

# Hamagakure's Trouble

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*Welcome to Hama, the Beach Village. Romance, parties, not a sad face to be found. Until the Sound Village comes. Naruto, Sakura, Lee, and Ekyt venture there to fight off the Sound Village attack. But they get more than they bargain for...*

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# 1 - A Rude Awakening

Sakura Haruno woke up fast, throwing herself upright, drenched with a cold sweat. Her breath coming in gasps, she looked around her darkened room for the source of the threat. There was, of course, none. The room was empty. Completely empty, except for Sakura. That, and her hopes and dreams. It had been a dream. Just like always. For one fleeting moment, Sakura thought that Sasuke had returned, just for her. Her subconscious still hadn't let go of a romance that had almost no chance of ever coming true. Not only that, it made things worse. Sakura WANTED to forget.

The cold floorboards creaked as Sakura eased herself out of bed. She let the red comforter fall off the bed, to the floor, where she looked at it for a moment, still dazed from being awoken so abruptly. Sakura finally ignored it and stumbled to the kitchen. Her mind was wide awake, but her body was still asleep. With a glance at the clock, she saw why. It was four in the morning, a time for sleeping.

**Sasuke...I hope you're alright...** Sakura thought wistfully. She wasn't sure she was in love with him anymore, now that two and a half years had passed. And it wasn't like she didn't have other friends. But still, she had a hard time forgetting the Uchiha boy. It was hard to forget someone you had felt so strongly about.

Sasuke was, of course, the fodder of her nightmares. Promises of love, happy reunions, and jealous Ino-pigs were always included. Those parts were okay; great, in fact. It was when the dreams went wrong- hatred, death, and Sasuke leaving all over again. This worried Sakura to no end. She was fifteen, going on sixteen, nightmares didn't scare her anymore. But her dreams had been accurate once before, succeeding in predicting Orochimaru's movement. She hoped that these were just nightmares, the pressures of the world taking their toll on her mind, rather than premonitions of disaster.

Sakura took her mug of hot chocolate to the window, looking outside at the starry sky. The moon had taken a sickle shape, casting pale blue-ish light on the sleeping Leaf Village. The same moonlight bathed Sakura's smooth face, somehow making her somber expression add to her beauty.

There was no doubt Sakura had grown in terms of both looks and abilities. She had outgrown the fan-girl stage of her life, and grown into a more mature look, crossing the bridge from "cute" to "beautiful." Her new clothes reflected her more mature feelings and abilities. Gone was the long, cumbersome one-piece dress she had worn before. It was replaced by a red vest that met a pink skirt of sorts at her waist. Beneath that was a shorter version of her blue gi tights.

Right now, however, she was wearing her pajamas, a two-piece combo of red shorts and a red top that revealed just a few inches of skin on her stomach, before the shorts began just below her navel. Nights in Konohagakure could be hot, and she WAS still a girl, after all; you couldn't expect her not to care how she looked! For some reason people had a hard time remembering that kunoichi were both girls AND warriors. Unlike most girls, Sakura never sacrificed modesty on the alter of comfort. She wanted to be liked because of who she was, not her looks. Or, more accurately, not purely her looks. She turned her fair share of Shinobi heads, though few bothered to make any passes at her. She had spurned people before due to her love for Sasuke. Now, at a time when she *might* have considered dating them, they didn't make any attempt to ask.

That made for a lot of lonely nights for Sakura. As strong as she had become, these nights sometimes ended in tears for her. She wondered if everyone felt like this. Alone, frustrated, unnecessary. It was enough to drive ANYONE to tears.

**I wish I could just get a good night's sleep, for once. I must be the only one awake!**

With that thought, Sakura clutched her mug of hot chocolate thoughtfully, letting the steam rise up,

licking the underside of her chin. She found that just holding the drink helped calm her frazzled nerves. After a few more seconds of contemplating the rising steam, Sakura drank from the dark blue mug, savoring the taste of the rich chocolate. Though she still felt saddened, the chocolate helped remind her of the good parts of her life. She had friends who cared about her. She was the top medic-nin, after Lady Tsunade. In terms of combat, she had Kakashi, one of the best instructors possible.

**THAT was just what I needed.** Sakura's thought process had finally started to succumb to the allure of sleep. Crawling back in to bed, Sakura pushed all her thoughts aside and just let sleep permeate her being.

There was one other person awake at this horrible hour. Namely, Ekyt Kaguya.

Ekyt was something of a mystery to the town. He was likeable enough, and he had made sacrifices for the town, as a thanks for their acceptance. But the kid was a closed book. Aside from the fact that he was a frustrated genin who kept narrowly missing promotion to chunin due to someone on the Hokage's council, and the fact that he had talents that most genin shouldn't be able to even look out. Oh, and the fact he had befriended Naruto Uzumaki. THAT had cost him some popularity at first, but once it became clear that Ekyt was not going to become the second Naruto as everyone feared, he was accepted readily into most circles in the village. Ekyt himself understood Naruto. While Ekyt had parents, unlike Naruto, Ekyt had never been accepted anywhere. The two had instantly befriended each other, despite being polar opposites in personality.

Tonight, like every night, Ekyt was doing what he normally did- studying. For the three or so years he had been in Konoha, Ekyt had studied every night. Every jutsu, every exercise, it was all painstakingly recorded in his scroll, mysteriously titled "ShoBu." "Sho" meant "win", while "Bu" meant lose. The two together, with "Sho" on top, translating to "Winning but losing." What that meant was anyone's guess. His last name, Kaguya, wasn't his true name, just one he assumed to fit in better, taken from his cousin, Kimimaro. Kimimaro, who had been dying from an illness that was normally fatal, came to the Leaf Village at Ekyt's insistence. Ekyt had promised that Kimimaro could go back to serving Orochimaru, but that he "refused to let someone die needlessly." Kimimaro had left immediately after the surgery, albeit changed slightly upon seeing how the world REALLY was. As of now, he still served Orochimaru, but in a strange twist, would go out of his way to help his cousin in a time of crisis.

Ekyt hadn't been born into a Shinobi family, but he displayed skills that were unheard of for a genin. He wasn't naturally gifted in anything, it seemed, until it came to learning jutsus. His long hours of studying had paid off. He had been ridiculed for his lack of a social life by his friends, but shrugged it off. What were friends for, anyway?

Ekyt gave a heavy sigh, then rubbed his eyes sleepily. Six hours of studying...enough for one night. He rolled up his scroll and put it away, into one of the Makimono pouches on his vest. He stood up and stretched, then started the walk home.

It had been a beautiful night outside, with a starry sky being a banner of the heavens. The trees were losing their leaves due to the crisp autumn air. Their colorful foliage decorated the ground, changing the yellow cobblestone street into a plethora of red's, orange's brown's, and yellow's. Their colorful hues were crunched, unconcerned, by Ekyt's boots.

A small rain storm had left a puddle in the street. Ekyt passed it and peered down into it. He saw his face, covered with a mask, and his hazel eyes, full of...there was some strange, unreadable emotion in Ekyt's eyes. He decided not to think about it at the moment, he had enough stress. He stepped through the puddle and kept walking, ready to go home and rest after a long night of practice.

As he settled into bed, Ekyt's fatigued mind still turned over thoughts from the day. **Promotion- not gonna happen. That rotten Ebisu. Naruto was in rare form today...Gotta love the Ninja Harem**

**Jutsu when you're not on the receiving end...I wish I could be that care free...Sakura...there was something wrong with her...she looked tired...yeah, that was it. I wonder...could those dreams have returned? If they have, I hope they're just dreams, and not premonitions like the last time. That poor girl...she's been through so much...**

Naruto woke up, immediately yawning and stretching. He scratched his back, then his arms, trying to shake away the last dregs of sleep.

"Ugh, why did Kakashi-sensei have to make this training session early?!" Naruto complained, even though he was alone, in bed.

With a few more incoherent mutters, Naruto pushed the blankets aside roughly. One of them hooked his foot and he tripped in a comical way, his face hitting the chilly morning floor. After a curse that was muffled by the floor that was blocking his face, Naruto got up again, threw the blanket angrily aside, and continued his pilgrimage to the kitchen. It was time for breakfast, and that meant one thing: ramen!

Lee and Ekyt were up and sparring on Lone Pine Hill before Naruto had even poured his milk. Ekyt had never beaten Lee, a fact which he readily pointed out. Lee furiously maintained that Ekyt COULD beat him, if Ekyt would use jutsus. Instead, the match was always taijutsu vs taijutsu, and usually classics. Ekyt trained insanely, much like Lee, but his training also encompassed ninjutsu and genjutsu. That left less time for taijutsu, but Ekyt could live with that. Before coming to the Leaf Village, he had trained in four martial arts, none of which even mentioned chakra. That had been helpful in building up his stamina and muscle strength, but left him at a serious disadvantage against those who HAD trained with chakra.

Sakura arrived first, receiving warm greetings from Lee and Ekyt. Naruto appeared next, and he began intently watching the fight. Occasionally cheering for one combatant or the other, or wincing when a particularly nasty strike hit home.

This was a morning ritual. Sakura and Naruto knew full well that Kakashi-sensei wouldn't show up on time. Lee and Ekyt needed a place to practice. So, by mutual agreement, Sakura and Naruto got a show, while Lee and Ekyt got a place to practice.

The two had started out in a gym. About thirty seconds later, Lee had countered a Dynamic Entry attack by Ekyt and sent Ekyt sailing into the mirrors in the front of the gym. That put an end to their time training there, as the owner wasn't part of the "fun" and therefore wasn't amused by their antics.

A full hour of sparring later, Kakashi-sensei finally waltzed up.

"Morning everyone!" he called brightly, *Make-out Paradise* already in hand.

"You're late Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto and Sakura yelled in unison, accusatory fingers pointed at the silver-haired jonin.

"Oh, you're right! You see, there was this cat, and" Kakashi began, before he was cut off by Sakura.

"At least be original!!!" she shouted.

Ekyt and Lee took drinks from their respective water bottles.

“So Ekyt-san...” Lee began, his voice sounding strange.

