

The Power Inside (Naruto)

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Submitted: January 21, 2008

Updated: September 20, 2008

This fic begins as a better version of "hell in the land of herbs". But from there, it becomes a regular story. Enjoy!

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1 - Healing, Torture, and Dedication

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. She and her mother enjoyed the friendly bantering.

Kora's mother smiled back and waved as her daughter raced off. **She's such a good girl, any mother would be proud to call her 'daughter'. She even made breakfast this morning, how sweet of her!**

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. Most teachers already adored her. She always tried her best, and had never once gotten detention, or even a reprimand.

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. Kora was always nice to him, though. She felt a little sorry for him, truth be told. He lived by himself, and this job was really all he had. Supposedly, all his relatives were dead. After the death of the Koubakage, Koori had reportedly been so distraught that he disappeared into his home for ten years, never once leaving. Of course, that story had to have been exaggerated by time and word of mouth.

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. That meant that if ONE Village tried to attack, they would be destroyed by all the other villages, who needed the precious herbs that this land heralded.

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 her biggest smile. **Something’s wrong, sensei never goes out of his way to talk to anyone. Maybe me being nice to him is working!**

“Never better...” Koori told the girl, returning the smile with a mixture of yellow, black, and missing teeth. Then he 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...

The Land of Herbs? Nothing ever goes wrong there, there’s not even a place to get a drink! Aside from that healthy s* they serve up. That’s one place that won’t be hounding me about debts anytime soon...**

Sakura listened while Lady Tsunade explained the mission.

“Take Kakashi and Naruto...plus two others. This sounds like a major issue, and I really would like to send more people, 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...” Sakura told her, her voice echoing the seriousness of the situation.

“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. **You’re NOT going to crack me, sensei. But if it makes you happy to try...** Ekyt thought highly of Ibikki, but couldn’t help wondering if his ‘hard @\$\$’ demeanor was just an act, or if the man really was that way.

“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.” The last comment was a challenge on Ibikki’s part.

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

Anko, who had just joined them, 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?" This had been on Ibikki's mind for a while now. If the kid was ANBU, he should be jonin, or was jonin-level in skill.

"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. He and Ekyt had clashed over a number of issues, not least of all Ekyt's friendship with Naruto Uzumaki.

"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-san, it's good to see you, too. I never got to congratulate you on becoming a chunin." Ekyt almost always spoke in a solemn whisper, and never spoke unnecessarily.

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 eyes were 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?" she asked, knowing that Ekyt would have the answer.

Ekyt was clearly grinning under his mask.

"Where else- training in the woods. And all of you call MY training insane!"

"Well, it is..." Sakura told him, laughing playfully.

"998, 999, 1000! Guy-sensei, I have done it! 1000 kicks!" Lee announced, throwing a couple more by

way of celebration.

“Great job Lee! Ahhh, the power of youth! Now, 1000 punches! Go to it Lee!” Guy replied with the same vigor. He seemed to have a natural, never-ending sugar high.

“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, trying not to laugh.

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 had to stop thinking about that when a slug started to ooze it’s way up her leg. She grimaced, always hating the feeling of a slug’s ‘saliva’ on her. But this was Tsunade’s summon, and it only showed up when something major was going on.

“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 the group of three.

“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 grace the table 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 man’s’.

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. She had never heard something so eerie. Her little body shivered in fear and cold, until she finally vomited and passed out...

“OK, winter wear...My old outfit would have been good...but I’ve outgrown that...” Sakura was thinking 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 the coat wasn’t too long.

The three met up at the appointed time. Lee and Ekyt, as per usual, were early, which left time for Lee to talk with Ekyt. Or try to. Lee was one of the few who could get a full conversation out of Ekyt. It was a show of trust on Ekyt's part, as a lack of trust normally was all the incentive he needed to keep his mouth shut. 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 stretched the word out, annoying his friend.

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. It was probably the most well-kept secret in the Leaf Village, except for the two that knew. Lee had 'threatened' to tell Sakura how Ekyt felt about her. Ekyt warned him that he should have his next of kin notified if he did. It didn't matter if Ekyt never beat Lee in a taijutsu sparring match, he said. Ekyt would KILL him.

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. She had wanted to go, to meet some of the medics there. She wondered if she would get a chance on this mission.

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 he

thought his dark whisper hid the smile pretty well.

“But” she started to protest.

“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’. Ekyt returned with a glare that said ‘if you keep talking, I’ll kill you’.

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

2 - The First Blow (Is Struck)

Ekyt stared at the fire for a while longer. It's flames were transfixing, a point of relaxation. It was rare that Ekyt felt like this. He always felt loyalty, but a curious sensation had risen in his chest. Something beyond 'loyalty'. Perhaps it was the myth that was 'friendship'.

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. **Good luck, Lee-san. Linda is the most cold kunoichi in the world...I know from personal experience. Still, if you've dated her for three years, you did better than me...**

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. But what came out of her mouth didn't SOUND like her in the least.

"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...Why wasn't he dead yet? He wanted to die, now, to end the pain.

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. There were two ways to end genjutsu. One was the 'release' command. The second was intense physical pain that was caused by something other than the genjutsu.

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.

"ReELEASE!" 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 sank into Lee's neck. Lee felt the life start to drain out of him.

"RELEASE!"

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. I don't see anyone around, I would have sensed it. Ibikki taught me how to trace chakra, but if the person isn't in range, it's pointless."

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, somehow sitting up by themselves. As soon as Sakura had touched the clothes, the sky had

darkened. The world seemed black and white. Everything was still. There was a breeze, but no trees were moving. It was as if only Sakura and whatever was causing this could move.

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 and chests.

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.

"RELEASE!"

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. Lee leapt right up.

"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, the dagger in his direction.

"My name is Ekyt Kaguya. I am a genin from the Leaf Village. I am a loner, and I am stuck as a genin because of Ebisu-sensei," he spoke slowly and deliberately, keeping his voice in its normal toneless state.

Sakura lowered the kunai. She leapt up and in to Ekyt, quickly scissoring his waist with her legs. 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. It was...pleasant, he decided.

Enjoy it later Casanova! Right now, these two need you! Ekyt's scolding to himself worked, albeit with a little hesitation. No matter how dark, he was still a boy, and one who was being hugged by the girl he had a crush on.

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 the next town," Ekyt told her, thinking back to studying the map.

"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. Ibikki-sensei told me that, for one that powerful, it would take nearly a full day to recover. We shouldn't go in half-cocked, we don't know the full extent of the situation we're walking in to. But it's your call, Sakura-sensei."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "You and your honorifics. But, I agree with you. Let's get ourselves healed before we go blasting in to a new place with danger we don't even know anything about."

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...The one who broke it could sense my chakra somehow. I fear he could have traced it, had I not removed the traces of it immediately."

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?"

Koori cooed, as though Kora had a choice.

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's right, I'm leading it! 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, while steadily avoiding looking at Lee. 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 hand and wrist 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 is that?" Ekyt asked. The strange statement by Lee turned out to be a rib in the making.

"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?!" she demanded.

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, who didn't seem to care. Muffled sounds came from beneath the gag that was stuffed into his mouth.

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 to stop Sakura and Lee. 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 unfazed by the attack and pushed Ekyt backward into the castle wall. He hit it with a grunt.

"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 aiming for his face. Ekyt dodged away, but the thing's claws were so long, you couldn't avoid them for long...

"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 added dryly.

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

3 - A Willing Opponent

“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, brows furrowed in thought. The stone seemed to stretch forever into the heavens, giving the castle an air of impenetrability. It was most likely meant to give that image. Battle wasn’t just physical, it was psychological.

“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, surprised that Ekyt had said it, too. Her gaze shifted to Lee.

“I do not let my teammates die,” Lee 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 herself.

“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 almost lustily. 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.

"Damn it...I hope we're not too late..." he muttered. 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. Someone's trying to scare us off," Ekyt replied.

They crossed the threshold into the castle. Their tabi 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 with age.

"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 aloud, his voice hushed.

"What? What is it?" Sakura questioned.

"That's not a table. It's a casket." Ekyt walked closer to inspect it.

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 bearded dragon was on Ekyt’s shoulder, while Holly was sitting at his feet, scratching 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-@\$\$ motel?”

Ekyt gave her a little tap on the head, not happy with her spouting the double entendre. “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 (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, eyes narrowed.

“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!” Holly told the group before Ekyt ended the jutsu.

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 eyes 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. It was wearing earth-toned robes, mostly green with a

brown trim. When it stepped out of the casket, Ekyt saw that it still sandals.

"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.

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 it's form. It was nothing more than ash on the carpet.

"Take the torch and go, hurry!" Ekyt told them firmly, turning back to his own task.

"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 that Ekyt noticed just now. 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 a 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...Release!" 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 a 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, 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 boy’s 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 lighting in a sepia-toned world of their own. 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.

"I only hope I've bought them enough time..." Ekyt said. He couldn't believe how strong his voice 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 young son close. The boy was silent, despite tears streaming down his face. "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 - Wake Me Up Inside

Ekyt fell through the glass window, it's ornate picture now destroyed. The picture's symbolism seemed destroyed as well. 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. There was a pause before 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. So much for the two skeletal jonin. The blast had shaken Sakura up a little bit, as it always did, but the thought of that evil bastard, torturing that little girl.

Sakura clenched a fist. She would make sure he paid for torturing her.

Lee chased the old man up the tower. Step after step. The old man was fast, deceptively fast. But Lee's hand was in reach of the long cloak Koori was wearing. As Lee reached for the cloak, something caught his foot. Seconds later- 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. He hung from the building, relieved, and let himself catch his breathe. Then, he began to climb back up.

"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 Kaguya, 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, both relieved at the findings.

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.

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

The Chinese Water 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. "Release!" 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!" Ekyt was shaking with rage.

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..." Koori said humbly, obviously not meaning it.

"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. He hit Ekyt, put Ekyt stepped to the side. To the already-pained Shinobi, the little pinprick meant nothing.

"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. Right now, she’s resting under a genjutsu. Whenever you can treat her, she’s stable,” Ekyt replied.

Sakura blushed seven shades of red.

“Ekyt-kun...you saved me?”

Ekyt shrugged. “I don’t let my teammates die.”

Sakura couldn’t help but stare. Ekyt stayed

Sakura tended to Kora. The little girl even smiled and hugged each of the team.

“Thank you so much. I was-really scared. But now, I’m fine!” Kora turned to Sakura. “It’s all thanks to you, Sakura-san! Thank you! I want to be as strong as you someday!”

Sakura smiled and patted Kora on the head. “You’re already strong, Kora. Not too many would have survived what you just went through.”

Kora looked proud of herself. She looked over at her other two rescuers. Lee was exercising, of course. Ekyt was...by himself, staring at...nothing. Kora frowned, then tugged on Sakura’s sleeve.

“What’s wrong with him? Is he sick?” Kora asked Sakura.

Sakura saw what she meant, and realized she didn’t know.

“He’s a different one, Kora-chan. Don’t worry, I’ll see what’s wrong with him, and I’ll fix it, okay?”

Kora nodded, proud that she had a difference.

Ekyt was staring at nothing, just thinking. **What if...** But his thoughts were interrupted by Sakura putting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” she asked simply.

“Just thinking,” Ekyt replied quickly.

Sakura cocked her head. “You have a bad habit of doing that. Can I ask what you were thinking about?”

Ekyt debated whether or not to tell her. Somehow, he, the person who defined trust as ‘just a word that few give meaning to’, felt comfortable enough with this kunoichi to tell her something that had been on his mind lately.

“Lately, I’ve been feeling...well, incomplete. My anxiety is back, and, well...I’m still a genin. But more than that, I don’t have a family. I just wonder what my life would have been like if I was...normal. Would I have met...someone, and not spent all this time alone? Has everything I’ve done been worthless? Why am I being punished?” Ekyt stopped, looked Sakura in the eyes, then quickly looked away.

I can’t tell her. I just can’t. When she turns me down, she’ll feel guilty, and I want more for her than that. I’m not good enough for her...I know I’m not.

Ekyt shook himself out of his trance and continued. “I’m sorry, you don’t need to hear this. You’ve got enough stress, without my complaining. I’ll be fine, I...always am.”

Sakura didn't believe him. "You know, I've seen you depressed before. You have something on your mind. If it's a real concern to you...it's real to me. You can always come to me...I hope you know that. Whatever you're thinking, whatever you're feeling...you can talk to me. Okay?"

Sakura was really worried. The tough-as-nails boy in front of her looked near tears. She had never seen him so emotional, so upset.

Ekyt wished Sakura knew. How he felt about her. There was no longer any doubt in his mind: He was in love with her. Head over heels, ain't no doubt about it (Yes, I meant to write that), crazy in love. But he couldn't tell her, he wasn't good enough. He was NEVER good enough, and he never would be. He nodded his thanks.

Sakura looked over at Ekyt. He was deep in thought again, but in the places where his mask had been torn, she could see his face. And it was red, from blushing. Without thinking about it, Sakura put an arm around his shoulders. She could feel every muscle tense at the touch. She was reminded of Kakashi-sensei. The mystery, the occasional pained look. Of course, they were two different types of people. Kakashi was jovial and laid-back. Ekyt was wound tighter than a cheap watch, and studied as if there was nothing else.

In his world, maybe there wasn't. It had been dawning on Ekyt for a long time that, as much as he needed the 'human touch' (as Rick Springfield so poignantly pointed out), that you really couldn't count on anyone or anything. He wanted to be the exception to that rule.

Sakura noticed the far-away look in Ekyt's eyes again. There was a flickering pain in his hazel eyes, an internal pain that was hard to explain. Had Sakura not been a medic, she might not have noticed at all. But she guessed that it was something that her friend needed to work out. All she could do was heal his wounds (which were of considerable size- had it not been for his constant training, he wouldn't be alive right now), and then offer a hug. She did just that, then left the suddenly perplexed genin to think.

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.

"Ekyt...they want us to stay. They want you and Lee to train them, and they want me...to be their next Koubakage."

Lee and Ekyt exchanged glances. Ekyt spoke up.

"Is this a choice on our part...or a demand on theirs?" he wanted to know. Before Sakura could answer, Ekyt got his answer- swords, pitchforks, sais, bos, and other gardening tools were being pointed at them.

"An answer- NOW!" one town official demanded.

Ekyt, Lee, and Sakura all knew where their loyalty lied. With Konoha.

"No. Sorry, but no," Ekyt told them.

"Wrong answer!" the official said, and jabbed at Ekyt with a pitchfork. Ekyt stepped to the side and swept the man's legs, taking up his weapon.

"Wrong move..."

5 - A Wish Fulfilled

The angry people of the Land of Herbs closed in. Their weapons were familiar to Ekyt. He had trained with most of them. In his old arts, such as his Karate, he was told that they were designed as gardening tools, but the clever people used them in self defense against the oppressive government and it's minions. Obviously, these people knew martial arts. So fighting through them would be a struggle. Sakura didn't really want to hurt these people. They had been without a leader, had suffered a disaster, and were, she would have bet, more confused than angry. To them, the three that had been their saviors would have made them the most powerful country in the world. But Sakura, Lee, and Ekyt had sworn allegiance to Konoha. They wouldn't leave, not even for such lucrative positions. They all stuck by their word, a rarity in this day and time. One sentence that all three had repeated once again surfaced on their lips.

"I will not let my teammates die."

Sakura, the leader of the mission, stepped forward toward the people.

"Listen to me, all of you! You need to help yourselves! The three of us...we have loyalty to our own land. Just as none of you would leave your homes...none of us would leave ours." As Sakura finished saying that, Sasuke crossed her mind. She stopped dead, in the middle of her speech. Her train of thought had stopped at 'ours', as now all she could think about was Sasuke leaving. She felt Lee pulling her back. Ekyt stepped up to where she was.

"All of you are capable people. There is a leader among you, I'm sure of that. You won't have to worry about scum like Koori, and you can always count on our village for help. But make no mistake- if you threaten us again, there WILL be problems. BIG problems. So, drop your pitchforks and use your brains. Who would make a good leader..." **Wait...the Koubakage's last wish...of course!** "I have had the honor of meeting your Koubakage (gasps from the crowd), and even dueling him. He mentioned that his last wish was that a relative of his would take up the title of 'Koubakage'. I promised him I would do my best to make it come true. So, I urge the parents of this girl (Kora) to come forward..."

Sakura shook her head, trying to shake herself out of this. She already knew she wasn't in love with Sasuke anymore, but his leaving still haunted her. If she wasn't busy, the way he had hit her before he left haunted her. Naruto's promise to bring Sasuke back...that also occurred to her. She was vaguely thankful that Lee had gotten her away from the crowd, and that the nerve-prone Ekyt had somehow found the internal fortitude to step up and tell these people what they needed to hear.

"Sakura-sensei, please calm down. Your mind has been weakened by the genjutsu. Please, rest for now. Ekyt-san has the crowd under control."

Sakura nodded vaguely at Lee's words.

A man and a woman stepped forward. Both were wearing tired faces, as though they hadn't eaten for slept in days. The man was short and stocky, mostly muscle, just a little bit of fat on him. The woman was tall, with perfect posture and seemingly-military attitude. But one look at her face and you instantly thought 'motherly'.

"I'm Kora's mother, Karai," the woman said quietly.

"I'm her father, Fujitsu," the man told them, his tone quiet.

“One of you should take over the Koubakage title. Do either of you possess any Ninjutsu powers?” Ekyt asked in his dark whisper.

“I do,” Karai admitted.

“So do I!” came an all too familiar voice.

Ekyt whipped around. Koori was glaring at him. The crowd backed up as Koori advanced. Ekyt hadn't forgotten what he had done to Sakura, and to that little girl. It burned him up. If this guy took a swipe at him, they would never find his remains. One gloved hand crunched into a fist, while the other pointed a single finger (no, not the middle one) at Koori.

“You aren't welcome. I know what you did. Murdering the Koubakage out of jealousy. A jealousy that has only served to turn you into a bitter, pathetic old man. If you're looking for a fight, why don't you try me on for size again? Because all that has just been achieved, in such a short time...I'm not going to let you ruin it. Now, either back up, or step up.”

Koori glared at Ekyt. It was obvious to Ekyt what he was doing, Ekyt could already sense his chakra.

“Release,” Ekyt said dully. Then he repeated the word. “Trying to hide a genjutsu within a genjutsu...that won't work on me. Not least of all because I know how much damage I did to your mind. I left your sanity hanging on by a thread...don't make me sever that thread. I'll regret it, but regret can vanish after a while, if you know how the mind works...sanity is gone forever, no matter what.”

Koori stepped forward to challenge Ekyt, but was stopped by Kirai.

“I can't let you attack my Land. I've assumed the title of the Second Koubakage. And I won't have you ruining it. If it means executing you...I'll do it. DON'T force me to make that decision. You WILL regret it.” ‘Motherly’ suddenly took a back seat to business, and she glared at the old man, her now-icy blue eyes staring the old villain down.

The crowd cheered as Kirai stared Koori down, eventually succeeding in making him leave. When they all turned back to the Konoha group, they found they were gone. Kirai smiled and silently thanked the three.

“Feels great, doing a good deed!” Sakura declared, stretching a little bit. All three were tired and sore from combat. But they had done their job, and done it well.

“It does! Nothing feels better! I cannot wait to tell Guy-sensei how well we did!” Lee, of course, didn't act tired in the least. He was so excited at the prospect of telling his sensei how well he had done that he was practically running.

Sakura shot a glance at Ekyt. He was the only one who hadn't spoken up. She knew that it wasn't because of the mission, it had been a success, and he had gone out of his way to do good deeds. Something- or somethings- were harping at him. Part of Sakura wanted to ask what was wrong, but she held her tongue. She had already offered him a place to vent. Whether he used it or not was up to him. It was a personal thing, and Sakura didn't want to pry. Well, actually, she DID, she desperately wanted to know what was on the guy's mind, but she had more respect for him than that.

“We should stop and rest. The journey is two days, and we should let ourselves heal. The power of that genjutsu might still be affecting our judgment.”

Ekyt had piped up suddenly. He realized how much he sounded like Ibikki at this point. They were both considerably jaded, and with good reason.

“You're right. A hot spring town would really hit the spot!” Sakura added.

“It would! The water is great resistance training!” Lee replied, giving his input.

“There should be one, about ten miles out of our way. But for the rest we’d get, it would be worthwhile,” Ekyt chimed in. “Especially if we got attacked again. We’ll need ourselves at full strength, or as close to it as possible.”

One look at the three, and you would be inclined to agree. All three of them had tattered and bloodstained clothes. And once they got out of the Land of Herbs area, the weather warmed significantly. Ekyt’s trench coat would become especially cumbersome and annoying, not to mention the boots they were wearing would become impractical. So it was unanimous: They were headed for a hot spring town.

Sakura hummed merrily, stripping out of her sweat and blood soaked clothes. She marched into the hot spring, practically diving into the perfect water. The steam rose off her skin and off the water’s surface. Sakura gave a long, contented sigh as she let herself sink deeper into the water. She could practically *feel* her cuts healing, her bruises fading, and her mind clearing. There was no doubt- Sakura had matured into a beautiful girl. Without Sasuke around, she had thrown herself into training, and had bettered herself. She would have been the catch of the boys among the Leaf Village, but most wouldn’t consider bothering her, because she had always been so intent on Sasuke. But, now, in truth, she would have dated someone. She just didn’t know who. She didn’t judge based solely on looks anymore. A lot of the guys she had considered judged her by her looks only, and she didn’t want some superficial relationship.

But I don’t want to be alone either... she thought, somewhat despairingly. She was still young, there was plenty of time for her to find someone, she knew that. But was she being too picky?

“Hurry Ekyt-san, the water is perfect!” Lee called, already swimming laps, pissing off the only other occupant in the process. That person soon left, grumbling about ‘damn kids and their sugar-highs’. Ekyt was never comfortable being naked, not in the day and age where you should always have a weapon. But, for hot springs, he could make an exception. It was one of the few times he let himself relax. He knew that he needed to rest right now, if only to keep his sanity. Other than that, he wouldn’t have just sat and done nothing. There was always a jutsu to perfect, or a girl to dream about. Girl? shoot. That was part of his problem. The perfect girl for him was on the other side of a stupid fence. Lee knew how Ekyt felt about Sakura, but knew enough not to grill at this particular moment. Silently, they both let their bodies start the healing process. Lee eventually spoke up, trepidation in his voice. “Ekyt-san?”

“Hm?” Ekyt grunted his reply.

“You know why I train...but why do YOU train, if you do not mind my asking?”

Ekyt paused for a second, but his response was worth the short wait. “I train for the few people I care about. And because I want to fix what’s wrong with the world.”

Lee nodded, hoping his question had made Ekyt think. Was there more to work for?

“Hey, Lee?”

“Yes Ekyt-san?”

“I don’t know how to tell Sakura how I feel about her...I mean, after she shoots me down, she’ll either feel guilty, or she’ll go all Linda (more on her later) on my @\$@ and make my life hell. Either way, it’s lose/lose.”

Lee shook his head. “No. You are not considering the likely option that she will like you back.”

“I DID consider it. It’s not likely to happen, not in this life time. She’s only got eyes for Sasuke, every guy knows that.”

“It has been a long time. I am certain her love for that traitorous deserter has diminished. You will never know until you tell her. You are beating yourself up over it. Does not Sakura deserve an answer? She has noticed that something is wrong. She has asked me, and I told her that I could not say. But you worry her Ekyt-san.”

“She’ll worry less if she doesn’t have the guilt of turning me down,” Ekyt replied. Lee dropped it, knowing his friend was stubborn. They were both content to just soak in the water for a while. Eventually, their discussion dissipated like the steam.

Sakura dried herself off, then pulled on a robe. She liked this inn already. The towels were warm, the robes were comfy, and the beds were big and had just the right mix of firmness and plushness to make it perfect! The rooms were huge, each containing a bathroom, a sitting area, a bedroom, and a deck. Normally, the inn rooms had a futon, maybe a bathroom, but this place was the luxury type, especially at the bargain price! It was so relieving, to just be able to relax. She had just gotten into her pajamas when there was a knock at the door.

Ekyt got out of the water and immediately dried himself off. He threw on his clothes- this time his ANBU gear, since the climate was warmer. He always felt weird wearing the sleeveless ANBU armor, and a tattoo on his rangy body seemed weird. Thank God the think only showed up with the gear, some weird jutsu to keep agents from being detected. Ekyt suddenly forgot that. Something felt wrong to him. Was it something Lee had said? Maybe Lee had made a good point...Ekyt didn’t want Sakura to worry. If he was the cause, he needed to clear it up, for her peace of mind. Ekyt lived with enough destructive, poisonous thoughts by himself, he didn’t need his friends suffering because he didn’t have the guts to talk to a girl. So he summoned up his courage and went to Sakura’s room. But as he was walking by the front desk, he felt something was wrong...really wrong, and it wasn’t him. He sped to Sakura’s room, because he was sure she was involved.

Sakura was laying in bed, passed out. But in her dream, she was answering the door. When she opened it, Naruto stumbled in.

“S-Sakura...H-help...” As she tried to catch him, Naruto disintegrated into ash. His eyes, however, were still open, and they stared accusingly at Sakura. **It’s all your fault!** the eyes were saying. Somehow, Sakura could HEAR the eyes.

“No...Naruto, what happened? I don’t even know!” But Sakura’s shouts were of to no avail. The eyes continued their accusing stare. Their stare only stopped when they were crunched under the tabi boot of a familiar figure.

“S-Sasuke!” Sakura hardly dared to breathe. Was this real? Could it be?

Sasuke sneered at her. “Still weak, Sakura? Hmph. It doesn’t matter. Orochimaru will take over soon enough. It’s a shame you and your little friends can’t do anything about it...I was hoping for a challenge from you losers.”

Ekyt heard a yelp from inside Sakura’s room. Praying she was decent, he rammed the door with his shoulder. It buckled and splintered under his momentum, and he was carried by his own inertia into the room. He saw her trapped in what was, undoubtedly, a genjutsu. Her mind couldn’t take too much more. It hadn’t had a chance to recover from the brutal two she had to endure two days ago. Ekyt knew

of only one way to see what was REALLY going on. He made a series of handsigns, then let himself enter Sakura's subconscious. He carefully made sure to let his body slide down the wall, so he didn't hurt anything while entering her body. This jutsu was forbidden, Ibikki had told him so, except where following one's nindo was concerned. Since Ekyt's dictated that he didn't let people die needlessly, he decided it was appropriate.

Sakura backed up as Sasuke drew his sword. He crushed both of Naruto's eyeballs. They squirted a jelly-like substance all over Sakura. Sakura slipped on it and fell down, her back to the wall. Her breather became deeper and deeper as Sasuke drew closer and closer. Snakes, which appeared from nowhere, bound Sakura to the wall. Sasuke was now right in front of Sakura.

"Aren't you lucky? Not everyone will get to die by my hand. But maybe I'll give you one last wish...the kiss you always wanted." Sasuke leaned forward to supply it. Sakura couldn't move. She found she wanted no part of the kiss. She wanted no part of Sasuke. But it didn't look like she had a choice.

Ekyt saw this happening. He zipped over and rammed Sasuke with his shoulder.

"Striking Shadow Snakes!" he called out. His four snakes burst from his wrist. They grabbed Sakura and pulled her free. He had the snakes set Sakura down on the other side of the bed.

"Sakura, listen! This is genjutsu! You've got to end it! You've got to- oof!"

Sasuke barreled into Ekyt, striking him twenty times in a matter of three seconds using the speed he had copied from Lee. Ekyt crashed into the wall, denting the plaster. Sakura was too shocked to form the "Release" sign. Ekyt vaulted back into the room, using a body replacement jutsu just before Sasuke's sword would have diced him up. Instead, from behind, Ekyt jammed two kunai home in Sasuke's hands. That stopped him from attack with jutsus. All he could do now was kick.

"You can do it, Sakura!" Ekyt urged her. A miraculously healed Sasuke grabbed Ekyt and threw him hard into the wall. The genin lay there, unmoving. Sasuke moved toward Sakura one more time. But he was halted. Ekyt was kneeling in front of Sakura, to get the angle he needed. The senbon he had thrown pierced Sasuke's neck, while he jammed a kunai into Sasuke's heart.

"You've got to end the genjutsu, Sakura. It's the only way out of this. This is an elaborate nightmare, nothing else. But you have to break it. In real life, your mind can't take much more of the strain this genjutsu puts on you."

This all felt so real to Sakura. But Ekyt's voice was calm and soothing. **He's right. You've got to escape before your mind collapses. Come on, release!** Sakura forced her hands into the 'release' sign, then said it aloud.

Sakura woke up, leaping harshly to her knees on her bed. She looked around the room, finding the door splintered and an unconscious Ekyt laying against the wall. Blood was spilling from his mouth. Sakura had read about this genjutsu. Any injuries endured by the person entering the subconscious became real. That was one reason it was forbidden. Fearing the worse, Sakura, despite her own shaking, got down on the floor and felt Ekyt's pulse. It was stable. Sakura breathed a sigh of relief.

That genjutsu was the most real I've ever felt. Even while I KNEW it was fake, it FELT so real, that if Ekyt hadn't showed up to tell me to fight it, I would have believed it was reality...It was different from that genjutsu in the forest...more real, and even more powerful. Whoever used it knows me, because Sasuke talked about 'loving' me. Sasuke...was it...one of those dreams? The kind that I used to have before he left? Sakura pushed those thoughts aside. Instead, she picked Ekyt's unconscious form up and laid it on the far side of the bed. She propped up his head to relieve the

pressure on it. She had read that using a genjutsu as powerful as he just had took a great deal of chakra, and put a huge strain on your brain.

I wonder how he feels? He told me about being alone...what did that mean?

At that point, Ekyt stirred. He didn't even utter a sound of pain. He must have known it was coming, because he didn't panic at all. He tried to use the Chakra Scalpel to make sure there weren't any serious internal injuries. But his chakra had been sapped, but good.

"Damn it..." he muttered, trying again.

"Are you alright, Ekyt?" Sakura asked kindly.

"I will be. Just got to get my chakra together and...O, crap, I'm sorry, I'll come back!" Ekyt said, looking away quickly.

Sakura made a sound of surprise, then giggled. "It's alright, they're pajamas, not...whatever you thought you saw. Come on, let me take a look at you. If you're too hurt to use that jutsu, then you'll have to let me do it. While I'm working, you can tell me what just happened."

Ekyt nodded and removed his ANBU armor. Sakura had to cut the shirt open, she needed a clear access path to his insides. She did so, wondering why she was blushing. She again prompted Ekyt to talk.

Ekyt, who had been thinking about his own blushing, was relieved that he could forget about that for a while and tell her what happened.

"Whoever it was knows you pretty well. It isn't Sasuke, that wasn't his chakra. It would have to be someone with an intimate knowledge of forbidden jutsus. That leaves Orochimaru. But, anyway, what happened. I used a genjutsu of my own, to let my subconscious get in yours. It's kind of like Ino's Mind/Body Transfer Jutsu, except that the target, you in this case, is still in control of it's body, it just has more than one inhabitant. I used the jutsu because your mind could have collapsed under the stress. That genjutsu was powerful, and it was targeted at you. It reminds me of something Sarutobi-sama told me. He said that there are three Shinobi who are going to be the next "Legendary Three". Unless I've missed my guess, it's you, Naruto, and Sakura. You've all been trained by the Legendary Three. Someone doesn't want you to become as powerful as Lady Tsunade."

Sakura finished up, thankful to find no serious injuries. His ribs would hurt for a little while, but nothing major. Ekyt sat up and thanked Sakura. He was still blushing. Sakura found this amusing, until she remembered she was also blushing. So Ekyt bowed from the room and went to get Lee. It was time to get home. Whoever had attacked them would try again, and it would be harder to hit a moving target.

6 - The Elder Speaks

The trip home was uneventful. Getting back, however, was noteworthy. Lee, Sakura, and Ekyt gave their report, and were subsequently given a physical examination by Tsunade, then a mental one by Ibikki. They had all passed. Ibikki looked proud, and took some time after to talk with Ekyt, which, even though Ekyt knew him and counted him as a friend, was rare.

“Heard about your nice use of the subconscious...guess you WERE paying attention. Kid, your heart isn't stone, but it's not soft either. Nice work.”

Coming from Ibikki, that was the equivalent of winning the Super Bowl.

Sakura and Lee were soon free to go, but Lady Tsunade requested that Ekyt stay a little longer. She poured him a cup of sake (a sure sign of something bad, if she was willing to share the good stuff), and Shizune seemed to fidget a lot, looking at Ekyt, then away. Tsunade seemed to ask a lot of questions. That was uncharacteristic enough, without the sudden ‘motherly concern’ she had.

“You're sure you're alright? Not injured?” Tsunade asked, fingering her robe nervously.

“Nothing serious,” Ekyt replied, a little bit of question in his voice.

“Um, well, it was brave of you to do all this...”

“Thanks, I'm just doing my job...” Ekyt was starting to wonder what was wrong.

“Sakura and Lee, hell, the whole Village mostly, they think a lot of you...”

“And I think a lot of them. The Leaf Village has been great to me,” Ekyt replied, seriously dreading what was going to happen when whatever it was they were waiting for happened. They sat in silence for a while. Tsunade refilled Ekyt's cup. He downed it, strengthened himself, and finally piped up.

“Does someone want to tell me what this is about?” Ekyt finally asked quietly. Kakashi, Asuma, and Guy had filed into the room, along with Master Sarutobi, and an old man Ekyt didn't know by name or face, but rather by his status as an elder.

“It seems that Elder Akira has found an...well, a law that you're in violation of,” Tsunade began, uncomfortably.

Ekyt tried to appear only vaguely interested. “Really, now? What law? May I have a look for myself?” **WHAT?! I've done everything they've asked, what kind of law have I broken? Was my genjutsu forbidden? No, no, Ibikki-sensei would have chewed my @\$@ but good if it was. I used it in context, the way he taught me! Is this some BS by Ebisu?**

The elder shuffled up and dropped an ancient book in front of Ekyt. One wrinkled finger pointed to a passage, while a nasty old mouth barked a single demand.

“Read.”

So Ekyt did. He narrowed his eyes as he came across the law.

“I've been in violation of this law for nearly four years, and it's never come to attention before. Not to mention even I haven't read it, and I've devoured every scroll and book I could find to prevent this. Why is this being brought up now?” Ekyt looked from one jonin to the other, already guessing. Their gazes were trained on the old man...and Ebisu, who had just arrived.

“Well, it seems you have illegal training! Any art, except for those that encompass the Shinobi training, is illegal. We can't, in good conscience, keep you, now can we?” Ebisu said mockingly.

Ekyt ignored him for the moment and looked to Lady Tsunade. She nodded her head sadly, indicating that he was right. “I need your headband.” Tsunade was cursing herself for it, but she had no choice.

Ekyt pulled the hitai-ate off and, after a reverent glance at it, handed it to Tsunade.

“Well, that’s that then. I guess I have to take my trade somewhere else. Thanks for everything,” Ekyt said pleasantly, waving to the people in the room he liked. As for the other two. Ekyt couldn’t lay a hand on an elder, unless provoked.

Ebisu, however...

WHAM! Ekyt’s right fist hit Ebisu under the eye. Ebisu’s glasses went sailing, while Ekyt kept Ebisu from sailing by holding him up by his shirt. The jonin was too scared to move. The other jonin knew this was coming, and they also knew when they would step in. For now, they were playing the ‘I’m too surprised to help you, Ebisu’ card. Ekyt held him up to the wall, already feeling the jonin gently prying his hands off of the Tokubetsu Jonin currently suspended in the air by a pair of strong arms belonging to an angry individual.

“So you think you’ve finally won? Jokes on you, jackass. You’d better pray you don’t meet me in combat, because the headband I was wearing was the only thing stopping me from kicking your damn teeth in...”

Ekyt dropped him and stormed out of the office. Just before he reached the door, he threw a chair at Ebisu, breaking his nose. He laughed at the bloodshed, then threw ryo on the floor. “To pay for the damage I just caused, Lady Tsunade. Just for the record- it was worth it. If I had another chair, I could break his big jaw, too...” Ekyt glared at Ebisu, then finally stomped out the door, punching a hole in the wall as he left.

Kakashi followed Ekyt out, knowing that the former Leaf Ninja would talk with him, if prompted.

“What a load of (censored).” Ekyt didn’t use that word often.

Kakashi laughed. “It’s not like you to throw around words like that, but if it fits... Which it does. Mind if I ask where you’re headed?”

Ekyt looked Kakashi in the eye. “The Sound Village. Maybe they’ll accept me...in the mean time, sensei, could you...could you do me a favor?”

Kakashi hid his surprise at Ekyt’s answer and nodded. “Please tell Lee, Naruto, Sakura, Shikamaru, Tenten, and Temari (She defected from the Sand Village, disgusted with her brothers) that I’ll miss them. And the senseis, too. And thank you for everything. I really wish this hadn’t happened...but I guess we have to keep moving forward, even when it isn’t the most welcome prospect. You do what you have to do.”

“You don’t have to leave, you know. But I understand why you are. You not training just doesn’t seem right...Wherever you wind up, I wish you well.”

“You too, Kakashi-sensei.”

Something fell out of Ekyt’s pocket, but he was already walking away and didn’t notice. Kakashi picked it up and pocketed it, promising to look at it later.

In Tsunade’s office, the jonin debated what to do, while they waited for Kakashi’s report. Lee and Sakura had been called in, too. The oil burned late that night, as those close to Ekyt tried to find a loophole to the law Ebisu had dug up...It was proving difficult. Even Sarutobi, the ‘Professor’, didn’t have a clue as to where to start.

Naruto and Shikamaru, meanwhile, had ideas of their own.

“We’ll drag his skinny @\$@ back here, believe it!” Naruto shouted, ready to go.

“Hold on Naruto. We need a team. Us and Choji. But we’ll only leave if they can’t find a loophole.”

Shikamaru never wanted to exert more energy than necessary.

"He WHAT?!" Sakura shouted.

"YOU MUST BE KIDDING! EKYT-SAN WOULD NEVER LEAVE!"

Tsunade held up hand to silence Lee and Sakura. "He had little say in the matter. Now, I need you two to promise me you won't run off and go after him."

"I-I can't do that, Lady Tsunade," Sakura stammered defiantly.

"This is a direct order, Sakura," Tsunade warned, voice and ice cold as ice.

"I don't care! It's wrong, and you know it!" Sakura shouted back.

"Sakura is right! We cannot let him go somewhere else! I-I refuse to be a member of this village if this is how you work!" Lee declared, pulling the hitai-ate off from around his waist.

"I'm with you, Lee!" Sakura whipped her own headband off. Both clattered onto Tsunade's desk.

"He could have stayed." Tsunade told them solemnly. "But he wouldn't have been allowed to train, or study. He chose to leave."

"Oh, please! That old piece of s*** did this, and you LET him!" Sakura snarled, wondering where this bravery was coming from. She looked at Lee, who nodded. They both stomped out the door. Tsunade put a hand to her head, massaging her temples. That had NOT gone well...

Tsunade was soon joined by Master Sarutobi.

"You were right to uphold the law. They put you in a bad position, and you had to choose between one bad choice or the other. You made the right choice."

Sarutobi's words offered little solace to Tsunade. "I've just lost three talented ninja, all under the age of 20. And once word gets out, who knows how many more will have quit on me? The village is at it's weakest, I couldn't afford to lose Ekyt, let alone all the others that left with him!" She slammed her fist on the desk in frustration.

Sarutobi himself took up a book and looked through it. **She's not even aware of the predictions...Ekyt needs to be here, before he finds REAL danger. The Leaf Village is the only place that would protect him. And the obvious loyalty he inspires, consciously or not...it's not something we can afford to lose.**

In Otogakure...

Ekyt knelt before Kabuto, Orochimaru, Sasuke, and...Chakaro. Ekyt felt his face burn with hatred. He had respect for Kabuto, and even some for Orochimaru, but that was it. He was kneeling before three villains, swearing an allegiance to them that he, in no way, felt.

"I never thought that I would see the day...well, it's welcome, to be sure. (laugh) Give him his new hitai-ate. Make him feel...welcome," Orochimaru ordered. Sometimes, you could be charmed into thinking there was something good about him, but you had to remember there wasn't, or it was easy to get sucked in.

Ekyt took the sound village headband, shame written all over him. He tied it around his left shoulder, holding it in place with a few pins.

"I know I've got some stroke Orochimaru, being the "Dragon Boy" and all. I've got two conditions before I work for you: One- I do NOT answer to that jackass (Chakaro). Two- I don't want a cursed seal.

Do we have a deal?" Ekyt kept his voice from wavering, although that proved to be very difficult. Orochimaru licked his lips. "That would be fine with me. Although your second chakra would make you a candidate for a host..."

Ekyt laughed outright, stunning the three Sound Ninja. When he stopped laughing, he stared at Orochimaru, his gaze hardened.

"It's not great, trust me. It hurts like hell to use it, and you have to summon it by letting yourself feel hate, or love, for everything. Then, all my chakra changes direction. And that hurts even worse. It feels like it would rip me in half. I don't know what it would do to someone who wasn't born with it...If it can seal even your curses, imagine what it would do inside your body...Especially one that's due to deteriorate soon..." Ekyt stopped there, letting Orochimaru's mind conjure up the rest of the sentence. Orochimaru, if possible, turned more pale. "Take him to meet his team. And...you might as well have him see his cousin...before he dies..." Orochimaru turned to talk to Ekyt now, as Kabuto nodded his understanding. "You are now part of my elite Sound Squad. You already know Sasuke. Kimimaro and Kabuto are the others. Though Kimimaro won't be with us much longer, I'm afraid. So enjoy your time with him, I know how hard you tried to save him..."

Ekyt tried to hide his surprise that Orochimaru almost sounded regretful to lose Kimimaro.

The Leaf Village was soon in an uproar. By the end of the day, the headbands of Tenten, Temari, Naruto, Lee, Sakura, Hinata, Shikamaru, Choji, and even Hayate were piled on Tsunade's desk in protest. More were to come. Iruka's headband followed, as did Ibikki's and Anko's. Tsunade and Sarutobi's explanations only warranted an angry roar from the crowd of chunin and jonin. With the Leaf Village's military strength at it's weakest, and one of the stronger now playing for the other side, there were major problems. The only reason that most of the jonin hadn't gone was because they knew Tsunade longer than Ekyt. Even they voiced their displeasure at the situation. But Elder Akira and Ebisu would hear nothing of it.

"He broke the law, and he is being punished!" Akira declared. He ducked as rocks and bricks came his way.

"He hit me, and you do NOT hit your instructor!" Ebisu said, smirking. A rock hit him in the mouth, supplied by Tenten. She was tossing another in her hand, with a kunai in the other.

"Yeah? Well, that makes two of us that hit you. Do you want to keep running your mouth and risk something worse? THAT was a rock, the NEXT one will be a knife!" she shouted. The crowd roared again, delighted to see Ebisu looking scared.

Akamaru leapt up onto the balcony and bit Ebisu through the nose, then pissed on Akira's robes.

Tsunade and Sarutobi weren't the targets of attack, and though they tried to quell the crowd, Tsunade couldn't help but laugh when Akira's robes started to change color. Yellow really was his color.

"If you did that to a kid who's never put a toe out of line, what's to say you won't do it to me next?!"

Naruto shouted, along with others. "He gave everything for this village, just as much as you did! And even more than you, Closet Perv! Believe it!"

"I'm not from the Leaf Village. What'll happen to me? You'll give me back to the Sound Village?"

Temari sneered. More yells of approval.

"It's becoming rapidly clear that this is about more than Ekyt...if someone so close to the Hokage is gone in an instant, they all fear for themselves." Sarutobi puffed at his pipe thoughtfully. **Can't say I blame them. If someone with loyalty like that, who's never broken a rule, can be removed...isn't anyone fair game? Tsunade is in an awful position, and there's only one way to rectify it...but**

there's no legal backing for it. She, and therefore, the village, are in a jam. There is no problem that cannot be solved without thought...but thought takes time, time that we do not have...

"Tsunade...He needs to come back. We need to work this out, or the Village will fall apart. All those who dropped headbands on your desk...They're the heart and soul of this village, and will be for the next generation. We have no choice, we must break the laws the Hokage before us set, if the Leaf Village is to survive."

"I know...but how? It's not like we can just 'break' the law. There has to be some kind of precedent sent in order for the law to be broken...but what precedent can be written for this? Damn it! I don't even know where they dug that stupid old book up! His training in other arts has saved his life, and the life of his team mates, when he's had any! He's gotten one raw deal after another, and now we've handed one of our most talented and dedicated warriors to Orochimaru on a silver platter!" Tsunade downed a cup of Sake, prompting Shizune to take the bottle away before coherent thought went away quicker than the sake.

Ekyt, Kabuto, and Sasuke walked to Kimimaro's room. Ekyt peered in, biting his tongue. His cousin was dying. Wasn't there anything he could do?

"Kabuto, have you thought about his disease being subconscious?" Ekyt asked suddenly.

"We've considered it, but his condition is physical, and it's from his curse mark. Beyond that, there's nothing else to know.," Kabuto responded. The medic in him didn't like the thought of Kimimaro dying. The traitor in him was even disturbed.

"I can check it...but I'd be contaminated myself...unless...it's worth the risk." Ekyt muttered to himself, before speaking to Kabuto. "I'm going to seal his curse mark, then undo the seal. That might re-boot his system. At the worst, nothing will change."

