

Hell in the Land of Herbs

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Hell on Earth...The Land of Herbs sends for a medic-nin and a task force. Sakura, Lee, and Ekyt draw the task. The peaceful land has no enemies, and is wealthy. So what sadistic monster wants to ruin it?

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1 - The Chilling Entry

The Land of Herbs.

A land of vegetation, as the name might suggest. Ironically, it was a cold place. The herbs that grew here were unique to the land. The soil was rich, except for the soil that grew the sandy herb known as *Yurakuri*. This herb was used in countless medicines, and was very important to almost every ninja culture.

“Kora-chan, please don’t forget to check the Jinsei herb before you leave!”

Kora gave her mother a mocking rolled-eyes look.

“O-kay! You don’t need to remind me!” she called back, smiling widely.

Kora was a girl of 10. She had a burning desire to become the greatest gardening kunoichi ever. Her mother held the title for now, but Kora was already close to surpassing her.

Kora’s long black hair was drawn into two tight buns on either side of her head. Despite that, there was enough long hair left over to fall down her back in a ponytail, tied with a blue and white checked ribbon that matched her school uniform. Kora was the girl everyone boy wanted to be seen with, and the one every girl wanted to be friends with. Somehow, her big brown eyes could light up a room, and even the tiniest smile would melt the heart of even the coldest teacher.

Kora looked at her schedule. She sighed loudly. Today, they were to learn inside the castle. That meant down in the dungeons with Koori-sensei. She hated the sessions with the tall, thin man. He was too old and too mean to teach. That, at least, was the opinion of many of the students. His long brown cloak, his gold-rimmed spectacles, and his two tufts of white hair gave him the look of an insane old man. Which, the kids agreed, he was.

The day FELT wrong. But Kora shrugged it off. Nothing EVER happened in the Land of Herbs. There were no ninjas to wage war with, and everyone needed their harvests.

But even Kora knew something was wrong when Koori-Sensei grabbed her arm and took her aside, into one of the dungeons.

“Good morning Kora. How are you today?” the old man asked.

“I’m great Koori-Sensei! How are you?” Kora replied, smiling.

“Never better...” Koori grabbed her.

“Hey! Help! Someone! Mmph!” A piece of cloth was shoved roughly into Kora’s mouth.

“Can’t have that Kora-chan,” Koori said mockingly. “Not until you agree to tell me the secret of the *Yurakuri* herb. Come now, I know you know. Tell me, and we’ll forget this ever happened...”

Kora shook her head. She had already been told to never speak of the herb.

“Fine. Enjoy your stay!” Koori shouted, his voice echoing in the cavernous stone room. He bound the little girl to a table with cold, black chains.

“Soon the fires of hell shall envelope thee!” Koori yelled. He ran one yellowing finger down Kora’s face, his long, claw-like nails cutting a small line down her smooth cheek. “The fires of hell will ingest thee,

and turn thee into the charred husk of thy ancestors!”

Lady Tsunade looked grimly at the scrolls piling up on her desk. One caught her eye.

“Request for an expert medic-nin and a task force...to the Land of Herbs...Kidnapping...town injured...”

Tsunade’s head snapped toward one of her aids.

“Go get Sakura Haruno! This is urgent!” Tsunade snapped. The medic-nin in her hated the thought of people dying...

Sakura listened while Lady Tsunade explained the mission.

“Take Kakashi and Naruto...plus two others. This sounds big, but this is the most I can spare,” Tsunade said, flustered with the piling-up paperwork.

“I understand Lady Tsunade. I know just the two...”

“Well, you’ve decided on ANBU Torture and Exam Proctoring, until you’re experienced enough to have your own squad? Good for you...IF you have what it takes.”

“Put me to the test Ibikki,” Ekyt replied to the drill instructor routine.

“Your genjutsu has worked on our prisoners...but I can tell your heart isn’t in it. You don’t WANT to torture, to ruin minds...you might be a natural, but your heart isn’t hard enough yet. You haven’t killed your first opponent.”

“Crippling is more cruel. Killing end their suffering,” Ekyt responded.

Anko laughed outright. “You got that right kid! Well, here’s the deal: You’re best suited toward teaching, but you don’t have the mission experience yet. We’ll just categorize you as a part-time torturer, even though you’re a natural. You seem the like the type to protect more than anything. So, take what missions you can. Hopefully, you’ll be proctoring the next academy exams. Man, I’m so tired of those kids mouthing off to me! I’ll stick with the chunin exams, those are fun! Weeding out the weak, watching the strong piss their pants! Those maggots never know what to expect!”

“Well, you’re done here for the day. Feel free to take the day off, or take more missions. Whatever it is you normally do. Considering how many missions you have under your belt already, I think I know the answer,” Ibikki told Ekyt.

“Alright. Thank you.”

“How are you not a jonin yet? Or even a chunin?”

“No squad, and Ebisu-sensei doesn’t want me to take the exams,” Ekyt replied. His gloved fist clenched at the name of the pompous private instructor.

“I THOUGHT there was something going on there. I’ll have to talk with Ebisu. You’ve been ready to test for damn near three years. I think you’ll find Ebisu is cooperative this time around,” Ibikki said, smiling with the same smile that was the last thing most prisoners saw before going insane.

Anko heard a knock at the door.

“Hey, Ekyt, this one’s for you! Looks like a kunoichi’s finally come calling!”

Ekyt shot Anko a fake glare, but shook his head tolerantly. On his way out, Anko gave him a swat on the butt. “Go get ‘er tiger!”

“Ekyt-kun! Great to see you!” Sakura exclaimed.

“Sakura-chan, it’s good to see you too. I never got to congratulate you on becoming a chunin!” Sakura waved his congratulations aside. “Everyone knows you should be a jonin by now! But thank you! Listen, I was hoping you weren’t busy, because I’ve got a mission, and I’m picking out my team.”

“I’m in,” Ekyt said instantly.

“I haven’t told you the mission yet!” Sakura exclaimed, giggling.

“I don’t believe in turning down a mission,” Ekyt replied. His right eye, the good eye, was smiling. Sakura shook her head. Mercifully, she didn’t notice how her swaying pink hair captured the young Shinobi’s attention.

“Nice to know you haven’t changed. Come on then, just have one more to grab. Where IS your sparring partner at this time of day anyway?”

Ekyt was clearly grinning under his mask.

“Where else- training in the woods.”

“998, 999, 1000! Guy-sensei, I have done it! 1000 kicks!”

“Great job Lee! Ahhh, the power of youth! Now, 1000 punches! Go to it Lee!”

“Yes Guy-sensei! 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...”

Ekyt held a branch aside for Sakura, then stepped in himself.

“Pardon me, Guy-sensei?” Sakura asked.

“Oh, Sakura, Ekyt! Two hard workers! What can I do for you?!” Guy exclaimed.

“Well, I was hoping Lee could help me on a mission,” Sakura explained. “I need to a task force, apparently, and Lee would fit in perfectly!”

Guy nodded, then turned to Lee.

Guy: Lee...
Lee: 21,22,23
Guy: Lee...
Lee: 24,25,26
Guy: LEE! (Punches him!)

Lee got up off the ground, shaking his head.

“Yes Guy-sensei?!” He said, adding a crisp salute.

“Lee, you’ve got a mission. Sakura and Ekyt here will brief you on the way. Make me proud Lee!”

“I will Guy-sensei!”

The two hugged.

Ekyt and Sakura (With big sweatdrops) watched the strange display. No matter how many times they had seen it, it still struck them as strange that a sensei and his pupil could be so in tune with each other.

“And he wonders why I wouldn’t date him,” Sakura muttered.

Ekyt nodded silently.

Sakura looked over at him, trying to gauge his reaction. Inner-Sakura had a few words, though.

Cha! Look at him! He never shows any emotion? Why don’t you comfort him? He’s a nice guy, and he’s done a lot for you!

“Sakura, I’m sorry, but Naruto and Kakashi can’t go. The chunin exams are coming up, and Naruto

needs the training, and only Kakashi can give it. Or so he says. Personally, I think he just wants to read his stupid perverted book. But whatever. So, it's just you three," Lady Tsunade informed them.

"What's the climate?" Ekyt asked.

"It's cold. Not quite freezing, but very cold."

"Terrain?"

"Hills and plains. A regulated amount of water, and good roads," Tsunade informed them.

Ekyt didn't question anything else, and neither did Sakura or Lee.

"Alright then. You're dismissed. Good luck."

Back in the Land of Herbs...

Kora struggled against the chains, but gave up after a few minutes. The thick black chains weren't moving, and neither was she.

Koori looked over at her and said mildly "Thank God you stopped that infernal racket. I was just going to kill you."

Kora's eyes widened. She didn't move a muscle.

"Let me see...ah, here it is...the cross symbol is made in between the eyes with the dried soot of hell's newest member..."

Koori looked over at a man bound and gagged against the stone wall.

"So thee shall meet thy end...perishing, suffering in the eternal flames of damnation. I deliver thee to thy final place of rest! Your soul will become the food of Satan, your body the bread of his minions, and your blood, the wine of the damned souls!"

Koori drew a short dagger. It was sharpened at the tip, the hilt, and the pommel. He made a cut at a just-so angle in the man's chest with the tip. He then raked the butt end across the man's face, slowly, agonizingly, creating a deep well of blood that flowed from between his eyes. He used the two points on the hilt to puncture the man's kidneys. Even then, the man was alive. Koori opened the man's mouth, his old gray eyes staring unblinking into the innocent mans.

His old, yellowed fingers grabbed the tongue of his prisoner, pulling it out slowly. Then his dagger slashed down. The tongue fell onto the dusty stone floor, lying there as though it had never been alive.

Koori forced the man's mouth shut. The blood filled his mouth, and then his lungs. He had drowned in his own blood. Koori used his thumb to wipe some of the blood off of each spot.

His hands still dripping with the plasma, he walked over slowly to Kora, muttering his strange sayings, but now in an alien tongue. Lightly, he made a strange shape between Kora's eyes. It wasn't a cross, but a circular, swirling shape.

Then, on her forehead, Koori painted obscenities. He then bent down and kissed it gently, blood staining his lips as well. The old man walked away, muttering again.

Kora would re-live this scene many times during the night. She would wake up, horrified, drenched in a cold sweat, her hair becoming unraveled and matted, sticking to her face and forehead. Her screams were silent. She wished Koori was silent. His laughing and chanting was scaring Kora. Her little body shivered in fear and cold, until she finally passed out...

"OK, winter wear...My old outfit would have been good...but I've outgrown that..." Sakura said aloud.

Lee's normal gear was suitable for a cold climate, but he pulled on a warmup jacket over it. Green with yellow-orange cuffs.

Ekyt silently grabbed his trench coat. The rest of his gear would suffice. He pulled it on, checking to make sure it's wasn't too long.

The three met up. Lee nudged Ekyt in the ribs.

"Come on Ekyt-san. You know that you like Sakura-san," Lee taunted.

"Of course I do. She's a good friend," Ekyt replied immediately.

"You know that is not what I meant. You lllllllllkkkkkeeee Sakura-san," Lee taunted.

Ekyt raised an eyebrow. "You have better sources than I do, Lee-san."

Why the hell did I just deny that? Ekyt thought to himself.

Because you don't want to get hurt...again. he also answered himself. Then he wondered if it was a normal thing to ask yourself something like that, and then even more so to get an answer.

Sakura came running back. Lee poked Ekyt.

"Do not forget to blink, Ekyt-san," he snickered.

Ekyt was worried he had forgotten just that. If possible, Sakura looked more beautiful than usual, but in a different way.

She had decided on a pair of long blue pants, similar to the short pants she typically wore. On top, she had pulled on a long-sleeved pink shirt. That was covered by a red coat. Her pink elbow pads and black gloves were still in place.

"Ready to go?!" she asked brightly.

Ekyt nodded, feeling stupid. Lee was right, apparently. He DID have it bad for Sakura.

The three journeyed out that night, reaching the summit of the mountain near the Land of Herbs.

"Why is it a land, and not a village?" Lee asked suddenly.

"Because it's independent. Everyone needs the medical herbs it grows, so it's one of the wealthiest areas. It doesn't need to associate with any one village, it's powerful on it's own, even without ninja," Sakura answered. She had read about the village before, when studying with Lady Tsunade.

Ekyt tossed a log on the fire. It's orange-tongued flames leapt higher into the air, crackling merrily.

"What bothers me is why such a peaceful place is suddenly ridden with crime and illness," Ekyt scowled.

Sakura shivered suddenly, staring into the fire almost longingly. Suddenly, there was a coat being held out to her. She followed the arm up to Ekyt.

"I can't do that! What about you?" she protested.

Ekyt dropped the coat on her lap.

"You're the mission, not me. Besides, I'll live," he said, trying to force a smile into his voice.

"But"

"Sakura-san, I would not argue. Ekyt-san believes in chivalry, and he will not take "no" for an answer," Lee said, shooting Ekyt a look that plainly said 'Told you so'.

The three would have to have their wits about them tomorrow...

2 - The Gates Open...

Ekyt stared at the fire for a while longer. It's flames were transfixing, a point of relaxation.

Ekyt glanced at his two sleeping comrades. Lee was sprawled out, breathing heavily, muttering something about making "Guy-sensei proud," and "Marry you? Of course Linda-chan!" Ekyt grinned at that.

Sakura was curled up into a little ball in her sleeping bag, under Ekyt's coat. She seemed to sleep soundly, breathing normally.

Ekyt was suddenly hit with a rush of...what was it? Appreciation? Affection? **I would give anything to protect these two. Lee, befriending me when no one else would, sticking with me through the years...Sakura, always offering support, always ready to help me out...**

Ekyt turned to tend to the fire, adding some wood, when he suddenly heard Sakura sit up suddenly.

"It will happen soon..."

Ekyt didn't like the sound of that. Sakura continued in the strange voice.

"Soon, the land will be filled with the evil. Repenting will not save you! Hell's gates are being opened as we speak! Hope is futile!"

Ekyt put a hand on Sakura's shoulder. She screamed, eyes darting wildly.

"It's just me Sakura-chan. Are you okay?"

Sakura looked at him for a moment, her green eyes reflecting the fire's glow. She leapt at him, pushing her head into his chest.

"Ekyt-kun, it was awful! It was a horrible nightmare! We were all dying, or possessed, or something!

I-I've never been so scared in my life!"

Ekyt cradled her head. But something felt wrong.

Blood.

He moved his hands away. On top of Sakura's head, a gaping wound had opened. In desperation, Ekyt put his hands on it, trying to stop the blood flow. Suddenly, Sakura's face was staring at him.

"Dead by dawn, Ekyt-kun! Dead, all of us, dead!"

Then Sakura bit into his chest, tearing his innards. But he was alive, somehow.

She chewed them, laughing hysterically, evilly. Ekyt's own blood and Sakura's covered his face, more spraying on with each bite.

Sakura spat out Ekyt's heart. It was still beating. She grabbed his mouth and forced it open. She stuffed the heart into his mouth. The blood continued to flow.

"Swallow Ekyt-kun! Swallow!" she cackled.

Sakura reached into Ekyt's back and, in one swift move, pulled out his spine. She began to hit him with it. Then, she took the long bone and wrapped it around Ekyt's neck. He could feel his head loosen as his neck snapped. The skin and muscle began to give. His head would pop off any second...

Ekyt's head snapped up. He was only aware enough to realize that this was genjutsu. He couldn't force his hands into the "Disengage" hand sign. He saw the fire roaring in front of him. With a shaking hand, he reached toward it. The nightmare was pushing him to stop, but he forced himself.

Ekyt touched a burning log. The flames licked his hand. He yanked his hand back, breathing heavily as his scorched fingers began to ache.

But he had broken the genjutsu on him.

He saw his two comrades struggling in their sleep, their mouths opening and closing as though they were screaming, but no sound came out.

“DISENGAGE!” Ekyt shouted, forcing his charred fingers to work with him.

Lee woke up.

“Good morning everyone! I hope you have all slept well!” he declared.

Sakura and Ekyt appeared to be attached at the lips.

Good for them...they have finally noticed...wait...something is not right...That is not kissing!

Lee leapt over to the two, forcing their mouths apart. Both bodies dropped, lifeless. Lee could actually SEE the life drain out of them both. He ran over to Ekyt and lifted up his ashen face.

“Swallowed our souls...each of us...swallowed our souls...all dead...dead...SOULS!”

Sakura bolted up. Her teeth met Lee’s neck. Lee felt the life start to drain out of him.

“DISENGAGE!”

A part of Lee’s mind heard Ekyt’s voice.

Lee was awake.

“Was that...genjutsu?” he coughed out, still shaking.

Ekyt nodded. “Yeah. A pro laced us good.”

Lee looked at Ekyt’s hand.

“What happened to your hand?”

Ekyt contemplated his charred hand. “I had to end the genjutsu on myself somehow. Physical pain was the only way out.”

Lee and Ekyt both looked over at Sakura. She was starting to stir.

“The genjutsu was concentrated mostly on her. Someone doesn’t want any medics reaching the Land of Herbs...she’ll wake up soon, her body has to recover...”

Sakura saw Ekyt and Lee sitting by the fire, hunched over.

“Good morning guys!”

Then she screamed. When she touched them, they had simply toppled over. Those were only their clothes.

Sakura felt something touch her head. She whipped around, a kunai at the ready. But it fell from her hand.

Ekyt and Lee had been clothed in what looked like tight black underwear that came to just shy of their knees. Other than that, they were naked.

Their lifeless bodies swung slightly in the breeze. They were hung from a tree branch, their faces both purple. Their necks hadn’t broken- they had suffocated.

Even then, that wasn’t the worst of it.

Carved into their chest and stomachs was a circular swirl. They had obscenities painted on their foreheads.

An unholy voice that came from nowhere declared “The gates of hell have been opened!”

Then, she heard a more calming, more passionate voice call out loudly.

“DISENGAGE!”

Sakura threw herself up. Slowly, Ekyt approached her.

"It's okay Sakura. It was a genjutsu. Not even a nightmare. We all had one," Ekyt told her carefully.

Sakura leapt up, kunai at the ready.

"Prove that you are who you say!" she called to them.

"I am Rock Lee. I am the Beautiful Green Beast of Konoha. My role model is Might Guy! Guy-sensei, I can do it!" Lee shouted irrelevantly.

"Now you!" Sakura called to Ekyt.

"My name is Ekyt. I am a genin from the Leaf Village. I am a loner, and I am stuck as a genin because of Ebisu-sensei."

Sakura lowered the kunai. She leapt up and in to Ekyt. The stunned boy managed to catch her.

"It's alright," he assured her, as she hung on to him around his neck. He had to grab her gently around the waist before she choked him to death. That added some slack and was more comfortable for both of them. It was after this that Ekyt noticed the pink-haired kunoichi was shaking. A sheen of cold sweat lined her hair. Ekyt found he cared only about soothing her at this point. He put a hand on the back of her head.

"I'm sorry!" Sakura suddenly yelled, burying her face in Ekyt's vest.

"For what?" Ekyt asked in surprise.

"For being weak! I'm always weak!" she shouted.

"Sakura, that genjutsu was targeted at you specifically. That's the only reason I could break free," Ekyt told her calmly, despite the fact he had NO IDEA what to do. He'd never had a girl hug him like this before.

Enjoy it later Casanova! Right now, these two need you! Ekyt's scolding to himself worked.

Sakura remembered to let go after a few minutes.

"I-I need to get cleaned up," Sakura said.

"There should be a hot spring in town," Ekyt told her.

"I could also use a chance to get cleaned up," Lee said thoughtfully.

"Let's head there first, then. THEN we'll get our mission straightened out. There's no point in going in if we're not of sound mind," Ekyt added. "That genjutsu took a lot out of all of us."

Koori removed his hand from Kora's temples.

"They broke my genjutsu. I thought only the girl had talented. But the other two are of resilient mind as well..."

Koori smiled at the little girl. Blood came from her mouth, and even out one ear.

"Thank you for the use of your body Kora. I'm afraid my old body can't cast genjutsu alone anymore."

That explained why Koori had put his hands on the girl's temples and why Kora had screamed so much. She could still feel the blood markings on her face.

"It is time for the next faze. This will not hurt you...not right away."

Kora flinched as Koori pulled a short, silver dagger from somewhere. There appeared to be jewels encrusted in the hilt. Then Kora saw that it wasn't jewels. It was blood.

The dagger cut her one-piece dress at the stomach, making an opening from her navel to the top of her stomach.

"This time, I need younger blood...Kora, I'm afraid that's you. Hold still like a good girl, won't you?"

The twisted old man cut the little girl on the chin. It wasn't deep, but it still stung. But Kora was too scared to even cry out.

Koori put a finger on the blood. He made a pattern on the helpless girl's stomach with it. Kora saw that it was writing, Kanji. She couldn't read it, but she didn't need to. Koori chanted it aloud.

"Hell's gates have been unlocked. One gate remains sealed. The darkest hour of mankind is upon them."

Koori smiled again. "Not much longer now. Your foolish protectors will be coming soon Kora. I can't let that happen, I'm afraid. Once they reach the castle, they'll be in a battle for their own lives...there will be no time for yours. By then, it will be too late anyway. You feel your body growing weaker, don't you? You are very strong Kora, none of my previous subjects have survived this long. But you won't last much longer, I'm afraid."

Sakura pulled off her sweat-soaked clothing in the women's changing room. She grabbed a set of towels, using one to dry her hair off. She carried the others with her as she walked into the hot spring. The water was so perfect that Sakura sank right in up to her chin. She sighed, feeling content for the moment. As she washed herself, her thoughts drifted to what happened.

Ekyt-kun...how did he stay so calm during all that? I mean, not to brag, but I control my chakra better than he does. But he used the disengage...but his fingers...Oh, I forgot! I'll bandage them when I get out! But still...I can't believe I did that! Leaping at him like that. The poor kid probably didn't know what to think! But he handled it...I know I picked the right people for this mission... Mission.

That genjutsu was aimed at me...but why? And by who? Sakura kept on wondering for a while, then gave up and relaxed in the water.

Lee stripped and pulled on a towel before Ekyt had even shrugged off his vest. Lee realized Ekyt had been keeping watch. That wouldn't ordinarily be necessary, but Lee was thankful that someone was watching out for him, for all of them.

"I will meet you in the water!" Lee called.

Once Lee was safe, Ekyt stripped himself. He had some difficulty with his shirt. He had charred his arm pretty bad, and bending it was hell.

Hell?

Ekyt stopped thinking about it. He had already tried to rationalize the genjutsu. He needed to stop and rest his mind for now. He stripped the rest of the way and wrapped a towel around his waist. He dragged his gear with him. He didn't want to get caught naked. But he decided to wash it quickly in some machine while he washed himself.

"Ekyt-san, it seems that genjutsu did some good," Lee began, scrubbing one arm.

Ekyt didn't look over at Lee out of courtesy.

"What good?"

"It seems Sakura-san found you to be rather"

"Stuff it Lee," Ekyt replied, a smile in his voice.

Lee was silent for a moment, but then continued.

"What do you think of Sakura-san?"

Ekyt finished washing his leg before answering.

"I think she's beautiful, intelligent, and, to answer your next question, completely out of my league."

Ekyt was the last one out of the hot spring. Out front, Lee and Sakura chatted amiably, when Lee decided he HAD to know.

“Sakura-san, what do you think of Ekyt-san?”

Sakura seemed slightly taken aback.

“What do I think of him? I think he’s one of the best in the Leaf Village, that he’s cute, and that...wait, why do you want to know?!”

Lee shrugged. “I am sorry, I did not mean to upset you. I was only curious.”

Lee couldn’t believe it. **If I understood them both correctly, they hold each other in such a high regard...Ekyt is intimidated by Sakura, even though she’s a friend and is not aware of that, so much so he doesn’t realize his feelings. Sakura is more aware of her emotions, but can not sort them out, for some reason...It must be frustrating.**

“The castle. That’s where she is. I can tell,” Sakura piped up suddenly.

“I had the same feeling,” Ekyt said.

Lee looked surprised. “So did I.”

“That’s too weird to be a coincidence guys. We’d better be careful...” Sakura warned.

Inside the castle’s threshold, there was an army of Shinobi. The Land of Herbs had not had an army for years.

Every last Shinobi in the group was already dead.

Koori sighed animatedly. “Well Kora-chan, I’m afraid I need another sacrifice. That small group of re-animated minions just won’t do...so...”

Koori looked at his next victim. This one was a young man, maybe 18.

Koori drew his dagger again. It’s four sharpened edges were still covered with the blood of their last kill. Koori first cut off fingers and toes, one at a time. Slowly, methodically. He took the fingers and toes and preserved them in a jar. There was one more jar.

“Thank you for your help so far. But more is required of you...”

Koori grabbed the boy’s eyelids. With a swish of his dagger, the eyelids fluttered to the floor.

“It makes my work easier,” Koori informed the boy.

The last thing the boy saw was the yellow fingers with the long nails reaching for his eyeballs.

Koori had another jar for his collection. Green eyes were so rare, too...

As they approached the castle, Ekyt put a hand out. From above, an old stained-glass window shattered. A long-dead Shinobi flew at Ekyt.

“Get away!” Ekyt called to Lee and Sakura.

Ekyt gave the thing a hard shove, then followed through with a punch that rattled it’s teeth. It seemed unphased by the attack and pushed Ekyt backward into the castle wall.

"Oh no you don't!" Lee called. As he sailed in for a Dynamic Entry, the thing backhanded him, sending him flying. It turned back to Ekyt, it's long claws slashing him once across the face.

"No way!"

Sakura stabbed the thing at the base of the spine. When it turned around to grab her, Ekyt grabbed it's head. He leapt up high, cradling it's head and legs, and drove it into the ground with a backward Konoha Snapdragon.

"Gotcha, didn't I, ya little sucker?" Ekyt kicked it's head away from it's body.

"There's gonna be more," he said dryly.

But it was time for a showdown with something so evil Satan himself had spat it back out.

3 - History Repents

“Just what the hell was that thing?!” Sakura couldn’t help exclaiming.

“It makes sense...” Ekyt said suddenly. He was looking up at the towers of the castle. The stone seemed to stretch forever into the heavens, giving the castle an air of impenetrability.

“What makes sense Ekyt-san?” Lee wanted to know.

“Orochimaru...he didn’t INVENT kinjutsus, he just learned them. They had to come from somewhere...someone...”

A wind suddenly kicked up. Sakura’s nose wrinkled.

“Do you smell that? Blood, on the wind. Something’s happened in there...something evil...” She shivered suddenly. “Something evil...it’s going to get us...we’ve got to get that girl, quick! Or we’re all done for!” The years hadn’t lessened Sakura’s fear of battle. Anything so high-profile still made her freeze up at first. She had a sudden picture in her mind of Kakashi-sensei assuring her that

“I will never let my comrades die.” Three voices said it, all at once.

Sakura looked up. Ekyt was staring with a grim hatred at the castle.

“W-what?” she stammered.

Ekyt was looking curiously at Lee.

“I do not let my teammates die,” he said, shrugging.

