the worried faces. Of course, the fact that he was bleeding from multiple places belied his words.

Temari didn't go check on her brothers right away. I can't believe Kankuro did that...well, he got what he deserved anyway. And Gaara...was he off today? Because that Ekyt kid can't be THAT strong! The way he fought Gaara was smart...I'd better check on those two idiots. Still...Hope that kid is okay. He's an interesting one. It would have been a shame if they had killed him...What the hell? Damn, that kid MUST be good if I'm thinking nicely about a Leaf Villager... Temari thought with a sardonic grin.

Sakura didn't know what to say. **He forfeited the match...to protect Ino and I...but he could have won! Why am I so useless?! No wonder Sasuke never notices me...I'm going to show him someday! CHA!** Sakura shook herself out of her stupor.

"Let me see your leg..." she said aloud to Ekyt. He obediently stretched his leg out while a medical-nin checked his ribs.

"Just bruised, you'll be fine," the medical-nin told Ekyt. He nodded his thanks.

"Ekyt...your leg is broken!" Sakura exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"How the hell did you NOT know you had a broken leg?!" Sakura shouted.

Ekyt shrugged. "Didn't think of it. Too caught up in the moment, I guess. Probably had something to do with opening the chakra gate. You're supposed to heal more quickly."

Ino was tapping Sakura nervously on the shoulder.

"What?!" Sakura snapped.

"Look at the board Sakura. You're not going to believe this..." Ino pointed at the board that announced the competitors.

The following matches will take place next week:

Rock Lee vs. Tamaki, Chakaro

Temari vs. Mike

Yamanaka, Ino vs Donalds, Kayla
Haruno, Sakura vs. Uchiha, Sasuke

Oh dear...if I know Sakura...she'll forfeit immediately...I can't stop her... Kakashi thought sadly.

"Sakura...this is your chance to get Sasuke's attention," Ekyt said from the ground.

"But...I can't keep up with him!" she protested.

"Yes you can. You can control your chakra like no one else. If you just give up, Sasuke won't respect that. It's your choice...and I'd be willing to help, if you need me."

"But why would you help me? I mean, we're not on the same team!"

"We're friends Sakura. I'm out of the tournament. And I'm not on anyone's team. Shikamaru, Ino, and Choji are still a team, I was just filling in," Ekyt answered, taking the crutch offered to him. He had his leg bandaged heavily, although the healing process had already started and was rapidly progressing.

"I'll do it" Sakura leapt to her feet. "I want to do it. But how can you help? I mean...you're injured..."

"Don't worry about that. It'll be you doing the work. I'm just going to give you a tool to help.

Besides...It's not really MY help you need...you've got all the ability, I'm just going to give you something to do with it."

As Ekyt limped off, Sakura stood there, stunned. **H-How did this happen? It's my fault he didn't win the tournament, and now he's helping me...against Sasuke? But I can't win! Wait...what he told me...I've got to try, otherwise I'll never get Sasuke's attention...and no one will respect me.** Sakura's mind fired up! **CHA! Watch out Sasuke, here comes the killer kunoichi! Here we go!**

32 - Sakura vs. Sasuke

The participants so far had been discussed by the jonin, and Iruka, since he had trained with all of them at one point or another. Ekyt's name came up.

"He forfeited a match he could clearly have won (The Sand Kazakage gave a dismissive snort, but a small glare from Lord Hokage put an end to that) to protect those two (Sakura and Ino). He fought through injury (broken leg), showed chunin-level skills (Using those jutsus and opening the Gate of Opening), and proved he could lead (Ino was distracted, and Choji was a follower). Although he didn't win his match, he made the choice that saved lives. Does anyone disagree?" Lord Hokage questioned the council. When no one spoke up, he continued.

"Then we will all cast our votes. However, under the circumstances, he should be present. Hayate, please have him join us."

Once he got home, Ekyt again felt depression consume him. **Dammit! I could have won! I was close...of course, it's up to the judges, I might still be made a chunin...but the broken leg...Damn it, Gaara got away, and Lee get's to fight Chakaro! (shakes head) Was I born to be the ultimate loser? Ah, forget it! It's time to study. Tonight is no different...** Then Ekyt heard a knock on the door.

He hobbled over to open it, finding the ashen-faced Hayate wanting his attention.

"Lord Hokage (koff) needs to see you."

"Ekyt, the council is considering you for the rank of chunin. However, it needs to be unanimous. Hayate, your vote. (Yes). Kakashi, yours. (Yes) Asuma, have you decided? (Yes). Kurenai (Yes). Iruka (Yes). Ebisu (No.)

Ekyt stifled a curse. He bowed to the council, and hobbled out of the room. It was time to meet Sakura anyway. **Ebisu, you're an @\$\$...** he thought viciously. Tokubetsu Jonin or not, Ebisu was REALLY getting on his nerves. Ebisu, however, wasn't through.

"Lord Hokage, should a genin like him REALLY be helping Iruka teach?" Ebisu questioned with the slightest of smirks.

"Iruka, have you had any complaints?" Lord Hokage asked, his tone even.

"Of course not Lord Hokage. WHY Ebisu-sama decided to even bring this up is beyond me," Iruka replied, shooting a nasty glance at Ebisu.

"It is beyond my scope of understanding as well. We will put this issue aside, for now, it will be reviewed later. As per the standard procedure Ebisu, please defend your reasoning for vetoing him for the rank of chunin," Lord Hokage ordered firmly.

"Well Lord Hokage, it seems to me he is too young, too angry, and too disrespectful," Ebisu answered smugly.

"Oh please Ebisu. I was a jonin at his age," Kakashi said roughly.

"Well there's still the matter of his anger," Ebisu replied, pushing his glasses up farther on his nose.

"Anger is a tool. Besides that, can you honestly blame him Ebisu? One ruined eye, no team, and now, not attaining the rank of chunin? I'd be pretty upset myself," Asuma added.

Ebisu adjusted his glasses again, more angrily this time. "Well, there is still the matter of his disrespect."

Ekyt, who was still in the room, snapped back toward the council.