Kabuto wanted to try that, but he had been around too long to trust anyone. He and Ekyt were the same age, and as such, didn't pull his punches when asking his question, despite the faint mutual respect that was between them.

"How do I know you'll make good on your word and undo the seal?" Kabuto questioned. "You could just seal his curse mark for good and walk away. I haven't learned nothing in 19 years, you know. I've switched sides myself..."

Ekyt shrugged. "The guy is family. And I know the medic in you doesn't want him to die. And you want to know what's causing the disease, the same as me. After I do the seal, I'll be weakened. So if I try to go back on my word, you'd have no problem killing me. You've seen me in combat, so you know that I'm not lying about the fatigue. Besides...he's family, whether he thinks of me that way or not. I've disowned most of my family, but Kimimaro is still part of my family. And I'll do this, with or without your permission. If it works, then you'll be the first to witness a new healing method. If it doesn't, well, back to square one."

Kabuto and Sasuke nodded. The two could overpower the young man any time, so if he strayed from the plan, they could dice him up.

7 - Otogakure Update

The chakra grew to the right size in Ekyt's hand. His Blue Flame Chakra was easy to access; he WAS angry. He didn't have to force anger. He had been removed from his home, forced to serve his enemy, and now bowing to the same vermin he had tried to get rid off. It made his sick, and angry. And that anger, always so hurtful, was about to be helpful.

"Blue Flame Chakra: Sealing Jutsu!" Ekyt jammed his hand onto Kimimaro's curse mark. His hand slid under Kimimaro's skin and into his body. Ekyt found what he was looking for. It was a 'battery' of sorts, for the cursed seal. It was a buildup of chakra that took away life energy. Ekyt was about to pull the plug on it. He felt the 'battery' in his hand. He squeezed until he felt the chakra flow from it slow, then finally stop altogether. He pulled his hand out, and the Blue Chakra disappeared back into him. "Watch his vitals. I'll unseal the curse the minute they change."

That would take time. In the mean time, Ekyt had a conversation that he didn't want any part of.

"Ekyt...tell me about the Village."

Ekyt didn't want to talk to Sasuke, but felt he had little choice in the matter.

"Sakura still thinks about you, but she's matured. Most everyone misses you, and wishes you hadn't left. A few have even forgiven you. But the only one that trains with you in mind- is Naruto. He's determined to get you back. He's told me that you're like a brother to him, a best friend. He's never forgotten you, or the fight you had. He's become a chunin, along with the other 'rookies' from that time. That's really all that you wouldn't know about, not much has changed."

Sasuke smirked. "There IS one thing- why are you here? You, Konoha's pride? What are you up to?" Ekyt stared back dully. "I was forced from the village because of my previous training. I came here because...you were really my only option, weren't you? Who else would take a samurai? Who else would bother to use me? No one."

Sasuke drew his sword. "If I were to think your motives were otherwise...you might just taste my blade..." Ekyt didn't change his expression. For good reason. He was behind Sasuke, senbon in hand.

"If I were to think that you threatened me for no reason..."

At the same time, they spoke: "I'd kill you."

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. Ekyt held the senbon in place.

"So, answer my question. Why did you leave? You wanted power so bad you were willing to cheat? Think about that. Your brother, whom I've had the...pleasure...of meeting-"

Sasuke whipped around. "YOU...he came after YOU...before me...WHY?! WHAT COULD YOU POSSIBLY POSSESS?!"

"Chakra, and the knowledge of how to use it," Ekyt spat. Sasuke looked sad, a little like the Sasuke of old. But he marched away, leaving Ekyt to wonder what was going through his head.

Lee, Sakura, Naruto, and Hayate met in private.

"We have to bring him back, before the village falls apart!" Sakura told them.

"Agreed. (koff) But getting him back won't be so simple. (koff) Otogakure is all military, and the village (koff) attacking in it's weakened state would be suicide," Hayate explained. He had a big-brother complex when it came to Ekyt, and he had clearly been thinking about this.

“Strength in numbers means nothing! Aren’t we ninja? We’ll stealth our way in, bail his @\$ out, and bring him back! Believe it!” Naruto, of course, was ready for action.

“It will not work that way. We would need disguises, and ways to make sure they are not penetrated. But if we were to watch the Sound Village, and observe, Ekyt-kun might come to us...” Lee offered.

“That’s our (koff) best lead,” Hayate said, earning nods. “Alright, let’s disperse before (koff) the elders find us.”

Everyone leapt off in different directions, save for Sakura and Naruto. They had more to discuss.

Ekyt activated the blue chakra again. He reached in and pried the ‘battery’ open again. Kabuto was watching Kimimaro’s vital signs.

“Heart rate...normal...Blood pressure...normal...lung functions...normal...I think you did it. You actually...did it...” Kabuto was stunned. **His chakra is amazing! Even I couldn’t heal him, and I’ve been compare to Tsunade herself, when she was in her prime. Is it a family thing? Or was it pure chakra?**

Kabuto smiled. He liked puzzles. This one was interesting.

“Your chakra...you can access it freely now. I remember, in combat, you had to wait until I had pissed you off so bad you couldn’t see straight. And you’ve honed it to such control. Your blood pressure has hardly risen itself...interesting how that works...you told me that this chakra is pure emotion. Everyone has emotions, why do you channel your emotions into chakra?”

Ekyt shrugged. “Anxiety. Depression. Whatever it is, I feel it more strongly than most people. The chakra came about as an accident. But it’s saved my life so often...it hurts to use, but every time I have, it’s been worth it.”

Kabuto nodded, wondering vaguely if Ekyt was telling the truth. **He’s being honest...if anyone can tell, I can...**

At that moment, both were summoned by Orochimaru. Kimimaro would wake up soon enough, and he was stable enough to be left alone. The two ninjas disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

“Sakura...I remember when we tried to get Sasuke-kun back...we failed, with five of us. How can four of us hope to get him back?” Naruto hoped that Sakura, being a year old, might have an answer. Sakura, it seemed, was preoccupied with something. But she shook herself out of her daze to tell Naruto what she thought.

“Sasuke-kun...he left by free will. Ekyt-kun had nowhere to but the Sound Village. He doesn’t want to serve them, so he won’t fight us when we find him. And we WILL find him. The Leaf Village is falling apart, all because of that stupid elder! That damned four-eyed freak! When we get Ekyt-kun back, I’m going to lock him in a room with Elder Asshole and watch Ekyt beat him until blood comes out of Akira’s ears!”

Naruto, serious for once, asked Sakura a question. “Sakura...what do you think of Ekyt? I mean...you know. How do you think of him. As a friend? Or something more?”

Sakura didn’t quite know how to respond. Thankfully, Naruto cut her off with one of his trademark displays of bravado

“CAUSE WE’RE GONNA GET HIM BACK, AND SASUKE, AND WE’LL HAVE A TEAM AGAIN! BELIEVE IT!”

Sakura smiled, thankful she didn’t have to answer his question. She wasn’t sure she knew herself.

Orochimaru was waiting for Ekyt and Kabuto. Kabuto landed kneeling, while Ekyt stood upright. "You are new, so I won't punish you- this time. When I summon you, you are supposed to kneel. Observe Kabuto."

Ekyt, controlling his rage, forced himself down to one knee, head bowed.

"You summoned us, lord Orochimaru?" Kabuto asked/stated.

"Yes. I wish to assess our newest acquisition's skill...This is the game we'll play. If you can last 3 minutes against me, then I will give you a treasure, something even I would hate to part with. If you can't last three minutes- well, then you don't have to worry, do you?"

Ekyt kept his head bowed. "Fine. Lord Otokage."

Orochimaru hadn't been called that before.

"What did you call me?"

Ekyt, confused, looked up. "Lord Otokage? I did get that right, didn't I?" Ekyt wasn't sure why Orochimaru was surprised. Wasn't that his title? (For the record, it IS, but Otokage isn't recognized as a Village by the Land of Fire, so they don't recognize Orochimaru as "Lord Otokage" either – N(owing his stuff)G(od what a bad joke!))

Orochimaru smiled again. "You did. I'm so used to Lord Orochimaru, that I forget that I AM the Otokage. You caught me off guard...interesting...perhaps you planned it that way?"

Ekyt didn't say anything. He HADN'T planned it that way. But if Orochimaru wanted to believe that...

"Well then. Kabuto, kindly proctor our match, and do stop me if I seem to get close to...killing him..."

Ekyt didn't like this. Suddenly, he was out on a roof, enclosed with a dome of opaque black material. **This is the dome...he used on the Third Hokage! Does he take me that seriously? Can I last three minutes? Wait, he's not a man of his word, I can't trust that he's telling the truth! But I have no choice but to fight him...and to kill him, if that what survival means...damn it! Konoha...Please forgive me. The jutsus I created that you forbid...I need them! Now!**

Tsunade looked the young man up and down. Fourteen years old, former member of ROOT. He would have to do. They needed Ninja, and fast. She couldn't be choosy.

"So, Sai, welcome to Team 7. You'll meet your team in a little while. For now, please tell me anything I should know about you. Your files from ANBU are sketchy, at best...something about a personality issue is what I gather."

Sai stared at her, not speaking. **Most people joke when breaking tension...and they smile...** Sai's mouth curled into one of the most insincere smiles she had ever seen.

"You have nice breasts," Sai told her, still smiling.

Tsunade was up in an instant, ready to rip the kid's head off. Then she remembered the 'personality issue' that had been in his files. By that point, Shizune had grabbed her and restrained her. If Shizune hadn't, momentum would have carried Tsunade into Sai. ANBU or not, Tsunade would have killed him. Or at least maimed him. Maybe not as badly as Jiraiya when he tried to spy on her in the women's bath house, but pretty bad. She forced herself to calm down.

"About the personality thing...we'll have to work on that. Saying something like that will generally get you...hospitalized, at the least. Especially with who you're working with. She's beautiful, but has a temper as bad as mine, with less restraint. And she's used to hitting guys (Obviously Sakura and Naruto, lol), so she won't hesitate to do it to you. Just to warn you."

Sai was still smiling, nodding as if he understood. He didn't, that much was evident. Tsunade was still smarting over his crack, so she decided to hot-drop him in to Naruto and Sakura's team without really briefing either one. **It'll foster teamwork...in addition to getting me a little revenge, if he insults Sakura...**

Orochimaru stood tall, laughing at the wonder in Ekyt's eyes.

"You are thinking of when I tried to assassinate the Third Hokage. Well, I thought the "Dragon Boy" would enjoy seeing how a master handles his jutsus. It's not enough to KNOW them, you have to know when to use them. But you must already know that, if you've already survived so many battles. So, enough talk. Let's fight! Kabuto, start the timer!"

2:59

Orochimaru appeared in front of Ekyt, hand slashing down in an axe hand strike. Ekyt dodged it, but Orochimaru had predicted that. His other fist hit Ekyt in the stomach with enough force to send him across the dome. Ekyt righted himself and kicked his feet down hard. He generated enough force to propel himself forward. Orochimaru was waiting with an axe kick. Ekyt swept it aside with a crescent kick, then slammed his fist home against Orochimaru's stomach.

POOF! The clone disappeared. Ekyt guessed what was coming next, and he used a Replacement Jutsu. Good thing, because 100 shuriken stuck in the log where he had been seconds earlier. Ekyt knew he couldn't stand still. He didn't even know where Orochimaru was at this point. It was all guesswork. He had made a tactical error, he realized. In this dome, he was wasting chakra.

Because it wasn't real.

"RELEASE!" Ekyt shouted. Had he not been trained by Ibikki, Ekyt wouldn't have noticed the genjutsu. Even now, as he released it, he was wary for more. But he didn't sense the chakra, and he was still in Orochimaru's 'office'.

"I'm impressed. It took Sasuke MUCH longer to see through that genjutsu. Of course, he was but a boy, then. Now, his skills come close to even my own. But you've broken my first technique, a very powerful False Surroundings Jutsu. It's to be applauded. Now, let's get back to business..."

2:35

Ekyt didn't answer, instead, he threw eight senbon. Orochimaru leaned backward, dodging them all. Then he disappeared, into a snake's mouth. This was bad news for Ekyt. He didn't know where Orochimaru would pop up. But maybe he could delay Orochimaru, or throw him off. Ekyt made handsigns at top speed.

"Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique!" It was the same technique Orochimaru had used. But there was a point to it, especially with Ekyt's fighting style taken into account. Much like when you threw a fake punch to get your opponent to bite, Ekyt was baiting Orochimaru. He made handsigns again.

Orochimaru sensed the genjutsu, and immediately released it. He was safe inside the snake's mouth, so no matter what the boy had planned, it was fruitless. **Still, not bad for strategy...I wonder what he'll do next...**

That was answered when Ekyt appeared beside him. He had used a Replacement jutsu, and had targeted the snake's tongue! Not only did this take away the snake's senses, but he had the drop on Orochimaru! The shocked Shinobi looked over at Ekyt as he finished his hand signs.

"Chakra Scalpel!" Ekyt called. He tagged Orochimaru on the arm, then cut his way out of the snake and leapt back up into the office. Orochimaru was up in an instant, holding his left arm.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Ekyt called. Two more Ekyt's appeared. Together, they yelled a jutsu Orochimaru had never heard of:

"Dance of the Sickle Moon!"

Dance of the Sickle Moon was a jutsu partly created by Ekyt. It was based off of Hayate's "Dance of the Crescent Moon". It involved an intricate pattern of attack with swords and clones, dancing in and out of

range, slashing as fast as possible. Ekyt and his samurai training made this jutsu tailor-made for him. He took it and made it his own by adding a samurai blade in one hand and a straight katana in another. One was for stabbing, one was for slashing.

1:53

Orochimaru couldn't believe that, at such a young age, and without ninja blood, save for a little Kaguya, that anyone could use such a jutsu. His wonder would cost him. The first clone slash high, while the second slashed low. They each swiped with the samurai blade while stabbing with the straight katana, making it difficult to dodge, even for him. Then the real Ekyt popped up and cleaved Orochimaru's right shoulder, his good arm, while his straight katana went through Orochimaru's hand.

Ekyt held them there, staring Orochimaru in the eyes. The two clones had dug in with their blades as well. Ekyt pulled his out and backed away. He made handsigns, while Orochimaru was trapped.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" He punched at Orochimaru, sending a stream of flames directly into his face. Orochimaru's skin melted away. Ekyt ended the attack, wondering if he had won. But he doubted it. He spun around just in time to see the real Orochimaru stand up. He had hidden in the ground! All that chakra wasted on clones!

:50

"Very impressive, I'll give you credit. But I think I'm through holding back. Now, we fight- for real!"

This disturbed Ekyt. **shoot! I've been fighting for real the whole time! How powerful is he?! It doesn't matter, I've got to stop him- somehow! There's 50 seconds left. My chakra is too low for anything big. Think...what did Ibikki say? Low chakra...easy genjutsu...and Guy-sensei... 'When your ninja tricks fail, you'll always have taijutsu!' And Kakashi-sensei... 'Don't go where the enemy is, go where he WILL be...and Asuma-sensei... 'A little chakra can go a long way. Control it, and you'll be hard to beat every time...**

Orochimaru opened his mouth. From inside, came a snake. From it's mouth, a sword protruded.

"Kusanagi?!" Ekyt sputtered in disbelief. Orochimaru swung the sword (Still in his mouth) at Ekyt.

POOF! Clone. He swung again. POOF! Another clone. That left the real Ekyt. THAT Ekyt had made the handsigns he needed while Orochimaru was distracted.

"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Techn-" he managed, before the Kusanagi pierced his abdomen...

8 - Surprise Visit

Poof!

“Huh? Another clone?” Orochimaru looked around wildly, controlling his urge to start hacking everything in the room to bits. Slowly, his snake-like eyes spotted Ekyt. THIS Ekyt was nursing a hurt right arm. That meant that Orochimaru HAD hit the real Ekyt at some point, and the clone jutsu had been a distraction to buy time. **A good move that spared his life...but his chakra took quite the hit...And I doubt his ability to heal his arm...then again, if he's trained with Tsunade's pupil, I should expect-**

“Chakra Scalpel,” Ekyt muttered, using his good left hand to heal his hurt right arm. He just finished that when Orochimaru's tongue snared him around the waist and pulled him in, arms trapped at his sides. Ekyt cursed; this was bad. VERY bad. He had to scrap his counter-attack plans and focus on keeping himself alive.

:25

Ekyt was headed for a showdown with the Kusanagi that he wasn't going to win. His arms were pinned at his sides. In this position, he couldn't use any jutsu, or even access his Emotional Chakra. He COULD, however, make things a little more difficult. Ekyt dug his heels into the ground, slowing his speed toward the razor-sharp blade Orochimaru was wielding.

:19

Ekyt reached down in his kunai pouch, his hand hadn't been far from it when he had gotten snared. He grabbed a kunai with two fingers and flipped it up into his mouth. He drove the point into Orochimaru's tongue, again and again. Orochimaru laughed.

“You can't hurt my tongue! It's stronger than steel! But I'll give you credit for trying!” Orochimaru crowed. He would give the boy credit for being resourceful. Some would have given up in a hopeless spot like this.

Ekyt smiled at him. “Who says I'm aiming for your tongue? Remote Detonation Jutsu!”

BLAM!

An exploding tag went off near Orochimaru's feet. When Ekyt had reached for his kunai, he had hidden a wadded-up exploding tag in his other fist, then thrown it when he guessed he was close enough to do damage. He had guessed correctly. The trouble was, he had been too close, and had taken some damage. Minimal, but still, against Orochimaru, minimal damage might mean the difference between life and death.

:09

The exploding tag had stunned Orochimaru, giving Ekyt a second's time to get his arms free. He used a jutsu all too familiar to Orochimaru. **It can't be! How can he know THAT jutsu...Anko Mitarashi...she must have told him how to use the-**

“Striking Shadow Snakes!” Four snakes came from Ekyt's right wrist, hissing angrily as they homed in on their target. They wrapped themselves around the Kusanagi, and gave a sharp tug. The sword came free from Orochimaru's mouth and clattered to the ground. Ekyt let himself get pulled in while Orochimaru was still dazed, using one last attack, but lacing it with chakra.

“Dynamic Entry!” A flying sidekick! In a twist, Ekyt had used Orochimaru's momentum against him, and now sent him sailing, crashing through the office.

:00

The match was over. Ekyt had survived. He stood upright, trying to contain his fatigue. **I can't drop my**

guard just yet. Orochimaru is probably going to be beyond pissed that I met his challenge. And I'm outnumbered here to begin with...

Hayate, Sakura, Lee, and Naruto watched Otokagure, looking for some sign of Ekyt. They didn't see any, and Naruto was getting antsy.

"C'mon, let's just storm them! I'll just use the 9-tails chakra, and we'll be fine!" Naruto declared. Sakura gave him a rap on the head. "Be quiet! We can't rampage in there! Chakra or not, we're outnumbered, big time! I wanted to get him back just as much as you do, but we've got to use our heads!"

"She's (koff) right. Let's keep watching, for now." Hayate crouched lower in the thick underbrush, hoping to get a glimpse of something useful. He got an eyeful. Hayate made mental notes about the layout of certain structures, the number of people he saw, their probable ranks and abilities. Seemed everyone here was a warrior. Not that he was surprised. Orochimaru's Village existed only as a military nation, he had no need or want for civilians, except for experiment. Hayate shivered at the thought. He had once worked with a jonin who had been one of Orochimaru's experiments. The only one to survive them. **He got some great powers out of the deal...but five seconds with Orochimaru is enough to last a life time.**

Lee chanced a glance at Sakura. She had tears brimming in her eyes, but brushed them aside. Lee slowly looked away. **Sakura-san has been like this for a while...I have Linda, or I would be comforting her...Her tears are caused by a void that isn't filled in her life...**

"And what are you four doing here?!"

Orochimaru picked himself up. Ekyt expected him to be angry. But Orochimaru was sporting a smile. He seemed genuinely happy that he had lost. It hit Ekyt that Orochimaru just wanted to gauge his abilities. Unconsciously, Ekyt hadn't showed his strength, which was good, because if he played his ace too soon, Orochimaru could home in on it and rip him apart.

"Very well, you won our little game. THIS time. NEXT time, I won't hold back. But, for winning, you can name your prize."

Ekyt smirked under his mask. "I want the Kusanagi."

Orochimaru's smile widened. "You want- my sword? Not entirely unexpected, Samurai. I'll make you a deal- I'll give you the sword AND the rank of Chunin- if you defeat him...you know him very well. Your former student, Chakaro. He's been waiting for you, Ekyt, and he wants to fight you. He's gotten quite powerful- maybe too powerful for you. But, if you want my sword..."

Ekyt didn't want the sword so much as he wanted Orochimaru to have one less weapon than he had now. Kusanagi had undoubtedly killed a lot of people. If Orochimaru didn't have it, those souls could rest easy, and maybe, just maybe, a few lives might be saved.

"Alright. This is a match I've been looking forward to for quite some time myself..."

Hayate and the others turned around to see a Sound Village jonin looking at them. Hayate considered his options. **We're on his home turf, we can't attack, not yet. He could get help too easily...besides, this might be a chance to get to Ekyt..**

"(koff) We want to join up with the Sound Village. (koff)."

Sakura and the others picked up on his cue. "Yeah! Orochimaru is so powerful! We want to be on the

winning side!”

“That is right! My taijutsu is at his command!” Lee declared, jumping up and saluting.

Naruto grumbled; he REALLY didn’t want to do this. But the thought of Ekyt with Orochimaru...and Sasuke...he was suddenly motivated to play the role fate had given him.

Kakashi was reading his book when it hit him. **Ekyt dropped something...I wonder...** Kakashi opened it, finding it to be a scroll. There were only a few words, and Ekyt had coded them, so only people he WANTED to understand could:

“I’m bringing him home, if I can”

So, he’s going after Sasuke...he might as well, if he’s in the Sound Village. That law still bothers me...and I don’t remember any “Elder Akira...not that I’m familiar with the Elders of the village so much...but I wonder...something seems wrong here...very wrong. The elders like Ekyt, no one has complained about him, Samurai or not...And Ekyt winds up in the Sound Village...maybe I should go visit Elder Akira and see what the problem is. I can’t remember that law either...if Tsunade and Master Sarutobi can’t...

Suddenly, Kakashi realized that he should hurry up. This was bad news, and it looked like there was someone behind all this. Who, he could only guess. But he thought his guess was pretty good.

Kimimaro woke up, feeling...different. **Without disease...I haven’t felt like this in a long while...** He stood up, disconnecting the IV’s in the process. He felt his chakra, it was normal. He could move his body, as opposed to using his mind to move his body. He felt relieved, as if he could breathe freely again. He wasn’t going to die. **My cousin...why would he help me? I’ve done nothing for him? I’ve even fought against his side...but he helped me. I have to know why he helped me.**

With that Kimimaro walked toward Orochimaru’s office. On the way, a jonin and four familiar faces were marched by.

Orochimaru had been pleased with the fight. **Potential...I may have to claim his body for my own...Is he bluffing about how hard it is to use that chakra of his? It wouldn’t be hard to lie...but I’ve felt it’s effects, and seen the pain on his face...that was not fake...well, I’ll let this fight decide for me. If Chakaro wins, I’ll stop him before he kills the boy, and I’ll take over his body. If Ekyt wins...Well, I AM a man of my word. He’ll get my sword...and I’ll be wielding it, through his body!** Orochimaru’s train of thought was derailed there, as a jonin escorted four prisoners. Orochimaru recognized them all.

“Naruto...the Kyuubi...Sakura, the talented medic-nin...Rock Lee, the taijutsu master...and Hayate Gekko, one brave enough to oppose me! To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? Were you snooping around?”

Sakura spoke up. “We want to join you. If Ekyt is working for you...all of us belong here, too.”

Orochimaru cocked his head. “Well...if you don’t mind waiting...he’s a little busy right now, but you’re welcome to watch.”

Four domes, made of a clear earthen substance (think Zabuza’s Water Prison) enveloped Naruto, Sakura, Lee, and Hayate. Four Orochimaru clones held them in place.

“I’m afraid your friend is in a fight for his life...but I’m sure he’d like to see you again, should he fail to defeat THIS opponent. I’ll give you credit for showing him loyalty. But he’ll need more than loyalty to

save himself! But, come see for yourselves!”

Ekyt and Chakaro wasted little time. They didn't break out the weapons just yet. It was taijutsu vs taijutsu. Ekyt had taught Chakaro a lot; obviously, Orochimaru had too. But Ekyt had learned more about chakra, that much became obvious. By forcing a taijutsu match, his chakra was replenishing itself. By the time his stamina started to wear down, his chakra would be back, and then Ekyt hoped his training would validate itself. He thought back...

(Bold is Ekyt 'remembering' things. Thinking is in Italics)

“C'mon Ekyt, enough already!” Linda was tapping her foot impatiently. “Enough studying already, you've got to relax sometime!”

Ekyt looked up from the scroll that was occupying his attention. *It's alright for YOU to relax. You rejected me, and now you want me to go site-seeing? Forget it. I know what my priorities are. I know Chakaro, and he's studying just as hard as I am. I can't lose a step. It might not mean anything to YOU, but falling behind is death, as far as I'm concerned...*

“You go ahead. I want to finish this scroll and get it back to Asuma-sensei,” Ekyt told her.

“Besides, I'll have to face Gaara again someday. To get a little revenge for my eye, you know?”

Ekyt's left eye had been destroyed by Gaara. A black headband covered what remained of the eye. It was grotesque image, so Ekyt hid it. Much like his mask hid his emotions. How he felt...you could trust no one but yourself...that didn't mean not CARING about other people...but trusting them- it just wasn't that easy for Ekyt...After Linda had rejected him, it became even harder.

“KEYA!” Chakaro aimed a hammerfist at Ekyt. Ekyt stepped into it with his forearm, using a backfist to aim for Chakaro's face. Chakaro swept the attack aside and aimed an elbow at Ekyt's throat. Ekyt dodged backward, snapping a kick at Chakaro's chest. Chakaro stepped to the side and grabbed the leg. Instantly, Ekyt rolled forward, breaking Chakaro's grip, then used his positioning to aim for a leg sweep. Chakaro jumped. Ekyt hadn't learned nothing from Lee. He braced himself, and kicked upward just as Chakaro's coming down. He caught Chakaro under the chin, knocking him back into the air. Ekyt leapt up to follow him. He aimed for a “Backward Dragon Impact”, but Chakaro rolled over Ekyt's shoulders and kicked. Ekyt blocked the kick and leaned away from the incoming punch. Chakaro spun and hit Ekyt with a backfist that sent him sprawling to the ground. Chakaro leapt down instantly, but Ekyt was already on his feet. He stepped into a Crane stance and kicked with the side of his foot, aiming for Chakaro's knee. Chakaro raised his shin up to block the kick, then used the same foot to return it. Ekyt swept the kick aside with a crescent kick of his own, then aimed an uppercut at Chakaro's chin. Chakaro spun away from the uppercut while throwing his foot backward, aiming for Ekyt's stomach with a back kick. Ekyt leapt backward, hoping Chakaro would advance. Chakaro took the bait, and Ekyt was waiting with his counter. He uncoiled from his crouching position, aiming for a sidekick. Chakaro blocked that with his forearm, then punched at Ekyt's face. Ekyt kicked with a roundhouse at the same time. Both hit's connected, and both combatants skidded backwards. Instantly, they leapt toward each other. Their strikes canceled out, and they grappled for position. Chakaro was taller and naturally stronger, but Ekyt was quicker and more experienced. When he and Chakaro grappled, Ekyt feigned going for Chakaro's legs, instead grabbing him around the neck. He stepped in, so his hip was against Chakaro's, and turned his body sharply. Chakaro grunted as he hit the floor from the throw. He rolled with the momentum and managed to hit Ekyt in the ribs with a non-vital open-hand strike. He had

missed any tenketsu, which Ekyt knew was easy to do without Byakugan.

“So that’s it? There’s no...no hope of recovery?” Ekyt tried to keep his voice steady, and the tears out of his good eye. Ekyt had just suffered a critical strike- Kabuto had cut Ekyt’s chakra coils. Now he was in a position similar to Lee’s. Ekyt had trained hard, but nothing like Lee. He couldn’t survive, not in the Shinobi world, with only taijutsu. He had honed his jutsus. But that was all for nothing.

“It’s not the end of the world. Lee can help you with Taijutsu, and Hinata has volunteered to teach you the Tenketsu points, and how to disable them with the Gentle Palm style,” the Third Hokage told Ekyt. He expected Ekyt to be upset, but the normally stoic Shinobi had last control at last.

“That’s it? I don’t have Byakugan, that trained would be next to useless! And I’ve trained WITH Lee, but not LIKE Lee. I’m as good as dead! What did all my training do? Did it save me? NO!” “Your fight with Kabuto allowed us time to evacuate the others. You made a sacrifice that will not be forgotten while I am Hokage.”

Ekyt’s hitai-ate clattered against the wall. “I’m glad it was worth it. I’m going to polish my old arts, and pray that they’re enough to keep me alive.”

“You can still help-”

“HOW CAN I HELP OTHERS?! I CAN’T EVEN HELP MYSELF!” Ekyt shouted. He brought his hand down across his kitchen table with such force that it cracked in half. He glared at it’s remains, then left the room, a defeated man.

Ekyt DID get his chakra coils healed by Lady Tsunade after a risky surgery.

Chakaro was panting from the effort he had just exerted. It occurred to him what Ekyt had been doing. Too late, however, as Ekyt’s chakra had returned. But Ekyt was in for a surprise.

“Pardon me for interrupting...” Orochimaru began as he and his clones marched into the room. “But you have some visitors, Ekyt.”

Ekyt’s head whipped toward the door. Sakura...Lee...Naruto...Hayate. He couldn’t believe it! He had to get them free! Chakaro tried to take advantage of the distraction, but Ekyt was prepared to deal with him first.

“Chakra Wakasashi: Jodan Strike!” Chakaro called. A short sword, made of pure chakra, came crashing down at Ekyt’s head. Ekyt focused his own chakra to his feet and leapt away, making handsigns before he even hit the ground.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” Ekyt shouted, making a punching motion. Orange flames roared toward Chakaro, who used his chakra to maneuver his sword in the way. He then used a puppet-like technique, controlling the sword. Ekyt could only dodge as he formulated his plan. With that damn sword in the way, he couldn’t get near Chakaro. But his plan was sound enough, he just had to implement it. For now, he had to force Chakaro to slip up. Ekyt threw eight senbon, which Chakaro knocked aside with the sword. (Normal thought)**So, he’s using that sword to block everything...how much chakra does he have? I have to force him to make a move, and now. With that sword in the way, I can’t get near him...**

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!” Ekyt called.

“Release!”

“Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique!” Ekyt replied!

“Release!” Chakaro chanted.

Ekyt noticed that every time Chakaro used the 'Release' technique, his chakra sword flickered. That meant that, timing it right, Ekyt could...

"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!" Ekyt called. As soon as he finished the words, he charged in.

"Release- OOF!"

Ekyt used a Dynamic Entry, breaking Chakaro's chakra concentration entirely. Ekyt used a Shadow Clone Jutsu, and one Jutsu he had been dying to try out.

"Drawing Blade's Course!" Ekyt called, swiping at Chakaro with a kunai. Then the kunai elongated and the swipe hit Chakaro in the ribs. Nowhere vital, but enough to hurt him badly.

Orochimaru clapped.

"Very well done! Your friends claim they have come to serve me...is this true? Or is this a plot by you and your village?"

Ekyt looked Orochimaru in the eye. "I had no idea...what do you plan to do with them?"

Orochimaru's smile widened. "Kill them, of course. Or I'll let...Sasuke have the honor..."

At the name "Sasuke", Naruto and Sakura froze up. Ekyt knew that Orochimaru had just struck a hard blow to their subconscious.

"Why kill them if they're willing to serve you?" Ekyt asked.

"Because they aren't fit to serve me."

"Don't kill them. Keep your sword." Ekyt knew this was borderline pleading, but the thought of four of his friends dying...he couldn't do it. They would leave alive, or he would die trying to save them.

"I never intended to let you have the sword, whether you won or not. My only plan...is to take your body for myself!"

"You can't use that technique for another year!" Ekyt knew about the abilities of Orochimaru as well as anyone could.

"I've learned to speed up the process. Now then, where were we...Of course. I kill your friends, or I take your body...choose!"

Ekyt looked at his friends.

"That's great, Ekyt! You've learned so quick!" Sakura told him, smiling.

"I had a good teacher," Ekyt replied, blushing.

"I might have won Ekyt-san, but if you would use your other techniques..." Lee offered.

"No, taijutsu vs. taijutsu. It was a good match, Lee."

Lee struck his "Nice guy" pose.

"You (Koff) know your sword work, so this won't be hard for (koff) you. It's called 'Dance of the Crescent Moon.'"

Ekyt wrote the jutsu down in his scroll, then tried it, producing two clones. But it worked for him.

"Thank you, Hayate-sensei," Ekyt said with a bow.

"Hey, Ekyt! Can I show you a jutsu? I want to know if I'm doing it right..." Naruto seemed

genuinely perturbed.

“Sure, Naruto,” Ekyt replied, watching intently.

Naruto focused hard, then used the jutsu:

“Ninja Harem Jutsu!” The result was ten naked girl-Naruto’s. All of them hung on Ekyt, causing the stunned Shinobi’s eyes to pop out, before he went sailing backward with a massive nosebleed.

Lee, Sakura, and Ekyt were staring at the gate of the caste, in the Land of Herbs.

“I will never let my comrades die,” they had all said at once.

Ekyt’s gloved hand closed in a fist.

“No...” he spoke in a whisper.

“No? No what?” Orochimaru asked pleasantly.

“You can’t have me, and you can’t have them! I’ll die before you get to them! I swore I’d protect them!

If I meant enough to them to come for me...You won’t touch them!” Ekyt shouted, shaking with rage.

Even as he was talking, his clones cracked the stunned Orochimaru clones, releasing the four Leaf Ninja from their prisons.

Orochimaru gave a big mock sigh. “Very well. I guess I’ll have to take your body...if that doesn’t work...I can always kill you...”

9 - An Influx of Insanity

Kakashi appeared in Tsunade's office in a puff of smoke. Without speaking to her or Master Sarutobi, he stared at Elder Akira, his Sharingan activated. It confirmed his suspicions.

"Yes, that explains it," he said softly, still staring. Kakashi let a little chakra flow to his hand, enough to create a light show for Elder Akira. This 'light show' was one of the last things Kakashi's enemies saw. The Raikiri in its opening stages.

"What is this?" Akira demanded, sounding worried upon seeing the chakra in Kakashi's hand. The crackling blue energy was transfixing.

"What is this? THIS is me about to dice you in half- unless you reveal who you REALLY are, and you start explaining WHY you made up that bogus law. Not to mention I'd like to know where you got that book. That book is forbidden to all but the Hokage and top jonin- THAT'S what seemed to wrong- that you, an elder of little status, had it. So you can start talking," Kakashi said cheerfully, his palm now filled with crackling chakra, "Or I can burn a hole through you and see what your autopsy determines. Either way, I'll get answers."

Akira looked to Lady Tsunade. "He's crazed! You know he was close to that boy! He needs to be stopped, Lady Tsunade!" Akira insisted, pointing at Kakashi with a weathered arm.

But Lady Tsunade didn't seem to hear his complaint, not at first. She walked closer, watching the 'Elder' shrink in fear. The fear of dawning realization. He was screwed.

"Kakashi's instincts have never been wrong in the time I've worked with him...if he's got a reason to use the Lightning Blade on you, I've got no reason to stop him. So I suggest you start doing what he asks, and do what apparently comes naturally to you: Open your big mouth and spill the details. *Now*. Because if the Lightning Blade doesn't scare you- maybe I do..." It was part suggestion, part threat, and all message. The elder seemed to grasp that message.

"Fine. I will remove my disguise, and then I will speak," Elder Akira said, reaching for the tufts of short gray hair on the sides of his head with one hand, the other pulling at a wrinkled face. His hands were shaking as he removed the disguise.

The face was unfamiliar to Tsunade. But by the slight change in Master Sarutobi and in Kakashi's visible eye, she got the message: This was a surprise, and not a welcome one.

Hayate, Lee, Sakura, and Naruto stared at Ekyt. It wasn't immediately apparent what he was doing. He was just...standing there. Then, Hayate sensed it- chakra.

A huge buildup...emotional...that's Ekyt's style...but what's he going to do with it? It's not in his hand, like normal...Is this one of the forbidden jutsus? I guess he doesn't have a choice...I hate to say it, but he's the best match for Orochimaru of those of us here. After what Orochimaru did to me (Hayate hovered near death for a month before recovering after a brutal stabbing, courtesy of Orochimaru disguised as the Sand Kazekage [Not Gaara, the Fourth Kazekage]), and Naruto's emotional instability right now...It's going to be up to me and Lee to literally move Sakura and Naruto, something hit them hard. Ekyt is going to have to concoct some plot to hold Orochimaru off while Lee and I run for it...

"Lee, you take (koff) Naruto! I'll get Sakura! Ekyt..." Hayate began.

But Ekyt was already doing what needed to be done.

“Demonic Illusion: Mind Barring Technique: Speed Break!” he shouted. Immediately, blood came from the corners of Ekyt’s mouth, a sign of internal injury. But the effects of the jutsu were easily worth it in his eyes. Orochimaru had stopped dead, hit hard by the surprise jutsu and the fatigue of his battle with Ekyt earlier.

What the Mind Barring Technique (one Ekyt originated) did was all medical. It was a genjutsu wrapped in a ninjutsu. First, the opponent senses a genjutsu. Whether they react to it or not, the second phase happens: The brain and the nervous system stop communicating temporarily, leaving the target of this attack paralyzed temporarily. When used in the ‘Speed Break’ form, the target may receive brain damage. There’s a 10 percent chance the target will indeed receive internal damage. But the user (Ekyt), also suffers from it. He loses chakra because the chakra is what severs the connections between the brain and the nervous system. But the amount needed, and how it exits the body, leaves small internal damage in the user, which has to be treated quickly.

Orochimaru was frozen. Inside Ekyt, there was a bigger battle:

Do it! Kill him! Kill him! All the lives you’ll save! one side argued.

Killing someone with no defense slays your honor... the other side replied.

Killing a murder is saving lives! Saving lives is honorable! the first side said.

Don’t kill him. Protect the others. What means more to you: Killing a defenseless man, or protecting the few people worthy of trust? You know what’s right...

“DAMNIT! SHUT UP!” Ekyt shouted to the voices. He decided he would compromise with the two.

Ekyt’s emotional chakra had already been activated by his sudden outburst, so he put it to use:

“Blue Flame Chakra: Transparent Protection Seal!” Ekyt shouted. He jammed his hand over Orochimaru’s mouth and arms, sealing them. Orochimaru would live, but his existence would be problematic. Just as the Third Hokage had sealed Orochimaru’s arms and forced him to get a new body, Ekyt had done the same, and included Orochimaru’s mouth. Ekyt didn’t know how strong the seal was, and he didn’t care. He had to leave, and catch up with the others.

Gaara held council with Kankuro and Baki, in a Sand conference room. Their discussion had been about security, then about personnel.

“Temari has been gone for over three years...The time has come to retrieve her, or kill her. Our numbers must be balanced. We need more Shinobi, or we need Temari.” Gaara’s voice, as always, left no room for argument when it turned steely.

“Well, we DID try to kill her, Gaara. And there’s no way she’ll come back. Our last report of her indicates that she’s joined the Leaf Village. She’s forged friendships there, and with the top talent. In addition, she may have formed a romance with one of two individuals. That’s all we know, as she, well, mangled our agent upon discovering him,” Kankuro told Gaara, thinking of the ruined man in the hospital. **I hope you’re alright, Temari...I said some harsh things, but that’s all sand at the beach (note- water under the bridge to us non-Sunagakure people) now...I just hope you’re happy.**

Gaara had no such thoughts. He had developed feelings, love, hate, anger, and he genuinely cared about his people, now that he was the Fifth Kazekage. And he cared about Temari. He wanted her back, but at the same time, didn’t want her to be unhappy. The ‘killing’ part was just something he said naturally. Because he had little experience with such complexities as ‘mixed feelings’, Gaara didn’t quite know how to word things some times. But the people loved him, and they understood his difficulty. Very quickly, he had turned from ‘freak’ to ‘hero’, and was held in high regard by nearly everyone, save the elders, and even they were coming around. He had proven to be more effective than his father in the role of Kazekage.

Kankuro was holding the summoning scroll that contained ‘The Crow’, one of his puppets of choice. I

wonder...is one of the two guys Temari might be with that Ekyt guy? The one Gaara fought? I know the other one is that Shikamaru character. Gaara wouldn't be so bothered by that. Ekyt, though, gave Gaara a run for his money, and then he punished me. And I deserved it. What was I thinking, holding two kunoichi hostage, and then attacking Temari? I've never fought him before, and now that we're allies, the most I'll get is a sparring match...but how would Gaara feel if Temari was with Ekyt? That could cause a war. Or is Gaara past all that? Maybe the bigger question- Is *Ekyt* over it? Gaara destroyed his eye...if someone did that to me, I'd want to kill them...I wonder if his eye ever got healed...Either way, Temari- just take care of yourself.

"If Temari won't come back, we'll demand someone else from Konoha. No...demand isn't the right word...request. Request someone from Konoha, to keep the balance. Temari was a strong jonin, we'd need someone of equal or close strength, especially with the new threats arising. For now, meeting adjourned. Kankuro, you make the journey to Konoha with me. Baki, you will maintain security while I'm gone."

Kakashi narrowed his eyes in an uncharacteristically nasty expression.

"Mizuki? You? Of all people, you? I didn't think you'd have the backbone to try this...unless..." Kakashi realized that there was a more disturbing prospect behind all of this. Kakashi turned to Tsunade and relayed his thoughts. They were troubling, to say the least.

"Mizuki wouldn't have the courage to do this, not unless he was sure he wouldn't get caught. I considered the Sound Village, but Orochimaru wouldn't take someone so weak. The only group that could use a pawn, such as Mizuki, is the Akatsuki."

Tsunade's brow furrowed dangerously. She grabbed Mizuki around the neck and lifted him up, ignoring his gasping pleas of 'put me down, please!'

"You'd better start telling us who you're working for and what they're after. Because if I found out you've done something to hurt my village, or it's people, I'd be forced to rip you into little, tiny, bits of coward. Now, start talking..." Tsunade dropped him to the floor, then stood above him menacingly. Immediately, Mizuki cracked. "The Akatsuki put me up to it! They gave me power, and the promise I would be protected! They wanted anyone protecting Naruto out of the way! Without Sasuke, there were only a few people left that could help Naruto! They want his demon fox! That's all I know! Really!" Ebisu, who had been quiet, spoke up. "I should have seen through this...Tsunade-sama, I DO hate Ekyt, and Naruto- but I would NEVER want to see them killed, or unjustly removed from the village, no matter my distaste. I...I should have known! Punish me for going along with Mizuki in ignorance, if you need to, but please understand- I really didn't know..."

The Sound Village Shinobi had heard the rumors about the Leaf Villagers. Weapons at the ready, they attacked the five as they left. Naruto and Sakura were out of commission, and were being pushed along by Lee and Hayate. Hayate, however, used one jutsu, in addition to Ekyt. The two called the same jutsu: "Dance of the Crescent Moon!"

That meant six sword-wielding shadow clones were leaping in and out in an intricate pattern, keeping Sound Ninjas away while the real deals escaped. Ekyt heard the sound of curses and screams on anguish, but knew his clones weren't killing anyone. Hayate's might have been. Suddenly, Ekyt was tired, but he was in the best position to get them out of here. Ekyt thought back to working with Shikamaru. He didn't have time to lay a trap, but he could improvise. The agent that made exploding tags explode, mixed with his fire...

Ekyt threw exploding tags, encouraging Hayate and Lee to do the same. When there was enough, Ekyt detonated them. With the residue of the explosion agent in the air, Ekyt took a risk. "Go, run ahead!" he called to the other four, before using his jutsu: "Dragon's Encampment Wall!"

With the exploding agent still lingering in the air, coupled with the fire-based jutsu, there was a second explosion, and a wall of fire. That wall was between the Leaf Shinobi and the Sound Shinobi. This could have gone horribly wrong- the flame could have shot back at Ekyt and burned him to a crisp, despite it being his own jutsu. But his risk had paid off. Using the Body Flicker Jutsu, Ekyt and the others were headed for home. But not fast enough. Ekyt didn't know what happened to Naruto and Sakura, but he guessed their minds would crumble soon, if this was a genjutsu as he suspected.

"Hayate-sensei, pass Sakura off to me! Lee, are you up to opening the first gate?" Ekyt called over to Lee.

"I am! Let us do it!" Lee replied with his usual gusto.

Hayate knew an advanced Body Flicker Jutsu, so he could keep up, while Ekyt and Lee, each toting one stunned Ninja, zipped away as fast as they could. That wall of fire wouldn't hold up forever, and they didn't want to be around when it died down. That's not to say they would be escaping without scars. Emotional and physical scars were aplenty...

As Kakashi and Tsunade exchanged thoughts about the Akatsuki, what appeared to be three people were suddenly in the room with them. Quickly that began five, as Ekyt and Lee unloaded their 'cargo'. Ekyt didn't say a word, he knelt down near Naruto and Sakura. He knelt close to them, focusing his chakra to his senses. He was sure this was a genjutsu, somehow triggered by Orochimaru using Sasuke's name. And he was sure it powerful. And he was POSITIVE that it had to be broken- now. He put his hands together in the correct sign, and said it aloud:

"Release!"