Koori took his hands off the Kora’s temples. Her blue eyes turned back out to face the world. The girl screamed, but apparently only inside her own her.

“So young...such excellent eyesight...such a pity, yes...well, the hour has come at last. I can’t very well, however, perform the ritual with those three knocking on my door. Kora, I must ask you for a small donation of blood...”

Kora watched helplessly as the sick old man drew his dagger one more time. He cut his own finger first, licking the excess blood off. Then, slowly, the dagger came down across Kora’s forehead. The obscenities became blurred from the new blood. A single drop rolled down her face, then trickled off her nose and into a vial.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” The old man spoke the words of endearment in such a way they were intimidating rather than calming. That was, most likely, his intent.

“We...we need a plan.” Sakura’s declaration was met with nods of approval. She was the ranking member. But now that fact seemed to haunt her.

“Ekyt, you’ve had the most missions like this...what should we do?” Sakura asked.

Ekyt looked surprised. “I think we need to stay together, at all costs. All of us possess skills that the other don’t have so sharply...we just comb this castle, inch by inch...then ruin the monster behind all this...”

“I agree. We must not break ranks!” came Lee’s enthusiastic agreement.

“Right. Everyone ready?” Sakura asked.

After a quick salute with their kunai, they opened the door a crack.

“Look out!” Ekyt pushed their heads down as his hand flashed out. He caught a vial...of blood.

“Damn it...I hope we’re not too late...” he muttered.

The glass shattered suddenly. The three all put arms in front of their faces to protect themselves from the glass.

Ekyt looked up again.

“Not again...” he muttered. “Lee, Sakura...we’ve got trouble.”

“The master does not appreciate your presence! Leave this place at once! Once you have crossed the threshold of the castle, your souls will be eaten by the undead, by the spawn of Satan himself!”

“Give Satan my regards!” Sakura snarled, kicking the “Messenger” under his bony chin.

The skeletal form turned to powder.

“Do you think it was telling the truth? About our souls?” Sakura asked.

“Satan is a liar and a conniver. He spreads discord among men...In other words, it’s crap,” Ekyt replied.

They crossed the threshold into the castle. Their boots (No sandals, it’s cold in the Land of Herbs) clicked across the marble floor. Otherwise, it was silent.

“It’s dark in here...Ekyt, can you do something about that?” Sakura asked.

Ekyt looked around, seeing what he was looking for. An old torch bracket, with a torch still firmly in place. Ekyt yanked it off the wall.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu,” he whispered. He made a flicking motion with his fist. A small flame sprang up, lighting the torch. The flickering light grew and began to crackle merrily. It illuminated the dark room enough to get a good look around.

They were standing on a faded red carpet, it’s edged threadbare and torn. Overhead hung chandeliers, dusty from lack of use over the years. Banners hung on the walls, also tattered.

“I wonder who’s face that is?” Sakura wondered, pointing at the banners.

“Their Kage,” Ekyt replied, pointing at a large wooden table. “My God...” Ekyt said aloudm his voice hushed.

“What? What is it?” Sakura questioned.

“That’s not a table. It’s a casket.”

Lee walked toward it. “He is right. And the portrait on top matches that of the banners!”

“I don’t like this...if there’s undead running around...” Sakura looked over at Ekyt.

He had narrowed his eye, but said nothing about the casket.

“Any more of these around?” Ekyt asked, indicating the torch.

“I would rather have my hands free,” Lee said.

“He’s right. We’ll take turns carrying the torch. Having a bonfire with us might attract too much attention,” Sakura pointed out.

“Good point. I’ll take lead. Lee, I think you should take point, since you’re the quickest. That leaves Sakura in the middle. That’s the best place, she’s the mission priority.”

Lee and Sakura nodded their agreement.

Koori smiled.

“So, they braved my messenger? They are brave indeed...perhaps my own blood...yes...yes...it must be done.” The old man was muttering as he walked. From a rotting wooden shelf, he pulled a scroll. He bit into his own thumb, then ran the digit down the scroll’s title.
“Thy time is at hand! Thy noble quest shall be fulfilled! Pawns, come forth, be ye good or evil, today thy shall drink deeply from the cup of hatred!”

Sakura, Lee, and Ekyt all stopped in unison. They were halfway up a marble staircase when they all felt something. Something evil. BEYOND evil.

“What do we do?” Lee asked.

“We keep going,” Sakura replied firmly.

“Lee, hold the torch for a second...” Ekyt held it out. Lee looked questioningly, but took it with his usual enthusiasm.

Ekyt pierced his thumbs with kunai. He slammed both hands onto the stairs.

“Twin Summoning Jutsu!” he said in a harsh whisper.

POP! BLAM!

Ekyt’s dog, a keeshonden named Holly, and his Bearded Dragon, named Umisu, appeared in a flashes of smoke. The beared dragon was on Ekyt’s shoulder, while Holly was sitting at his feet, scatching at her ear.

“Kid, you’re a real pain in the @\$\$\$. And...where the hell?” Holly muttered, trotting around. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Blood and dust? Is this some cheap-@\$\$ hotel?”

Ekyt gave her a little tap on the head. “Holly, can you sense something? Preferable something very old, and very pissed off?”

Holly sniffed the air. “Yeah, I can. Follow me kids!”

“Hold on,” Ekyt told her. He turned to Umisu. The dragon looked at him inquisitively.

“Lady Tsunade needs a report...Umisu, take this (Vial of Blood), and this (Small scroll). Tell her this isn’t Orochimaru, but it’s kinjutsu...Tell her to send ANBU if we haven’t reported in on time.”

The Dragon closed one eye in a wink, then spun itself in a circle, disappearing with a small pop.

“Lead the way Holly.”

Holly’s nose led her to the casket.

“Evil boss. And alive.”

The three exchanged glances.

“Alive? You’re sure?” Ekyt asked.

“Positive. This nose doesn’t lie,” Holly replied, sounding slightly insulted.

“Alright. Thank you Holly. I’m going to send you away...This is about to get dangerous, I’m sure of it.”

“Roger, kid. Good luck. And to you two as well!”

The earth suddenly shook. Glasses smashed against the floor. Old brass candle-holders clattered to the ground, scrolls following in their wake. The dust was shook up again, sending Sakura and Lee into coughing fits. Ekyt’s mask had protected him. His good eye widened in shock.

“That casket...damn it! Kinjutsu! We have no choice...we’ve got to fight. Lee, Sakura, you two recover. Don’t rush into this until you can see again!”

The casket's top began to crack. Out of nowhere, it blew off the casket. An iron helmet became visible in the velvet-lined box. The occupant sat up.

"I am sorry...I am not doing this of my own free will," said the skeleton in a sad voice.

Ekyt bowed slightly. "Lord Koubakage...I understand. Since you've told me this, I need to make sure my friends can go free...so I challenge you, one on one."

The Koubakage bowed his head. "I accept...and I am very sorry...I hope you will defeat me...the kinjutsu is poorly done, as he has not completely overridden my mind. My free-will, yes, but defeating me will end the jutsu. I can sense your innocence, young man, and the purity of you and your comrades...may your mission be successful. The girl is being kept in the dungeons...I can say no more...Now, we must fight..."

"Ekyt-kun! That's a kage! The best of the best!" Sakura shouted.

"I know. There's no choice. You and Lee have to save the girl."

"But...but...you could die!" Sakura couldn't help but say it.

"I know. But it has to be done, whatever the outcome. Go and find the girl quick." Ekyt looked at them, for the first time, his eye full of life. "I'll catch up."

Sakura didn't notice the ninja forming from the dust behind her. Lee was suddenly jumped by his own, just as he rushed to her defense. It stabbed down.

Sakura put up a hand, but found the kunai had stopped short of her. She looked up, her green eyes alive with fright.

Drip. Drip.

Ekyt's hand had halted the knife. It had pierced nearly all the way through his hand. It was his blood that had been making the sound.

"Uhghhhh..." Ekyt grunted in pain.

"Ekyt-kun!" Sakura called.

Ekyt grabbed the kunai with his free hand and eased it out, then swung the torch at the demon holding it. The dust became ablaze, destroying its form. It was nothing more than ash on the carpet.

"Take the torch and go, hurry!" Ekyt told them firmly.

"He is right Sakura-san, we must go! Ekyt-san...you catch up quickly!"

"I will Lee! Go!"

Ekyt squared himself up against the Koubakage. His skeletal form was clothed in earth-toned robes, with a green sash. In the green sash there were the two sharp gardening tools. Sai.

"I sense samurai in you...my kind and your kind did not get along well. My weapons...they killed many of you..."

Ekyt bowed his head. "I have never killed. But I will ALWAYS do what must be done in the name of duty and honor...protecting those who need, fighting for what's right...following both Bushido (Way of the Samurai) and my Shinobi way. But I'll spare you the lecture, I'm sure you're already aware..."

Koubakage looked at Ekyt curiously. "No hatred in your eyes...That is a first for me. I died over fifty years ago, as the first and last Koubakage. I fought many battles...but I can tell you are unique...Good luck to you."

"And you," Ekyt replied.

They both lunged forward, their weapons clashing. Ekyt's kunai deflected the sai attack. He tried to pin down the Koubakage's robe with his foot, but was thwarted as the side of a sai struck his face. Thankfully, it was blunt. But it still dropped his guard for a split second. The butt end of the other sai cracked him smartly in the forehead. As he leaned back, the other sai hit him hard in the stomach, knocking him backward across the floor.

He wiped his bleeding mouth with the back of his hand.

I'm overmatched...I can't win...I've just got to hold on...

Lee and Sakura raced through the endless corridors and hallways. It quickly became apparent that they were lost in the dungeons.

"We should mark where we've been, so we don't go around in circles. And so Ekyt can find us...wait...that's it!"

"What is it?" Lee asked, confused.

"Genjutsu..." Sakura said, pointing at the wall. At one point, the torch had fallen, charring the wall and floor. They saw the same burn mark now.

"It's the Sly Mind Affect Technique. The same one was used on Naruto and I during the chunin exams four years ago...Disengage!" Sakura called, her hands forming the appropriate sign.

Immediately, an enormous red door appeared at the end of the corridor. They hadn't seen it because of the genjutsu.

"That's it," they said together.

Ekyt got to his feet, ignoring his pounding head. The Koubakage rushed him again. This time, Ekyt made hand signs.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu! Body Replacement jutsu!" he called, one after the other.

The Koubakage's sai pierced his abdomen.

"It is over..." Koubakage said sadly. He rotated his sai, at least trying to spare the boy's suffering.

POOF!

The clone disappeared. That was what had gotten speared.

Where did the boy go... Koubakage wondered. From above, he got his answer.

Ekyt cut the final cord that held the chandelier in place. He used to silent jutsu as it crashed to the ground.

Koubakage will have moved...and he'll be expecting a counter...so let's go one step further...

Koori lost his cool.

"Damn it! Why have you deserted me?!" he shouted at no one. "If I am condemned to eternal damnation, I will not be alone! Spirits, occupy a host! Bodies abound, partaking of the wine of power! Come forth!"

Two former jonin of the Land of Herbs sprang to life at Koori's feet.

"Protect his place, at all costs! I must finish with the girl! GO!"

Lee kicked open the barred steel doors.

“End of the line- huh?” Lee stopped in mind shout. He was yelling at a defenseless old man.

“I am sorry sir, I did not mean to”

“Lee, watch out!” Sakura shouted, pushing him aside. She had spotted Koori coming up behind Lee. Just in time, she pushed him aside. Koori’s dagger stabbed down, narrowly missing the base of Lee’s neck.”

“Children, you have made it far! But your quest ends here! You shall perish here!”

“Go to hell,” Sakura said flatly.

“Koori smiled. “Why do that? Hell is here!”

The two skeletal jonin were wielding axes. Those slashed down. Lee and Sakura leapt aside.

“Lee, it’s time! You know what we discussed! We have to do it!”

“Right!” Lee said with a salute. He began to focus, hard.

Sakura’s hands formed a series of hand signs.

“Painful Sky Leg!” she yelled, slamming her heel into the ground. A crater stretched across the floor, extending from Sakura’s heel all the way to the feet of Koori.

Lee and Sakura saw that the old man was far from defenseless. He leapt up high, landing safely on a narrow beam on the ceiling.

“Finish them!” He called to his minions. He grabbed the unconscious Kora and ran from the room.

“Lee, you follow him! I’ll handle this!” Sakura called, feeling a sudden rush of bravery.

“But Sakura-san, I”

“Lee,” she said firmly, smiling at him, “I can handle it.”

Koubakage jumped to the side of the falling chandelier. He ducked and twisted around Ekyt’s strike, then jammed his sai into the boys’ good eye. POOF!

“Another clone? Then where did...”

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!” Ekyt’s shout reached the Koubakage ears. Flames shot at Koubakage from three directions. Koubakage back-flipped away. Only then did he realize that he had fallen right into the boy’s trap.

BLAM!

An exploding tag rocketed the Koubakage upward, burning off one arm. The arm fell to the ground while the Koubakage kept moving. As he was thrown upward, he righted himself and landed on the second story landing.

Moonlight streamed through the stained glass window. Ekyt and the Koubakage both stopped, smiling upon noticing the picture on the glass. Most of the glass green, but reds, yellows, blues, and purples spelled out a scene.

A master fighting his pupil. The moonlight illuminated it strangely, making the picture seem alive.

The master and the pupil wore smiles of respect, even as their weapons clashed. The master was holding sai, while the pupil held a bo.

“The picture seems to speak volumes,” Koubakage told Ekyt. Neither had dropped their guard.

“A picture is worth a thousand words...” Ekyt replied.

“It is an awful shame that our paths did not cross as master and pupil. Though we are not enemies, neither are we friends...”

“Allies.” Ekyt spoke the single word sharply.

“Perhaps, at another time, we would have been friends...you have shown me more respect than even my most trusted pupil...”

“Lord Koubakage...you mean the one behind all this, don’t you?” Ekyt asked calmly.

Koubakage nodded. “Koori. A dissatisfied student. He was the one to put the dagger in my back. He wanted the power of the Koubakage position. But the town grieved so upon my death...they put an end to the title, out of respect to me...”

Ekyt looked around quickly. Not dropping his guard, he side-stepped over to a suit of armor holding an axe. The end, as if on cue, broke off, leaving only a bo.

“We need to finish this...” Ekyt said, holding the bo in a guard.

“I agree,” Koubakage added, his tone reflecting the wonder he felt.

The moonlight gave the two combatants an eerie profile, as though they were both on fire. The Koubakage’s sai aimed at Ekyt’s head. Ekyt blocked with the bo, kicking at the Koubakage’s stomach. Koubakage broke the weapon stalemate by quickly flipping the sai inward. His other sai cut the bo in half, then stripped the pieces away.

Ekyt saw the strike coming. He knew he had been bested. The sai pierced his vest and coat. He bowed his head, accepting his fate.

“I only hope I’ve bought them enough time...” Ekyt said. He couldn’t believe how strong his voice was. Or how little pain there was.

The Koubakage’s leg kicked him in the stomach. Ekyt leaned backward as the second sai came down. It hooked his mask, pulling it half off. Before he could right himself, Koubakage kicked him again.

The quiet night was shattered. The sound of breaking glass echoed across the Land of Herbs...

One mother held her son close. “Our hope...it will die with that boy...”

Despite never meeting him, the young mother felt terribly sad. So much was riding on the Leaf Village’s ninja...She prayed that the other two would be enough to halt the evil plaguing them.

4 - Too Late To Apologize

Ekyt fell through the glass window. They were a long way up. His mind went blank on how to save himself. He was too far away to dig into the wall with his kunai. He was free-falling backwards, so tucking and rolling was out.

I'm going to die...Lee...Sakura...I hope you've finished the mission...

Then he saw their two faces, smiling.

"I won't let my comrades die," they had all said. They had bonded. If one died, all of them died, at least a little.

"I won't make a liar out of my comrades!" Ekyt said it aloud. Then it hit him. He knew how to save himself.

Sakura focused her chakra. Some to her feet, some to her fists. She reached the first skeleton, leaping high, driving her leg home. When it dodged backward, she aimed a kick at the other one. It too leapt backward.

"Kunai Blizzard Barrage!" she called, throwing thirty kunai, all laced with explosives. She threw the torch.

The torch arched through the air. It landed in the middle of the tags. The heat spread into the carpet, setting it ablaze. That blaze reached the tags.

Sakura ran behind a stone pillar.

BLAM!!!!

The explosion was enormous. Sakura could hear bones clattering against the walls.

Lee chased the old man up the tower. As he was halfway up, something caught his foot.

KABOOM!

An exploding tag!

The stairway caved in with a loud crash, rocks tumbling down. Lee could see no other way to get up to the tower. But he had to stop that insane old man from doing whatever it was he had in mind for that girl. So Lee began to dig, as fast as his muscles would allow. Having opened the first gate of chakra, his stamina and strength were at incredibly high levels.

But they wouldn't stay high for long. Opening the chakra gates gave you incredible abilities- but you couldn't keep them open for long. And when you closed them, fatigue set in very quickly.

This is not the ideal position for a Shinobi to be in...but there is no other option. I must continue...

Ekyt made the hand signs rapidly. Horse, dog, serpent...

"Hidden Shadow Snake Hand!" he shouted, throwing his right arm up. Four snakes burst from his wrist. Their fangs sunk into the side of the stone walls, slowing and then stopping Ekyt's descent.

"Why hasn't the jutsu ended yet? I killed the boy..." Koubakage wondered aloud. Then he heard a

sound near the window. He smiled in disbelief.

I KNEW this one was special...

Ekyt put one arm in the window. Then the other appeared. He pulled himself in, first to his knees, then to his feet. The shattered glass broke again as Ekyt walked forward.

"I still have fight in me," Ekyt declared to the Koubakage

"Young man, please tell me your name and rank," the Koubakage asked kindly.

"Ekyt, genin," Ekyt barked out.

"I see...but you do not fight as a genin would... your skills are near-jonin level..."

Ekyt grinned, which you could actually see. His mask was hanging around his neck, with glass in it's creases.

"That's why I can't die...I can't let my team face this alone...and I have a sensei to prove wrong...not to mention this evil guy to thwart...so much I haven't done...dated, kissed a girl, told off that bully, had a family...become a jonin..."

"I hope I do not rob you of your dreams, then. I had a dream as well...Part was fulfilled, the part where our Village has become wealthy and, for the most part, safe. My second dream was for one of my descendants to take the Koubakage title..." the Koubakage looked away briefly.

"I'll make it happen, if at all possible. But, for now...let's finish our fight."

Sakura cheered inwardly. She had done it.

Cha! I'm not weak now! Hell yeah!

Not she had to finish her mission. That little girl needed medical help. Sakura sprinted off to join Lee.

Lee cleared the last of the rocks out of the way. Then his stamina failed him.

"Lee! Are you alright?!"

Lee heard Sakura's concerned voice. He formed a tired smile.

"I am fine Sakura-san. I cleared the way. But I am not yet recovered..."

"Just take it easy," Sakura told him. She quickly checked him. "No breaks, tears, or pulls this time." She informed him.

Lee managed to his "Nice Guy" pose. "But Ekyt-san is not back yet..."

Sakura made herself smile.

"Lee, if there's one thing I can say with certainty, it's this: Ekyt hasn't finished his mission yet, and he's never refused one, and never left one undone. He's not going to start now."

"Damn it!" Ekyt missed one more time. He had to win this. He formed a plan quickly, then put it into action.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu! Hidden Shadow Snake Hand!"

Four clones accompanied Ekyt, using the Hidden Shadow Snake Hand. Lord Koubakage dodged three of the sets of snakes, but the fourth set snared arm, knocking him off balance.

Ekyt saw the opening. He rushed in as fast as he could and grabbed the Koubakage. He leapt high, falling backward off the second story landing.

"BACKWARD KONOHA SNAP DRAGON!"

The Koubakage hit the ground hard. His exposed spine snapped, tearing him in two pieces.

“Very good! You need to finish me, quickly!” he shouted to Ekyt.

“What?” Ekyt couldn’t believe it.

“You’re doing me a favor! I am already dead, it is not murder, I cannot die again! But I ask you...as a friend...Send me home...”

Ekyt was panting with the effort.

“How do I do that? If that move snapped you in half, but didn’t kill you...what can I do?”

“You need to put me back in the casket, then seal the casket. My top half will fight you, but you need to put me in that casket. And...break me up. Make sure my bones cannot be reformed so easily...I never want this to happen again...”

Lee and Sakura were at a loss for ideas. They didn’t know what to do. Neither one of them was in any condition to take on Koori. Sakura would need all her chakra to help heal the little girl. Lee hadn’t recovered yet.

But time was running out for the girl. They HAD to act.

“We can’t give Ekyt any more time. We have to try,” Sakura said, finality in her voice.

“Yes...I hope he is alright...but we must put a stop to this, here and now!”

Koori smiled at Kora, his yellowed teeth penetrating her mind.

“Well, you have been a very good girl for me the past few days Kora. But I’m afraid you must be punished...punished for the misdeeds of your ancestors...Everyone must pay...they do not know hell, not as I have experienced it. But they will...the time has come...the most forbidden jutsu, the one I have kept secret to me...The time has come to use it.”

“You will not!” Lee shouted, aiming a Konoha Whirlwind kick.

Koori batted it aside, knocking the exhausted Lee to the ground.

“You have become a pest! I am going to kill you now!” Koori yelled. His four-points dagger came down toward Lee.

Koori yelled with anger when his strike was blocked with a kunai.

Sakura used her chakra to force the strike back. She tagged Koori with a solid right hand, sending him soaring twenty feet. He hit the wall hard, his spectacles falling to the floor.

“Lee, take Kora! Hurry!” Sakura said firmly.

“I cannot leave you alone!”

“Do it! I outrank you!” Sakura snarled. **I’m sorry Lee...but the mission comes first...if I have to pull rank on you to make sure it’s a success, I will...please don’t be mad...**

Lee nodded slowly. “Yes Sakura-san, er, sensei.” He went to work on the chains holding Kora down.

They wouldn’t come loose, so he started to use his kunai, sawing at the thick metal.

The Koubakage was back in his casket.

“Thank you...for helping me feel alive, even only for a brief while, Ekyt-san.”

“It was an honor Lord Koubakage...are you sure about this?” Ekyt asked. He had re-arrange the bones of the First Koubakage, as he had been asked. Now, he was to seal the casket.

“Yes, I’m sure. Just use a five-pronged seal on where the casket meets the top. And thank you again...I was right...you are special.”

Ekyt nodded, silently thanking the Koubakage. He shut the casket’s lid, then rolled up his right sleeve.

“Five Pronged Seal!”

Ekyt pressed his hand against the wood of the coffin, at the precise spot the Koubakage had said. His fingerprints burned into the wood. For a moment, Ekyt wondered if the whole casket would go ablaze. As he turned off the chakra flow, he realized that wasn’t going to happen.

“Rest in peace,” Ekyt said solemnly, kneeling near the casket to pray. He finished, got up, bowed one more time to his opponent, then started toward the stairs. He prayed again, this time that he wouldn’t be too late...

Lee barreled down the stairs, holding the little girl across his back. He saw Ekyt.

“Ekyt-san! Thank God! You are alright!”

“I’m fine Lee. Is everything alright?”

Lee shook his head. “I have the girl, but she is weak! Sakura-san is upstairs, fighting Koori. I do not think she has a chance...”

Ekyt narrowed his good eye. “Where is she?”

“The North Tower.”

“Will you be okay here?” Ekyt asked Lee.

“Yes, I will be fine. But the girl, I am afraid for her...”

Ekyt thought quickly. “Alright, I’m going to put a False Surroundings Genjutsu around her. Flowers, animals, etc, to keep her calm and sedated.”

Ekyt performed the jutsu quickly. He saw the little girl smile.

It was an eerie scene. Her torn dress, blood-stained hair and clothes, and the obscenities on her head. The smile seemed out of place.

“I’m going back for Sakura. If I’m not back in a half hour, send word that ANBU needs to get here pronto. I’ll leave Umisu with you, he’ll know where to go. Summoning jutsu!”

Umisu, Ekyt’s Bearded Dragon, landed on his shoulder.

“Umusi, stay with Lee, okay? You may need to go Lady Tsunade, but you’ll have a rest first.”

The Beared Dragon closed one in a wink. Ekyt put a gloved hand on the Dragon’s head fondly, then took off at top speed.

Sakura slammed her heel into the ground. The crater opened up widely, but missed Koori.

“You foul dog! You have ruined my plans! I will sacrifice YOU instead! My filthy ancestors...You ruined my chance at becoming the Koubakage! I needed to kill the last heir in the family!”

“The girl...she’s related to the only Koubakage?” Sakura asked, surprised.

“I am her great uncle...but that matters little now...I may be an old man, nowhere near my peak...but you have not yet reached yours...your chakra is almost gone...your mind is mine! Demonic Illusion: Hell Bringer Technique!”

Ekyt saw the attack happen. Sakura cried out, though nothing actually hit her. After training with Ibikki, Ekyt knew the limits on the mind. And Sakura’s was nearing the end... she needed rest to replenish her

mind's integrity.

It meant using the last of his own chakra, but Ekyt kicked the door open the rest of the way. "Disengage!" he shouted, the correct handsign accompanying it.

Sakura slumped to the ground, finally exhausted. She heard Ekyt's shout, but could do nothing else.

"If you hurt one hair on her head, you'll going to see hell first-hand, you sorry son of a dog!" Maybe it was the fatigue. Maybe it was the fact that he should have died twice over tonight. Whatever the reason, Ekyt felt every emotion more strongly. Right now, love and hate were predominant. "I have not harmed her...seriously...But I AM sorry for putting you through all this trouble..." "It's too damn late to apologize, it's not going to get you mercy!" Ekyt snarled. "That is an empty threat. You have no chakra, you would not DARE attack without it?"

Ekyt felt his emotions surge through his chest. He felt the coldness of his own anger. His rage built in his chest. He put a hand to his chest. When he held it away, a blue flame was crackling merrily in it.

"No chakra? Wrong." **Time to put Ibikki's training to work...**

"Yo-you can't have any power left!" sputtered Koori. The old man tripped over his cape, looking helpless.

Ekyt pressed forward, Ibikki's training in his mind.

"You planned to take the Koubakage title, didn't you?"

"Yo-you c-can't know that!"

Ekyt stepped forward again.

"You meant to kill that girl. You're related to her, aren't you?"

Koori's eyes darted around the room. His own chakra was nearly exhausted.

"Speak up, you heartless bastard! You know I'm serious if I'll let loose with a swear word with a girl in the room. You talked about hell coming here...it'll be easier if I just send you there."

Koori smiled widely. His hand found the hilt of his dagger. He stabbed.

Ekyt couldn't even dodge it. The knife hit him in the center of the chest. It was lodged in tight. And just deep enough to do damage. Koori didn't have much to put behind the strike.

But...why aren't I dying...wait...

Ekyt pulled his coat open. He dug under his vest and chain mail. He pulled out a silver object.