“Respect?” he spat, while the council stared on in shocked silence. Ekyt hobbled over as fast as his crutch would permit him to.

“Respect, Ebisu-sama, is something earned. NOT bestowed. I can respect a rank, such as jonin, or Hokage, or chunin. But the person IN that position...”

Ekyt seemed to tower over Ebisu suddenly. Kakashi stifled a chuckle under his mask, while Asuma laughed outright. **We can add “guts” to the checklist**, thought Asuma.

“The person in the position is a different matter entirely. And, while I’m on the subject- what does it take to impress you? I can only assume you don’t hold my friendship with Naruto against me. I’m certain you’re too much of a professional for that. So, please tell me just WHAT it is you have against me. I’ll listen. BUT- I would *respectfully* ask that you talk to me like I’m a human being.”

“Now you see hear, you fresh-mouthed little” Ebisu began, his finger in Ekyt’s face.

“Ebisu...I see no problem with his request,” Lord Hokage said, an unspoken message conveyed through his eyes.

“Lord Hokage! To tell him would be unfair!” Ebisu indignantly exclaimed.

“Most likely,” Ekyt said carefully, “Because I already outlined the WHY for him. I’m sorry you dislike me Ebisu-sama. And don’t think I haven’t figured out that you don’t want me around. I’m a fact of life, I’m not going anywhere.”

Ekyt looked out the window.

“With the council’s blessing, I really should go attend to...some private matters,” Ekyt quickly said.

“I need to stop out as well Lord Hokage. I’ll have someone take the notes for me.” Kakashi said, already piercing his thumb with a kunai. He used a summoning jutsu to bring...Pakkun?

“Again Kakashi?” Pakkun drawled.

“I’m afraid so Pakkun.”

The basset hound-pug-something-else mix sighed, but answered, “Alright, I read you.”

Ekyt was outside, muttering to himself.

“Damn that Ebisu...pompous @\$\$...”

“I’d be inclined to agree...if for the fact I never speak ill of my colleagues,” Kakashi added quickly. “So, where are you off to?”

“I promised Sakura I’d help her get ready for her match with Sasuke,” Ekyt replied.

“Really? She doesn’t plan on giving up?” Kakashi asked, masking his true feelings. **Good girl Sakura! Never give up!**

“I told her that she would get Sasuke’s attention this way. I should have asked you first,” Ekyt admitted.

“I’m glad someone talked to her. She could be so talented. It’s good to know she’s got a concerned friend. That, or reading Makeout Paradise has done wonders for your social life,” Kakashi joked with a wide smile.

Ekyt shook his head tolerantly. “Like you said Kakashi-sensei, she’s got potential. And...well, I’d hate to see her depressed after she just gave up. If I was in her place, I’d be fighting a moral battle. Did I do the right thing? In her case, ‘Did I impress Sasuke’.”

Kakashi cocked his head to the side while he dug out his book.

“You know, You’ve really impressed most of us. Lord Hokage is an easy man to get along with, but NOT easy to impress.”

“Thanks Kakashi-Sensei.”

“So, what are you planning on teaching Sakura?” Kakashi asked.

"The last thing Sasuke would expect..." Ekyt said with a grin under his mask. "Do you think Sasuke will be upset with me?" Ekyt suddenly asked.

"No, I think he'll be grateful, if anything. He cares more for Sakura than he lets on, I'm sure. As for you...how do YOU feel? After what happened with Kankuro and Gaara?"

"Well, I didn't get to beat Gaara, and Kankuro cost me my match...but it was worth it. Like you say Kakashi-sensei, letting your comrades die makes you scum."

Kakashi grinned under his mask. "You'll make a fine chunin some day. Even a jonin."

Ekyt thanked Kakashi for the compliment. Then it was time to train Sakura.

"Sakura, what do you think your strong point is?"

Ekyt's question caused Sakura to think. She blushed as she remembered what it was.

"I have really good control over my chakra," she said, not sure why she was blushing.

Ekyt nodded, adjusting his arm on his crutch. "Okay, how to test this...shake my hand."

Sakura took Ekyt's hand and shook it.

"Okay, now slowly start to focus your chakra into that hand," Ekyt told her.

Sakura did, and she could feel Ekyt's hand starting to feel weaker and weaker. She let go before she broke it.

"You can apply that to any strike. And since Sasuke can't "see" through taijutsu..."

"I can use that as an advantage!"

"There's one other technique...but I don't know if you'll want it," Ekyt said, realizing she might very well not.

"What is it?" Sakura asked excitedly.

"One way to break Sasuke's Sharingan...but it's...well, it might be kind of painful for him. That's normally the point, but"

"I'll do what I have to do! I'm going to show everyone I'm not weak! I don't care if it IS Sasuke! I'll MAKE him pay attention to me when I beat him!" Sakura was cooking now!

Ekyt nodded. "Alright. You'll get this quick, I'm sure of it."

One week later, it was time for the match. Sakura approached Ekyt before the match.

"I can't do this!" she cried out.

Ekyt gave her a comforting look. "Yes you can. You've got to trust yourself Sakura. You want Sasuke's attention, right? You've got to go for it."

At Sasuke's name, Sakura's eye got their life back. She nodded once, firmly, then leapt down to the floor.

Sasuke slouched down to the floor. **This will be the easiest match ever, Sakura won't attack me.**

"Begin!"

Sakura used her body-flicker jutsu, landing behind Sasuke, kicking him in the head, then landing back in the starting position, letting two kunai go. Both tore through the fabric on Sasuke's arm protectors. Sasuke was in complete shock.

"You didn't quit?"

Sakura smiled widely. "No way! And don't you DARE take it easy on me!"

Sasuke looked completely befuddled. Even more so when Sakura rushed him again, using a shadow clone jutsu on the way. All three tagged Sasuke in the ribs (both sides) and stomach, respectively. Sasuke slid backward, wondering where the heck this was coming from.

"I shouldn't have underestimated you Sakura...No holding back? If you're sure...Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!"

Sakura dodged the attack, using a body replacement technique. She dropped right in front of Sasuke. Right hand, left hand, right foot. On the last strike, instead of following the pattern, she swung her right foot back across, hitting Sasuke with a good shot using her heel. Sasuke hit the wall ten feet away, not believing this was the shy little fan girl that worshipped the ground he walked on.