No dice. It WAS genjutsu, as he thought, but too powerful to be broken by an external release. Ekyt put a hand on Sakura's shoulder, then one on Naruto's. He focused his chakra and forced a little of his own chakra in to them. They both stirred, sitting up. Sakura reared back and cracked Ekyt in the face, thinking they were still among the enemy.

"Sorry!" she called. Ekyt had taken out a bookcase, but that didn't matter. He was already unconscious. Using those jutsu, and then opening the Gate of Chakra, had taken their toll on him. He was unconscious, his impromptu mission a success. However, his rest wasn't going to last. Almost immediately, Tsunade hauled him to his feet. She even slapped him a couple times to bring him to his senses.

"I really need a report, Ekyt. You have information that none of us have. I know you're tired, but please tell us what you know," Tsunade told Ekyt. She was speaking to him as though nothing had happened. That would prove to be a mistake.

Ekyt, any other time, would have been fine with that. But, through his bleary eyes, he saw the person who had let him be removed from his home. Someone who had turned her back on him...Another one. Was there no one worthy of trust? (Though that thought was quickly dispelled by five of the people in the room) He felt a seed of anger in his stomach, and it expanded, until it burst, and with it came a wave of anger.

"Why should I? I'm not a part of Konoha, remember? THIS headband (Sound) is outdated, too. You know, what about thinking about my damn health? I'm bleeding, maybe even dying, and you want information from me? You toss my @\$\$ out on the street, and then you want a favor? I'll write you a standard report, have Umisu (Chinese Water Dragon Summon) deliver it, then find my new home. It's pretty damn obvious I'm not welcome here!"

Tsunade was prepared to fire back, but she stopped herself. **He's right...Where is my head? It's not like we're in immediate danger...I should have healed him first...if someone kicked me out of my home, I'd be pissed, too...I haven't even told him that everything was false! But I DID take his headband, and with it...probably what dregs of pride he had.**

"I'm sorry, you're right...I saw Naruto and Sakura hurt, and I let my emotions get the better of me. But I DO have good news: Everything was fake. This 'Elder Akira' was an imposter, and-"

The 'and' was cut off by Ekyt striding over and grabbing Mizuki by the vest.

"Give me one reason I don't kick your teeth down your throat. Speak up, you traitorous piece of shoot!" Ekyt slammed him into the wall, then gave him a teeth-rattling slap. "I said, start talking. I don't work for anyone, so you'll find I have no problem beating the life out of you. I don't have a village to disgrace by doing so."

Mizuki, though he was older, and a chunin, was still intimidated by Ekyt. He quickly thought of a way out of his situation. The giant shuriken he kept on his back...he pushed Ekyt, grabbed one, and threw it- at Sakura!

SCHEWING!

(NOTE: yes, I AM aware that this is a blatant ripoff here, but I've always wanted to write this, so bare with me, okay? XD)

Sakura, who was still stunned, couldn't move. She saw the shuriken spinning toward her, but couldn't move out of the way. She put her arms up to defend herself, then turned away, wincing. That genjutsu had really hurt her. Everyone else was stunned by Ekyt's display of rage. Now, they were stunned by his display of courage. The giant shuriken was sticking out of his back. Ekyt was on all fours, covering Sakura. He had just saved her. (Picture Iruka saving Naruto. Hence the rip off)

Sakura looked up, still shaken from the genjutsu, to see a masked face and two eyes. The eyes were closed in pain. Blood was dripping down mask, coming from under it. Then more came, this time from around the back of the owner of the eyes and masked face.

"Ekyt..." she said, shocked.

Ekyt struggled to his feet, pulling the giant shuriken out. Mizuki was ready with another one. Kakashi was ready to block it, but Ekyt had beaten him to it. Mizuki froze, dropping the shuriken to the ground, where it landed with an audible 'clang!' He was shaking. Slowly, he fell to his knees, then to the ground. Ekyt didn't break eye contact. He had used genjutsu to torture Mizuki, and he had poured in on thick. Just short of destroying the man's mind. Ibikki would have been proud, had he known about it.

"I've been a coward..." Ekyt said suddenly. He blinked back tears, hating them. Hating his emotions. Why did they exist? They only hurt. They ripped him apart.

"I could have killed Orochimaru! I could have killed Kabuto! Killing those two would have saved lives, and I couldn't do it! All the good I could have done...just by taking even one life...taking one...simple...life. But it's never simple, is it? I ran from a fight I could have won...on the premise of saving my friends...and all I did was put one of them in worse danger..."

Ekyt finished his rant, then passed out from the blood loss. Sakura ran over and gently turned him on to his stomach, to close up his back. She used the Chakra Scalpel to clean and close the wound up somewhat, then bandaged it. She saw the cut on his arm, and tended to that, too. For a few seconds, she just knelt there, wondering what had happened to make him snap like that. The bashful, hard-working kid who never put a toe out of line, had just cursed his very existence- over one judgment call? Not to mention blocking that shuriken- how had he done that, in such a weakened state?

Kakashi looked at Ekyt's unconscious form, and sighed. "He's right, in a way. He's never taken a life. He told me once 'Life isn't something you should take, unless you can give it back'. If he had killed Orochimaru, he would have been beating himself up for that. What he needs now, more than ever, is purpose and understanding."

Tsunade nodded. "His trust was breached when he was forced to leave. I can't say if it will ever come back...the Akatsuki didn't completely succeed, but they might have cost Konoha a very loyal citizen. As it is, I can't welcome him back yet. He'd have to start from scratch. Not that it would take him long, but there's still the point of dignity to consider."

"Ekyl-san will recover...He will not give up. He is at a point of despair. He feels as though he belongs nowhere, and that false law reaffirmed that belief..." Lee steeled himself, ready to speak to the Hokage. "Tsunade-sama, you should address the people, and tell them that the law was false. To calm them. Leave Ekyl to the five of us...I know it is not standard procedure, but I think it is what Ekyl-san needs...the people he trusts..."

Ekyl was awake after a few minutes, though considerably sore. He apologized to Sakura, Lee, Naruto, Hayate, and Kakashi.

"I could have killed him, and I shouldn't have. Now I'm glad I didn't. There's no honor in killing a defenseless man...Kakashi-sensei, I know you got my note. I'm sorry, I failed that mission..."

Kakashi was clearly smiling under the mask. "You stood up to Orochimaru and defended a village you thought had abandoned you. You have a special kind of integrity. You carried a hurt comrade out of a village, improvised as necessary, and then you...cursed out the Hokage (Ekyl: -_-'). I think you should know what kind of loyalty you inspire..."

"That's right! The place came unglued! Tenten hit Ebisu with a rock, and twenty people turned in their headbands! Believe it!" Naruto laughed at the memory of a confident Tenten smirking after puncturing Ebisu's lip with a rock.

That's when Ekyl noticed that all of the five he was talking with were headband-less. Kakashi had tied a black headband around his eye, instead of wearing the Leaf Hitai-ate.

"Temari, Tenten, Shikamaru, Asuma, Guy...the list goes on. All because of what happened to you," Sakura told him. Then she looked at Hayate and Kakashi; she hadn't told Ekyl the whole truth, and he was sharp enough to know it.

"People were afraid that they would be next. But the five of us...you mean a lot to us. Temari, too, apparently, because she was right behind us."

Naruto couldn't resist stirring the shoot. (Sorry, crude, I know, but it made me laugh, so I included it).

"Hey, isn't Temari the same age as you? And not bad in the T&A department either, dattebayo!"

Naruto declared, nudging Ekyl. Ekyl, true to form, turned progressively redder. Sakura punched Naruto.

"You pig! Women aren't for staring at like that!" Sakura shouted, furious at Naruto for his insinuations.

"Oh yeah? Then what's a make-out bar for?!" Naruto replied.

"For perverts like you!" Sakura snarled.

Naruto's right...but I like Sakura! But she's only got eyes for Sasuke...Temari likes Shikamaru...who the hell knows anymore! All I know is, either I'll have a surge of bravery, or the girl will tell me "You like me, I like you". I sure as hell can't figure it out! Believe THAT!

Gaara and Kankuro arrived at the Hokage's office.

"Lady Tsunade, I need to speak with you, concerning a member of your village..."

10 - Akatsuki Appearance

It was the middle of the night. Most of Konoha was sleeping peacefully. It seemed only one person was up. With scrolls strewn about the woods he had chosen as his 'hotel', the boy worked feverishly on a jutsu of his own creation. It was a self-imposed ritual, or punishment, similar to that of the Uchiha clan's "Fireball Jutsu" tradition. Once you could do that, you were an adult in the Uchiha clan. To the boy working, it meant a minor success. But it was proving troublesome, as thought and thought, poison to his mind, rattled his concentration.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt shouted, making a striking motion at the tree that was about 100 yards away. The flame missed it reaching it by 20 yards. Ekyt tried again.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" The orange flames scorched the ground in front of the tree, but didn't actually hit the tree itself.

Focus...Focus! Nothing else exists. You and that tree. That tree is a threat to your life, your existence, everything you stand for. It needs to go away, and you need to do it! Get rid of it! Stop thinking of them! Friends, yes, you have them! Can they always come through for you? No! Now, focus! Forget everything. You, a jutsu, a tree...that's all that matters, that's all that exists. Now, go!

"DRAGON'S EMBER JUTSU!" This time, the flame shot into the tree, setting it ablaze. Satisfied, Ekyt used another jutsu to extinguish the flame.

"Water Clone Jutsu," he said, almost tonelessly. He pointed toward the tree. The clone nodded and leapt on the growing fire, putting the flames out while evaporating itself. Ekyt didn't smile- this was a logical step, and hardly successful. In combat, he wouldn't have the luxury to stop and think, to block everything out. There would be variables, other teammates, other enemies. He had to get the jutsu right the first time. 100 yards WAS impressive, considering this was a relatively new jutsu, and little power was sacrificed despite the long distance.

Distance?

That brought up more thoughts. Ekyt was in Konoha, back home. Temporarily. The place no longer felt like home. It felt cold, alien. Despite the warm welcomes, and assurances that all the problems were in the past, Ekyt had his doubts. **Stick your hand in the lion's mouth, and you get bitten. I'm always saying 'the sword fits the hand'- does it? Is Konoha really where I belong? I have friends here...but I've always relied on myself. If I go somewhere else, at least until I reach the rank of chunin, maybe things will have healed. Does time really heal all wounds? That's what everyone says...but is it true? People say a lot of things, and people and what they say are, by and large, unworthy of trust.** Ekyt pondered that as he walked through Konoha, to find an empty rooftop where he could curl up with a scroll and the two candles he needed to provide light. There was a lot to think about, and ALL of his actions were going to have consequences of some sort. He still felt betrayed, no matter what Lee, Sakura, Kakashi, Naruto, and Hayate say. **Maybe I'm just not ready to forgive the village yet. No, not the Village, it's leadership. The Village has been great. The system, not so much. So I should leave until there's a change in the system. But, at the same time, I already know that I would be back here, protecting them and the people in it, no matter what...why isn't anything straightforward? This is a gray area...choices are easier when the only colors are black and white.**

And it doesn't help that Sakura is in Konoha. I'm so confused. I know I like her for more than her looks. But Temari's name comes up, too. She's my age, and beautiful. But I've had my eye on Sakura for years! I'm wasting my time, neither one would call me their boyfriend. I don't have a village, let alone a girl! I have only myself to rely on.

Tsunade listened patiently, with Sakura and Shizune at her side, as Gaara and Kankuro explained what was going on. It troubled her, to say the least.

"The Akatsuki have already taken the Shukaku, and now they're after Naruto's demon fox. We have reason to believe that Sunagakure might be their target. And, if you agree to lend us a strong Shinobi, we'll help you lay a trap for the Akatsuki. But we need someone Temari will acknowledge as at least close to an equal. And Gaara has to agree with her choice."

"I can't spare any Shinobi right now," Tsunade explained to Kankuro when he had finished speaking. "The Leaf Village isn't at it's strongest. We've just lost a Shinobi ourselves. You remember Ekyt Kaguya, right? Well, he was forced to leave the Village. But now, we've found that the law he was indicted on was a fallacy, a plot by the Akatsuki. If I had the Shinobi to spare, I would be sorely tempted by your plan. Naruto is at risk, but I'm remedying that by adding an ANBU agent to this team, in this place of Sasuke Uchiha. The boy is a little rough around the edges personality-wise, but he has the necessary training and ability."

Gaara spoke this time, knowing his words had a more commanding presence than Kankuro's. "In our treaty, an agreement between our Village's, we agreed to provide military and economic support to each other. You are not fulfilling that end of the deal. I understand your position, but you have to understand mine."

Gaara and Tsunade stared at each other. No hatred in either's eyes, but there WAS a growing frustration in Tsunade's. It felt like there was an easy answer to this problem, but she couldn't but her finger on it...

Ekyt, who had picked a rooftop, heard the commotion in the Hokage's office. Risking a glance around the building, he saw Gaara and Kankuro. In a flash, his scroll was gone and his candles were extinguished. The next instant, he was in front of Tsunade and the others. He had a snarl on his face under his mask, visible in his eyes. He was glaring at the two Sand Shinobi, and looked ready to attack. "What the hell? Kid, are you nuts? Get out of the way!" Tsunade demanded.

"You have no authority over me," Ekyt reminded her dryly without looking back at her. He heard her curse and call him a nasty name, but he didn't particularly care.

"Ekyt, please, do what she asks," Shizune told him gently. Ekyt, who had no problem with Tsunade, backed off. But he didn't take his eyes off of Gaara. The memories of Gaara destroying his eye almost four years ago lit a fire in the rogue's eyes.

Gaara looked over at him. "Please summon Temari. I won't touch her, sand or otherwise. But she needs to name someone. That, or I'll be forced to make peace with another Village, and annul our treaty. I have no choice, I have to do what's best for my Village. Keep in mind the trap I explained. It's beneficial for all of us."

Tsunade nodded and used her Summon, a slug, to bring Temari to her office.

Temari received the message while with Naruto. Her face going pale clued Naruto in to the fact that there was a problem.

"It's Gaara...he wants me back, or a substitute...And he's here, now. I've got to go meet him. Last time we met, he tried to kill me..."

Naruto stepped up. "I'll go with you! Gaara won't touch you while I'm around, believe it!"

Temari nodded her thanks, and they set off at a spring for the Hokage's office.

Ekyt and Gaara were staring at each other.

"I see your eye is healed..." Gaara's dry whisper informed Ekyt.

"Yeah. It is. I see you're the Kazekage. Congratulations. Bastard," Ekyt replied.

"If this is about your eye...forgive me...I was confused, and thought that killing validated my existence...It was wrong."

Ekyt was genuinely shocked by this, especially from Gaara. **But no apology. Guess he isn't THAT human yet. I'm the other end of the spectrum- TOO human.** Ekyt duly noted.

Temari and Naruto hustled to Tsunade's office. They were surprised to see Ekyt, who didn't seem to know who to glare at first. Shizune had put a hand on his shoulder, clearly ready to grab him if he attacked Tsunade. For now, the hand was there for comfort. Sakura stood on his other side, hands behind her back, with perfect posture. She didn't trust Gaara, and she knew how Ekyt had to be feeling.

I was the one who performed the surgery on his eye...the damage was incredible...I don't blame him for wanting to rip Gaara apart. Sakura thought, chancing a glance at Ekyt.

Tsunade explained the situation to Temari. She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized she didn't have to go back. But finding a replacement- easier said than done.

"I'll do it," Ekyt piped up.

"Stay out of this, Ekyt!" Tsunade snarled at him.

"If it concerns my friend, it concerns me. I'll do it," Ekyt repeated.

Temari looked at him. "Kid...thank you. It means a lot. It really does." Temari pulled him into a hug (earning a curious look of anger/shock from Sakura), then turned back to the others.

"He's more than skilled enough, and Konoha wouldn't be losing anyone. Everyone wins," Temari declared. "Well, except the kunoichi!" she declared, only to make Ekyt blush. He didn't disappoint.

"For our plan to work, he has to sufficiently mimic Naruto. He can do Shadow Clones, but can he-"

Ekyt looked up, in horror.

"That skill is rather...unnecessary, don't you think? Naruto only uses that skill as a joke, not in combat.

There's no reason he needs to learn the Ninja Harem." All that came from Sakura, who found Temari and Shizune nodding in agreement. **Guess I'm not the only one that senses his innocence...** Sakura thought. She hoped he didn't have to learn that jutsu.

Gaara looked Ekyt in the eyes. Neither spoke, until Gaara broke the awkward silence.

"Can you work with me? I can't ask you to forgive me. But can you work with me?"

Ekyt looked back at him. **This is a sacrifice for a friend. A comrade you won't let die, right? Well, two of them. If they go through with this plan, I'm in the Akatsuki's crosshairs...but this means protecting Naruto and Temari...I'll do it. Whatever it takes. The Akatsuki won't get that demon while I live!**

The plan was simple: Ekyt was to maintain a transformation jutsu on the way into Sunagakure, and any

time he ventured out. This would lure the Akatsuki into the open. If they tried to sense Chakra power, they would sense that Ekyt, in his Naruto disguise, would have two chakras. That would be all it would take to convince them. Ekyt suddenly realized he was daydreaming, and turned to face Gaara and Kankuro, two people had considered enemies. People he had wanted revenge on.

He extended his hand.

"I can work with you. And I will. For their sake, and your Village. I've never been to Sunagakure, but I'm willing to bet it's a nice place," Ekyt said, a hint of a smile on his face. It didn't stem from his comment. But he had just thumbed his nose at Tsunade once again. It was obvious she was furious.

Good. dog. Ekyt thought viciously.

Tsunade controlled her anger. **Damn it, that kid is doing this on purpose! He's TRYING to piss me off- and it's working! I DID make him leave, I guess, but I've tried to make things right. I'll give this time. I can't apologize again, I've got to maintain a Hokage's position on this- not a friend's position. And he's right- I have no jurisdiction over him or his actions unless he's living here or wearing a Leaf Hitai-ate. I hope time really does heal all wounds...after what Master Sarutobi told me, he needs the Leaf Village, just as much as we need him. But if he won't work with us...time and space. Maybe he'll lose his anger. He just did with Gaara...**

Although, Tsunade's mind soon added a sardonic quip.

Maybe he only forgave Gaara because he's mad at me...

"So you're leaving again?"

"On a mission this time...of course, rogue's don't get paid, so it's purely for the sake of a couple of people," Ekyt explained to Kakashi. He told him the plan.

"If you face Itachi Uchiha, avoid his eyes. If you face his partner, don't touch his sword. It'll be your first instinct, but don't touch it."

Ekyt nodded. "Would you tell the others I said 'thanks, and see you later' for me? I want to leave tonight. The sooner, the better, to get Naruto out of danger."

Kakashi looked Ekyt up and down. He looked just like Naruto, except when he talked, something sensible came out.

"Don't forget, you're Naruto Uzumaki. Be a little more hyper, and add "Dattebayo!" to the end of your sentences. And, though it's normally stupid, yell and then rush, using Shadow Clones first. It's Naruto's hallmark, and if this plan is going to work, you need a convincing act. And, if you get in trouble...you can always come to us." Kakashi ruffled Ekyt's hair.

"Thank you, sensei. I know I'll be back...I'm just trying to keep the last shred of dignity I have..."

Gaara and Kankuro walked on either side of Ekyt. Kankuro kept shooting glances at Ekyt, glances which the rogue genin didn't return, at first. Finally, he looked over, as an invitation for Kankuro to speak.

"Hey, listen, I'm sorry about what I pulled at the chunin exams. It was low, and I deserved the @\$\$-kicking you gave me. When you defended Temari with a broken leg, I knew that I was either wrong, or that you and her were sleeping together."

Ekyt chuckled, but in Naruto's voice. "She has her eyes elsewhere. I count her as a friend, dattebayo."

Kankuro chuckled at the Naruto impression. It was necessary, but still funny. Gaara didn't smile, but Kankuro could tell when his mood was lightening. **Thank God...he was his murderous self the whole**

way here.

“Glad you could help us out, Naruto. Just be careful, it’s the Akatsuki after us. They got the Shukaku inside me, your nine-tails might be next,” Gaara told him grimly. If the Akatsuki were listening, they had to make this plausible.

“Ha! Bring them on! I’m not scared of those cloak-wearing freaks! I’m gonna be Hokage some day, I won’t let a bunch of reject criminals take me down, Dattebayo!” ‘Naruto’ paused, trying to think of what he should say next. “Hey, is their ramen in your village? Please tell me there is, I’m starving! I could really go with some beef ramen! Or maybe seafood! Yeah! Hey, are we there yet?!”

Kankuro looked over at Ekyt, suppressing his laughter. This was hilarious. How could Ekyt keep a straight face?

“Shut up, already! We’re almost there!” Kankuro admonished ‘Naruto’.

Itachi ended the jutsu. He opened his eyes, letting the Sharingan deactivate. He wanted to let his chakra replenish itself.

“Report?” Pain demanded harshly, though you could hear a hint of eagerness in his voice.

“Two chakras, and his actions are that of Uzumaki. He’s protected by the Kazekage, and one other individual, a puppet master,” Itachi’s toneless voice supplied to one of the faces of Pain.

“Good. Deidara and Sasori, Itachi and Kisame are to handle this. If the Leaf Jinchuuriki is involved, his village will be, too. That means Kakashi and Tsunade’s pupil, if not more. We need at least as many as them, however powerful the four of you might be. Do we know the status of the rogue Kaguya, Ekyt?”

“Last known status was Sound Village genin. He’s disappeared off our records since then,” Itachi replied. **No small feat...the boy was nearly a threat last time we met...if he’s gotten away from us, he’s matured into the threat I thought he’d be...**

Pain sighed. “No doubt he’ll protect the Jinchuuriki. His specialty is...genjutsu, if memory serves. Itachi, when you met him, you said he would be worth our time some day. Perhaps that day has come. When we have him AND the Jinchuuriki, it will make us that much stronger. It would seem Mizuki has failed us. Let Zetsu deal with him...in his own, inimitable way...”

(NOTE: YES, I am aware that this is different from the Shippuuden storyline.)

Deidara had heard of his newest mission, as had Sasori, his partner.

“Again with the demon fox, un?” Deidara muttered happily. The mouth of his hand chewed away, making a small bird.

“So it seems...” Sasori mumbled. He wasn’t in the mood for banter.

Deidara smiled again. “You don’t sound happy, un. Afraid your ‘art’ will be destroyed? I have no fear that MINE will be, that’s the beauty of my art. It lasts only seconds...But it’s detonation, and the destruction it causes- beautiful.”

Sasori shot him a sideways glance. “Art should last forever, not for seconds. That clay of yours isn’t art...”

“It IS art. And my art, unlike yours- is a bang!” Deidara let the bird fly from his hand. It got far enough away, and then detonated upon Deidara’s ‘Katsu’ command.

“Beautiful...” Deidara sighed as the scent of smoke lingered in the air.

11 - Taking the Bait

"Welcome, Lord Kazekage!" Baki greeted Gaara, bowing as the stoic Kazekage strode by.

"Reports?" Gaara said, by way of response. He hadn't stopped walking and didn't return Baki's bow. A common occurrence, apparently, because Baki kept speaking in a respectful tone.

"No breaches, no incidents. Everything has been clear. And-" Baki's eyes fell on 'Naruto'. "Lord Kazekage, a Leaf Villager walking freely? We have a pact with them, but I do not trust-"

Baki was cut off by Gaara putting up a hand. He looked over to 'Naruto' and nodded. "Show him, then go back. He needs to be know."

Ekyt ended the disguise jutsu, just for a couple seconds. He gave Baki a curt nod without speaking, then immediately became 'Naruto' again.

"What're you lookin' at, old man? You gotta problem with me, dattebayo?!" 'Naruto' glared at Baki, then turned to Gaara and Kankuro.

"Gaara-kun, where's my room?! I'm not sleeping on some damn futon! And come on already, where's the ramen, 'tabeyo!" 'Naruto' demanded.

Kankuro really had to try not to laugh. "I'll take him, Gaara. If he doesn't behave, 'The Crow' could use a workout." He had asked to walk Naruto/Ekyt to his room for a reason.

"Hey Naruto, tell me about my sister. Is she...alright? Happy?" Kankuro asked as he led Ekyt/Naruto through a sandy corridor and up a staircase that showed Sunagakure in all it's glory through the window.

"She likes the Leaf Village. She isn't violent by nature, just naturally skilled, and the Leaf Village tries to breed that, so she fits in perfectly. As for your next question, I don't know if she has a boyfriend or not. It's not me, if she does. The only guy she's had any feel for is Shikamaru. But, other than that, she's a skilled jonin, and generally handles field missions, rather than teaching or in-village issues," Ekyt/Naruto spoke thoughtfully.

"We're not being bugged here, you can speak normally," Kankuro told him. "Thank you, by the way."

"For what?" Ekyt asked, still with Naruto's voice. He had made the disguise jutsu and the voice jutsu intertwined to save chakra. If one lost it's power, the other was worthless anyway.

"For kicking my @\$\$. It knocked sense into me. Made me treat people different, and train harder. I can't believe I attacked my sister. When you defended her, with a broken leg, it kind of hit me that maybe I can rely on people more than puppets sometimes."

Ekyt nodded. "I apologize for the severity of my attack. I just...saw my friends threatened, and snapped. Not to mention that I didn't make chunin. Defeating Gaara would have been quite a feat. But if my rage served a purpose, I'm genuinely happy about that."

Kankuro smirked and opened the door to a comfortable room. "This is yours. You're a guest, anything you need, we'll have someone tend to you. But you have to stay Naruto, unless the blinds and door are closed and secured. That's really everything...except...thanks for being there for my sister. You were a friend when she needed it the most." Kankuro finished his sentence, then closed the door.

(NOTE: THE NEXT PART OF MY FIC IS ANOTHER TURN FROM THE NORMAL SHIPPUUDEN STORY LINE, AND IT'S SIMILAR, FOR ENTERTAINMENT'S SAKE)

"He left again?!" Naruto shouted. Kakashi clamped a hand over his mouth. Naruto's muffled voice lost

any coherent sound.

“That’s right. And you need to keep a low profile for this plan to work. Otherwise you put Ekyt at risk, even more so than he is now. This is a major risk for him, and we can’t have him compromised by you being the hyperactive knucklehead you usually are.” Kakashi kept his hand over Naruto’s mouth.

“Kakashi-sensei...did he say anything before he left?” Sakura asked, a little downcast. **Ekyt-kun...be careful. I’ve lost one friend, I don’t want to lose another...**

Kakashi smiled at her reassuringly. “He said ‘thanks, all of you, and see you later.’ Now, we’re going to be getting a new member on our team for this mission.”

“Wait, we’re involved in this mission?” Naruto asked, surprised.

“Yes, knucklehead, why else would Ekyt be posing as you?” Kakashi told Naruto, ruffling his hair.

“Anyway, the new guy is an ANBU agent, and he has some personality problems. I expect all of you to behave, and make him feel welcome. Alright?” Kakashi surveyed his team.

Neither Sakura nor Naruto looked pleased with the prospect. Naruto looked downright upset, and even voiced it with a few choice words. Sakura was a little harder to read, but she had her head bowed in thought and a grim expression on her face.

I expected as much...neither of them think anyone but Sasuke belongs...I’m not thrilled either, guys...but it’s necessary. Kakashi thought with a sigh.

At that moment, someone walked up to them, drawing away in a sketch book. Kakashi knew this was the new team member.

“Naruto, Sakura, this is Sai. Sai, the pink-haired kunoichi is Sakura, and the blonde knucklehead (“Hey!” Naruto protested) is Naruto.”

Sai smiled. It was unnerving. The smile seemed so...fake, and out of place. Sakura’s eye twitched while Naruto looked him up and down.

“He’s not so impressive!” Naruto declared, arms crossed on his chest, a stubborn look adorning his face..

“Yeah. Just like your dick,” Sai replied, still smiling, as though this was a perfectly okay statement to make.

“WHAT?! YOU BASTARD!” Naruto made a run at Sai. Sakura grabbed him, holding him back the best she could. The kid was bucking like a bronco!

“You can’t kill our new teammate, Naruto!” Sakura protested as she held him back. Not that she blamed him, she would have wanted to kill him if he insulted her like that.

“Hmm...I like to ***** girls like you,” Sai told Sakura, still smiling. Sakura let go of Naruto. Her eyes turned completely white, and her brows twitched dangerously. Sakura’s ‘Look of Death’.

“WHAT?! YOU PRICK!” she charged at Sai, her fist cocked back, ready to hit him full-blast. She and Naruto were both within inches of him when Kakashi grabbed them both, speaking calmly.

“It’s not nice to kill your team mates. Besides, I told you, he has a problem with personality. You see, he was part of ROOT, a section of ANBU that trains their agents to show no emotion from a very young age. Therefore, Sai isn’t sure how to interact with you. He was trying to break the ice. Give him time, okay?” Kakashi said kindly. **This is not going to be a fun mission...**

Ekyt closed and locked the door and windows, then shut the blinds. He ended his disguise jutsu, thankful. **Chakra was getting low, there. I need a break from that. Dattebayo! ... crap, now I’m THINKING like Naruto!**

Ekyt leaned back against the bed, thinking. He thought about getting out his scrolls, but found he wasn’t in the mood tonight. Instead, he thought about strategy. He knew Itachi Uchiha’s style, but the rest of

the Akatsuki was more or less a mystery to him. He needed more information. Information that, hopefully, Kankuro could provide. **I'm going to need to fight these guys...I need any advantage I can take. They're all S-ranked criminals, I know that. You don't earn an S-rank, good or bad, unless you're dangerous. Very dangerous. I wonder if I was S-ranked to Orochimaru's group? (grins) Bet I am now.** A more somber thought follow. **What if I'm S-ranked to Konoha, as a criminal?** Against this grim thought, Ekyt got up and transformed into Naruto once more. He made sure to run, as opposed to walk, and even thought to knock over a plant on his way to find Kankuro. Upon spotting the puppet master, he shouted.

"Hey, Kankuro!"

Kankuro looked up. "What is it?"

"What do you know about these dicks? The Akatsuki or whatever. I'll kicked their cloaked asses, dattebayo! But, I guess, Kakashi-sensei is always telling me I should know my enemy. So, what do we know about them?"

Kankuro started to talk, but Gaara strode over and interrupted them.

"Konoha's team is in place. It's time to begin the mission. Naruto, you'll be standing by yourself. You need to hold out for at least a minute, while we all get in place. Maintain the disguise as long as possible. Once they realize you're not Naruto, they're going to aim to kill, not capture."

Ekyt gulped inwardly, but felt the familiar rush of adrenaline. A welcome feeling. He was going to make a difference. Movement meant life, fighting meant life. Ekyt had felt as though he had been living a cursed existence. Now, in his sights, he saw a chance to rectify that. He smiled at the thought of meeting the famed Akatsuki. He hoped he would be alive afterward to tell the tale. And he REALLY hoped that this plan worked.

Ekyt/Naruto stood in the clearing, just outside Sunagakure. The sand crunched under his tabi boots, and it was damned uncomfortable outside. Hot, muggy. Konoha, and even Otogakure had been temperate, maintaining a perpetual spring. This was the armpit of summer year round.

Thank God this is a temporary assignment! Of course, that begs the question- where do I go after this? I don't have a home to speak of. Brood later, you retard! (he scolded himself) You're on a mission. Now, if Gaara is right, I should be getting jumped soon. All of the Akatsuki tend to talk first, and in this case, they want me alive. I should give the impression I've dropped my guard, give them an opening. That would be the 'Naruto' thing to do.

"This sucks, dattebayo! Where are these freaks, anyway? Bad enough I'm stuck here, but waiting like this! Gah!" Naruto/Ekyt made a face of frustration, then aimlessly kicked at a Yucca plant, one of the few that grew plants in Sunagakure's extreme conditions. Ekyt wanted to remove 'Naruto's' outer jacket and fight in the black t-shirt under it, but that might expose the fact that Ekyt didn't have a seal on his stomach. And that would blow the plan, but good.

Whoosh. Foomp. Foomp. Fooomp. Fooomp.

Ekyt/Naruto looked around, seeing four cloak-wearing individuals, with straw hats pulled down over their faces. One, however, stood out. Red eyes, tomoe of Sharingan...

"Itachi...Uchiha...you're Sasuke's brother!" Ekyt/Naruto declared. **Duh, captain obvious!** Ekyt thought. But it sounded Naruto-ish.

Itachi and the others revealed themselves one by one. Ekyt checked them off mentally.

Deidara...Sasori...Kisame...and Itachi...that leaves a few unaccounted for. Looks like they bought in to our trap, if only four came.

"You freaks want my fox? Well, come and get him! I'm gonna make you pay for what you did to Gaara! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto/Ekyt shouted. He sent the four he could create after Sasori, Kisama, and Deidara. He didn't bother with Itachi, he knew that Itachi could see through the clones. And Naruto would go after the strongest himself.

Itachi narrowed his eyes. "That isn't Naruto," he said quietly. Ekyt didn't look him in the eyes. He simply ended the disguise jutsu.

"That's right. I'm not."

Deidara sat down on a rock. "So we get to tangle with some boring kid, un?"

Itachi shook his head. "No...I fought him before...he was almost a threat then...his second chakra would be valuable. He's not a Jinchuuriki...but we'd still have use for his chakra."

Ekyt looked around at his attackers.

"It's been a long time, Itachi. Nearly four years. It seems you and I are similar, in a way...release!" Ekyt barked the last word out harshly, for he felt Itachi's genjutsu creeping up on him. He avoided Itachi's eyes, although he had heard horror stories of Itachi using genjutsu in other ways. Still, they were all dwarfed compared to the Mangekyo Sharingan.

"Please, introduce me to your associates," Ekyt requested kindly. "We'll be fighting soon enough, why not tell me who you are?"

Deidara grinned. "Spunky kid. Deidara, un. I'm an artist. My art-is a bang!"

"Sasori. Puppet master."

"Kisame, wielder of the"

Ekyt cut him off. "Very nice sword. As a...Samurai, I can admire your taste in blades.

Samehada...Sharkskin, meant for tearing, rather than cutting, as a traditional blade would, correct?"

Kisame grinned, his shark-like teeth a disturbing sight. "Correct. I see no sword on you...a swordless Samurai?"

Ekyt smiled cheerfully. "I'm fighting as a Shinobi today. Besides, I reserve my blade for those as honorable as me."

The verbal barb provoked Kisame into attacking. His sword was in a dangerous position, Ekyt noted. He was aiming for a chest-height cut. Ekyt either had to duck it, leap it, or go backwards. The side movement he had planned wouldn't work here. He considered trying to get the sword away from Kisame, but then Kakashi's words about not touching the sword came back to him. Time for a quick counter-attack.

"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!" Ekyt called. The other Akatsuki members hadn't moved. **They're gauging my skill...so they DO want me alive...or they think me a threat...hurry up, you guys!** Where the hell were the others?

Kisame was forced to stop his cut to use the 'Release' hand sign. During that time, Ekyt had thrown a series of senbon. Kisame blocked them, but not Ekyt's chakra-laced kick to the chest. Kisame sailed backward, but righted himself. He shouldered his blade and laughed.

"Not bad for a kid. Itachi, you weren't kidding. What's your village, hotshot?"

Ekyt tightened his jaw. "I don't have one. I guess you would classify me as a missing-nin from Konohagakure. Although I'm working for the highest bidder now..."

This news surprised Itachi. **When I fought him last, he was dedicated to the Leaf Village. Now- he belongs to no one? Perhaps now is the time to offer him a spot with the Akatsuki. I know what he desires...And the Akatsuki can give it to him. At least, part of it. This battle will be a good**

opportunity to gauge his skill.

“You are protecting the Jinchuuriki, Naruto. Perhaps we can make a deal...” Itachi seemed to be speaking for the group. None of them looked as though attacking was on their minds; they were content to listen. At Ekyt’s nod, Itachi continued.

“The Akatsuki have use for you. You’re S-ranked, a missing-nin criminal from the Sound Village. We know you severed ties with Konoha...and we know that you have powers that even you aren’t aware of. The Akatsuki can give you what you want.”

Ekyt looked vaguely amused. “And, what exactly is it I want?”

Itachi looked Ekyt in the eyes. There was no Sharingan active now, showing that he meant no harm.

“You want to belong.”

Ekyt looked surprised, and with good reason- he was. **The Sharingan can sense- no...It’s my eyes. They’ve given everything away...my emotions. WHY?! WHY DO THEY EXIST?!** Ekyt regained his composure.

“I’m a criminal for doing what most consider good, hardly the Akatsuki type of criminal. How do I know you won’t try to suck the chakra out of my body? I know what would happen if you DID...but still, you could try.”

Itachi still hadn’t moved. It was unnerving. How could someone stay so still?

Ekyt looked up at the sky. Just like everything else, it was out of reach.

“So, you mentioned a deal. What kind of deal are we talking about?” Ekyt said finally. He had hoped Itachi would speak first, but quickly realized that he wouldn’t win the waiting game.

“If you agree to join us, we will stop pursuing the Kyuubi sealed inside your friend.”

Ekyt didn’t hesitate with his answer.

“You’re lying. It only takes common sense to know what the Akatsuki are doing. I will protect Naruto. If you weren’t after him...I’d join. I DO want to belong. But there are too many people I care about, people I couldn’t abandon. Konoha might have rejected me, but I will always be there to defend it or it’s people.”

Itachi looked impassive. “Your loyalty is misplaced.”

“My loyalty exists, Itachi. Yours does not. You are hardly the person to lecture me on loyalty,” Ekyt retorted, looking Itachi in the eyes. No Sharingan...That meant that Itachi’s chakra was low, or he was baiting Ekyt into attacking. Either way, Ekyt wasn’t buying it.

The blonde-haired one, Deidara, spoke up.

“You’ve got to admire his guts, un. No brains, but guts. I hope he gets a bang out of my art!”

Ekyt braced himself for a fight. Four on one...not good odds. For anyone.

12 - Three Villages, Two Swords, One Chance

Ekyt found himself staring down four fearsome criminals. This wasn't good. Not good in the least. Where the hell were the others? Had they abandoned him? It didn't matter, he would be dead in seconds, unless he agreed with Itachi. But was he prepared to do that? Could he live with himself as a member of the Akatsuki. He had considered their offer. He needed more time. Either his team would show up, or they wouldn't. But either way, he had to sort this out.

"Give me 5 minutes to think about your offer, Itachi," Ekyt told him. "It's not an easy decision. At the end of five minutes, you will have your answer- one way or the other."

The others looked at Itachi. He had addressed Ekyt first, and had received an answer. They couldn't wait to see what Itachi's response would be? Tsukuyomi? Amaterasu? Chidori? Itachi opened his mouth.

"Five minutes." Itachi looked at his comrades, seeing shock written on their faces. **They don't understand just how delicate a situation like this is...the boy is leaning, he needs a push in the right direction- and he, and soon, the Kyuubi, will fall into the arms of the Akatsuki. Even if he's only stalling us for time, it won't matter. It will draw out the Kyuubi. Either way, we walk away with someone.**

Ekyt knew this was the part of the plan that was going to be hard for him. He had to improvise. On the one hand, joining the Akatsuki made him a criminal and put him in danger. But if he joined, he could prevent capture of other Jinchuuriki and the extraction of their biju's. He would likely be killed if (and this is likely) the Akatsuki found out what he was doing. But what were his other options? Go back to Konoha and beg? No, he had a small shred of pride left. Back to the Sound Village? No, they were just as likely to kill him. Stay in Sunagakure? Ekyt had considered that. The old thoughts of Gaara destroying his eye disturbed him too much. If Temari had been in Sunagakure, he might have stayed. There were really only two options: Stay a rogue, or join the Akatsuki. Ekyt wished he had someone to discuss this with. Kakashi-sensei would be perfect. But he had only himself to count on...

Again.

So he stood upright and walked back over to the waiting Itachi.

"Itachi, let's put lies and deception aside for a minute. I've already figured out what you plan to do...with me, with Naruto...and I can't let it happen. If you weren't targeted the Jinchuuriki, I would join you. All of you are warriors of the highest caliber...to a point. And that point is the one that I've been struggling with. You're a loosely-bound organization. What happens when one of you gets greedy, or feels their power threatened.? The whole organization would fall to pieces. I think it's something all of you have thought of, at one point or another. Most likely, after you'd conquered the world, you would break off and fight. But what if you introduced a new factor into the equation? The new factor, meaning me, would ruin your entire equation. You all have a balance of power- but I'm younger than you, and I have more room to grow. So what would happen?"

Itachi's Sharingan was visible now.

"Your bluff isn't going to work. However true, we are united with a common goal right now. You are with us, or against us, and I think you've made yourself clear."

"Have I, Itachi? Well, this might come as a shock...but I accept your offer."

In the bushes, Kakashi's team was stunned. Strangely, Kakashi seemed non-plussed. He muttered something into a field mic no one knew he had. He returned to watching the battlefield a second later, visible eye narrowed in concentration, right hand near his headband, ready to use his Sharingan in the likely even that Itachi found them.

Ekyt whipped around, smiling under his mask. **Right on schedule, Orochimaru...**

"Lord Orochimaru! What are you doing here?!" Ekyt shouted.

Orochimaru smirked. "You did very well, drawing the Akatsuki into the open...but alas, there are more than I bargained for...so it's time to withdraw."

Ekyt looked confused. "My genjutsu...it WOULD wear off...my seals...I guess you ARE worthy, Lord Orochimaru. But, you see, Itachi seems to think I'm worthy of the Akatsuki..."

Orochimaru's smirk slightened. "They can't give you anything but a ring. I can give you the rank of chunin...and help you unlock powers you never knew you had. To show my sincerity...I remember your desire to possess my blade, the Kusanagi...I was fully prepared to give it to you, when you made your...hasty exit. But I think what I have may indeed be better."

Orochimaru's mouth widened. From within it, a snake popped out. It hissed, then opened its mouth and spewed a package out.

"Go on, open it. You'll find it to your liking, I'm sure. Dragon's aside, you're proficient with snakes...so why not possess these as well..."

Ekyt's eyes involuntarily widened in shock. The two blades, held within a sheath of snake skin, were legendary. Ekyt could sense that they were real. He touched them, and knew- he now possessed the Twin Striking Serpents blade. It was supposedly mythical, created by a ronin samurai, exiled from his village. He hoped to create a blade powerful enough to one day conquer his village. The nameless samurai had kidnapped a ninja and forced him to use his chakra on the sword, in effect making it lighter, faster, and stronger than any blade created. The ninja, however, had cursed the blade. The bearer had to have a connection with snakes, or the blades would turn on him in battle. Enraged, the samurai studied snakes, and formed a bond with one, just before his death. That snake, at the time a little garden snake? Orochimaru's summon, Mando.

Ekyt was indeed proficient with snakes. He had one attack, taught to him by Anko Mitarashi, the "Striking Shadow Snakes", and it had saved his life countless times.

"A little known fact about those blades...they come with a summon, a snake. One less greedy than my dear Mando, and slightly less powerful. But you'll find the two of you share a kinship..."

Ekyt looked at the blades. **Okay, so far, so good. I've turned on Konoha, Orochimaru, and the Akatsuki. Now, I'm in the middle. The ultimate goal is to get rid of the Akatsuki. The question is- where will I do more damage? Within the Akatsuki, or with Orochimaru? The Akatsuki...they're bluffing, and even if I could keep pace with one, I couldn't handle all of them. Orochimaru...he's the better choice. But can I trust him? I almost blew my cover, but good, when I attacked him in defense of Sakura, Naruto, Lee, and Hayate...**

There was one more voice in Ekyt's head, this one speaking up more clearly than ever.

Orochimaru will make you a chunin.

Ekyt opened his mouth and...

WHOOSH! The Konoha group burst on the scene. Kakashi's hand was crackling with blue energy.

"Oh shoot," Ekyt muttered, looking at Kakashi, but avoiding his eye.

"Lightning Blade!" Kakashi zipped towards Ekyt, his hand ready to jam the attack home, but it was blocked- by a snake? Kakashi looked at the snake, shocked. Ekyt shook his head; he hadn't summoned hit.

"I can't allow you to attack my master. He possesses the blades, I defend him. Please do not attack my master again, or I will be forced to kill." The snake spoke in a deep voice, with a slight accent. It was roughly eight feet tall, and it was green and black in color. Its eyes were black, with green rims around them. "My name is Shuurai, and you, Ekyt Kaguya, are my master as long as you hold those swords. To summon me, put one blade in the ground and perform a summoning jutsu, using the other sword to make the cut for the blood tribute." Shuurai disappeared.

"This mission is over, Ekyt. It's too dangerous to continue. Pull out," Kakashi ordered.

"This was a setup?!" that came from a lot of people from each group.

"No. Lord Orochimaru has just given me a gift, and something Konoha couldn't give me, no matter how deserving I was! I'm a chunin of the Hidden Sound Village now. Your mission- ha! It ended long ago. I would attack you, but it seems we have a common goal- the elimination of the Akatsuki! For once, the Sound and the Leaf are on the same page. It was just a matter of time before I decided to pick someone else. Konoha held me back! I gave it everything I had, I gave it my life! All I got in return...was abuse, and lies! Orochimaru's made good on his promises. The Akatsuki are a close second. If I was a jonin, I would have sided with them. But I want my rank first." Ekyt declared.