“Yes Lee?” Ekyt replied, not liking where this was going.

“Are you finally going to tell Sakura that you lo- oomph!”

Ekyt clamped a hand over Lee’s mouth. “Shut up! You’re the only one who knows, and it’s going to stay that way!”

Lee’s mouth twisted into a wry grin upon Ekyt letting go.

“Perhaps I should tell her for you...” Lee taunted in a sing-song voice, taking a hard step in Sakura’s direction.

“You do, and it will take more than the chakra gates to stop me from killing you,” Ekyt warned, smiling despite the severity of his words. He enjoyed the bantering. With a sigh, Ekyt continued. “I’ll tell her Lee, don’t worry. I’m just...well, worried. I mean, after Linda...Besides, how can I compare to Sasuke? He probably has me beat in every category.”

Lee leapt up, a fire in his eyes. “He does not! He is a deserter and a traitor! You have fought well against him! Sakura-chan would see the difference if you would tell her how you feel! It is stupid to keep this silent!”

Ekyt was about to retort, but was stopped by Kakashi calling them over.

“We have a mission. Or, the four of you have a mission. Two of you are chunin, and two of you are a heartbeat away from chunin. Now, the mission. There’s an uprising in Hamagakure, and”

A sound of surprise from Sakura stopped Kakashi.

“Hama-as in the beach village? The perennial party land? I’ve wanted to go forever! When do we leave?!” Sakura exclaimed, reminiscent of her fangirl mode, rushing off to pack.

“And she’s going for jonin...well, she’s a damn sight better than some of them...” Kakashi muttered to himself, a certain Tokubetsu jonin in mind.

“Sakura-san in a bathing suit...wow. So, Ekyt-san, are you” Lee started, a playful grin on his face.

“Shut UP, Lee! I’m NOT a pervert! I think she’s beautiful the way she is! Besides, she won’t wear a bikini on this trip!” Ekyt said dismissively. Even if she did, Ekyt would be too polite to stare. His respectfulness and chivalry toward kunoichi had earned him points with the females in the village. Until he had been in the hot spring one night. He had his days wrong, and in walked three kunoichi. Ino, Tenten, and Kurenai didn’t want to hear any explanation as to why he was there. All they cared about was the fact that they were only wearing towels. About a week later, most of the bruises had healed on Ekyt’s body, and all had been forgiven. But not before he had gotten his new nickname: The Pervy Samurai.

A snickering Naruto snuck up behind Ekyt. Quietly, he used the Sexy Jutsu.

“Excuse me, sir? I was really hoping you could help me with something...You see, I seem to have misplaced my clothes...If I just hang on real tight to you, then I’ll be covered up...” the girl Naruto gave Ekyt a squeeze, making a shy cooing sound.

Ekyt had made the mistake of turning around. He should have known better. Upon seeing the giggling, naked girl, Ekyt and Lee were thrown backward violently, their nosebleeds spouting blood proudly.

As the two lay on the ground, Naruto bent down near Ekyt.

“Not a pervert, huh? Coulda fooled me!” Naruto crowed, laughing hysterically.

After all four had packed some necessities, they set off for Hamagakure, the “Beach Village.” That wasn’t its real name, of course, but it was more or less a tourist-trap resort area, famous for its food and its parties, as well as its beaches, which were said to be able to “make romance happen in the most unlikely circumstances.” A lot of bunk, most thought. How could a beach cause romance?

**Probably a gimmick to lure in tourists...still...It would be great to see Sasuke here! But that won’t happen...** Sakura thought sadly. **No! I don’t need Sasuke! There are *plenty* of other boys! I just thought...he was the one...**

## 2 - Welcome to Hikaru

The night was as beautiful as the day that had preceded it. The stars were innumerable, and they cast a pale, flickering light down on the group of four Konoha ninjas. There was the hyperactive Naruto; skilled in his own way. There was the steadfast Rock Lee; quit was not in his vocabulary. There was Ekyt; the stoic ANBU agent, whose specialty was torture genjutsu (although he was well versed in taijutsu and ninjutsu as well). And there was Sakura, the perky medic-nin Kunoichi whose beauty was matched only by her skill. They were currently on their way to a town that was almost to Hamagakure. They were going to stop more out of necessity than desire. While Lee and Ekyt could have kept going, Naruto had started to complain, and Sakura's lack of sleep was beginning to show with her constant stifled yawns, despite her assurances that she could keep going.

"Finally!" Naruto mumbled, enthusiastic upon seeing the small town for the first time.

It was indeed a site for sore eyes, er, bodies. It was a quiet little town, seemingly untouched by any modern technology beyond lights. There were a few stores, selling necessities and the occasional trinket. It was the kind of small town where everyone knew everyone else, and gossip traveled quickly. It seemed like the town hadn't aged for fifty years, everything was antiques. But everyone seemed friendly, to the point where it was almost creepy. There were even two girls waiting to greet the four ninja as they crossed the border!

"Welcome!" the two said in unison. Upon getting closer, it was revealed the two were twins, both with a distinct *kunsai* (Western Japanese) look to them. When they continued speaking, their accent matched their look.

"I'm Mia!" the one on the left declared.

"I'm Kirai!" the one on the right said, equally as enthusiastic.

"And welcome to Hikaru!" the two called, dancing around merrily, throwing flower petals around and putting a necklace made of flowers around a blushing Lee's neck.

"Thank you," the group said as one. Sakura noticed Ekyt's eyes narrowing, but dismissed it as nothing. He would have spoken up if something was wrong.

"This is the place," Sakura announced, pointing at an inn. She went to the front desk to secure the rooms for the night, and to ask a few questions about the town.

"Hey, Bushy Brow! I've got a plan! Let's get those two to bunk together!" Naruto whispered with a schoolgirl-ish giggle, referring to Sakura and Ekyt.

"I do not know. Ekyt-san would kill us if he found out..." Lee mumbled apprehensively.

"Ah, come on, he doesn't have to know we're behind it. With any luck, he'll think Sakura's gotten so desperate (Lee's face is now a mask of horror. He's staring open-mouthed at something behind

Naruto) for affection that..." Naruto's voice trailed off. He turned to see what had Lee so spooked. Sakura grabbed both of them by their heads, then cracked their skulls together.

"You perverted little trolls! Calling ME desperate! 'Bunk together', you're lucky I don't know which one of you you're talking about!" Sakura shouted, storming off to her room.

Lee and Naruto were lying on top of each other, nursing injuries.

"Okay, scrap the plan...violent kunoichi, doesn't she know we're trying to help?" Naruto said, teeth clenched in pain.

"I will not give up!" Lee declared, leaping up. Then he had to sit back down; the pain in his head was too great to move just yet. Sakura could really pack a wallop.

Sakura sighed contentedly, a smile on her face as she looked around the room. Rice-paper doors on the inside, leading to another part of the room, a sitting area of sorts that included a comfortable leather couch and a matching armchair. A fire was already crackling merrily in the stone hearth that abutted the chair's hassock. A thick oak door led to the outside hallway. The room was large, and had a large bed, which looked like absolute heaven to the weary kunoichi.. Upon further inspection, Sakura noticed a door out to a small deck, which overlooked a lush green garden. She decided she would check it out later, settling on hitting the hot springs instead. She pulled off her mud-and-sweat stained clothes and pulled on her gold and black checked cotton bathing robe, really looking forward to a nice long soak in a hot spring. She had just kicked off her sandals and tied the robe closed when a knock came at her door. Sakura made a small sound of surprise, but called "come in!" to the person on the other side. Ekyt opened the door. He immediately blushed at the site of Sakura in a robe.

"I'm sorry! If this is a bad time, I can come back..." Ekyt managed, his hand already fumbling for the door knob, a furious red color rising in his cheeks.

Sakura giggled good-naturedly. "Ekyt-kun," Sakura added the appropriate honorific to make the shocked Shinobi blush further, "It's alright. I'm wearing a robe, it's perfectly acceptable! Looks like you timed coming to see me just right! I hope you're enjoying the view, Ekyt-kun..." Sakura played with her hair, trying not to crack up at the mix of horror and curiosity on her friend's face.

Ekyt's mouth dropped in shock. **W-what does she mean by that?! Does she know...how I feel? About her?**

Sakura shook her head, a smile on her face. "Back to earth Ekyt, come on. I'm just playing with you, relax! That innocence of yours...well, it's a welcome difference from Naruto's constant...pervertedness...I doubt that's a word, but then again, there's no words that do Naruto justice!"

"Yeah. His hearts in the right place though. Lee too," Ekyt began. He was standing stiffly, still near the door. He had stared death in the eyes, in the form of Orochimaru, Kabuto, Itachi Uchiha, Sasuke Uchiha, and an angry, drunk Lady Tsunade. But a cute girl in a robe scared the hell out of him, while at the same time attracting him. He was fond of Sakura, no matter what her attire was. Something like this was new to Ekyt, and it clearly showed.

"Come in, have a seat, I don't bite," Sakura urged.

Ekyt took a few cautious steps in before he carefully folded himself into seiza (brutal position between



sitting and kneeling) in the center of the room. He scratched his head and looked away. He had pulled his hitai-ate off, and was scratching at his thick brown hair, trying to get it back into shape.

“Sakura...I’m not sure, but did you notice anything...well, strange, about our ‘welcoming committee’?” Ekyt questioned, his eyes everywhere but on her.

Sakura narrowed her eyes. “Not really...why, what did you see?”

Ekyt shrugged. “It could be nothing...but I sensed chakra around them. A lot of chakra, like a genjutsu that was still in effect. And why would two kunsai girls be running an inn here, of all places? It just seems too convenient...”

Ekyt could practically *feel* his face burning from all the blushing. **She’s so pretty, not to mention smart...with a sense of humor. For a minute there, I thought she could read how I feel about her...she probably can. Oh my God, she’s in a robe! I’m NOT a pervert, but this would still make for a bad scene if Naruto or Lee walked in! Oh crap! SHE might not care, but she could just destroy them if they said or did something wrong! Oh man, if I’m caught here, the ribbing will be endless**

“Ekyt?”