In the stands, Kakashi, Lee, Naruto, and Ekyt were standing together, watching the fight unfold. Linda walked over and stood near Lee. But Lee was so entranced by the fight he hardly noticed.

"I- I did not know Sakura could do that!" Lee exclaimed.

"Yeah, who taught her that?" Linda asked.

Kakashi pointed to Ekyt. "He's responsible for this one."

Linda walked over to Ekyt. SLAP!

"Bastard! You never helped ME like that!" she shouted at him.

Ekyt shot her a death glare. "That's because you were always ahead of me. As I recall, YOU were the master at the dojo, while I wasn't even a true instructor. And, for the record, if I helped her, I'm proud of it."

Kakashi watched the match, making sure to stay indifferent. **So she's learned to use her chakra in the form of taijutsu...it's a shame I haven't had the chance to teach her more of that...it looks like she could give Sasuke a run for his money...**

Naruto couldn't believe it, but didn't care. "GO SAKURA! YEAH! NAIL HIM! YOU CAN DO IT, BELIEVE IT!"

"You've improved...time to end this. Sharingan!"

Sasuke picked out the real Sakura and threw a series of kunai at her. Sakura back-flipped away, then leapt up high over a Fireball jutsu. She suddenly found strings tied around her.

"Time to give up," Sasuke told the tied-up Sakura.

Sakura shook her head, then concentrated.

"Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique!" She called aloud.

Sasuke grinned smugly. "Did you really think that would fool me? Kai!" Sasuke used the dispel jutsu to end Sakura's genjutsu. But before he could move in for the kill, he saw a flurry of leaves. They disappeared, and the world looked normal.

Sasuke was wrong.

"Big Brother! Stop!"

Sasuke was a little boy again. Above his parents dead bodies stood his brother, a bloodied sword in his hand.

"Don't come any closer Little Brother. Go, run, hate me. Live in shame, knowing you're a coward!"

Sasuke tried to attack Itachi, but Itachi used a sidekick to propel Sasuke into the wall. Before Sasuke even hit the ground, Itachi used Tsukoyumi.

"For the next twenty-four hours, relive that day..." Itachi held Sasuke eye-level. Over and over, Sasuke saw his entire family wiped out by his brother.

"What did she do to him?" Lee asked.

"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique," Ekyt answered.

"She...actually used it on Sasuke? I didn't think she could bring herself to cause him pain." Kakashi lifted his headband, activating his Sharingan. **Seems she learned more than she bargained for...and to learn to hide a jutsu within a jutsu in less than a week...I knew she was powerful...but that's beyond chunin level! And how did Ekyt teach it to her in such a short time, or at all for that matter?**

Sakura burst free from the strings. She was forced to end the genjutsu. Hiding a jutsu within a jutsu took a lot of chakra, and she didn't want to be totally wiped out. Sasuke would probably be angry...

Sasuke was on his knees, trying to steady himself. He got up on his feet again, just in time to dodge Sakura's Dynamic Entry kick. He gave her a hard shove backward. She hit the stone wall legs-first, and sprang off, landing a solid right punch on Sasuke...or, it would have been Sasuke, if he hadn't replaced himself with a log.

Sasuke landed behind Sakura, striking her hard between the shoulder blades. Sakura hit the ground, but rolled over and aimed a kick at Sasuke's groin (lol, I'm sorry, this part cracked me up!). Sasuke dodged backward as Sakura sprung to her feet. She was exhausted, and had proven her point. But she wanted to drive it home by winning. Her chakra was almost gone.

Sasuke leapt away, making hand signs rapidly in the air. "Temple of Nirvana!" he called out. He had copied this jutsu from Kabuto, and put it to use now.

Sakura fought the genjutsu as long as she could. For two full minutes, she tried to snap herself out of it. Her chakra was too low. In desperation, she reached for her kunai, ready to stab herself to end it. (The genjutsu, not her life. Genjutsu can end when the target endures a high amount of physical pain). Just as the kunai began its descent into her leg, it clattered from her hand. Sakura slumped forward, finally asleep.

Hayate looked at Sakura, then pointed his arm toward Sasuke. "Winner: Sasuke Uchiha."

Naruto, Ekyt, Lee, and Kakashi all leapt down. Ekyt landed hard on his hurt leg and uttered a word that he normally wouldn't.

Naruto laughed. "Why the hell did you jump on that?!" (meaning Ekyt's broken leg)

Ekyt shook his head. "Today I'm partly stupid, with a chance of moronic, I guess." (If you don't get the joke, I'm using a line like a weatherman might use. "Partly cloudy with a chance of rain.)

"She fought very well," Lee said quietly.

Kakashi put his hands together. "Kai!"

That ended the genjutsu. Sleepily, Sakura rubbed her eyes. "Damn, I lost," she murmured.

"It was a good match."

Sakura froze. Had SASUKE just said that to her?!

Ekyt gave a smile. Congratulating her could wait. Let her have her moment with Sasuke.

Ekyt wasn't the jealous type, but he couldn't help but feel a little twinge. He thought he knew why, but dismissed it as his normal depression and loneliness.

MORE TO COME!

33 - The Price You Pay

All night, Ekyt tossed and turned. He was happy Sakura had finally gotten Sasuke's attention. But every time he moved, his broken leg reminded him of his own failure. Hadn't he made the right choice? He had saved lives.

One damn vote...damn that Ebisu! I've had it!

Ekyt pushed himself out of bed, grabbing his crutch while tossing on his vest. After struggling for a moment, Ekyt was ready to gimp his way to Lord Hokage's office. He had an idea. Well, two of them actually. But he needed Lord Hokage's OK for both.

"Be more careful. You can't afford to be careless. You've already riled up the Leaf Village, and you've picked a fight you shouldn't have even looked at."

"He shoved me!" Hyojoun snarled. Naoki gave him a rough push into his spot.

"Shut up while Ryu-sensei is talking, will you?!" she hissed, paying rapt attention.