Lee and Shikamaru looked at each other, then nodded to Sakura.

"Shadow Possession Jutsu!" Shikamaru called. He snared Ekyt successfully. The snake defending him was gone now, and Ekyt had no way of summoning him.

Lee walked forward, and looked Ekyt in the face.

"We were comrades...you swore...to never let your teammates die. Have you forgotten the promise you made? Were you not part of my team once? What about Sakura? And Naruto? Not all of us have betrayed you."

Ekyt looked Lee in the eyes. "It would only be a matter of time. Trust is just a word that has no meaning. It's a shame I had to learn that the hard way. It's better we part as friends, than let time force us apart as enemies."

"Time is a companion, not an enemy!" Lee told Ekyt with his usual vigor.

Ekyt smiled. "Time is a predator that stalks us all our lives." (Who can name the movie I borrowed that quote from? -NG)

Lee shook his head sadly. "You will not listen to me...maybe...maybe you will listen to Sakura?"

Here we go... Sakura thought as she stepped forward. She forced herself to make eye contact with Ekyt. Her light green eyes met his dark hazel eyes. Some unknown force locked their gazes together. Shikamaru shifted his posture to his normal slouching position, so Ekyt's body had to follow suit.

"Ekyt...is this really what you want? To live among criminals, and liars, and murders? If I know one thing

about you...it's that you're none of those! You're an honorable person! All the good you did...give Konoha a chance to right itself...you know you'll always have me on your side...Thirty people were willing to leave the Shinobi life behind because of how Lady Tsunade treated you. Give her...us...a chance...to make things right...because no matter what you say and do now, you're saying it while angry and hurt! People say things they don't mean when they feel that way. I can sense it, you know...your chakra. The emotional one. It wants to explode, it wants to burst. It's eating you up...We need you, Ekyt. All the times you and I have teamed together, and the times I've patched you up...all in the name of Konoha...a bond exists between you and us, and it can't be broken by a snake like Orochimaru, or a bunch of run-away criminals! It's loyalty, Ekyt. Your Nindo, Bushido, whatever you call it, your way of life, your way of thinking. Don't throw it away by choosing these people over us!"

Ekyt looked back, this time tones of remorse in his voice.

"Konoha and duty...were two voids in my heart...but there was always the third. Companionship. I never had that, did I? I always envied you and Naruto, or Lee, Neji, and Tenten, or Shikamaru, Choji, and Ino, all of the teams. I even envied Temari. All of you...have people to rely on. Have dreams that can still be fulfilled. While me...I have nothing but 'duty' left. The void in my heart has grown...and I don't think anything can bridge it's gap..."

Temari landed, soon followed by- Kimimaro?

This wasn't part of the plan...

But Kimimaro said nothing, not right away. Temari spoke up, and she wasn't shy and sweet like Sakura. She strode over and slapped Ekyt hard across the face. (In effect, Shikamaru was hurt by the slap! "Hey! Knock it off! Troublesome woman!") She grabbed him by his vest and pulled him close to her face.

"Do you remember defending me, on that broken leg? Against my brothers? The deal you made with them? And you're going to forget all that, and join this scum? If you do, there's no way you're as smart as I gave you credit for! You're pissing away everything! And you know why? Poor you, you're not a chunin, you don't have a girlfriend, and your life sucks? Yeah? I'm a jonin, who's left her own village, has no boyfriend, but you know something? I don't dog and moan. I DO something about it, and that doesn't include running away, because it's easier."

"You left your village...what gives you the right to yell at me?" Ekyt shot back. Temari tugged him closer, loosening her grip slightly upon realizing she was choking him (And Shikamaru, in effect)

"I left because I was threatened...you left because you were forced to. But you were welcomed back! Instead, you're piddling here, your tail between your legs. Why don't you grow a set and come back? Or are you afraid of Lady Tsunade, and the Village. Afraid of...failure? Get your act together! Maybe THEN you'll get someone to love you!" Temari gave Ekyt a hard shove backward.

Sakura had to try hard not to rush over and heal him. For now, Shikamaru still had him trapped in the Shadow Possession Jutsu. He wasn't seriously injured, but apparently shaken up by Temari. Temari glanced at Sakura, who cautiously nodded her approval. They HAD to talk some sense into him now.

Kimimaro walked over to Ekyt, pulling a bone from his shoulder, but not holding it in a threatening way.

"Why did you help me?" Kimimaro asked Ekyt.

"You're family, Kimimaro. And now, you can serve Lord Orochimaru longer and better," Ekyt replied, staring his cousin down. Kimimaro didn't respond to the stare.

“You have a strange idea of family. I have done nothing for you, and you mean nothing to me. I live to serve Lord Orochimaru. Family...I barely know the meaning, and I know that I don't need it. Or you. But...I should thank you...for saving me, regardless of whether or not I care that we share a last name and a blood heritage.”

Kabuto joined Ekyt next. “Think of how they treated you. Here, you have family. And, of course, power. I've already studied your chakra...the power it holds is unreal. But you don't know how to unlock it...we can help...”

Finally, Itachi strode over.

“Talking to you won't do any good. Attacking you while you're trapped...I could kill you AND your comrade...”

(Shikamaru let go of the Shadow Possession)

Ekyt drew the two swords he had just been given. Automatically, four snakes came from each wrist and wound themselves around the handle of the sword, securing it. Ekyt slashed at Itachi, and cut him through the middle. Then he pressed his hands together.

“Release!” he chanted, ending the REAL Itachi's attempt at genjutsu. “If that was a clone, and I follow your chakra...” Ekyt threw kunai in five places. Five Itachi's leapt out, all holding the kunai. They threw them back. Ekyt used his “Dragon's Encampment Wall” to knock the kunai down.

Meanwhile, Kakashi held Naruto back. “Trust me...you will get a chance to avenge Gaara...but you need to stick with the plan. Understand?” Kakashi looked Naruto in the eyes.

“I...understand.”

Naruto looked at Ekyt. **It's like Sasuke...but there's still a chance to help Ekyt make the right choice! I can't let him go to Orochimaru, or the freaks in cloaks! Konoha needs him! I'm a future Hokage, and it's time I acted like one! And that means getting the others in on my plan!**

But before Naruto could, Itachi used an attack that sapped his chakra, but gave him what he wanted.

“I've had my Sharingan activated for so long, watching you Konoha ninjas, and you Sound ninjas, that I've neglected my chakra. But this should be sufficient...You, Dragon Boy, are feared because of your genjutsu. But until you've faced me, you can't call yourself a master. And you WILL face me now...unless you join the Akatsuki...”

“No,” Ekyt said, gesturing everyone back with his head.

“Ametarasu!” Itachi shot jet-black flames in a circle around him and Ekyt.

“Ordinarlly, that would burn for seven days and nights. But my chakra being so low, I can only manage a couple hours. But that's plenty of time to kill you.”

Ekyt felt something inside himself. He was ready. He knew it. He felt it.

He was ready to take a man's life for the first time.

13 - Cargo to Konoha

"Holy shoot! We've got to help him!" Naruto was running toward the fire, when the strong arm of Kakashi seized him.

"Matte! Sorry, wait. My mistake. Let's me see...Sharingan!" Kakashi's useful eye could see through the thick black flames, and what he saw, while disturbing, was also a long time coming.

"So it's happened...he's ready..." Kakashi muttered. "I knew this day would come. His anger (**I can't say it aloud, but his love for his comrades**) has reached a where his emotions have leveled out. He's at sort of an abnormal homeostasis. His mind has matured. It's temporary, but right now, he'll do anything to serve his village...even take a man's life. His posture, the way he's holding the swords, even his eyes...his innocence has faded, for now. Something Itachi said or did set him off...or his mind became overloaded with choices to make...I don't know how he'll fare, but he may very well kill Itachi."

"What? Ekyt-kun? That powerful?" Sakura couldn't believe it. "He would never kill!"

"Unless he thought he was defending someone, or someones, important to him," Kakashi piped up.

"He and I have talked at length. He said any jail sentence, death, anything, it would be worth it if he saved a life in the process. Ekyt-san knows what is at stake, and he is going to fight. Whether he belongs to Konoha or not, it would be a victory, should he defeat Itachi," Lee added helpfully.

"But kill? The kid really has it in him? He's think twice before taking an ant's life, never mind a human!" Temari said dismissively.

"No, Kakashi-sensei's right. Even I can sense it. He's not angry...but something beyond that. Beyond frustration and anger. And he can't hold it in any more," Shikamaru told them. "But, we have to leave that fight to him. We can't pass those flames. We've got plenty of other enemies..."

But the Akatsuki and Orochimaru and Kabuto were just watching.

"How interesting...Two Leaf deserters fighting it out. Both of them praised for being the best...yet both unsatisfied. Who could have seen such an outcome? After their fight...Leaf Ninja, you want to eliminate the Akatsuki. For now, we should put our differences aside...we've got a common enemy. But, for now, let's enjoy the fight..."

Ekyt and Itachi looked at each other. Ekyt had lost all trace of stoicism.

"You bastard...murdering your family...your best friend...You had people who cared, you had talent, you had everything you could want! But that wasn't enough, was it? They may yell at me for wanting more, but I've got no reason to be content. You were the heir to the most respected clan in the world! Now, you're scum! Scum that's going to pay for his crimes!" Ekyt's voice was strained and distorted. Every bit of chakra in his body was being called upon, even a small buildup in his throat. He could feel the heat of the Amaterasu burning, but he couldn't care. All he saw was Itachi. And then himself...Being turned down by Linda, having his eye nearly destroyed by Gaara, withdrawing from the chunin exams, being kicked out of Konoha....Inside him, his emotional chakra bypassed his normal chakra. It hurt like hell, it burned him, it bit into him like a thousand senbon. But at this point, life and death was all that mattered.

Itachi sensed the change in Ekyt. He wasn't concerned, he was far more skilled than the boy. **But the**

buildup of power...it's incredible. But it's not a chakra that the Akatsuki can use, not if it reaches a state like this. Bijuu's can be controlled...these...emotions...they're wild. They're predators in their own right. He intends to make me fight. Rapidly, Itachi made hand signs. Ekyt already knew Itachi could copy his, so he wasn't going to use jutsus that Itachi could copy and make his own.

"Twin Striking Serpents!" Ekyt drew the blades and made cuts as fast as he could. He felt the eight snakes (four on each wrist) assist him in wielding the blades. Itachi was forced to move, in contrast to his normal fighting style. Ekyt, remembering his old training, moved the blades in a windmill pattern. He drove Itachi toward the wall of black flames. Itachi fell backward, and the fight was over. Itachi had to be burned to a crisp. POOF! Shadow Clone!

Instantly, Ekyt stepped to the side in anticipation of attack and swiped at Itachi. Another clone. But he could sense Itachi's chakra, and it was getting weaker with each attack. He thought back to Ibikki's training...the limits of the human mind coupled with weak chakra. It was a volatile mixture for the target. Ekyt put away his blades and used a Shadow Clone jutsu. The three clones swarmed Itachi. Itachi, effortlessly, batted them away, before he felt a new pain. Genjutsu.

"Release!" he said calmly. "I'm not weakened enough to fall pray to your genjutsu. Try all you want." Instead, Ekyt zipped over to Itachi. Itachi was ready with a side kick. He caught Ekyt full in the stomach, sending him tumbling backward. Itachi tried a genjutsu of his own, but Ekyt used the release technique himself. Ekyt knew that fighting the Sharingan was hard, and that he couldn't make eye contact. That meant taijutsu. Ordinarily, Ekyt would have opened the first gate of chakra. But in this case, he wanted Itachi's chakra to run out before his own. If he opened the gate too soon, he would be vulnerable to counter-attack. Instead, Ekyt channeled his emotional chakra to his hands and feet.

"Blue Flame: Dragon's Power Circle!" Ekyt called. He threw punches and kicks, enhanced by the blue flames rising in his hands and feet, but none landed.

"Damn it! Striking Shadow Snakes!" the snakes grabbed Itachi, and Ekyt landed a kick to the jaw, sending Itachi into the flames. POOF!

"Another clone? You have to come out eventually! For once, Itachi, I don't care about your life. You've made a threat to those I care about. Don't think I can't sense it. Your chakra is low. Soon, you won't have your Sharingan to depend on. I see the flames...they're shrinking already. I'll just have to find you!" Ekyt threw two scrolls in the air, biting the end of his thumb to open a cut, and ran blood down them.

"Twin Summoning Jutsu!" he called. Holly and Umisu joined him in searching.

"Kid, he's underground!" Holly barked out, digging with her paws, making an 'X' in the ground.

Umisu leapt up on Ekyt shoulder and made a strange hissing sound. Apparently, Ekyt understood that hissing.

"Too weak, Umisu? Thank you both. Time for one more attack...Plus, you two should get acquainted with him. Striking Serpent Summoning!" Ekyt put one blade into the ground, using the other to cut his thumb open. He bashed his palm onto the ground. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, the ground twisted and heaved, and out came Shuurai.

"Shuurai, the enemy is underground! Can you flush him out?" Ekyt asked.

"I'd be happy to," Shuurai replied politely. He hissed once, then dove underground. When he resurfaced, he had Itachi Uchiha in his mouth. He spat the Uchiha criminal out. Ekyt had been waiting for this.

"Blue Flame Chakra: Swallow Strike Jutsu!" Ekyt moved fast. The name of the jutsu came not only from the speed (That of the swallow, a quick bird), but also from the form Ekyt took. When in position, his body imitated that of a swallow in flight. Lastly, the jutsu name was from his samurai days- it meant striking twice along the same line. In this case, Ekyt punched straight at Itachi's temple, then followed through with a ridge-hand strike to Itachi's temple. Finally, Ekyt focused his chakra into a side kick.

The flames from Amaterasu died as Itachi sailed through the air. He landed at Kisame's feet, but was on one knee instantly. Ekyt ran past them, following up, senbon at the ready. He threw them. Kisame deflected them with Samahade. Ekyt, seeing this was about to become a sword contest, drew his own two and slashed at Kisame.

"Enough."

Itachi put a hand up.

"Akatsuki, it's time to withdraw. My chakra is gone, and the boy is at his most powerful. It would be to our advantage to observe, rather than engage."

The others nodded in silent agreement.

Itachi strode towards Ekyt. Poof! Clone?

shoot! From the back?

Itachi grabbed Ekyt and looked him in the eye. The Mangekyo Sharingan.

"Tsukuyomi!"

The world was black and white, as if an undeveloped negative. Ekyt was facing Itachi, but he was paper thin. And he was burning. Itachi watched dispassionately.

"You don't know what it's like to fight for someone other than yourself! If the people I care about die, I die with them! And you...are...pissing...me...off! I WILL NEVER BETRAY THEM! IF YOU WANT TO KILL ME, FINE, BUT YOU'LL COME WITH ME!"

Ekyt let his emotional chakra leave his body. It's magnitude was unreal. It wiped the nightmare realm clean of Itachi's influence, ending the jutsu. Ekyt landed on his feet and attacked once more. But the Akatsuki grabbed their comrade and left, swearing revenge. One of them threw a small bird out as he left.

"Katsu!" The bird exploded, providing a smoke-screen.

Not long after that, Ekyt let himself fall. **My emotions...they cooked. Blew up. My inner pain is gone...I've never felt so....at peace. But at the same time...I know the pain will come back. And soon. I need this time...to complete my mission. To do what I set out to do...When the pain comes back, I'll be myself again. But right now, I don't have it's influence. If only...this feeling would last...** Ekyt gave up the thought, wishing, not for the first time, that he was normal. But it wasn't so, and he had no choice but to use his disadvantages to his advantage. Slowly, he got to his feet. In his weakened state, he didn't sense the attack right away. Instead, Orochimaru's head was right near him when he did.

"No!" Came several voices. Two of them were kunoichi.

Sakura's kunai and Temari's fan blew Orochimaru's head off-course. Lee's Dynamic Entry knocked it further away, and Naruto's Clone Body Attack, sent Orochimaru's body off-course. Ekyt looked at them, then at Kakashi.

"Sensei...did I do alright?" Ekyt asked wearily.

Kakashi, after making Ekyt lay down, patted him on the head. "You did it perfectly. You infiltrated the enemy, and drew the others out into the open."

"Wait a minute! This was a plan?!" everyone shouted at once.

"Sorry I couldn't tell you, but Ekyt and I were sworn to secrecy. As I said, his mission, S-ranked, is finished. However...everything you saw with Tsunade-sama, Sakura, was real. She and Ekyt...don't get along. But what you DIDN'T see was the most important part of all.

Ekyt pulled off his headband and dipped his thumb into the small cut he had made on his shoulder. With his thumb, he drew a line of blood across the Leaf Village symbol.

“With my blood, I swear an allegiance to Konoha to complete this mission. I will protect the life of others before my own, and I will do all in my power to see this mission through successfully. May the blood on my hitai-ate remain a symbol of this.”

Kakashi and Tsunade nodded.

“If you’re willing to take such a risk...infiltrating Orochimaru...then maybe I need to reconsider my opinion of you...I might hate your guts, but I know I can count on you for loyalty...” Tsunade told Ekyt. Ekyt was still glaring at her, but ignored the comment.

“I’ll do my best. If I fail, I guess you’ll be thrilled. You won’t have to deal with me anymore.” Ekyt’s reply stung Tsunade. She WANTED to like the boy, in a way. But he thought so freely that she couldn’t bring herself to like him, as she had before.

“Just complete the mission...we’ll hash out how we feel about each other later. You have your orders. Kakashi, take the team, but don’t tell them anything. Let them think Ekyt’s gone rogue. We can’t have them giving away this illusion. This is too important. This might be our only chance to see Orochimaru from the inside.”

“Understood. I’ll ready the team...”

Ekyt got up and walked over to the group. They were huddled together. They looked at him, unreadable looks on their faces.

“I’m sorry...I wanted to tell you all...but I was forbidden...I understand if you hate me. It was...never my intention. My allegiance to Konoha expired when I defeated Itachi. If you’ve decided you hate me, I can move on. Because when I said “If my comrades die, I die with them,” I meant it. I’m proud to call all of you friends.” Ekyt gave them a small wave. Sakura grabbed his arm.

“Hold on, at least let us heal you, before you run off.”

“Yeah, how far do you think you’ll get with a hole in you?” Temari added.

Sakura looked at the damage and sighed. “You’ll have to go to the hospital, this goes deeper than the chakra scalpel. Ibikki Morino would have to help guide me. When you let your mind go, and you were willing to kill, you did something to your brain and nervous system.”

Ekyt nodded. “I felt the connections fray. They’ll heal on their own. I really should leave...”

Kakashi, silently, grabbed Ekyt in a headlock. It eased the boy into unconsciousness.

“He’s coming with us. He has to give a report, anyway. It’s a shame he feels there’s nothing in Konoha for him...Maybe this will help correct things. Naruto, since it was you he was protecting, you can carry him back.”

There was a scout team (Neji, Tenten, and Kiba) waiting for the return of the others. Tenten gasped upon seeing Ekyt. Kakashi explained the situation, and asked Tenten to run ahead and make sure there was a hospital room for Ekyt. He had been lying through his teeth about how much damage had been done to him.

Immediately, Tonton came running up, oinking wildly.

“What? Tonton, is she serious?!” Sakura demanded, picking the pig up.

“Oink!” Tonton said sadly.

“Hold off on that hospital room- Tsunade is demanding a report, now,” Sakura told the group. They shook their heads collectively. Ekyt stirred, and eased himself off of Naruto’s shoulders.

“I’ll give her a report...I’m sure I won’t die before that. It’s better she’s me battle-scarred. Besides, who cares?”

Tenten gave him a crack on the head, not hard, just enough to get his attention. “Judging by how many headbands are piled on Tsunade’s desk, and how many people volunteered to come to retrieve you...a lot of people care.”

14 - Things are Explained

"I attacked too soon...An oversight that I will not make with my next body," Orochimaru resolved. He clenched a hand in anger, despite the amusement in his voice. He glanced at Kabuto, who was looking over some numbers on a computer screen. More than a minute passed before Kabuto spoke.

"I studied his chakra, and there's a chance that that emotional chakra might have rejected your attempt to take over his body. When he broke Itachi's Tsukuyomi with the pure chakra, I captured a sample of the trails in the air from it," Kabuto told Orochimaru.

"And what did you learn?" Orochimaru wanted to know. That's when he saw Kabuto's bandaged right hand and small burn mark on his face. **Even a medical ninja, the caliber of Tsunade in her prime, couldn't heal the burns directly?**

"It's volatile. The probe I used exploded on contact with it. When I tried to touch it, it rejected my touch and exploded," Kabuto explained, smiling about something.

"Do you EVER bring me good news, Kabuto?" Orochimaru sighed.

"Right now. That chakra could kill him. When he fought Itachi, I used a medical jutsu to judge his emotional tolerance. He was close to insanity. When he stopped using the emotional chakra, his tolerance levels dropped back to normal. But if he had been pushed, his mind might have cracked under the strain."

"Interesting...and how is Sasuke?" Orochimaru asked in reply.

"Sasuke is coming along nicely. His body...and yours...will be ready on time at present rate," Kabuto responded as he typed at a console, succeeding in bringing up the vital signs of both of them.

Orochimaru smiled at the blue screens currently casting a pale light on his even more pale face.

"Excellent...Also, how much longer before I can activate the poison I laced those blades with?" Orochimaru asked.

"The swords? The Serpents? You poisoned them?" Kabuto asked.

"Yes, a poison I can activate remotely. Since our friend Ekyt didn't want to be on our side...maybe it's time to let the poison work it's magic..." Orochimaru licked his (non-existent) lips greedily.

Kabuto nodded, then turned away to tend to his duties. **It might be the best way to rid ourselves of the boy...cowardly, but effective. And effectiveness is what counts...**

A crutch under his arm, Ekyt delivered his report to Tsunade. Next to him was the scowling retrieval team. Not one of them was wearing a hitai-ate. It was clear they were...disapproving of how Ekyt was being treated.

"I see...and you accepted a gift from Orochimaru...let me see it," Tsunade demanded. Ekyt hesitated, but handed the swords over.

"They're poisoned. And if you've used them...Sakura, use your chakra to check him for toxins! I'll detox these blades, then we'll give them back."

Ekyt pulled off his vest and let Sakura check. While she worked, Ekyt spoke to Tsunade. He wasn't going to beg. He had never bowed to any mortal (Not sincerely anyway), and he wasn't going to start with the Fifth Hokage.

"I need to know...am I welcome here, Lady Tsunade? I'm aware my blood oath is over, and we could agree to part ways...but I think you should hear the second part of my report. I had Orochimaru beaten. I could have killed him, and ended it...but I didn't. I couldn't do it. I escaped with the others, which, in

retrospect, was the better choice for them AND me. But when I fought Itachi, I was..." Ekyt seemed to trip over his words, as though he was disbelieving himself.

"You were going to take his life, if necessary," Kakashi finished for him. Ekyt nodded. The bags under his eyes were even more pronounced from the stress, and he looked gaunt from not eating. (He hadn't touched any of the food Orochimaru had offered him. The Sand Village lacked in food that wasn't spicy, and spicy stuff affected his stomach at times)

"I was willing to...if it meant someone else got to live...even if I died with him. My only thoughts were of Konoha, and it's people. I was told, once, by Master Sarutobi, that I've become a pillar for the people in Konoha. And, to be honest, I think you need those thirty headbands back that are on your desk back on thirty people. And the thirty-first, my headband...I'd like it to be back where it belongs. On my head."

Tsunade finished examining the Striking Serpent Blades, and handed them back to Ekyt.

"Well, I've discussed the matter with Ibibiki and the other ANBU members you've worked with. They all seem to think that chunin doesn't suit you..."

Ekyt felt his heart plunge into his stomach. Before he could speak up, Tsunade continued.

"They all told me that you should be getting ready for jonin, and that chunin would be a waste of time for you entirely. I disagree with them, you're talented, but inexperienced...but I DO think that you've more than earned the rank of chunin...and I wish I could give it to you...As much as I hate to admit it...you've done great work, and you're not an easy guy to hate. The mission you took was S-ranked, and after the way you were treated, you didn't need to take the mission at all, let alone volunteer for it. Your payment from the Sand Village will be arriving soon. You played your part to the hilt, and the Kazekage is thrilled. Or, as close as Sand puss gets...but, the point is...you're welcome in Konoha. And I'm glad to have you back." Tsunade smiled and leaned back, eyes closed.

"Tenten and the others are important, and so are you. Oh, I thought you should know, Tenten cracked Ebisu in the face with a rock. I thought you might enjoy hearing that."

Ekyt couldn't help but smile. Tenten smiled, an arm behind her head in modesty.

"He was standing still, it made for an easy target. It hit his mouth. I should have aimed for his brain..."

Tenten said, giggling.

"You're too skilled to miss a target that big," Ekyt replied, earning laughter from everyone. Everyone except Sakura. She had found some poison.

"Ekyt, hold still, okay? I've got to extract this poison. If you move too much, I won't be able to get it all. Tenten, hold his arm still, would you? He gets fidgety around kunoichi. (kunoichi giggle) Thanks. Now, don't move." Sakura moved her hand to the poisoned area on Ekyt's arm, and began to force the poison out by using her chakra.

Ekyt gulped. **Perfect...the only thing missing is Temari, then all three kunoichi I like will be in the same room, at the same time, paying attention to me. I think I would be blushing more than Tsunade when she gets drunk! Not that I'm not already...I never DID say why I was so willing to take that mission...it's not like I have anyone waiting for me here. All the kunoichi are out of my league, or they've got their eyes on someone else. It's amazing...I can tell who likes who, but when it comes to me, it's like trying to review a complete stranger. I know WHAT I like, and who has those qualities...but I know I can never have them...THEY would never have ME...**

Sakura smiled at him. "You're all done! You can go...do whatever it is you do...do I wanna know?" Sakura joked.

"Training. Brooding," Ekyt replied, ticking them off on his fingers as he said them.

Sakura shook her head. "What are we going to do with you?" Sakura ruffled his hair playfully, then bowed out of the room to tend to some other patients.

"Ekyt, you said you know a bo exercise. I looked at the scroll you showed me, but I've never seen this done before, would you mind helping me out with it?" Tenten asked, studying said scroll.

“No problem. It’s easier with two people, it was designed that way,” Ekyt replied.

Tsunade interjected. “Actually, you two will be working together on a mission. Team Gai has a mission, and it’s in need of a fourth person, since Gai himself is busy with S-ranked missions. Sakura and Naruto are getting a new member. After he gets broken in, we’ll work something out.”

Ekyt was thrilled to work with Lee, Neji, and Tenten. But he wondered why this guy was being put on Naruto’s team instead of him. **You’ve just gotten back in Tsunade-sama’s good graces, don’t screw it up now! Question it later!**

Kakashi met with Sai, the newest member of his team. Immediately, he knew his group was in for a rough ride.

If Ekyt is stoic, then this one is something beyond that...and not in a good way...Naruto isn’t going to like him...and Sakura will question why Ekyt didn’t get the spot...oh well, he’s a comrade now, no going back...

The boy smiled, but the smile seemed to so fake and insincere even Kakashi had a a hard time returning it.

“Hai!” Tenten finished the last strike of the kata (imaginary fight). “I see how this works!” she exclaimed, practicing the last strike in the air a few times.

Ekyt nodded. “I thought it might be helpful.”

“Aren’t you a genjutsu user?” Tenten asked, playing with her bo.

“That’s my specialty. Well, strictly speaking the specialty given to me, I don’t officially have one. I took five forms of taijutsu before I came here. And ninjutsu just kind of...happened.”

“That’s probably why they’re assigned you to our team,” Tenten said thoughtfully. “Neji and Lee are great at close range taijutsu, and I have my weapons, but none of us is overly adept at genjutsu or ninjutsu. Neji can SEE long range, but it’s a problem drawing people in to attack.”

Ekyt aimlessly spun his bo behind his back, catching it, then repeating the move on the opposite side. “It makes sense, I guess. I’ve worked with Lee a lot. But I’ve only fought against Neji, and I’ve trained with you here and there. Seems like I’ve worked with everyone,” Ekyt mused.

“Yeah...sorry about all that’s happened. It was great of you to take that mission. Especially after how you were treated...you must really care about something, or someone.”

Ekyt nodded. “I’ve got Konoha. That’s it, really. No doubt Naruto the walking mouth told you I’m shy around kunoichi. At the same time, there’s always been an attraction to kunoichi. Because, and forgive me for generalizing, you’re not material girls. And you can’t really be stereotyped. Where I...came from, the girls were...well, ‘easy’, and I want more than that. Something real...I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to rant, just thinking out loud.” Ekyt looked horrified at what he said. Or, more accurately, was horrified that he had been speaking to a kunoichi.

Tenten put a friendly hand on his shoulder. “I see why you and Lee train together, you both get excited about weird things. You NEEDED to say that. You know, I’m a kunoichi, and you just talked to me- what’s stopping you from talking to the others? Or me again? Just what about kunoichi make you so nervous?”

Ekyt shrugged, his ears reddening. “You’re a hybrid...female, and warrior...the two most deadly things in the world...”

Tenten laughed, even as she knew he was being completely serious.

“So, who are you going to go after?” Tenten said, out of nowhere. She couldn’t help but tease him a little. Ekyt somehow couldn’t meet her admittedly cute brown eyes.

“Me? No idea. I don’t know who’s single and who isn’t. Besides, it would take a very special girl to put up with me...” Ekyt looked up at the sky, having a great view from the roof they were on.

“A very special girl..” he repeated quietly, to himself.

“Hey...you okay?”

Tenten’s voice shook him out of his trance.

“I’m fine. Sorry about that. I was just thinking of...hell, actually,” Ekyt said with a laugh.

“hell?” Tenten repeated.

“In the form of a female...the girl Lee’s dating...her and I were...almost...well, boyfriend/girlfriend. Now, she’s kind of on a mission to make my life miserable. Since SHE dropped ME, I’m not entirely sure why.”

Tenten and Ekyt were joined by Lee and Neji.

“We have to leave right away. The Village of Kakushu is under heavy attack, and we’re needed for assistance.”

The four exchanged glances and took off.

Whoosh. Whoosh!

“So, Kakushu is a village with one Shinobi family, and that family is attacking the village?” Tenten asked.

“That’s what the report said. But I suspect it’s a trap of some kind. The Leaf Village has many enemies...” Neji said. He dropped back to keep pace with Ekyt, who was taking point.

“Ekyt, I’m glad you can work with me. But I’m going to warn you now...I will kill you if you hurt Tenten.” Ekyt nearly missed the branch he was aiming for. He righted himself and kicked off.

“What? Neji, it’s not like that. We worked on a kata, that was it. She DID ask me a couple questions, but trust me...I’m not a threat to you. Besides, I can hardly imagine Tenten putting up with me, outside of working with me.”

Neji stared at Ekyt, apparently agreeing with him. “You’re ANBU on this mission. We may need you to use torture genjutsu to extract information. Also, think of a way to draw people into attack range against Lee and I. That’s why Lee requested you. I had my doubts, but Lee was adamant.”

Neji turned to stare at Ekyt, when Ekyt saw something. He squinted into Neji’s hitai-ate. He thought he saw a figure moving with them.

“Neji, use your Byakugan. To my left, I saw a figure in the reflection of your hitai-ate.”

Neji nodded. “Get up to Lee and Tenten, and watch out for them. If I see anything, I’ll report it. If, for whatever reason I’m delayed...you lead.”

Ekyt nodded his understanding, and sped up to Lee and Tenten.

“Byakugan!” Neji’s eyes powered up, and he began to scan the area.

Neji immediately spotted a figure.

“No headband...family crest...yes. That is the crest belonging to the attacking family. The Akamuso...” Before Neji could say more, he was unconscious.

“I THOUGHT this one would fall for that. Let’s take him back with us, his little rat pack will be at the village soon enough.”

15 - Puppets: Toys Run Amok

Ekyt, Tenten, and Lee moved on in silence.

“Neji should have caught up by now...” Tenten said, looking over her shoulder with a worried glance.

“If you DID see an enemy, perhaps we should assist Neji...” Lee questioned. Ekyt shook his head.

“We’re going to get him back. But going back would be walking into a trap. If it caught Neji...” Ekyt didn’t need to finish that sentence. They all knew that if a jonin got caught in a trap like that, they would be easy bait.

“Heads up!” Ekyt called. He was in his ANBU gear. He pushed ahead of the others and drew his sword overhead. He sliced at what appeared to be nothing. But then shreds of what looked like fishing line fell.

“A net? They WERE expecting a trap...” Lee pushed up next to Ekyt.

“Damn! Jump!” Tenten called. The three leapt in separate directions, avoiding the exploding tags that were under their feet.

“Stand back!” Tenten called. She threw a well-placed kunai at a wire she had found. The trap sprung. Inches away from the faces of the three, knives whizzed by.

“Someone’s expecting us...” Lee speculated.

“That, or this village is paranoid. They only have one Shinobi family, and one that’s been falling apart the last generation or so. They need some kind of protection...at this point, one is as likely as the other...I think we’d better hurry. If we do, maybe we can set a few traps of our own before Neji’s captors get there. They’ll be heading back to their village with him, demanding money or information. They’re not getting either, and we’re getting Neji back. We’re going to have our cake and eat it, too,” Ekyt muttered grimly. He didn’t look thrilled at the situation. He was the lowest ranked member, and Neji telling him to lead seemed like a...challenge. But not really a good challenge. It was as if Neji hadn’t been thinking clearly, or he wanted the mission to fail. Ekyt let his mind ponder that as the three continued to press forward. **Orders? No, too elaborate...Either way, if I’m the leader, we ARE getting Neji back, jerk or not. Especially for Tenten’s sake. The village needs her, and she needs Neji.**

“I refuse, ‘tabeyo!” Naruto was being stubborn. He was doing what came naturally, in other words.

“I don’t like it either Naruto, but there’s no choice...” Sakura tried to smile comfotingly at the new guy, but he was too creepy. She couldn’t even fake it.

Sai kept smiling. It was a misplaced smile, but he was trying. Emotions don’t come easy to someone who has lived for years, training not to show them. The smile didn’t even waver when Naruto circled him, looking him up and down.

“I don’t see the big deal, he’s not so great!” Naruto snorted. Kakashi and Sakura rolled their eyes.

“Yeah, you’re right, I’m no big deal. Just like your dick,” Sai replied. Sakura blushed and stifled a giggle, while Kakashi immediately seized the back of Naruto’s jacket to stop him from attacking.

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?! LEAVE MY DICK OUT OF THIS!!!”

Sakura blushed even more. **Naruto, don’t talk so loud!**

“Well, now you’re all acquainted. It’s time for a mission, I think. Let’s go see what Lady Tsunade has for us.” Kakashi indicated with his head that his team should follow him.

“Hopefully it’s a better team mate, ‘tabeyo!” Naruto muttered to Sakura.

The village seemed strangely...pleasant.

"Th-there's nothing wrong here!" Tenten exclaimed.

"You are right! It is peaceful! But why would we be summoned to a peaceful village?" Lee wondered.

Ekyt looked closely at the people walking by. Their faces seemed...wrong...insincere. Like the guy Naruto had complained about. Their smiles were TOO big. And they didn't waver, at all. Ekyt turned to Lee.

"Lee, attack me. I want to see what the deal is here. Act as though you'll kill me. If someone puts you in danger, get out of the way. Tenten, you observe. Something isn't right here."

As he suspected, nothing happened when Lee attacked. The people kept smiling and moving. Some people even walked by more than once.

"Whatever is wrong, we should see the leader of this place," Tenten said thoughtfully.

"Yes, this is too strange. Someone must have a controlling effect over these people," Lee added.

Ekyt agreed. "It's most likely the biggest building in the village that we need...that one up on the hill might be it. It looks fortified. Compared to the village itself, it looks impenetrable. And I...wait." Ekyt saw something new. A tail? On a human? It moved oddly, as though segmented. As if it didn't have muscle, or bones...

"They're puppets," Ekyt muttered. "A bunch of...puppets..."

"Pissed off puppets!" Tenten shouted. The puppets that had been wearing those sickening smiles seconds earlier were now grinning- at Lee, Tenten, and Ekyt. Soon, they swarmed, and piled on. One, with an explosive on it's back, detonated.

BLAM!!!

Neji woke up, pissed at himself for losing like that. He had gotten jumped. He focused so hard on the far away figure, that the close figure eluded him. Of course, someone he deemed untrustworthy pointed out the problem, that made him look harder. **I over looked...how could I fall for that? Now I'm trapped...I hope the others had the good sense not to fall into the same trap. I'll have to trust that moron for now, and hope that Lee and Tenten are enough to swat any stupid moves on his part. Now, weaknesses...I'm outnumbered, and tied up. Chakra-laced rope. For now, I'd better play their game...in the mean time, I'll focus my chakra...**

Ekyt saw the puppets. As they piled on, he headbutted one, while Lee and Tenten fought wildly. He made handsigns as fast as he could. He saw the one laced with explosives coming and cursed out loud. "shoot! No choice now! Great Fire Release: Dragon's Encampment Wall!"

Tongues of fire shot up between Tenten, Lee, and Ekyt, separating them from the puppets. The fire detonated the puppet's explosive early, saving them. But they were still outnumbered.

"Lee, Tenten, go! Check out the tower! Someone's controlling these damn things! I'll hold them off and find Neji!" Ekyt called to the team.

"Right!" Lee said. He didn't want to leave Ekyt alone, but he knew there was no other choice.

"A-are you sure? There's so many!" Tenten exclaimed.

Ekyt nodded. He squared off against the puppets. "I'm the only one with the jutsus to handle these wooden bastards. Besides, I made a promise to Neji...go!"

Ekyt used taijutsu as long as he could, but soon learned it was a fruitless battle. These things had to be destroyed to be stopped. If you broke one in half, it continued to attack by biting.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu! Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation! Dragon’s Path Jutsu!”

While three clones attacked with fire (great for setting pissed-off puppets ablaze), the third jutsu allowed Ekyt to run along the fire. He wanted the high ground. That thought was put to rest when his leg was grabbed. A firm tug sent him spilling to the ground. His clones destroyed the one that had grabbed him, but trying to get back on the fire would be fruitless. It was time to be less subtle. As subtle as an explosion.

Lee and Tenten ran toward the castle, batting aside the occasional puppet. To their surprise, they met little resistance, and met none at the castle doors.

“It is like an invitation...a trap?” Lee said aloud.

“Maybe...should we wait for Ekyt?” Tenten replied.

“If we do not stop whoever is controlling those puppets, Ekyt-san is done for! And we do not know about Neji-san...I believe we should attack, and hope they are both alright!”

At Neji’s name, Tenten agreed. **For Neji...Ekyt-kun, you take care of yourself, too...**

Neji focused his chakra, and, all at once, released a burst from everywhere!

“What the hell?” his captors had time to say.

“Eight Triagrams two palms..four palms...eight palms...sixteen palms....thirty-two palms...sixty-four palms...one hundred twenty-eight palms!”

In a matter of seconds, Neji had completely ruined his assailants. He left them, barely alive, where they had fallen.

“I hope that things aren’t TOO screwed up. Where would I go if I was my team...Byakugan!” Neji began to scan the horizon. He spotted the castle that Tenten and Lee were at.

“There!” he decided.

Ekyt leapt up high. “Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Three clones accompanied him now. All four were back to back. Exploding tags attached to kunai rained down, numbering fifty in all. They fell in an intricate pattern. From above, Ekyt smiled at his ‘work of art.’ **That Deidara clown was right...art IS a bang!** The tags had fallen into the shape of a Konoha Leaf. Ekyt’s clones disappeared as he shouted the order:

“Remote Detonation Jutsu!”

KABLAM!!!

The ground rocked with the force of the explosions. All the puppets that had been attacking Ekyt were in pieces, shattered and charred beyond recognition. Ekyt landed on the ground, paralyzed by a lack of chakra. He still had his stamina. That would have to get him to that castle, at least. **Damn it...if Neji hadn’t gotten me riled up, I would have been more careful with my chakra...No, this is my fault, I can’t blame Neji. He is what he is. I got careless. But at least those damn puppets are gone. That, and about 20 meters around them. I’d better leave, quickly. If someone decides to smoke, the residue in the air will light up, big time. I’m not going to be unarmed, though, maybe I can bluff my way out of any trouble if I use those...**

Ekyt drew the Striking Serpent Blades from a summoning scroll and ran toward the castle.

Tenten and Lee were just about to go inside when Neji zipped up from one side, and Ekyt from the other.

“You’re both alright!” Tenten exclaimed. Neji didn’t have a scratch on him, and Tenten’s check for poison showed nothing.

Ekyt nodded to Neji, deferring command back to him.

“And why were you not with them?” Neji demanded.

Ekyt narrowed his eyes. “I was fighting...this whole village...puppets. I told them to go ahead. I blew the puppets up.”

Neji stared at Ekyt harshly. “At any rate, we have a mission to complete, and- what the hell?”

The castle doors burst open.

“Heroes!” was the repeated word. These were real people, swamping the four. One man was allowed a path to the front. Everyone bowed in deference to him.

“I am Yugo Akashira, the Elder of these people. You four are responsible for destroying our nation’s defenses...”

“The four of us are not...he is,” Neji pointed at Ekyt.

“I don’t deny it. Your little toys went haywire and attacked,” Ekyt said, his tone both respectful and angry.

“Of course! The puppets were not controlled by us! This castle was our last stronghold. Through the top turret, we saw you (Neji) defeat those oppressing us. The two of you (Lee and Tenten) broke the jutsu on our castle. The jutsu was meant to keep up in, not to keep others out. Your very presence broke it. And you (Ekyt) destroyed the minions of our oppressors. Our message to the Hidden Leaf was received, then. Thank you all for coming. Please, come in, and let our nurses have a look at you.”

The castle was grand, though it was clear it was crowded at the moment. Ekyt was the only one banged up. He was semi-forced into a bed and immediately worked on by two nurses. Lee walked to his bedside, looking disdainfully at Neji.

“All that you have done...and this is how you are repaid. Even though you are not a member of our squad, we should have shared your pain.” Lee shook his head. “It is not right that you are not getting credit. Neji was captured, and you led this mission. He did not. It should be you in his place, taking the payment...”

Ekyt smirked, then sat up. “Neji dislikes me. That’s fine. As long as he can work with me. Besides...I kept my promise to him. ‘If you hurt Tenten, I’ll kill you’, that was what he said. Well, mission accomplished.”

The four traveled back to the Leaf Village, no incidents on the way this time. Ekyt was silent almost the entire trip. His eyes were half-lidded, giving him a Kakashi-ish look. Really, Ekyt was thinking. Something didn’t feel right. But he couldn’t figure out what. It took him the entire trip home to think of what it could even remotely be.

Do I miss...working for others? The Sand Village? Kankuro and Gaara treated me nicely...and the Sound Village...if Orochimaru hadn’t come so close to biting me, I would still be on that mission, digging up info on them. As it is, I almost regret saying anything. I was never mistreated. They kept Chakaro away from me, and I could have learned a lot from Kabuto, and been near my

cousin, Kimimaro. Of course, I mean nothing to Kimimaro. And Kabuto...he's skilled, but you can't trust him. He's not above healing his enemies if he respects them, and that sort of honor is rare. And now, where am I? The Leaf Village. I love the people. Tsunade-sama doesn't like me. I have no team, no sensei, and this is the first mission I've had that wasn't D-ranked, save for that S-ranked infiltration, in a long time. Am I waiting around, hoping for the promotion and love I want? I can't deny it anymore, I have a lot of regrets. And I deserve most of them...

Neji's voice broke the silence.

"You will deliver the report to the Hokage-sama. My team and I need to rest," Neji added the 'team' part smugly. Ekyt stared back, his expression unchanged.

"Whatever. I don't mind," Ekyt replied. Neji actually turned around and leapt so he was even with Ekyt as they jumped through the trees.

"I expect an accurate report, not some daydream. After all, it's MY name on this mission. You're a footnote," Neji added.

At this, Ekyt turned his head.

"If you say so. Did I mention that Tenten and Lee are talented? You're lucky to have a squad like that..."

"Hmph," Neji said.

"You didn't let me finish," Ekyt protested, smiling. "You lucky to have a squad like that because they can carry you and make up for your mistakes. I don't have that luxury. I don't have the support of a team. Or a sensei. Like I said, you're lucky." With that, Ekyt pushed off from the branch, leaving Neji to wonder if he had just been insulted.

There was little time for rest when they got back. For Ekyt, anyway. He delivered his report.

"You did good work. And it's good to have you back. And I-" Tsunade was cut off in mid sentence. A messenger bird from Sunagakure had flown in and landed on Tsunade's shoulder. She opened the pouch on it's leg and read the scroll. Her eyes grew wide.

"Ekyt...Get Team Kakashi! They'll be meeting at the gates in five minutes! Give this scroll to Kakashi. You're to accompany them! Don't ask questions, go!" Tsunade ordered.

"Understood!" Ekyt leapt out the window and took off. He reached into his pouch of tools and popped a rations pill. He needed chakra, and now, if Tsunade's note was any indication.

Sakura was the one who say Ekyt coming.

"Hey, it's Ekyt-kun! He's got something!"

Sai looked up, no readable expression on his face. "So that's the Dragon Boy..."

Naruto, seeing a chance to annoy Sai, piped up.

"That's right, 'tabeyo! And he'll kick your @\$\$, so don't talk about...that again." Naruto finished lamely.