A thick, silver cross was in his gloved hand. It was as wide as his hand, and appeared to be somewhat Celtic in design.

Koori couldn't believe it. A cross- it had saved the boy?

"You spoke of hell...well, let me introduce you to hell..."

Ekyt's good eye glowed blue. His second (Blue Flame Chakra) chakra was focused into the eye. It bored into Koori's.

Ekyt had used his specialty. Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique. He stared at Koori, making sure it sank in. Ekyt head Koori scream. He would witness his own gruesome death over and over again.

“Welcome to hell...it’s all yours,” Ekyt said, his eye alive with the mysterious twinkle again. This time, though, the mystery had disappeared, replaced by one of contentment.

Sakura stirred slightly, feeling the weight of a blanket on her.

“Thank God,” she heard someone sigh with relief.

She sat up, kunai at the ready.

“It’s all over Sakura. You did it.”

Ekyt’s calm voice instantly settled Sakura.

“And Kora?”

“She’ll be fine, same as you,” Ekyt replied.

Sakura blushed seven shades of red.

“Ekyt-kun...you saved me?”

“You didn’t NEED saving, I just happened to be there,” Ekyt told her.

Sakura got to her feet, feeling a little shaky still. Or, at least, faking it. She fell into the surprised Shinobi.

“Are you alright?” Ekyt asked.

“Never better Ekyt-kun,” she replied, moving closer to him.

The shocked 19 year old blushed, trying to think of something productive to say, but getting it.

“I’ve know for a while, you know,” Sakura told him.

“What?”

“I mean...how you feel...you boys can be so transparent. And too stubborn to be honest!”

Ekyt finally understood.

“How long have you known...about this?”

“Like I said, a long time. The incredible number of times you saved my life, the way you treated me different from the other kunoichi. You probably didn’t even notice it.”

“I didn’t,” Ekyt had to admit.

Sakura giggled. “I did. You didn’t blush around Ino. Much like you’re blushing now. And, let me tell you a little secret...”

Sakura leaned to Ekyt’s ear.

“I love you, too.”

“Awwww!” Lee called. He had been watching the whole thing. “I am so happy for you both! The power of youth springs eternal through such an emotion! And I can’t wait for”

BAM!

Two fists rocketed off Lee’s head.

“I WARNED you I would take your head off if you spoke this out loud Lee,” Ekyt said calmly.

“YOU PERVERT, HOW DARE YOU LISTEN TO THAT?!” Sakura shouted not-so-calmly.

Lee lay in a heap ten feet away. Once he twitched, they ignored him.

“Right. So, I love you too. I just wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to get hurt again,” Sakura said shyly, thinking of Sasuke.

“Same here,” Ekyt told her, thinking of Linda.

That was the past.

“Did you know that kunoichi tend to be very protective of their Shinobi? The one they decide to put a label on, I mean?”

Ekyt shook his head. “No. To be honest, kunoichi scare the hell out of me. You included,” he had to admit.

Sakura giggled, blushing herself. “It’s not an accident that it works like that kiddo.”

Sakura drew herself up. "You know how a hug works, right?" she asked sarcastically.

Ekyt forced his arms to return the embrace.

"Alright, good. Now, time to seal the deal."

"What? I just...wait, what?"

Sakura rolled her eyes tolerantly. "Not THAT far, pervy samurai!"

Ekyt's eye widened. "That pervy thing was a complete accident, I swear! And believe me, I paid for it!"

(LOL, THIS WILL BE EXPLAINED NEXT CHAPTER!)

Sakura shook her head. There was the pink hair again, entrancing somehow.

"You really ARE as innocent as you seem. Clueless too. I meant one of these..."

Sakura leaned forward and kissed him. She closed her eyes, savoring it. Ekyt tried to do the same, but his eye wouldn't cooperate.

All too soon, the kiss was over.

"Well, you'll get better at it, after some practice!" Sakura said with a wink. **Boy, he's really shy! He's gonna be fun!**

As Ekyt was trying to figure out what the hell just happened, a town official wanted to talk to Sakura. She talked briefly, then came back, a troubled look on her face.

"Guys...I think I'm going to stay here..."

TO BE CONTINUED!

ALTERNATE END FOR THIS CH (MORE CH'S TO COME!)

"I see. Okay. Well, let me think about it."

Ekyt stood with Lee while Sakura finished her mission.

"So, Ekyt-san, are you ready to admit you like Sakura."

Ekyt shot him a glance. Without the mask, his grin gave him away.

"Yeah Lee, I am. But only to you. Don't let it get out."

Lee shook his head. "Ekyt-san, You do not need to worry. Sakura must like you too!"

Ekyt shrugged.

"Tell anyone, and you'll need those gates of chakra to stop my wrath," he threatened. But his grin belied his words.

Ekyt decided to talk a walk. His body ached after all that.

"Lee, thank you again. I couldn't have done it without you," Sakura told him.

"It was my pleasure Sakura-san," Lee began. He stretched out. "So, are you ready to tell Ekyt-san that you like him?"

WHAM!

"NOT SO LOUD, BIG MOUTH!" Sakura shouted at him.

"I'll take that as a no..." Lee slurred, feeling the growing welt on his head.

"Where is Ekyt anyway? I need to talk to both of you."

"Present," Ekyt said from her right.

Sakura looked at the two of them.

"Guys...I think I'm going to stay here."

Lee fell backward, while Ekyt's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Say that again?" Ekyt requested wearily.

"I think I'm going to stay. They offered me a spot as the top medic-nin...and they need help...so I think I'm going to stay."

Lee and Ekyt were at a loss for words. In desperation, Lee looked at Ekyt. Without words, Lee was asking Ekyt to do something that was normally so easy for him: Be honest.

"Sakura-chan...and I hope you don't kill me for this...but..."

Before he could finish, Sakura darted forward, leaping against him in a flying hug/tackle.

"Ekyt-kun, I think I love you!"

"Wh-wha?" he stammered. **Damnit, THAT was smooth! Now she thinks I'm a retard!**

Sakura stared at him curiously, then slowly broke into a giggle.

"You were just about to say the same thing, weren't you?"

"Well...yes...but, if I can ask...when did this happen?"

5 - Surprise, Surprise! Ibikki and Anko's Message!

Before Ekyt could even respond to that, there was a sizable explosion behind him. He spun around, kunai at the ready.

"Kid, if you finish that strike, that's a great way to ensure your own death."

Ekyt breathed a sigh of relief. Anko, Ibikki, and two nameless ANBU ninjas were standing in front of him.

"You didn't check in on time. Any explanation?" Ibikki asked in a cold tone.

Ekyt indicated for all of them to follow him with a nod of his head.

Koori stared at the wall, even when the heavy iron door keeping him in the dark cell clanged open.

"Time to talk," Ekyt said gently.

"Thy shall rot in the depths of hell for your misdeeds! I will resurrect them all and become Koubakage!

And you will die! The flames of hell will"

Ekyt grabbed the old man by the cloak.

"I warned you, talking to me that way will only earn you a one-way ticket to hell. Now, you're going to tell the nice people what you did...or I'll send you to hell again. Do you want that?"

Ekyt's face was inches away from the old man.

"Your threat of genjutsu doesn't scare me, young one! Catching me by surprise is the only way you would be able to defeat me!"

Anko started to step in, but Ibikki put an arm out.

"Let's see where this goes. Maybe his training took..."

Anko shot Ibikki a glance. "That man is more powerful than he is!"

Ibikki smiled. "Then I don't believe Ekyt has ever revealed his true power."

"Surprise? Well, certainly someone as...aged as yourself must be difficult to surprise. Ah, how the mind works. It's fascinating, isn't it?" Ekyt was speaking to himself, walking circles around the tied-up Koori.

He stopped and leaned close to Koori. His mask was back in place, giving him a darker look.

"The mind is a powerful tool, isn't it? But so...fragile. It has to be cultivated, like a child, bent and moved to adapt to the situation. Older people...it becomes difficult for them to absorb new things."

Ekyt took a step back, removing his mask. He was smiling; altogether not a pleasant gesture in this case. His young face looked so calm, he almost seemed...insane.

"You're an older man...I wonder how far I could push your mind...I've never killed a man...but you DID try to assassinate my team...decisions, decisions...live, or die."

"You little bastard! You will not lay your fowl, unkempt hands on me!"

Ekyt grabbed the old man's cloak and gave it a hard tug.

"I asked you not to speak to me like that," Ekyt said in a placid voice. He raised his headband.

"OH MY GOD! NO NO! TAKE IT AWAY! YOU DEMON!"

Ekyt pulled his headband back down over his eye.

"Ready to talk yet...or do I need to let you sample my "pathetic genjutsu" again?"

" I WILL SPEAK! STAY AWAY, DEMON!"

Ekyt grinned. "Glad to hear it."

Lee and Sakura were pacing outside, waiting for Ekyt to finish.

"Lee...you knew how he felt?" Sakura asked suddenly.

"I did Sakura-san," Lee replied.

"And you didn't mind? I mean...well, you used to have your sites on me..." Sakura blushed, not sure why.

"I do not mind at all! Ekyt-san is honorable, and I know he too will protect you with his life. Besides, I have dated Linda for some time now, I am not on the market."

Sakura shrugged, a little laugh coming out of her mouth.

"Well, as long as it's all right Lee-san. I'm really happy you found someone!"

"I am happy as well. For you and for Ekyt, and for myself."

"He's a goofy kid...but it's kind of cute. He reminds me a little of Sasuke, in some ways."

Lee piped up. "Sakura-san, do not be hard on Ekyt if he comes off as completely clueless when it comes to romance."

Sakura laughed outright. "I won't Lee. I KNOW how he is. Besides, that shyness of his is gonna be fun!"

Lee shook his head, smiling. "He does not know what he is in for."

"You did well," Ibikki told Ekyt.

"No guilt holding me back this time," Ekyt said by way of explanation.

"Good. It looks like you've matured. Just in time, too."

Ekyt had replaced his mask by now, but still showed confusion.

"In time? In time for what?" Ekyt questioned.

"Well, we can't have a weak chunin, now can we?" Anko said mischievously.

"I...I don't think I follow sensei," Ekyt replied, confusions dotting his speech.

"Ibikki and I had a little talk with Ebisu...okay, threats maybe, but the fact is- you're in for the next chunin exams.

Ekyt felt his jaw drop.

"The man you cracked...it seems he watched you through the little girl...and she saw you fight the Koubakage. After your Bearded Dragon reported that, Lady Tsunade agreed that it was ludicrous to hold you back any longer, regardless of Ebisu. A shame, really...he was a fun nut to crack." Ebisu chuckled cruelly.

Anko grinned widely.

"One hitch kid- your team. Naruto Uzumaki and Rock Lee. The catch is, there's no medic-nin. Lee can't heal with chakra, and Naruto...well, he'd be more likely to kill you...that leaves you. You've got a month to hustle up medical skills," Anko barked.

"I do believe...his girlfriend could help there," Ibikki muttered, glancing at Ekyt.

"Huh? I didn't even mention that, and I know you didn't read my mind sensei..." Ekyt wondered how they found out.

"Let's just say...a little Dragon told me," Ibikki said with a rare grin. One gloved hand petted Ekyt's Dragon Summon.

"You have a big mouth Umisu..." Ekyt murmured.

Sakura waited for Ekyt, hoping he would be done soon. She had to talk to him.

(NOTE: Sakura normally dresses like the time-skip version of her, but her hair is still short, as before the skip.)

“Ekyt-kun!” she exclaimed upon seeing him. She shot a quick grin at Lee. Lee shook his head.

Poor guy...he is not aware of how devious kunoichi can be...although that just makes them more endearing...I wonder how she will use his awkwardness?

Sakura leapt up at Ekyt. He managed to catch her around the waist. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his arms in a fond hug.

Lee grinned. **So THAT was her plan...Play aggressively...Ekyt-san has no chance!**

Sakura glanced at Ekyt’s good eye, staring fondly at the rest of his face. **Gotcha...(giggle) this is fun!**

Ekyt’s good eye was widened in shock. He clearly had no idea what to do.

Sakura clung on even tighter, to the point where she was hanging on by her own strength. She moved her head onto his shoulder, so close that her cheek was touching his...mask? Sakura used one hand to slide the mask down around his neck, then she returned her cheek next to his.

Ekyt looked over at Lee, with “What the hell do I do?” clearly etched on his face.

Sakura’s laughter finally gave her away.

“I’m sorry Ekyt-kun, you’re just so innocent!” Sakura declared, giggling.

Ekyt breathed another sigh of relief. He went to replace his mask, but Sakura stopped him.

“Ekyt-kun, you don’t need to wear that around me! I don’t want to have to move the damn thing every time I want to kiss you!”

Ekyt pulled the mask off, staring at it. Then he held it out to Sakura.

“You can have it Sakura-chan. I kept the handkerchief you gave me.” Ekyt shyly held the mask out to her.

“Huh? When did you- Oh! From the nightmares! When I was having those dreams, and I cut my hand. You gave me that mask, to stop the bleeding...Then I gave you...”

“The red handkerchief,” Ekyt finished. He rolled up the right sleeve of his coat. High up on his arm, near his shoulder, was the red handkerchief.

Sakura took the mask and tied it around her right arm. **That’s so sweet! (giggle) He is a rare one, that’s for sure!**

“I was never keeping my face a secret...just my emotions...” Ekyt muttered quietly.

Sakura gave him a sympathetic smile. “You’re a sweetheart, whether you know it or not,” she said, giving him a kiss on his newly exposed cheek.

“But we have to talk...They’re kind of pressuring me to stay here...I don’t want to...but they’re pushy...”

Ekyt narrowed his good eye.

“Did they threaten you?”

Sakura shook her head, but then changed it to a nod.

“You can’t talk about it. Got it. Who did the threatening?” Ekyt asked.

Sakura nodded her head in the direction of the man who had talked to her.

“Go ahead and give him your answer. He won’t touch you.”

Whoa...when did he get like that? So protective of me...has he always been that way? But he's right, they shouldn't be threatening me. And there's two of them...If they attack.

"Rock Lee, correct?" Ibikki barked.

"Yes sir, I am Rock Lee, the Noble Green Beast of Konohagakure!" Lee answered with gusto.

"Good. You've been placed for the chunin exams."

"I have! Guy-sensei will be proud!"

Ibikki sighed. "He was, yes, very much so..." Ibikki replied, thinking of how Guy had hugged him. Ibikki continued after clearing his throat. "Your team has been selected.

"My team? But I am the only one on my squad who is not a chunin!" Lee told Ibikki.

"We're aware...there are two others who haven't attained the rank of chunin...your team is Uzumaki, Naruto and...Ekyt."

Lee cheered.

"Yes! I will make Guy-sensei proud! I will become a chunin! With Naruto-kun and Ekyt-san, we will dominate!" Lee started to jump and dance, cheering loudly.

Anko chuckled at Ibikki's murderous look.

"Come on Ibikki, you were a kid once. A LONG time ago, but still."

Ibikki shot Anko a glance. "Funny Anko. Very funny. I still say the kid needs to be punched."

They watched Lee dance around.

"He'll settle down Ibikki...after my exam, he won't have the energy to make his pinky dance!"

"Excuse me."

Jukiro saw a young man in a long coat waiting politely to speak with him.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" Jukiro asked amiably.

"Well, I hear you MIGHT have threatened my fr...girlfriend (Ekyt corrected himself. He's not used to that word, lol)."

"There must be a mistake, I haven't threatened anyone...Who's your girlfriend?"

Ekyt nodded at Sakura, who stared defiantly at Jukiro.

"I think your girlfriend is confused."

Ekyt took a step closer. "I don't think she is. And I would strongly urge you to stay away from her...you might find that it becomes...detrimental...to your health. Understand?"

"I certainly do sir, and I'm sorry if I upset her," Jukiro replied, bowing humbly.

Ekyt returned the bow, then stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and walked away!

SNAP!

Jukiro brought a stick he had hidden down across the young man's head.

"Ekyt!" Sakura cried out.

Poof!

Ekyt disappeared. The gathering villagers looked around, wondering where he went. That was answered when Jukiro found that he had a kunai held to his neck.

"Don't do that," Ekyt said darkly, holding the kunai in place. "It's not smart to threaten her, and then attack me. From behind, no less. Only scum attack when the enemy's back is turned. Keep that in mind."

Ekyt pulled the kunai away from the stunned man's neck.

From behind, he was jumped. The attacker was light, a child or female.

"Hey, let go of my boyfriend!" Sakura shouted, grabbing the girl around the neck and yanking her off Ekyt.

Sakura glared at the girl. "Yo, she-dog- let's go!" Sakura yelled.

Junkiro started toward the two girls, but Ekyt yanked him back.

"Don't even think it. You're the ones who attacked. Besides, if you even ruffle one pink hair on her head, I will bring you personally to hell."

Apparently Ekyt's threat was substantial, as Junkiro looked on sullenly. This hadn't been his day...

Sakura stepped in and clocked the girl. That was the end of the fight. That one chakra-enhanced punch sent the nameless girl skidding across the ground to Junkiro's feet.

"What are you people?!" Junkiro shouted.

"Ninja...in his case, samurai and ninja, but ninja," Sakura answered.

"Ninja? I thought you were only a healer!" Junkiro cried out. "I am very sorry for my disrespect! We would not have attacked if we had known!"

"Well, I'm not staying here. That solves that problem." Sakura stretched her arms.

"Light workout," Ekyt said.

"Yeah. Thanks for defending me. I really appreciate it. Just because I CAN take care of myself doesn't mean it's always appropriate."

Ekyt suddenly looked furious with himself. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have gotten involved! I'm new to this, I'm sorry if I screwed up..."

Sakura's gloved hand lightly grabbed his gloved hand. "It's okay, I'm glad you got involved. That stick would have killed me. I wouldn't have thought to use a clone jutsu there..."

Sakura could HEAR Ekyt's gulp. **Nervous Ekyt? C'mon, it's just me!**

That night, Lee, Sakura, and Ekyt sat around the bonfire they made on Lone Pine Mountain. They were halfway home. They had agreed to leave the Land of Herbs ASAP.

"Ekyt-san, I was wondering...the kunoichi...why did they call you the pervy samurai?"

Ekyt's head snapped up.

"I'd like to hear this too Ekyt-kun," Sakura said mischievously.

"Okay...well, they called me the "Pervy Samurai" because...okay. I was going to the hot spring, and I had my sword in my belt. The only problem was that it was a kunoichi-only time...and, well, I didn't know that. So as I was in there, Ino, Tenten, and even Kurenai all walked in, wearing only towels. Apparently, they were more angry than scared. Tenten is violent, and Kurenai is just plain scary...let's not talk about

what Ino did...”

Lee and Sakura cracked up.

“Wh-what did they do to you?!” Sakura managed to ask in between laughs.

Ekyt rubbed the back of his head. “I’m not entirely sure...I woke up about three hours later...They did SOMETHING, because I could barely move.”

Lee fell asleep soon, still reeling from opening the first Gate. Ekyt had since pulled out one of his scrolls, studying it’s contents by the fire’s questionable light. With a sigh, he gave up on the scroll.

“What’s the matter?” Sakura asked, concerned that Ekyt wasn’t studying.

“Can’t concentrate. Besides, that flickering light is going to ruin my eyes,” Ekyt replied. He didn’t sound all that upset.

“What’s bugging you?” Sakura questioned, concern in her voice as she gave Ekyt a concerned look.

“Nerves, I guess. It’s not every day you fight a kage, get your first girlfriend, and then get told that you’re in the chunin exams.”

Ekyt sighed again. Without the mask, Sakura noticed how defined his facial expressions were. This time, a shy smile, coupled with his signature blush, crossed his young face.

“I-it was mostly the kiss that distracted me...it’s a good thing,” Ekyt said shyly.

Sakura giggled again; she couldn’t help it.

“It’s funny...you’re this tough-as-nails warrior, you’ve stared death in the eyes...but you’re most afraid of the attention from a girl!”

Ekyt nodded. “That’s about the size of it.”

Sakura gave a loud, fake yawn.

“Oh well. I’m kinda tired. Good night.”

The next thing Ekyt knew, Sakura was using his chest as a pillow. Carefully, he shrugged off his coat and put it across her, like a blanket. The winds would pick up soon, and the nights were brutally cold in the mountains.

Ekyt’s mouth slowly formed a half-smile at the pink-haired kunoichi curled up against him.

There’s a first time for everything... he said, his grin spreading. He didn’t have it in him to sleep, so he stayed as still as possible for the few hours remaining in the night. They would leave for the Leaf Village at dawn.

Kakashi took a seat across from Guy.

“You know Kakashi, it looks like, much like you and I, Lee and Ekyt have a rivalry for the ages! Ah, youth! Lee’s such an amazing kid...”

Kakashi looked up from his book. “I’m sorry Guy, did you say something?”

Guy’s eyes twitched. “That was an excellent comeback, Rival Kakashi! To the point, and it kind of pissed me off...”

Kakashi looked at Guy, the same bored expression on his face.

“Well, as long as you’re pissed,” Kakashi said, giving a big thumbs-up to Guy.

“Lady Tsunade, it is inexcusable! He is NOT ready for the chunin exams!”

Tsunade rubbed her temples. “Ebisu, he is taking the exams. But, since you have a beef with him, you’re going to spar it out.”

Ebisu grinned smugly. “I defeated him last time, there’s hardly any reason to have a rematch!”

Tsunade raised an eyebrow. “The last time, the match was ended by the proctor because you kicked him on his broken leg. Now, I don’t want to hear about this again...If you protest this again, you will spar ME instead of him. Understood?”

Ebisu looked horrified at the thought.

“Yes Lady Tsunade, Understood.”

BONUS: SCRAPPED CONTENT! (Caution- it’s a tad...suggestive, but nothing major. Ages 12 and up, we’ll say)

Ekyt looked over at Lee, with “What the hell do I do?” clearly etched on his face.

Sakura’s laughter finally gave her away.

“I’m sorry Ekyt-kun, you’re just so innocent! But I know how to put an end to that...” she said seductively, leaning back and tossing her hair. Then she zipped next to him.

“Let’s go to the hot springs...you know...to celebrate...”

Lee was near tears, he was laughing so hard. Ekyt either couldn’t hear him, or just couldn’t move yet.

Ekyt stammered incoherently.

“Speechless? Already have ideas, hmmm, Ekyt-kun? You’re so bad...” Sakura cooed. She gave him a playful look. “Luckily, so am I! Give me some sugar, you bad boy!”

Sakura stepped back. Two seconds later, the train for nosebleed central had left.

“Think I over did it Lee?” Sakura asked.

Lee watched Ekyt land hard on his side, eyes still wide with shock.

“No Sakura-san. I think that was just the right amount. Do you...do you think you could talk to Linda-chan? That looked like fun...”

Sakura’s unmistakable look of anger crossed her face. WHAM!

“Pervert! YOU tell your girl what turns you on!” she shouted, stomping away.

Asuma offered Ekyt a cigarette. “Trust me. Once you’ve kissed, she owns you. Your fun is over kid.”

Kurenai shot Asuma death glare. “WHAT was that Asuma? Am I boring you?!”

Asuma turned pale. “I was kidding!”

He whispered to Ekyt “See what I mean?”

Ekyt didn’t take the cigarette. Asuma knew he wouldn’t. Just force of habit for Asuma to offer.

6 - A Name...

Lee, Sakura, and Ekyt arrived at the Leaf Village in the early hours of the next morning. Lee and Sakura had slept well. Ekyt, who hadn't slept at all, was just as refreshed at they were, for some reason.

"I'll give the report to Lady Tsunade," Ekyt offered. "I need to speak with her anyway."

"Sounds good to me! I can't wait to get home for a little while!" Sakura nudged Ekyt with her hip. "If you think I'm pretty NOW, wait until you see me all cleaned up!"

Sakura stuck her tongue out playfully. "See you later! Thanks again! Lee-San, say hi to Linda for me!" she jogged off.

"I must go as well, Guy-sensei wants a report, and I wish to speak with Naruto before we start training for the exams," Lee added.

"I'll catch up with you and Naruto later...I've to hustle up some medical skills," Ekyt muttered, rolling his left shoulder. All of him ached, but he shrugged it off. He didn't hurt any worse than any other day.

Except for his hand. The one that had been almost completely pierced by a kunai.

"It is lucky that a certain pink-haired medic-nin has taken a personal interest in you," Lee said mischievously.

"Lee...if I didn't need you to be healthy for the chunin exams...I would hurt you," Ekyt retorted with a smirk.

"Ekyt is here with his (koff) report."

Lady Tsunade looked up from her desk. "Send him in Hayate, thank you."

Tsunade broke into a smile as "jonin in genin's clothing" walked into her room, still wearing his winter wear. True to form, duty before comfort. It was a little chilly, but that trench coat must have been murder.

"I thought you were all business Ekyt," Tsunade began, getting up and staring at him from across the desk.

Ekyt blinked in shocked. "Have I done something wrong?"

Tsunade seemed to tower over him. "You completed your mission successfully, so no. I'm just surprised that someone as focused as you found a girlfriend. Much less Sakura. I swear, if I heard "Sasuke" one more time, I was going to lock her up! So, howdya do it?"

Tsunade leaned on the desk, apparently interested in the gossip.

"Damn that Umisu...that big-mouth dragon..." Ekyt snarled under his breath.

Tsunade laughed good-naturedly. "Kid, you are something else. If I had just landed the hottest guy (or the prettiest kunoichi, in your case), I would be flaunting it, not hiding it."

"The village might not like that. Or me liking her, for that matter. That's no so important, I guess..."

Tsunade nodded for Ekyt to stand at the window next to her. It was a beautiful day. A light breeze lifted Tsunade's hair and Ekyt's coat. The bright blue sky was dotted with puffy white clouds, and even some birds soaring majestically. The village itself seemed alive with movement; it seemed like all of the village was in a good mood. Businesses were prospering, and people were finally getting over the depression caused by the Sand Village and Sound Village attacks during the chunin exams four years ago.

"Just answer me this: Do you like her? Sakura, I mean?"

Ekyt nodded. "I do. I have for four years..."

Tsunade gave his hitai-ate head covering a ruffle. "Then who cares what anyone else thinks? It's not hurting you, her, me, or the village, so nobody else should have a problem."

Tsunade sat back down, while Ekyt walked back to the front of the desk. He began to give his report. Tsunade stopped him.

"Hayate, please see that we are not disturbed for any reason," Tsunade told him.

"(Koff) Alright." Hayate replied, exiting the room.

Tsunade looked at Ekyt again. "Hmm...you got a resemblance to Hayate. How long have you had bags under your eyes, kid?"

"Four years. Since my eye..." Ekyt's voice trailed off. Ekyt's gaze shifted to the ground momentarily.

"...Please continue. Ibikki mentioned that you fought a Kage?"

"That's true," Ekyt admitted. He explained in detail, and then explained about Koori, and the girl he had tortured, Kora.

Tsunade sat back in stunned silence. "My God...that's sadistic..."

"Lady Tsunade, I DO have one theory that I thought might be relevant..."

Tsunade raised an eyebrow, she invited Ekyt to continue.