Ekyt leapt up from his sitting position, cracking his head on the ceiling.

Sakura shook her head, a hand over her mouth in laughter. “Sorry about that, didn’t mean to scare you. You’re right, about the chakra thing. But why would they need genjutsu with us?” Sakura’s question held tones of dread, as if she already had ideas of her own.

Ekyt, rubbing his head, replied with “I’m not sure, it could just be them trying to hide their age or something...but it doesn’t FEEL like that. It feels like a threat, like they’re watching us or something.”

A knock came at the door. “Come in!” Sakura called. **Oh, damnit! I don’t have my kunai on me! I hope Ekyt is armed!**

The door swung open. Mia and Karai came in perkily.

“Oh-ho! Did we interrupt something good?!” Mia questioned, a hand over her mouth upon seeing Ekyt in the room as well.

“Hope we’re not in the way of...romance!” Karai added, her gaze finding Ekyt also.

Sakura blushed furiously. “No, not at all! What can we do for you?” Sakura replied, waving her hands dismissively. Sakura saw Ekyt, behind the twins, forming the “Release” handsign, then silently muttering the word aloud.

“Well, we just like to make sure our guests are comfortable. Right now, we’ve got two of our employees checking in on Mr. Uzumaki and Mr. Lee. You are the last two we have to check on...are you enjoying your stay?”

Ekyt said the word “release” to himself. He watched as Mia and Karai began to age. And... one of them changed gender?

Sakura stood up, switching into a guard position. Mia and Karai looked down at themselves, knowing their cover was blown, but good.

“Little brats! I’ll give you credit for reading our genjutsu, but you’re still gonna pay!” ‘Mia’ had become a boy. His hair came to his shoulders, a greasy brown rat’s nest of a mane. He wasn’t huge, but muscular enough to be a major threat, even without jutsus.

‘Karai’ stayed a girl, but aged, until she looked about twenty. She had blonde hair, tied back in a neat braid that fell to her waist. She was dressed in a kimono, looking more like a geisha than a kunoichi.

That image changed when senbon appeared between her fingers.

“Sakura!” Ekyt tossed a kunai at her feet.

“Thanks Ekyt!” she called back. Then she gasped. The forehead protectors on the enemies... Sound ninja...

‘Mia’ made a move toward Sakura. Ekyt seized him by the back of his neck and dragged him backwards.

“Letgoa me!” the sound ninja snarled. He aimed a kick at Ekyt’s shin. Ekyt had been expecting this, and had a counter in place. As soon as he felt the ninja shift his weight, Ekyt torqued his body violently to the right, in effect throwing the sound ninja to the ground. As the ninja moved, he found a kunai at his neck.

“Don’t even think it,” Ekyt snarled, putting the slightest bit of pressure on the opposing Shinobi’s neck. As the sound ninja gulped, the razor-sharp kunai dug in at the Adam’s apple, just enough to create small trick of blood.

Sakura dodged all but one of the senbon. The cold metal pierced her shoulder, but didn’t do any real damage. Well, except for pissing Sakura off. With a yell of rage, Sakura reared back and punched, using her chakra-enhanced fist to KO the kunoichi that threw the senbon.

From below, Ekyt heard a familiar jutsu being cast.

“Shadow Clone jutsu!”

Ten Naruto’s suddenly popped up through the ceiling, all massaging their heads and cursing. They were followed quickly by another Sound Village Shinobi. He had been rocketed up through the hole created by the Naruto’s, courtesy of Lee’s Konoha Whirlwind kick.

The sudden movement allowed ‘Mia’ to roll aside, away from Ekyt’s kunai, and grab his wrist. Ekyt dropped the weapon, then quickly fell to his knees, tossing ‘Mia’ over his shoulders, to the floor, hard, from a fireman’s carry position. This wasn’t enough to end the fight. The ten Naruto’s piling on top was, however.

The four packed up quickly and set out. They needed to rest, but would find none in Hikaru.

“At least we know who our enemy is now. This is information enough to prepare us,” Lee stated.

The night was a little colder than before. The wind had picked up, sending a stinging blast of cold air whistling through the tight nit group. The something-like-a-pine trees swayed slightly, their branches waving merrily at the passing Shinobi. The real annoyance was the dirt path they were walking on. Everyone, except Ekyt, was wearing sandals, and the gritty dirt and sand beneath them was starting to cause cuts on their exposed toes. Ekyt’s annoyance was rocks in his *tabi* shoes.

Naruto suddenly piped up.

“So, Sakura-chan wearing a robe, and Ekyt just happens to be there...kind of a suspicious coincidence, dontcha think Lee?”

“It is Naruto. I wonder what those two were REALLY doing up there? Ekyt-san, are your eyeballs dried out from staring at Sakura-chan?”

Ekyt rolled his eyes.

“Lee, I’m going to have to hurt you if you don’t shut up...” he warned.

The four made camp for the night. Not the quality lodging they would have preferred, but they found a nice cove that offered some protection from the wind, with enough wood nearby to make a fire. The wood was very good for burning; it crackled merrily and created gray smoke that twisted and curled happily up to the sky.

Lee was doing pushups. Naruto was commenting on how stupid it was to be doing pushups at a time like this. Ekyt had pulled out a scroll, but the questionable light from the fire wasn't suitable for studying, so he left it open more out of habit than anything. Sakura had noticed one of the jutsus on the scroll and was questioning Ekyt about it. She knelt down next to him, pointing out that the handsign was wrong.

"I think you want "dog" there, not "dragon"," she pointed out.

"Ah, you're right! I always have trouble with the dragon hand sign, for some reason," Ekyt told Sakura with a small sigh.

"Let me help!" Sakura grabbed his hands and formed them into the sign.

"Oh, I understand now!" Ekyt replied. He blushed, realizing that this was indirect hand-holding.

"WHOA! What's next, are you two gonna make out?! Can I watch?!" Naruto exclaimed, laughing at his own joke.

Sakura wasn't laughing. She was punching.

WHAM!

"Get your mind out of the gutter, you pig! I'm a girl with principles! Can't I help a friend without perverted comments?! Grow up!"

Sakura stomped off, but slowed herself as she got far enough away to think without Naruto breathing down her neck. **Why did I do that? Ekyt is so nice to me, and all I do is deny any feelings between us. He's just a genuinely nice guy, I don't even think twice about talking to him about anything. From now on, I'll make my responses nicer...don't want Ekyt to think I don't like him...**

After a half hour, everyone said their goodnights. They went to their respective sleeping bags and curled up. Ekyt was wide awake. He had a feeling that something was going to go wrong. That's when he heard it. Sakura, in her sleep.

"Sasuke...no...don't kill...please...the village...so much blood..."

Ekyt cursed to himself, leaping up and over to Sakura. No doubt about it, the nightmares were happening again. These were the kind of nightmares that meant something, a connection between Sakura and Orochimaru, with Sasuke's emotions as a medium. Sakura had been plagued by these dreams before, and she had come to Ekyt. But the dreams...after being attacked by two Sound Ninja, it was too much of a coincidence to ignore. The Sound Village was their enemy.

Sakura woke up with a start, hyperventilating immediately. She pulled the blankets up to her chin, then let them drop, as though she didn't know what to do with her hands. She started to smooth her hair, then stopped. Her eyes darted around, looking for something, but not seeing it.

Ekyt had seen her like this once before, so he kind of knew how to react.

“Sakura, it’s okay. It’s a dream. I’m right here, nothing’s happened,” he told her quietly, in a soothing voice.

Sakura’s head whipped toward him. She uttered a small sound with an unintelligible ring to it, then grabbed Ekyt around the chest. Her grip was so tight it was almost painful, but Ekyt didn’t protest. Gently, awkwardly, he put one arm around her shoulders, using the other to brace the back of her head. After a few moments, Sakura calmed down enough to realize that she was actually hugging Ekyt.

“I’m sorry!” she exclaimed, letting go.

“It’s alright, really,” Ekyt told her sheepishly, finding himself wishing she hadn’t let go, although he was happy to see her calmer. “Was it...one of THOSE dreams?” Ekyt asked, worry etched in his eyes. Sakura nodded. “Sasuke...killing everyone...but this time, it was us, Naruto and Lee, too, and we were on a beach...Sasuke came out of nowhere with this army...and...”

Sakura fell back into silent crying. No matter how strong she had become, some things were enough to reduce ANYone to tears. Sakura found herself clinging to Ekyt’s arm. She looked up, surprised to see Ekyt wasn’t blushing or even moving. He sat steadfast, like a rock, looking straight ahead. The rare sight was enough to shake Sakura out of her trance.

“Y-you’re really a nice boy Ekyt,” Sakura told him. “I mean, putting up with me like this. I know...I mean, how easy it is for you to get nervous around kunoichi...but right now, you’re so calm...Why?”

Ekyt noticed that she was still hanging on to his arm.

“Because my friends mean more to me than any nervous feelings. I never had people to protect before, much less people that actually gave a damn about me. I mean, my parents were great, but I mean other people. Now that I have friends, I understand: Strength reveals itself in strange ways, at strange times.”

Sakura continued to look questioningly, so Ekyt elaborated.,

“It means a lot that you and the others have accepted me. Plus, I kind of took Kakashi-sensei’s words to heart. I won’t let my comrades die.”

Sakura shivered against the cold, her skin clammy with a cold sweat.

“I’m so tired...but if I go to sleep, I’ll have another dream...” Sakura said with real concern in her voice.

Ekyt thought for a moment, then said “Lie down. Think about the beach tomorrow. You’ve always wanted to go, right? No one’s going to ruin it for you, I’ll make sure of that if at all possible. Just breathe in through your nose for a count of three, out through your mouth for a count of four, and think about that beach. The endless sand, the peaceful waves...”

Sakura found herself relaxing. She settled back into her sleeping back, zipping it closed and putting her head back on the pillow she had brought.

“Would you mind staying...like last time?” This time it was Sakura’s turn to blush.

“No problem, I’ll be right here,” Ekyt answered, indicating with his hand that he wouldn’t move.