"Oh, your tiny dick? Don't worry, I won't." Sai was still watching Ekyt and didn't see Naruto's fit of anger. Kakashi grabbed him by the back of his jacket and held him still. (I'm gonna kill him, dattebayo! Let go, sensei! He's talking about my dick again!)

Ekyt was them and came in for a landing.

"For you, Kakashi-sensei! Urgent from Sunagakure!" Ekyt panted, waiting for the rations pill to take

effect. He felt his chakra return.

“Ekyt-kun, what happened to you?” Sakura asked as Kakashi read the scroll.

“Little fight...damn puppets, I hate them,” Ekyt muttered. Sakura giggled as she healed a small cut on his cheek.

“I’m sure there’s a great story behind that...” she said. Then she frowned, seeing burn marks on his arms. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m alright. Is Sunagakure alright is my worry,” Ekyt replied. He sounded worried. Tsunade was sending him with Team Kakashi, something she had avoided studiously for a long time.

“Ekyt...Naruto...you two are in direct danger, but Tsunade seemed to think you’d ignore orders if they were ‘stay away’. Sunagakure is near collapse from the Akatsuki. Two members. One has puppets, the other explosives. A third is fighting with the Kazekage, and a fourth with Kankuro. Our job is to assist before they fall. Let’s hurry this up...”

16 - Sunagakure Under Siege!

Gaara's sand flew through the air and sent Deidara flying. The blonde artist landed hard, but rolled up to his feet immediately, evading another helping of sand.

Kankuro's puppets tangled with Sasori, in what was an incredible display of puppetry. Sasori was caught somewhat unprepared. He hadn't expected another puppet master to be waiting, much less someone as skilled as Kankuro. He couldn't use his most powerful jutsus, not just yet.

Kisame and Itachi waited. They had seen the messenger bird, and they knew it's likely destination. And they also knew who would be coming.

"It's a shame we have to capture, instead of kill," Kisame remarked. "It's always a pain leaving these people alive."

Itachi's Sharingan glowed as he spoke. "If we can't possess the city, we'll destroy it. The demon fox...it would take both of us giving our lives to kill it. Capturing it is the safer option."

Kisame shot a sideways glance at Itachi. "I know, I know...I'll just hope for a good fight. But if it's those brats again...well, I can content myself with killing everyone we DON'T need." Kisame gave his sword an affectionate pat.

"They aren't far...they'll be rushing if the Village is going to fall..."

"Good point!" Kakashi popped up from under the ground and grabbed Itachi.

"Now, Naruto!"

Naruto was already in the stages of using his signature move.

"Rasengan!" he shouted, driving the ball of swirling chakra into Itachi's stomach. Itachi went sailing. He had actually been hit by that attack. With his attention diverted, he hadn't considered Kakashi coming from underneath.

Kisame took up his sword and swung at Kakashi. The only one in position to block was Ekyt, who used the Striking Serpent Blades to do just that.

"Ah! You little bastard! You were lucky before, toying with us the way you did! We've got a BINGO book of our own, and you're in it!" Kisame rolled his sword, aiming for the top of Ekyt's head. Ekyt stepped to the side and feigned a kick to the leg. Kisame stepped back, again in line with Ekyt's body. Ekyt had the speed advantage- or he thought so. As he stabbed with both swords, he found a foot cracking him in the stomach. It hit him precisely three inches below his navel, which forced him to bend over.

shoot! He must be good if he can hit that spot with an off-hand kick like that. I'm wide open. I'd better block, or something, or I'm gonna get killed A hard kick to the face sent Ekyt sailing backward. His lip was cut, but that was the extent of the damage.

"Stop the village from falling, you outnumber them! I'll stall the guy with the little fork here," Ekyt called to the others. Kisame was supremely insulted.

"To call my blade a 'little fork', you've just signed your own death warrant!" Kisame cut downward.

Ekyt leapt up and back, making an handsign as he went. As soon as he landed, Ekyt used a new jutsu: His Triple Summoning Jutsu. Not overly clever, but useful.

Holly, Umisu, and Shuurai all landed around him.

“Get the villagers to safety, keep them away from the battle!” Ekyt ordered, while Kisame watched, apparently interested.

“What about you, boss?” Holly asked, pawing the ground nervously.

“I’ll be fine, I always am. For now, these others are at risk. Anyone without a headband, get them out of here, alright? At the first hint of danger, protect yourselves, too.”

The three animals ran/slithered/jumped off to do just that.

Meanwhile, Kisame was ready to attack. Ekyt again leapt out of the way, on top of a Sand Village building.

“Dance of the Sick Moon!”

Ekyt and two clones raced toward Kisame at incredible speed. The clones and Ekyt moved in an intricate pattern, faster than normal eyes could follow. Kisame’s sword was long enough to block his entire body, and the most Ekyt did was force Kisame back two steps. Kisame laughed.

“You’ve got guts, kid, I’ll give you that! You’re a little short in the brain department if you think your little tricks are going to save you!”

Ekyt found himself agreeing.

Deidara dug into his bag for more clay, finding himself running low.

“Almost out, un? Well, I’ll make do.” The mouth on his remaining arm (Other was destroyed by Gaara) lapped up the clay greedily, infused it with chakra, then spat it back out. Deidara formed a small bird, and sent it at Gaara. Nonplussed, Gaara’s sand blocked the explosion.

“I won’t let my Village fall,” Gaara told Deidara.

“As if you had a choice in the matter, un,” Deidara responded cockily. Then he saw Gaara hold his hand out in a familiar way. **Like when he ruined my arm.** It was then Deidara noticed that sand had crept up around his legs.

“Desert Coffin!” Gaara closed his hand. In the nick of time, Deidara used a replacement jutsu. As soon as he could, he molded three more birds out of clay. Faster ones, harder for that sand to hit.

“Katsu!” he called, causing the birds to explode. Gaara’s Ultimate Defense sand flared up, protecting him from harm. He followed up by manipulating his sand to attack from below and right, forcing Deidara to back up or go to the left and up. Either way, Gaara was ready for him.

“Sand Shuriken!” Countless sand shuriken filled the air. Deidara hadn’t anticipated this. He covered up and tried to make sure nothing vital was hit. He felt a lot of stings, but none vital.

Unfortunately for him, he was out of clay. **Where is Master Sasori? He’s the one whose late this time! If he doesn’t get here soon, I’ve got to pull out.** Deidara already knew that if Sasori hadn’t come yet, he wouldn’t in time, and probably needed help. He ran from the room, evading Gaara’s sand one more time. Gaara’s chakra was almost drained, so he didn’t pursue. He had taken the threat out of the man, Baki could finish Deidara if they crossed paths. Most anyone could without that clay and zero chakra.

Sasori hadn’t expected another puppet master. Kankuro had improved greatly, and was wielding the Crow and the Ant at the same time. While Sasori tried to find an opening, he was hit from behind by a short, blunted sword, cracking his puppet body.

“You are an artist as well!” Sai said, smiling his insincere smile. “Your works are very nice. I would like it very much if you saw mine.” At that point, Sai’s drawings came to life and leapt on Sasori. The ink

became blotted when Sasori's puppets counter-attacked. But the chakra-infused ink also inhibited his puppet's movements. The ink sunk into the joints, forcing Sasori to use more force to make them work, and even then, the puppet's movements were delayed. Soon, he was overcome by Kankuro's skilled puppetry. In anger, he threw a smoke bomb down, allowing him to escape.

Ekyt cut toward Kisame, then drew back across the same line. Kisame simply blocked down with one hand, and tagged Ekyt with the other.

"Time to end this...you've been fun, kid, but you've got no demon to save you, and your chakra isn't going to help. My 'little butter knife', as you called it, can absorb chakra. Game over, and checkmate, wimp!" He slashed Ekyt across the stomach as Ekyt leapt backward. He missed anything vital, and didn't get deep, but it gave him the opening he needed. With his huge amount of chakra reinforcing the strike, Kisame backhanded Ekyt one more time, sending him through a wall of sand and rocks. The rocks crumbled, then fell on the unconscious Leaf Shinobi. One arm stuck out of the rubble, and it wasn't moving.

"That's one of those little punks down. Now, I- what?" Kisame turned at the sound of running.

"RASENGAN!" Naruto hit Kisame full-force. He didn't even stop to see what damage he had done. Kisame skidded 50 meters away. Naruto's anger at a friend being hurt had lent him some power from the demon fox.

"Sakura! Over here! This is important!"

Sakura stabilized her current patient and ran to where Naruto was pointing.

"Who-who's under there?" Sakura stammered. Naruto didn't reply.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto and the clones, along with Sakura, began to clear away the rubble. In horror, Sakura soon saw who was buried. Ekyt's mask was torn away, with blood flowing close to freely from his mouth, along with a slash across his stomach. In a panic, she leapt down next to him and felt for a pulse.

17 - Feelings (Almost) Revealed

She felt one, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Naruto, find out where the hospital is. I can stabilize him enough to make him ambulatory, but if he doesn’t get treated...” Sakura looked down, their friend still unmoving. With shaking hands, she sheathed his swords and put them back inside the summoning scroll. **Broken ribs...fractured arm...he got lucky, for something like that. He must have had his chakra focused at his feet and back. If he hadn’t, this would be a lot worse.** Sakura took off his hitai-ate and put a washcloth on Ekyt’s forehead. She had dipped it in some pain relieving medication. All she could do was make the boy somewhat comfortable.

Sakura knelt there for what felt like hours. In reality, ten minutes had passed before Kakashi rushed over.

“Is he alive?”

Sakura nodded, blinking back tears of worry. “There’s so much blood, sensei...I did the best I could, but he might have lost too much...”

Kakashi put a hand on Sakura’s shoulder as he knelt down.

“Sakura, you did your best...he did his. That’s all anyone can ask. His sacrifice saved the lives of innocent people. People you treated, lives you saved. If he doesn’t make it...you have to understand: It wasn’t your fault. It’s in the nature of the Shinobi, and yes, the samurai, to put their honor over their life. And to him, honor means other’s lives.”

Sakura nodded her head, understanding, but not accepting. She continued to watch him until the Sand Village medic-nin got him on a stretcher. Sakura followed them, knowing she could assist. If not Ekyt, she could help others. She had seen teammates close to death before, but that was mostly after they’d been healed. And besides that, she knew Ekyt’s thought process. **He’s going to beat himself up over losing...just like always...no wonder he and Lee are friends. I hope he’s alright...**

Itachi, Deidara, Sasori, and Kisame rushed away from Sunagakure. No pursuit squads were sent. After they had covered enough ground, they replaced their hats and spoke in low voices.

“Never before have I been in a raid with such little damage!” Kisame complained.

“That Kazekage brat has gotten stronger since we last fought, un. Without that demon, he thinks more clearly.”

“That is your fault for not being more prepared, Deidara,” Sasori said with a sideways glance. Deidara was annoyed by this, and for once, dropped the ‘Master’ title he had bestowed to Sasori.

“Oh, and your battle was more successful, un? Only one of us can claim victory today,” Deidara shot back

Kisame shrugged. “If the little brat hadn’t tried to out-sword me, he might have had a chance. I was disappointed. I wanted to see how my Samehada would have stood up against his famed ‘Emotional Chakra’. He didn’t summon it, which surprises me. Itachi, is that information of any use to us?”

Itachi nodded silently. “His chakra is dangerous, but he has to feeling a certain emotion strongly, or be completely out of his regular chakra. Kisame, you avoided insulting him or attacking someone he cared about. And he still had chakra left when you defeated him. The next time we face him, he must be removed early, either by death, or by focusing on him. He came close to sealing my Sharingan. He’s a

threat, and not to be taken lightly. But the greatest threat is still the demon fox. This plan was not completely in vain, we learned more than they know about them. And knowledge IS what we came for, after all.”

“I still don’t understand why we couldn’t have killed those other brats right away. We let them become threats,” Kisame complained.

“But now we know just how far their power extends. And you DID get to kill one, Kisame, don’t complain. My puppets are damaged, it’s going to take days to repair them. That damn ink...that artist kid is a problem. He’s sharp. Their medic, the girl there, and with Kakashi leading them, there’s no telling what damage they could have done if they had decided to pursue us. Their mission must have ended with stopping the village from falling. It’ll be interesting to see what measures they will take to protect their allies.”

“That IF the leader decides Sunagakure is still a worthy target. We have their demon. Konoha is too strong...but there are other demons and other threats. It will all fall on the leader.”

Ekyt felt himself being moved, but couldn’t do anything about it. He was aching, but he knew the pain would go away. He didn’t fear dying, for some reason he couldn’t explain. He just knew it wasn’t going to happen, not right now.

If I hadn’t focused my chakra, that would have been a lot worse...losing that fight was bad enough...it never occurred to me before, but I’ve never truly lost a fight, until now. Was all my work meaningless, my training worth? The endless studying? No, if it weren’t for that, I would be dead right now. It’s a sign...I need to work harder...as soon as I can, I know what I’m going to do.

Ekyt heard voices.

“Out of the way! He’s critical! Get out of the way!”

“Move aside! Damnit, move!”

“Pulse is normal, but those ribs are nearing internal organs!”

“Hurry up, damnit!”

Ekyt considered the voices, but didn’t react to them. He opened his eyes slightly, just enough to look around.

Hospital...must be in Sunagakure still. Probably wouldn’t have made it to Konoha.

Sakura left the room, once she was sure Ekyt was stable for the moment. Naruto, Kakashi, and Sai were waiting for information. Well, Naruto was. Kakashi was reading, and Sai was drawing a picture.

“How is he? Is he dead?! Tell me he’s alive?! Come on, Sakura!” Naruto wanted to know.

“He’s fine for the moment...well, physically,” Sakura replied, hedging the question. She caught a glance of what Sai was drawing. Her eyes widened in shock and anger. **He can’t be that much of an asshole! He just can’t!**

Sai dipped his brush in the ink again, and made one more curve. The picture was finished. He looked at it without smiling, until he saw Sakura. THEN he broke into one of his trademark fake smiles. She was anything but smiling.

“YOU MISERABLE BASTARD! HOW COULD YOU DRAW THAT?!” Upon it’s creator being punched, the drawing went sailing. Naruto caught it, and his eyes turned with anger. His hands shook as he looked at the picture, which was grotesque, to say the least.

It was a picture of Ekyt arching through the air, a huge cut across his stomach, blood coming from his

mouth. Only the sword that did the damage was visible, though it was obvious it was Kisame's figure that was the dark silhouette. It was Ekyt's mangled body that had enraged Naruto and Sakura. Kakashi hid his disgust and pulled Naruto and Sakura off.

"Come on, it's not worth fighting over. It's just a picture. Be concerned with the real thing," Kakashi urged/ordered.

"Sensei, I don't want to travel with this piece of shoot! Why don't you go home with him and Naruto, and I'll stay here? I need to cool off, because right now, I'd kill him. If Ekyt-kun dies, I don't want him to be in a strange place, with only strangers watching him. They don't know him, and they don't care if he dies."

Kakashi nodded slowly. "If you feel that strongly Sakura, you can stay in Sunagakure. How long before Ekyt will be allowed to travel?"

"Just a day or two, sensei. Enough time for me to cool down," Sakura muttered.

Sai dusted himself off. "I didn't mean to offend you. I thought their battle was artistic. I'm sorry my drawing upset you..."

"YOU THINK THAT'S GONNA MAKE EVERYTHING OKAY?" Naruto shouted. "YOU DON'T HAVE A CLUE 'TABEYO!"

Sai looked at Naruto and smiled. "And you don't have a dick." Naruto stopped dead. How the hell do you counter that? Naruto would ponder that all the way home. About three hours later, his mind came up with the perfect response. By then, it was too late to be effective (Don't you hate that?! -NG)

Ekyt woke up, feeling the sensation of a genjutsu leaving him. The pain of surgery hit him, but not hard. He didn't feel any drugs in him, so he guessed the damage didn't go much beyond his ribs and arm. With good medic-nin, those problems disappeared quickly, thanks to chakra and surgery. Ekyt tested his arm, finding little pain. A good sign. It was then he saw Sakura standing by the window, looking troubled. Ekyt hadn't planned on saying it, but he couldn't help but voice his surprise.

"Sakura?" he said in disbelief. **She stayed...to be with me? Does this mean she likes me? Or she knows how I feel? If nothing else, she cares enough to hang around while I heal. As if I needed another reason to like her.**

Sakura turned at her name, a surprised look on her face.

"You're awake already? You were supposed to be out for another hour! How are you feeling?" Sakura came and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I don't feel much pain. I vaguely remember I have you to thank for that."

Sakura blushed. "Well, it's my job. I'm just glad you're alright."

Ekyt looked around. "The others aren't around?"

"They went home. Sai was being an asshole, so I decided to stay here and cool down, not to mention keep an eye on you. Because I know you too well..."

Ekyt gulped. **She DOES know how I feel about her. Good God, I might have a relapse here. What's she gonna say?**

"...I know you too well. If I wasn't here to physically stop you, you'd be out of bed getting missions!"

(NOTE: Imagine the black lines of doom and a huge sweatdrop on Ekyt's face) "Yeah, you're right," he said, blushing at his own stupidity. **Getting my hopes up, that's not like me! Stop doing that to yourself, the falls a lot shorter if you don't build yourself up!**

"I appreciate it. I'm in no rush to go back," Ekyt said. **Damn, I didn't want to say that out loud!**

At this, Sakura inched closer to him. "Something was wrong before this. And now, the way your mind works, you're upset that you lost that fight. I don't know what was wrong before, why you left Konoha so easily. Mission or not, I know you would have fought harder than that. Konoha still means something

to you. The people. Maybe not all of them, but a lot of them mean a lot to you. But losing this fight...you've got to understand, even Gai-sensei had a hard time with him. Your fight saved precious lives. There were hundreds of people behind you. If you hadn't fought, they'd be dead. You'd be alive, in a sense. But in another, how well would you be? I know how your conscience treats you. You'd be eating yourself alive. Right now, you're more at peace than I've seen you in weeks. But there's still a lot bothering you." Sakura reached over, thinking nothing of it, and grabbed Ekyt's hand. Immediately, red sprang up under Ekyt's patched mask. It stayed, even as the bearer of the blush realized what was going on. **She holds patients hands...that's all it is. Why do I keep hoping for something more.**

"I hope you know you can talk to me...about anything. I will be there for you, the way you have been for me. The dreams I had, fighting Itachi, fighting Sasuke, you, and Naruto, and Kakashi-sensei, all of you have been behind me. In the chunin exams, when I had to fight Sasuke (See previous fics), you made me think I had a chance. You helped me get the strength I needed to fight Sasuke, instead of worshipping him. And you've never asked anything in return. You're really a special boy."

Ekyt bowed his head, and looked away. **I should tell her now. Just say it. 'I think I'm in love with you'... 'I love you'...**

"Did you say something, Ekyt?" Sakura questioned, brow furrowed in concentration.

"Ah, nothing, nothing, he he!" Ekyt cursed himself for panicking. **It's a girl, not a demon! You weren't afraid of that Kisame dipshoot, WHY are you afraid of a kunoichi that's being nice to you?**

"You've only been down a day, so you can- hey, get down!" Sakura tried to talk Ekyt off of the roof.

"Don't jump!"

Ekyt laughed. "I'm not going to jump. It's nice out here. There's a breeze today. Sunagakure is beautiful, in it's own way. I thought about staying. I've thought about it more than once. At least until I had a team, and chunin status. But I could never leave Konoha...it would take something awful to drive me away. Unfortunately, Tsunade and Ebisu might just be it," Ekyt said with a sigh. He sat leaned against the rough surface of the wall, absently picking sand off it with his fingers.

Sakura climbed out next to him. **He's been spending too much time with Hayate-sensei. They're starting to sound and look alike! Or has he always been like that?**

"Do you really feel that way? Ebisu rubs EVERYONE the wrong way. And Lady Tsunade doesn't hate you, she hates the situation that you were put in. But, that's not a good enough reason to leave us. At least tell me this: You met with Master Sarutobi, what did he say.

Ekyt froze up.

Ekyt: Master Sarutobi...(breaks down, crying) What will it take? I'll never be successful, I'll never be a jonin! No matter how hard I work, or how respectful I am, I'm always held back! I love Konoha and all it stands for, but I can't serve it any better than this the way I am now! How much more will it ask of me? I have no girl to comfort me, no parents to complain to...I've remained stoic and distant for four years, and here I am, cracking in front of you! What kind of warrior breaks down and cries over some depression?

Sarutobi: Ekyt, your metaphorical sword is difficult to wield. You remain stoic, but when you DO show emotions, you show them powerfully, in the form of chakra. It's your nature. I wish more people had your burden. There would be less war, and more understanding. You, much like Team 7, have a burden to carry, and it seems that it's your kekkai genkai. It won't go away, Ekyt. If you learn to channel it's power, you will be one of the strongest Shinobi ever to wear that

hitai-ate.

Ekyt: Master...what about Team 7? What's their burden?

Sarutobi: (Puffs on pipe, looking out over deck) I believe the three are destined to be legendary. Sakura has learned from Tsunade, Naruto has been tutored by Jiraiya, and Sasuke has chosen Orochimaru's path.

Ekyt: How are our burden's similar? I'm struggling to become chunin, and all of them are going to be legendary?

Sarutobi: They were great because of their guidance...they had my tutelage, and I gave them all the knowledge and love I could. Two embraced that love, one rejected it. But all three were naturally brilliant.

Ekyt: I...still don't understand, Master...

Sarutobi: Everyone who becomes legendary has people who have helped them. They're footprints in the ground are rarely alone, there is always a second set, belonging to a mortal who helped them become strong. And you, Ekyt, might very well be that person.

Ekyt: But the burden...I'm going this alone, they have each other, and Kakashi-sensei...I don't have any steadfast help, not like that...It could make all the difference.

Sarutobi: It must be frustrating...I have felt frustration. Learning a new jutsu, teaching my students, or fighting Orochimaru. Nothing ever goes as planned. In each case, I had a stepping stone that led me to victory. For the jutsu, a scroll. For teaching, the jutsu I learned from the scroll. And for fighting Orochimaru: the time I spent teaching him. Everything and everyone serves a purpose, Ekyt. Yours has yet to be revealed. But I have little doubt that your fate is intertwined with that of Sakura Haruno's and Naruto Uzumaki's.

Ekyt: So...that means I won't be remembered, like a legend? I'll help them get there, but I'll die in obscurity?"

Sarutobi: (laughs) No. Actually, I think of you as a Kakashi of sorts. Kakashi will someday be legendary. It wouldn't surprise me if he became hokage himself someday.

Ekyt: I'll help them, then. Sakura and Naruto. Master, I've seen it too. There's some...something ahead, isn't there. Some danger. Orochimaru? The Akatsuki? Both?

Sarutobi: (Smiles) That is why you will be remembered, Ekyt. You can read the signs just as well as anyone. If nothing else, your loyalty will make you legendary. Naruto and Sakura will come to turn to you. And you, of course, to them...

Ekyt gulped. "It was about my kekkai genkai and my emotions. He says I'm stuck with them." **Lame! You dickhead! Well, you've got your chance now: Tell Sakura how you feel! Do it! Just say it! If**

she says no, you stay in Sunagakure! If she says yes, you live happily ever after! Come on, grow a set, and say it! Sakura scolding him interrupted that thought. Ekyt realized he would have a horrible time saying those words to Sakura.

“Come on, get back in your room. If you’re well enough to be out here, you’re well enough to go home.” As soon as she said it, Sakura knew it was a mistake.

“I’m ready to go! I’ve traveled with worse. Really, I’m fine. I’d rather be in Konoha. Just let me pay my respect to the doctor and nurses, and the Kazekage...”

18 - Time Passes

Gaara and Kankuro were discussing the recent invasion when Baki escorted Ekyt and Sakura to them in a Sunagakure conference room.

“Out of bed already?” Kankuro questioned. “Hmph, you must be tougher than I used to think.”

Gaara stood up. “It seems I...and Sunagakure...owe you a debt of gratitude. By putting yourself between Kisame and Sunagakure, you prevented hundreds of deaths. And you, Sakura, you saved those that were injured. We escaped with only twelve deaths.”

“That’s twelve too many, but we would have been out at least fifty more if it weren’t for you guys, and your team. Damn those Akatsuki...they’re tough,” Kankuro added, practically spitting out the last part..

“Thank you for your hospitality, Kazekage-sama. And yours, Kankuro-san. It’s time for me to return home. Should you ever need me, don’t hesitate to summon me,” Ekyt said politely. Gaara stood up and walked over. Ekyt was on his guard, but Gaara only offered his hand. Ekyt took it, finally shaking hands with the one who had nearly destroyed his eye almost four years ago. The hatchet had been buried.

“We will be calling on you again, rest assured. The Akatsuki isn’t done yet. We’ve already got plans in the wings, and your unique fighting style would be helpful.”

Kakashi had reported to Tsunade when he was joined by Sakura and Ekyt.

“Oh, you’re back already? You cooled off quickly, Sakura. Sai’s nose healed, in case you were wondering...”

“I don’t care if that asshole’s FACE heals!” Sakura snarled.

Tsunade shook her head. “I didn’t want him on your team, Kakashi. It was a mistake putting him there, but I have no choice.” Tsunade looked down at her desk regretfully. She pulled out a scroll from a pile, and read it’s contents.

“Ekyt, if you want this mission. I know, it’s D-ranked, but...” Tsunade held the scroll out to Ekyt. Ekyt looked at it, then at her.

“Hokage-sama...I’d like to be taken of the list for missions until further notice. For personal reasons, including medical reasons. I’ve got some nasty scars that haven’t healed yet, and I’m told they could be a problem in the future. I’d rather be in a condition to serve the village than to blow out my knees, or worse, now, than to be crippled in two years.”

In surprise, Tsunade withdrew the scroll. “Alright, I guess that’s fair, you’ve done more than your fair share of D-ranks.” **I’m going to give him a break...his physical condition IS rapidly deteriorating, and he’s obviously got some plan...I’m going to trust him.**

“Thanks. Sensei, Sakura, thanks for taking me along, I’ll see you both around.” Ekyt leapt on the window frame and prepared to jump, but he stopped himself.

“Oh, that’s right. Lady Tsunade, Those documents I requested...are they ready?”

Tsunade nodded after a moment’s hesitation. “I don’t know what you’re planning, Ekyt, but I’m glad you’re still helping the village out.”

“Believe me, this is the best way. Let me know if I get a team while I’m out.”

The last part was part joke, part sarcasm, and ALL wish. But Ekyt didn’t get his hopes up.

Six Monthes pass...

Sasuke, Chakaro, Kabuto, and Orochimaru met. Meetings like this were frequent. But of this nature...it was a strange conversation to be having. To put aside trickery and befriend the very enemies they had tried to destroy.

"An alliance with Konoha is in our best interest, if we're to be rid of the Akatsuki. Konoha poses less of a threat, and this is a chance to work with them, learn their techniques, and even gain their trust," Orochimaru told them all. He seemed amused, if a little angry, by the whole idea. It had been his idea, and it made sense.

"We have no way of knowing they'll accept an alliance. We already know they don't trust us, and we haven't given them reason to. We've done nothing but double-cross them. We should earn their trust first, help them out, even defend them. They'll be more accepting after that," Kabuto said.

"An alliance with Konoha...I will never work for my former sensei!" Chakaro declared.

"And you won't have to. Our treaty says that our two villages will engage the Akatsuki, with neither taking the lead in a cohesive plan. We each follow our own plans. Being attacked from two sides could ruin the Akatsuki. If Itachi Uchiha was able to throw of my...admittedly new technique, he himself poses a greater threat than anyone living, save for the other two sannin." Orochimaru was more thinking out loud than speaking to the others, but his words had the same effect.

Sasuke was the only one who hadn't spoken up. **If an alliance with Konoha will bring me to my brother...I'll do it. I'll do whatever it takes. I wouldn't be with Orochimaru if he couldn't give me the power I needed. Brother...it won't be long now...**

Orochimaru wrote down his treaty on a blank scroll, then passed it off to a snake he had summoned.

"Give it directly to the Hokage!" Orochimaru watched the snake slither off. As it slithered past Sasuke, Orochimaru smiled, albeit very slightly. **And you, Sasuke...it won't be much longer now...only a year until I can make your body mine again...Your Sharingan is almost fully developed, and your skills are almost rival to your brother's. It's almost time...**

Tsunade heard the slithering. Immediately, she grabbed a long fire poker and jabbed at the snake. It crawled up and around the poker and spat a scroll out onto her desk, before it disappeared. Tsunade's eyes narrowed as she read the scroll. It was shocking to say the least, and it was time for a meeting.

"I DID IT! I DID IT! BELIEVE IT!" Naruto was leaping around, face flushing with pride.

"I'm a chunin!"

Iruka smiled tolerantly. **Well, he's always been different. An appointment to chunin. It's not like he could take the exams again, without a team. But still...one of my students, much less THIS student, a chunin...** Iruka's smile widened.

"Well, come on then, Naruto, I promised you Ichiraku when you became a chunin. If you're hungry, it's on me," Iruka said, patting Naruto on the head.

"You'd better believe I'm hungry! All that celebrating takes a lot out of a guy! Ichiraku, here we come!"

He he he, ramen tastes even better when it's free!"

"It's not free, you idiot! I'm paying, that's all. And the next time you'll get this out of me is when you get promoted to jonin!" Iruka kept a serious face, but was smiling inside. **He's one step closer to hokage...That light at the end of the tunnel gets bigger all the time. Keep working hard, Naruto. That's the first and continuing steps to achieving your dream.**

"Oh, hey, that's right. Old Man, his meal is on me!" Naruto called to Teuchi.

"Uh? You, Naruto? Okay, but I've got to say I'm surprised." Teuchi had never seen Naruto pay for someone else's ramen.

So was Iruka. "You're buying for ME? That's not like you, Naruto...what did you do?" Iruka accused, looking around for any traps, or signs of Naruto-ish destruction.

"Nothing, Iruka-sensei! Really! I just wanted to say 'thanks' and 'congratulations'."

"Why, because I've trained the next Hokage?" Iruka joked.

"No. Because you're a Tokubetsu Jonin now. Right? Didn't you get appointed by Granny Tsunade?"

In all the ruckus, Iruka had forgotten his own promotion. "I guess I did...wow, and you, of all people, remembered. Thanks, Naruto."

The two, teacher and pupil, dug in happily.

Kiba and Shino were jonin now. It was amazing to see the 'rookie nine' progress so quickly and so well. Sakura was rapidly becoming an equal to Tsunade. Lee had become a Tokubetsu Jonin, skilled in taijutsu. His dream had almost come true.

"Sakura!" Tsunade barked out. Sakura, who was studying an old scroll, immediately got up and went to Tsunade.

"You've become so powerful, Sakura. It's amazing how far you've come. From shy kunoichi...to powerful medic. That's why I'm appointing you a Tokubetsu Jonin. All your hard work, you deserve the recognition. And, maybe I'm a little drunk here, to be fair, but you would make an excellent squad leader, and maybe even Hokage. Of course, I've got plenty of time left as Hokage, and I have my successor in mind anyway. But you're far from the shy little girl I started training. It's time to teach you more advanced jutsu. Starting with a Summoning. But that can wait. Why don't you go celebrate, you're not the only one promoted...Now, go and enjoy yourself."

"Yes, okay!" Sakura was so surprised she could barely sputter out her response coherently.

There was one person who hadn't been promoted. Of course, he wasn't aware of it. After six months of begging off of missions, Ekyt Kaguya had trained alone, or with one of two partners. Either Master Sarutobi, for Ninjutsu, or Rock Lee, for Taijutsu. He had sharpened his Genjutsu so much that he was able to cast it without hand signs. And his sword work had become even greater. He had pored through every book and scroll he could get his hands on. His non-existent love life had driven him to the brink of reading Makeout Violence, but he held off on that. But he was still doubting himself. Six months after nearly dying at Kisame's hands, Ekyt didn't know if he was good enough. One day, he stumbled over a power of his by mistake. In frustration, Ekyt wasn't fast enough with his hand signs. He felt a surge of anger run through him, and his Blue Flame Chakra leapt up into his hand. Curious, Ekyt found he could shape the chakra. He made a kunai, a shuriken, a sword, and then a version of the Rasengan. He had decided he needed to learn how to call on this power at a moment's notice, rather than wait for

emotions to happen. This progression happened at the six month mark since his self-imposed exile. Now, armed with this knowledge, Ekyt ended the exile. It was time to go back to missions. More importantly, it was time to find Kisame and get a rematch.

After six monthes, one thing was still noticeable. Ekyt couldn't word to Sakura how he felt about her.

Sakura, however, had talked with Tenten.

"He seemed really down, Sakura. He's alone, and that's not good for him. He wants a kunoichi, but he doesn't know who it's 'safe' to ask out. Or even how. He's like a lost puppy. Cute, but clueless- at least when it comes to kunoichi. By the way, have you seen him?" Tenten hadn't seen the Kaguya boy around for some time.

"No, I haven't...he asked to be taken off missions six monthes ago, and none of us have heard from him since." Sakura's mood had grown laden with worry.

"Lee is the only one. And he says that Ekyt-kun is...well, different. More like...like Kakashi-sensei. He wouldn't say HOW he was more like Kakashi, just that he was...I think Ekyt swore him to secrecy."

Ekyt vaguely noticing the celebrating as he walked through the Village. He recognized a new group of genin, all of them wearing bright smiles. Ekyt couldn't help but smile, too. But his smile came with a poisonous thought:

They can't understand...all the trouble that they don't know of...I wish it was better they didn't know, but they're just as likely to be killed as me or anyone else. But why rain on their parade? No point in that, I'm not the one to deliver the news. I hardly know any news myself...

Ekyt's boots clicked on the cobblestone street for the first time in six monthes. His face was pale from lack of sunlight. A straw hat he had died black adorned his head, giving him the look of an undertaker when accompanied with his trench coat and fingered gloves. The hat was pulled down over his face, so that only his eyes were visible. He walked slowly, but had a purpose, and he was going to reach the Hokage mansion. But there was no rush. He had been off the radar for six long monthes. But now, he decided, it was finally time to end his exile and speak with Tsunade. Before he could do that, he passed Ichiraku. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Naruto- with a chunin vest.

He's been promoted? How is that possible? He doesn't have a team to test with! That means that there's a loophole, one I've missed...one that Tsunade can tell me about...

With that, Ekyt used the Body Flicker Jutsu to land on the rooftop behind her desk. Apparently, a meeting was going on. One person pointed to the newly arrived Ekyt, then threw a kunai. Ekyt dodged aside.

"Hold it!" he called out in a raspy tone. "Give me a second to...there." He had pulled off his hat and showed his headband. In surprise, Tsunade got up and opened the window to let Ekyt in.

"Sorry about that. Ebisu, DO be more careful with who you throw those at. You shouldn't pick a fight that you might not win," Tsunade warned.

"I'd like to think that I am more than competent enough to handle a...(Ebisu smirked)...genin."

"Stick it sideways, Ebisu. I don't need to hesitate to rip you into little shreds of asshole. But there's not much point, I've already bested you in combat. And I'm not here to talk with you, nor do I care to. As far as I'm concerned, you're scum I've already wiped off my boots." Ekyt finished berating Ebisu, then turned to Tsunade.

"I'd like to have a private appointment, Hokage-sama, but this would involve the council anyway, and,

for once, I'd like to activate my right to be here while this is discussed. It's about something that I've thought about for a full four years now...especially the last six months. I'll be glad to detail what I've done in those six months for you, but first..."

Ekyt shrugged off his coat and laid in on the floor.

"I'm here about a promotion I'm long-overdue for..."

In the front, Master Sarutobi stood up, placed a weathered hand on Ekyt's shoulder.

"For six months, I have worked with him. He has been in a self-imposed exile to better his skills. Having seen them, and having helped encourage their development, I need to voice my personal opinion before we begin officially. This genin has surpassed all who have come before him in this rank. He could gain no more from it. That is when it is time for a Shinobi to be promoted. And I will add, on the record, please, Shizune, that he is indeed long overdue for this promotion. Of course, I am no longer in position to set forth this motion, so I will step aside, and let Fifth Hokage speak."

Tsunade stood up, eyes closed. When she opened them, she was staring at Ekyt. Most people flinched at her stare, but Ekyt only looked back, the same unreadable expression on his face.

"Motion is denied," she said tersely. "Ekyt, I will speak with you later, right now the council needs my attention."

Ekyt grabbed his hat and coat, dusting both off, slowly and deliberately, forming words in his head. When they came out, they came out strong, and angry.

"No. The time for talk has ended, Hokage-sama. If my actions and my loyalty haven't spoken for themselves, we have nothing to discuss. In the meantime, I have my own personal healing to attend to...provided that, too, isn't denied."

Tsunade rubbed the bridge of her nose, keeping her temper in check. Shizune had her poison needles at the ready, if Ekyt attacked. She would regret it, but she would do it to him if she had to.

"Of course you can heal yourself. And I'm sorry, I can explain,"

"I'm sorry, but I've heard the same bullsh*t for four years. If you think I can serve Konoha best as a genin, who am I to question you? If Master Sarutobi's judgment means nothing, it's not my place to voice my concern. But I had hope..." Ekyt smiled, and nodded toward Kakashi.

"If Naruto Uzumaki could be a chunin...I could, too. I will say this now, should I be forbidden an opportunity later: Naruto will be Hokage material someday. And I only pray that I can be there to support him, as he has me. I don't know what you put in the water, Tsunade-sama, but no one wants to leave Konoha, it seems, no matter how angry, frustrated, and furious they get. I've pledged my life to Konoha, and even now I'm not questioning that decision. All I question is...why. But enough of a sob story, I've got a wrong to right. Au Revoir." Ekyt leapt out the window with the speed of a jonin.

"What did he mean?" Tsunade demanded, from Kakashi and Sarutobi.

"If I had to guess...I would say he plans on fighting Kisame again. After training with me for six months, I have no doubt that the playing field is leveled..."

Tsunade didn't wait for Master Sarutobi to finish.

"shoot! Yamato, Kakashi, Sai, Sakura- go, and bring Ekyt back here. This is a mission, and I'm considering him a criminal. Bring him back alive, kill him only as a last resort."

Kakashi and Yamato nodded to each other.

"Sai, Sakura, get Naruto...we have our orders..."

19 - The Path of Most Resistance

As they zipped along through the trees, Sakura finally voiced what was on everyone's mind.

"Are we...are we following Tsunade-sama's orders? Or...is this different?" Sakura wasn't sure how to word this.

"Sakura, Naruto, Sai...Yamato and I have discussed this...do you remember what I told you, the first day you became genin? You too, Naruto. What was it I said?"

Sakura and Naruto thought back. The test with the bells, the empty stomachs, the pain, the shame, the pride of winning, and then it hit them, the wisdom:

"People who abandon their comrades are scum!" Naruto and Sakura said at the same time.

"That's right. I will always put my comrades before the mission...in this case, the mission and the comrade are the same. We need Ekyt alive. If he faces Kisame, he'll be facing ALL of the Akatsuki. We need to take him home."

Yamato, who had only worked with Ekyt under ANBU terms, had been briefed on Ekyt's past. He had, like most jonin, taking a liking to the boy's work ethic and honesty.

"After I worked with him, I wondered why he was denied the promotion. There IS a reason, and Kakashi and I have agreed to tell you, when the time is right. For now, retrieving Ekyt alive is the priority. At the mission's end, when we have him with us, you'll understand everything."

"What's there to understand?" Naruto couldn't resist asking. "I mean, he's skilled enough, and loyal enough, why SHOULDN'T he be chunin? When I'm Hokage, I'm going to change that!"

Sakura didn't say anything. But the look of concentration on her face said enough.

Ekyt pushed off the branches, controlling his anger, keeping it bottled up. He would need it to fight Kisame, or whoever got in his way. Now that he had learned to call on his emotional chakra freely, his chakra control had improved, and he had learned more jutsus, and had more ability than before. But he had sacrificed everything to get it. Some people were born with talent, others had to work for it. Ekyt wasn't blessed with natural ability, and he knew that. But he also knew that Lee was right- hard work WOULD pay off. But it was the second part of that advice that Ekyt couldn't bring himself to do. Four years ago, when he had first become a genin, maybe he could have, but now, he couldn't follow through with it:

"Hard work...But it's useless unless you believe in yourself...I say that makes you an overconfident jackass, if you voice it often enough. There's something that's being kept from me, and it's starting to really piss me off. I thought with hard work, I could do it. And when I saw Naruto wearing a chunin vest, it gave me hope. After all, who was more ostracized than Naruto? But I guess it all comes down to who you have in your corner. Am I as alone as I think? Who's REALLY on my side? And I owe Master Sarutobi and Lee a lot, I'd never have gotten better without them. After this, it's back to my exile. I can't do any missions, not while violating my principles."

Ekyt was thinking out loud, trying to sort things out. WHY couldn't he be a chunin? WHAT was the problem, and WHY wasn't anybody telling him anything? If Master Sarutobi or Lee knew, they weren't talking. **What if it's something like Naruto...do I have a demon? Or is it my clan, the Kaguya? Or the samurai in me? What could make them stop me from progressing? And why couldn't they tell me about it? No matter...I swore to serve Konoha, no matter what. And right now, I think getting my self-respect back would be a nice first step. Kisame...this isn't over!**

Tsunade finished the meeting with the council. After Ekyt's 'interruption', it had been all down-hill. But the council had glumly agreed to Orochimaru's suggestion of a short alliance."

"We will sign an alliance with Orochimaru for a year, at the longest. That should be time enough to destroy the Akatsuki. Dismissed," Tsunade said crisply. Only Master Sarutobi remained.

"A criminal, Tsunade? Isn't that a little...harsh?" Sarutobi said around his pipe.

"You know what will happen as well as I do once he's outside our protection. If I have to lock him up, I will. He cannot be allowed to...you know. I can't say it aloud."

Sarutobi nodded. "He would have understood, Tsunade. You owe him an explanation. He's shown us loyalty, and devotion. He loves this village with all his heart. More than once, he broke down, crying in front of me, worried that he was being selfish and deserting Konoha while honing his skills. He wanted to know what was wrong with him, why he was forbidden from doing work more worthy of his skills. He put his heart and soul into his training. He never once fell asleep, Tsunade. Every night, for six monthes, he passed out when he had nothing left. Lee reported the same thing. You owe him an explanation..."

Tsunade nodded. "I know. I owe him a lot more than an explanation. But right now, I need him back in the village. If he'll talk to me, I'll tell him. If not, I've authorized Kakashi and Yamato to tell him, if it will get him home peacefully. Oh man, he is going to be PISSED that he's under arrest." Tsunade cupped her hands under her chin, looking more angry, glum, and worried than Sarutobi had seen her since Dan had died.

Sarutobi exhaled in shock. "You're arresting him on a crime he didn't technically commit. Tsunade, you know that is not the way to handle this. You're backed into a corner, between him and Naruto, and Sakura. But understand, he and Naruto have the hardest path to follow. And he could follow that path as a chunin. Or, even more importantly, as a jonin."

Sarutobi exhaled again, looking at Hokage rock. "To think...he thinks that Naruto Uzumaki will someday be Hokage...it's uncanny how often his judgment is correct..."

Ekyt landed just outside Sunagakure. He stood there, unmoving, his hat and coat protecting him from the raging sand. After a brief time, he sensed the arrival of someone else. No, someones. **Kisame...no, this chakra is familiar. Damn it, I need to move! Now!**

Ekyt leapt up and away from the chakra trail. A vine, which grew into a branch, came from the ground and snared his ankle. It hauled him toward the ground.

"Chakra scalpel!" Ekyt cut the branch holding him, then danced away from another one. Then another. Soon, another familiar jutsu hit him.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Twelve Naruto's were standing around Ekyt.

"Are you gonna come with a quietly, or do I break you in half and drag you back to the village?" the Naruto's asked as one.

"Why the hell are you following me?" Ekyt didn't have time to waste with these clones, or chakra. Instead, he threw senbon, laced with explosives. The clones all disappeared with a 'poof'. Ekyt, who had leapt up and backward, landed back on the ground.

Soon enough, he saw Team Kakashi, with Yamato, staring at him.

"Listen to us. You're a criminal in Tsunade's eyes. We need you to come back with us." Kakashi wasted no words.

Ekyt let his face drop. "A criminal...I'm...no...the one thing I didn't want to be...damn it, why am I being tortured like this?!" Ekyt just stood there, staring at the sand. It seemed endless, like his problems. But

then Ekyt thought of an hourglass. How much sand was left in the one determining his life? He knew that he was young and of good health. But the risks he took...and all in the name of Konoha, or it's people. "Wood Restraints Jutsu," Yamato called. The wood started to wrap itself around Ekyt, who didn't fight it. He just stood there, head bowed.

"So...that's it, isn't it? I'm a criminal? All the love...the effort...the life I've given to Konoha...and this is how I'm repaid?" Ekyt's tears soon stained the wood that was snaking it's way around his body. It tightened around his ankles, then his midsection, then his shoulders. He could have still escaped, his hands could have touched for a replacement jutsu. But he seemed to be mentally absent.

"All that this village meant to me...And I'll I've been to it...is a burden? Is that it? What will happen to me at the village?" Ekyt asked quietly. He looked up, hazel eyes looking from person to person, searching for an answer.

"Well, you're A-ranked due to your skill, so you'd be up for treason...and death..." Kakashi admitted. Ekyt still didn't move as the wood locked itself in place. Instead, he let his head fall forward again. Then he spoke the most chilling words Team Kakashi had heard from him.