"It seems you hold ties to a clan that is no longer...with us." Lady Tsunade rummaged in her desk drawer for a moment. She extracted a white envelope. Ekyt recognized the handwriting as his mother's.

"Umisu delivered this. Don't worry, your parents are well, they sent me a letter separately.

Ekyt looked absolutely shocked. He stared at the envelope stupidly, then opening it after some hesitation.

Son,

Your last letter worried us, although we knew you'd do fine on that mission. Your father and I are almost ready to move, it's not safe to stay in one place too long. I won't tell you where, your dragon knows our new address.

One name you mentioned stuck in my head, and I couldn't figure out why. It hit me the other day. I've enclosed a picture of your "new" relative.

Keep in touch son. We love you.

The letter ended without a signature or a greeting. This was done to protect Ekyt and his parents, as they could easily be hunted down if their names were found out.

Ekyt reached into the envelope and pulled out a picture.

What? Is this real?

Ekyt, as a baby, at his cousin's wedding. The ring bearer's picture was the one his Mother had been referring to.

It was a picture, unmistakably, of a 3 year old Kimimaro Kaguya.

"Lady Tsunade...there's one surviving member of this clan. Kimimaro Kaguya. Rock Lee fought him.

One of the Kaguya clan must have married my cousin...we knew he was killed...that explains why I never knew of the family name..."

NOTE: In this fic, Kimimaro is still alive, but is suffering from the same illness as in the canon works. Hayate Gekko is also still living, so there's no confusion.

-NG

Lady Tsunade looked down.

"We'd like you to take the name..."

"What?" Ekyt couldn't help it; the Kaguya clan had met a gruesome end, to the point where the name was taboo.

Lady Tsunade put a hand on his arm.

"Relax. Just for the chunin exams. Partly to pacify Ebisu..." Tsunade's glare told Ekyt two things:

1. She wasn't happy with Ebisu
2. He had better do what she said

"I'll do it."

Naruto and Lee sparred.

"Hey, where's the pervy samurai?" Naruto wondered.

Lee gave a heavy sigh. "He is learning medical jutsu from Sakura-san."

Naruto put his arms behind his head, knocking his already-messy blonde hair around. "Whatever. I bet she's teaching him the female anatomy..."

Lee glared at Naruto. "I hope you are not implying that Sakura-san is...easy."

"Relax bushy-brow! It was a joke! I doubt Ekyt would have any clue what to do anyway..."

"And you know?" Lee scoffed. THAT was a mistake.

"Sure I do! Watch! Ninja Harem Jutsu!"

A hundred naked girl Naruto's all clung to Lee.

"Leeeee-saaaannnnn!" They cooed in unison.

Lee never stood a chance. The giant nosebleed that followed sent him flying high into the air. He then crashed hard, still not entirely recovered.

Naruto cracked up! "You shoulda seen your face! It's like you've never seen a girl before! I got you GOOD, believe it!"

Sakura hummed merrily as she tied her hair back with her headband.

Things have changed so much...from being Sasuke's fangirl, all the way to having a boyfriend. And I've grown, too...I led my first mission, saved a patient who was nearly terminal...kissed my first boy...Things are looking up! CHA!

Sakura tossed her hair one more time, making sure it was just so. She was expecting Ekyt any time now.

Knock Knock.

Sakura smiled slightly. **Right on time...THAT hasn't changed.**

When she opened the door, she found Ekyt. But he was looking at a picture, his brow furrowed in concentration, maybe even frustration.

"Ekyt-kun, is everything alright?" Sakura asked, genuinely worried. **Without his mask, his expressions are so defined...No wonder he wore it. It might be cute to me, but to an enemy, it's a dead giveaway...**

"Sakura-chan...I just found out I have a cousin...and...this is strange. Why don't you take a look, I'm kind of at a loss for words..." Ekyt held up the picture, offering it to Sakura.

Sakura took it, wondering what could be so surprising.

"Kimimaro? Does this mean that you...you're a Kaguya?"

Ekyt shook his head. "No. It's not a blood relation thing. I think we'd be third cousins or something. Lady Tsunade wants me to take the surname, but only for the chunin exams. Something Ebisu complained about."

Sakura shrugged. "Well, come in. We can talk more about this inside."

Ekyt stepped inside. It hit him that this was the first time he had ever been invited into a girl's room. The first time he had broken in, and that was Sakura's room too. Although he had broken in for a good reason, and that was to help her, so there was never any hard feelings. But being invited in...much like a lot of things in this new relationship, it scared the hell out of him. He took a cautious step inside.

Sakura's apartment was incredibly tidy. Her bed was tucked in one corner. The sun's rays shined down on the red comforter. From there, the sun shined on her dresser, where there was picture of Team 7, probably near the last time they were all together.

"Well, let's put that aside for now. There's really only two jutsus you need to learn. The "Chakra Scalpel" and "Poison Removal". They aren't too difficult, as long as you can control your chakra.

An hour later, Ekyt was saying goodbye to Sakura.

"You did really good today, Ekyt-kun! You just need a little more work on the poison removal."

Ekyt scratched at an angry red blotch on his arm. That poison was a pain to get rid of.

Sakura shook her head. "We'll poison Naruto next time."

"How about Ebisu?" Ekyt suggested.

Sakura rolled her eyes, smiling tolerantly. "Whatever you say sport. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm supposed to meet Naruto and Lee for some training. But...um, well...if you like...(damnit, how does anyone do this?)we could...do...something...whenever your free..."

Real smooth Ekyt! Now she probably thinks you're retarded! Well, she wouldn't be the first...but you actually CARE what she thinks.

"Really? I'd love to!" Sakura exclaimed, apparently not sharing Ekyt's thought process.

"I think you'd better name the place...because I am completely clueless..." Ekyt admitted.

"Good idea, I'm afraid you'd pass out if I made you choose! How about Ichiraku, tomorrow night?"

"Sure, it's a..." **damn it...THAT word. I can't say it! It's too...scary? Yeah, the big brave samurai/Shinobi warrior can't say the word d...**

"Date?" Sakura finished. "You mean "It's a date."

Ekyt nodded, suddenly feeling like he couldn't say a word.

I REALLY hope I'm not tongue-tied for tomorrow night...

7 - Ekyt X Sakura: The Village Reacts!

Ekyt and Sakura walked to Ichiraku. They both immediately ordered. Wasabi Vegetable for Ekyt, beef for Sakura. Their conversation were somewhat pleasant, if a little forced. Ekyt's shyness was really glaring, something Sakura seemed to think of fondly. But their little outing wasn't going to last long.

"Well, what do we have here? Finally given up Sakura?"

Ekyt didn't turn around, but he held his chopsticks tighter. He chanced a glance at Sakura. She looked...scared. Ekyt shifted into "boyfriend mode."

"It's been a while, hasn't it Sasuke?" Ekyt said over his shoulder.

Sasuke looked bored. "Oh, you. Still a genin?"

Ekyt nodded. "Afraid so. And you?"

"Genin."

"Well, good luck on the chunin exams. Don't let us keep you..." Ekyt said dismissively.

"I'm curious Sakura...why pick him? Did you give up on me?"

Sakura started to shake, but said nothing. Ekyt started to feel anger welling up, but his voice was working just fine.

"Back off."

Everyone in Ichiraku ground to a halt. A stare down, with the promise of a fight, really got everyone's attention.

Sasuke smirked nastily. "Really? You'll make me?"

"If I have to," Ekyt replied, sounding almost like Kakashi.

Sasuke ignored Ekyt again, focusing on Sakura.

"I've never been more powerful Sakura...more alive...you should be happy for me...if you really love me."

The chopsticks left Ekyt's hands like senbon. They sped toward Sasuke, who knocked them down with a kunai. Ekyt threw four more, then leapt closer and tossed his piping-hot ramen. The boiling soup and noodles struck Sasuke's face, blinding him temporarily. That gave Ekyt an opportunity to use a body replacement technique, switching places with Sakura.

Asuma was walking by, lighting a cigarette. He had just taken his first puff and exhaled when he saw the trouble. He sprinted over to Ichiraku, hoping that his eye were deceiving him.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"He was torturing Sakura, so we, er, exchanged pleasantries," Ekyt explained.

"Sasuke Uchiha...You must be here for the chunin exams." Asuma's voice held tones of displeasure.

"That's right," Sasuke replied with a sarcastic grin.

"Well, then you shouldn't be here pestering them. Scram." Asuma jerked his thumb toward the exit.

Sasuke stalked toward the exit, but turned sharply before he left. "You've just signed your own death warrant. You Ekyt, and Sakura too."

Ekyt stared back, but said nothing. That had been enough trouble. He needed to help Sakura, that was

more important right now.

“Sakura...”

It was no good, she was really out of it. Then it hit Ekyt. Genjutsu!

“Release!” Ekyt called, adding the proper hand sign.

Sakura perked up instantly. She looked up, fear etched on her face.

“It’s alright Sakura. He’s gone.” Ekyt hoped he sounded assuring.

Sakura’s breathing was still heavy. Ekyt gulped, then took the plunge.

“It’s okay Sakura-chan,” Ekyt said, pulling the scared kunoichi close to him. She, either consciously or unconsciously, let him do so. Ekyt put his arm around her shoulders. She could feel her bare skin, and it was goose-bump filled and shaking. After a few moments, he felt her relax a little. She curled up against him, her head on his vest. Ekyt stroked her hair with his free hand. After a little while, she wrapped her arms around his slim waist, pulling herself in tighter. The shaking was almost gone. Still, she didn’t seem to want to move just yet.

After a few more minutes of silent cuddling, Sakura broke the silence.

“I-I should go home...”

Ekyt helped her up. Sakura stumbled, but regained her footing quickly.

“I’ll walk you home...if that’s alright...” Ekyt’s instinct to protect had overcome his shyness...well, almost.

“T-thanks. I’d...I’d like that,” Sakura answered. Her beautiful green eyes were shimmering with silent tears. That genjutsu had been powerful, and she was ashamed she hadn’t seen it coming.

Why did HE have to show up...just when things were starting to work...

Ekyt walked Sakura home. He even walked her inside and made sure every window was secure. He remembered how to make tea, so he busied himself with that while Sakura pulled on her pajamas in the bathroom. That was really the only treatment for such a brutal genjutsu attack, once it had been broken. Rest and green tea.

Sakura walked out of the bathroom, thanking God her pajamas were modest. Well, to her. If she had been feeling better, she would have toyed with Ekyt. With that in mind, she crawled into bed, flopping down. She felt her face redden in shame.

Both of us...the first date, ruined! Why aren’t I stronger?! I didn’t even see the genjutsu coming! And Ekyt...he was willing to fight Sasuke...I’m going to be stronger. I’m a chunin, and I’m not going to be pushed around anymore! CHA! Hell yeah!

Ekyt placed the cup of tea near her bed.

“Feeling better?”

Sakura indicated for him to sit. “I am, thanks to you. But...could you...could you tell me something?”

Sakura asked, blushing shyly.

“Sure.”

Sakura stood up and ran her hands through her hair, smiling shyly.

“Are these pajamas too revealing?” They were a two-piece deal, red shorts and a red top. The top ended just below where her chest met her stomach, and her shorts started just below her navel, leaving a few inches of skin exposed. The shorts ended just before the knees.

Ekyt, apparently, couldn’t answer. **This is a trick question...there’s no right answer...I either come across as a pervert (oh, don’t wanna go down that road again, kunoichi are violent) or like I don’t care about how she looks.**

Sakura continued to stare innocently at him, milking the tension. Finally, she couldn't take it. She HAD to laugh.

"I didn't believe you could be as innocent as you came across. But you must be! Ekyt-kun, you don't have to answer that..."

Ekyt breathed again.

"...if you pay a toll. Kiss me on the cheek, and I let you off the hook."

Ekyt did. He felt his lips meet her smooth face. Despite his nervousness...this felt...comforting. When he heard Sakura sigh, he knew she felt the same way.

"Do you need anything else?" Ekyt asked, still trying to figure out what he had just done.

"D-do you think Sasuke will come back?" Sakura replied. She was feeling nervous again.

Fate can't be that cruel! H-how is happening? And why? I just figure out that I'm in love with this boy, when the guy I USED to be in love with comes along...

Ekyt looked down and away. "He might. It might be better...if we found you a more secure place to live...until this is over."

Sakura nodded her approval. "Let's talk to Lady Tsunade. She'll know what to do."

On the way, Ekyt and Sakura ran into Lee, Guy, and Kakashi.

"So it's true. You were right Lee," Guy told him, patting him on the shoulder.

"It's the power of youth, Guy-sensei! It is just like I said!"

Kakashi looked up from his book. "Well, look at this. (Big, fake, joking voice) The love between a man and a woman...is there anything stronger?!"

Sakura and Ekyt exchanged glances.

"I'm going to take a wild guess...Umisu told you, right?" Ekyt asked Kakashi.

"Sure. After all, Sakura IS still my student." Kakashi reached into his pouch and handed Ekyt a small green book.

"This'll come in handy," Kakashi told him with a wink.

The book was titled "Make-Out Tactics."

"Get your mind out of the gutter Kakashi-sensei!" Sakura exclaimed.

"Right, right, sorry. So, the chunin exams. It looks like you're going to be one of my students for now Ekyt. You'll be training with me, to learn some special tactics, worthy of your Junior Black Ops status."

Sakura seemed surprised. She knew Ekyt was an interrogator, but ANBU material? Was he THAT powerful? And only a genin?

It's like me...I'm the top medic, behind Lady Tsunade...it looks like my new boyfriend is the top genin...who knew either of us would pull that off?

"Kakashi-sensei, I'm not sure if you've heard...well, this isn't a conversation for here. Do you have the time to come to Lady Tsunade's office?" Ekyt asked, looking around quickly.

"If it's that important, sure. Lead the way," Kakashi answered. **If it's got him AND Sakura worked up...It can't be a good thing.**

"WHAT?!" Tsunade exclaimed, her chair flying backward as she leapt to her feet.

Kakashi's visible eye showed surprise

Ekyt nodded. "It's true...he's back. And he's out to get Sakura...and possibly Naruto. If Asuma hadn't come along...Things could have been much worse."

"Damn it! First the chunin exams, now THIS?! Damn the council, letting the Sound Village participate...I don't like the thought of those bastards walking freely in the village...especially Orochimaru..."

"Lady Tsunade...maybe it's time I tracked him down..."

"You mean..." Tsunade began.

"Yes. Him. The third legendary sanin."

Tsunade's face switched to a thoughtful expression.

"Yes...yes, that's a good idea Kakashi. You can set out whenever you're ready. But I want you to have at least two days with Ekyt first. Because he's drawing his first ANBU assignment. Right now, in fact."

Tsunade shifted to face Ekyt, who was doing his best to contain his excitement and, admittedly, his nervousness.

"ANBU draws assignments that are potentially fatal...missions that require loyalty...you are one of the youngest members of ANBU, the youngest ever being Kakashi here. I will not assign you to missions that are assassination, because I know you aren't a killer. Your mission is to protect Sakura. I'll assume that's your mission as her (snickers to annoy Ekyt) boyfriend anyway, but she is also the top medic in Konohagakure, and she needs protection."

Ekyt looked excited, then his face dropped. "Lady Tsunade...do you really think I can handle it...I could never forgive myself if I let anything happen to Sakura..."

Tsunade gave him a wide grin, then put a hand under his chin, forcing him to look her in the eyes.

"I KNOW you can. And I don't think Sakura doubts you either." Tsunade let go of his face, smiled briefly, then leaned forward again, back to business. "I'll assign someone to her when you're in the exams, training, or when you need a rest. No need for me to kill you...not on your first ANBU mission anyway."

Sakura grabbed Ekyt's hand.

"You can handle it Ekyt-kun."

"There IS one more thing...Ekyt, you're going to have to wear the mask again. One like Kakashi's will do the trick. I can't have my ANBU agents at risk for inhaling poison."

While Lee took a turn guarding Sakura, Kakashi and Ekyt found a field to practice in. It was the same field where Kakashi had first trained with Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura.

"So, let's start with you telling me all the jutsus you know." Kakashi put his book away and settled in to listen.

"Alright. Here they are:

Ninjutsu:

Dragon's Ember Jutsu (D rank, Offensive, Unique to Ekyt) Fire shot from the fist

Shadow Clone Jutsu (D rank, Offensive Unique to Ekyt)

Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation (C rank, Offensive Unique to Ekyt) Clone performs the Dragon's Ember jutsu

Dragon's Path Jutsu (C rank, N/A Unique to Ekyt) User "Surfs" along the path of the fire created by the Dragon's Ember jutsu

Fire Style: Dragon's Ember Encampment Wall Jutsu (C rank, Defensive Unique to Ekyt) A wall of fire that protects the user

Body Replacement Jutsu (E rank, N/A)

Body Flicker Jutsu (E rank, N/A)

Disappearing Jutsu (E rank, N/A)

Rope Escape Jutsu (E rank, N/A)

Hidden Shadow Snake Hand (C rank, Offensive)

Drawing Blade's Course (Not ranked, Offensive, unique to Ekyt) The user can elongate any weapon by transferring chakra into it.

Summoning Jutsu (C-rank, N/A)

Twin Summoning Jutsu (A rank, N/A)

Remote Detonation Jutsu (E rank, N/A)

Ekyt can summon a Keeshonden dog ("Holly") and a Bearded Dragon ("Umisu") Umisu is mostly used for delivering messages, while Holly is used for tracking and surveillance. Holly can speak (In a Rouge the Bat-esque voice), while Umisu has body language that Ekyt can decipher.

Medical:

Chakra Scalpel- (A rank, medical)

Poison Extraction- (A rank, medical)

Genjutsu:

Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique (C rank, N/A)

Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique (D rank, N/A)

Sly Mind Affect Technique (Crank, N/A)

Demonic Illusion: Mind Barring Technique (S rank, N/A unique to Ekyt) By attacking the nervous system and brain simultaneously, the user stops the brain's messages from reaching the body, causing paralysis. This is done over a period of five minutes, so it uses a negligible amount of chakra.

Demonic Illusion: Mind Barring Technique: Speed Break (S-rank, N/A Unique to Ekyt) A faster version of it's namesake. The faster the attack is performed, the more likely brain damage becomes to the enemy.

Taijutsu: (NOTE: This does not include standard stuff. Punches, kicks, etc)

Dynamic Entry (D rank, offensive) Flying Side Kick

Forced Exit (D rank, defensive Unique to Ekyt) Heel Push Kick to the chest, knocks the target backward, out of range of attack for both user and target.

Goken (AKA Strong Fist) (Style)

VERY LITTLE Jyuuken(Gentle Palm) (Style)

Leaf Whirlwind (C rank, Offensive) Spinning Heel Kick

Konoha Strong Wind (D rank, Offensive) Sweep Kick

Konoha Hurricane (D rank, Offensive) Kick that launches the opponent into the air. Performed from a crouching position.

Backward Konoha Snapdragon (C-rank, Offensive Unique to Ekyt) The user grabs the opponent around the neck and one leg, then leaps high into the air, driving the enemy back-first into the ground.

Backward Konoha Snapdragon: Modified (C-rank, offensive Unique to Ekyt) Starts the same as the regular Snapdragon, but the user shifts and grabs the enemy's arms while standing on the enemy's back. This drives the opponent chest-first into the ground

Seven Gates of Chakra (N/A, N/A)

Kekkai Genkai (Blue Flame Chakra, Transparent Hand Chakra) NOTE: This is Ekyt's Kekkai Genkai abilities, they are all unique to him

All the following Jutsus begin with Ekyt feeling a particularly strong emotion: Love, Hate, or (The final one he has yet to feel, and you only feel it once) Death. The emotion builds up in his chest and is painful. Ekyt puts a hand to his chest. When he removes it, a blue flame springs up around his hand. His hand becomes transparent.

Transparent Hand Jutsu: Blue Flame Protection Seal (N/A, Sealing) A sealing jutsu shown to be effective against most curse marks, including Orochimaru's.

Blue Flame Chakra: Swallow Strike Finality Jutsu (N/A, Offensive) Ekyt throws a punch as a distraction, then uses an advanced version of the body flicker jutsu to "disappear" and reappear at the enemy's feet. He uses a backfist to hit the enemy under the chin. When the strike lands, all the emotional and physical pain Ekyt has ever endured is put into the enemy. The enemy's blood vessels start to rupture, turning their skin red. They vomit violently and bleed from the mouth due to internal injuries. This jutsu is capable of crippling, but not killing.

Blue Flame Chakra: Seven Gates Unlocked Finality Jutsu (N/A, Offensive)

Seven gates of chakra are opened, making this the most powerful strike in Ekyt's repertoire. With this power, he can easily kill with a single punch. He has never killed, although he is aware of this ability. The speed of this jutsu is such that Ekyt's molecules vibrate at a speed that allows him to put any part of his body into another. For example, he could put his hand inside someone's chest and crush their heart.

The jutsu is potentially deadly to Ekyt, although with proper chakra control, it will do no lasting harm.

Blue Flame Chakra: Focused Hardening (N/A, Defensive) Ekyt can focus any amount of his Blue Flame chakra to any part of his body, hardening it against attacks, even from weapons and some jutsus."

Kakashi looked mildly surprised. "That's a lot of jutsus for someone so young...especially since you weren't raised in a Shinobi home...And you've pioneered quite a few jutsu...of course, there's always more to learn. Let me pass on a couple to you..."

Five hours later, Ekyt was dripping with sweat. He was on all fours, panting in exhaustion.

"Ready to quit?" Kakashi asked mildly.

"Not yet. I'm going to get this one right..."

Ekyt made a series of handsigns, each time with increasing speed.

"Water Clone Jutsu!" he called out. Beside him, the puddle he had been working with formed into a

clone of him.

"Well done! You learned that quick! You'll make a great ANBU agent. But, let me ask you this: What else do you have in mind for your life?"

Ekyt sat down, letting the water clone splash down on top of him. That felt great, what a relief!

"I'd like to teach some day. And...well, maybe even have a squad of my own."

Kakashi appeared to smile. He picked up his book again.

"How about a wife and kids? I'll bet my little Sakura would be happy to oblige..." Kakashi said, tapping Ekyt on the back.

Ekyt rolled his good eye. "Kakashi-sensei, with all due respect...get bent."

Kakashi chuckled good naturedly.

"It's good to know that you have your priorities in order. Well, it's time for you to head back to the village, and it's time for me to find the Toad Sage."

"Good luck Kakashi-sensei," Ekyt said, bowing politely.

"You too...one more thing...don't hesitate to use the book if your relationship get's stale."

Kakashi leapt off, chuckling to himself.

"Bastard..." Ekyt muttered, but he couldn't help grinning himself.

Ekyt walked by Hayate on the way back. They were occasionally paired up on missions. Hayate had sort of a brother complex when it came to Ekyt.

"(koff) Ekyt, you have a minute?" the Tokubetsu Jonin asked.

"Sure Hayate-sensei," Ekyt replied, wondering why Hayate had decided to talk so much, for him. **He's as nervous as I am...**

"Well, you showed me that sword work. (koff) Since you're ANBU, I can show you a jutsu that's been great for me. (koff) Because you're part samurai, you'll have no trouble with it."

An hour later, Ekyt had learned the "Dance of the Crescent Moon". It was an attack in which three shadow clones joined Ekyt with swords matching his. They attacked in unison, making it next to impossible to defend against.

"Thank you Hayate-sensei."

"(koff) No problem. Besides (Rare grin by Hayate)...you've got a girl to take care of."

Ekyt (With huge sweatdrop) just stared. Coming from Hayate, that was the equivalent of Jiraiya going a week without doing "research".

On his way back to Sakura, Ekyt ran into Lee and Guy. He should have known right away that something was up.

"Ekyt-san!" Lee called. Ekyt turned around.

"Yes Lee?"

"Ekyt-san, Guy-sensei and I were wondering...What does Sakura-san taste like?"

Lee and Guy took off running, both laughing hysterically. Ekyt made a series of rapid hand signs.

"Dragon's ember jutsu!"

Two small flames shot from his fist, igniting Lee and Guy's matching spandex suits.

"How does it feel to have your @\$@ literally burning?" Ekyt replied dryly. **Damn, I had known I was going to get ribbed...but these people are insatiable!**

"Ekyt-kun...what DO I taste like?" Sakura asked, a finger over her lips and her eyes wide.

"Whoa! Where did you come from?!" Ekyt wondered aloud.

"Oh, I was just coming to greet you. Apparently, we're both being moved to some hotel under false

names.”

“That’s a relief, neither of our houses are safe.”

Sakura gave Ekyt a nod, and then a cute smile.

“I saw what you did to Guy and Lee...”

“They deserved it,” Ekyt muttered, smiling despite his dark tone.

“They’re lucky you got to them first...” Sakura too was smiling.

“HEY BILLBOARD BROW!”

Sakura’s head snapped in the direction of the voice.

“Oh damn, it WOULD have to be Ino...”

NEXT TIME: WHAT DOES INO HAVE TO SAY? THEN, A ONE-MONTH TIME SKIP- THE FIRST TWO TESTS OF THE CHUNIN EXAMS!

BONUS: SOME SCRAPPED CONTENT! (WARNING- IT’S MILDLY SUGGESTIVE)

“Iruka-sensei! And you Naruto!” Ekyt was surprised to see them. He hadn’t seen either of them for quite some time.

Iruka smiled kindly. “Would you like to join us? I mean, if Ichiraku will let you back in. I heard you caused quite the disturbance the other day.”

Ekyt nodded his agreement. He didn’t see it, but behind him, Sakura nodded to Naruto.

“So, I hear you’re with Sakura now. I can’t say I’m surprised,” Iruka said innocently.

“Really? Why is that sensei?” Ekyt wanted to know. (You think that, by now, he would know this was a trap!)

“Well, both of you are shy, kind, caring, and don’t have any common sense,” Iruka said with a laugh.

“Besides, the way you defended her...that wasn’t just friendship. So, now that you’re together...What doe she taste I-”

“Please don’t finish that sentence sensei. I’d rather keep on liking you just as you are- alive,” Ekyt said, mockingly angry.

“Now Naruto!” Sakura whispered.

“Right! Ninja Harem Jutsu!” he whispered.

“Irukaaaaaaaa-kuuunnnnn...”

“Ekyt-kunnnnnnn....”

Ekyt and Iruka turned around.

“Not again!” They exclaimed in unison.

One hundred naked, posing, kiss-blowing Naruto girls. The two Shinobi never stood a chance.

Two nosebleeds with the power of rocket fuel later, Naruto high-fived Sakura.

“Again! Iruka-sensei and Ekyt are closet pervs!” Naruto declared.

Sakura looked at Ekyt, her hands on her hips.

“Is that true Ekyt-kun? If you wanted a look, all you had to do was ask, you bad boy!”
Ekyt: 00’

8 - The Chunin Exams

Ino sauntered up, followed by Choji and Shikamaru.

“Well Sakura, I never thought it would happen! YOU got a boyfriend?!” Ino crowed. Choji and Shikamaru didn’t share her mirth apparently.