"Alright. Now, PLEASE don't do anything stupid. Let's just get through this without incident. You've all mastered your chakra, there's nothing to prove, right?"

Mike, Naoki, and Hyojoun nodded. Ryu put a hand to his temple.

No chance in hell I got through to them just now...I haven't before, why would this time be any different. They've got skill, and drive. They just need common sense, and a little more respect. I doubt any of them would have made the choice to forfeit a match to save someone else. Because they've mastered their chakra, they would have tried to do both...and probably pulled it off...

Ekyt limped through town. He had gained some status as a hero. The hero part was nice, but he wasn't in it for the kudos and the medals. Right now, his thought process was too erratic anyway. He didn't even notice the Shine Village's group collectively stare when he hobbled by.

Sakura collapsed into bed. She had fought hard, impressed a bunch of people, and was up for the rank of chunin.

Not to mention Sasuke's attention! This time, I'm gonna reel him in! Cha! Sakura thought, smiling to herself. Something outside the window caught her eye. A silhouette. Feeling brave, she reared back and threw a kunai at it.

Ekyt kept limping forward. Suddenly, a kunai flew at him from one side. He hit the deck, stifling a curse as his broken leg went down hard. His graceful leap had turned into a crumple. To rub salt in the wound, the damn thing had hit him in the shoulder anyway.

"What the hell was that all about?" he muttered, plucking the kunai out and tossing it down. He pulled himself up using his crutch and continued his walk. Or, tried to. About five seconds later, someone leapt at him from out of the bushes.

"Ha! Oops!" Sakura put on the brakes in mid air.

"Heheh, sorry about that Ekyt," Sakura said sheepishly.

"I was wondering who threw the kunai at me. I should have known, only you would be smart enough to factor in my movement," Ekyt replied placidly, ignoring his bleeding shoulder.

"I'm just a little excited tonight," Sakura replied cheerfully.

Then it hit her. Tonight. Two things.

"Thank you so much for your help. You were right! Sasuke noticed me!" she exclaimed.

"You gave him a run for his money Sakura. You're talented naturally, you just had to crack that shell."

Ekyt kept moving, his mind fixated on reaching the Third Hokage's office before dawn.

"It's four in the morning! Where are you headed?" Sakura questioned.

"Lord Hokage's."

"He's not giving you a mission is he? That's a broken leg, I mean"

"No, no, nothing like that. I'm on my way of my own accord," Ekyt assured her, limping gamely on.

"Well...let me at least walk you there. It's the least I can do, after the week of help you gave me,"

Sakura said, falling into step next to him.

"Thank you," Ekyt said simply.

"So, what are you up to?" Sakura asked, a little more firmly this time.

"I'm going to propose an idea to Lord Hokage. And, if I have my way, fight a certain jonin."

"What? A jonin? Why?"

"You...haven't heard?" Ekyt asked, regretting mentioning it.

"Heard what?"

Ryu had seen Ekyt limp by. It occurred to him that he should say something to the genin. They had talked briefly, and it was apparent their thought process was similar in some ways. Ryu caught up just as Ekyt was explaining what happened to Sakura.

"One vote...one vote is the reason I didn't get the green vest," Ekyt explained, having finished his story.

"One vote...and you know which jonin it was? I know it wasn't Kakashi-sensei..." Sakura added.

"No. Ebisu."

"Ebisu? That private trainer? Ekyt, don't take that personally, Ebisu is an @\$\$ to everyone!" Sakura said with gusto.

Ekyt chuckled slightly. Suddenly, he shifted his weight, a kunai knife in his free hand.

"Good morning. How about you join us in the light?" Ekyt barked.

"Leaf Villagers are tense today," Ryu muttered, grinning. He hadn't exactly been sneaking up.

Ekyt lowered the kunai.

"Sorry about that. I suppose I'm a little...wound," Ekyt said in his mid-toned voice.

"I hadn't noticed," Ryu murmured sarcastically.

"Anyone would be before a meeting with Lord Hokage," Sakura said, some edge to her voice. She didn't trust Ryu yet.

"And what are you three doing out?" A stern voice asked.

Sakura froze up. Ekyt and Ryu turned to see who it was. Ekyt smirked.

"Ebisu-sensei, just the person I was hoping to see, for a change," Ekyt told the tokubetsu jonin.

"Watch your tongue! No genin should be out at this hour! And what about you?" Ebisu shot at Ryu.

"I'm the Kage from the Shine Village. I have every right to be here, the Third was my sensei. Call it a

social call."

"I don't trust you..." Ebisu started.

"I haven't bitten anyone in a while," Ryu stated, "I hope you don't give me reason to break my streak."

Ebisu pushed his glasses up on his face. "Well, I can't do anything to you. But THESE two, I can punish."

"Sakura was simply escorting me. She's my primary medic," Ekyt told Ebisu. He continued with a lie.

"She tried to talk me out of coming. So, if anyone is to blame, it's me."

Sakura shot a glance at Ekyt. **Ekyt...you're protecting me? Why would...Forget it. You're a good guy Ekyt...** she thought, smiling to her self again.

"Ebisu-sensei, I'm here for a reason. I respectfully disputed your reasoning for denying me the rank of chunin. Now, I respectfully request a sparring match," Ekyt finished, not breaking his glare.

Ebisu laughed. "You're only a genin! You couldn't defeat me! But I'll humor you. When and where, and who's the proctor."

"Right here, right now, and I don't care," Ekyt shot back.

Ebisu laughed even harder. "You've got a broken leg! You couldn't handle me with two good legs!"

"Care to prove that?" Ekyt replied calmly.

Ebisu stopped laughing. "Fine. I'll make you a deal. If you can last two minutes with me, I'll change my vote."

"Deal."

"Guys, this sucks! I'm tired of sitting around! Let's follow Ryu-sensei!" Hyojoun declared.

"You idiot, he told us to stay OUT of trouble, not shout it's name!" Naoki reminded him in her own incomparable way.

"I agree with Hyojoun, Naoki. Ryu-sensei could be attacked. I don't trust the Leaf Village yet. Let's follow him..."