"Then kill me. Use your Lightning Blade, and kill me. I'm not going back to Konoha, and I will fight all of you. You'll have to kill me to stop me. I don't want to take any of your lives...so why don't you save yourself the trouble? You, Kakashi, or you, Naruto, your Rasengan can kill. If I've outlived my purpose, and I have no one, I see no reason for me to continue to live a sham of a life. Just, do it now...I can't face life as a criminal...not least of all for something that isn't a crime..."

Naruto's mouth dropped open. He went back in time, to his first C-ranked mission. To Zabuza and Haku. On the Great Naruto Bridge...

Naruto...Please, kill me...that's what Haku said. Why does everyone want to die when they've been defeated? I don't understand?!

Naruto walked up to Ekyt and looked him in the eyes.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Why, what?" Ekyt replied.

"Why do you want to die? Why do you want to give up everything? Why are you so willing to forfeit your life? Because you lost a battle? Because you're wrongly considered a criminal? Why?"

Ekyt smiled. "You know, it's nice of you to ask, Naruto. I've apparently become everything I've hated...a criminal...and even worse...a burden to my village."

"That doesn't mean you have to die! Make things right! You damned coward! Death is the easy way out! Don't you have any guts? Any courage, any honor at all? At least TRY to make things work!"

Naruto grabbed Ekyt by the vest.

"Do you think it's easy to sit here and ask for a death I don't deserve? It's not easy, Naruto. But I don't see any alternative. I'm not spending my life in a jail cell, and I'm not going to be killed by the establishment like that."

Sakura was in tears, watching this happen.

"Sensei, you know what's wrong, tell him! Please, don't let him do this to himself!"

Kakashi sighed. "I really don't want to tell him. It might not make things any better."

"He's asking you to assassinate him! How much worse could things get?!" Sakura asked.

"Sakura...you talk to him. You two have always gotten along...I know you can talk him down. I don't want to tell him, not just yet. If I do, in the state he's in, he might put a kunai in his own heart..." Kakashi looked sadly at Ekyt, who wasn't even fighting. He was just standing there. His hat had blown away,

revealing his pale face. Every bit of it was etched with sadness and anger.

“Sakura...don't forget a kunoichi's original purpose, if it comes to that,” Yamato reminded her.

(Kunoichi [Female Ninja] were originally used to seduce male enemies into giving away secrets, or to be killed easily)

Ekyt stood still, finally giving up. **A criminal...the ones I wanted to stop...now I AM one...I don't want to die...not like this...not restrained by some branches, and not as a criminal. Naruto's right! I need to clear my name! But how? It's pointless, I DID it. I challenged the Hokage's ruling. It wasn't a crime to me, but if it was a crime by Tsunade, I'm guilty as charged. I could always plead...but I WILL keep my pride. And that means walking back to the village under my own power...wait, that would mean they would fail their mission. I swore to protect my friends. There's only one alternative...**

Before Ekyt could act on his thought, Sakura approached him.

“Ekyt-kun...you need to know something. Everything has been done for your protection. I can't say what, that's not up to me. They sent me over here to act as a kunoichi...but I'm going to act as your friend. Don't give up on yourself. Konoha needs you, whether you know it or not. Your friends need you, loner or not. You've got every right to be upset about this, and God knows what else. But think of all the help you've been. The lives you've saved...you need to save one more life...”

“Yours.”

Sakura nodded to Yamato, who released the wood restraints. They uncoiled from Ekyt's body. He didn't move. Sakura walked forward and hugged him. She felt him return the embrace, his body shaking with emotion. It shook Sakura up, but she closed her eyes and continued her speech.

“You're brave, Ekyt-kun. It's unfair of what's asked of you. And it's even more unfair you have to go it alone. Naruto...he has a team. You've done this yourself. And I know asking you to put your trust in others is a pointless battle. But...well, all I can do is say out loud what I've been saying to myself...You can always come to me.”

Sakura didn't let go of the embrace, and Ekyt didn't either. She could tell the boy was clueless as to what he was supposed to do. Let go? Hold on? Sakura would have laughed if this wasn't such an awful situation.

“Sakura...it means a lot...” Ekyt began. **I'm going to say it. If they're going to put me to death anyway, I might as well say it.**

“Sakura, I've been meaning to say- Oh shoot! Look out!”

Kisame's sword slashed down into the sand. Ekyt had leapt backward just in time, Sakura still in his arms. He put her down and rushed forward. Permission or not, this fight had just become personal. The others, against their orders, backed off.

Ekyt zipped forward, unimpressed by Kisame or his sword.

“I'm not the boy you fought before! Now, I've got nothing to lose!” Ekyt began to attack, his speed reaching Lee-ish levels. Without anyone, save for Kakashi's Sharingan eye, seeing it, Ekyt used a Shadow Clone Jutsu. Both attack, leaping in and out, crowding Kisame, not letting him use his sword. Kisame could only block, shocked at the boy's improvement.

“Little bastard! You still can't win, I don't care how good you've gotten!” He used the butt end of the

sword to hit Ekyt in the forehead. Ekyt moved aside kicked the sword. The blade hit Kisame in the leg. While it didn't hurt him, it threw him off-balance. Ekyt took advantage of that and cracked Kisame in the face with a punch that jarred Kisame's shark-like teeth.

"You damned coward! Get a set, get some honor! Attacking from behind! You pile of rat shoot!" Ekyt kicked at Kisame with his heel. Kisame rolled away and backward. Ekyt zipped forward, striking again and again. Kisame blocking just in time. Kisame's ring hand caught Ekyt in the face, but it didn't even seem to faze him. Instead, Ekyt got in close, forcing Kisame to use his hands more than his sword. Ekyt knew that if you counted on a weapon for too long, you lost some of your touch in other abilities. Hand to hand combat was one of those things, and Kisame was a little rusty. Kisame was surprised, and he knew he HAD to get the kid out of hand to hand combat range. He did so by physically shoving Ekyt. Ekyt slid backward in the sand, already throwing his weight forward. Kisame threw the Samehada at Ekyt. But the boy was gone!

"Where did he go?!" Kisame couldn't believe it.

BRACK!

Ekyt kicked Kisame under the chin, sending him into the air. He hooked his legs and neck with his arms.

"I'm right here, moron. Thanks for giving me a free shot! Backward Snap Dragon!"

Ekyt drove Kisame into the ground with the attack. Immediately, he knew he had just buried a log with his premier taijutsu move. He also knew that Kisame probably wasn't alone. He had to end the fight quickly.

"You wanted to see my chakra? Well, I've got plenty of emotions to use, and I don't need your to help me access them. That nasty little necessity is outdated. That's why you've kept your big jaw shut. For now: Blue Flame: Dragon's Circle!"

Ekyt's body was outlined with a blue fire. Kisame couldn't believe it. Ekyt used his "Dance of the Sickle Moon" jutsu again. This time, the speed was so incredible even Kisame had a hard time keeping up. He got cut 12 times. But it was clear Ekyt wasn't aiming to kill. He wanted Kisame to live, and suffer. After the attack ended, Kisame's cloak was in tatters, and his face was scarred from the cuts. But Ekyt's momentary exhaustion gave Kisame an opening. He swung down. Ekyt dodged aside, but the sword still caught him on the arm. Blood dripped off the sword and Ekyt's arm.

Sai started to draw the scene, but was quickly stopped by Sakura.

"You dumbass, don't you ever learn?!" she shouted.

Kakashi suddenly narrowed his normal eye. "Ekyt's...smiling..."

Ekyt was indeed smiling. He was doubled over in pain, and he was bleeding from the mouth, but he was, in fact, smiling. He even chuckled a little bit.

"This match is over. Good fight, freak. But I win," Ekyt said, smiling.

"You're the one with a sword in him, not me!" Kisame shot back.

"No, but you walked right into my trap. Did you think all those cuts were for nothing? I wasn't just playing with you. While my two clones attacked, I put exploding tags all over. Your sword, the ground...your arm. And, funny thing, it only takes a little flame to set them all off. Or a Remote Detonation jutsu- but where's the fun in that? Dragon's Ember Jutsu!"

Kisame and his sword went up in a fiery explosion. He rocketed backward across the desert, leaving a trail of blood.

Ekyt followed the trail, looking down at Kisame. Aside from having no chakra and being badly scorched, he was alive.

“Those explosive tags, laced with my emotional chakra...you’re in for a lot of pain. Be thankful your sword didn’t touch my friends...you’d be dead, now. But, as it is, I think I need to take care of you anyway. You’ll live, but I’m going to ruin you.”

(NOTE: IS IT JUST ME, OR IS EKYT GETTING MORE SINISTER? KABUTO-ISH, MAYBE?)

Ekyt held his hand to his heart. The blue flame left his body and seeped into his hand. It extended to Ekyt’s finger tips, where they would use a jutsu that would make ANYONE’S life hell.

“Blue Flame Sealing Jutsu!” Ekyt put his hand on Kisame’s. Each one turned black and became unusable. But Ekyt felt it wasn’t enough. He needed an exclamation point, especially if he was going to jail.

“I’ll just take this with me, as a little trophy. I hope my friends will carry you, because I’m kinda tired...” Ekyt’s speech became slurred at the end, but he still managed to take away something Kisame would have given his life to keep.

Ekyt was now the proud owner of an Akatsuki ring.

Silently, Ekyt dragged Kisame back.

“Let’s make this look legit. Yamato-sensei, I think you should use the Wood Restraints Jutsu on our prisoner. And Naruto, maybe 12 clones escorting me would do it? I don’t want you guys to fail your mission because of me. If your mission was to bring me back alive, as a prisoner...well, I’m turning myself in.”

Kakashi patted him on the head.

“Just stay strong for us, Ekyt. You won’t like what Tsunade-sama has to say, but keep this in mind: We DO need you.”

Ekyt nodded, then slowly felt himself passing out.

“Damn. I’m gonna black out here, just so you know. Used a little too much of the emotional chakra,” Ekyt said, his speech becoming more and more slurred.

Sakura grabbed his hand. “Before you do...thanks for saving me.”

Just before he passed out from pain, fatigue, and having no chakra, Ekyt got a kiss on the cheek from the object of his affection. That left him time for one last thought:

shoot...I never told her...that I was...in l-

Sakura and Naruto both carried Ekyt, after restraining him with chakra strings. They felt him pass out, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well, he won his fight, and we passed out mission. I guess we all win, huh?!” Naruto said happily.

Yamato shook his head. “Ekyt hasn’t won. The fight, yes. But what Tsunade tells him will either destroy him, or save his outlook on life.”

20 - Chapter 20- Stacked Odds

Team Kakashi walked in to Tsunade's office. Upon seeing the two unconscious figures, she immediately called ANBU. Instantly, two agents, and Ibikki Morino were in her office.

"I want information out of Kisame. Anything can help. You have your orders!" Tsunade barked. Ibikki hesitated. He walked over to where Ekyt had been laid, on the floor.

"No damage to his brain...kid's a fighter," Ibikki muttered aloud.

"Ibikki...you have your orders..." Tsunade said firmly. Ibikki wheeled around.

"That is one of my students, and a prized member of my unit. Leaving him there without making sure he was okay is not something I am prepared to do. And besides, I think the boy will have a hell of a story for you. Or, at least something to keep your attention. It would be in the best interests of the Village to at least PRETEND you care about his well-being, as he's got something I think you'll want." Ibikki's glare was enough to make even Tsunade nervous. But at Sakura, he gave a somewhat warm smile.

"I know I'll be seeing him in my unit again...he's getting the best care in Konoha, and possibly the world. Not to mention he keeps excellent company." Ibikki referred to Team Kakashi, and specifically to Sakura's medical skills, which had undoubtedly helped the boy exponentially. With one last glance at Tsunade, Ibikki left the room, following the ANBU agents.

"Yamato, I want the boy restrained. He is, until his trial, considered a criminal, and dangerous."

"It...might not be in the best interests of the Village, Lady Tsunade. He holds some very interesting information...or, rather, a very interesting artifact. And if he wakes up in restraints, he might not share it freely. This is very delicate, and I know it's not my position to speak freely, but this pertains directly to the village."

Tsunade had enough of this.

"Sakura, wake him up. He can go back to sleep, or whatever after I've had my time with him."

Sakura hesitated. "Tsunade-sama, what about his health?"

"The Village comes first. And he'll want to hear what I have to say, just as I want to know what he's got that's so damn important. Now, wake him up, or I'll do it, and a LOT less pleasantly."

Sakura stepped back. Ekyt woke up, and immediately leapt up.

"I've heard enough. Tsunade-sama, I'll give you what I have...but I'm going to make two requests: First, I would like Master Sarutobi present. Second, I want to know- just what is it that is so taboo about me? Why can't I be promoted, and why am I being treated like crap, when I've given nothing but respect?"

Tsunade stared Ekyt down, or tried to. The stoic genin wasn't budging.

"You're in no position to ask for anything," Tsunade countered.

"I think I am. And I will. I have a right to know. At one point, you trusted me, almost to the point of an advisor. Now, I'm being treated like dirt, even though I've taken your missions, and done nothing but what's been asked of me. And, to be honest, I think I've gone above and beyond the call of duty Konoha gives me. The hours studying, and the time I've spent helping Iruka-sensei. No matter what the information that you are withholding is, if it concerns me, I deserve it."

No one talked to Tsunade like that. No one. Not even the other Sannin dared to tell her anything like that. But Ekyt had nothing to lose. He had no life to speak of if he didn't have the village. His parents-alive, but he would put them at risk if he went back to them, until he knew what was going on, at least. And without a wife, or even a girlfriend, all he had was his skills and himself.

How far I've come...from being a semi-talented loner to a loner who dares talk to a Sannin in a nasty tone. But I don't care. If I'm on trial for treason...when the hell did I commit treason? I haven't told anyone anything! Unless...it has to be. There's no other option. And if I'm right, I have a choice to make.

"Tsunade-sama, if I'm correct, then I see where you think me a criminal. But I think that I could prove my innocence. But please, just answer this...is the information you're hiding from me the reason you've decided to hate me for the last few months? You and I used to be on good terms, until you got this 'information.' So, just answer me that: Is it the reason?"

Tsunade nodded. "It proved that you can never trust a samurai," she shot at him.

"I was right. There are samurai rebelling against the village. (Tsunade's shock confirms his suspicion) I had nothing to do with it, but telling you that won't do me any good, will it? I'll just have to go prove it."

Tsunade stood up. "Kid...You've got guts, but you've also got an arrest warrant hanging over your head. I can't let you go."

Ekyt lost his cool, finally. But he had his information, so he reached into his pocket.

"THIS is what I thought I would donate to Konoha. As a sign of loyalty. But maybe I'll just keep it," Ekyt snarled. Kisame's ring glinted in his hand.

"I defeat him cleanly, and took his ring. His sword is in the desert, sealed in a scroll by my emotional chakra. If that isn't showing loyalty to Konoha, I don't know what is."

Tsunade's mouth dropped open in shock. **He has Kisame's ring? I know how important those rings are to the Akatsuki. He knows it, too. He must have thoroughly defeated Kisame. But there's only one way samurai would attack us. He must have been feeding them information for four years. I want to trust him...but I can't. The Village comes before friendship. There's only one way I'll even consider letting him do this.**

"Fine. I'll allow you to confront the samurai. But I am sending a team of jonin with you. Kakashi, Gai, Asuma, and Sarutobi will go with you. If you try to help the samurai, they are authorized- and they will-kill you."

Ekyt stood up and starting pacing. "Fine, do whatever you want! Damn it, I need to stop them! This is the only way to clear my name. I'll either make you believe me, or I'll die trying."

Sakura and Naruto were huddled together in a corner with Yamato, talking rapidly, but in low tones.

"How long has Tsunade know of the attack?" Yamato asked Sakura.

"Nearly nine months. Which puzzles me. Ekyt was on that insane mission nine months ago, infiltrating Orochimaru and the Akatsuki. She wouldn't have trusted him with a mission like that if she thought he was a traitor. It wasn't until he got back that she REALLY stopped trusting him."

"There's got to be another samurai that would do this!" Naruto exclaimed. Sakura thought for a moment, then got an idea.

"Ekyt! Come here for a minute!"

Ekyt walked over, looking ready to go. It was no secret his honor meant a lot to him. He was ready for a fight.

"Yes?" he asked quickly, as though that would speed up the arrival of the jonin.

"Your rival...that guy that left, Chakaro- was he samurai, too?" Sakura asked.

"Yeah, why?" Ekyt asked. "I trained him...damn it, if I had known what he'd become..."

Sakura grabbed Ekyt around the shoulders.

"He's behind this! Don't you see it? A samurai ordered an attack on this village. And if it wasn't you...that leaves one samurai who would even know where this village is so easily."

Ekyt's eyes lit up. Sakura was right.

"Ekyt, I'll convince Tsunade. Naruto and Yamato, you should take Sai and go with Ekyt. Because I'd bet my headband that Chakaro will be there. And Ekyt needs to be able to concentrate if he's going to fight him."

Everyone nodded their agreement. Ekyt gulped, and started to say THAT to Sakura. What he had been trying to say for the longest time. He was in for the fight of his life (and his honor), and if he DID die, he wanted no regrets.

"Sakura, I..." Ekyt shook his head. **Damn it damn it damn it! Why can't I just tell her? Why?**

"Thank you for everything, Sakura. Not least of all going to bat for me with Tsunade-sama."

Sakura smiled at Ekyt. "Just do me a favor- don't get yourself killed. I'll be showing up. If you're wounded, just hang on, alright? I've already lost one friend thanks to the Sound Village. I'm not losing another one."

Ekyt nodded clumsily, then felt another hand on his shoulder.

The jonin stood before Ekyt. Ekyt wasn't sure what to say, he didn't know what they thought. But he was soon put at ease.

"We believe you. Now, c'mon, let's get rid of these pain in the @\$@ samurai." Asuma lit a fresh cigarette.

Chakaro looked up, not surprised to see a pissed-off Ekyt hauling toward him.

"Get him," he called lazily to the samurai in front of him. They leapt in front to protect him. Chakaro was amazed to see Ekyt didn't even slow down. Instead, a wooden prison sprang up, engulfing the samurai, save for a few. The solid wood blocked what was happening from view, but Chakaro heard the screams of the samurai. He decided he should fall back.

Ekyt focused his chakra to his feet and ran up the structure, gathering speed.

"Dance of the Sick Moon!" he called on top of the structure. He and his two copies leapt down, slicing at Chakaro. Chakaro's skills had grown, he survived the assault with only one cut, and a superficial one.

"You waste your time! You think you've gotten stronger? You don't have a Sannin like Orochimaru teaching you! Your own village disowned you! Linda wouldn't have you, and Kayla and I left you in the dust. You're always behind, aren't you? No matter how hard you try, 'sensei', you will NEVER be in the same league as me!"

"If you fight as well as you talk, THEN I'll worry. You dragged my name through the mud. Now I'm going to plant YOU in the mud, six feet under. Chakaro, I thought a lot over the years. It's better to end one life, than to let one live while ten others die. If fate selected me to kill you, then I will do it. You'd

better pray your Sound Ninja's can save you, Chakaro. You've sold your soul to the devil, in the form of Orochimaru. That's fine, because it's your @\$\$ that I own!"

Ekyt wasn't sure where this new willingness to kill Chakaro had come from. But over his six months of training with Sarutobi, he had heard many stories from the old man. All had been, he later realized, like a puzzle. Ekyt was supposed to put this puzzle together. At the end, all he had figured out was that he was somehow special, his fate was somehow tied to the fate of Team 7, and that if he hoped to save others, he had to learn to kill. He remembered protesting to Master Sarutobi, telling him he could never take a life. The old man had puffed on his pipe for a moment, then set things into perspective.

WHAT WAS SAID:

Sarutobi: Ekyt, if someone came in here, meaning to kill me, would you defend me?

Ekyt: Of course, Master Sarutobi!

Sarutobi: What if the only way to stop this ninja was to kill him? If you broke every bone in his body, he'd come back within weeks to try again. What would you do then?

Ekyt: I couldn't incapacitate him forever...so I would have to kill...

Sarutobi: (smiles) No one should have to take another's life. In our world, however, it is necessary. I can see in your eyes, you would never kill- until the circumstances were special enough.

Ekyt: Special? I'm not sure I understand...

Sarutobi: Special. Such as Lee. He has vowed not to use his Lotus techniques unless he is protecting his life, the life of someone precious, or his Shinobi way.

Ekyt: And I'm the same way...is that right?

Sarutobi: Only you know how you feel. But when the time comes to take a life, you will know, Ekyt. But, understand, taking a man's world from him...it is not so straightforward. By killing him, are you protecting another? Or are you taking his world needlessly?

Ekyt: I think I understand...but I'll know when the time is right. I've felt it once before...against Itachi Uchiha. I would have killed him. All the suffering he's caused, maybe his death would have brought a measure of closure to the families of those he murdered...maybe even to his brother.

Sarutobi said nothing; he didn't need to. He smiled understandingly, then handed Ekyt a new scroll and dismissed him.

BACK TO THE PRESENT...

Ekyt had the feeling again. He didn't want to kill, he had no desire to. But if Chakaro was going to threaten the village he called home, Ekyt would do anything to protect it. Anything. If Chakaro ran, Ekyt wouldn't pursue him. The way he saw it, his mission was to clear his name and protect his village. Anything aside from that was extra.

Chakaro could instantly sense the change in Ekyt.

It's scary...he's improved, and he even called my bluffs. But I started this, and I'm going to finish it. I have my honor, against what Ekyt thinks. If I need to kill him, I'll do so. And, unlike him, I've killed before. It's almost a sure thing one of us will walk away from here, and the other will be buried here.

The jonin on the other side of the wood prison were leaning against it casually. Asuma was smoking, Kakashi had his book, Gai was glaring at Kakashi for having the gull to ignore one of their contests for a stupid book. Only Master Sarutobi seemed concerned. Maybe the other's couldn't sense it, but he felt a change in two chakras. One he recognized as Ekyt's. The other, he could only tell that it was evil. As long as he heard the sounds of battle and talking, he wouldn't get involved. As soon as they stopped, or sounded labored, Sarutobi would step it and check on things. Nearing his 70th birthday, he wasn't in the ideal position for such a fight. But, just as he had defended the village against Orochimaru, so would he defend it, and Ekyt, outmatched or not.

In battle, the only thing that is for certain is that there are no certainties.

Ekyt and Chakaro stared each other down.

"Do you remember, Chakaro, the time when Master Linda rejected me?" Ekyt asked quietly.

"Of course...we were the best of friends...Do you remember when I rejected Kayla, then felt guilty about it?" Chakaro asked, equally quiet.

"I do. You were always stoic, Chakaro. Probably why we got along so well. That's why I have to ask you...in case one of us DOES die tonight in battle...just what did Orochimaru offer you. That servant of his that came to get you...why you? And what made you leave?"

Chakaro looked up at the sky. It was just starting to darken.

"He offered me power. Abilities I could never even dream of. In exchange, all I had to do...was let myself go. I was to be a temporary host for Lord Orochimaru. But it was you, in fact, that saved me from that fate. The day you sealed his arms and mouth was the day I was to become his new body. But then he decided- no more temporary hosts. Sasuke was going to be his body. But I've still earned power. I was gifted with natural ability, as you know. This has been no different."

Ekyt too looked up at the sky. The rapidly darkening sky was accented by clouds turned purple by the sun setting. One, however, had a silver lining. Ekyt smiled at that.

"I think I can understand now...what my mentors have been saying...what my studies have taught me...a situation is never a forgone conclusion. You'll always have your natural ability, Chakaro."

Ekyt stopped there, smiling serenely.

"There was a time we were friends. You chose to end that friendship. You had your reasons Chakaro, and I can finally say this to you: I don't blame you. You were tempted, and at a young age. Anyone would have taken the bait."

"You didn't," Chakaro pointed out. He had to admit, he was curious as to why.

Ekyt exhaled loudly, the cold night air forming a small cloud in front of him.

"I've asked myself 'why'. I can only find one reason, Chakaro. And, not to be insulting, but it's one you may have a hard time understanding."

Chakaro didn't seem offended. "And what is that?"

Ekyt closed his eyes. "It's love. A sense of belonging. And even a sense of desire, of something more than power. What good is power if you have no cause to fight for? Now I've found my cause, and I've sworn to defend it...them...all the people in Konoha...even if it means giving up my life. To love something is to give it up, or so I'm told. I think a greater love is to never let go. When you give up, you let yourself down. I've lived a life of self-imposed exile from the world, and I don't regret it. It's made me hardened, and jaded. But now, for the first time, I'm experiencing a different type of love, the type parents don't give you. It's love of people. Some you know, some you don't. And it's loyalty. Loyalty to those people."

Chakaro shook his head. His greasy black hair moved slightly with the gesture.

"That's not something I can understand. My parents robbed me of honor before I was born. I'll never forgive them. And the Leaf Village might have embraced me. I'll never know. I've taken my path. Now, I have a question for you, Ekyt: Did you and Master Linda ever get together?"

Ekyt chuckled. "No. Actually, she's your greatest rival in terms of wanting to kill me." **Something is strange here...Chakaro is acting like his old self...talking to me, as we used to. Teacher to pupil. Although now, we're on opposing sides. I don't want to believe it, but I'm sure- this is a trap. He's too respectful...unless...no...it can't be...did...did Orochimaru take over his body? I've got to find out...but how? What is something only Chakaro would know? Something that would lure Orochimaru into the open? There's only one thing I can think of...**

"Chakaro, do you mind if I introduce you to one of my mentors? Besides, I should say goodbye, in case you DO kill me..."

Chakaro smiled strangely. "Of course."

"Master Sarutobi!" Ekyt called over the wooden barrier.

"WHAT?!" Chakaro's body exploded! Orochimaru!

"I thought so! You DIDN'T take over his body, not yet! Chakaro would NEVER talk politely to someone he thought an enemy," Ekyt shouted.

"Very perceptive. It's a shame that you'll die soon...those blades you are holding...they're poisoned..."

Ekyt looked back dully. "They've been detoxed by the best. But, that aside- get out."

Orochimaru smiled widely. "My, my, such nasty language! Don't you know I'm your elder? You should talk nicely to me!"

"Scram, shoothead," Ekyt retorted. He didn't usually resort to such language, but annoying Orochimaru made it worth it.

"As if I'd deal with you myself. You're not worth my time. I'll just let my assistant take care of you...well, one of them. I've got so many quality helpers. And you've got jonin on the other side of that barricade. The barricade which I've sealed. So it looks like you're alone. While I am not..."

Orochimaru. Kabuto. Chakaro. And...Sasuke.

Then there was Ekyt. For once, his thoughts were despairing.

shoot...this really IS it...I can't handle Sasuke...I'm not good enough. That Sharingan...if I could focus on him, I could at least hold out until the Jonin and Master Sarutobi broke the seal. But all

four of them? I-I never told Sakura how I felt...maybe it's better that way...if I die, and I HAD told her, she'd feel guilty. She doesn't need that. No of my friends do. This is MY burden now. Damn it...Well, I guess there's no choice...I've got to break every rule in the book. I've got to buy the village time...

Ekyt used a summoning jutsu. His Water Dragon, Umisu, landed on his shoulder. Ekyt patted him, then handed him a small note.

"Go quickly Umisu. Tell them that Orochimaru's here, and to mobilize the village. And this is for Master Sarutobi...I'll miss you, Umisu." Ekyt petted him again. He wasn't afraid of dying. He was afraid of not detaining the enemy long enough to save the village. The village was unaware that Orochimaru was involved. They had to find out.

Master Sarutobi read his note, and immediately knew that Ekyt was in major trouble. The note was elegant in it's simplicity, and it made the old man think.

All this note says... "Thanks for everything." He's fighting someone he didn't plan on. Curse my age...But no matter. He's my student. And I need to take matters into my own hands. The others will have to get by the barrier if I can break Orochimaru's seal from the other side. For now...

Sarutobi ripped off his robe, revealing his black, fighting attire. (As seen in Naruto, when he fights Orochimaru at the chunin exams)

...I'm all the boy has...

21 - Accepting Pain

WHAT?!" Tsunade thundered. "Get ANBU moving! Shizune, you and Tonton alert the Village. I don't want to trust them, but send a messenger to Sunagakure!"

Underneath all the chaos, Tsunade thought to herself: **Damn...If Ekyt dies, it's my fault for not trusting him...and now that I think of it, he's deserving of trust. Well, it's time to do what a Hokage does best- protect the village!**

The Leaf Villagers that weren't Shinobi took cover in their houses or businesses, boarding up their doors and windows. Mothers hurried their children along, until the streets eventually emptied. Hiashi Hyuuga and the other parents of the current generation of Shinobi hurriedly donned their battle gear and secured the perimeter of the village.

"Just like the good ol' days!" commented Shikaku Nara.

"You said it," Akimichi rumbled. He had already used his expansion jutsu.

"Well, at least my daughter isn't in combat this time. That girl worries me sick!" Inoichi Yamanaka complained.

"Are you STILL dogin' over having a daughter? Hey, at least your son won't be tied down to someone woman's apron strings. Your daughter will be calling the shots!" Shikaku shot back, earning a laugh from his two comrades.

"InoShikaCho rides again!" Inoichi declared. The three hadn't lost a step, as they soon began showing the Sound Ninja just what they were capable of. As the three guarding the gate, the most obvious entrance, the Sound Ninja were having a hell of a time trying to get through the gates. They were either stomped, had their minds destroyed, or their shadows turned against them.

At the gates, Ibikki Morino, Anko Mitarashi, Hayate Gekko, and Genma Shiranui moved forward, taking out some of the stealthier forces.

"Come on, at least make a real effort!" Anko taunted after snaring another luckless Sound Shinobi with the Striking Shadow Snakes.

Hayate used his "Dance of the Crescent Moon", while Genma smirked and spat out the senbon clenched between his teeth. In the mean time, Ibikki had used the distraction to use a powerful genjutsu. Three more down.

"You're trying your luck again, old man? You won't get away alive this time!" Orochimaru declared to Sarutobi.

"I'm afraid I'm not the main course, Orochimaru. But I have my student to think of!"

Orochimaru and Sarutobi were in close combat, both conserving chakra. Eventually, they resorted to grappling. For the moment, they were evenly matched. "What makes this brat so special?" Orochimaru spat.

"You are unaware, Orochimaru. His fate is tied with that of Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. You have, no doubt, heard the prophecies of the next "Legendary Sannin?"

“Of course, you feeble old fool! What has that to do with this pathetic samurai?” Orochimaru snarled, attempting unsuccessfully to reach around Sarutobi’s head to pull him down into some sort of knee-elbow combo.

“That young man has given his life to the village. He’s been given access to records and books allowed only to jonin, and in some cases, only Hokage. All for the purpose of learning. Few know what he’s learned, and even fewer realize he may very well know- thought he’s not able to perform them- as many jutsus as I have. You know that I am called “Professor”...With no prompting, and little support, Ekyt Kaguya has read almost everything he could find in the Leaf Village. One night, I asked him to show me his scroll. I remember how much he worried that I might turn him in. It contains jutsu forbidden to genin. Even I marveled at the contents of the scroll. Even if Ekyt Kaguya never leaves the genin rank behind, he will have been one of the finest jonin the Leaf Village has ever had.”

For nearly an hour’s time, Ekyt and Chakaro traded jutsus and strikes, neither gaining the upper hand for long. Both their chakras were exhausted. The outcome would be decided by one strike of a kunai. Both leapt, leaving defense on the ground. Both stabbed directly for the heart. It was a question of which kunai would reach first.

When it became apparent Ekyt’s kunai would strike first, Chakaro did the unthinkable. It seemed as though the world faded to black and white. Time stood still for everyone, except Ekyt and Chakaro. Ekyt didn’t see what Chakaro was doing until it was too late. His eyes widened, his mouth dropped open in shock. His own kunai changed direction, in an attempt to stop this new crisis.

It was too late. As soon as Chakaro saw he was beaten, he plunged a kunai into his stomach. It sank in handle-deep. In an eerie moment, his teeth already red from internal bleeding, Chakaro smiled at Ekyt. The kunai sank deeper as the two combatants began to fall back to the ground. Ekyt’s eyes flickered with shock and...sadness. He found that, no matter what Chakaro had done, this seemed wrong. Ekyt’s kunai stayed in his hand, his arms still in a guard, but his eyes couldn’t leave the kunai in Chakaro’s stomach. Until he spoke, Ekyt was frozen.

“I’ve never lost in a death match, Ekyt...I’ll die by my hand, not yours.” The now-red teeth smiled once more. The triumphant smile when he had gotten his black belt...when he had kissed Kayla...when he had overtaken his teacher, Ekyt- or so he thought. Now that smile was meant only for himself, payment for a job well done.

With that, Chakaro slumped to the ground. He lay face down, unmoving, in the dirt path just meters away from the Village Hidden in the Leaves. After four years of fighting and training as a Shinobi, and after six years of knowing Ekyt, Chakaro Tamaki took the path of death, of suicide, rather than die by another’s hand.

It was surreal. Ekyt felt hands moving him away from the corpse. He was too much in shock to resist them. He recognized the chakra, and didn’t sense the threat, so he didn’t even fight. He couldn’t take his eyes away. It was like a car accident- you didn’t WANT to look, but you HAD to.

“Come on. You don’t need to be here. You didn’t do it. Come on,” came the gentle voice of Shizune. But Ekyt pulled away.

“Chakaro...” Ekyt could feel tears welling up. “We’ve been enemies...for so long. And our final battle...it ends like this. I had always hoped I could make you see things the correct way. That I could somehow change your mind. Enemies or not, Chakaro, you never forget your first student. Now I’ve made Kayla a widow, all because...”

But Ekyt couldn’t finish the sentence. He hadn’t killed Chakaro, Chakaro had killed himself. Then why did he feel responsible?

Because I led him to kill himself...I defeated him, something he couldn't live with. I've taken the life of a man without ever bloodying my own hands...Chakaro, Rest in- What?"

Ekyt pushed Shizune back. Hundreds of serpents devoured Chakaro's body. Shizune, who had been worried about Ekyt, was now worried about what was going on. This was wrong, in so many ways. Snakes, coupled with Orochimaru, always meant a problem.

The snakes came together, forming a tall shape. When Ekyt saw what was going to happen, he warned Shizune to get out of the way. But he didn't need to. Instead of the snakes attacking, they formed one giant snake. Ekyt's mouth dropped open as the snake shed it's skin.

Chakaro.

Chakaro, who had been laying still, opened his eyes, his cuts healed.

"I'm glad that jutsu worked, I would have REALLY died. Now you can understand why I chose Lord Orochimaru. Too bad my chakra's gone. From the look on your face, I could kill you with the weakest of my jutsus. Well, perhaps I can anyway. Or I can make a request."

Too late, Ekyt realized what was going to happen. A snake bit him on the ankle. Immediately, his vision blurred and his legs went numb. Master Sarutobi used a fire jutsu to back Chakaro off, then immediately called for Sakura.

"The poison is already advancing. Sakura, he's only got minutes, and you're his only chance. I'll make sure you get the time," Master Sarutobi said over his shoulder.

Sakura already had Ekyt laying down, his headband removed and replaced with a washcloth. Her green healing chakra wasn't strong enough to remove the poison, but she stopped it from spreading. But a lot of Ekyt was infected by the venom. Sakura was ready to give up. Lady Tsunade couldn't have pulled it off, with her fear of blood. No matter what, she still had that fear. Sakura's fear was of losing a patient.

Or a friend. I lost Sasuke to the Sound Village...and now Ekyt...why does everyone I care about die? Naruto's fighting Sasuke...I never thought I would hope Naruto would defeat Sasuke. But when he promised me he'd bring Sasuke back, and he couldn't, it ate at him. Just like this death will eat at me. Ekyt, I'm so sorry...Please, just let go, it won't be painful...I can't watch you suffer...

Sakura's tears stained Ekyt's blood-splattered vest. In the reflection of one tear, Sakura saw herself, as a younger kunoichi. Watching. Just watching while Naruto and Sasuke risked their lives. Then she went back even farther, seeing herself crying because she was being bullied. She saw Ino step up and tell the bullies to back off.

I was always in the back...even now that I'm talented as a medic, it seems like I can't do anything to help anyone. I've healed cuts, but I've never saved a life. Only one, really...and that was Ekyt. Naruto heals himself, and he needs me for support. He hates to lose teammates just as much as I do...how hard he worked to get Ekyt free in the Sand Village when those rocks trapped him...He didn't quit. I can't either! Ekyt told me once that I was strong, stronger than any kunoichi he's ever known. I've never heard a lie pass his lips. If he meant it, then I'm not going to make a liar out of him. Now, think. Antidote...no time, no ingredients. Jutsu? Advanced poison removal...it'll drain me of chakra...and even then, there's no guarantee it'll work...but if I start it, Tsunade-sama or Shizune-sensei could finish it. I've got to try, at least!

Naruto's Rasengan had hit home, but Sasuke shook his head. POOF! Shadow Clone.

"You're still a loser...you thought us friends, brothers...If you still think of me that way, you're a fool. I have one brother, and he will soon be dead. But if you continue to get in my way, I'll kill you."

"You keep talking, Sasuke! I swore I'd bring you back to the Village, even if I had to break your body to do it! I'm not the same punk you used to spar with! You started to fight me as a real ninja! I've always

wanted to fight you, and now I've got my chance! I'm not going to blow it! I've waited too long. I'm going to show you that I'm NOT a loser, I'm NOT a reject, and that I CAN win! BELIEVE IT!"

"Fireball Jutsu!" Sasuke called.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto replied as he dodged the fireball. The fireball started a small fire. Two Leaf Ninja who were skilled with water put the fire out. The village was now fully engaged in combat with Orochimaru's followers. The Sound Ninja hadn't had time to prepare, thanks to Ekyt and the jonin advancing so quickly. Ekyt's message had reached Tsunade.

Four of Naruto leapt around Sasuke. Thanks to his Sharingan, Sasuke could tell which Naruto was the real one. That was, in fact, what Naruto was banking on. The last time they fought, Sasuke aimed for the clones first. If he stayed true to form, Naruto was ready.

Sasuke didn't. Instead, he floored the REAL Naruto with a tooth-jarring punch. Naruto went sailing and landed near Ekyt and Sakura.

Sakura finished the jutsu. She was so exhausted...but she had done it. Ekyt would feel a little dizzy, but the poison was gone. The Third Hokage had ran Chakaro off, and was fighting Orochimaru. He was really exerting himself, and Sakura worried for his health. But soon, Lady Tsunade would be here, and she would fight Orochimaru instead. Things were going as well as they could, under the circumstances. Ekyt stirred and sat up. It was clear that he wasn't quite aware of everything yet. He mumbled something. Sakura only caught one word.

"Thanks."

She gave him what she hoped was a comforting smile (She couldn't tell at this point, everything ached) around the panting she was doing from using so much chakra. She saw a change in Ekyt's face. It was a look of horror and...something. What was it? Anger? Frustration.

Determination.

Naruto started to get up, when he heard the sound of birds chirping.

shoot! Chidori! He's too close, I'll never get out of the way in time! C'mon fox! Gimme your chakra!

Ekyt got unsteadily to his feet. He grabbed the back of Naruto's jacket, then put a hand on his neck. He was about to break a rule by using a forbidden jutsu, but he either didn't care, or wasn't aware.

Sasuke saw Ekyt grab Naruto. "I can just kill you both at once. You're making it easier!"

"You'll never get to him!" Naruto shouted back. Ekyt said nothing. He was either incapable of speech, or was concentrating. It soon became apparent which was the case.

Naruto felt a second chakra. But this one was...blue...and it felt weird. It wasn't the fox. He had sensed the chakra before. Then he knew. **He practiced that jutsu with me and my clones...but he's never**

done it like this before!

“Voluntary Pain Acceptance Jutsu!” Ekyt called, coughing blood on himself as he spoke. He had activated his Emotional chakra. This jutsu was one of his own design. It allowed him to accept pain and injury on behalf of someone else. He could take half the pain and accept it into his own body, to save someone else from injury or death.

“Chidori!” Sasuke drove his hand home just as Ekyt called the jutsu.

Naruto cried out in pain. But only a burn mark appeared on his chest. Behind him, he heard another sound of pain. Ekyt had a burn mark as well. The jutsu had worked. Ekyt accepted the pain, and saved Naruto’s life. But in his weakened state, between the damage using his Emotional chakra did, and the power of the Chidori, adding in the effects of the poison, Ekyt’s body was being pushed to it’s limits.

Naruto felt the hand fall off his neck. He turned around to see Ekyt, face-down, Blue chakra receding, arm still extended. Naruto felt it. The demon fox. The anger of a dead comrade had done it. Three tails grew out of him as he dropped to all fours, snarling at Sasuke.

“You bastard!” Naruto raced toward Sasuke, who was still recovering from the Chidori. Naruto simply opened his mouth and howled. Pure chakra sent Sasuke sailing a hundred meters away. Naruto ran after him, a fourth tail growing. Naruto had little control over his body now (His control has improved), but all he knew now was one thing:

Get Sasuke.

Sakura cursed herself. **I AM too weak! Ekyt just risked everything! I can’t help him, my chakra is gone! Damn it! Why am I so useless?! No matter how hard I work, it’s never enough!**

Sakura felt a hand push her away.

“I’ll heal the kid. Sakura, you go with Shizune. Take a ration pill and tend to our wounded. We’ve almost turned back the invasion, now that two of Orochimaru’s subordinates are gone. I’ll join the fight in a minute to relieve Master Sarutobi. Right now, I’ve got a pervy Samurai to save.”

Tsunade knelt down next to Ekyt and got to work...

OKAY, DID I LOSE YA WITH ALL THAT? HERE’S WHAT’S HAPPENING!

NARUTO UZUMAKI IS FIGHTING SASUKE UCHIHA

SARUTOBI IS FIGHTING OROCHIMARU

TSUNADE DEFEATED KABUTO YAKUSHI

EKYT DEFEATED CHAKARO TAMAKI

22 - Every Demon has it's Day

Ekyt was awake.

Sort of.

He could pick out the subconscious, and he knew he was in his own. He didn't need many guesses as to 'why'.

I'm dying.

"Hardly," a voice returned his thoughts. Ekyt was instantly on his guard. But his guard dropped in shock. He saw himself- older, and slightly different looking- but it was him.

"Who are you?" Ekyt couldn't help but ask. The other him flicked a match and used it to light a candle. The 'room' Ekyt realized he was in was less dim instantly. Around him, he saw pictures. All of his memories.

"I'm you. You already knew that. I CAN read your thoughts. But I'm going to stop," the older Ekyt said.

"So why are you here? Or, why am I here, might be the better question." Ekyt couldn't stop looking around. On a desk of sorts, Ekyt saw a picture. He and his parents, and...Holly. All of them smiling. Holly, of course, wasn't talking yet, she was just a puppy, but still, the site warmed Ekyt's heart. There were other memories, too. All of them framed in this dusty office/library. There was his third birthday, a vacation at age 13, and earning his hitai-ate at age 15. Finally, it showed him getting a kiss on the cheek. Sakura was the giver, Ekyt the receiver.

And there were others. So many memories. And they all seemed good. One corner of the office, however, was darkened. Ekyt somehow knew not to go near that part of the office.. With that, he turned his attention back to the slightly older-looking him.

"I'm here, and you're here, in your subconscious, because you just got knocked for one hell of a loop," the older Ekyt responded. He handed Ekyt a glass of sake, then downed his own.

"So, I'm not dying. I've got that much- so why am I here? I got knocked for a loop, yeah, but I've had my bell rung so many times, why is this time different?" Ekyt wanted to know.

His older self took another drink. "Well, it's about time you realized that you're special."

"Special? Come on, you invite me in, and then bullshoot me?" Ekyt snorted dismissively.

"Hey, I would have said the same thing. Boy, what a cynical wiseass I was!"

"Still are," Ekyt corrected him.

"Whatever. Anyway, point is, you're special. Your chakra- that's me, partly. See, I'm the emotional you. I can show my feelings. But I hold them in, same as you. And that's because I know what's going to happen. And you, my friend, need to know. It's all in this scroll."

Ekyt took the scroll, seeing it was like a mirror image of his scroll, ShoBu. But this one was black, and sealed with the sageyo of a samurai sword. Ekyt looked at the scroll hard.

Do I WANT to open this? Do I really want to know?

Ekyt's thoughts were pushed aside as his hands opened the scroll. The contents were only mildly suprising. But they WERE a let down.

"So I was right..." Ekyt said sadly, closing the scroll up. His older self nodded.

"More or less...it's not too late to change that, you know. This part here, about you being alone- it's already untrue. Right now, you have three medics trying to revive you. Sakura is pushing herself to her limits trying to save your life. This proves that your fate ISN'T set, at least not yet. You can still turn things around. You can still-"

Ekyt got up and walked over to a picture. It was of himself. By himself. In the original picture, he was

with Master Sarutobi, Lee, and Sakura. But this one showed him alone. Ekyt took it off the wall and studied it closer. There was no trace of his friends. Not a single bit. The memory was so sad...Ekyt put it back, pushing back tears. His older self put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's not over, you know. You can't give up. For every bad memory, there's at least one good one. Don't you want more good memories?"

"What do they matter?! In the end, I'll die alone! I live to serve only a few people. When they're dead, so am I! What girl could want me? An emotional trainwreck? Who would put up with me? My own FAMILY deserted me, those bastards! Only four people stayed true to me...out of all my family...and then a few more. But who else were they going to turn to? I was the one to offer support. That's all I am- a crutch. A convenience. Why is it like that? Why am I tortured like this?!"