Sakura smiled and yanked Ekyt closer. “That’s right Ino-pig. As I recall, you’re still single...”

Ino turned red in the face. “Well, when I get a boyfriend, he won’t be defective like this one!” Ino shouted, pointing at Ekyt.

Ekyt’s expression remained neutral, maybe even a little amused. Choji shook his head, crunching loudly.

“Man, Ino’s cruel!” he exclaimed around a mouthful of chips.

“She’s just jealous she didn’t land (In her words) “The hottest thing since Sasuke Uchiha,” Shikamaru drawled, not helping the situation.

“JEALOUS!” Ino shouted, pointing at Ekyt. “WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO BE JEALOUS OF?!”

Ekyt shook his head. This was almost funny, in a sad way. Are people really this shallow?

Sakura, once she saw Ekyt wasn’t bothered by it, smiled widely.

“Y’know Ino, I think red is your color. It looks so great on your face...wait, are you trying to copy my color scheme?” Sakura added the sarcastic accusation at the end.

“Oh, that’s gotta hurt,” Shikamaru said, grinning at how Ino had been humbled.

“For sure!” Choji agreed. He smirked at Ino’s obvious anger and embarrassment.

Ino sputtered furiously. “I bet you two aren’t even together! Hey, Ekyt! How much did she pay you to be her dog?!”

Ekyt raised an eyebrow. “It’s sad, Ino, the way you throw yourself at me...”

Sakura, Choji, and Shikamaru howled with laughter. Ino had just been burned, but good! And she was, understandably, outraged. She swung a finger, pointing at Ekyt, then commenced shouting.

“You two are such fakes!” Ino shouted in a rage. “I’ll bet you’ve never even kissed her!”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Of *course* he has, moron!” she told Ino, making it sound like the most obvious thing in the world.

“PROVE IT!” Ino yelled, beside herself.

Ekyt and Sakura exchanged glances. Sakura was surprised to find Ekyt didn’t seem nervous at all. He simply slid his mask down around his neck and waited. It took Sakura a second to recover from the shock, but she stepped into his embrace. Their lips met in a warm embrace of their own. Without speaking, both had decided to milk this kiss for all it was worth, thanks to Ino watching. Her reaction was going to be too good to pass up!

“Okay, okay, I believe you! What are you, joined at the lips?! Break it up!” Ino frantically called out, waving her arms wildly, like she wasn’t sure what to do with them.

“You asked for it,” Shikamaru pointed out dryly. “Man, your complaining is such a drag...”

“I said a kiss, not a make-out!” Ino protested loudly, shooting a glare at Shikamaru.

“Looks like you lost this round Ino,” Choji added gleefully. He hadn’t forgotten some of the “fat” remarks she had made to him.

“Come on, let’s go! If I see those two in a lip lock again I’m gonna throw up!”

“Catch you guys later,” Shikamaru said with a vague wave as he slouched away.

“Nice one!” Choji told them. He too bounded, er, rolled off.

Ekyt maintained his position until everyone was out of site. Then he breathed out a big sigh.

"Wow...didn't think I was gonna pull that off," he murmured.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Sakura questioned him, a little worried.

"I might not have shown it, but I was nervous as all get-out," Ekyt admitted shyly, looking at the ground.

"I've been wondering about that Ekyt-kun. I know it's your nature...but is there something about me that makes you really nervous? Is it something I can fix?"

"No, it's not you at all Sakura-chan. It's just...well, me. I'm new to this, and I've never been so...set, I guess, on a girl before. All I ever did was study, and this...well, it's new to me."

This girl really cares...Sakura was willing to change...for me...I don't think I've ever gotten that kind of love from anyone except my parents...I always said it would take a special girl to put up with me...and Sakura is definitely special...

Sakura nodded understandingly. "I was always so fixated on Sasuke, it's new to me too. I wish I was as self-assured as I told Ino...Ekyt-kun, I'm just as scared as you are. I just don't show it. My Inner-Sakura does, though."

Ekyt gulped, then straightened his hitai-ate. "Well, it's always awkward, I guess. From what I'm told anyway."

"Yeah," Sakura agreed, "We'll figure it out! Awkwardness somehow kinda suits you...it's kind of cute..."

"It's not hard to figure out why I was attracted to you...but what you saw in me...I'd ask you why you picked me, but I'm almost afraid to find out."

Sakura wished she knew if he was joking or not. A sudden chill sprang up.

"Well, come on then Mr ANBU prodigy. It's time for me to go home," Sakura said in a mockingly serious tone. She grabbed Ekyt's arm and pulled herself in close to him.

Each wondered how they had gotten lucky enough to find the other.

One hour later, Kakashi had stopped by with Ekyt's new uniform. It wasn't going to be required all the time, just at formal events and on select missions.

"I look...like a complete @\$\$ sensei," Ekyt told Kakashi, holding his arms out in disgust.

"Oh, come on, I wore it. It's not that bad. Besides, you used to wear that samurai skirt..." Kakashi argued.

"Kakashi-sensei, you have something resembling muscle! I'm a scrawny teenager! And it was a hakama, damnit, not a skirt! HA-KA-MA!" Ekyt protested.

"Only one way to find out..." Kakashi replied mischievously.

"Sensei, don't do it..." Ekyt warned.

"She'll know eventually...Sakura, can you come here a minute?" Kakashi sang.

"Damn it..." Ekyt hissed, giving Kakashi a dark glare.

Sakura came into the room after knocking.

"Yes sensei...WHOA!" Sakura's exclamation brought a smile to Kakashi's face.

(Picture Ekyt standing under a spotlight, twinkling. You know, like in anime!)

"Look at you! So Kyuuu-teeeee!!! (translation: Cute, if you don't read fangirl!)" Sakura squealed, going into fangirl mode.

Ekyt had never experienced something like Sakura's fangirl mode before. He didn't know what to expect. He just knew how he felt.

Like a retard. This wasn't him...well, it WAS, but it was awkward.

Sakura's squeals were derived from her reaction to Ekyt's ANBU uniform. The sleeveless black shirt,

long black pants, sword across the back, knife harnessed on one leg, kunai pouch on the other. His custom-made katana from his samurai days was in a sash tied across his waist. His chain mail shirt was visible underneath the thin black shirt. He wore his vest over the whole thing, but having his arms open like that sort of bothered him. Most likely because he wasn't overly muscular. His body was healthy and functional, martial-artist muscular rather than mountain of muscle muscular.

"See? Is this so bad?" Kakashi questioned, eye twinkling with mischief.

Ekyt was too busy staring at Sakura, who was nearly drooling, hanging on his arm and staring at him, heart nearly visible in her eyes.

"Kakashi-sensei, will she be all right?" Ekyt pointed with his free hand to Sakura. Sakura grabbed at the hand, smiling widely, apparently not in control of her body.

"Oh, that happens with her. Just give her lots of attention for a few hours, she'll snap out of it."

Kakashi disappeared in a puff of smoke. Ekyt realized he was trapped. The uniform was causing Sakura's problem (Rabid fangirl-ism). But he couldn't take it off, not in mixed company...

I guess I've gotta wait it out...

A small grin formed under Ekyt's mask. **Could be worse...**

ONE MONTH LATER...

Time for the chunin exams. The written exam was an easy one. Ekyt and Lee knew enough for themselves AND Naruto. They expected the tenth question trap, so they passed relatively easily. Ibikki took Ekyt aside after the test.

"Listen...I've got the best agents watching Sakura, so she can come. I think she'd want to be there to cheer you on," Ibikki told Ekyt. Before Ekyt could thank him, Ibikki told him to get to the next exam.

"Chunin aren't late!" he barked. **Ekyt Kaguya, for now anyway. He'll be one to watch someday...hell, he is now...I'm going to enjoy this...this is shaping up to be one of the most interesting chunin exams we've ever had...**

"The Forest of Death...It got it's name honestly- people die in there! Especially maggots who DON'T PAY ATTENTION!" Anko shouted the last part, glaring at a certain orange-clad Shinobi.

"I hear you, I hear you already, Old Lady! I survived it before, and I'll do it again! AND I'LL BE DONE BEFORE ALL OF YOU, BELIEVE IT! I'M NOT GONNA RUN, 'CAUSE I'M THE NEXT HOKAGE! NARUTO UZUMAKI, REMEMBER IT!"

Ekyt and Lee (with sweatdrops) stared at the spectacle that was their teammate in disbelief.

"He...he really said all that...I didn't think he would be THAT thick..." Ekyt said under his breath.

"You will find Naruto-kun to be extraordinarily thick," Lee answered, disgust in his voice.

Despite their apparent anger, anyone who dealt with Naruto would have to face Lee and Ekyt as well. Ekyt had developed a big brother complex with Naruto, seeing himself in the younger ninja. Lee had bonded with Ekyt, mostly due to both of them having an insane work ethic.

The other teams, obviously, did not share Naruto's enthusiasm. Those who were taking the exam for the first time were already incredibly nervous. Even those who had taken it and survived wondered if this was the time their luck would run out. How many times could you survive the forest of death before it caught up with you?

The team of Ekyt, Lee, and Naruto was the only Leaf team to make it. Graduation rates from the

academy had been down, and many of those who DID graduate weren't ready for the chunin exams.

The other team of interest was the Sound Village team. Sasuke Uchiha, Kabuto Yakushi, and Sasame Fuma (Sasame is the kunochi of the group, for the record).

The teams entered the Forest of Death. Ekyt spotted their target, a team from the Grass Village.

"Naruto, you're up," he whispered.

"Right! Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Ten Narutos popped up, scaring the life out of the Grass Ninja. They attack, belatedly. One of them was holding back.

"He must have the scroll...this is all you Lee..." Ekyt muttered.

"Right!" Lee called as he sped out of the bushes. CRACK!

Lee had landed a Konoha Hurricane to the jaw of the one holding the scroll.

"What the hell? I can't move!" called Hirai to his teammates. They were too busy fighting off the multiple Narutos and the one incredibly quick Rock Lee.

"It's going to stay that way until my team is clear."

Ekyt leapt down from a tree branch, landing next to Hirai.

"Looks like you stumbled into my chakra-enhanced rope trap. If you move, fifty exploding tags are going to fall directly on you. So, I'll just take that scroll off your hands and be on my way."

By now, Hirai had no choice. His team was unconscious, and he himself couldn't move.

"Take it..." he spat somberly.

"Thanks. Best of luck to you in the rest of the exams," Ekyt replied, no sarcasm in his voice.

"Sweet! We're the first one's done!" Naruto leapt up high, cheering wildly.

"That was quicker than I anticipated...Perhaps the competition has dropped off?" Lee wondered.

Ekyt hadn't said anything yet. He looked at the two scrolls in his gloved hands. "Let's open these. THEN we'll celebrate. The only thing that could go wrong is..."

POOF!

"You've GOT to be kidding me," Ekyt muttered, shaking his head.

Ebisu was the one who was summoned when they finished.

"THIS was the only thing that could go wrong..."

Ebisu smiled widely. POOOF! It was Iruka-sensei!

"Sorry, I couldn't resist! You three did very well, you beat the old record! Congratulations! OOF! Easy, you fool!"

"IRUKA-SENSEI!!!!" Naruto flying hugged the chunin, who patted him on the head.

"It's nice to see you too, Naruto! Okay, get down, come on. So, you three are all qualified for the third round of the chunin exams, which is an elimination-style tournament. You don't have to win to become a chunin, but you must display skills equal to that of a chunin, and show that you deserve it. That shouldn't be a problem with you three. You're dismissed, good luck! Oh, and Ekyt...say hi to Sakura for me!"

"Damn, you guys are relentless!" Ekyt exclaimed.

“Sorry pervy samurai! Landing the cutest kunoichi in the village comes at a price!” Naruto laughed!
“Hey...listen, I want you guys to know...well, thanks for working with me...and maybe we’ll get to fight each other...Lee, you and I have sparred countless times, and I have yet to win...Naruto...somehow, we’ve never fought...I hope it happens someday...”
“It will, believe it! Besides, if I beat an ANBU guy, I’m that much closer to being Hokage!”
“I would consider it an honor to fight either of you. Good luck to all of you!”

“As you know,” Lord Hokage began, surveying the small crop of chunin hopefuls, “Graduation rates have been lower in all of the villages. There is no need for a preliminary tournament. So, the next tournament is the final tournament. Since we have an odd number, one of you will get a by to the next round. That will be determined now.” The aged Third Hokage paused, then turned his attention to the giant scoreboard.

Uzumaki, Naruto

“NO WAY! I DON’T WANT A FREEBIE!” Naruto shouted. But that fell on deaf ears. The next matches were popping up.

Yakushi, Kabuto

Vs

Lee, Rock

There were a number of other matches, but the last one caused gasps to emanate from everyone in the building:

The scoreboard told all:

Kaguya, Ekyt

Vs.

Uchiha, Sasuke

Sakura had been standing with Ekyt. Her mouth dropped open in shock. **How can this be happening? My boyfriend and the guy I had a crush on for all that time...they’re going to fight? I can’t believe it!**

Sakura’s gaze shifted over to Ekyt. He didn’t seem disturbed at all. He seemed ready to fight.

“You okay, Sakura?”

Sakura nodded at his question.

Ekyt bowed his head. **I wonder what’s going through her mind...this can’t be easy for her...I know she still has some sort of feelings for Sasuke...I hope that can’t be used against her...**

“Good luck Ekyt-kun,” said a recovered Sakura.

“Thanks Sakura-chan. Here goes nothing...”

9 - Ekyt vs. Sasuke

“Fine. Some Leaf loser isn’t going to stop me!”

Sasuke’s declaration earned the ire of the Leaf crowd.

Ekyt stared at Sasuke, but broke into a grin. “You weren’t good enough for the Leaf Village, that’s why you ran...ran like a scared little rodent...That might be an accurate description...”

The crowd cheered loudly, showing their support for the Leaf genin. Sasuke responded by activating his Sharingan.

“Begin!” Hayate called before stepping out of the way.

Ekyt and Sasuke charged, meeting each other in the middle of the arena. They both leapt high in the air, thwarting each other’s knife strikes and kicks. At the twenty foot mark, their kunai clashed, sending sparks flying onto the spectators.

With a thud, both landed. Both broke into a chakra-enhanced run, kunai at the ready.

SCHINNGGG!

Their blades glinted twice. The second time, Sasuke’s was stained with blood. Ekyt looked at his left shoulder dispassionately. The wound wasn’t deep, and not serious. He put his right hand on it, noticing that some blood had dripped onto his left hand as well.

“Fire Style: Fireball jutsu!”

Sasuke’s fire attack blasted a crater in the ground. Ekyt had leapt away, clinging to the guard rail on the catwalk with his legs.

“Dragon’s Ember jutsu: Clone instigation!”

Ekyt’s newly-formed clone used the Dragon’s ember jutsu. From the clone’s fist came a continuous stream of fire. Sasuke countered by stepping to the side.

“Dragon’s Path Jutsu!” Ekyt called. He leapt off the railing and “surfed” on the stream of fire. His right leg flew out in a Dynamic Entry attack. Sasuke pushed the leg aside and kicked at Ekyt’s temple. Ekyt leaned back and snapped a kick at Sasuke’s shin. It connected, but didn’t do any real damage.

“Sharingan!” Sasuke activated his kekkai genkai.

He and Ekyt both punched, parried each other’s punches, then aimed for sweep kicks. They both leapt over the strike.

“Give up, anything you can do, my Sharingan can copy...and I can do better!”

Ekyt gritted his teeth in frustration, but didn’t reply. **He can’t keep that Sharingan activated forever...**

Kakashi stood next to Sakura, Naruto, and Lee.

“Does Ekyt have a chance?” Sakura asked quietly.

“COME ON EKYT, BEAT HIS SORRY UCHIHA @\$!” Naruto was too busy shouting to hear Sakura’s question.

“Ekyt-san does indeed...do not count him out yet Sakura-san...I know, having sparred with him...he has more than one trick up his sleeve...”

Kakashi put a hand on her shoulder, but didn’t say anything. They focused on the match.

Ekyt sailed in with a dynamic entry. Halfway through, he changed that into a crescent kick. Sasuke

raised his guard, leaving a small opening for Ekyt. Praying that Hinata's help had taken, Ekyt's open palm struck Sasuke near his kidneys. He had tried to memorize all the points of chakra, but it was impossible without Byakugan. He remembered the biggest ones, and he had struck one just now. Sasuke grunted in pain. He kicked Ekyt in the stomach, forcing Ekyt to block low. He used a chakra-powered punch to send the Leaf genin flying. Ekyt recovered and slid in a crouching position. Maybe it was time to break out some of his new jutsus...The time was right. Ekyt made the hand signs. Sasuke could follow and copy, but he couldn't do anything about the jutsu that was happening. Sasuke also didn't have Kakashi's experience, so defending and copying at the same time would be difficult. Ekyt drew his samurai katana, then his straight-blade ninja katana.

"Dance of the Sickle Moon!"

This jutsu was Ekyt's version of Hayate Gekko's "Dance of the Crescent Moon." Whereas Hayate summoned three shadow clones, Ekyt summoned two. But he combined the attack with a second, more deadly jutsu:

"Drawing Blade's Course!"

This jutsu elongated the weapon Ekyt (and his respective clones) were holding to any proportion. It used a negligible amount of chakra when done correctly.

Sasuke saw the attack, but he didn't know what to do about it.

What the hell is it? I've never heard of these two jutsus! I don't know how to defend against them!

Ekyt's first clone missed on his first strike, but managed to graze Sasuke's leg with its sword before it disappeared. The second clone cut Sasuke's left arm, tearing his hakama and spilling his blood. Ekyt's strikes cleaved Sasuke's shoulders. Not horribly deep, but painful strikes.

"OH MY GOD!" That seemed to be the most common exclamation. It seemed appropriate. Sasuke Uchiha was still standing, despite the four slash wounds. Naruto and Lee were practically falling over the guard rail. Kakashi yanked them both back by their collars.

Sasuke threw a series of kunai. Ekyt dodged all the kunai, but immediately knew something was wrong. **Strings! Damn it, I knew this was coming! I've got counter this, or I'm dead!**

Sasuke yanked the strings tight, tying Ekyt to a post.

"Renounce the Leaf Village and quit. Or you're going to feel my flame...pick, now," Sasuke's warning sparked a cry of worry and hatred from the crowd.

Ekyt shook his head, one part of him he could move.

"Sasuke, you think you know me...if you did, you know that I would rather die than betray the village...all it's done for me...the only place to accept me...the only people to take me seriously...I will defend them with the same intensity I defend my Shinobi way, and the code of Bushido."

Ekyt's mini-speech caused a few tears, as many believe those were the last words the boy would speak.

"I may not have powerful clan blood running through me, but I'm not a one-trick pony either. You thought you wounded me earlier...really, you just played right into my hands. I KNEW you were going to try your stupid string trick...so I planned ahead...You think this blood wound up on my hands by accident?"

Ekyt reached down with his mouth. He flipped open a makimono pouch and pulled out a scroll with his

teeth.

“Enough of this! Fire Release: Dragon Fire Technique!” Sasuke shouted, inhaling deeply. He then sent a giant ball of flame at the tied-up Ekyt. He hadn’t gotten away...

Sakura finally sobbed out loud. She couldn’t take it. The unimaginable pain both boys must have been in...it was unbearable to her. She didn’t want either one to die. Now, it seemed too late...

“Twin Summoning Jutsu!” Ekyt called. He slapped his palms weakly backward against the pillar he was bound to.. BLAM! BLAM!

Umisu, Ekyt’s bearded dragon, and Holly, Ekyt’s keeshonden, appeared at his sides.

Umisu closed one black eye toward Ekyt in an unmistakable wink. The dragon leapt onto the string that had the rapidly approaching flame on it. Umisu began to swell, growing in size until it looked like the normally diminutive dragon would explode. Then the unthinkable happened- it did!

Umisu exploded, or appeared to. In reality, the dragon had used a jutsu by itself! Water Release: Water Encampment Wall! The fire struck the wall of water and was extinguished.

“DAMN IT!” Sasuke swore loudly, preparing to attack again. “That dragon might have saved you for now, but you’re still tied up, and still at my mercy without it!”

Holly, Ekyt’s dog, leapt up. Her sharp teeth destroyed the strings and freed Ekyt. Ekyt thanked her, then gave Umisu (Who was sitting on his shoulder) an affectionate pat. He put the scroll away and ended the jutsu.

“It’s not over yet Sasuke...not by a long shot.”

The match had lasted twenty minutes so far. Both combatants were near exhaustion. Their chakra was seemingly endless, but it couldn’t stay that way forever. They were in close quarters now. Sasuke had a sudden burst of energy.

“Lion’s Barrage!” he kicked Ekyt in the air, punishing him with a series of kicks.

“Chakra Scalpel!” Ekyt countered. His hand glowed an electric blue. (Like Kabuto’s when he fights Naruto) Using his hand like a knife, Ekyt cut into Sasuke’s calf muscle as he came down for the axe kick. The kick still landed, but it wasn’t anywhere near as powerful.

That didn’t stop Ekyt from hitting the ground at a high speed. He landed on his back, the stone floor adding to the pain he was already feeling. But there was no crater from the impact. Ekyt had done enough damage to keep himself alive.

This has to be over...no way he can come back from that... Hayate walked over to Ekyt. Since he was still conscious, he asked Ekyt “Do you want to quit?”

Ekyt pushed himself up to his knees, then to his feet. He looked wobbly, but he was up.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE IT! THAT WAS THE DAMNDEST THING I’VE EVER SEEN! HOW THE HELL CAN HE STILL MOVE! YEAH! GO EKYT!” Naruto was beside himself with joy that Ekyt was still alive and

even still fighting.

“Ekyt-san...is he a person? He should not be alive...I know how devastating that attack is...” Lee couldn’t help but smile. “WAY TO GO EKYT-SAN, YEAH!”

Sasuke rushed over and kicked Ekyt in the face, knocking the barely-conscious genin backward, hard. “Die, damn you! You’re just a stepping stone to me.”

Sasuke looked for a second kick, but Ekyt’s hand slashed up and knocked it aside. His fist then nailed Sasuke in the groin. (This caused many cries of anguish from the men in the crowd) From there, Ekyt battled to his feet again, hitting an uppercut, then a spinning crescent kick, followed by a roundhouse, then a Konoha Hurricane, which launched Sasuke into the air.

Ekyt hooked Sasuke’s neck and leg.

“Backward Konoha Snapdragon!”

Sasuke knew this attack well enough to at least damage Ekyt on the way down. He stabbed a kunai into Ekyt’s arm, weakening his grip. The effect was still devastating.

Ekyt landed on his feet, while Sasuke crashed and burned on his back.

Hayate checked on Sasuke. A look of unmistakable fear appeared on the Tokubetsu Jonin’s face. It didn’t take long to see why.

Sasuke cracked Ekyt under the chin with an uppercut, knocking him into the air, then knocked him to the side with a back kick.

Sasuke’s cursed seal had been activated.

“I never thought YOU would be the one to force me to activate this...I guess I need to kill you really badly then...Good riddance! Cursed Seal: Second Level! Chidori!”

Sasuke began to gather chakra in his fist. Ekyt still hadn’t moved. His back was up against the wall. Blood was running from the corners of his mouth, a sure sign of internal injuries.

Sasuke began to gather speed. Ekyt still hadn’t moved, aside from shaking his head to Hayate’s “Do you want to quit?” query.

It’s now or never...NOW!

Ekyt used a quick jutsu to get himself out of the way. He landed on the other side of the stadium-styled arena, already breaking into a run. He felt his hate building in his chest...

“AGHHHHH!” Sasuke drove the Chidori home, right on target.

Ekyt’s hate grew...

The water clone Sasuke hit evaporated from the sheep power of the Chidori. Sasuke spun around.

Ekyt’s hate was now a physical manifestation. While running, he put a hand to his chest. It burst into a blue flame.

Sasuke groaned. Everyone heard it. Then he broke into a smile.

“I’ve seen what you can do with that...don’t think your Swallow Strike will save you this time...”

Ekyt hit his top speed. His hand signs became too rapid for even the Sharingan to follow.

“TRANSPARENT HAND CHAKRA: BLUE FLAME PROTECTION SEAL!”

Sasuke hadn’t counted on that.

Ekyt opened the first gate of chakra, increasing his speed even more. Sasuke lost sight of him. Then, he heard Ekyt. Behind him.

Near his neck.

Ekyt's hand reached into Sasuke's neck, his hand moving so fast his molecules vibrated to allow him to reach into Sasuke's body.

Ekyt coughed up blood from the sheer agony. His hate had grown so strong...it hurt. It could tear him apart. **No...I'm too close! Control it!**

Sasuke's curse mark receded, then faded. Finally, the mark on his neck disappeared all together.

Sasuke crumpled to the floor slowly, laying face down. Ekyt stood over him, the blue flame becoming smaller, then finally dying.

Ekyt folded to his knees. Then he fell forward, using a hand for support. He pulled himself to his feet.

Hayate checked on Sasuke.

It was over.

"Winner: Kaguya, Ekyt!"

The building, which had been in a stunned silence just seconds earlier, erupted. No one could believe it. They cheered, some people even cried.

Naruto, Lee, Sakura, and Kakashi leapt the barrier and landed at Ekyt's side. Lee and Naruto each grabbed him with one arm propped on their shoulders. Ekyt coughed again, bright red blood staining the floor.

"You did it..." Sakura spoke with disbelief. Carefully, she wrapped her arms around Ekyt's neck in a fond embrace. Then she disappeared, saying that she had to sit down.

Sasuke pushed himself up. He found a pair of soft hands helping him.

"Sakura?"

The pink-haired kunoichi nodded...

Ekyt stood up, under his own power. THWAP! A senbon struck him in the back. He yanked it out. He noticed there was a note attached. Ironically, the note was stained with his blood. Later, it would become stained with one single teardrop.

Sakura had gone with Sasuke.

"It is the council's unanimous decisions that we have one new chunin right now. He has shown BEYOND chunin level skill. Let the records of Konohagakure show that Ekyt Kaguya has reached the rank of chunin on this day, 7 November 2007."

The council understood Ekyt's heart wasn't in it. He took the green vest that he had worked so hard for. He shrugged it on to enormous cheers. He managed a smile, for the sake of those in the crowd who

didn't know what had happened.

"I want this mission Lady Tsunade," Ekyt said immediately, handing her the note.

"Ekyt, that's ridiculous! You damn near killed yourself two seconds ago!"

"I don't care. Please, give me this mission. I want this mission." Ekyt's pleading eyes met Lady Tsunade's.

She sighed. "Look, I know what she means to you...but what if she went with Sasuke by her own free will?"

"She wouldn't...she would NEVER betray this village and it's people..." Ekyt said it so firmly Tsunade didn't even consider doubting him.

"You would just go anyway, wouldn't you? With or without orders, wouldn't you?"

Ekyt nodded. "I'd hate myself, but I would. It's not in my nature to disobey orders...but...well, letting your teammates die makes you scum."