“Thanks. It really means a lot,” came Sakura’s truthful reply. She settled back into sleep, letting it occupy her being once more, secure in the knowledge she had a warrior protecting her.

Even the ever-stoic Ekyt had to smile. **Good...she really needs her rest. I have a feeling we’re in for a rough day tomorrow...Those attacks were no accident. Besides, these idiots travel in packs, there’s never just one or two...**

### 3 - Keeping a Promise

Sakura woke up, feeling strangely calm. **Is this the calm before the storm?** she wondered. She stretched her arms up over her head, feeling upbeat. After a partially-muffled yawn, she sat upright and looked up through the canopy of the trees above. It looked to be a sunny day, even on the hot side. Sakura smiled, in spite of all the stress. That dream didn't even seem to be a threat to her, despite the mission at hand. She barely remembered what it was about anyway. Sakura unzipped her sleeping bag the rest of the way and pulled on her sandals. It was only then that she looked next to her. She giggled, surprised at, then amused by her own reaction.

Ekyt hadn't moved all night. He crouched, then sat, then kneeled, then crouched again by Sakura's side, in accordance with his promise. It made for sore legs, but Ekyt wasn't one to break a promise. Lee woke up next, immediately flopping over on to his stomach to do his morning 500 pushups.

Naruto woke up. Well, he was forced awake by Sakura. He grumbled, tried turning away from her, pulled the covers over his head, and complained, but eventually crawled out of his sleeping bag.

"What's for breakfast?" he mumbled, his words barely coherent, due to the fact that he was still half asleep.

"Well, I've got the food, and Lee gathered the wood...damn, no matches!" Sakura said in frustration. Without a word, Ekyt made a series of handsigns.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu," he called. He made an abbreviated punching motion at the wood. A tiny flame shot out of his fist, igniting the dry wood. The bark on the wood still had some sap on it, and it made for a pleasant smell while it burned. Then the bark began to curl under the heat's pressure, and the smell of burning wood overtook that of the sap.

Minutes later, Sakura had served up a feast. Naruto could only make ramen, and Ekyt wasn't a stellar chef himself. Stir fry, ramen, and fish were pretty much the extent of his abilities. He never ate much anyway. Lee was a very picky eater; his body had to be functioning at optimum efficiency as often as possible. But all three of them could agree: This girl could cook!

"This is awesome, Sakura!" Naruto declared, happily biting into his toast. In his other hand, he held a few strips of perfectly-cooked bacon, and was double-fisting his food as fast as his body would allow. Even his constant burping didn't tarnish the meal.

"He is right, Sakura-san!" Lee added, although he wasn't scarfing his food. Lee was savoring every bite while still eating with the same fervor with which he trained.

Ekyt simply said "Thank you," and "This is great," while eating more or less silently. He was the first to finish (He didn't eat much, although he was tempted to have a lot more. The fact that he would have eaten more was a huge testament to Sakura's cooking ability), so he began cleaning up their camp.

"We should get going. The longer we wait, the bigger the danger gets." Ekyt's words came out of nowhere. Despite that, they made sense. Once everyone had removed their various belongings from inside the cove, they made sure to cover their tracks and break up the charred wood they had used for their fire. They wanted to leave no trace of their presence.

The walk was short and uneventful. Reaching Hamagakure, however, was an incredible site. There

didn't seem to be a sad face within site. There was a beautiful beach, dotted with palm trees. The beach seemed to stretch on forever. The water seemed endless as well, it's shades of blue making for a nearly majestic scene. Peaceful and welcoming to be sure.

There were people everywhere, and all of them seemed to be having fun. Mothers and fathers played ball with their children, colorful beachballs and Frisbees were all over the place. Some kids were having a relay race, starting on the end of the beach, and swimming out to reach a buoy. The boy that won did a backflip, then landed back in the water. He popped up seconds later, a big smile on his face, his short black hair plastered to his head. He and his friends began to splash each other with the water. That soon turned into a wrestling match.

"Wow! It's so incredible!" Sakura exclaimed, drinking in the view. "Hey, what's that?" she wondered aloud, putting a hand over her eyes to shield the sun. She jogged over to a sign that said "Welcome to Hamagakure" in colorful red letters. Below it was some more writing, blue in color.

"The beach of Hamagakure is famous for it's ability to relax even the most hardened soul...and for creating romance, even in the most unlikely circumstances..." Sakura read aloud.

**It could never happen...no one's asked me out...I wasted all my time with Sasuke! He'll never love me, even if this beach WAS magical! And now I've driven away every other boy!** Sakura thought.

**It would be incredible. I am so in love with Linda-chan. I must bring her here, she would love it! And there are so many women here, maybe Gai-sensei would find a kunoichi of his own!**

**I wish this beach WAS magic. Maybe it would give me the courage to tell Sakura how I feel. Aw, who am I kidding? She's out of my league. And besides, I couldn't compare to Sasuke, and I know she hasn't given up on him...** Ekyt's thoughts were depressing, but his expression was covered by his mask. **Sakura can't know this is depressing for me...she's always wanted to come here. I hope she'll enjoy herself. She deserves it.**

Sakura went to the women's dressing room to get into her beach clothes. There didn't seem to be any war or uprising, or even an orderly protest. So why not enjoy the beach? She hummed merrily as she picked out what to wear.

**CHA! Now we're talking, girl! THAT'LL turn some heads!** Sakura thought. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and struck a joking pose, sticking her tongue out at herself. She had always hated the showoffy girls. But this WAS the beach; who WOULDNT want to get some attention on a beach?

Ekyt, Naruto, and Lee went to the men's changing room. Naruto pulled on a pair of orange and blue trunks. He was bouncing off the walls with anticipation at a day without training!

Lee wore a pair of green and white trunks, similar to Naruto's. He was excited too, although he was planning on exercising in the water. ("It will make great resistance training!")

Ekyt, by contrast, took off his uniform, but pulled on his ANBU gear.

"Whoa, wait a second! Time out!" Naruto held a hand out, stopping Ekyt from moving.

"What?" Ekyt asked in alarm, ready to attack the threat.

"You'll NEVER get Sakura's attention like that! And you're gonna die in that heat!"

"I'd rather not be caught unprepared," Ekyt told him dryly. Besides, the ANBU uniform was sleeveless. He was uncomfortable with that much of his skin showing. He wasn't out of shape, just modest.

“Whatcha think Lee?” Naruto asked, sizing Ekyt up.

“Guys?” Ekyt asked carefully, not liking this.

“I think we need to help Ekyt-san with his fashion sense,” Lee said with a solemn nod.

“Lemme see...Tactical shorts is the closest thing he’s got...the ANBU vest...that’ll have to do it...”

“Guys? What are you plotting?!” Ekyt asked.

“Ekyt-san, do not fight, this is for your own good...” Lee warned.

From behind, a horde of Naruto clones jumped Ekyt, hog-tying him.

“Good. Now, time to get dressed Ekyt-san...” Lee said mischievously.

Sakura wandered outside. She was wearing a pink robe with a black collar. It looked to be made of satin. The color matched her hair, which was pulled back into a ponytail of sorts, although her short hair made it seem more like a bun. Her hitai-ate held it in place.

“Now where did the boys get to?” she wondered, holding her robe closed.

“Damn you guys!” Ekyt protested, still tied up. Now he was wearing his ANBU tactical shorts. They were like a pair of somewhat tight swim trunks that came to just above his knees, and were black in color. Their material reflected the sun, contrary to their color, which attracted it under normal circumstances. Ekyt’s shirt was gone, replaced by his black ANBU vest, which was held closed by only one of the straps, meaning that most of his chest, arms, and stomach were exposed. It was WAY too revealing for Ekyt’s taste, and he started to say so.

“This is for your own good. You like Sakura, right? Well, you’ve gotta get her attention first, and this is how to do it! Believe it!” Naruto and Lee forced Ekyt out of the room.

Lee and Naruto forced Ekyt out of the changing room. There was Sakura.

“What took you guys so...” her voice trailed off. She had seen Naruto and Lee without shirts before, but Ekyt was a new one on her.

**W-wow...I’ve never seen him without a shirt! I wish I had sooner! He’s so careful about his body. I figured he’d be out of shape or something...but he’s totally hot! CHA!**

Sakura shed her robe, revealing a light pink bikini swimsuit. Now it was the guy’s turn to stare. Except Naruto. He had spotted a couple kunoichis in bikinis, and he decided to introduce himself by staring and drooling. He had indeed learned something from his time with Jiraiya.

The kunoichi, however, didn’t take too kindly to his staring. One of them, a pretty brunette, walked over and tickled his chin.

“While I appreciate the attention (she began sweetly)...YOU’RE A PERVERT!” she shouted. Seconds later, Naruto was flying backward. When he could move again, a large welt had grown on his head.

“Ow...it was worth it, believe it!”

Sakura blushed at the expression on Lee’s face. She couldn’t see Ekyt’s expression under the mask,

but his ears had turned incredibly red.

“Ekyt-kun, it’s not a crime to stare. You’re not a pervert for it, you know! I’d, um, well, be flattered by the attention!” Sakura said, in an attempt to ease his conscience.

Ekyt glanced over shyly. “I’m sorry. I...was never good at this. The whole “girl watching” thing...you look incredibly beautiful!” Ekyt managed at the end, blushing even more furiously, even bowing at the end.. “You’re no slouch yourself Ekyt! How come you’ve been hiding that chest from me?” Sakura asked, leaning forward to take a mockingly closer look. She couldn’t help but giggle as every muscle in Ekyt’s body tightened up in embarrassment/desire.

The four of them hit the beach. Ekyt really didn’t know what to do. A couple kunoichi had made passes at him, which he politely declined. He just felt awkward, standing half-naked, with nothing to do. He wasn’t going to stare at Sakura, despite her assurance that it was “Okay” and “Normal for boys to do.” He had more respect for her than that. Still, he couldn’t help risking a glance at her. Her beautiful, toned, athletic body just seemed to glow. Her hair swayed, earning his attention even more. **And she’s smart, too...not like all those girls that throw on attention-getting clothes.** Ekyt waved those thoughts aside, picked out a rock, and started to do pushups on it, to tighten the skin on his knuckles and build up his upper body strength.