Ekyt was shaking now, his hands sweating, his eyes as wide as they could go. "I'm as alone as I ever was. And I'll die that way. I could never ask a girl to share my burden...this pain has to die with me. This anxiety, this torture, every night, every day!"

The older Ekyt put a hand on Ekyt's shoulder.

"Don't you think that maybe, just maybe, some girl thinks the same way? That YOU wouldn't give HER the time of day? That she's got problems that she's reluctant to share? Do you really think you're alone? Your emotions are powerful, Ekyt, and you're stubborn. That's why things are this way. If you wanted to, you could change everything. You could HAVE a girl, a family. But right now, you've got what you need to keep going. A cause. A purpose. And the more time you spend here, the less time you're giving to the people you care about. Whether they reciprocate that care or not, you love them. Love isn't a one way street. You can't battle yourself. You NEED this cause, Ekyt. It's the link to everything else you need, you want, you desire."

Ekyt couldn't hold back the tears any more.

"It's like dying...every night. Scaring yourself into thinking you're dying, or worse. What girl could want that? What VILLAGE would want that?"

The older Ekyt smiled. "I think you know the answer to that as well as I do. Now, before you go, take this scroll with you. You're going to need it. Use it when the time is right. For now, get back to your body, before Tsunade decides you're dead."

Ekyt nodded, and headed toward the door in the office. On the way out, he saw a stack of magazines of, um, questionable content. Then he saw it, in all its orange-bound glory.

"Makeout Paradise?" Ekyt shouted, throwing the book at his older self. "I'm a PERV when I get older?!" Ekyt grinned, then ran toward the office door, and threw it open. He was falling, but somehow, he knew he'd be fine.

Ekyt sat up. Tsunade, Shizune, and Sakura, all of whom had been trying to save him, were stunned.

"I'm fine. There's no time to explain. I'm not sure I could. Right now, I-that's it! Tsunade-sama, Orochimaru is planning something. He's nearly immortal. And I can't kill him, but I CAN end this invasion. But I need something from you..."

"What?"

"I need you to let me go with Yamato-sensei to retrieve Naruto."

Tsunade nodded. **What the hell? This kid was a fugitive not two hours ago. Now I'm doing whatever he tells me? But he's never spoken like this- convincing. We've got nothing to lose by listening to him. And I owe him a great deal of trust.**

Sarutobi was nearly out of chakra. He was panting, slight bent over from age.

“Ha ha ha! I warned you, old man! You were never a match for me! If you had only killed all those years ago!”

Sarutobi knew his time was up. But then he felt the presence of Ekyt next to him.

“Master...let me handle him.” Ekyt reached for his scroll, bit his thumb, and opened it. Then, he threw it. It unraveled at Orochimaru’s feet. The Blue Flame Chakra was alive.

“An Emotional Clone, Orochimaru. I wouldn’t have called upon him if I didn’t think you were a threat. So be honored,” Ekyt said disdainfully. The emotional clone was the Blue Flame Chakra, but it looked like Ekyt. With one swipe of it’s arm, the clone struck an approaching Kabuto. Kabuto, who rarely yelled out in pain, screamed in agony.

Without Chakaro, Kabuto, and with Sasuke distracted, Orochimaru was in trouble.

I’ve never seen anything like this! Is this a forbidden jutsu? Did he invent it? What happened?

“Swallow’s Strike Finality!”

Orochimaru narrowly dodged the clone’s attack. It was then he felt it.

“Genjutsu? You try a mere genjutsu on me? Release!” Orochimaru hissed.

“Good catch, Orochimaru. I guess you beat my genjutsu. But if you’ll look closely at your ankle, you’ll see that you got hit by my REAL attack.”

Orochimaru looked down. Four snakes had latched onto his ankles.

“Swallow’s Emotional Element: Rage!” The Emotional Clone called. THIS strike hit home. It looked like a simple punch to the stomach, but in reality, the clone’s hand was sealing tenketsu. Nearly all of them were sealed before Orochimaru broke away. He looked at Ekyt and his clone, then dove into a snake’s mouth, which whisked him away to safety.

The clone looked sadly at Ekyt.

“I have to merge with you again. When you offered the blood tribute, you put your emotions in the scroll. I have to return to your body. It’s going to hurt, but just know that you WILL live, and the pain WILL end.”

Ekyt nodded his understanding. The clone walked towards Ekyt. It didn’t stop. It just walked INTO Ekyt.

Tsunade saw the whole thing. She started towards him, but Sakura beat her over to him.

“What was that?! Are you okay?!” Sakura was nearly hysterical with surprise and worry.

“I’m fine. And that was...well, my second chakra. It’s a long story. Right now, we need to retrieve Naruto.”

“That will have to wait, Ekyt. Yamato has been injured, and can’t perform the jutsu.”

Ekyt shook his head. “The form he takes could kill Naruto, you know that! Let ME try. If I can talk him down...if not, I’ll seal the demon again, and remove it after the fight. Either way, Naruto is as close to death as I was.”

Tsunade clearly didn’t want Ekyt to go, but knew that she had a snowball’s chance in hell of stopping him.

“Sakura, you go, too. Take care of my two talented idiots.”

Naruto and Sasuke were both nearly finished. That was when Naruto’s fifth tail appeared. With a roar, he lost control of his body. He would kill Sasuke at this point. Sasuke sensed this, and used a newer

version of his Chidori. It took two hands, both chirping with the energy of 1000 birds. Naruto was still fighting for control, so the attack hit. It propelled him, in his demon fox form, to the gates of the Leaf Village. Sasuke flew over in his cursed seal form and landed on top of the village's walls.

"Fools. You can't resist Orochimaru. That's why I left this idiot Village." Sasuke smirked as the stunned Villagers looked up at him. He heard a 'tok' next to him. Before he could turn, he was kicked off the village wall with a well-placed Dynamic Entry.

"Don't insult the village that just kicked your @\$#! How weak does that make you look?!" Ekyt shouted down. He leapt down in front of the transformed Naruto. The Blue Flame chakra was in hand.

"Blue Flame Protection Seal!" Ekyt called.

Naruto roared, knocking Ekyt off the wall. POOF! Shadow Clone!

"Blue Flame Protection Seal!" Ekyt called again. This time, he had to dodge backward to avoid Naruto's tails. The villagers gasped in horror as Ekyt barely got away.

"Striking Shadow Snakes!" he called. Ekyt's snakes held four of Naruto's tails. But the fifth tail kept him away.

"The scroll...No, I've used it, it would kill him, he's too unstable. There's no choice. I'm sorry, Naruto..." Ekyt reared back and threw the ball of chakra in his hand at Naruto.

The problem here was that the chakra was connected to Ekyt. He was throwing away his emotions. And that was going to be painful. Ekyt knew it. But he also so something else. A friend dying. Ekyt had told Master Sarutobi he would protect Naruto. Even if it meant his life, Naruto was the future. Sakura was the future. Ekyt didn't know about his own, except that he was going to protect those two. So when he released that ball of chakra, he freely accepted the pain that came with it. His body, however, did not. At least not very well. As soon as the ball left Ekyt's hand, he staggered backwards. True to form, into the worst spot possible. Right near a pissed-off Sasuke.

Naruto felt the demon fox's chakra recede. It slowly oozed back inside him, back behind it's seal.

"Naruto!" Sakura immediately called on her trusty chakra scalpel again.

"You'll be okay, Naruto!" she promised. "Hang in there!"

Ekyt chanced a glance over his shoulder. Naruto was getting medical attention. Good. **All I've got to do is hold off a weakened Sasuke...great.**

But Sasuke didn't fight Ekyt. He stared at him.

"I remember you...you were one of the few I respected. Now I can tell...that respect wasn't unfounded. Tell me one thing, before I'm forced to leave: I've been told you own the ring of an Akatsuki member. Is that true?"

Ekyt nodded. "It is. I defeated Kisame and took his ring as a reward. Let me guess: The Akatsuki have a bounty on me? You're going to collect it?"

Sasuke shook his head. "No. I'm only interested in one member of the Akatsuki: my brother. I'm going to ask you a favor. My brother...if you meet him, don't kill him. It's the only dream I have left. I'll never rebuild the Uchiha clan. I'm convinced- it will take me giving up my life to kill Itachi. If that's the price, I'll pay it- without hesitation."

Ekyt breathed out, buying himself time for his response. Or, rather, buying someone else time. **I made a promise, so did he...**

"Sasuke...I have no intention of killing your brother. It would take a lot to drive me to that point. My goals are...well, they're kind of private. It's taken me 19 years to realize something most people figure out in twelve years. But don't concern yourself with that. Concern yourself with your own goals. Such as

rebuilding your clan. Not that we need more dangerous bastards around. But I hate to see people fail at their goals.”

Ekyt heard the sound of running. He snared Sasuke with a genjutsu as a distraction, while Naruto used his Rasengan, planting it right in Sasuke’s stomach. It knocked Sasuke backward- into the village. Right at Sakura’s feet.

Naruto couldn’t believe it.

“I-I did it? I brought him back! I brought him back! I kept my promise to Sakura! YES!” When Naruto turned to thank Ekyt for his help, he found that Ekyt was gone.

Sakura was grateful. “Thank you, Naruto. This means a lot to me...and probably to you, too.”

“It sure does! It took forever! But we’ve got Sasuke back!”

The Villagers flocked around, all of them surprised that the kid who had been ‘the enemy within’ had brought back the talented Uchiha boy.

In the Hokage’s office, Ekyt smiled for the first time in days.

“It’s about time he got the spotlight he deserves...no point in me being there. Those people would have given me their attention. As nice as it would have been...every dog...or fox...has his day. Today was Naruto’s day. It’s been a long time coming for him.”

Ekyt was thrilled for his friends. He, himself, of course, couldn’t share their joy. He didn’t tell himself ‘job well done’. He had done the near impossible. But it meant nothing. Or so it felt. As he pressed his hand against the window, Ekyt saw his reflection. A beaten-up young man whose view of the world was jaded greeted his tired eyes. He didn’t see success. All he saw was...pain.

“Oh well. Naruto’s having quite a run of luck. First he’s a chunin, now he’s the star of the day.

(chuckles) I can’t think of anyone more deserving. I could go join them...no, that’s not my style. Besides, being this depressed, I would be the rain on Naruto’s parade.”

For Ekyt, it was back to business as usual. After a routine check-up at the hospital, Ekyt went to where the chunin exams were held.

“I’ve only been here once as a competitor. Probably the only time I will be, too. Since the building’s empty...Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

The two Ekyt’s faced off at the opposite ends of the arena. Soon, they were in close, fighting. Ekyt had given the clone half his chakra, so they could fight until the chakra ran out.

“You’re a hero!”

“Way to go, Naruto!”

“Ramen’s on me!”

Naruto couldn’t believe how much the people liked him now. All for beating one enemy.

This is what it’s like to be loved? I like it! I wish everyone could feel this! It took so long to get the Village to even acknowledge me...now, some of them like me! I’m that much closer to being Hokage!

Naruto saw Sakura tending to Sasuke. But soon she stopped that and stood next to Naruto.

"You deserve this, Naruto."

Naruto smiled widely, finally laughing.

"Sakura-chan, I have never heard you say that to me before!" he declared happily.

Sakura ruffled his hair. "That's because you never DESERVED it before," she joked.

"Well done, Naruto," came a familiar voice.

"Pervy Sage!" Naruto turned around. Indeed, it was Master Jiraiya.

"Don't call me that, alright?" Jiraiya looked around, hoping none of his 'specimens' heard that.

Master Sarutobi soon left the celebration. He knew Ekyt all too well. He wouldn't have found him if it weren't for his crystal ball. Sarutobi felt horribly sad as he watched the boy spar.

Such a happy day for the village...but the boy has no happiness inside him. All he feels is his sense of duty...and maybe a sense of longing. Still, the way he stepped aside to make sure Naruto got the glory was...unnecessary. I need to make one last appeal to Tsunade. Then, I have to guide Ekyt into making a decision that's going to hurt us all. But if he wants to succeed, this is the only way...

Sarutobi watched a little longer. The real Ekyt soon defeated his clone. With reverence, Ekyt looked around the room. Finally, he sat down and opened his scroll, the one that had just saved his life.

Business as usual.

"I'm getting too old for this shoot!" Tsunade declared.

"Have you thought of a successor?" Sarutobi asked jokingly.

"I said I'm GETTING too old, not that I AM too old! Besides, there's you, and there's Kakashi. Unless you want me to put Naruto in charge!" Tsunade shot back.

"I see your point. If you are getting too old, then I AM too old. What about the Kaguya boy?" Sarutobi asked.

"He's not the Hokage type. Although he's everything that would make a great Hokage, he wouldn't take the title. Not before Naruto. That would be taking his friend's dream, and I know he's not capable of that. By the way, will Ekyt be coming to the parade?"

Sarutobi shrugged and puffed on his pipe. "I doubt that. I haven't spoken to the boy. I've only seen him. And he's back to business as usual." Sarutobi showed Tsunade how Ekyt went right back to training.

Tsunade chuckled. "How much better does he need to be? It's not like he's in the chunin exams."

Sarutobi narrowed his eyes, in thought. "You could, of course, appoint the boy. To chunin. Or jonin, for that matter. He's long outgrown being a genin."

"Don't think I haven't considered it. I'm just not going to. Then EVERYONE will want a promotion."

"I'm sure they are aware that the Kaguya boy is a special case. Well, I had hoped you would relent Tsunade. Truth be told, I don't think the boy would need much convincing right now. He had other options besides staying here, others have noticed his ability. I don't mean within the Leaf Village either. He's garnered the attention of Orochimaru, and even the Akatsuki. And the Sand Village has already contacted me, hoping they will send Ekyt and Temari to them. I assume they'll be asking you soon."

"I wouldn't let either of them go! Temari is an excellent jonin, and Ekyt is the most skilled genin I've ever seen!"

Sarutobi shook his head. "Tsunade, I think you should let the boy go."

Tsunade stared at Sarutobi harshly, not sure she heard that right.

"Pardon me?"

Sarutobi looked Tsunade in the eyes.

"I think you should let him go. You won't promote him, and he can't learn anymore from us without that promotion. His talent is going to waste on mindless D-ranked missions meant for people nearly half his age. If the Leaf Village can't use him, I'm sure our allies can."

Tsunade glared at Sarutobi. "He would never leave. Never. No matter what. Even if I demoted him to academy student."

"Big deal. It's one step down. I'd graduate in two weeks," Ekyt piped up, walking into the room. His mask was around his neck, so you could see his facial features. He was sporting a smile, beaming at the chaos his little joke had momentarily caused.

"You fought very well today. You should be proud," Tsunade told him. She reached out to touch his shoulder, but Ekyt had moved away. But it didn't seem like he had noticed, or meant to. He had his eyes fixated on the Village out the window.

"I don't suppose I've miraculously become a chunin?" Ekyt joked.

"Sorry, no. You're the most talented genin since Itachi Uchiha," Tsunade told him proudly. She thought she would get a smile. Instead, she got a thoughtful, hardened look.

"Itachi...I wonder if...well, never mind. At any rate, I thought I should tell you in person: I feel I should resign. Leave the Village, travel, try to find a place. I've really got no obligations to fulfill, and there's really no place for me. So, I was hoping you wouldn't mind if I went to work for another Village."

Tsunade's smile faded. "Of course I mind. You're not allowed to go anywhere."

"So, I'm not a chunin or a jonin..."

"No," Tsunade replied.

"I have no family here..."

"I guess not," Tsunade admitted.

"I'm not going to be promoted any time soon..."

"Not likely," Tsunade had to concede.

"I'm not working with Naruto and Sakura, or any team..."

"No..." Tsunade realized what he was doing.

"Well, seems like I'm wasting my time, then. I can't learn anymore here. I should move on. I don't NEED your blessing to leave...but I had hoped the mutual respect was there, where if I voiced my concern to you, you would take it seriously. I misjudged you, Lady Tsunade. I guess we all have lapses in judgment."

Ekyt jammed a straw hat onto his head and pulled on his long black coat.

"Well, I need to be going. Master Sarutobi, thank you for your time. I don't want to rain on Naruto's parade, so if you wouldn't mind giving him and Sakura...and Sasuke...my best..."

Tsunade was NOT going to let this happen.

"If you try to leave, I WILL have you stopped, just like last time."

Master Sarutobi stepped in. "Tsunade, you're pushing him further away. Naruto may indeed be the hero of the day, but he had help getting there. The unsung heroes usually are rewarded with enough land for a grave. This hero, however, has received nothing."

"Master Sarutobi...it's alright. If the Fifth feels so strongly, I won't leave the Village. But I won't do any missions, either. I'm going back to my training, and my healing. Everyone wins," Ekyt said pleasantly,

walking out of the room.

“Wait! Damnit! Who’s going to do these D-ranks?!” Tsunade protested.

Sarutobi picked them up. “Their intended clients- the genin of the village. He’s done 500 missions, all D-ranked. That’s more D-ranks than anyone else, and nearly more total missions than anyone else. It makes one wonder- where DOES loyalty go when it is pushed away, rather than received?”

Ekyt picked out a private rooftop. There, he unrolled his scroll. But it made him wonder...if he could talk to himself for guidance when he was dying, why not now? So Ekyt instead focused his mind and chakra in a meditation-like state. Soon, he found himself in the office he was in before. He had been there only a minute when his older self, Makeout Paradise in hand, looked up from a couch in surprise.

“You learned to find me quickly enough. You must have a problem. Or I need to change my locks,” the ‘older Ekyt’ said.

“Funny. I’m sure you saw the parade and whatnot...I don’t mind Naruto getting the attention he’s worked for. I just thought that helping save the Village might be enough to make me a chunin. Am I wrong for...well, desiring this? Is it wrong to think this way? Virtue IS it’s own reward, but would it hurt to get some visible virtues? Why do I care so much about that damn green vest?”

Older Ekyt closed his book and his eyes. “You don’t want the vest. You want the rank and the recognition that comes with it. You want someone to notice your hard work. You want something to be proud of. It’s not uncommon, and it’s not wrong.”

“Do I deserve it? Do I deserve to be a chunin?” Ekyt asked.

“You know as well as I do, don’t you. I’m wearing that green vest now. It still means a lot, even though I’ve worn it for all this time. It’s tattered from the battles I fight in your mind, the same way yours would get tattered from combat. Let me ask you this: The words of wisdom you came up with, on that scroll you wrote. The ones that apply to any martial artists. What are they?”

Ekyt thought for a moment, then responded. “A martial artist should never let his emotions take control. He should never let his anger dictate his actions. His mind should be clear and free of hatred.”

Ekyt paused.

“That’s noble and all, but no matter what, I HAVE emotions. I just don’t show them. And showing them won’t help, I’ve tried that.”

Older Ekyt got up. He suddenly looked panicked.

“Go back to your body. You’re in major trouble! Hurry!”

Ekyt leapt up. There was Itachi Uchiha. Behind him was Deidara and the giant bird that had got them both here.

“It’s time to give back that ring,” Itachi told him. Ekyt avoided his eyes. Everyone was still partying over the enormous Victory over the Sound Village, which had wielded a prisoner. Ironically, Sasuke’s capture had been the opening Itachi needed to get to Ekyt.

“I don’t think so. And I’m not going with you.”

Itachi’s Sharingan was already activated.

“Fireball Jutsu!”

The ball of fire was approaching Ekyt. Quickly, he forced himself out of the dregs of his healing trance and into combat mode...

23 - A Desire Fulfilled

Ekyt leapt aside, tucking and rolling. When he rolled to his feet, he leapt back with a curse.

“Katsu!”

An explosion nearly killed Ekyt, but he saw it coming in time. He felt the strains of genjutsu on his mind.

“Release!” he barked, throwing it off. At the same time, a horrible thought struck him. **These guys are something beyond jonin...I'm in trouble. And that damn festival, no one could hear me, even if I DID yell. I've just gotta hope someone notices and notifies Master Sarutobi...**

“Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!” Ekyt called. A duplicate of him attacked Itachi with a continuous stream of fire. This forced Itachi to move, in contrast to his regular style.

The huge explosion of fire attacks earned the village's attention. A quick headcount revealed who was missing.

“We've gotta get up there!” Naruto shouted. He and Sakura nodded. Kakashi soon joined them and they hit their top speed, trying to reach the roof.

“Deidara, the dome,” Itachi called over.

“Right, un.” Deidara focused his chakra, activating the four-sealed barrier around the roof.

Seconds later, Deidara cursed as several throwing needles (different from their cousins, senbon) struck him. The last one had an exploding tag attached.

“Remote Detonation!” Ekyt called. The explosion caused smoke to engulf the dome. This was a blessing and a curse. Ekyt hoped he had incapacitated that blonde guy, because Itachi needed his full attention. That was when Ekyt felt it. A genjutsu unlike anything he'd ever felt before. It wasn't the Tsukuyomi, but it was just as powerful. But Ekyt sensed the chakra use, and saw it was much less than the Tsukuyomi required.

There were three ways to break genjutsu, and an unconventional fourth way. That fourth way was a rare ability. The three ways were to either (1) Use the 'Release' technique and stop the chakra flow, (2) Physical pain not caused by the genjutsu, or (3) have someone else break the genjutsu by putting their chakra into you. The fourth way, which was almost exclusive to Ekyt, was to push the genjutsu aside with sheer will power and rush your opponent, to force him to defend himself and weaken/break the genjutsu. Ekyt chose the fourth option. This clearly stunned Itachi. Especially when Ekyt used a replacement jutsu to land behind him. Itachi wasn't considered a genius for nothing. He broke the genjutsu and punched instead. The smart crack across the face sent Ekyt sailing. He bounced off the other end of the dome. He saw Itachi coming. The speed was incredible. Ekyt was frozen for a second, before he decided he needed to move. He leapt straight up. As Itachi started to follow, he found himself snared with four snakes.

“So you replaced yourself with that clone quickly enough to fool my Sharingan...”

Ekyt gave a sharp tug from the right, pulling Itachi toward him. Itachi let the speed happen. He extended his leg in a strike. His Sharingan revealed a clone. **Another? He can't dodge forever.**

That wasn't Ekyt's plan. Ekyt came down from above, two swords in hand.

“Dance of the Sick Moon! Drawing Blade's Course!”

The second jutsu allowed Ekyt to elongate a weapon for a short time, usually for just a strike. (Like the

ability the 3rd Hokage's staff and Orochimaru's Kusanagi possess naturally) Ekyt's clones disappeared as he struck downward. His swords cleaved Itachi's shoulders. The swords were the Striking Serpent Blades. Coupled with "Striking Shadow Snakes," Ekyt had grabbed Itachi, held him still, then struck. The blades stuck in Itachi. Ekyt tugged them free, carefully avoiding Itachi's gaze.

"Hurry! I don't care how good he's gotten, that's still the Akatsuki up there!" Naruto pushed off hard. Naruto, Sakura, and Kakashi were soon joined by Sasuke. "If my brother is up there, I'm going to kill him. Ekyt promised he wouldn't...Itachi is mine to kill..." "He'll do what he has to," Kakashi said roughly. "And I'LL do what I have to..." Sasuke shot back.

A small clay bird came flying at Ekyt. He swatted it out of the air, then leapt away as it detonated. Then a second bird, soon followed by a third came. Ekyt knocked them away as quickly as he could. The fourth bird came from behind. Ekyt spun around and kicked it away. When he turned back around, Itachi was right there. He punched side-kicked Ekyt so hard blood shot from Ekyt's mouth as he hit the ground some meters away.

Ekyt knew he was going to have to pull out all the stops to save himself.

"First Gate: Gate of Opening: Release!" Opening the first gate wasn't ideal in this situation, but it was the only way to dodge Itachi's speed. When he was far enough away from both Akatsuki members, Ekyt accessed his Blue Flame Chakra. He had a desperate plan in mind. He took off, dodging Deidara's birds, his chakra in his hand.

"Dragon's Emotion Flame!" Ekyt kicked and punched at Itachi, with Itachi handily dodging each one. On the last strike, Ekyt turned up the tempo. The chakra singed the helm of Itachi's cloak.

My chakra's almost gone...but if I pull this off, I can focus on that blonde guy. There's no way he's as big a threat as Itachi.

"Blue Chakra: Bloodline Sealing!" Ekyt shouted, his hand aiming for Itachi's eyes. WHOOF!

Itachi's punch to the stomach stopped Ekyt's hands just short of Itachi's eyes. Ekyt looked away before the Mangekyo Sharingan could take its toll. **Time to comprise...or buy time.**

"You want the ring?" Ekyt shouted. **I'm beaten...but that doesn't mean I have to let these guys call ALL the shots. If I'm going to die, I'm going to take as much of them with me as possible. And if they want this ring so bad, I'm going to make sure they don't get it.**

Still holding the Striking Serpent Blades, Ekyt used them to cut open his thumb.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

From under the roof, Shuurai, Ekyt's snake summon, popped up.

"Yes, master?" Shuurai asked humbly.

"Shuurai, take this (puts the ring in his mouth) and go! Give it to...the trustworthy one! You know who I mean!"

Shuurai took the ring and leapt down the hole he came from. He popped out underneath the dome and slithered away, seeking who Ekyt directed him to.

This time, Ekyt turned around, and he was immediately grabbed by Deidara.

shoot...

“Hold still, un! Hurry up, Itachi, he’s bucking like a damn bronco!” Deidara called. Ekyt’s foot connected with Deidara’s groin a split second later, causing Deidara to let go and utter a string of curses. But it was too late. Another set of hands grabbed his head.

“Tsukuyomi...”

Itachi had finally snared Ekyt with his most powerful genjutsu. Ekyt, after opening the First Gate, and using Emotional Chakra, had little left to fight it.

The world was black and white, with a strange shade of red.

Itachi’s world.

Ekyt knew he was in trouble. He was running on his last reserves of chakra and stamina. Before him was Itachi.

“You put up quite a fight. All we wanted was the ring...but now I know how dangerous your chakra is...it’s a shame our leader has forbidden me to kill you. But, torturing you-for the next day, I’m going to stab you with this sword.” Itachi walked forward, a long sword in hand. It’s point gleamed dangerously. Ekyt backed away, but hit something. He turned his head to look.

Skeletal forms of all that had suffered Tsukuyomi. There was Kakashi, Sakura, and then Ekyt saw himself. All three were rotting corpses. But they were talking, begging for help. Ekyt drew his swords and ran at Itachi again. A jutsu would have been great here. But he didn’t even have the stamina left to break the genjutsu.

“I don’t need to tie you up...” Itachi said, bringing two fingers up to his face. Time stopped, and so did Ekyt. Itachi walked over to Ekyt, who could SEE what was going on, but couldn’t actually do anything about it.

“...But it saves this sort of trouble. It’s extra work. Your fate is the same.” Itachi let time begin again, and Ekyt’s run took him straight into Itachi’s sword. Before he could move, Ekyt was stabbed twenty more times. Then thirty. Then fifty. Itachi’s hand became a blur, and Ekyt’s body became porous.

Finally, Ekyt succumbed to the torture. He hadn’t lasted the full day. Before he blacked out, Itachi stood over him. His eyes still glowed dangerously with the Mangekyo Sharingan.

“Your training served you well. No one else put up such a fight at such a young age. Now, it’s time for us to take the fight out of you.”

Itachi’s hand came down and struck Ekyt at his Chi point, three inches below the navel. This time, Ekyt blacked out.

Itachi threw Ekyt’s body to Deidara, who loaded him onto his bird. Itachi climbed on and they took off.

Naruto and the others were too late. Deidara’s bird was flying away. They could see Ekyt’s unconscious form curled up in the tail.

Naruto thought back to Gaara. He had been in the same position. And when they had gotten there, they were too late. Older the elder from Sunagakure, Chiyo, could save him, and she gave her life to do just that. If they extracted Ekyt’s...

“Hey, he’s not a Jinchuuriki, and he doesn’t have the ring! What are they extracting?! Why not just kill him?” Naruto asked, thinking of Gaara’s helpless form being used as a bench by that bastard blond

artist.

Sasuke spoke up. "His emotional chakra. Even Orochimaru wanted it. Now they're going to take it." Kakashi nodded. "He's right. We can't let that happen. Gaara had a guardian angel. Ekyt won't. If they take that out...well, we don't know what will happen. Sakura?"

Sakura shook her head. "He could live without his second chakra, it's not a demon. But what KIND of life he would have...this is all theory, though. His body might not react to the extraction, and this might actually kill him. It's hard to tell."

Kakashi lifted his headband.

"Our best bet is to follow that bird. I'm going to send Pakkun for back up. If all the Akatsuki are there, we WILL be fighting them. We get Ekyt and run for it. No one of us is a match for Itachi."

Everyone, save for Sasuke, nodded their agreement. Naruto nodded, but to his own thoughts.

Pakkun raced to the Village. He ignored Tsunade, he needed others.

"Gai! Hey, down here! Damn it!" Pakkun bit Gai on the leg.

"Yeow! What the hell?! Is this some game of Kakashi's?" Gai shouted at Pakkun.

"No, you dolt. He needs back up. The Akatsuki are involved. They've got Ekyt, and"

"They've got my Lee's best sparring partner! Lee, get Tenten and Neji! We have a mission!"

Pakkun shook his head. **With help like this, the kid is done for.**

Deidara landed his bird while Itachi unloaded Ekyt.

Pein, Zetsu, Sasori, and the rest gathered around.

"This is not a Jinchuuriki, Itachi. Why did you bring this boy to us?" Pain demanded.

"He's a threat. He's Konoha's "Dragon Boy", the one with the Emotional Chakra. He nearly sealed my Sharingan. He's too much of a threat with that kind of ability. We need to take it away from him."

Itachi looked down at Ekyt. The boy would be waking up soon, unless they began the extraction process. Once he woke up, he would pose a threat again. Even outnumbered, Itachi knew what the boy could do. **If HE figured it out, it would be a disaster.**

"And the ring?" Pain asked.

"He sent it away before we could retrieve it, un. He gave us a good fight, I'll give him that. Itachi's right. He's too dangerous. If he were to ever harness his full abilities, it could be disastrous for us. He protects the Jinchuuriki, Naruto Uzumaki. Apparently, they're friends, un."

"Then let's begin. Even without Kisame, this shouldn't take three days."

"We were followed closely by Kakashi Hatake and his team. Among them is my brother, Sasuke. We don't have sacrifices on hand for our usual stall tactics."

Pain stroked his chin. "Then we'll welcome them. We have a hostage. I will perform the extraction. Everyone else- warn them that if they get too close, I'll kill the boy."

"And what the hell happens to the kid? Is Zetsu going to be shooting his corpse for a week after this, or is he going to be alive?" Hidan said in his own, inimitable way.

Pain studied the boy. "I cannot say for sure. He may live, or he may die. But my best guess...His second chakra will be gone, and perhaps even his soul. Emotions are tied in with the soul. If we take one, we may take the other. He can live without his soul. But his existence would be...meager. No chakra, no jutsus. Just...existing. But he's done enough damage, it's time for him to pay the price."

Pein began the extraction.

Ekyt was in the office again. This time, his older self was running around, pulling things off the walls, nailing things down, locking doors.

“What’s happening?” Ekyt shouted over the roar of the noise.

“They’re pulling out your emotional chakra. Listen to me, don’t talk. They’re taking out your second chakra. How to get it back is in this scroll. I can’t say if you’ll survive to get it back, but right now, you’ve got to take that scroll and get out of here! If you get trapped in here, they’ve got your soul, too, and you’ll be all but dead! Go, hurry!”

“What about you?!” Ekyt shouted back.

“I’ll be fine. You’ll see me again when you get that chakra back! Now, go!”

Kakashi, Gai, Lee, Tenten, Neji, Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto burst into the room. Immediately, they all squared off against someone. Except Sakura. She had one person in her sites: Pein.

While performing the jutsu by himself, Pein was in a trance of complete concentration. He wouldn’t know if someone attacked him. That’s what Sakura was betting on. She saw the chakra pouring from Ekyt. She wanted to cry, but knew that wasn’t how Ekyt would want it. And he wasn’t dead. She somehow KNEW he wasn’t dead. And she was going to stop this horrible process. Activating her chakra scalpel, she sliced Pain’s fingers, causing his handsign to fall apart, and the extraction to stop. But had Sakura been too late?

Sasuke and Itachi stared each other down.

“I’ve waited too long, Itachi. It’s time for you to die. What you did to the clan is unforgivable! I’ve relived the pain more times than I can count. I owe you for years of pain, and I WILL get my retribution!” Itachi didn’t move. “Has your hate grown yet, Sasuke? Do you hate me enough to kill me?”

Angered, Sasuke used his Mangekyo Sharingan. Itachi didn’t smile, but he felt a sense of accomplishment.

Good, he’s developed the Mangekyo. My own eyesight will fail me soon. That’s why I left you alive, Sasuke. All those years ago. I needed your eyes. And they’re ready. But this isn’t the time or the place. And your abilities could stand developing.

“Your hate is at it’s peak, isn’t it, Sasuke? This isn’t the time or place for us to have a final confrontation. This is between brothers, and there’s only one fitting spot to do it, and only one fitting day.”

Sasuke nodded. “Our old home is still taped off...and the anniversary of your betrayal is in two monthes. I’ll be waiting, Itachi. This time, we’re on equal ground. For now, I owe Konoha a small debt, and I’m going to pay it. Enjoy your last two monthes of living, big brother.”

Ekyt got up, weakened from the attack. He saw Pain heading towards Sakura. When he backhanded her, he WANTED to feel angry. He wanted to get his blue chakra and beat that rotten son of a dog until blood came out of every fiber of his body. But Ekyt didn’t feel angry. He didn’t feel anything, except physical pain. Nonetheless, he knew that he cared about Sakura, and he needed to stop the attack. As

Jiraiya had taught him, Ekyt called upon his fire and held it in his hand. Silently, he stood behind Pain. He jammed his hand onto Pain's neck. Then, in a Neji-like attack, Ekyt used his fists and feet to strike Pain's body. Every time a foot or fist made contact, a burn mark rose on Pain. Finally, Pain had enough and ordered the Akatsuki to withdraw...

It was quickly apparent Ekyt wasn't himself. He held a scroll in his hands, but he didn't bother opening it. His eyes were cold and lifeless, and he spoke in a toneless, but raspy whisper.

"Everyone okay?" he said.

"The question is, are YOU okay?" Lee asked.

Kakashi ghosted over to Sakura. "Sakura, go up to him and hug him. That's the one sure-fire way to get a reaction."

Sakura nodded numbly, sure she already knew what was going to happen. She walked up to him and hugged him. She cried silently. But Ekyt didn't blush. He returned the hug, but there was no...emotion. That was it. That was the vacant look. Ekyt was the same person- but he had no emotions. The very things he had strived to get rid of.

Now, he wanted them back.

24 - An Emotionless Existence

The trip home was nearly silent. Eventually, Naruto, of course, couldn't take it.

"That's it! I'm gonna get those emotions back into you, right now! Sexy Jutsu!"

The beautiful, naked girl popped out, barring nothing. Ekyt's eyes didn't even flicker. Not even the 'blowing kisses' and 'Teach me, sensei' stuff worked. Ekyt's eyes were as cold and lifeless as before.

Naruto ended the jutsu. "Damn it, not even a nosebleed?!" Naruto grouched.

"I can't. I just don't feel...anything," Ekyt said in the same raspy, toneless voice.

Sasuke smirked a little. In his own way, he tried to lighten the mood.

"Now you're an ideal Shinobi. We aren't supposed to have emotions. The fact that we do means we've gotten sloppy."

Sakura shook her head. Her emotions were more sensitive due to her genetic composition (in other words, she's more sensitive, being female), and she knew they could be a curse, but they were also part of your character, your defining trait. **There's really a difference...he was so stoic before, it was like he didn't have emotions. NOW I see the difference- before, he was HIDING emotions, NOW he doesn't feel them, period. Usually, there's pain in his eyes...now, it's just...scary. There's nothing.**

"And what are your plans, Sasuke?" Kakashi asked. He sounded the same, but the question was almost threatening in its own way.

"In two months, at the Uchiha dojo, I'm going to kill Itachi. Until then, I guess I'm a prisoner. Or for as long as I choose to be," Sasuke added, letting everyone know that if he wanted to leave, he was going to.

Once they reached Konoha, everyone went their separate ways. For Ekyt, that meant a straight march to the Hokage's office. He had to let her know he was alive. That was it.

Alive in the loosest sense of the word.

When he walked in, Ekyt was immediately questioned by Tsunade about the Akatsuki. When she didn't even mention his health, he just sat there, and shook his head. Tsunade saw this coming, and decided to spring her little surprise. Sakura walked back in with Shizune, to get some herbs from Tsunade's personal garden.

"Congratulations...Master Sarutobi finally made me agree with him, and your story...well, just take it."

In Tsunade's hands was the vest Ekyt had wanted for so long. And with it, the rank of chunin. Ekyt took the vest and looked at it, saying nothing. Finally, he replaced it on Tsunade's desk.

"What?" Tsunade couldn't believe he was just...giving it back. "You've been after this for four years, why would you just hand it back to me without a word?!"

"Because I don't want the rank for something I lost, because you're feeling sorry for me...I want it because I'm truly worth to be called a chunin. I don't believe in 'pity ranks'. I want everyone, including you, to be able to say I'm a chunin and mean it, not just give it to me, to make me shut up and go away."

At any rate, I've given you my report. Am I free to go?"

Tsunade was completely taken aback. "The ring...what happened to the ring?"

"It's in the safest hands I could think of...Master Jiraiya's."

Tsunade groaned. "Kid, just WHAT are you smoking?"

Ekyt blinked. "Nothing. If you're questioning my decision, please say so. I'm afraid the Akatsuki now own my sense of humor."

With that, Ekyt left the office, walking out the door, instead of leaping from the rooftops like usual.

Turning to Sakura, Tsunade asked "Just what was that about?"

Sakura shook her head, then looked down. "It was horrible...when the Akatsuki captured him, they removed his emotional chakra. I stopped them before they took his soul, too, but he can't feel emotions. He's got a sense of right and wrong, but that's it. There's nothing else."

"The Akatsuki...they really did that? He must be in pain...I guess he must still have his pride, if he won't talk to me about it." Tsunade immediately felt guilty. **If it wasn't for me, he would have been at that festival...the Akatsuki would never have gotten him, surrounded by all those Shinobi. When he gets his emotions back, I'm going to set things straight. IF he gets them back.**

Over the next few days, the buzz was still all about Sasuke Uchiha and Naruto Uzumaki. But, gradually, word got out about Ekyt Kaguya's fate. Some even speculated he had actually died, until he walked by, face pale, eyes devoid of emotion. Then the mutters started. 'He survived the Akatsuki?' 'I heard they all but killed him'.

Ekyt ate his ramen, his expression unchanging. Ayame, Teuchi's (the ramen maker) daughter, was one of the kinder people in the village. A lot of people frequented Ichiraku more for her than the delicious noodles, as she also happened to be nice looking. She was one of the few to have seen Ekyt without his mask, since he couldn't eat ramen through the mask. She had seen expressions on his face that no one else had. Joy, anger, sadness, rage. But this expression was the most disturbing she had ever seen. It was living without life. She had never really talked to Ekyt, but he had always been cordial and friendly, if a little shy.

"Thank you," came Ekyt's toneless voice.

"Thinking about anything important? You seemed more deep in thought than usual," Ayame asked with a smile.

"My name. My first name, I mean. No one can pronounce it, and I think it's time I got a new one. I don't have any emotional attachment to that alias."

"I never knew that wasn't your real name!" Ayame exclaimed. She knew him well enough not to even ask his real name.

"When I was a vigilante of sorts, I needed it to protect my parents. Now that I've got a new life, maybe a new name should come with it."

Ayame smiled again. "Well, good luck with that."

"Thank you."

Even if I don't use the name, I should have it in place. What was it I picked? Oh, right- Ryouko. Ryouko Kaguya...it works, I guess. I'll keep answering to Ekyt, until it's a problem to use that name. That's one thing. Now, my emotions. Do I really want them back? I guess I should ask advice. Kakashi-sensei is usually good for advice. Maybe he could even help me with the scroll that I have to decipher to get my emotions back. No...I should do that on my own, until I HAVE to

get help. Somehow, that just feels right.

It was ironic, Kakashi noted. **Naruto, who's been here for 15 years, and has been shunned the entire time, is a hero after one attack. He's finally getting the attention he deserves, a little luck. Those of us who have seen what he can do, and how he cares about the village, know that he isn't just blowing smoke anymore. He's a far cry from the prank-playing brat he used to be. Now, he's got friends, and he's gotten stronger. Becoming Hokage...it's no longer a pipe dream for him.**

Naruto finally brought Sasuke back, meaning he kept his promise to Sakura. But Sakura hasn't batted any eye at Sasuke. What does that mean? That her eyes are somewhere else, or that she's finally learned how to reign in her emotions? Either way, she's not the bubbly, perky, fan girl of old. She's a medic-nin who will someday rival Tsunade herself.

And Sasuke...all the time he's spent training to kill his brother. He was defeated by his greatest rival. Whether he knows it or not, Naruto is his rival, his friend, and his brother. Itachi is nothing more than an enemy to him.

Funny how things work out.

"Kakashi-sensei, do you have a minute?"

Kakashi looked up from his book. Ekyt, of course. Kakashi was wondering when he'd be here.

"Sure. What's on your mind?" Kakashi asked.

"Well...I guess my question...do I REALLY want my emotions back? After hiding them for so long, isn't this kind of what I wanted? At the same time, I kind of miss the feelings I get...and I'm afraid I'll say something I'll regret while I can't care. Like telling Sakura how I feel. I just refused my chunin promotion. I don't want their sympathy, sensei. I want what I've always wanted, I guess. To belong."

Kakashi was a little taken aback at how much Ekyt had said. **That's right, without emotions, he'll say anything to anyone, and won't give it- or their reactions- a second thought. But he has to make this decision by himself. I can only guide him.**

"You're saying it was easier, and felt better, to hide your emotions, right?" Kakashi asked.

"I guess so."

"Well, Ekyt, you need to look out for yourself. If you miss your emotions, get them back."

"That's just it. I can't tell if I miss them or not," Ekyt replied.

Kakashi had never seen the boy look so lost. It was unnerving.

"Let me ask you this: Did you ever think about having a family?" Kakashi asked.

"All the time. I would want one. That's part of the hold up- without emotions, I don't feel my anxiety anymore. I feel physical pain, but I can rationalize it before it starts to worry me. And I can think clearly. But I feel like something's...just not there."

Kakashi nodded. "Well, I think you've answered yourself. You'll never belong if you don't feel emotions. Love for the village, hate for Ebisu. And I know this for a fact- Sakura feels emotions. And maybe you've noticed, but she hasn't batted an eye at Sasuke. She's feeling more emotions, and she's hiding them, the same as you. The love of her life has shown up, and she hasn't said anything to him. Now, you said your mind is clearer now- what does this mean?"

Ekyt immediately answered. "It means that she needs an outlet, a sounding board. Someone to talk to, because she can't sort through her emotions. They're too complex."

Kakashi nodded, smiling. "You ARE thinking more clearly. To be honest, right now, I think the best

person for her to sound off to- is you. YOU can process the emotions for her. Not to mention that, when you do, you can decide for yourself if you really want those emotions back.”

“I’ll give it a try. I can’t feel anything, but I can tell right and wrong. And I still follow my nindo, which dictates that I don’t let my friends suffer or die if I am able to stop it.” Ekyt started to walk away, but stopped.

“Sensei, I DO sort of feel one thing...I...want to get my chakra back. I want to make the Akatsuki pay. It’s a really distant feeling, and I’m not sure where it’s coming from, but I feel it.”

Kakashi took that into consideration. **He’ll figure it out. In the mean time, I’d better talk to Naruto, Sai, and Yamato- Ekyt will be going after the Akatsuki, and I’d better make sure they’re ready. Now, what was I thinking about before? Oh, right, how everyone has grown.**

Ekyt was the last one. His six months of nothing but training really paid off, if he held off two Akatsuki members for so long. But he’s flawed, and he knows it. He doesn’t claim to be ultimate. If he did, he wouldn’t have gotten rid of the ring. He would have kept it, knowing he would win. He thought strategically- why let the enemy call all the shots? Make them work harder for what they want. His abilities are at a jonin level now, there’s no longer any doubt. But what does that mean? Master Sarutobi’s ‘prophecy’ says there will be more legendary ninja- is he among them? I guess only time will tell...

Sakura stacked the papers in Tsunade’s office silently. Her teacher had picked up on this. Usually, to Tsunade, Sakura was TOO cheerful. But today, it seemed like something was bothering her. Tsunade looked out the window. A picture-perfect day. Bright blue sky, fluffy white clouds, and the sun was high. Not too hot, and a slight breeze. Sakura didn’t seem sick, either. So what was wrong. Tsunade was about to ask when Ekyt walked in.

“May I borrow Sakura for a moment, Lady Hokage?” Ekyt drawled.

Tsunade nodded silently, then cupped her hands under her chin. **Interesting...has he picked up on something, too?**

“Ekyt? This is a surprise!” Sakura tried to sound cheerful. No matter how depressed she was, Ekyt always seemed to top her in that department.

“Well, I was just wondering...Now that my mind is impartial, I can kind of...sense other’s emotions. And I was wondering if you’re having the same trouble I was with emotions...” Ekyt would have felt awkward if he could feel anything.