Tsunade couldn't help but give her newest chunin a smile.

"Alright. Consider it your second S-ranked mission. But you are to go as an ANBU agent..."

"Fine."

"Good. I'll inform you of my decisions of whether you have a team or not."

"Lady Tsunade...Lee and Naruto both have their part in the exams. Let me go alone. As an ANBU agent..."

Tsunade shook her head. "Damn it, how do you do that? Twist my words around, make it seem like you're agreeing with me, but somehow completely change my mind. Since I know how damn stubborn you are...you can go."

"Thank you...And...thank you for making me a chunin. I know you really went to bat for me."

Tsunade patted him on the head. "I wouldn't have done it if you hadn't earned it. Now, go on kid. Bring her home..."

NEXT TIME: Ekyt's newest mission begins. His destination- the Land of Herbs. He is assigned the double mission of investigating kidnappings and murders, in addition to finding Sakura and Sasuke.

Lee squares off against Kabuto. After that, Naruto learns who his opponent is going to be...

10 - Itami Hodoki (Untie the Pain)

Whoosh.

The bitter night stung against Ekyt's exposed arms. He had to dress the part of an ANBU agent. All was not well in the Land of Herbs. Kidnappings and murders.

"Again...what the hell is going on...peaceful land nothing...they're hiding something..."

Ekyt leapt off another tree branch, landing safely on the next one. The Body Flicker jutsu was starting to take a toll on his chakra, so Ekyt made one last leap, then stopped. CRACK!

The branch broke under Ekyt's feet. Ekyt righted himself, landing in a crouched position. The branch fell harmlessly behind him. He was about to continue on, but stopped. Something about the branch caught his eye.

A trap? That branch was cut deliberately...someone's expecting me...or watching me...either way, this isn't good. I'm walking into a big trap... A thought of Sakura flashed across his mind...

She was dead.

Ekyt saw it so clearly. Her corpse was tied to a stake, still bound securely. The stake was scorched with flames. Ekyt forced himself to look at her. She was charred beyond recognition. But, somehow, Ekyt KNEW it was her. He reached around the stake to undo the ropes binding her. Her limp remains fell onto his shoulder. The head disturbed Ekyt the most. It moved as though it was hanging on by the barest of threads.

Ekyt started to run again, carrying the body with him. He couldn't bring himself to dispose of it, now here. Not in this foreign land. Sakura deserved better. That was all Ekyt could think.

"Miss me Ekyt-kun?"

Ekyt stopped running so suddenly his momentum carried him into a tree.

"Sakura?" The word barely escaped his lips. It couldn't be...

Sakura's body was moving, but unnaturally, as though it were a marionette, bobbing along, held by strings. Her hands were raised in a position of attack, a kunai held in each one.

Ekyt pushed himself backward as the charred remains continued forward. He drew his breath inward suddenly as his back hit a tree. He felt his arms being held behind him by tree branches. They had a mind of their own.

Sakura's body stopped just inches from Ekyt.

"What's the matter Ekyt-kun? Is there...something wrong?"

The eyes...they were the most unnatural. The undead *thing* that had been Sakura was burnt to a crisp. But the eyes...they were still alive, their bright green hues boring into Ekyt's dark hazel (good) eye.

With an unearthly cackle, the kunai plunged down. Ekyt felt the daggers pierce his chest, his arms, his legs, his stomach. He coughed up blood, knowing he was dying. He looked up at Sakura. The burnt face now revealed untouched teeth. The teeth were the last thing Ekyt saw before the dagger plunged down again, piercing his heart. The teeth were now stained with blood. His blood.

Lee leapt down to the floor, ready to go with his usual intensity. On the other end of the arena, Kabuto smiled slightly. He raised his arm.

"I forfeit my match. I must have used up too much chakra in the forest," Kabuto said with a care-free,

polite air.

“Do not be a coward!” Lee shouted at him, not lowering his guard.

“It’s not cowardice, it’s brains. Live to fight another day, you know?” Kabuto walked off the field to stunned silence from the spectators.

Hayate shrugged. “Winner: Rock Lee.”

Up in the stands, Guy had apparently not noticed the way Lee had won.

“ALRIGHT LEE! YOU SPECIAL KID! I KNEW YOU WERE GONNA WIN! THE POWER OF YOUTH!!!”

In his own, imitable way, Kakashi put Guy in his place.

“Guy, you’re making an @\$ of yourself.”

Lee started to walk off the field.

“Hey, hold on. (koff).” Hayate pointed at the scoreboard. Ekyt vs. Sasuke had been good, but this match proved to be a classic.

Uzumaki, Naruto

Vs.

Lee, Rock

Guy whipped around, ready to spar with his “lifelong rival”.

“That was an excellent reply, rival Kakashi! My Lee will defeat your Naruto, easy!”

Kakashi looked up from his book.

“Guy, I don’t own Naruto, so he’s not “mine”. As for Lee winning easily...I don’t think that will happen.”

Ekyt shook himself. **Genjutsu...at the same spot as last time...it’s either a genjutsu that’s been placed on the land that will keep on re-occurring...or I’m being watched...damn it, whoever it is knows me...it doesn’t feel like Sasuke’s chakra, I’ve felt that enough...it’s not Sakura’s, or that deranged old man’s (Koori)...then who the hell is doing this?**

Ekyt was nearly frozen by the genjutsu. His time with Ibikki had not been worthless, however. He forced his hands into the “Release” handsign.

“Disengage!” he called aloud, his voice shaking, despite his mind being calm.

The genjutsu lifted; Ekyt felt his head clear immediately. He quickly forced himself to run. That genjutsu, he could tell now, was recurring. It had been placed as a trap against enemies of the land.

Or me...

“WHAAT? I GET TO FIGHT BUSHY BROW? THAT’S AWESOME, BELIEVE IT!”

Naruto leapt down to the floor, all smiles. Lee looked happy with the match-up too.

“Hey Lee...no hard feelings after I kick you @\$, right?” Naruto asked, holding out a fist.

“If you agree to hold none toward me when I defeat you,” Lee replied. He punched Naruto’s fist, then leapt backward. Naruto did the same.

“Begin!”

Lee and Naruto ran headlong into each other.

“Shadow Clone jutsu!” Naruto called immediately. Four, eight, twelve...twelve Narutos.

“I anticipated this!” Lee said happily as the Naruto clones tried for an Uzumaki barrage. Suddenly, Lee was gone...

One by one, Naruto’s clones started to disappear. All anyone (save for Kakashi and his Sharingan) saw was a foot slashing out, hitting one of Naruto’s befuddled clones. Poof! Poof! Poof!

“Konoha Whirlwind!” Lee’s spinning heel kick nailed the last clone in the head. Another poof, and one Naruto remained.

“d-damnit! You’re faster than I remember! Well, it doesn’t matter, I won’t lose to you!” Naruto shouted, running at a stationary Lee.

Lee moved his guard, following Naruto’s movement with his outstretched hand. Naruto leaned in to throw a punch, but was thwarted by Lee’s sandal tagging him in the cheek. Naruto sailed backward, then skidded on the floor.

“Direct attacks will not work on me Naruto. You should know that! What?!” Lee’s tone changed as he heard a voice behind him.

“No duh, Captain Obvious!” Naruto’s fist connected with Lee’s face, sending the green-clad Shinobi on ride. As he flew, Lee couldn’t help but think:

When did Naruto cultivate a sense of strategy? He has indeed grown!

The people in the Land of Herbs muttered quietly. They were a peaceful land; something like this didn’t happen everyday.

The bodies swinging from the lamppost was an unnerving site. Mothers pulled their children in tight, ushering them away as quickly as possible.

“Who would do this?” was the common cry.

Ekyt walked into town. Slowly, every head, every whisper, they were all directed at him. Ekyt looked up, wondering what he had done. Then he saw the bodies.

An entire family. A man, a woman, and two children, one boy, one girl. Their eyes, while glazed off, were still open. They seemed to stare accusingly at the townspeople, as if daring one of them to come forward for the murder.

“IT WAS HIM! HE DID IT!”

Ekyt heard the shout, and knew it was directed at him. It was Jukiro, the man who had attacked Ekyt last time.

The Land’s police, samurai, came running, drawing their swords.

“You are under arrest for the murder of”

“Since when does Bushido demand you persecute without proof?” Ekyt barked.

“What does a ninja know of bushido?!” One samurai sneered.

“A ninja- no idea. I’m a special case. I’m afraid I have samurai blood in me as well,” Ekyt replied.

“Have you proof?! One does not wield a katana and call oneself a samurai!”

Ekyt put his hands in front of his chest. The top hand was open, palm inward. That hand covered a fist.

“Peace over power...That proves nothing!” shouted one samurai angrily. His companions moved closer, their swords pointed dangerously at Ekyt.

“The *Hagakure*, written by Tsunetomo Yamamoto. The fist article reads:

These eleven volumes from beginning to end must be burned in due course of time.

I have put down the verbatim what the author remembers for (his own) future reference:

On the society; the right and wrong of samurais; conjecture; manners and customs, etc.

These notes may very well arouse ill-feeling.

It is best to remember the author has repeatedly and strictly told me to burn these manuscripts.

We first met March 5th in the year of the Hiei (1710)

How far from the floating world

These mountain cherries are!

-Tsunetomo Yamamoto

Under a white cloud

I have just come across a flower.

-Tsuramoto Tashiro

The samurai lowered their weapons. Ekyt took on a formal tone, speaking something like Lee.

“Let us talk of these events. I come from the Village Hidden in the Leaves. I am of their ANBU Black Operations. I will say no more here, for there is more that may upset the company of those who need not hear such words spoken. If it will make you more comfortable, I will change my attire to something you may find more acceptable.”

The samurai in charge bowed to Ekyt, who returned the bow.

“Come with us. We will talk in private.” The samurai beckoned for Ekyt to follow.

Lee straightened himself out, skidding backward. He had a smile on his face, despite the scrape marring his cheek.

“You have improved Naruto. Perhaps it is time...yes! Guy-sensei, it is time!” Lee shouted. He leapt up to the guardrail around the catwalks. He balanced himself in front of his sensei. The weights were coming off.

“Come ON, Bushy Brow! TO-DAY!” Naruto grumbled from the ground. When Lee dropped his weights, he added “About time! Now it’s gonna get interesting, believe it!”

Ekyt pulled on his Hakama, then his keko gi.

“Damn thing feels like it’s made of carpet...” he grumbled. For a fleeting moment, he wondered what Sakura’s reaction would be. He smiled briefly. Having a fangirl girlfriend- he could get used to that... Then he put his mind back on the task at hand.

He walked out and prepared to sit in seiza, a position between sitting and kneeling that was a stone dog to stay in for any length of time.

“Why have you come? This is no concern of a ninja, even one who honors Bushido.” The samurai narrowed his eyes at Ekyt until they were mere slits.

“I am afraid it DOES concern a ninja. Me. There has been a kidnapping...I have been dispatched to investigate it...it is on a personal level for me. Therefore, to honor Bushido, I must put my entire body, mind, and soul into it,” Ekyt replied tersely.

The samurai leaned forward, taking the little cup of Sake in front of him. “Personal? Family?” he grunted.

“No...she seems like family. But she is not,” Ekyt replied. **I’m tired of talking like this, it sounds like a**

cheesy kung-fu film! Oh well, time honored traditions.

“It is the love of a woman! Of course! Stolen by a rival?” The samurai declared.

Son of a dog! I can’t escape the ribbing, even outside of the village!

“You could say that,” Ekyt said aloud. “But that is enough of my affairs. I cannot detail anymore. Now, please, tell me what has happened here. Violence is not a way of life here. This, too, is part of my mission. I am to assist you in investigating the murders and kidnappings.”

The other samurai grinned. “You may act a samurai, but does the blade fit the hand? If you best me in combat, I will tell you. I wish to test my skill against a new sword...” The samurai looked, almost hungrily, at the sword in Ekyt’s sash.

“I agree. We will use wooden swords. In the Hour of the Tiger (I think that’s 3:00 am),” Ekyt offered.

“I accept the terms of the duel. Incapacitation, not death...you are a new-age samurai. Under normal circumstances, I could not respect that...but I sense something different about you. We meet in two hours time! Go, prepare, for you face someone who’s sword is not unknown in the Land of Herbs!”

11 - Kokoro Hodoki (Untie the Heart)

Ekyt waited, concealed, for twenty minutes. He studied the terrain, as the Hour of the Tiger grew closer. He saw every nook and cranny his opponent could appear from. In a friendly comparison of techniques such as this, it wouldn't be necessary to know every little detail so well, but with all that had been going on in the land of herbs, Ekyt didn't dare drop his guard for an instant.

At ten minutes before the hour of the tiger, Ekyt drew his normal sword and pricked his thumb. He reached under his keko gi and pulled out his summoning scroll.

"Summoning jutsu!"

With a small poof, Umisu perched himself on Ekyt's shoulder. Ekyt finished the small scroll, signed it, and gave it to the bearded dragon. The dragon swallowed it, nudged his master fondly with his head, then disappeared.

Lady Tsunade yawned. Her aide, Shizune, had stepped out.

"I thought she'd never go," Tsunade said around a yawn. Her head drooped forward. She was asleep before she hit the desk.

BLAM!

"What the hell?!" she yelled as she raised her head. She found herself staring into one big black eye. It winked.

"YAHHH!" Tsunade screamed. She wasn't awake yet.

"Lady Tsunade, I heard a..." Shizune began. Then she covered her face and turned away. She broke into a loud giggle.

Tsunade looked at her, death in her eyes. "The damn thing scared me. Will you cut that damn giggling out already?!"

Tsunade unrolled the scroll, releasing another yawn.

"Shizune, remind me to kill that kid..."

"Who, Lady Tsunade?" Shizune asked.

"Ekyt. Damn it, I told him to report in every six hours. I didn't think he'd take it literally!"

Shizune cast a look of curiosity at Tsunade. "HOW long have you known him?" she questioned, still giggling. She controlled herself, then looked at the scroll. She smiled widely.

"Only in the Leaf Village...this is the only place in the world with Shinobi moonlighting as Samurai..."

Lady Tsunade agreed. "When you write my reply, please underline the part about using common sense when answering. Like waiting until after 6:00 am! Tell him that if that damn dragon wakes me up again, I'll have a new belt around my waist when he gets back."

Umisu, who was smarter than most summons, knew full well what he was doing next. He gave Lady Tsunade an affectionate lick with his long tongue, then disappeared as she took a swipe at him, a disgusted look on her red face.

"I'll kill them both...that's it," Tsunade muttered.

"You usually reserve that for me Tsunade!"

Tsunade groaned. "The one thing missing from my day...the pervert."

Jiraiya gave her a mock angry look. "I'm not a pervert...I'm a mega-pervert who is also a best-selling author! You read my book yet?"

Tsunade shot Jiraiya a glare of doom.

"I'm not going to read you stupid perverted novel. Now, did Kakashi explain why you're here?"

"He thought that was best left up to you. So, go for it!" Jiraiya sat back, his feet on Tsunade's desk. Tsunade's temper was as legendary as her losing streak, and Jiraiya's attempts at messing with her going to help further that legend.

Naruto and Lee, after a half hour battle, had used every strike in their arsenals. At the 59 minute mark, both were barely standing. One strike would decide the fight.

Lee ran in, aiming for a Leaf Hurricane. Naruto leapt up, aiming for a final punch that would win him the match.

Lee's kick hit Naruto under the jaw just as Naruto's fist cracked him in the nose. The combined power of the strikes sent them spinning away from each other just as the match clock struck 1 hour.

"Due to the time limit expiring, I conclude there is (koff) no definitive winner. This match is a draw," Hayate's hoarse whisper informed the crowd.

An hour later, the council convened to discuss chunin promotions.

"Rock Lee for sure. He did everything right. Lasting an hour against a ball of energy like Naruto is a near superhuman feat," Kakashi offered.

His proposal was met with sounds of agreement.

"Kabuto Yakushi...Not gonna happen...Sasuke Uchiha..." Lady Tsunade glanced over the scroll at the name.

Kakashi sighed. "He's talented, but a chunin wouldn't kidnap an innocent girl."

"No argument. Let's see, the last name...Naruto Uzumaki..."

Tsunade took note of the votes. Everyone said yes...everyone but one. Once Tsunade saw the face attached to the body with the offending arm in the "No" position, she sighed.

"Of course...Ebisu...Well, it looks like Naruto is out again. I'd ask you to defend your reasons, but we've all heard them six times before."

"That is because they are still valid," Ebisu said indignantly.

"Valid? Have you noticed you're the only one here who holds the kid's inner demon against him?"

Iruka shouted. He had finally had enough. "Look Ebisu, I can't make you like Naruto. But holding him back for personal reasons is wrong and you know it!"

"Don't you talk like that to me Iruka! I realize you hold a soft spot for the little demon, but you are still a chunin. You are only here because of all the jonin we've lost the last few years!" Ebisu snarled.

Iruka stood up, daring Ebisu to do the same. "I wouldn't be here if I wasn't the one in the best position for the job. And you know, I'm glad someone finally over rode you about Ekyt. He's another good kid who deserves better than your abuse!"

"There is no one above receiving criticism!" Ebisu retorted, standing up as well.

"That's true, but you shouldn't be the one giving it, not at this point! If Lady Tsunade sees no reason to hold them back, who are *you* to criticize her?" Iruka pointed out vehemently.

Lady Tsunade cleared her throat loudly, prompting the two to stop their quarrel. "Oh, that's right. Thanks for reminding me, Iruka. Let the records show Iruka Umino's appointment to jonin will be considered in one day's time. I will be the one to make the decision. The rest of you have your missions."

Ebisu look deflated, while Iruka looked shocked.

“Lady Tsunade...I had no idea...” he whispered.

Tsunade smiled, a sarcastic look on her face.

“I can’t have that @\$\$ failing my genin. You know them better than anyone Iruka. This won’t change your position, unless that’s what you want. If anyone deserves to be a jonin, it’s you.”

Iruka left, not sure what to think about the compliment. **She must have meant it, Lady Tsunade doesn’t throw around compliments...**

Ekyt and the nameless samurai stared each other down, wooden swords in their hand. With a battle cry, the samurai leapt at Ekyt, aiming for his head.

“Sa!” Ekyt breathed out hard, stepping to the side, drawing the wooden sword up, giving the samurai a hard crack on the triceps.

Samurai fights never lasted long, usually less than thirty seconds. When you played with swords, things got dangerous in a hurry.

The samurai made a return strike, Ekyt cut downward. The samurai stepped aside. Ekyt, however, had been a student of swallow form. He drew his sword back along the same angle, the wooden blade making contact on the samurai’s chin. The samurai bowed his head in surrender.

“Very well fought, young man. You do follow bushido.”

“I do. I am certain you do as well. Now, please tell me what has been happening here...”

Suddenly, the samurai all shook. Ekyt looked up, took one look at their eyes, and drew his real sword.

“Our master...he and his girl...they do not like you...DIE!!!”

Ekyt narrowly leapt aside, slashing the samurai in the stomach. The samurai’s bones were visible.

“Not the undead thing again! I don’t have time for this supernatural BS!” Ekyt snarled, cursing the situation, his good eye darting around, looking for the closest threat. **Were they always undead...or was it just activated...more importantly, by who? And...the master and his girl...does this mean Sakura left under her own will? NO! I won’t believe it!**

Ekyt had two more undead samurai to deal with.

“Bushido doesn’t cover the undead. Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” Ekyt punched forward, with a red-orange flam shooting from his first, scorching the first enemy. Ekyt ran through the fire, unharmed, and slashed away with his sword. One Jodan cut later and the samurai crumpled to the ground. From behind, the other came, sword held high. Ekyt didn’t have time to turn around, so he jammed his case backward into the samurai’s stomach. The zombie was too close. Ekyt jammed it in the forehead with the butt end of his sword, then drew forward, cutting it in half at it’s chest. He heard a sound, so Ekyt glanced over his shoulder. He stabbed backward, his blade digging it. While his arms were busy, one of the samurai tried to attack Ekyt from the front. Ekyt focused his chakra into his right leg and kicked. The undead samurai crumpled into a pile of bones, a hole the size of Ekyt’s foot in it’s chest.

Ekyt shook the blood and dust off his sword and put it away. The first order of business was to get out of the hakama and back into his ANBU gear. He would need all the weapons. A sword could become cumbersome in battle. Against hordes of enemies, all of whom moved fast, the sword might become a hindrance more than a help, especially in close quarters combat.

Before he could do any of that, Ekyt was hit with something in the side. It had long brown hair, and was roughly up to his waist.

Kora?

Kora didn’t seem like a little girl anymore. She tagged Ekyt’s chin with a crescent kick. Ekyt didn’t want

to fight her. Then it hit him- the little girl couldn't be doing this of her own free will. Ekyt blocked a punch with his forearm, knocked it aside hard enough to spin the girl around, then clasped his hands around her neck in a headlock meant to ease her into unconsciousness.

The little girl was possessed, and had some much power she flipped the ANBU agent onto his back. Ekyt recovered from the throw quickly and rolled aside just as a high-heel buried itself in the grass where his throat had been just seconds earlier.

"Live by the sword...DIE BY THE SWORD!" Kora shouted, wildly swinging a sword from one of the fallen samurai.

As Ekyt dodged backward, he weighed his options. **She's under someone's control...I can't attack her body, anything short of killing her won't stop her, and I'm not going to kill a little girl...If I assault her mind, I'll have to do it carefully...if I do it wrong, she'll have brain damage. If I could just get her to Lady Tsunade...I've only got basic medic training...**

Ekyt leapt over one more sword strike, finally drawing his own and knocking the opposing blade aside. It was strange seeing a little girl wielding a sword as large as she was.

I've got no choice...I've got to use it...

"Demonic Illusion: Mind Barring Technique!" Ekyt called out.

The little girl screamed an unearthly wail, then charged. The genjutsu would take five minutes to work. Ekyt needed to contain her until the jutsu was in full effect. (The Mind Barring Technique interferes with the instructions the brain sends to the body, causing temporary paralysis)

"Hidden Shadow Snake Hand!" Ekyt called. From his right wrist, four snakes burst forth, hissing angrily. They wrapped around the little demon girl, holding her in place.

Ekyt used his free hand to give himself a small cut high up on his shoulder. He wiped the blood down a scroll, rolled it up, and struck the ground.

"Summoning jutsu!"

With a BLAM sound, Holly, Ekyt's keeshonden summon, appeared at his feet.

"Kid? You're reduced to beating up little girls?" Holly muttered, giving her master a look.

"Holly, I need you to take this girl directly to Lady Tsunade. Something is very wrong with her. I'll send Umisu ahead to warn her you're coming, so the guards won't question you."

"OK by me boss, whenever you're ready!"

Sakura woke up, shaking her head. **What happened...Sasuke!**

Sasuke was standing near the window in the dungeon-esque room. He turned around as he heard one of the ropes binding Sakura to the table rub against the coarse wooden grain.

"So you're awake...for the first time, you've done something to help me. Thanks to you, I escaped the Leaf Village," Sasuke explained.

Sakura found she couldn't move. Despite this, her anger got the best of her.

"Screw you Sasuke! I've never been anything but nice to you, and THIS is how you treat me! I was a fool to ever love you! And I can promise you, no matter what you do to me, Ekyt will be here, and he will rip you into little pieces for this!"

Sasuke put a hand under her chin, a look of mock concern in his eyes.

"That's why I sent that little girl after her. She made a fine host for one of my demon souls. He won't kill her, but she, on the other hand, will kill him...I wonder, how long will it take you to realize that good and evil aren't real? It's power, and those who are willing to work for it are the ones who succeed.

"You're wrong Sasuke...there's love. YOU might have never felt it, but it does exist...I know it does..." Sasuke ruffled Sakura's hair. "You have the mind of a child. Well, when your loser boyfriend gets here,

we'll solve that." Sasuke hit Sakura in the temple, knocking her unconscious.

Sasuke felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Big mistake, touching her..." Ekyt's cold voice told Sasuke.

Meanwhile, a clone of Ekyt's was untying Sakura.

Sasuke drew his sword and cut in the same motion. Ekyt fell to the ground like a wounded deer, his head hanging on by a thread. More accurately, the piece of wood Sasuke had diced up fell to the ground, and a small side limb clattered to the ground.

"I've already proven I can best you in combat...don't test me," Ekyt shot at Sasuke.

Sasuke aimed a Phoenix Fire Jutsu at Ekyt. Ekyt used a series of three water clones to douse the flame.

"Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique!" he called.

"Your lame genjutsu doesn't scare me." Sasuke's dry reply was cut off. He fell to the ground, clutching his head, his mouth moving in silent screams of torment.

"Looks like my lame Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique was something you didn't count on."

Sasuke was opening his mouth, then closing it, screaming silently. Ekyt had a suspicion he knew what was going in Sasuke's head. But at this point, he was back to being an ANBU agent, not to mention a concerned boyfriend.

Ekyt suddenly felt a second presence.

Itachi's side kick caught Ekyt in the temple. The strike had been laced with chakra, making it that much more painful. The chakra hit Ekyt's brain, scrambling the signals temporarily.

"You defeated my brother at the peak of his power...I thought you would be more of a challenge..." Itachi whispered darkly. He raised his hand in an open-hand strike, cracking the helpless chunin in the forehead. Before Ekyt had landed, Itachi wound up again, moving at an incredible speed.

"You prick!" the recovered Sakura brought her leg down in a Painful Sky Leg attack. Itachi leapt over the growing crater. Sakura had anticipated this and cocked her fist back. She caught the older Uchiha with a punch that sent him reeling into a wall twenty feet away.

"You'll be okay," Sakura assured Ekyt. Ekyt nodded, unable to speak just yet. His good eye suddenly opened wide in a warning glare. Sakura spun around, walking right into Itachi's strike.

Itachi grabbed Sakura, quick as a flash. Ekyt knew what was happening, but he could do nothing to stop it.

Sakura saw Itachi coming.

"Tsukeyomi, the nightmare realm." Itachi chanted dully, staring Sakura in the eyes, three tomoe of Sharingan visible. They changed as Itachi activated his Mangekyo Sharingan.

Itachi was in Sakura's subconscious, trying to assault her mind. Inner-Sakura, however, had something to say about that. She barreled into Itachi, rocking the stunned Akatsuki member with a hard right fist.

"CHA! DON'T SCREW WITH ME! NOW GET OUT OF MY HEAD, BASTARD!"

Itachi ended the jutsu.

Immediately, a kunai knife was thrust into his hand, pinning him to the wall.

A sweat-soaked Ekyt held it there, panting with exhaustion.

"You don't...(koff) hit a lady..." Ekyt managed to cough out. His brain waves were still scrambled, but they were coming back.

Ekyt felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Ekyt-kun, may I?" Sakura asked pleasantly.

"Huh? Um, sure..." Ekyt didn't know what she had in mind, but he stepped aside, holding the kunai in

place.

"Thanks so much!" Sakura exclaimed while drawing her fist back.

BAM!

The chakra-laced punch rattled Itachi's teeth.