Sakura occasionally stared at Ekyt shamelessly. **I can just sense something about him...something different from the others...I already feel like I can tell him anything...so what is this new feeling about?**

As she was pondering that, a shadow suddenly blocked her light. She turned to see the disturbance, and drew back in surprise.

“Sasuke!” Sakura exclaimed. She couldn’t believe her eyes.

Sasuke looked at Sakura, his eyes half-lidded.

“So you’re still crawling after me, Sakura?” Sasuke taunted. “I could never love you, you little dog! I’ve always hated everything about you...you’re ugly, you’re whiny, and worst of all, you’re weak!”

Sakura was near tears. “Sasuke...”

“I could never love someone so weak. Nothing personal.” Sasuke seemed to be enjoying tormenting Sakura. He continued his merciless tirade.

“It’s sad that you haven’t let go, even after all this time. I can only love power, something you don’t have. You’re a scared little girl, and that’s all you’ll ever be. So I’ll do you a favor and put you out of your misery...”

As Sasuke stepped forward, he found his path blocked. A kunai was at his neck, held there by a strong hand. Sasuke looked down the cold metal implement of destruction to see it’s owner. He narrowed his eyes.

“You? I’ve waited a long time for a rematch...since you humiliated me at the chunin exams...you’ve had this coming a long time...”

Ekyt’s hand held the kunai in place, right at Sasuke’s neck.

“You had your reasons for everything you’ve done, and I won’t judge you for that...but saying things like that...untrue things...to that girl...is wrong.”

Sakura perked up upon hearing this. Where was he going with this.

“You never understood, did you? Strength isn’t something you can measure with jutsus...it’s measured by bravery...and that kunoichi is the bravest; and strongest, one of all. And you underestimate her...why



insult her, Sasuke? If it's Naruto and I you have the problem with, be man enough to take it up with us. Because I promise you, while I live and breathe, you will NOT touch this girl. I won't stand by and let you torment her anymore!"

Sasuke drew his sword. "Why are you defending her so furiously?"

Ekyt gave a shrug. "None of your concern, Sasuke. I respect you and your abilities...but you're really pushing my patience. So I'm going to say this one more time: Back off."

"You're in no position to be making threats! My Sound Ninja are already in place, attacking shops and killing people, all while you waste words with me!" Sasuke knew that would earn Ekyt's ire.

Naruto came charging over, kicking up the sand as he went. He rammed into Sasuke with his shoulder. "You guys go and help the others! Sasuke is all mine!" Naruto told them. The demon fox inside him had awakened.

"Right. You can do this Naruto...believe it!" Ekyt told him. He and Sakura took off.

"Ah!" Sakura called out, in pain.

"What's the matter?" Ekyt asked, alarmed.

"Caltrop...they're waiting for us..." Sakura told him through gritted teeth.

Ekyt nodded. "We've got to keep moving...here, um, if it's okay, I mean..." Ekyt held out his arms. With a smile, Sakura climbed up into them, smiling at the look in Ekyt's eyes, which was a curious expression between pleasure and fear.

Sakura gritted her teeth. "Agh...they dipped the damn thing in poison. I've got to get it out of me, quick!"

"Damn..." Ekyt uttered, almost silently.

Kabuto was standing in front of them. Behind him were fifty Sound Village Shinobi, ready to fight.

"If you give up, I'll heal her. She's not our target anyway." Kabuto's voice was strange in the way that he could be saying 'I'm going to kill you,' while sounding like your best friend.

Ekyt handed Sakura to Lee. "The poison has to get out of her. Take her someplace safe. I'll handle these guys until you get back."

"But Ekyt," Sakura began to protest.

"I know you can handle yourself Sakura. But you've got to be selfish right now. Get that poison out of yourself," he replied, nodding at Lee. Lee took off with Sakura.

A few Sound Ninja's started after them, but a wall of fire sprang up in front of them.

"Fire Release: Dragon's Ember Encampment Wall!" Ekyt called. That explained the fire. Then Ekyt moved to the side, as Kabuto had come in with a straight punch.

Ekyt noticed the Sound Ninja's were almost all grunts, with little or no skills. Kabuto, after his attack, leapt smugly behind them.

"Get him," Kabuto told them, a smile on his face.

"Dance of the Sickle Moon!" Ekyt shouted. Two shadow clones wielding katanas leapt from behind him. Ekyt joined them in an intricate attack pattern. Between the six blades, twelve enemies fell, wounded seriously, but not mortally.

The next wave threw a barrage of kunai that appeared to hit Ekyt. Ekyt used a body replacement jutsu just in time. As the enemy charged in to finish him, the exploding tag he had attached to the log he replaced himself with exploded, sending five more backward.

Kabuto leapt into the fray. That in itself was enough to distract Ekyt. The two matched strikes with their

kunai, causing a deadlock neither was willing to break. That meant that Ekyt only had one hand to defend himself with. Because of that, he couldn't block the knife that stabbed into his shoulder. He gasped silently in pain. Kabuto took advantage, giving the Leaf genin a kick to the chest that sent him sailing backward, skidding across the sand, all the way to the shore.

Four grunts tried to jump him, but were foiled by a water clone that knocked them all away.

**I can't keep this up forever...I've got to be careful with my chakra, especially with Kabuto waiting. That bastard knows it, too, he wants to wear me down...**

"So, you're still after me, loser?"

Naruto looked sadly at Sasuke. "Why...Sasuke, why do it? You were already talented, you didn't need Orochimaru..."

Sasuke put a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "I needed power...you wouldn't understand...you've NEVER had parents...imagine having them, then losing them, and everyone else important to you? I live to kill the one responsible, and I will do whatever it takes to kill my brother. Even if it means selling my soul, I WILL see my brother to hell."

"You betrayed us...Sasuke, I swore I'd bring you back to the Leaf Village. This time, I'm willing to ruin you to do it!"

Sasuke drew his sword and put it against Naruto's neck. With a mild sound of surprise, he looked down. Naruto was holding a kunai against Sasuke's neck.

"You want a battle, Naruto? Fine. Your rotten friend might have sealed my cursed seal (He's referring to Ekyt sealing it at the chunin exams), but I don't need it to beat you..."

Lee put Sakura down, laying her gently in the wet sand underneath a pier.

"Thanks Lee. Just give me two seconds to focus...Poison Extraction Technique!"

Sakura's hand glowed with a wispy green energy. She put it to her foot, allowing the chakra to seep into it. She grimaced as the chakra met the poison. She focused a little more chakra in, enough to overpower the poison and remove it from her body.

"Alright! Let's go get them! Ekyt needs our help!" Sakura leapt up.

"Sakura...how do you feel about Ekyt-san?" Lee asked quietly.

"Huh? What brought this up, Lee?" Sakura replied in surprise.

"I am just curious. This is the first time that you have mentioned him before Sasuke..."

Sakura shrugged. "He's done a lot for me. Now let's go!"

Lee nodded and ran after her. **Sakura, what do you really feel? I think that you are hiding some feeling from everyone, even yourself...**

**MORE TO COME! THE BIG BATTLE, SOUND VS. LEAF!**

## 4 - The Next Level of Courage

The beach's white sand was now stained with blood. The sun beamed down, as though unaware of what was happening on the beach below. The surf kicked up onto the shore, depositing some shells on the sandy white trail, and leaving long strands of green seaweed on the beach. Somehow, this seemed to make the beach look MORE natural, rather than take away from it's pristine beauty.

"Damn it!" Ekyt cursed as a kunai slashed the strap holding his vest closed. That had been too close for comfort. He felt the familiar sensation of his own blood trickling down his stomach. Keeping his temper in check, Ekyt kicked the offender away, spun, ducked low under a wild strike, then followed through with an uppercut. To his right, he felt someone coming. Tossing a blind elbow over his shoulder (and hearing a satisfying CRACK,) Ekyt kicked quickly, aiming low. As the goon leaned forward to stop his shins from getting destroyed, Ekyt brought his foot up, stuffing the man in the stomach. From behind, a goon jumped on his back and held on around his neck.

"I've got him, I've got him!" the Sound grunt shouted.

"Get offa me, prick!" Ekyt leaned forward, then kicked his own legs out from under him, crushing the grunt under his weight. Ekyt kicked again, making contact with an approaching jaw, but the goons piled on, finally restraining him. Of the fifty that had attacked, only twenty were left conscious.

Bleeding and sweating, Ekyt conserved his energy, letting the goons hold him. Two had his arms out at his sides, while two had his legs, holding them apart to keep Ekyt off balance. A few of them took shots at the helpless Leaf Genin, bloodying his lips and bruising most of his body.

"I don't suppose any of you have ever seen a public execution," Kabuto told the crowd that have gathered. Murmurs of anger greeted his statement. Kabuto, however, ignored them.

"Oh well. It would have been fun to finally have a few rounds with you, but orders are orders." Kabuto drew a particularly sharp kunai, spinning it around his finger casually. He flipped it into a reverse grip, then charged at Ekyt.

"No you don't!" Sakura shouted. She struck the ground with her heel, creating a crater between Ekyt and Kabuto. She rammed into Kabuto from behind, knocking him into a tree.

"This is between medics now!" Sakura shouted to him. Her right hand was glowing with chakra. The "Chakra Scalpel" was used for medical purposes usually, but in close combat it could be a handy weapon, severing tendons and ligaments without showing any damage on the outside of the skin. Kabuto focused his chakra to match Sakura's. "Have it your way. I'll give you credit for saving his life...for now..."

"Whoa, that girl is totally hot!" one grunt holding Ekyt exclaimed.

"Yeah! And that bikini ain't hurtin' her case!" the other replied, nearly drooling.

The two at Ekyt's legs added their agreement. Ekyt piped up after a few moments of listening to them drooling over Sakura and making disgusting comments.

"Don't you pigs have any respect for her? She's a LOT more than looks, you retards! She could whoop your asses without using her hands. And, frankly, I'm getting tired of standing here, listening to you idiots drool over that girl. She deserves more respect than that..."