Mike's words shocked Naoki. But she agreed to it, more to annoy Hyojoun than anything.

Lord Hokage was humming a catchy tune. He had woken up in a good mood. His face dropped at the stare-down between Ebisu and Ekyt.

"It's too early for this," Hokage moaned.

Immediately, Ebisu ran up and started complaining about Ekyt. Ekyt, for his part, just knelt on the ground respectfully, waiting for Lord Hokage's attention.

Hokage motioned for Ekyt to stand up.

"Did you challenge Ebisu to a match?"

"Yes Lord Hokage."

"And you want this match to take place now, on a broken leg."

"Yes Sir."

"Why?" Lord Hokage asked. He had to smile.

"I feel the need to prove something to myself...I know I shouldn't be, but I wasn't happy with my performance during the chunin exams," Ekyt admitted. "I will never regret the choice I made...but that means I never got a definitive answer to "Am I good enough?" And, to be honest, I feel that Ebisu-Sensei holds a personal grudge against me, and that a sparring match will clear the air."

"I will not permit this match to happen," Lord Hokage said firmly. "Ebisu is a Tokubetsu jonin, it wouldn't even resemble a fair match."

Ekyt REALLY bit his tongue. Being careful to keep his tone respectful (Despite Ebisu's smug look), Ekyt said "Understood," before limping away. Then he stopped and turned around.

"Lord Hokage...who would the match be unfair to?" Ekyt asked.

Sakura and Ryu cracked up. Ebisu lost his cool and took a swipe at Ekyt. Ekyt ducked it and grabbed Ebisu's arm, pulling the jonin off balance, and then in. Ekyt's elbow met Ebisu's face, then his backfist glanced off Ebisu's temple.

"Enough."

The one sharp word from Lord Hokage stopped the minor fight.

"Ekyt, you shouldn't have baited Ebisu. Ebisu...You should have more control than that. Since you two can't get along, I'll let this match happen. But ONLY after your leg had healed Ekyt. You are both dismissed. And if I've heard you've attacked each other before the match, there will be consequences."

MORE TO COME!

34 - Something Had to Give

Sakura had never seen Ekyt so upset. He had gone to Ebisu for an honorable match, and it gone thrown in his face.

Ekyt limped over to Lord Hokage's, the same as he did every morning.

Hokage looked up in surprise. "Ekyt, what are you doing here?"

Ekyt looked confused. "I'm just looking to see what missions I have Lord Hokage." He had done this every day.

Lord Hokage shook his head. "Your leg is broken, I couldn't, in good conscience, give you a mission. And no, even if you were a chunin, I wouldn't give it to you. The only mission you have is watching the end of the chunin exams, is you want."

So he did. Ekyt gimped his way up to the catwalk, watching by himself in a far corner. He stared murderously out across the field, waiting for a match that he admitted he was looking forward to. Naoki (SharinganKakashi) vs. Temari was looking to be the best Kunoichi vs Kunoichi match of the exams.

To everyone's surprise, Temari walked out onto the floor, her arm in the air.

"I refuse to fight this match as a member of the Sand Village. My brothers have made despicable choices. As of now, I have no village,"

The crowd murmured in surprise. Some shouted nasty things at Temari. She drew a kunai from the holster on her thigh and dragged a line across the Sand Village's symbol.

Gaara couldn't have cared less, but Kankuro lost it. He rushed onto the floor, sending Temari soaring with a punch. The girl struggled to her feet, only to be hit again. She hit the wall hard, blood on the corners of her mouth.

Ekyt looked around. Wasn't anyone going to help her?

Kankuro's fist drew back for the Coup de Grace.

"I always knew you would go soft on us. Die, dog!"

WHAM!

Kankuro was trying to pry his head out of the wall. A pained-looking Ekyt held him in. (Picture when Guy rescued Naruto at the chunin exams)

"Will someone PLEASE help her?" he shouted, sounding angry.

What kind of heartless bastards are they? he thought, referring to the crowd.

Kankuro succeeded in getting his out of the wall after a few moments of effort. No one had moved yet, possible out of shock, some out of fear of the Sand Village, and some out of hatred.

"Get out the way! This is between us Sand Villagers!" Kankuro shouted.

Ekyt stood in the way, one hand raised in a guard.

"She's not a part of your village any longer. She's a friend. It's between you and me now," Ekyt said calmly.

Belatedly, the stunned Leaf Village jonin leapt onto the floor, pulling Kankuro and Ekyt apart.

Ekyt glared at Kankuro, daring him to make a move, before he pushed his way over to Temari.

"You alright?" He asked, bending down as much as his leg would allow.

"I'm...fine. Thanks," Temari replied, uncharacteristically unconfident. "Why did you help me?"

Ekyt shrugged. "It's the right thing to do. Besides, I count you as a friend."

Temari shook her head. "After all the crap I've done to your Village...kid, you must be a dumbass to think I'm a friend."

Ekyt shrugged again. "Not the first time I've been called that."

He offered Temari a hand up.

Lord Hokage smiled slightly.

"That must be the first time I've ever seen a display of sportsmanship like that."

Next to him, Ebisu leapt out onto the floor.

"Ebisu, don't...let's see where this goes..." Lord Hokage sighed.

Ekyt turned around. He was suddenly pushed into a wall by Ebisu.

"I've got you now! Aiding a known rogue! You'll go to jail for this!"

Ekyt narrowed his eyes. "If you don't let go of me, right now..."

"You'll what? I have your arms, you can't use any jutsus! Your leg is broken."

Ekyt used his good leg to knee Ebisu in the groin. Ebisu fell to the ground, clutching his crotch, tears forming under his glasses.

"Taijutsu, Ebisu-sensei."

The other jonin snickered. They couldn't help it. Seeing that pompous @\$\$ rolling on the ground, crying because a genin kicked him with such an obvious strike...it was hilarious!

Lord Hokage knew where this was going.

"Ryu...kindly go proctor this match. I knew I couldn't stop those two..." Hokage said, smiling despite the severity of his words.

Ryu nodded, looking forward to the match himself.

"Well, let me at least leave you with some protection sensei. Summoning jutsu!"

KABLAM!