"That's for touching me and hitting my boyfriend, you Uchiha asshole!" Sakura declared, shaking her aching fist out.

Itachi freed himself by prying the kunai out of his hand.

"Foolish little girl...I won't enjoy killing you, but I will if I have to," Itachi's dull, menacing voice supplied. Sakura flipped her kunai to a reverse grip. Ekyt still couldn't make his body work, and he was cursing himself for it. Sakura, however, didn't seem worried.

"I don't die easy Itachi. Everyone thinks I'm a helpless little girl...but I've grown...and so have my skills. Even if I'm not as strong as you, I've got a purpose, and I'm not going to die yet! Chakra Scalpel!"

Itachi looked slightly surprised at Sakura's bravado.

"You have changed...but you're hardly worth killing...hardly..."

"You need a diaper over your mouth Itachi, that's where the crap is coming out," Sakura answered with a big smile.

As soon as the words left her mouth, she used the Body Flicker Jutsu to spring forward, landing near Itachi. She danced out of the reach of his kunai, then used her Chakra Scalpel to cut tendons in his forearm. She used the Body Flicker again, this time landing behind Itachi. She took a swipe at his neck. She missed, but leapt away before Itachi could retaliate. Sakura used a quick Clone Jutsu. Her clones were only diversions, not the more useful Shadow Clones. Itachi wouldn't have had a hard time with this, but the failed Tsukeyomi Jutsu had left him very low, to the point where he had to deactivate his Sharingan. He hit the clones one by one. His left leg finally hit the real Sakura. She hit the wall with a hard thud. Itachi moved in for the kill. Sakura booted him in the groin, then landed an uppercut to his jaw. Itachi sailed backward.

Sakura took the break in the action to use the Chakra Scalpel on Ekyt. She fixed his brain waves, allowing him to move again. It had exhausted her chakra, however.

"Thanks Sakura...but...you have to leave me!" Ekyt's voice took on a sudden urgency.

"What? Why?" She wanted to know, surprised.

Ekyt pointed. "Him..."

Sasuke stood in the doorway menacingly. He had recovered, but he walked past Ekyt and Sakura.

"So I've finally caught up to you Itachi...this time, you won't be able to ignore my power!"

Ekyt and Sakura exchanged glances.

"We have to go, neither of us are in any shape to deal with them," Ekyt told her.

Sakura, who had turned pale, nodded. Ekyt weighed his options, the blushed. **I WOULD have to be wearing this sleeveless ANBU stuff...But it has to happen...**

"Sakura, we've got to get out of here quick...Here, if you...don't mind, grab on around my neck." (Ekyt is holding his arms out like he's carrying a box.)

Sakura looked at him questioningly, but climbed up into his arms.

"Kakashi-sensei helped me with a faster version of the Body Flicker. Hold on tight...If I trip or misjudge, this is gonna hurt..."

Tsunade was napping placidly on her desk. She was curled up into a ball. She suddenly felt something

near her face.

"Damn it Jiraiya, don't pull that on me!" Tsunade yelled sleepily. She felt a tongue give her ear a lick.

"YOU ARE GONNA DIE, YOU DAMN PERVERT!" Tsunade sat up wildly, aiming to clock Jiraiya.

However, she only saw Ekyt's dragon.

"NOW what?" she barked at the dragon.

The dragon's long tongue unfurled, leaving a scroll in front of Tsunade. It gave her a wink, then jumped off, probably to nap in the sun.

Tsunade opened the scroll, thinking it was just a check in. But the next check in wasn't due for another four hours. **What's happened?**

Tsunade's mouth dropped open in shock. "My God..."

Holly burst into the room, carrying the unconscious Kora.

"Here you are, Lady Tsunade, compliments of Ekyt Kaguya!" Holly barked with false enthusiasm.

"I'm going to kill your master for waking me up twice..." Tsunade said off-the-cuff.

"Go for it. Bastard does it to me all the time...Well, I'm gonna nap before the kid needs me to save him...again..." Holly said, her snout in the air as she trotted off, pausing near the door to scratch at her ears.

Tsunade examined the girl. She suddenly saw a flash of smoke.

WHAP!

"Ow! You okay?"

Tsunade looked down and broke into a big grin.

Ekyt had been carrying Sakura. They were moving so fast Ekyt misjudged when to stop. He had tripped over Tsunade's desk, then slipped backward on scroll. Sakura landed on top of him in a semi-suggestive way.

"Okay you two, I'm glad you're in love, but get a room! And I don't mean my office!"

Sakura giggled at the joke, while Ekyt seemed to be burning with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry Lady Tsunade. I'll have a report written for you ASAP," he said crisply.

"Don't mean to ruin your fun kid. Just can't have you two doing that here. I'm an impressionable young lady!" Tsunade declared.

"Young?" Jiraiya said from the doorway. "Last I checked, you were almost fi"

"If you finish that sentence, I'll break every bone in your body, pervy sage!"

MORE TO COME!

12 - Kage wo Hodoki (Untie the Shadow)

“Cheerful as ever Tsunade.”

Every head in the room whipped around. That voice...

“Third Hokage? I was wondering when you were going to get here,” Lady Tsunade said pleasantly, offering the older man a chair.

“So, which is it? I was surprised that you and Jiraiya have both taken on an apprentice. I was even more surprised to hear that you had a chunin for me to train. It’s good for me to stay active.”

I wonder who the lucky one is? The Third Hokage...He hasn’t aged much since he retired...He looks younger, if anything. Ekyt thought.

“You’ll know him Lord Hokage. Ekyt Kaguya?” Lady Tsunade pointed to the kneeling Ekyt.

“Me, Lady Tsunade? I-I’m honored!” Ekyt sputtered. **They picked ME to learn from the Third Hokage? This is a huge surprise!**

Next to him, Sakura squeezed his hand. **I’m proud of you Ekyt-kun. You worked so hard, and you’re finally getting a break. Now we’re both learning from legends!**

Ekyt could only stare blankly at the floor until the Third Hokage acknowledged him.

“There’s no need for such formality, I’m not Hokage anymore. You know me Ekyt. Although, I confess, the Kaguya part is new. And the fact that you appear to be holding hands with Sakura...and ANBU? I knew you were talented, but Jr. Black Ops at 19?”

Lady Tsunade put a hand on Ekyt’s back.

“This is one of my two newest chunin, Sarutobi,” Tsunade announced proudly.

The Third smiled. “So you made it...all the times I had to deny you entry to the exams...I’m very pleased that you made it to chunin.” The retired Hokage drew himself up. “My job is to get you to jonin. Since your ANBU rank comes with “Specialized chunin,” (Something Ekyt wasn’t aware of, and it showed on his face) you need to choose between “Jonin” and “Tokubetsu Jonin” so I can gear your training toward your selection.”

Ekyt gulped, then forced himself to stand. “I don’t want to be tied down to one area Sir. I want to teach, to lead squads, to proctor...same as before.”

Sarutobi (Formerly 3rd Hokage) nodded sagely. “There was never a doubt in my mind. Black Ops missions are few and far between at times. Have you a career other than that?”

Ekyt shook his head. “No, I”

“Yes you do! Or, you will! Come in, please!” Tsunade called to the hallway.

“Iruka-sensei? What are you doing here?” Sakura asked, surprised to see him.

“Being a jonin!” he exclaimed proudly. Sakura gave him a big hug, while Ekyt shook his hand, which turned into a stiff hug between comrades.

“Lady Tsunade, I want to try my hand at squad leader for the interim three month period. And I need to feel secure that my classes will be well taken care of in my absence...If he’ll take, I’d like to appoint Ekyt Kaguya for the position of Academy Instructor while I’m trying my hand at leading a squad.”

Lady Tsunade broke into an even bigger grin at the obvious shock on Ekyt’s face. She watched as Jiraiya went over and gave the kid a slap on the back. Somehow, that jolted him back to reality. He nodded vigorously, apparently unable to speak.

“Should a mission for the Jr. ANBU agent come up, I need to be certain that there will be another teacher lined up. Ekyt, that will become your responsibility. Understood?”

“Yes Lady Tsunade! And...thank you. And you Iruka-sensei,” Ekyt managed, flushing with well-contained pride.

“You deserve a chance to show what you can do. I was not able to do that when I was Hokage. It is thankful that Lady Tsunade has found a way,” Sarutobi said with a mild chuckle.

“Times have changed Sarutobi. The need for jonin has allowed me to bend the rules. Besides, this young man defeated a kage in battle. I couldn’t hold him back anymore. He’s survived both Uchiha boys, Orochimaru, Kabuto Yakushi, and countless other enemies. If none of them killed him, the chunin exams weren’t going to do it. Besides, he’s got a girlfriend now and I’d say he’s grown quite a lot in four years. Apparently lil’ Sakura thinks so too...”

Ekyt and Sakura could only shake their heads tolerantly. What were they going to say?

“Alright then, it’s settled. Oh, one more thing Ekyt- how about showing all of us that new vest?”

Ekyt managed a nod. He reached for his ANBU shirt...

Sakura stood stoicly. Inner-Sakura, however...

CHA! Yes! That’s it kid, gimme the show! That’s the ticket!

Ekyt stopped. “I’m sorry, I nearly forgot...” with a somewhat teasing grin at Sakura (And a thought of “What the hell? Did I just smile at her?”), Ekyt tossed a smoke bomb down.

Seconds later, when the smoke cleared, Ekyt was standing, back military straight, in a chunin uniform.

The brand new green vest made him look like all the others. It needed a few alterations, as it was a little big, but it was just about perfect for him.

CHA! So close to seeing the chest! Inner-Sakura sighed.

Ekyt walked out with Sakura. He seemed to be more relaxed than Sakura had ever seen him.

She decided to ruin that.

“Ekyt-kun...d-do you want to try dating again?” Sakura asked, acting shy.

“Huh. S-sure. I mean, if you want to...”

Sakura took his hand gently. “I would...oh, I forgot, come with me!”

She dragged the shocked Shinobi to one of her favorite places.

“It’s beautiful in fall!” Sakura exclaimed. She had lead Ekyt to a narrow pathway by a hill that was just outside the Village. The fall foliage made for a picturesque scene.

The two walked on the path, leaves crunching under their feet. They came to Sakura’s favorite spot.

The foliage was perfect here. There were two cherry trees a few feet apart. Their branches intertwined more as the height of the branches increased. They moved slightly in the wind. The wind also tossed Sakura’s hair, something that never failed to gain the attention of the awkward Ekyt.

Sakura looked at Ekyt. Her first thought was sadness. His good eye was so full of life, even though you could still see depression in it. His ruined eye did little to taint the scene, but it saddened Sakura nonetheless.

“Ekyt-kun, isn’t it beautiful here?”

Ekyt nodded his agreement.

“Do you remember the first time I brought you here?” Sakura asked him, real curiosity in her voice.

“I do. You talked about a dream you had...about kissing a boy under the cherry blossoms. And then you said it was like the “School Girl” fantasy that boys get...”

“Okay, let’s focus on the first part Ekyt-kun,” Sakura suggested. She sat down on large rock. Sakura patted it’s smooth surface with one gloved hand, wordlessly asking Ekyt to sit next to her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

This took Ekyt by surprise. “For what?”

Sakura had tears in her eyes. "For being weak. You beat Sasuke at the chunin exams, and what did I do? I checked on him instead of you!"

Ekyt breathed a sigh of relief. "Is that all? Sakura-chan, that's okay, it's nothing to worry about. Sasuke meant a lot to you. Something that means so much to you isn't easy to forget. Besides, I understand..."

Sakura was still crying. "Why am I so weak? No one thinks I can do anything! I don't want to be weak!"

"You're a strong girl, Sakura. There's only a handful of people I know who could fend off Itachi Uchiha. Don't sell yourself short, Sakura."

Sakura pushed herself as close to Ekyt as she could. She felt his shaking arm across her shoulders. She gave a small sigh of contentment, then snuggled up to him and buried her face in his vest.

I'll show everyone...I'll prove Ekyt right. I'll be as strong as he believes I am...

Ekyt could hardly believe all that had just happened to him. Tomorrow he would be teaching an academy class, learning from a retired Hokage, and possibly being sent on some Black Ops mission. Not to mention Sakura.

As he was walking home, mulling all this over in his head, he passed Naruto.

Naruto had an uncharacteristically disturbed expression on his face. Even Ekyt, in his daze, took notice. He was one to think of other people's problems before his own. Neglecting his own problems made him nearly ill at times, but he couldn't bring himself to ignore a friend's problem.

"Naruto, anything I can help with?" Ekyt asked the troubled genin.

"Huh? Oh, well, I doubt it. I just...thought I would be a chunin. But Iruka-sensei told me Ebisu voted no..."

Ekyt narrowed his good eye. "I heard about your fight with Lee...I watched it on tape...you deserved to be a chunin...I know what the deal is. Naruto, I'm going to have a little talk with Ebisu. We'll just see how that smug idiot likes having this thrown back in his face, for once. Now, the second thing that's bothering you- and don't bother lying, I know there's at least two things..."

Naruto rubbed the back of his neck while looking around uncomfortably.

"It's Sasuke. I mean, we used to be rivals, maybe even friends...but now he's completely evil...It bothers me that someone could change...just like that...change...Now we're not even rivals..."

To Naruto's surprise, Ekyt's face morphed into one of unmistakable sorrow and understanding. "Let's talk somewhere else..." Ekyt said in a hushed tone.

"My former student...Chakaro...you remember that he turned on me...what I didn't say...is that he and I were rivals, much like you and Sasuke. We both strived to be the ultimate martial artists. He has two black belts to my zero...he was a gifted natural, with a tragic past, just like Sasuke. Until that point, Chakaro and I formed a collective yin and yang...We trusted each other, watched each other's back..."

Ekyt paused for a moment, leaning back against the tree root he had balanced himself on.

"...When he left, things went to hell. We've battled several times, but the outcome is always a stalemate."

Naruto piped up. "So you miss him? Is that it?"

Ekyt shook his head. "No. He's too evil. What I miss...is someone pushing me to do my best. The nights I've spent studying the past four years...They saved me. Chakaro and I met, about three years ago. We fought...he asked me how someone with no natural ability could keep up with someone who trained under a master who knows as many jutsus as Kakashi-sensei (Orochimaru)..."

"What did you tell him?" Naruto's curiosity had gotten the better of him.

"I didn't have an answer, Naruto. Maybe being a ninja was my niche...but I would bet...I would bet that it was knowing that I had to stay even with him that kept me going. If I take a night off, that's one night

that Chakaro has over me.”

Naruto looked on in, amazement in his wide-open blue eyes. **Whoa...it’s just like me and Sasuke...But why is Ekyt bringing this up?**

As if he had read Naruto’s mind, Ekyt spoke up again.

“It’s frustrating....Naruto, things are going great with my life right now. I’ve got two jobs, I’m being trained by one of the strongest Shinobi in the world”

“You have a hot girlfriend...” Naruto prompted.

“I have a hot...you prick. Anyway, my point is...something is going to happen. Soon. Life NEVER goes this smoothly...Maybe I worry too much, but I can feel it...something is going to happen...”

Ekyt shook his head, removing the thoughts.

Naruto had one more question, however.

“Ekyt, what’s your goal? I mean, I know your Shinobi way...but where do you want to go with it?”

Ekyt thought for a few seconds, but replied quickly. “I want to be the most trustworthy village in the ninja, someone Lord Hokage can count on for anything. Someone people come to with their problems, or come to for protection. Someone who is trusted by everyone.”

Naruto sighed at the response. “Thank God. For a second thought, I thought that you were going to say you wanted to be Hokage.”

Ekyt gave a smile and clapped Naruto on the shoulder. “One part of my Shinobi way is to not steal the dreams of my friends...You are MORE than welcome to the Hokage title Naruto.”

Ekyt got up and stretched himself.

“Besides, to paraphrase Shikamaru, paperwork is a drag.”

Lady Tsunade showed Sakura a more advanced chakra scalpel. But the pink-haired kunoichi seemed to be worried.

“Anything wrong Sakura?” Tsunade asked. She wasn’t the type to make friends. Sakura was an exception.”

Sakura looked at the floor. “I-I’m just a little worried Lady Tsunade. I always need to be rescued...how to I become stronger in combat? I don’t know what to do...”

“It’s amazing what thoughts a boy can invoke. Sakura, you already ARE powerful.”

Sakura made a small sound of question, which prompted Lady Tsunade to continue.

“Ekyt told me about the time you fought Sasuke during the chunin exams...and now, four years later, you fought his brother, one of the strongest Shinobi alive, saved your boyfriend, and lived to tell the tale. You know how Ekyt is...he was absolutely a wreck that he couldn’t protect you...so I just explained something to him, and he settled right down.”

“What did you tell him Lady Tsunade?” Sakura questioned, a hint of urgency in her voice.

“I asked him what he found attractive, beyond physical beauty. Purity of heart, courage, and strength is what he said. You know how steadfast Ekyt is about keeping his word...Well, this case is no different. That boy is SURE that you are all of those things. And I KNOW he’s right.”

“Everybody listen up!”

Iruka's voice boomed throughout the classroom, shutting down the student's chatter.

"As you may have heard, I have been promoted to jonin. For at least three months, I will not be here. I'm going to try my hand at being a squad leader."

"So what happens to us?!" came the inevitable shout from the back.

"I have already selected my replacement."

"But we'll miss you Iruka-sensei!"

Iruka smiled kindly. "And I'll miss all of you...but you'll graduate, and maybe you'll be in my squad. Besides, I'll see you around the village. Maybe you'll still be here when I come back...although I hope not, because all of you, even you Okkuu, have the potential for much more than this classroom can offer you."

Iruka panned the classroom, smiling widely, before he continued.

"So, my replacement! I'll let him introduce himself. Good luck to all of you!"

The classroom buzzed with life. Who was the replacement, they wondered. And where was he? Shouldn't he be here?

Okkuu Kazuki got up and walked to the desk at the front of the room. He looked at the door that the teacher was going to come in from. In a Naruto-ish prank, Okkuu placed a bucket of water on top of the door. The green and blue gi somehow suited the little troublemaker's untidily combed black hair.

"Hey, don't do that!" Yuuka Momoko declared. Yukka was an uptight kunoichi, twelve years old. She had long brown hair and eyes to match. Her choice of dress was based on her love for springtime. She had one yellow flower in her hair, which (according to her, anyway) complimented her pink shorts and yellow shirt.

Tatsuya Tsubasa looked over at Yuuka. **Wow, does she look cute today! Boy, she'd never even give me the time of day! Time to score some points!**

Aloud, Tatsuya called "Yeah Okkuu, come on! Give the new guy a break!"

"Hey, he's not here, and he should be! This is what he gets!" Okkuu replied. He ran back to his seat and took the position of a perfect, innocent student.

Ekyt opened the door. SPLASH!

"HA! YES! SCORE ONE FOR OKKUU!"

Ekyt lifted the bucket off his head, wondering if Umisu waking up Lady Tsunade had drawn him this assignment.

"Hmm...interesting...I've never hated someone on first site before. Okkuu, was it?" Ekyt asked in a Kakashi-esque drawl.

"Now you've done it Okkuu!" shouted Yuuka, who was unaware that Tatsuya was watching her intently. Belatedly, he shouted his agreement.

"Yeah! Why'd you have to go and piss off the new sensei?!"

Ekyt shook his head. All this seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it...He stopped trying. He began to weave his hands together.

"He's going to attack!" Okkuu shouted, leaping behind his desk, peeking out over the top.

Ekyt shook his head again. "Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation."

A clone of him popped up and used the jutsu, aiming it at Ekyt. The fire washed over him, to the shock of

his new class.

"That's better," said the newly dry Ekyt. "Now, down to business. My name is Ekyt Kaguya, and I am here to cover for Iruka-sensei for the next three months, at least. Now, I'm supposed to have all you ready to graduate in two weeks...well, all except three of you. Let me see...Kazuko, Okkuu...Momoko, Yuuka...and Tsubasa, Tatsuya...Please see me after class. No, you're not in trouble (Ekyt smirked at their scared faces)."

"Now, let's begin. You all know WHAT chakra is, and how to use it for basic jutsu. Today, I'm going ask you all your clan's specialty..."

"Come on, come on, just show us some jutsus Ekyt-sensei!" Okkuu yelled.

Ekyt looked at Okkuu. "You don't want me to do that...it would be cruel to show you my specialty."

"I could handle it! You know it!"

Ekyt shook his head. He was losing respect with the kids.

"You seem to think you're powerful Okkuu...tell me, what is your clan's specialty?" Ekyt asked kindly.

"My clan, the Kazuko's, are responsible for Konohagakure's landscape! The trees are all by us!"

"I meant your jutsus..." Ekyt told him patiently.

"Well, I DO know this one..."

"Go ahead and try it on me." Ekyt's voice silenced the entire class.

"What? You'll get killed! You couldn't dodge a bucket of water, how are you gonna dodge an expert jutsu?"

Ekyt pulled off his chunin uniform, revealing his ANBU clothes.

"I can handle it..."

Okkuu stopped his gloating and posturing. "Y-you're ANBU?"

"Afraid so," Ekyt told him coldly. "Now, please, go ahead and attack, I won't hurt you..."

Dejected, Okkuu sat down.

"Excuse me...Ekyt-kun!"

Sakura ran across the floor, jumping sloppily onto Ekyt.

"I missed you soooo much Ekyt-kun! I've been meaning to show you this all day!"

Sakura gave a wicked grin.

"Sexy jutsu!"

Ekyt's eyes widened. The girl in front of him wasn't Sakura. She was, however, naked.

"You're soooooo smart Ekyt-sama! Maybe you could teach ME something..." came the girl's innocent plea. Or not so innocent, considering the fact that she was naked. The girl blew a kiss.

That was all she wrote for the pervy samurai...a giant nosebleed ensued, sending the chunin backward into the wall, where he seemed to stick for a moment before sliding down, too dazed to move.

With a "poof", the girl turned into a hysterical Naruto.

"I got you good Pervy Samurai! Believe it! The look on your face...the nosebleed! You're as big a perv as Iruka-sensei!"

The recovered Ekyt leapt to his feet. "CUT THE STUPID TRICKS! THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!" he shouted.

Naruto laughed. "Yeah right, that didn't work when Iruka-sensei said it!"

"No?" said a voice from behind Naruto. "Well then...maybe you should be disciplined..."

Naruto turned to find Ekyt standing behind him.

"I'm sorry Naruto. Good joke. Class, this is Naruto Uzumaki, a good friend of mine, in addition to being

the number-one hyperactive, knucklehead, maverick ninja show-stopper. The emphasis on knucklehead..."

Naruto's eyes twinkled with mischief.

"This is Ekyt Kaguya, a friend of mine. But he's also known as the pervy samurai, due to his habit of peeping on bathing kunoichi..."

"Damn it, I SAID that was an accident!" Ekyt shouted back.

"Hey, hey, what would Sakura say if she knew you were about to kill me?!" Naruto asked, playing his ace.

Ekyt played his. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her..." he replied as he rolled his neck.

NEXT ISSUE: IRUKA'S TEAM, AND ONE VILLAGE'S UNREST MAY LEAD TO ANOTHER VILLAGE'S DEMISE! EKYT STARTS TRAINING WITH THE THIRD HOKAGE. BUT WHAT DOES ROCK LEE HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

13 - The Emergency Meeting

“Your name?”

“Kaguya, Ekyt,” came the dry reply. “As you know full well Ebisu.”

The irritated Tokubetsu jonin pushed his glasses up higher on his face.

“Now see here, I will NOT put up with your sarcasm! I don’t care if you ARE near jonin-level, I still outrank you at the moment, and you will do as I tell you.”

Ekyt rolled his good eye. “Oh please. Look, I have an appointment with them (points at door), and you’re making me late. If YOU want to explain to the council that you were busy harassing me, then go ahead and keep talking. Otherwise, move.”

Not wanting to face an irritated Lady Tsunade, Ebisu stepped aside, grumbling. He had stopped Ekyt’s promotion to chunin for four years, all because of Ekyt’s friendship with Naruto. Ekyt had displayed skills far beyond chunin level, and it became ridiculous to hold him back any longer.

This morning, class was being taught by the Third Hokage. Ekyt was needed in an emergency meeting.

Lady Tsunade, along with Iruka (A new jonin in this arc), Kakashi, Asuma, Guy, Hayate Gekko, Anko Mitarashi, and Ibikki Morino were waiting, making some small talk until Ekyt arrived.

“You’re early, Ekyt. Not that I’m surprised,” Tsunade added.

Ekyt assumed a kneeling position at the far end of the table. He took the time to glance around the room as he had walked in, and it was ornate, even by such a formal occasion’s standards. There were various scrolls all over the walls, most of them ancient and made of rice paper. Behind Lady Tsunade’s chair there was an enormous mural dedicated to the First Hokage.

The room itself seemed hidden. Ekyt guessed that meetings of great importance took place here. Meetings about things that didn’t leave the room...maybe even things that were evil.

Lady Tsunade looked to Iruka for a moment. “Iruka, your squad has been selected. They will be joining you soon. However, there are more pressing matters...”

Lady Tsunade began speaking. To Ekyt’s surprise, she was talking to him. Not only that, she was speaking to him as though he was one of her advisors.

“I’ve come to hold your opinions in a high regard. In this case, you are the person in the best position to give an opinion. Not to sound formal, but I ask you to sit among us on the council today, because this topic is very grave, and it could have consequences for you.” Lady Tsunade’s chilling tone caused everyone in the room to shift uncomfortably.

While Lady Tsunade sat on a low chair, the rest of the Shinobi knelt or sat on cushions. Only when indicated to do so did Ekyt take a cushion for himself. He settled as quickly as possible so that Lady Tsunade could continue speaking.

“As you are aware, the Leaf Village’s strength is weakening. Our business are down, and we hardly have enough ninja to meet the quota of missions. Graduation rates are down because enrollment is

down. Ekyt, this is where your opinion comes in handy. You filled in for Iruka while he tried his hand at leading a squad. WHY is enrollment down? And what can we do to pick it up?"

Ekyt gulped down dregs of fear. He knew (and was friends with) everyone on the council. But this was his first time sitting in, and everyone suddenly seemed a lot bigger and scarier.

"Enrollment is down because of fear. Some of our most supportive clans are stopping their children from enrolling. After the Sound Village attacked, everyone saw the families that had been broken apart."

The council muttered a general agreement before Ekyt continued.

"As for how to raise enrollment again...Everyone knows the Shinobi's path is not easy. We need to put a positive spin on that, show them that it's not all doom and gloom. Secondly, the town needs a hero. No offense to you, Lady Tsunade, but there isn't anyone who has done that one, incredible thing, or made that one great sacrifice to save the village."

Tsunade stood up and began to pace.

"I'll look into the matter Ekyt, although I suspect your judgment is correct. Now, the second issue...we've heard rumblings that the Sound Village plans to attack us. And these rumors are well founded. They've nearly doubled their strength, while we've lost some of ours."

The council nodded; this wasn't news to them.

"The problem- Orochimaru is personally leading the charge, and he's bringing his triumvirate with him..."