“Oh, well, ain’t that just tough?” one goon taunted, using his free hand to give Ekyt a mocking shot in the face. “Listen to the tough guy here. Defending his lil’ girlfriend!”

A green blur blazed onto the scene.

“Dynamic Entry! Leaf Hurricane! Konoha Whirlwind!” Three rapid-fire techniques cleared Ekyt of all but one attacker. That one Ekyt took care of with a well-placed legsweep/throw combo.

“Thanks Lee! Looks like we’ve got some guys to mop up! Hey, wait, what’s that...Lee, there’s too many, unless we do this...ANYONE HAVE SOME SAKE?!” Ekyt shouted to the crowd. The crowd, all too willing to help, threw small bottles of sake at Ekyt.

“Lee, are you up to the Drunken Fist?” Ekyt asked, tossing Lee a bottle.

“Gai-sensei will not like it...he says this technique is forbidden unless I am defending the my life, my Shinobi way, or someone precious to me.”

Ekyt looked at the oncoming wave of goons, all of whom seemed to be armed. Bos, sai, tonfa, kunai, daggers...

“I’d say this is life or death, Lee. Bottoms up!” He thrust the bottle into Lee’s hands and urged him to drink. Lee gulped down the rice brew, all while silently begging Gai-sensei to forgive him.

Sasuke and Naruto clashed kunai once more, both bleeding and panting with exhaustion.

“You’ve gotten stronger...loser...”

Naruto looked sadly at Sasuke. “You didn’t have to leave Sasuke...your power, it’s gone, and you know it. You could just come back...a lot of people miss you...”

Sasuke looked away, almost angry, but his face radiated embarrassment. “You can’t go back in time, Naruto. This is what I’ve become...”

“What you’ve become isn’t set in stone! Don’t you understand that?! Do you think, do you honestly believe, a day has gone by where someone in the village hasn’t kept watch for you to come back? None of us ever gave up on you, Sasuke. So, what? Are you telling me that you’re a quitter? Sasuke Uchiha, a quitter?!”

Sasuke glared at Naruto. “Shut up!” he shouted, but made no move. Then, slowly, he sheathed his sword.

“You’re right Naruto. If he can’t offer me power, Orochimaru can’t offer me anything...”

Lee downed the sake, making a face as it wasn’t off the best quality. The rice wine’s effect was almost immediately visible. Pink appeared on Lee’s cheeks, a sure sign that the Drunken Fist style was on tap (pardon the pun).

“Hey! Wassa hell YOU lookin’ atttt?” Lee slurred, pointing an accusatory finger in the general direction of the enemy.

“What the hell did he drink?” The enemies muttered.

Ekyt grinned. “You’ve never heard of the ‘Master of the Drunken Fist?’ Well, he puts on demos once in a while, and here’s one now!”

Lee got a running start. “I-I’m in the springtime (hic) of youth!” he yelled, red on the cheeks from the

sauce. He took a leap, stretched out, and...crashed and burned into the sand.

Ekyt (Sweatdrop) shook his head. **So much for THAT.**

Lee suddenly leapt up. "That hurt! It's all YOUR FAULT! (HiC!)" Lee's legs started to clear out enemies.

"Gai-sensei! I am doing it! THE POWER OF YOUTH!!!!!!!"

Sakura swiped at Kabuto, but paid the price with a cut tricep muscle. She grunted in pain, but managed to cut up Kabuto's quadriceps.

"You've gotten much stronger. (small laugh) Of course, that's to be expected from someone training under Tsunade, I suppose," Kabuto said, a hand on his quadriceps.

"I've got to be strong. I made a few promises, not least of all some to myself. And I'm going to follow through with them!"

"That's enough."

Everyone froze. The words had been spoken by Sasuke, in his usual dry tone. Despite the ordinary voice, the words had the effect of a bullhorn.

"This fight is over. Kabuto, take your troops and go," Sasuke ordered.

For whatever reason, Kabuto listened. He and the fifty Shinobi with him stepped back, then disappeared in puffs of smoke.

"Thank you Naruto. You've made me see what's really important. Orochimaru can't give me anything anymore. There are people in the Leaf Village who can."

Sasuke walked toward Sakura, a small smirk, showing shades of the old Sasuke, crossing his face.

"Sasuke..." Sakura said breathlessly.

"Sakura...I've missed you..." Sasuke murmured, a faint twinge of pink on his cheeks.

"Oh, Sasuke!" Sakura stepped into the hakama-clad Uchiha. Tears of ecstasy streamed down Sakura's face. They became heavier when Sasuke gave her a fond squeeze.

Ekyt held Lee down and forced water and bread down his throat, trying to shake him out of the "Drunken Fist" phase. It was from there he saw Sasuke and Sakura hugging.

"Guess this beach really can perform miracles...Good for her." Ekyt said all this, but it wasn't entirely what he felt. He felt depressed, but hell, that was nothing new. But he felt something else...he just couldn't put his finger on it. Something felt wrong, but Ekyt guess it was him. **Probably just fuzzy from the blood loss or fatigue.**

Naruto and Ekyt, both cut and bleeding, leapt into the water. Ekyt had shrugged off his more or less ruined vest, thankful he had another one. Between the sweat and blood glistening off his body, he was thankful that there was a source of water to get cleaned up in. He rubbed his chest clean, except for one stubborn little cut that wouldn't stop bleeding. **Funny how some deep gashes don't bleed at all, but**

**some of these little cuts won't stop bleeding.** As always, Ekyt checked his body for any signs of poison or disease, finding none, although he did find a small amount of muscle gain in his chest and arms since the last time he had checked. Most of the time, he was unconcerned with his outward appearance, as he didn't have much use for people. MOST of the time, anyway. He was ALWAYS concerned with how his body functioned. The small muscle gain was perfect; it added power without a loss in mobility.

After declining 'invitations' from two admittedly nice looking kunoichi, Ekyt left the beach to get into his dry, untorn clothes.

Naruto, Sakura, Lee, Ekyt, and now Sasuke made their way triumphantly back to the Leaf Village. Naruto was bubbling over with excitement, and rightfully so. The "promise of a lifetime" he had made to Sakura had been fulfilled. Lee, ever emotional, was caught up in the moment himself, explaining the fight in detail to Gai-sensei. Sasuke didn't seem to mind having Sakura on his arm; he didn't care either way. Ekyt's stoic nature made him impossible to read, so no one guessed anything was out of the ordinary, not even Lee.

Ekyt quickly wrote a report for Kakashi, then summoned his dog, Holly, to deliver it. Holly was exponentially smarter than most summons, and easily more intelligent than most humans. And she knew Ekyt. She would never call him "master", but she still thought of him that way.

"Something wrong kiddo?"

"It's nothing Holly," Ekyt replied evasively. He was reaching in his closet, unearthing his samurai garb.

"You never put the skirt on unless something's bothering you..." Holly pointed out flatly, laying down on Ekyt's bed.

"It's a hakama, and it's a pair of pants! I've still got samurai blood in me, can't I "wear the colors" without it sending up a warning signal about inner turmoil?"

"No. I know you too well kid, don't try to fool me. It's about that girl, it always is..." Holly questioned, her large brown eyes showing concern.

Ekyt rolled his eyes, but knew he had to say something. Holly was too smart. **I should have summoned my dragon, Umisu, instead**, Ekyt thought to himself, although he was really glad to have someone to talk to this about.

"I'm worried about her. I mean, Sasuke treated her like crap, then he left. I don't trust him. And, well, if he hurts her...I'll destroy him. Maybe even kill him," Ekyt told his summon.

"Because you're totally not over her, right? You've had a crush on her for years, and you never got the guts up to say anything," Holly helpfully added.

"Oh, shut up. When are YOU going to tell Pakkun that you lo-" Ekyt began, knowing what would happen.

"Kid, you had a scroll for me, right? Where's the scroll? Hey, wanna throw it and I'll fetch it?" Holly was suddenly eager to get out of her owner's company.

Ekyt pulled on his old tabi shoes, kekko gi, and hakama. He put his longsword, a custom-made 26 ½ inch weapon, a thing of beauty. It's copper hilt shined as much as the blade, both well maintained, despite nearly ten years of service to their owner.

In front of Ekyt lay his wakasashi, won in a brief duel four years ago. The hilt was a fine copper, with a Musashi guard. The sheath and cord were inlaid with gold, and the sharkskin on the handle was among the finest Ekyt had ever seen. He admired the weapon, thinking of the potential he once had. Everyone told him he was talented, both as a Shinobi and as a Samurai, but he could go no further in either one.

Samurai became lords, but they had outlived their use in this world, except as thugs. And Ekyt was trapped as a genin, though his skills were nearly jonin level, if they hadn't already hit that plateau. No further jutsus could be taught to him without a squad, and that Ebisu wasn't going to let him take the chunin exams, so he was boxed in. He could only polish his skills, and even that would get tiresome quickly, as most of his skills were already polished.

Ekyt heard a sound behind him. He stood up quickly, putting the wakasashi in his belt, his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to draw. The room, lit only with a candle and surrounded by rice-paper walls, made seeing hell. Ekyt crouch low, his sword held vertical alongside his head, in a position to either attack or defend. He moved in a shuffling pattern, until his back was up against the one solid wall in the room.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Weapon Revival," Ekyt muttered, holding his wakasashi in front of him. The tip burst into flame. Ekyt could see clearly now.

"Can I help you, Sasuke?" Ekyt asked, holding his sword in a guard despite the friendly tone. Sasuke had drawn his own, but sheathed it, showing goodwill.

"I know you don't trust me..." Sasuke began.

Ekyt nodded. "Trust is something earned...or re-earned." He hadn't put his sword away.

Sasuke nodded grimly. "That's fine. I really don't care if you ever trust me. I'm just here because Sakura wanted me to stop by and say something. I said what I needed...loser."

"Works for me...traitor. You think you're a mystery Sasuke...but I've already figured out that you're going to try to double-cross the Village again. If you hadn't hugged Sakura, your act would have been believable."