A HUGE timber wolf was sitting obediently near Ryu's feet.

"Stay here. This shouldn't take long," Ryu barked to his summon.

"Alright! FINALLY! GO EKYT, BEAT HIM! HEY, HEY, USE THE SEXY JUTSU!" Naruto shouted.

BLAM! "Will you cut that out, he doesn't use that perverted jutsu, he's not like you!" Sakura shouted.

"Relax Sakura. He'll be fine without the jutsu." Sasuke's dry tone caused hearts to appear in Sakura's eyes.

Cha! Ekyt, thank you again!"

Temari was being checked out by the Leaf Village's medical team. They were going to carry her out on a stretcher when she stopped them.

"I want to see this match," she said, rolling off the stretcher, using her fan as a crutch of sorts.

Lord Hokage realized he couldn't just sit there anymore. "Come," he said to his companion.

Ebisu and Ekyt were about two inches apart, snarling threats back and forth. Lord Hokage landed next to them.

"I had forbidden this match from happening until Ekyt's leg was healed. Ekyt, if you are prepared to take the risks, the match will take place now. Although I admire your chivalry, kicking a sensei...there...is not acceptable. However, you are not in trouble, as Ebisu physically provoked you. But I must stand by my jonin's judgment." **No matter how well deserved that kick was. He has such respect for the other instructors...I guess Ebisu rubs him the wrong way...he rubs everyone the wrong way...but he's talented...I hope I haven't let Ekyt bite off more than he can chew...though something tells me he'll be fine...**

"You can't win, you know. And your reasoning isn't justified! It is the Sand Village's right to hunt down their own," Ebisu said in that grating voice of his.

"I'm aware of that sensei. But, I'm also aware of my Shinobi way. And that does not allow me to stand by and let my friends be murdered. As far as I'm concerned, there is very little justification for murder. This is not one of those times when it is justified," Ekyt replied, not giving an inch.

Ekyt gulped inwardly. **A Tokubetsu jonin...I've never even sparred with one. No matter how much of a jackass, he's still talented, and I've only got one leg in working order. Then again, I only have to last two minutes, and even then I only have to land one strike. But that's not good enough for me...**

Ryu (alchemest1) and Hayate exchanged glances. Hayate stepped to the side, letting the Shine Village's Kage proctor the match. In a rare display, Hayate stepped to Ekyt's side of the ring. He glanced at Lord Hokage, indicating respect, but stayed put.

"Begin!" Ryu called.

"Hold on! He can't have that, it's not a ninja tool!" Ebisu was pointing at Ekyt's crutch.

"YOU SADISTIC SON OF A" Naruto began, before Kakashi clamped down on his mouth.

Before anyone else could say anything, Ekyt tossed the crutch to the side.

"Any other objections?" Ekyt asked calmly.

"No, but I WILL give you one last chance to drop this," Ebisu taunted.

"Not a chance," Ekyt replied tersely.

Ebisu leapt next to Ekyt, aiming a kick at his hurt leg. Ekyt expected this, but could do little about it. He focused his chakra into his good leg, leaping up over the strike. He shifted his weight in mid-leap, aiming a punch down at Ebisu's face. Ebisu stepped to the side and tried to tag Ekyt with a side kick. It landed successfully, knocking Ekyt backward a good distance.

Ebisu rushed toward Ekyt again. He was cocky, Ekyt saw, and he saw how to use that. "Shadow Clone Jutsu! Dragon's Ember Encampment Wall, Clone Instigation!"

Ekyt's clone used the jutsu. A wall of crackling, dancing red and orange flames landed in front of the two Ekyt's.

"Please, some parlor trick won't help you!" Ebisu shouted. "Water Style: Tidal Crest Jutsu!"

That extinguished the flame, leaving Ekyt exposed. Ebisu threw a kunai, hitting the genin in the heart. POOF! He disappeared.

At the same instant, the REAL Ekyt had used a transformation jutsu.

"Hey! Closet Perv!"

Ebisu whipped around, seeing Naruto on the field.

"Here's your favorite jutsu! Ninja Harem Jutsu!"

Ebisu covered his eyes. Carefully he opened them again. He gasped as he saw Ekyt's right fist inches away. Ebisu kicked Ekyt hard in the chest, just as his fist would have made contact with his face. On the way down, Ekyt's outstretched hand tagged Ebisu's hitai-ate.

Ekyt had landed on his bad leg, which distracted him long enough for Ebisu to land a critical strike.

"Senbon Barrage Jutsu!" Ebisu called. From his sleeves, thousands of senbon aimed for the immobile Ekyt.

More than half hit. The already injury-fatigued Ekyt forced himself to his feet, needles sticking out of every part of him.

"Why don't you just quit? Admit I'm better, and that you were wrong."

"You're a jonin, of course you're better, at least in terms of experience. And I wasn't wrong! So SHUT UP!"

Ekyt's hands weaved together. Shadow clones. Three of them leapt at Ebisu, who fended them off. As they disappeared in a cloud of smoke, Ekyt was crouching at Ebisu's feet. He kicked upward. Ebisu danced just out of range. Then he proceeded to earn the ire of everyone in the building.

He used a heel kick to crack Ekyt's broken leg.

Ryu winced. "This fight is over," he said in a hushed tone.

Ekyt was already trying to get up.

"It's over," Ryu repeated. He didn't need more violence to contend with.

Temari was the first one to Ekyt's side, helping him up, just as he had done for her.

"That was the damndest thing I've ever seen kid. I was right about you- I told Kankuro and Gaara you'd be special. And...thanks. You came to my defense when no one else would."

Ekyt wasn't totally conscious, but he managed to ask Temari "What are you going to do?"

Temari ruffled his hitai-ate. "I'm gonna take some time to clear my head. Thanks again kid." She walked out with a vague wave over her shoulder.

Ekyt bowed toward the two Kage and Ebisu, muttering a congratulations, not adding the "you bastard" after it, like he wanted. He retrieved his crutch and walked out of the building. Under his mask, his face was burning with anger.

"Serves you right! I hope you learned your lesson!" Ebisu declared.