Kakashi and Ekyt exchanged glances. They knew what that meant- For Kakashi, Sasuke Uchiha. For Ekyt, Chakaro Tamaki. Two Leaf Villagers who had chosen Orochimaru's promise of power over the Leaf Village. Kakashi had trained Sasuke, and Ekyt had trained Chakaro, so this was personal for both of them.

The third part of the triumvirate, Kabuto Yakushi, worried everyone. He had been compared to Kakashi on many occasions. Kakashi was the best hope against Kabuto. But if Sasuke was involved, Kakashi might be distracted. Against someone as skilled as Kabuto, that would be fatal.

"I've heard everyone else's opinion on this- but what about you?" Tsunade asked, again speaking to Ekyt. To her shock, Ekyt spoke up immediately, conviction in his voice.

"We need proof that this is going to happen. Once we've proved it, we can launch a preemptive strike to buy time, build our forces back up. We just need to do enough damage to set Orochimaru back. There's no one in Otogakure who could be considered a civilian, so we wouldn't have to be as fussy about we destroyed."

Tsunade considered Ekyt's words with a thoughtful expression.

"Anyone have an argument?" she called after a moment's thought.

"No. In fact, I think he's right. And I'd like to suggest Shikamaru for the mission. Thinking strategically is his thing," Asuma offered.

Tsunade again nodded in assent. "This mission is going to take a good amount of people. Since we're lacking, we've got to pick strategically. Kakashi...and Ekyt. You two are in charge of this case. I want each of you to put together two names in addition to yourselves."

"Understood," Ekyt replied crisply.

"Alright," Kakashi drawled.

"I wonder what brought that on?" Ekyt voiced his thoughts aloud as he and Kakashi walked out of the building.

"Probably the fact that you're a half-step away from jonin," Kakashi replied, his nose already in *Make-Out Violence*.

Ekyt had stopped in his tracks.

"Wait, are you saying that they're actually considering that? I mean, me, a Jonin?"

Kakashi looked up, a grin apparent under his mask. "That's right!" he said happily. "And you've earned it. You know how hard pressed we are for jonin. Your name has been coming up for months. But you were short a couple missions. In fact, one mission. Looks like, after this mission, you'll be all caught up."

Ekyt looked shocked. "Wow...but wait, what do they plan to do with me? I mean, there's no room for me as a squad leader, and the Third Hokage is teaching."

Kakashi shrugged. "Who knows? Lady Tsunade can be hard to read...not unlike Sakura..."

Ekyt shook his head tolerantly. Ever since he and Sakura had been boyfriend and girlfriend, the ribbing from the Village had been endless. Even Lady Tsunade had gotten into it.

"So, who do you have in mind for your people?" Kakashi asked suddenly.

"Well, I know you'll have Sakura and Naruto, aside from the two you pick. I had Shikamaru and Lee in mind."

Kakashi nodded his agreement, but added an amendment. "You should take Sakura and Lee with you, if we get split up. You three have worked together before and you compliment each other. Naruto and Shikamaru are opposites, but they can work fine together. All the same, it should be a mission priority to stick together. Oh, before I forget, this is for you. It's a mission scroll."

"What do I do with it sensei? This is my first one...I mean, aside from my ANBU scrolls...and that reminds me- do I go as a Jr. ANBU agent, or am I going as a chunin leading a squad? I could do either..."

Kakashi thought for a moment. "Go as an ANBU agent. Your gear will probably come in handy."

Kakashi's next question shook Ekyt to the core.

"Ekyt, in this mission, you might have to kill...can you handle that?"

Ekyt sighed and put a hand to his temple. "I've never killed sensei...I'd rather I didn't...but if it comes down to it...I'm sure I can."

Kakashi saw that his words had disturbed Ekyt. He wished he could tell the young man everything, instead of just these fragmented bits of what was in store for him...

A variable was suddenly thrown in. The Sand Village needed help. It was decided that Kakashi's team of Naruto and Shikamaru would head there. Ekyt's team was to head to Otogakure.

They hadn't gotten far when Lee suddenly collapsed. Behind him stood Kabuto and Chakaro. Wordlessly, the aimed for Lee. Ekyt leapt in the way, extending his foot out to his them both.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" he called. His clones appeared next to him, in front of Lee and Sakura.

"Hidden Shadow Snake Hand!" All five Ekyt's called. This drained Ekyt's chakra big time, but it was a good move in a pinch.

Chakaro and Kabuto leapt in opposite directions. Ekyt ended the Hidden Shadow Snake Hand jutsu. Instead, he had his clones use the Dragon's Ember Jutsu. The attack missed.

What is wrong with...wait. My attacks aren't THAT weak...genjutsu! But my chakra is almost gone...but it has to be done, it's probably affecting Lee and Sakura too!

"Disengage!" Ekyt shouted. The genjutsu that was throwing off his aim lifted just in time for both Kabuto and Chakaro to land critical strikes to the Leaf Chunin.

Ekyt went down hard, his chakra and excess stamina finally exhausted. Chakaro and Kabuto moved in for the kill menacingly. Lee was badly injured, though not critical. Ekyt had fought the two off as long as he could. Kakashi, Shikamaru, and Naruto were probably waiting at the rendezvous point.

Sakura felt her chakra welling up.

This is it...one last punch...I won't let him get Ekyt! He fought too bravely to die here!

Sakura's punch cracked off of Chakaro's skull. At the same time, her leg halted Kabuto's progress. She was then flung to the side. And Chakaro was closing in fast...

14 - A Family Matter

Chakaro leapt in for another attack. Again, he found the recurring Ekyt Kaguya in the way.

“Damn! What do I have to do you?! The girl is my target today, not you... “sensei”.”

Chakaro’s short, greasy black hair moved slightly in the wind, matching Ekyt’s hitai-ate strap movement.

Ekyt, of the Leaf Village, a Special Chunin in the Jr ANBU Black Ops, coughed roughly. Blood dribbled down his chin.

Behind Ekyt was Sakura Haruno. The stunned Kunoichi was ready to defend herself against Chakaro, Orochimaru’s recruit from 3 and a half years ago.

Ekyt, despite the panting and bleeding, took another punch, still unwilling to move.

“You...have no idea (koff) do you? (koff) To know what it means...to be willing to die (koff) not only in the name of duty...but in the name of love...for something...for someone...You never did (koff) understand that...And you never will, not like (koff) this.” Ekyt’s voice belied his weariness. Whereas his body was near collapse, his voice showed strength, and anger, and a willingness to defend. Even with his life.

Sakura shook her head. All the time she had spent talking to this boy...She had spoken to him as if she could tell him anything. At one point, Sakura was certain she had said “I wish Sasuke was more like you sometimes”. How had she not noticed that THIS was the kid who would have done anything for her sooner?

She looked again at the blood-soaked back of the 19 year old in front of her. It was an unnerving site, seeing kunai and senbon sticking out of him like some human pincushion. It was even stranger that the boy made no sound of pain when yet another kunai pierced his arm.

“So, the love bug has bitten my old sensei? How touching...I know this girl. Master Sasuke rejected her. She hasn’t given up on him completely...I can tell...how pathetic, BOTH of you chasing someone who hates you!”

Ekyt narrowed his eyes. Something wasn’t right. Every instinct he had was telling him to turn around. He didn’t know why, but he did. When he looked, he gasped.

“Forget it!” Ekyt leapt in front of Sakura.

“Remember this sensei? SAND SHURIKEN JUTSU!”

As the shuriken flew at him, Ekyt’s good eye shrank. The horror of what had happened...

“No...” he breathed. He wanted to turn the other way. But the sight of Sakura forced him to continue his leap. In mid air, his subconscious went back to that day...

FLASHBACK!

“Come on sensei! Can’t we rest?! We’re not insane, like you! Our bodies need to rest!”

Ekyt smirked. The complaint coming from the expected source. The pretty blonde “cheerleader” of the group, Kayla Donalds.

"It's good for you Kayla. Besides, we've gotta keep up our girlish figures!"

THAT came from Linda Mawashi. That also brought the corners of Ekyt's mouth back down.

I screwed up...but good. I really liked this girl...then I go and kiss her...now it's so awkward...

Ekyt's thoughts had been like that for days, so he didn't bat an eye. Not until there were three figures on the path in front of him.

"Hey, look at this! Are they ninja?"

Kankuro's question shook Temari out of a trance.

"They don't look it, if they are. I don't think they're a threat," Temari said, off the cuff.

"Two of them...are strong. I want to kill them."

Temari and Kankuro looked up in alarm. Gaara hadn't said two words. Until now. And when Gaara spoke, it meant something.

Ekyt put an arm out to stop his team. There was one red-headed boy, a pretty, but feisty-looking, blonde girl, and a guy- in a black pig suit? What the hell?

"You...and you...Help me feel alive..."

Ekyt and Chakaro saw that the red head was pointing at them. By unspoken agreement, the two approached cautiously. Chakaro and Ekyt's eyes met one more time, this time the message was clear: This kid was bad news.

Sand sprang up around Chakaro, enveloping him. Ekyt heard him groan in pain. The sand was slowly tightening around Chakaro. Ekyt whipped around; Kayla and Linda were both trapped as well.

Ekyt's voice turned low and menacing.

"Let go of them...now."

Gaara simply tightened his outstretched hand a little more. He smiled at the cries of pain he heard from the three who were trapped.

Ekyt's eyes widened. **Ho-how is he doing this?**

Gaara spoke up. "You know nothing of chakra...you would have fought back by now if you did..."

Ekyt's eyes narrowed this time.

"Chakra...I know what it is...are you saying...chakra is letting you do this?"

Gaara tightened his hand again.

"That's right. I sensed a strength from you, and one other of you group..."

Ekyt shook himself out of his trance. He drew his sword and rushed Gaara. Sand flew up, blocking his strike. Ekyt noticed this, so he did the logical thing: He pushed his sword against the sand, farther and farther against the wall. He heard a sound of shock as he felt his blade hit something solid. Ekyt guessed he had managed to hit the boy's forehead.

Gaara responded with a strategically-placed attack.

"You have a choice...fight me...or save her!" Gaara called in his dry voice. Five shuriken, made of sand, were speeding towards Linda.

Without a thought for himself, Ekyt pulled his sword free and ran. He made a last second move: A diving leap in front of Linda.

Four shuriken hit him in the arms, legs, and stomach. The fifth, however, shifted. Ekyt could do nothing as the sharp sand pierced his left eye. After the initial, sharp, stabbing pain, Ekyt felt nothing. "Come back..." he said silently as he lay on the ground. He didn't lay there long. He forced himself up, and put his hands in a guard position.

Temari saw the boy who she picked out as the leader get up again.

Against Gaara? Kid, stay down, don't be a hero...what am I saying? He's protecting his group...

"Gaara, they aren't a threat to you? Why not just let them go? No big deal, right?" Temari gulped, praying that this worked.

"I want to kill...but they aren't worth it..."

The sand slid off the group.

"Thanks..." Ekyt said to Temari, before he finally fell, first to his knees, then forward, lying face down in the road.

END FLASHBACK!

Ekyt's eyes shimmered with anticipation.

"Not again!" he yelled aloud. He landed on his feet, scooped up Sakura, and leapt again in one motion. The shuriken sailed away wildly.

Chakaro immediately gave chase.

Ekyt zigged and zagged through the trees. Sakura just held on, knowing how Ekyt's mind worked.

He's got a plan...but where is he going with this? Come on Ekyt-kun, you can do it...

Ekyt landed behind a large oak tree. His breathing was ragged from the pain he was in. He vaguely wondered how his body was still moving, but pushed that aside.

"Sakura...he's acting on Sasuke's orders...there's only one thing I can do against Chakaro...but it's going to take all of my chakra. After I do it, run. Don't look back, just keep going. No matter what. Okay?"

Sakura stood open-mouthed, staring at Ekyt. She didn't even answer when he jumped off, landing in a clearing.

"HEY! RIGHT HERE!" Ekyt shouted. Seconds later, Chakaro landed in front of him.

"Giving up?" he drawled in a hoarse whisper.

"No...I just thought I'd show you that I've got a few tricks up my sleeve...This battle isn't over Chakaro." Ekyt's thoughts turned to Gaara. His hate began to build. He thought of Chakaro, and Kabuto. He thought of how unfair it was that Naruto was ostracized...how unfair that Lee couldn't use jutsus...how miserable it was that Sasuke was with Orochimaru.

Ekyt's hate surged painfully into his chest. The chunin winced, knowing that the pain would hit its climax next.

A small sound escaped his throat as the pain reached his heart. Ekyt's body began to shake. Every bit

of chakra in him was changing the way it flowed. It normally flowed clockwise. But Ekyt's powerful emotions were changing it to counter-clockwise, and that was painful.

"I don't like doing this...but you're a special case."

Ekyt put a hand to his chest. It sank in, past his skin, right into his heart. Ekyt grabbed at something. When he pulled his hand out, a transparent flame was crackling merrily where Ekyt's hand had been. The hand was, in fact, still there. But it had become transparent as well.

Ekyt's hands weaved together. Chakaro, realizing that this was trouble, raced forward, throwing senbon as rapidly as he could. Ekyt was unfazed by it, his brain had already accepted the full amount of pain it could. Thanks to the chakra, it rejected the feelings of pain.

"Demonic Illusion: Mind Barring Technique: Speed Break!"

Chakaro suddenly felt his mind grind to a halt. He could only watch as Ekyt got a running start.

"What I've done is used a genjutsu to sever the ties between your brain and your nervous system...don't worry, they're self-repairing in this case...but I need to stop you...even if it means we both die, here and now."

Ekyt was gathering speed. His body's structure was even blurring.

"BLUE FLAME CHAKRA: SWALLOW STRIKE FINALITY JUTSU: SECOND FORM!"

The flame in Ekyt's hand leapt higher, now as tall as the one wielding it.

With a yell of rage, Ekyt threw his hand into Chakaro's face as hard as he could. He felt the traitor's jaw break. But that wasn't all this attack did.

Chakaro suddenly screamed. His body turned red. Some blood cells were rupturing. Every nerve in his body, every muscle, every cell was aching, screaming with pain.

Ekyt stumbled backward. But he had done his job.

"Like it Chakaro? That's ALL The pain I've ever felt...emotionally, physically, spiritually...all put into one strike...don't worry, you won't die...it's worse than death..."

Ekyt was breathing heavy, but still upright. He couldn't access his chakra for five minutes, but his stamina was still holding.

WHAM!

From behind, Ekyt was kicked so hard he flew ten feet into a tree. His head bounced off the wood, his outstretched arms blocking only some of the attack. He pushed off the tree and rolled backward.

"Kabuto! I should have known!"

But there was little Ekyt could do. He could barely fight Kabuto with a full compliment of chakra.

"You've been quite the thorn in Lord Orochimaru's side, Ekyt Kaguya. Yes, we know of that. That's why I've brought someone special to meet you..."

Sakura still hadn't moved. No matter what he said, Ekyt was still her boyfriend. He was ready to die for her...now she was going to show the same loyalty. She wasn't some scared little fangirl anymore.

Sakura Haruno had blossomed into a talented Kunoichi chunin, and a warrior. She was tired of people saying she couldn't do anything. She was going to prove them wrong.

Kimimaro Kaguya appeared at Kabuto's side.

"Interesting...fighting Lord Chakaro..." Kimimaro's placed voice seemed unnerving.

"It's good to meet you...cousin. I had hoped it would be under better circumstances..." Ekyt said. He felt the warmth of his chakra returning.

Kimimaro suddenly reached back and pulled a bone out of his shoulder. He thrust it at Ekyt's neck. He looked down midly, seeing a kunai held against his own neck.

The two cousins were at a stalemate.

"Good reflexes." Kimimaro coughed, blood falling out of his mouth.

Sakura suddenly flew into the clearing. WHAM! Her chakra-enhanced punch sent Kabuto skidding. Before he could recover, Sakura brought her heel down on the ground. The earth split and opened a yawning chasm that swallowed Kabuto.

Sakura's hands weaved together quickly.

Kabuto pulled himself out of the hole.

"That was foolish...you could have survived. Oh well, I guess I have to complete Lord Chakaro's mission." Kabuto started toward Sakura. Suddenly, he saw a giant flame leap up in front of him.

Non-plussed, he stepped through it.

"Genjutsu. Good try, I'll give you that. But"

Kabuto was cut off in mid-sentence. He suddenly saw horrible things...terrible things...

Sakura smiled. "Overconfident as always Kabuto. Enjoy viewing hell."

Ekyt looked at the blood. "You're dying needlessly Kimimaro. I know you won't betray Orochimaru...but I ask you...to trust me. There is help for your disease...but we have to go to the Leaf Village...you've committed no crimes against us, no one will persecute you..."

Kimimaro didn't move the bone away from Ekyt's throat. By the same token, Ekyt didn't move his kunai.

"Why would you help me?" Kimimaro finally asked.

"We're cousins. Besides, why die when there's no point?"

Kimimaro didn't reply.

"Please, trust me..."

Kimimaro stayed still. **Am I dying needlessly? But I am in the service of Lord Orochimaru...**

Kimimaro decided: He slashed his sword forward, slicing Ekyt's neck...

15 - Destiny's Beginning

Kimimaro's sword cut through Ekyt's neck. Well, a log where his neck used to be.

"Look, I didn't come to fight you Kimimaro. I'm only here in defense of someone I love. And I'm trying to help you, because your family. I know you can understand that," Ekyt told him.

Kimimaro cut with the sword again. Ekyt leaned back, using his kunai to knock the sword away.

"I don't think you family. Lord Orochimaru is my family."

Ekyt shook his head. "I'm not trying to take you away from him. I want to help you. I don't let my family or my teammates die when I can help it. There's help for your disease. I promise, if you come with me, no one will persecute you, and I'll stay at your side. After our medic-nin heal you, you can go, no questions asked."

"This is such a drag. It's hot, not to mention not really our problem."

Kakashi tried to stay patient. **How does Asuma put up with him?**

"Kakashi-sensei, Kakashi-sensei, we're here!" Naruto, the number one hyperactive, knuckle-head ninja, declared. "Huh? There's nothing here! This sucks, believe it!"

Kakashi and Shikamaru studied the horizon. Naruto was right. There was nothing going on.

"They wanted help...but with what?" Kakashi was thinking aloud.

"It was a trick. The Sound Village wanted to lure us away...that's the only thing that makes sense...how troublesome," Shikamaru murmured, looking up at the sky.

"Can I help you? Hey, what are you guys doing here?"

Temari had come to greet the guests, and was shocked to see Kakashi, Shikamaru, and Naruto.

"We got an urgent distress call to come here. What's going on?" Kakashi asked.

Shikamaru threw a kunai at Temari. It stuck on her, then exploded with a Flash-bang!

"What the hell was that Shikamaru?!" Naruto shouted, looking at Temari.

"That's not Temari. Temari's a rogue, remember? And there's no reason for someone to impersonate her, unless they were attacking us..."

"Smart kid you got there. NOW!" the fallen "Temari" shouted.

Ten Sand Ninja leapt out from various hiding places.

Five of them immediately took on a strange position, their hands on their heads, palms out.

"Shadow Possesion Jutsu...now let's see how you clowns handle this!" Shikamaru turned around. The enemies did the same. Shikamaru sprinted forward, into the desert. The five Sand ninja, however, turned and sprinted right into the walls of the building they had been hiding from. Shikamaru backed up, the ran forward again. One more time and all five were unconcious.

"You're going down, believe it!" Naruto shouted, holding his hand out while a clone formed a ball of rapidly-spiraling chakra. The clone leapt up and attacked one enemy, while Naruto ran at the other.

"Rasengan!" he shouted, driving the spiral ball home into the chest of the stunned Sand Ninja.

Kakashi lifted his headband. The three tomoe of his Sharingan faced the enemy, making for quite a

menacing picture.

They started to attack, but Kakashi matched them move for move, and even beat them to the punch:

“Wind Style: Great Sand Eclipse!”

The two ninja stared on in shock as their best jutsu has just been used against them.

“Man, that was easy!” Naruto declared, pumping a fist in the air.

“Celebrate later Naruto. Right now, we have to get back to the Village,” Shikamaru told him.

“He’s right. I wonder how Ekyt’s group did?” Kakashi wondered.

“Kyah!” Sakura drew her fist back again. Kabuto used his chakra scalpel to cut Sakura’s arm. Sakura just smiled.

“Stupid...I just hardened my chakra in that spot. And you just broke the cardinal rule of fighting- never take your eyes off your opponent,” Sakura said with an aggressive grin.

“I’m staring right at you...” Kabuto said, even as he was turning around. Sakura was behind him.

Kabuto took a swipe at her, only to hit a log.

“Sucker!” Sakura declared, smashing Kabuto in the back of the head with a kick. The chakra-enhanced blow sent Kabuto sailing. Sakura, in contrast to her normal fighting style, hit the ground running, giving him another boot in the face before he landed, then following with an incredibly quick combo- a flurry of chakra-enhanced punches, ending with an elbow to the chin.

By now, Kimimaro and Ekyt were standing three feet apart. Ekyt vaguely wondered how he was still standing as he plucked a few kunai and senbon out of his skin.

“Why do you think me family?” Kimimaro questioned Ekyt.

“Why? Well, because we are,” Ekyt replied, not sure that was the response Kimimaro wanted.

“Family is more than flesh and blood. I’ve done nothing for you. Why bother with me?”

Ekyt understood now. “Because you’re not evil. And like I said, I don’t like people dying needlessly.”

The Leaf chunin put his kunai away. “Trust me...let us help you...”

Kimimaro looked at Ekyt’s outstretched hand. **My time is short, I’ll have to decide quick...**

“I’ll decide while we fight. Tsubaki no Mai.”

Kimimaro stabbed incredibly fast with his sword. Ekyt used the Body Flicker Jutsu to leap away. When Kimimaro followed, Ekyt had drawn his own sword.

“Your time is limited, I can tell. I’ll make you a deal. I’ll duel you when after you’ve been healed. I want a fair contest, not one where you have to hold back because of some disease.” Ekyt really hoped his offer would do it.

Kimimaro stopped, considering it. **I could serve Orochimaru better if I let him heal me...I would die for Orochimaru...but why die if I don’t have to?**

Kabuto pushed himself up to his knees. He coughed violently, blood spilling out onto his glove.

“You’ve gotten stronger. Oh well, you win the round. Lord Chakaro and I have to go anyway. But don’t relax, you and I will cross kunai again.” It was amazing how Kabuto could be trying to kill you, but he’d be speaking respectfully, almost kindly, to the point where you’d want to trust him. Sakura, however, knew better.

CHA! I WIN! CHALK ONE UP FOR THE CUTE KUNOICHI IN RED! Inner-Sakura was having a field day.

“Good match to you, too,” the real Sakura said, even giving a pleasant wave. “Now where did that boyfriend of mine get to?”

Kimimaro watched Kabuto disappear.

“If I come with you...I will not be attacked, and I would be free to leave.”

Ekyt nodded. “That’s right. You have my word, on the code of Bushido AND my Nindo that I will do exactly what I have told you.”

Kimimaro put the bone in his sash. “I will do it.”

Sakura walked over, the still unconscious Lee cradled across her shoulder.

“He’s coming with us,” Ekyt told Sakura while reaching for two scrolls. He drew a line of blood down each of them, then bashed his palm against the ground, executing a jutsu.

“Twin Summoning Jutsu!”

With two “BLAMS!”, Ekyt’s two summons, A Keeshonden Dog (Holly) and a Water Dragon (Umisu) landed near him. Ekyt was already writing out the scrolls to hand to each of them.

“Again, kid? Can’t you give it a rest? I’m a tired pup!” Holly howled, to no avail. Ekyt stuffed a note in her collar.

“Sorry Holly, you’ll have to chew me out later. Right now, Lady Tsunade needs that. Give it directly to her, no one else, okay?”

Holly read the concern in Ekyt’s voice, and matched it. “Alright, on my way.”

Umisu was handed a smaller scroll.

“For Kakashi Hatake, okay, Umisu?”

Umisu gave a fond wink, then disappeared.

Ekyt turned back around. “WHOA! No, don’t do that!”

Kimimaro had drawn his bone/sword, aiming it at Sakura’s neck.

“She’s a threat.” Kimimaro said, not lowering the sword.

“She’s one of the medic-nin who can cure you. Not to mention the fact that she’s the strongest kunoichi around. And...well...my girlfriend,” Ekyt said the last part, blushing because Sakura was watching and listening.

“Hmm...Girlfriend? I suppose it’s healthy. Although it’s outside my understanding,” Kimimaro admitted. He put his sword away.

Lady Tsunade read the scroll from Ekyt, then looked up at Kakashi.

“So it’s happening...those two villages teamed up...I hope we can fight them off...I’m not gonna lie, it’s gonna be an uphill battle.” Tsunade sighed and put her head on her arms.

“Two of Orochimaru’s triumvirate are hurt, and we took out seven sand jonin and three chunin. Lady Tsunade, the Leaf Village might have less people, but we’re of a better quality. But, to help, I’ll enlist the aid of a few friends of mine.”

Tsunade nodded at Kakashi’s words. “Alright, go ahead. We’ve got you and Jiraih...we just need an advantage.”

Shikamaru slouched in. Behind him was a familiar figure.

“Is this how you treat a lady, Shikamaru?” the kunoichi questioned.

“If the girl is troublesome,” Shikamaru responded, before turning his attention to Lady Tsunade.

“She (Nods at the kunoichi) is a rogue from the Sand Village. She knows their attack patterns and formations. That’ll take away one advantage they have.”

Tsunade looked at the girl, then down at one of the scrolls in front of her.

“Temari, right? You requested citizenship a while ago...” Tsunade’s voice held a questioning tone.

“Yes...yes I did. I’m tired of being a rogue,” Temari responded truthfully.

“Well, if you’re gonna help us, I guess we need to get you a knew one of those, then...” Tsunade rummaged in her desk, then extracted a new hitai-ate.

“Welcome to the Leaf Village.”

Ekyt came in next, followed by Sakura. Lee was outside the door with Kimimaro.

“I’ve brought him, Lady Tsunade. I gave him my word that he would be free to go after the surgery, and that he wouldn’t be attacked while he was here.”

Lady Tsunade nodded her head once more. “Alright. I’ll do the surgery here. Sakura, you’re with me.

Ekyt, as I recall, you said you wouldn’t leave his side. So I guess that means you’re here too. After that, I want you and Iruka to take all the kids and hide them in the...well, you know where. Once you’ve done that, you and Iruka can act according to the situation.”

“Right. Understood.”

“Sakura-chan, wait a second...” Ekyt held back Sakura at the end of the impromptu meeting.

“Hmm? Ekyt-kun? What’s up?”

“Thanks for the save. Back there, with Kabuto,” Ekyt stumbled through his words.

Sakura smiled and put a finger on the tip of his nose.

“Well, you always defend me. Romance is a two way street, after all!” she exclaimed brightly. She removed her finger and kissed him on the nose.

NEXT ISSUE: LEAF VILLAGE IN PERIL!