Sasuke whipped around at Ekyt's words. Immediately, their swords clashed, the force great enough to knock them out of each other's grip. Their brawl spilled through the rice paper and out into the street. Sasuke threw a series of rights and lefts, but Ekyt parried all of them. He aimed for an uppercut, but Sasuke stepped aside and went for a leg sweep. Ekyt leapt over that and managed to land a weak roundhouse kick to Sasuke's face. Sasuke's foot flashed up and kicked Ekyt under the chin. That set Ekyt up for a Lion's Barrage Combo, which he avoided by twisting in mid-air and dropping an elbow on Sasuke's back. Sasuke fell to the ground, but righted himself, uncoiled from his crouched position, and threw a side kick. Ekyt landed in time to block it. He turned his body sharply, so the kick's momentum shifted, spinning Sasuke around. That gave Ekyt an opportunity to hit Sasuke with a solid left reverse punch. Sasuke continued to spin, landing a heel kick to Ekyt's ribs. Sasuke aimed for a front kick, but Ekyt parried it with a crescent kick. In mid-kick, he shifted his weight and used a side kick to knock Sasuke backward. Sasuke leapt high in the air, and brought his leg down with sickening force. Ekyt had dodged away by leaping up. Sasuke followed him in the air, where they traded elbows, knees, and blocks, before landing winded, but unharmed. They ran at each other once more. This time, Sasuke used the speed he copied from Lee to crack Ekyt across the face, sending him tumbling down the road. Before Ekyt had stopped rolling, Sasuke punted him in the other direction. When Sasuke tried for a third kick, Ekyt grabbed his leg and rolled forward, putting a horrible strain on Sasuke's muscles, forcing him to let go. From his crouching position, Ekyt aimed for a sweep kick, which was thwarted by Sasuke jumping up, then aiming an attack downward. Ekyt put his legs up, and Sasuke caught them both full in the face. While Sasuke was dazed, Ekyt tackled Sasuke around the waist and pushed him through a trash can. In desperation, Sasuke grabbed the lid and gave Ekyt a smart crack on the head. Ekyt didn't let go; instead, he flung Sasuke over his shoulders. Sasuke tucked and rolled with the blow, avoiding the serious injury the throw could have caused. As Ekyt turned around, Sasuke was there to meet him with a

kick to the head. Ekyt turned sideways, so the kick did minimal damage. He continued to spin and used his left hand to attempt a backfist. That hit Sasuke, but it was a glancing blow that did little harm. After that, both Ekyt and Sasuke brought their knees up, aiming for each other's stomach's. Ekyt threw a punch, which Sasuke dodged handily by leaning backward. But as he was leaning forward again, the side of Ekyt's hand struck him in the temple hard enough to knock him goofy for a few seconds.

By now, Sakura and Naruto had come to watch. Sakura started to interfere, but the newly arrived Lee and Naruto stopped her.

"Trust us Sakura," was all Naruto said. For whatever reason, Sakura did. She and the others watched, safely concealed.

Ekyt tried to follow up, but Sasuke's knee to the midsection stopped his efforts. As he doubled over, Sasuke's knee cracked Ekyt in the chin. Ekyt flew backward. He was heading for a showdown with a building he wasn't going to win. He crouched and hit the wall legs-first. He used that for momentum and shot himself toward Sasuke. Sasuke raised his arms in defense, but Ekyt picked an opening. Sasuke's left side was open. Ekyt spun around and slashed his heel hard into Sasuke's ribs. He heard Sasuke gasp with pain. Ekyt dropped an elbow on Sasuke's head, while Sasuke countered by hook kicking Ekyt in the back of the head. Quickly, he snared Ekyt and tried for a Peregrine Falcon Drop, but Ekyt used his legs to scissor Sasuke's head. He rotated to the side and drove Sasuke's head into the ground. Sasuke, at the last second, had grabbed Ekyt's head, so they both took face plants into the ground.

Sasuke saw his sword lying on the ground, inches away. Smiling to himself, he grabbed it, drew it, and prepared to kill. Ekyt got up, saw that Sasuke was armed, and tried to hide his worry. He put his hands up in a guard.

Sakura couldn't take it anymore. She ran out and stepped between the combatants.

"Sasuke, stop this! Please!" Sakura begged. Sasuke responded by drawing his newly re-acquired sword. He aimed the tip toward and jammed it toward her as hard as he could.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Blood was dripping off the tip of the sword. It hit the cobblestone road with an audible sound.

Sasuke was mildly surprised to find Ekyt in between his blade and Sakura. The sword had gone straight through him and out the other side. But Ekyt was alive. Blood was spilling from the corners of his mouth, a sign of internal injury.

"I told you...I wouldn't (koff) let you hurt her (koff) again. FIVE PRONGED SEAL!"

Ekyt jammed his hand onto the sword. He sealed it inside himself, so Sasuke (who was in contact with the blade) couldn't move. But Ekyt wasn't done.

"Blue Flame Chakra: Swallow's Strike Jutsu!" Ekyt's right hand was alive with a blue flame. He grabbed Sasuke's face and held on. As long as he maintained contact, Sasuke's chakra level would decrease, and the pain would increase.

But Ekyt felt his world going fuzzy. **No...can't...not yet...if I pass out, I die...Everyone dies...it can't end**



**like this...I've got to hold on...just a little longer...**

The flame in Ekyt's hand grew higher. He withdrew his hand from Sasuke's face and started to throw punches. They were enhanced by his chakra, and Sasuke was reeling from the blows. Now Ekyt was ready to end the fight.

"Blue Flame Chakra: Swallow Strike Dragon's Circle!" It was a mix of both of Ekyt's best techniques. The Blue Flame in his hand grew, then began to swirl. It circled so fast a small tornado formed in his hand. With a yell of pain and rage, Ekyt threw his fist forward into Sasuke's face one last time. This time, Sasuke passed out.

(NOTE: EKYT'S BLUE FLAME CHAKRA IS DERIVED FROM HIS EMOTIONS. IT'S A VERY PAINFUL TECHNIQUE FOR EKYT TO USE, AND IT RIPS HIM APART PHYSICALLY. IT'S NOT FATAL, BUT IT CAUSES HIM A LOT OF PAIN TO USE. HIS CHAKRA, WHICH FLOWS CLOCKWISE, CHANGES DIRECTION, AND IS THEN CHanneled INTO HIS EMOTIONS. JUST SO YOU ALL KNOW WHY HE'S IN SO MUCH PAIN)

Ekyt had won, but he still had a sword through his body. He had sealed it there, but didn't have enough chakra to get it out. Sakura, however, did.

"Five Pronged Seal Release!" she called, jamming her hand onto the curse mark Ekyt made. Carefully, she pulled the sword out of his body. Ekyt put a hand over the wound.

"Lie down, Ekyt. Please, I need to fix this. Lie down."

Ekyt did as he was told. Sakura activated her chakra scalpel. She cleaned out Ekyt's wound, and found that Sasuke had missed his vitals. He would be in pain until he got REAL treatment. Until then, though, he would be alive.

As Ekyt lay there, watching Sakura fix his wound, it occurred to him that life was short. He had just taken the biggest risk of his life, and he was alive. But what if he wasn't so lucky next time? He would die with many regrets, as most people did, that was unavoidable. But there was one regret he didn't want hampering him, should his time come before he did something about it.

As Sakura worked on Ekyt, she realized what the feeling was that she had in the forest, when she had woke up and Ekyt was next to her. She felt so...safe, and protected. Like nothing could hurt her. And now, thanks to Ekyt, nothing had. He had exposed Sasuke, and nearly gotten killed in the process. But the fact that what he had done had taken the meaning of courage to a new level made her realize something.

"Ekyt-kun..."

"Sakura-chan..." (They're both talking at the same time.)

In unison, they both said: "I'm in love with you."

**MORE TO COME!**

## 5 - Love Konoha (Yes, Horrible Title!)

“What?”

Four voices all said the four letter word. Each voice sounded shocked.

“Did you just say...” Ekyt and Sakura said in unison. This time their voices held wonder. Ekyt, in shock, had leapt to his feet, but flopped back down, since he had a hole in him from a sword.

“I...never knew...” Sakura was still on her knees. She had been tending to the hole Sasuke had put in Ekyt. **Did I hear him right? Did he really say...that he loved me? I-I can't believe it! I've wanted to hear that for so long! I never knew he cared like that...How could I have not noticed? He's done everything for me, saved my life, protected me, stayed up all night when I was having those dreams...**

Ekyt was still thinking clearly, despite his pain. **I...I said it. I can't believe I said it. I've been close to death so many times, and never backed down, but I couldn't say 'I'm in love with you' to this girl, even at a time when she needed it the most. And...she loves me back? How did that happen? I mean, she's out of my league! I counted myself lucky to just be friends with her. But in love? Is this a dream? Did I pass out from the fight? If this is real...truth really IS stranger than fiction...She loves me...Wait, what about Sasuke. Oh man! But Sasuke was gone.**

Lee and Naruto's mouths were on the ground. They couldn't believe it! They had poked and prodded their friend into saying how he felt, and he had finally done it, at the weirdest possible time.

Sakura, eyes brimming with tears, propped an arm under Ekyt's shoulder, helping him to his feet. She was sporting the biggest smile she could, and the biggest since Sasuke had left. Now, it all came to her. Ekyt's blushing, his chivalry, his actions, his words...**He's felt like this for a long time. Nearly four years? And he never said anything? He's been alone...but he wouldn't say anything.**

Ekyt blushed at Sakura's touch. They might have admitted they were in love- but where the hell did they go from here?! **I've been horrible...Sakura's been like me, spending her time training, or alone, and I didn't think to notice. How could I not notice the symptoms of loneliness. I've almost made being a loner into an Olympic sport!**

“Sakura-chan...I'm sorry...” Ekyt coughed under his mask.

“Huh? For what?” Sakura was still half-dragging him back to the Leaf Village. He needed surgery, for sure.

“For not saying anything sooner. I've had...a crush on you almost since I first met you. I thought back to how I acted...I should have noticed that you were lonely...I was afraid you'd turn me down. But I was MORE afraid that you'd feel guilty that you turned me down. The last thing you needed was guilt...that's why I've kept this to myself...I'm sorry.” Ekyt bowed his head.