Lee, Naruto, Kakashi, and even Hayate grabbed Ekyt, who finally lost control with the smug sensei.

"Wait until my leg heals, you prick! Kicking it was a low blow, but I can live with that! Consider this: A

genin came within a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of actually beating you at your own bet!"

"Ekyt, please, I know how he is, but let it go!" Lee urged.

Ekyt let the matter drop. He didn't offer any other signs of respect, which wasn't normal for him.

He leapt up on the roof. From there, he leapt across the town, roof to roof, until he saw the Forest of Death. He passed it, looking almost longingly at it.

Finally, he reached home. He stripped quickly, threw on his nightwear, and then sat in bed, picking up his scrolls and studying them. One of them seemed to poke fun at the situation, by declaring that this jutsu should only be learned by a chunin or higher. Of course, Ekyt was going to learn it.

At about 2:00 am, a message arrived by bird, from Lord Hokage. Ekyt didn't read it right away. He found himself angry with the old man. He actually picked Ebisu? Ekyt guessed it was a letter, reprimanding him for his actions. **Big deal. Oh well, there's always six monthes from now. I'll be a chunin some day. It's got to be sooner rather than later, right?**

35 - One Of Our Number Leaves

Ekyt woke up. Three hours of sleep. But he was refreshed nonetheless. He muttered something unintelligible as the stack of scrolls across his legs hit the floor. One small one was still on his night table. The one from Lord Hokage.

With a sigh, Ekyt pulled it open, studying it's contents as fast as his eyes would allow. He expected a reprimand, but that wasn't even mentioned. He was simply asked to meet Lord Hokage at his earliest convenience. Ekyt had calmed down since last night, so he immediately headed out, feeling no ill feelings toward the old man anymore.

Lord Hokage took a sip of the coffee in front of him. He hated it's chalky taste, but he guessed he would need the energy today. It was Ebisu's shift, and that meant Lord Hokage had to more or less guard himself, despite all of Ebisu's posturing. He also had the meeting with Ekyt. As if on cue, the young man walked into the room, ignoring the chair that had been set out for him. He simply stood next to the chair until he was acknowledged.

Lord Hokage nodded at him.

"You wanted to see me, Lord Hokage?" Ekyt's voice held a respectful, but questioning tone.

"We never finished our meeting the other day. You had a second concept you wanted to suggest to me. If it's still a viable concern, please, go ahead." **I wonder what he has in mind...he may look like Hayate, but that boy's wheel's are always turning.**

"Well, Lord Hokage, I'm not sure I'm the first case, but I'm sure I won't be the last genin without a team. I've been wondering what I could do about it. It's too much to hope that only two genin will pass any time soon, so..."

Ekyt hesitated. He suddenly had less confidence than usual.

"Go ahead. It's a matter I've given thought to as well," Lord Hokage said, prompting the young man.

"Well, what about a reserve force of Shinobi? Genin that don't have a team, or chunin that don't have a career yet could be put together in a pool. When an opening arises for a mission that needs more people, the necessary number could be put in. Or, if a mission only requires one person, then there would be someone ready to take it. If one member of a team is injured or killed, there could be an instantaneous replacement. This would also allow the respective Shinobi involved to keep their skills sharp, even when not 100% active."

Lord Hokage puffed on his pipe thoughtfully. The rich tobacco did wonders to sooth his nerves, at the price of destroying his lungs. After almost a minute of silence, Lord Hokage nodded sagely.

"You may have a point. Your case is unique, for the moment, but graduation numbers look to be slim. I ask you to present your idea before the council."

Ekyt nodded gravely, even for him. "I will. When and where?"

Lord Hokage wondered about the aggression, but realized it's cause immediately. Ebisu was on the council. "Tonight, at midnight. I do not want anyone not involved to know yet."

"Lord Hokage, one last question: I know we don't deal with other rogue's until necessary, but I would like to put my support behind Temari, formerly of the Sand Village, to be offered protection by the new program."

Ekyt's solemn voice indicated just how serious the matter was. Lord Hokage met his visible eye, and he

saw a look of anger mixed with concern in it.

"That will also be decided by the council," Lord Hokage replied.

"Majority rules? Or will everyone have to agree?" Ekyt asked, this time his voice matching the concern his eyes showed.

"Majority," Lord Hokage responded.

Neji put a hand to his head, sinking to his knees in frustration.

"This mark...it has sealed my fate...fate is not to be tampered with...but what if the mark could be sealed? I would be free to captain my own fate...but who could seal it?" Neji wondered aloud.

He suddenly knew. But it meant selling his soul to something so vile the Devil himself had spat him out countless times. It was not a decision to be made lightly.

Orochimaru heard the sound of Kabuto's arrival.

"Orochimaru, there is a Leaf Village genin here. He wishes to speak with you."

Orochimaru's long tongue licked his nearly non-existent lips thoughtfully. "Please, allow him entry. I will speak with him. Is it the Uchiha boy?"

"No. He is of the Hyuga clan. He graduated a year before Sasuke, but at the top of his class. He IS talented, I will vouch for his ability. Not to mention a rather unique Kekkai Genkai." Kabuto supplied, pushing his glasses up, smiling wickedly.

"A Leaf Villager, needing to see me? What is your name? I'm afraid I'm not aware of it yet."

Orochimaru's raspy whisper reached the ears of the one kneeling on the ground.

"I am Neji Hyuga."

"I see. Neji, why are you here? I don't get Leaf Villagers every day," Orochimaru asked in a caring tone.

"I...have a curse mark. And I would like it sealed. I am of the Cadet Branch of the Hyuga clan, and therefore bound by fate to serve the main branch. I want to make choices of my own accord," Neji replied.

"I'd be glad to help you. But...you'll have to tell me what's in it for me?"

"In return, I will swear my allegiance to you," Neji offered.

Orochimaru smiled, hit lips curling into an expression of ecstasy.

"You possess the Byukagan eye, correct?" Orochimaru questioned.

"Yes."

"I'll be happy to assist you...Kabuto, if you please."

Kabuto struck at Neji's neck in a surprise move, hitting the base of the brain and scrambling signals. It temporarily paralyzed Neji.