Sakura smiled at him, then ruffled his hair. “It's sweet of you to worry about my feelings. But, Ekyt-kun, you're a person too. You deserve to be honest. And I was feeling sorry for myself. ‘Oh, poor me, no boy will date me’. All the times I vehemently denied there was anything going on between us. I'm sorry for that. But now we've both been honest. It took me this long to realize that you're ten times the man Sasuke could ever hope to be. You treated me so well, you put me on a pedestal, and you protected me.

When you took that attack for me...it hit me. I knew. I had always liked you. But that feeling had matured, long before that. Into love. I just needed to realize it.”

Lee and Naruto, sensing that this was a private moment, said they’d catch up later.

Ekyt could soon walk under his own power, even though the devastating injury had occurred under an hour ago. Sakura really was an excellent medic-nin. Now they were walking through the a path lined with cherry trees. Ekyt realized it wasn’t an accident on Sakura’s part. He turned to her, blushing horribly. “Sakura...can I...I mean...if you want...” Ekyt opened his mouth, tried to speak, then shook his head when it didn’t happen.

Sakura smiled sweetly (She couldn’t help but giggle a little bit; the awkwardness was cute!) and wrapped Ekyt in a fond hug. She found she was tired. Really tired. She buried her face in Ekyt’s chest, right near the newly-healed wound. She snuggled in as though it was the most comfortable place in the world.

Ekyt looked down at Sakura curiously. **Did she mean to do that. Wait...she’s asleep...wait...she’s having one of those dreams. I’ve got to snap her out of it. Oh no, she’s passed out!**

Ekyt picked Sakura up, holding her like you would a box, and took off. He had to get her home, to get some rest. Or worse, is those dreams came true...

Sakura woke up suddenly. She was in her bed, she was safe. That dream had been a bad one. She had to warn someone. Sakura realized that there was someone at her bedside. She hadn’t felt threatened, so she instantly knew who it was.

“Are you alright?” Ekyt asked her immediately.

Sakura leapt out of bed and hugged/tackled Ekyt. Ekyt, who had been sitting on the floor, caught Sakura. They both went tumbling away, and landed in a way that was a little on the ‘provocative’ side. Sakura had a death grip on Ekyt. She buried her head in his chest. She felt his arms return the embrace, leaving a trail of warmth first on her bare shoulders, then on her vest-covered back. (She’s wearing her normal Shippuuden clothes). She didn’t particularly care how things looked right now. She shifted as close to him as possible and curled up into a ball, still shaking.

“He’s mad. Sasuke. He’s really angry,” Sakura managed to say. She found she didn’t care. **I’m cuddling with my new...boyfriend? Are we at that stage? You just tackled him, I THINK you’re boyfriend/girlfriend now.**

NOTE: THIS MIGHT GET A LITTLE LOVE HINA- ISH, so heads up for PG-13 provocative scenes, with moderately suggestive content.

Sakura got off Ekyt and got to her feet. She had a good grip on his hand, and led him to her bed.

Ekyt had never blushed so much in his life. **Huh? The b-b-ed? Wait, wait, wait, what? I’m clueless! Oh man! Calm down, calm down, think! Sakura’s not like that!**

Sakura picked up on Ekyt’s apprehension, and couldn’t resist playing with him a little.

“Come on Ekyt-kun, I don’t bite. You’re my boyfriend now, you’ve got obligations...” She laid on her side and patted the bed next to her. “Come on, don’t keep your little Sakura-chan waiting...” **This is so funny! Ekyt’s eyes are gonna pop out of his head! I’ve got to stop doing this...eventually.**

"I'm sorry Ekyt. I couldn't help it, that innocence of yours! I mean, would you mind sitting with me for a little while? The dream was really bad, and, well...I feel safe with you. Like I could tell you anything without you laughing." Now Sakura was blushing.

Ekyt obediently sat on the edge of the bed, his posture rigid. Sakura grabbed his hand. She sat up, next to him, her head on his shoulder.

"You're a rock, Ekyt. I mean, you've got these emotions, but even other people have told me, when they're battling on the same side as you, they're so sure they'll win. You've just got this way about you. And I feel the same way..."

Sakura was suddenly overcome with a rush of affection toward the awkward boy holding her hand. Everything about him suddenly seemed perfect. She couldn't help herself.

"Ekyt..."

When he turned, Sakura pulled him into a fond embrace, using one hand to hold his chin. She pulled his mask off, then hesitated. **I'd forgotten...he's cute without his mask...** She looked into his hazel eyes, searching for an answer to 'is this okay?'. Apparently, she found one, the right one, because she put a hand on the back of his head. To her surprise, she found him kissing her. In her mind, it surprised her, that the shy boy who hadn't spoken of this emotion in four years had kissed her first.

When they relinquished their lip-lock, Sakura couldn't help but hold on to Ekyt. She rubbed her cheek against his. She gave a contented sigh, feeling as if she finally had someone, something, a relationship, that she could hold on to.

Ekyt tried to guess what Sakura wanted. Eventually, he just let her do the hugging and kissing, and he followed suit. When she stopped, she apologized, then looked away, blushing. Ekyt couldn't imagine a reason on earth for apologizing for something so great. He assured her that it was okay, and 'my fault, I started it'. But she was calmer. That was the important thing. The fear of the dream had passed. Sakura's hair and skin were still decorated with a sheen of cold sweat. But Ekyt figured that, if he had been covered in sweat and blood, not to mention that nagging hole through him (He made a mental note to have the hole closed up pretty soon), and she could still hug him, he could give her a hug at a time when she needed it the most.

Sakura stood up and stretched. "I'm going to go to the hot springs, get cleaned up," Sakura told Ekyt. He nodded, apparently unable to talk just yet. That's when Sakura's devious kunoichi mind got an idea. "Wanna come with me, Ekyt-kun? Hmm? I'll scrub your back if you'll scrub mine..." Sakura told him teasingly, batting her eyes.

The slightest bit of blood dripped out of Ekyt's nose.

"Uh...uh..." Ekyt's ability to speak hadn't returned yet, or was gone again. **Huh? Is she serious? Is our relationship like that? Oh man, I don't want to say no to her! But is this really a good thing? Kind of fast...ugh! Damn it! I'm so confused!**

Sakura was going to let Ekyt wallow in that one for a while. But she thought of a way to make it worse. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to come on so strong...we can wait...really...I mean, no need to rush things..." Sakura forced tears to her eyes. Immediately, she saw Ekyt's eye change. He was caving. Sakura snickered to herself. **Gotcha again! This never gets old!**

But she kept her face set in one of despair and embarrassment. She slowly got up and headed for the door, waiting for the inevitable answer.

Ekyt sighed. "Sakura, hold on a sec..."

Sakura stopped. She was hurting her ribs, holding in her laughter. "Y-yes?" she sniffled.

“If you...you’d like to...do that...I mean...whatever you’d like...” Ekyt couldn’t complete a sentence, it seemed.

The poor boy was so flustered, Sakura was going to end the joke right there. But she couldn’t. She had one more idea.

“Alright, you bad boy, I knew you had it in you! Come on then, the mixed bath is open! If we hurry, we can get there before the old people come! I’d rather have you all to myself...” Sakura grabbed Ekyt’s hand and took off, leaving the stunned Shinobi to trail behind her, wondering just what the hell he had gotten himself in to.

Lee and Naruto were outside, on their way to visit Sakura (Ekyt had informed them of her dream), when Sakura and Ekyt zipped by them.

“Hey! Where are you two going?!” Naruto shouted.

“The mixed baths!” Sakura answered cheerfully, not slowing down.

Naruto and Lee turned toward each other.

“Did she say...” Lee began.

“Yeah. Wow, the mixed baths...I’ve never been in there...” Naruto smiled mischievously. “Let’s follow them!”

Lee shook his head. He put up a finger, looking like a know-it-all. “Naruto, it is wrong to spy on them. I will admit I am shocked that they are so forward, but it is their business and...” Lee looked up. Naruto had taken off. After a second’s hesitation, Lee shouted “Wait for me!” and took off, running after Naruto.

Ekyt hesitated outside the locker room. Sakura was nearly in tears, holding in silent laughter, but managed to straighten her face out.

“Come on, you ready? You can do this, it’s just a little bath, and it’s just me! You can trust me. You DO trust me, right Ekyt?” Sakura slid closer to him. She could HEAR his heart beating. **Cha! This is too funny!**

Ekyt opened his mouth as though to speak, but nothing came out. He simply nodded his head. Finally, Sakura cracked.

“I’m sorry Ekyt, I really am! But you’re too innocent to NOT mess with! I know neither of us are ready for this ‘bath’ thing, we’re still sorting out our relationship. But, you know, I promise, I won’t do anything that’s going to hurt either one of us, okay?”

“I trust you,” Ekyt told her solemnly. Then his eyes darted toward a bush.

Sakura had noticed it too. Ekyt walked over and reached in the bush. He fished out two familiar Shinobi. One was clad in orange, the other in green.

Sakura cracked her knuckles.

“I might mess with Ekyt...but you two are just plain perverts. Time to pay up, you little trolls!”

WHAM! WHAM!

Two punches rocketed Lee and Naruto away, into the sky. Unfortunately for them, they landed on top of a bathing Tsunade. She didn’t care how they got there. She didn’t care WHY they were there. All she cared about was payback...and that is a dog...

NEXT TIME:

YOUR CALL READERS!

1. EKYT AND SAKURA GO ON A MISSION WITH NARUTO AND LEE
2. WE FAST-FORWARD TO THE FUTURE, TO SEE IF THE ODD COUPLE OF THE SHINOBI SET HAVE A FUTURE. WHAT IF THEY HAVE KIDS? CAN EKYT SUMMON UP THE COURAGE TO EVEN PROPOSE TO SAKURA?

YOUR CHOICE! MAJORITY RULES!

AND THANKS FOR READING, EVERYONE!

NEXTGUARDIAN