"So you won't feel the initial pain," Kabuto explained.

"Good. Cursed Seal of Heaven!" Orochimaru called, extending his neck.

Orochimaru's fangs sunk into Neji's neck. Neji's hitai-ate fell off, exposing his Hyuga clan seal. Slowly, the seal began to disappear. In its place appeared three tomoe in a circular pattern.

"Good. You are free of the curse of your clan, and are now a Sound Village ninja."

Neji responded by howling in pain. He grasped his forehead and folded to his knees, burying his head in the them.

"The pain won't last long...but the power...THAT will last forever!" Orochimaru declared. "After all, isn't that what you're after?"

"Is he to be a host Orochimaru?" Kabuto asked. Every medical instinct he had wanted to go help Neji, but doing so would interfere with the process.

"Possibly...his body is acceptable...and his eyes...THEY are the most fascinating...To possess a power compared to that of the Sharingan...hardly something to pass up," Orochimaru said with a cruel chuckle. Kabuto didn't respond. He looked over his shoulder at the boy again. The pain would be reaching its climax soon. It would end quickly after that.

"So he's gone missing?"

"Is it true?"

"Quite the Coup for Orochimaru, isn't it?"

Ekyt had gotten an urgent message. He was to be accompanied to the proposal meeting by Lee, Tenten, Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto. The six walked there, Sasuke and Ekyt silent. Ekyt had pulled on his trench coat for the biting cold night, making him look more grave than usual. Sakura and Tenten were debating what the problem was, while Naruto and Lee were listening intently.

Ekyt went in first, to see the council looking at him gravely.

"What's happened?" he asked immediately. **Something's wrong...**

Lord Hokage stood up. "Sasuke, Sakura, Naruto, thank you for escorting Ekyt, Lee, and Tenten. I need to speak with them. You are welcome to stay. I think you will want to know...just what's happened..." Once the three were seated, Hokage continued.

"Earlier today, one of our number left the village. Tenten and Lee...I'm afraid it was Neji. He was seen...accepting Orochimaru's cursed Seal of Heaven."

Lee's mouth dropped open, while Tenten put a hand over hers in shock.

"It cannot be true!" Lee said loudly, looking wildly for Guy. Guy nodded, indicating it was.

"Neji...no..." Tenten said breathlessly.

Ekyt stared coldly ahead, then bowed his head.

"Ekyt...your motion, for the Shinobi Reserves...it has been passed, 9-1."

Ebisu didn't look so smug now that he had been outvoted.

"Starting now...I must ask you to temporarily fill in on Guy's Squad. Lee and Tenten...is this acceptable? He will be a member of your team, you should have say in the matter." Lord Hokage's glance looked over the three at the front of the packed room.

"I agree to Ekyt joining us." Came Lee's reply.

"I'm fine with it too...but Neji..." Tenten's reply was less assured, but she had taken Neji's defection personally.

"Guy has already approved it. Ekyt, you will fill in with them until a permanent replacement is found, or until a period of three weeks is up, whatever is to come first. Your mission is to find Neji...see if this happened against his will, or by his own hand...Bring him back alive, by all means necessary. If the mission is not completed in three weeks, the case will be closed. Are there any questions?"

Not a soul raised their hand or voiced a concern.

"Then you three will set out after Neji...Ekyt, you are the least personally involved. You are to be the squad leader. Send word by messenger every three days. Your summon will do fine, either one. Meeting adjourned."

Lord Hokage handed Ekyt a note, informing him of his next mission, after the assignment to Guy's team.

Ekyt was to offer Temari protection in the Leaf Village.

Ekyt pulled his collar up against the cold, stinging wind. He pulled on his gloves, full fingered with a metal plate on the back. Lee had donned a warmup suit with long sleeves, and Tenten had covered herself with a long pink coat. She had obviously been crying, but had dried her tears hastily. Lee looked stiff and determined.

"We need to make sure we have enough of everything for three weeks...Sound Ninja are the most likely enemy...And they'll be expecting us. Well, the two of you, at least. Which means we take no unnecessary risks..." Ekyt ran through the list of objectives.

Lee and Tenten nodded their approval.

"Our first checkpoint is at the top of Lone Pine Mountain. Otogakure should be visible beyond it. We need to arrive by nightfall tomorrow."

A full twenty-four hours after they left, the three had reached the summit of the forbidding mountain.

"You two go ahead and sleep...I'll take the watch tonight," Ekyt told them. He knew they were both exhausted mentally. Ekyt had lost his team, but he had grown to hate all of them. Lee, despite his rivalry, did not hate Neji. Tenten, who had been described as the most motherly of the kunoichi, was concerned. Ekyt guessed that there was a crush there, at least on the part of Tenten.

A sudden wind tossed Ekyt's coat in the night's darkness, about two hours into his guard shift. Two kunai stuck to the tree behind him. His two sleeping comrades were camouflaged by Ekyt's False Surroundings Technique. He didn't want to reveal their position just yet.

"Only one? After the top graduate two years ago? The Leaf Village's ranks must be thinning..."

Ekyt heard which direction the voice came from, but made no move. The sound ninja could have easily manipulated the direction in which their voices had come.

Ganai and Kujo exchanged glances.

"Is he gonna move sometime soon?" Ganai questioned, sharpening her nails with a file she held between her teeth.

Her dark-haired companion, Kujo, shook his head. "He wants us to make the first move. I'm not going to wait much longer..."

Ekyt figured out where the voices were coming from. His clone had done the trick. From up in the Lone Pine Tree, Ekyt used a silent summoning jutsu. His Bearded Dragon would do fine to wake up Lee and Tenten.

Time for an ambush of their own...

Neji woke up, immediately feeling testing his aching joints.

"What has happened? I-I can think. I can move...there must not be any serious damage. My mind feels so clear...I can't feel my curse guiding my decisions...not the same curse. I feel powerful...it feels so good...so good...The Sound Village...already you have done more for me than the Leaf Village...only one thing left to do..."

Neji scratched a line through his Leaf Hitai-Ate. He tied the Sound Village Hitai-ate around his head.

He was home.