“What do you mean?” Sakura asked as they walked along one of the cobblestone streets.

“Too many of them. You feel too much, and you can’t decide which emotion to act on,” Ekyt replied, nodding to Hayate Gekko as they passed in the street.

“Well-yeah, how did you- hold on, this isn’t the place to have this conversation. Let’s go somewhere quieter.”

Ekyt nodded, and followed her lead to the park under Hokage rock. **I’ve gotten her to open up, that’s a good sign. Now I’ve just got to help her do something I never could figure out myself.**

Sakura picked out a bench, shaded pleasantly under a tall, gnarled tree. Ekyt stood, back straight.

Sakura wondered why, then laughed a little at the reason.

“You can sit, you know,” Sakura couldn’t help but roll her eyes.

Ekyt sat down. “Sorry, Sakura-sensei...I’m not quite myself...”

Sakura giggled again. “You know, you SOUND like yourself. You’ve known me long enough to not add

the 'sensei' part."

"You still outrank me," Ekyt replied.

"Y-eah, but we're friends of good standing, and not on a mission. So you don't have to call me 'sensei'," Sakura pointed out. Ekyt nodded, trying to understand. His mind shot back a response.

She's correct. Sit down and complete this- it's just like a mission.

"Anyway, you're right. I feel a lot of things...Anger, betrayal, forgiveness, understanding...I just don't know about the fifth emotion..." Sakura was looking at the ground.

"Sort out the others first. You're angry because you feel betrayed, but you're ready to forgive Sasuke because you understand why he did what he did. Just think about that for a minute. Then maybe the fifth emotion will be clearer to you," Ekyt told her. A leaf fell in front of him. Ekyt looked up- and he saw the tomoe of Sharingan.

"I think I know...but I don't know if it's real or not...I don't even know if what I just said made any sense. But I feel...love," Sakura managed to say. She looked next to her. Ekyt was still looking straight ahead.

"Love? It must be a pleasant feeling. I never really felt the love I think you're describing," Ekyt admitted. **Relate this to Linda. She'll understand, and it's an appropriate analogy.**

"You didn't? You never had- a relationship?" Sakura asked. **Didn't he come here with that dog, Linda?**

"I THOUGHT I felt love, with Linda. But I never really did. It was something short of infatuation, and something less than love. I think it was a bond, perhaps. A bond I longed for. I made the wrong choice, and I'm thankful that she rejected me. She's jealous, spiteful, and mean-spirited. But she was also kind, gentle, and sweet, when the time was right. She was impossible to read. But that's all the past. Her hatred...rather, her desire for my health to deteriorate...is a backwards sort of caring. It's not a friendship I cherish."

Sakura frowned in concentration. "What does all that mean? You're mentioning it to me for a reason..." Ekyt nodded, then kept his head down. "I guess I'm saying...only you can tell if you're in love. You're probably beating yourself up over this, and what you think is an inability to act. I'm going to phrase this in terms I understand, and I'll relate them as best I can. If you were battling someone, would you use a jutsu you knew, one where you could calculate all its effects, and have precision judgment, or would you take a chance on the intangible, and hope you were right?"

"The first one, the sure thing...I understand!" Sakura looked over at Ekyt, amazed that he had related all this to her. She was saddened to see his eyes and (what little she could see of) his expression still distant.

"It's really your decision, Sakura. I'm only attempting to help you sort through your emotions. It's not difficult when you have none of your own..." Ekyt looked over at Sakura.

"If I can ask you something, Sakura..." Ekyt didn't want to ask this, but his mind told him this was the person to ask.

"Sure, go ahead!" Sakura was so relieved; Ekyt could have asked her ANYTHING.

"My emotions...without them, I'm rational, and more efficient. Therefore, I'm better off without them. But I still feel an emptiness, and I can sense that's from my emotions. I guess my question is- what do you think? Should I attempt to retrieve my emotions, even though they are an...irritation? Or should I stay this way, the perfect warrior type? I've retained my conscience...is that enough?"

Sakura stood up, grabbing Ekyt's hand on the way up. She pointed up to the Hokage faces.

"You've met two of the Hokage's, Ekyt. What sets them apart from the others? If they're grouped together as the greatest warriors, why does everyone say that the 3rd was the smartest, while the 4th was the best?"

Ekyt hadn't thought of it. "I'd never really considered it."

"Personality. Emotions. When you came to the Leaf Village, after you became a genin, do you

remember feeling anything?"

"Yes. Love. Loyalty. A sense of belonging," Ekyt listed them.

Sakura smiled. "Don't you want to 'feel' again? I know how hard you study, and how you want to make a difference. Well, those people didn't become Hokage because they were stone-cold warriors. They became known for their abilities, and their wisdom. But also, their character."

Sakura let go of Ekyt's hand. She put her hands on her hips and stared at him, smiling, almost mischievously.

"You always said you wanted to make a difference. All of us have said it- you're special. But now, efficient or not, you're not *you*. I know all of us would rather have YOU back, than a cold, efficient machine. But it's something you've got to decide for yourself." Sakura started to walk away, but stopped and turned around, hands behind her back.

"Oh- and thank you for helping me. I think I know exactly how I feel now."

Naruto was greeted again. This time, it was one of the Hokage's assistants.

"Tsunade-sama wants to see you and Sakura at your earliest convenience. And, listen, Naruto, I'm sorry about how I treated you before. I'm sure you've heard that a lot, but I really do feel bad. The terror of the demon fox just made a fear you...but you know, you're no demon- you're a good kid with a big heart." The messenger went on his way, while Naruto felt like his head would fall apart from his wide grin.

"But why does Granny Tsunade want to see me? Oh well, if she wants to see Sakura, too, then I'm not in trouble! That's something! I'll find Sakura and find out what's going on. Where would she be...duh! WITH Granny already, she works there!"

Ekyt watched, impassively, as Sakura left. He turned back to the tree.

"Can I help you, Itachi?" Ekyt asked.

Itachi dropped down in front of Ekyt. "You can give my brother a message. Tell him that he and I will meet at the Uchiha dojo on the specified date at midnight.

Ekyt nodded. "Fine. Is that all?"

Itachi nodded. "Life without emotions...it must be interesting. It's interesting that you're alive. Usually, after an extraction, the host dies."

Ekyt just stared back. After a moment, he replied. "I guess I wasn't ready to die yet."

Itachi smirked a little, as if he understood, before he disappeared.

25 - Living alone, Trapped Inside

Tok tok tok tok. (Sound of running, echoing footsteps). The landscape was a blur as Ekyt ran. The hallway was industrial metal on all sides. Machines spitting steam shot out, create small welts on his skin. But Ekyt knew he had to keep going.

He HAD to.

Ekyt stopped, a giant blue flame in front of him. He immediately knew what it was.

"It's you. My chakra..." Ekyt held out his hand. His own chakra turned on him. It burned his hand. Ekyt could only stare, open-mouthed, as the chakra became the clone of him again. They were standing in what appeared to be a warehouse. Some rays of light shone in through windows, but they were mere slits.

Suddenly, Ekyt could FEEL again. That's when his clone spoke.

"That's right. I gave you your emotions back. But I belong to a more powerful vessel now, I have no need for you! Pathetic, weak, flesh being."

Ekyt felt a tear in his eye. Angrily, he brushed it aside.

"No...you've belonged to me for 19 years! You still belong to me!" Ekyt declared. The clone sneered. Ekyt held his ground, but he was scared, make no mistake.

"Yeah, right? Who's been in charge all this time? You, or me? Your emotions, your anxiety, or...you? You know the answer, don't you?! You could NEVER rule me! You could never lead me, and you'll never lead anyone else, you hopeless little genin! I've owned your body since you were born! I was fated to own you!"

Ekyt stepped up to the chakra clone. "Maybe you're not hearing me. I SAID- I own you! Now, either come home, or I'll destroy you!" Ekyt held a kunai to the clone, but it just melted away. That's when Ekyt felt a kunai at his neck.

"Really? Then how come you never told Sakura, or Temari, how you feel about them? Or you never REALLY went to bat for yourself. You were always too scared. You pathetic little coward!"

The clone drew the dagger across Ekyt's neck.

Ibikki cursed. "shoot! I told you, lay off a little bit, you stupid sons of doges!"

"Sorry sensei!" Three ANBU members bowed their apologies. Ibikki got down next to Ekyt. He put a little chakra into Ekyt, to wake him up. When he did, the kid was still unreadable.

"Those idiots overdid it...again. You should rest. Your mind is nearing it's limits," Ibikki told Ekyt.

"One more time. I'll throw it off. I have to be stronger. If this is all I've got, then I need to be the strongest. I don't have my second chakra to use anymore. I've upped all my training. Genjutsu is my greatest weapon."

Ibikki didn't show his worry, although he suspected he should. But that wasn't his nature. After a moment of grappling, he put his foot down.

"Ekyt, no more today. You threw off two genjutsus at once. I don't know ANYONE who could throw off three. Save your chakra for ninjutsu. Genjutsu is already your specialty, now hone your other skills. ANBU interrogation isn't going anywhere. I don't care if you're a genin or not, or whether or not you officially work for me. You have a place in ANBU."

Ekyt saw the sad looks he received. But as soon as Naruto walked by, the sad looks turned to joyous looks. Naruto finally was a hero, a trustworthy Shinobi. Ekyt, if he could have felt it, would have felt jealously, but also pride, for his friend. Everyone had their lucky breaks, and their bad breaks. Ekyt just needed to work harder. That scroll wasn't going to solve itself. Ekyt soon realized he couldn't solve it by himself. He didn't know enough. All the studying in the world didn't help if you were missing one key bit of information.

Maybe it was that, or the fact that Ekyt was getting tired of the looks and whispers that followed him everywhere. Even Tsunade was treating him like a human being. It was unnerving. This was the treatment he wanted once he was a tried-and-true warrior. Not because people felt bad for him. He didn't want pity. So there was only one thing left to do.

Ekyt went into seclusion again, this time actually living with Master Sarutobi. He had questions, and he also knew Master Sarutobi could help him figure out the scroll. Parts of it were nearly indecipherable. One night, about a week after Ekyt began his stay at Sarutobi's, Ekyt asked him one question that was burning in his mind.

"Master? I have a question about my emotional chakra..."

Sarutobi looked up from the scroll, then gestured for Ekyt to continue.

"Is it a crutch? Using that chakra, I mean? Is it somehow 'cheating' to use it? It seems like an advantage. I know it's not ill-gotten, and I don't use it regularly, but still..."

Sarutobi seemed amused by the question, as if he knew it was coming. Rich tobacco smoke left his pipe in swirls, hitting the ceiling, then dissipating in the large room. Ekyt had vaguely worried the rice paper walls would catch on fire, but reasoned that if Master Sarutobi was willing to risk it, well, they both knew jutsus that could put out the fire.

"I was wondering when you were going to ask," Sarutobi muttered with a half-smile. "You're guilt ridden at the best of times, and I know honor means a great deal to you. That's why you refused the rank of chunin- twice. Something you've wanted for so long. So, in turn, allow me to ask you- do you consider using Sharingan, or Byakugan, a natural ability, cheating? Does Naruto cheat because he has a jutsu that is unique to him?"

Ekyt shook his head. "No."

"You have been gifted with a miraculous kekkaigenkai. You weren't blessed, at least not to anyone's knowledge, with the Kaguya's bone kekkaigenkai. To NOT use such an ability would be a waste. And you use it honorably, not something everyone can lay claim to."

Ekyt nodded this time. "I see your point. It was given to me for a reason. Master...I'm going to take it back. I want my emotions back, but the last thing I want is the Akatsuki to have my chakra like that. I want...need it back. Or I need to destroy it. Either way, the Akatsuki can't have it."

Sarutobi nodded sagely. "And, when the time comes, I will show you at least one jutsu that will help you. For now, we need to finish this scroll. The first step is to get your emotions back. If I'm correct, your chakra would need the emotions as 'fuel'. It seems that the Blue Flame is inaccessible unless your emotions are particularly powerful. To even access it, you need your emotions to exist."

Ekyt nodded again, and they went back to work on the scroll. At least four other scrolls surrounded the two on the hardwood floor, all reference material on the Akatsuki and extraction jutsus. They were almost to the end of the scroll, and so far Ekyt didn't have to do anything major. Blood tribute, jutsu, etc.

Naruto and Sakura waited for Tsunade to return from whatever she was doing. They knew something

was up. Shizune was all smiles. Once Kakashi, Sai, and Yamato joined them, Naruto and Sakura were a combination of curious and worried. Good or bad, something big was happening. Naruto began to fidget. "Sakura, what do you think this is about?" Naruto whispered. "I wish I knew. The suspense is killing me," Sakura replied. Finally, Tsunade walked in. She sat down, made herself comfortable, then spoke.

A knock came at the door. Ekyt got up and answered it, so Master Sarutobi could stay sitting. He would have been surprised, if he could feel anything.

"Master Jiraiya. It's good to see you," Ekyt said tonelessly. **He's not aware of what's happened. Or perhaps he is...if he's been watching the Akatsuki, he'll know what they did.**

"Well, I had to return your summon to you. Shuurai here did a great job. The ring is sealed away safely from the Akatsuki. Now, Master Sarutobi summoned me- here, hold these, will ya kid- thanks. Ah, there he is!"

Ekyt was laden down with books and scrolls. One page flipped open. Ekyt REALLY didn't want to be touching these right now. The contents were questionable, to say the least. **God knows where Master Jiraiya found this stuff...I'm glad he does and I don't...Orders are orders, I guess...**

"Ah, Jiraiya! I'm glad you could come! You really are our best hope here. Please, sit down. Ekyt, if you don't mind, the red bottle, and the blue one. It's not often Master Jiraiya stops by!"

Ekyt put down Jiraiya's things and went to grab the bottles. Then he realized he had no idea where they were. **Perhaps that was the point. They need to discuss something without me in the room.**

Jiraiya and Sarutobi spoke quickly.

Sarutobi: You witnessed it? The extraction?

Jiraiya: Yeah...

Sarutobi: And you couldn't have interfered?

Jiraiya: No...It would have given me away, and the information I'm getting is too valuable to stop collecting.

Sarutobi: I see...I'm sure Ekyt would understand. Now, Jiraiya, this scroll is an instruction list as to how Ekyt gets his emotions back. But his intention is to go after the Akatsuki and get his chakra back.

Jiraiya: That's a tall order...he'd have to have something the Akatsuki wanted. And a way to escape quickly once he got what he wanted. The Akatsuki would kill him as soon as he was done 'bartering' with them. They might not even wait until he was done bartering.

Sarutobi: I believe the two of us could help him with those jutsus. And the only thing the Akatsuki want...is that ring.

Jiraiya: I've almost figured out WHY they want them so bad if they're lost. I need a little more time.

Sarutobi: Take the time you need. Ekyt will need a period of at least one week to get his emotions back. That time, coupled with the time it will take him to master the necessary jutsus should be time enough.

Jiraiya: (nods) Right. I won't take too long, I'm close to solving the mystery. It has something to do with the abilities locked away within the rings.

Sarutobi: Abilities? Such as?

Jiraiya: They're all jonin, the Akatsuki. But something makes them MORE powerful than other jonin. And I'd bet it's those rings, and the jutsu contained within them.

Sarutobi: Let's discuss this later...while I'm thinking of it, however- is there a way to 'fake' the ring,

jutsu and all?

Jiraiya: Once I figure out what makes it tick, I can fake it. We pass a false one to Ekyt, so even HE doesn't know. He gives them the fake, runs for it, and we regroup. They'll mobilize soon...they've almost got enough money to start bribing some of our less trustworthy advisors. Danzou, for starters. I'm watching him.

Sarutobi: We need Ekyt on our side if this is the case. He has abilities the others don't. I don't know if he'll ever be 'legendary', but the vigor with which he defends those he cares about, coupled with his skills...they could help determine our village's fate.

Jiraiya: So how long has he had his eyes on Tsunade's apprentice? (Leaning against the wall)

Sarutobi: How long have you been peeping on Sakura? (flatly)

Jiraiya: It's only research! She's a beautiful young specimen! And if Ekyt DID object, maybe he'd be interested to know that my next book is a 'what if' that stars him and Sakura!

Sarutobi: You can't be serious, Jiraiya...(sweatdrop)

Jiraiya: Oh, but I am! I'm calling it "Makeout- Unlikely" It's all about a clueless guy and a cute girl. Those two are perfect! I couldn't GET better models! I can't wait until I put that feisty blonde girl with the fan into the mix. Hehehe, TWO beautiful women! One that treats him like a little brother, and another that's just too good for him! Or that's how HE sees things! I can't wait! He'll love it!

Sarutobi: I suppose I can't deny that. But still...never mind. I know I couldn't sway you, Jiraiya. Now, Ekyt's coming back. Talk with us- anything you can tell us.

Sakura and Naruto listened to their mission. Sai was also involved.

"Your mission is to keep an eye on suspected conspirators. The list: Elder Danzou, Elder Uroko, Ekyt Kaguya, P-"

"Hold it! EKYT? YOU SUSPECT HIM, OF ALL PEOPLE?!" Naruto thundered.

"He doesn't agree with me. I've got to go with my gut."

"No joke. It gets bigger every day, just like your nose with lies!" Naruto shot back. "How can you treat him this way, 'tebayo? He's done nothing but serve the village."

Kakashi, while he agreed, had to shut Naruto up before Tsunade killed him.

"Naruto, come with me. Sakura, maybe you'd better come, too. Sai, you take notes for all of us."

Outside, Kakashi laid down the truth for them.

"Tsunade considers him a threat because of how hard he's worked. She's worried he's lost it mentally. And, well...she doesn't trust samurai. So Ekyt being promoted isn't likely while she's Hokage. Unless he does something incredible, he'll stay a genin. We've all reasoned with her. If it weren't for that stubborn Ebisu, we could overthrow her. But Ekyt would refuse the rank anyway."

"Maybe not. If Tsunade considers him a threat, she has to believe in his abilities. If Ebisu agreed, that would do it, I bet! Ekyt would go for that!" Sakura was excited about it. That's when she was summoned by Temari and Tenten. To her surprise, Ino was also there.

Kakashi closed his eyes. "Well, I guess I'll just have a little chat with Ibikki and Ebisu. Maybe, between Ibikki and I, we can 'convince' Ebisu that Ekyt is worthy to be a chunin."

Naruto, of course, wanted to be involved.

"Listen, Sakura, I know we've had our differences, but you've GOT to believe me here: DON'T trust

Sasuke. Even I don't want him," Ino began.

"You'd be much better off with someone else," Tenten added gently.

"Yeah, it's not like you don't turn your share of Shinobi heads. I can name at least two, but I don't believe in stating the obvious," Temari said bluntly.

"Don't worry," Sakura told them, "I'm really not after Sasuke as anything more than a friend. I don't know where my eyes are right now. There are other options. I'll know the guy when I see him."

Temari leaned on her fan, smirking. "Well, hurry up and pick. 'Cause I think I'm going to be picking one pretty soon here myself, and it would really suck if we wound up fighting over the same guy, wouldn't it?"

Sakura rolled her eyes. "When I pick, you'll all know- as soon as I tell him," Sakura added with a laugh.

Ekyt went over the scroll with the Jiraiya and Sarutobi. At the end of the scroll, Ekyt's pale face went even more pale.

"I can't do that," he told them, holding the scroll out.

"Betray your village and everyone you hold dear..." Jiraiya recited.

Sarutobi re-read the sentence. He couldn't see a hidden meaning.

"My emotions don't mean more to me than the village, and the people in it. I could never sell them out. I'd rather stay emotionless, if that's how it is," Ekyt said quietly. He stood up, visibly shaken. Then he continued.

"But the Akatsuki can't have that chakra. I'm taking it back, or I'm destroying it. It's not a power I'm willing to let them have."

Sarutobi and Jiraiya nodded to each other.

"We agree. And we have a plan. But you need to learn a special jutsu with your one of your summons," Jiraiya told Ekyt.

"And a new genjutsu that I never dreamed I would be teaching a genin. But if you're facing the Akatsuki, it's necessary..."

26 - Plan into Action

Master Sarutobi and Master Jiraiya opened up an ornate scroll that was bound with a thick rope. Years earlier, it was one that Naruto Uzumaki had stolen, under false orders from Mizuki, and learned the Shadow Clone Jutsu, which ultimately led to saving his teacher, Iruka. Now, all the forbidden jutsus were at Ekyt's disposal. There was one in particular that Master Sarutobi pointed out to Ekyt.

"This was only ever used by the First Hokage. But the Akatsuki weren't a threat then, and you weren't involved. Make no mistake, this jutsu will be difficult, and you may not even want the advantage it gives. But it's necessary to learn it. Master Jiraiya will show you and your snake, Shuurai, the other jutsu necessary. If, at any time, you see a jutsu that could be a weapon for you, point it out. I don't want you using forbidden jutsu. But I don't want the village to burn, and I don't want to see you dead. You've sworn not to use these jutsu without taking the oath (Protecting his Shinobi way, his life, or the life of another), and you might very well be one of the few who can pull this off. Your ability to do so might save us all. You've survived the temptations of Orochimaru and the Akatsuki, and their promises. If any student of mine was trustworthy now..."

Sarutobi reluctantly opened the scroll to the correct jutsu.

"Kokoangyo no Jutsu...Bringer of Darkness?" Ekyt vaguely recalled this jutsu from somewhere, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"The First Hokage's Genjutsu. It causes your opponent to see nothing but darkness, enabling you to strike however and wherever you please, as long as the jutsu isn't broken. I'm going to use it on you now. When you can throw it off, I'll teach it to you. It takes a great deal of effort to throw off. Even physical pain inflicted as a means of ending the genjutsu won't work."

Master Jiraiya spoke up. "Itachi Uchiha has a jutsu of his own, a sort of rebound jutsu. It allows him to use his chakra to use the same genjutsu on you that you just used on him. He wouldn't even feel it. It's called Demonic Illusion: Mirror Heaven and Earth Change. Don't try this trick on him until he's worn down."

Ekyt nodded. He looked back down at the scroll. "I've mixed the theory of Rasengan with my own Dragon's Ember Jutsu, which gives me an A-ranked ninjutsu. My only real weak point is...myself. I can't FEAR it, but the thought of death disturbs me. More so now. Before, death didn't even come to mind, I was defending others. Now, with only myself to think about, it worries me."

Sarutobi re-read the jutsu. "There is a time for thought, and there is a time for action. It is time for action, Ekyt. However, you must NOT speak a word of this to Tsunade..."

"Why not? I won't, but I'm still curious...she doesn't trust me, does she?" Ekyt looked impassive, but both Jiraiya and Sarutobi could tell it bothered Ekyt, somehow.

"Tsunade doesn't trust you. She's got you on a list to be watched. Thankfully, she trust the two of us. That's why we have to teach you so quickly. We're no help to you if we get caught. So, unless Master Sarutobi has anything to add before we begin..." Jiraiya looked over at Sarutobi.

"I do. Ekyt, I haven't taught forbidden jutsu to anyone before. I want you to know something- you have people who DO believe in you. Never forget that."

Ekyt nodded gravely. "I'll never forget them...and I'll never forsake them."

Ekyt felt that little surge again- he wanted his chakra back. He would get it, or he would destroy it. Or he would die trying. And if he died, he would sell his life at a high price.

The Akatsuki watched the chakra bubble. They kept it in a four-sealed barrier. It had taken on the shape of it's owner, but said nothing. The chakra's feet were bubbling, but the 'chakra clone' didn't seem bothered. It simply stared back at the Akatsuki.

"It's like it knows, un. We're watching it, it's watching us. Creepy." Deidara resisted the urge to set off an explosion near it. They had done that already. The chakra simply made a rude gesture and ignored the explosion. They knew the Kaguya boy would be back for it- so they had to learn all they could about it. If it were implanted in one of them, the damage it could cause would be unreal.

Pein was certain, as he watched the chakra in front of them make another rude gesture, that the boy would be back.

"The question is not whether he will come- it is whether he will come ALONE...or with others. Who is known to associate with him?" Pein asked Itachi, who had frequented Konoha.

"Kakashi's Team. Sakura Haruno, Naruto Uzumaki, and two ANBU agents codenamed "Sai" and "Yamato". These are the most likely of all of them to show up. His only known family in the area, Kimimaro Kaguya, is in the service of Orochimaru and shows only a vague, detached interest in his cousin, after he was cured of a nearly fatal, unnamed illness. Other allies include-"

"Enough. We have already planted the seeds of discord- soon, the Fifth Hokage will have turned against everyone that was close to the boy. That includes the Jinchuuriki. The Kaguya boy is a stepping stone, nothing more," Pein said.

"Hasn't he caused enough trouble? Kisame's in rough shape, and even Itachi couldn't get to him, un. Why don't we just kill him. One of my creations, and the boy will be out of our hair," Deidara declared. Sasori shot him a glare.

"Really, Deidara? The last time you tried that crap you call 'art' on him, he beat you. It took you and Itachi to even get him into that genjutsu. Itachi could have done it by himself. YOU almost jeopardized the whole mission with your art, and the inability to make it effective."

"Enough!" Pein barked. "You forget- we have the boy's greatest weapon with us. He has something we want. A trade- and once we get the ring- we kill the boy. If he comes with backup, we engage until it becomes too dangerous. We can't afford to lose anyone else right now. This means think strategically, and put your egos aside. If retreat is the best option, then retreat. Zetsu, Hidan- you will join me in our next hideout."

The black-cloaked group nodded as one, and went about their individual assignments.

The emotional chakra melted into a puddle. It bubbled, almost boiling. It reformed into the shape it normally took, a clone of an older Ekyt, and put a hand to it's 'heart'.

Ekyt put a hand to his chest. He had finally thrown off the genjutsu. He had his attack with Shuurai down, and was ready to go. That's when he felt a surge of emotion. It was curious. It was vague and detached, but it was there. But what was it? What was the emotion? Anxiety? Hate?

Urgency.

Ekyt unfolded himself from the seiza position. Wordlessly, he packed up two scrolls he knew he would need, stuffing them into the makimono pouches on his chest. One had two animal prints on it, along with a thumb print from himself. The other scroll was ShoBu, his emotional scroll. Ekyt marveled briefly at that thought, he had somehow bottled up emotions and made them a weapon, but soon forgot that. He seemed to instinctively know where to go.

"Master Sarutobi, Master Jiraiya- I've got to go. I just felt another surge of emotions. This time, stronger. I can't wait anymore."

Jiraiya nodded to Sarutobi.

“Be careful,” the two Masters said in unison. Ekyt thanked them, then looked at the scroll on the floor, with forbidden jutsus in it. He pointed at it.

“I stole it- alone. You didn’t know what I was doing. You caught me, and I fled. Please, stick to that story if you’re caught. I don’t need two of my last supporters getting caught. And thank you, for everything.”

As soon as he left, Jiraiya keyed a field mic hidden behind his headband.

“He’s moving out, Kakashi.”

Kakashi heard the message. He keyed his mic quickly. “Alright. We’re after him. In the mean time, it might be best to back off from any activities, the Fifth is suspicious of anyone who’s associated with Ekyt.”

Kakashi heard the respond. “I read you. Don’t worry, I’ll have the old bat so pissed at me she won’t give the kid a second thought!”

Somehow, coming from Jiraiya, that wasn’t the most reassuring thing in the world.

Ekyt felt the small feeling of emotion in his chest again. This time, it was a distinct sense of urgency. It chilled Ekyt. Without other emotions to mix with, the urgency was horrible to feel. Ekyt wondered what would happen if he felt hate, or love. The pain, or even the joy, might be unendurable. It occurred to Ekyt that it would be painful to accept his emotions again. It would be like being born again, he guesses. Although, he wasn’t even sure what would happen when he near the chakra. Would it be like the genjutsu? Had the chakra picked a stronger host?

No...it hasn’t left me alone for 19 years, it’s not deserting me now! When I was in my subconscious, I could tell that the ‘older me’ was a representation of my chakra. And it wasn’t malicious, it just couldn’t control it’s power. No matter, I need it, or I need to destroy it- it’s too dangerous. It needs to be sealed inside me, or dispelled altogether.

Sarutobi and Jiraiya watched the boy travel on in Sarutobi’s crystal ball.

“Do you think he’ll figure out that other ability on his own?” Jiraiya asked. “He DOES have Kaguya blood in him, after all. If he managed to figure out that he has that kekkaigenkai...”

Sarutobi had been thinking of the same thing. “Without his second chakra, it’s possible the other kekkaigenkai will show itself. Kekkaigenkai are usually revealed when their user is in danger...if there was ever a time...” Sarutobi didn’t need to continue.

Jiraiya nodded his head, smirking. “It’s a shame you’re retired, Sarutobi. You’re the kind of sensei the boy needs. And your other student, it’s a shame he’s already a Kage somewhere else. There’s so much more he can learn. He has that kind of chakra.”

“That kind? A learning chakra, you mean?” Sarutobi asked, watching Ekyt move along the tree tops. He

would soon have to use the ground, as the Akatsuki's hideout was in a barren wasteland.

"Yep. He doesn't have the amount of chakra for Rasengan, or he would have learned it by now. He already knows the theory, and used it with his fire jutsu. Geez, you think this guy would be beating off fangirls with a stick!"

Sarutobi made a rare wisecrack. "It wasn't that way with YOU, Jiraiya. Even with your talent. As I recall, you were kind of lonely..."

Jiraiya (sweatdrop) looked away. "Well, I had my eyes somewhere else, you know that! I should talk to Tsunade...and clear the air. I've made things difficult for her, I know."

Sarutobi didn't have a clue what Jiraiya was talking about. For now, they both went back to focusing on Ekyt, as if their sheer willpower and belief in him would somehow help him.

Someone believing in him...It made a world of difference with Naruto. Maybe it would help Ekyt, too.

Temari had thought about her talk with Sakura. **For all I said, I was really blowing smoke more than anything! I'm too...mean. It's not that I don't care, if anything I'm overly dedicated. And no boys have even shown a real interest in me. Shikamaru...that lazy dope...He had me beaten at the chunin exams. We've got a lot in common. Then there's Ekyt...he's kind of like a brother to me, in a way. But do I want it that way? Do I want more than that? And what about Shikamaru? The one guy I'm SURE I'd like is that cousin of Ekyt's. But we're enemies! What am I doing?! Sitting here, feeling sorry for myself. Enough of that! I'll find that guy in due time. I can't be the only one to think like this!**

Kakashi, Sai, Yamato, Naruto, and Sakura caught up with Ekyt. They didn't confront him, they just leapt beside him, keeping pace.

"Am I under arrest again?" Ekyt asked quietly.

"Did you really think we'd let you go this one alone? No way, I'm gonna be Hokage, and that means never deserting one of your Villagers, believe it!" Naruto declared. He almost declared himself into a low-hanging tree branch. Sai pulled his head down at the last moment.

"Taking on the Akatsuki alone...that's something I'd expect from Naruto," Kakashi said pleasantly.

"I didn't want to drag anyone else into this. The Akatsuki have my chakra, and if they used it against any of you...I don't think they COULD, but the possibility..." Ekyt replied.

"That would undermine the purpose of the Shinobi. I believe it is "We don't let our comrades die," right?" Sai's smile was false, but his words were genuine.

"Talent is a factor with the Akatsuki, but so is experience. We have it, you need it. Now, swallow this (hands Ekyt a seed), that way I can find you if trouble really pops up." Yamato and Sai were as unreadable as Ekyt. Yamato COULD be encouraging.

"And where would all of you be without a medic-nin saving you?" Sakura said, smiling like the Sakura of old.

Ekyt felt the emotion again.

"I've got to hurry, this is getting bad. The Akatsuki must be close to some secret of my chakra. I can...feel...urgency."

"Then let's speed it up! That chakra's going home in it's original packaging, believe it!" Naruto

shouted.

“I’m going to send a Wood Clone ahead to scout,” Yamato told Ekyt. Ekyt nodded, going over jutsu after jutsu in his head. Plan after plan. This HAD to work.

27 - A Harsh Reality

Sasuke counted the days until he was to face Itachi.

On the anniversary of the day he killed our entire clan. How could he do it? Wasn't Father more powerful? Didn't anyone oppose him? And why? Why did he kill them, and leave me alive? I got in the way...I begged him to stop...

No. I only cried. I was young, but that shouldn't have mattered. I should have fought him, even if it meant dying.

Sasuke walked around the dojo. It was still untouched. A plaque on the outside had read "A memorial to one of Konoha's finest clans". The police tape was still up, after all this time, all these years. Sasuke still remembered seeing it for the first time, not believing his whole family was gone, just like that.

The village coddled me...cared for me. But I didn't have any love in me to give back. I have lived only for revenge, and to restore the Uchiha clan. But I need to love to restore the clan. After I kill Itachi, maybe I'll feel love.

Sasuke made his way into the gym, then lifted up the mat that led downstairs, the place that held the Uchiha clan's greatest secrets. The Sharingan, and the Mangekyo Sharingan. There was the Phoenix Fire Jutsu, and even...Tsukuyomi and Amaterasu.

My brother's specialties...Maybe there's a clue as to how to defend against them...of course not. The Uchiha clan never counted on fighting other Sharingan. But knowing it...knowing it might be enough to learn how to fend it off. Itachi was full of crap, I don't need to kill my best friend to get the Mangekyo Sharingan. The answers have been here the whole time. I need to develop...what? That can't be right! Itachi never...

Sasuke read the scroll again, making sure the weak candle light wasn't playing tricks on his eyes.

To develop the Mangekyo Sharingan, one must obtain a true Shinobi's path through honest skill assessment. Skill assessment? That's what Itachi told me! That was why he killed the entire clan. Maybe defeating his best friend wasn't enough. Only the clan as a whole could rival his skill. So, if I defeat Itachi, I'll have earned the Mangekyo Sharingan. He's the only one who's a true match for me...except for Naruto...and Ekyt. My Sharingan can almost see chakra, and it can easily sense power. Those two have it. If I can develop the Mangekyo Sharingan before I meet my brother, then he'll have no advantage...

Sasuke left the hidden area. He walked down to his old room, finding it to be the same, albeit a lot more dusty. It's walls had always been empty, except for the Uchiha Clan Symbol painted on the wall.

Sasuke could see some dried blood on the symbol. It was a strangely comforting scene. Sasuke imagined it SHOULD have been disturbing. After a brief nap, he walked down the outside corridor, out to the pond, where he had learned the Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu. That jutsu had marked his entry into adulthood in the eyes of his clan. It was also a memory for the unusually sentimental Sasuke.

Where, for the first time, Father spoke kindly to me, as if I were an equal to Itachi. Did he know all this would happen?

Sasuke, for old times sake, made the hand signs (Horse, Tiger) "Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!"

An enormous flame shot out across the pond. It held for fifteen seconds, before Sasuke ended the jutsu. As the fire died, Sasuke saw his reflection in the water. For the first time in years, Sasuke sat down to re-examine his life. Had he been wrong?

If I fight Naruto, or Ekyt, I WILL win, and I'll have earned my Mangekyo Sharingan. Itachi, the price you're going to pay for what you did is death! Then the Uchiha clan can be born anew, with

a clean slate!

Ekyt, who had taken lead, stopped. The Akatsuki base was in view. And Ekyt saw- his chakra! He saw a yellowish-aura around it. A protection seal.

“Go get it. We’ll cover you. Sakura, you stay slightly behind Ekyt. Yamato, Sai, you take the right. I’ll handle the left. No matter what, we all leave alive. No one gets left behind. No one dies.” Kakashi spoke gravely. Ekyt nodded.

“Thank you...all of you...if I can’t get my chakra, I’m going to destroy it. No matter what, all of you go home. I’m not going back without my chakra. It’ll either be mine again, or I’ll destroy it.” With that, Ekyt took off, using the Body Flicker Jutsu to reach the chakra. He looked around, wondering what security measures the Akatsuki had put up.

“One more thing- I don’t know how I’ll react to having my emotions again. If I become a detriment to any one of you- kill me, or leave me here.” Ekyt’s voice left no room for argument.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu,” Ekyt called, upon seeing the four-seal barrier. Three clones appeared. “You know what to do,” Ekyt told them.

“Right,” They replied. As one, they pulled the tags away. The barrier disappeared.

“Ah!”

The Akatsuki revealed themselves! Deidara squared off with Sai, while Sasori and Sakura glared at each other. Kakashi and Naruto matched wits with Itachi.

Ekyt looked back. He needed his chakra...but for some reason, his gut told him to help the others first. If Itachi was out of the way, the others would be easier.

“Dragon’s Circle.” Ekyt held a ball of fire in his hand. It crackled with life. Opening the First Gate of Chakra very briefly, Ekyt tore toward Itachi and drove the fire home, into Itachi’s stomach. He didn’t look to see what damage that did. Instead, he focused on Deidara.

“Bringer of Darkness Technique! OOF!”

Deidara was pawing around in the darkness. Sai’s paintings came to life and began to gnaw on the other artist.

The ‘oof’ was courtesy of Itachi. He and Ekyt were face to face. Itachi rapidly punched Ekyt. While he was flying, Ekyt formed his desperate plan.

“Bringer of Darkness Technique!” Ekyt called, staring Itachi down. He knew what Itachi would do.

“Demonic Illusion: Mirror Heaven and Earth Change,” Itachi replied. Ekyt saw all darkness. But his second jutsu had hit Itachi. A Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique. Ekyt had hidden a genjutsu within a genjutsu! He was trapped in his own, but Itachi was stymied by the second genjutsu. While he formed the release sign, Kakashi came roaring in with his Raikiri. Itachi moved, but Kakashi had hit one arm, the one with the ring on it. The arm stayed attached, but it was too injured to be used. That made Itachi only a little less dangerous.

Ekyt, meanwhile, saw nothing but darkness. Unconcerned, as he had anticipated it, he used the “release” technique. His site came back just in time to see Sasori striking at him with the long, bony tail of some puppet. Ekyt flipped forward, surprising Sasori. He kicked him across the face, then landed and made for his chakra again. Sasori had recovered quickly, and decided to focus on the girl instead.

There’s more than one way to ground that little punk...

Sakura destroyed another puppet. They were endless, and the powerful kunoichi was starting to get tired. But if she got hit, she didn't know what would happen. Sasori supposedly used poison. If that was the case, Sakura was safe- barely. A little cut on the skin could be fatal. And it was unlikely she'd have time to heal herself. Keeping that in mind, she leapt over a low strike, then ducked under a higher one. A powerful punch shattered the high puppet to pieces, while a well-placed heel kick put the lower puppet down for the count. Sakura wanted to know which one was Sasori. If she could stop him, the endless parade of well-placed puppetry would be put to an end. That in mind as well, Sakura dodged to the side, avoiding a nasty stabbing strike. She kicked the offending puppet, then punched an oncoming puppet. She didn't see the puppet coming from behind. It reared back and stabbed Sakura through the shoulder.

"Ah!" Sakura cried out in pain

Sakura was finally hit. Sasori stood over her, ready for the kill.

Ekyt stopped. His chakra was sinking back into him (He could feel Rage, Love, Despair, and Hate), but he heard Sakura fall. He had a choice to make. He had no trouble making it, even in the heat of battle. Sai's sword clattered to his feet. He kicked it back in Sai's direction, then made his decision.

Sakura knew this was it. She smiled serenely, happy that she had helped her friend get his life back, even if it meant losing hers. Sasori's puppet aimed it's sword at her, and swung. She closed her eyes. Suddenly, she was moving fast. VERY fast. She opened her eyes. Ekyt was holding her and was running top speed.

"Huh? Ekyt-kun, no! Go get your chakra!" Sakura protested. Ekyt kept running.

"No. I made a promise that I would NEVER forsake my village, and those that mean anything to me. I can always go back for it. You helped me get this far. I'll never forget it. That chakra is in my reach. Now, while I'm able, I'm going to give you some of my chakra. Use your Advanced Poison Removal. I'm going back. Kakashi and the others will be here soon. If anything happens, use this," Ekyt said all this very quickly, and handed Sakura a scroll at the end. Sakura saw it had a blood tribute on it already. "It's a one-time summoning contract," Ekyt had time to say before he kicked a puppet to pieces.

Sakura looked up at him, disbelieving. **But this mission...it's so important to him...**

"I've got to...it's now or never. I'm either saving my chakra, or destroying it."

Ekyt put that thought on hold. Sasori was closing in fast. There was no time to reach for a weapon. Ekyt felt rage, like nothing he ever felt before. He did NOT feel fear, that emotion was still waiting to be put back in. Without knowing why, Ekyt imitated his cousin, Kimimaro, and pulled a bone from his left arm. It didn't hurt, and it scared the hell out of the approaching Sasori. Especially when Ekyt started cutting away with a purpose. He was driving Sasori back. Kakashi swooped in and picked Sakura up. As soon as he could, Ekyt used the First's genjutsu one more time, this time on Sasori. It only gave him seconds, but that was long enough for Ekyt to reach his chakra.

Or, he would have. Itachi had it in another barrier, this one a continuing jutsu.

"Time to withdraw," Itachi told the other Akatsuki. They didn't look thrilled, but they leapt to his side.

This made Ekyt furious. But, he couldn't risk his chakra getting away. Taking a seed Yamato had given him, he threw it in the barrier by lacing it with the little bit of emotional chakra he had. Yamato could track his chakra now.

"This isn't over, Itachi. And the rest of you cloaked clowns. You'll have to kill me to get rid of me. And that's a tall order for a bunch of idiots like you!" Ekyt snarled. The Akatsuki disappeared.

Ekyt stared after the Akatsuki. He felt tears well up. Slowly, he folded to his knees, his fists clenched. Everyone was silent for a few moments.

"DAMNIT!" Ekyt threw the bone he had pulled out of his arm onto the ground. It clattered to Kakashi's feet. He put it in a sealing scroll. Now wasn't the time to bother Ekyt.

Ekyt looked around the hideout. No trace of where the Akatsuki had gone. He still had Kisame's ring, that was something. But not enough. Wordlessly, Ekyt opened a summoning scroll and pulled out explosive notes. He placed them all over. In the center of the giant stone room they had just fought in, Ekyt placed all the wood he could find. The others stepped back, and then ran out of the building.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu," Ekyt said, jabbing his hand at pile of wood. It ignited. Ekyt stared at the fire for a moment, as if his chakra was burning with it. Finally, he pried himself away and joined the others.

"Bastard artist. He wants a bang? I'll GIVE him a bang! Katsu!" Ekyt 'borrowed' Deidara's catch phrase, giving it a little twist. The "Katsu" set off a chain of explosion. The once-imposing building was now a ruin. Thick, black smoke poured into the air. Ekyt could almost see his chakra go up in smoke, too. But he knew the Akatsuki still had the rest of it. He was going to get it back.

He just wished that he had gotten the emotion "Hope" back.

"DAMN THOSE FIVE!" Tsunade thundered. "I want ANBU deployed, arrest all of them!" she shouted.

"Lady Tsunade, that's ridiculous!" Shizune protested.

"Do it- now!" Tsunade yelled.

"No! I've indulged you long enough! I will NOT be a part of you treating those five like criminals, when all they've done wrong is protect our village and it's members!" Shizune shouted back. Master Jiraiya chose that moment to appear.

"Shizune, please, give me a minute with Tsunade. This won't take long. I'm part of the problem here." Shizune was stunned, but bowed. "Of course, Master Jiraiya." Shizune left the room.

"Hey, you're the medic!" Jiraiya shot back. "We were both drunk. Or, I was, at least. But that's beside the point. It's happened now. How you...and I...handle it is a different matter. If it's really happened."

"Of course it has! Haven't you noticed how I act?" Tsunade said back, suddenly glum.

"You ALWAYS acted like this. You know, all dogy and princessy."

Tsunade gave Jiraiya a sharp crack across the head.

"Why do they call you a sage, anyway?! You're an idiot who writes pervy books for a living!"

"Are you kidding? I'm eating like a pig, and I have mood swings!"

Jiraiya snickered. "How can you tell? You don't seem any different to me...Relax, I'm kidding. I knew

something was up. Mostly because you've been treating Ekyt like dirt. You don't mean that, do you?" Tsunade looked flustered, and confused. "No...No, I didn't. And, Jiraiya...I was going to deploy ANBU after Ekyt. Is he, and the others...are they alright? What are they doing, anyway?"

"They're getting Ekyt's chakra back. I hope."

Tsunade sighed. "I'm just...frustrated. I've been the least successful Hokage yet. Our economy is only marginally better, and we have less Shinobi, barely enough to go around. So....I guess...I'm thinking of stepping down. The council has their own ideas as to what they want- a younger Hokage. They're not fooling me, they want a puppet. I go against them, so they want me gone."

Jiraiya put a hand on Tsunade's shoulder. "You were shouldered with a heavy burden as soon as you took the title of Fifth Hokage. The council has no right to dictate to you. It's the other way around. Who do they have in mind?"

Tsunade looked away, ashamed.

"The very boy I've been treating like dirt- Ekyt."

"He's skilled, and I have no doubt he'd make a fine Hokage someday. SOMEDAY, not today. The council is planning to use him. He's well-liked, and talented...someone is trying to maneuver you out of the picture. And I've got an idea as to how to flush who it is out into the open. But we're going to need a little help."

Tsunade nodded, controlling herself. **The worst part is...if I was in Ekyt's shoes, I'd jump at the chance to be Hokage...just to get back at me for being a dog! But he's too smart to fall for their politics, right?**

Ekyt watched the building burn. Naruto and Kakashi had talked to him, then gone off to discuss strategy. Yamato was next.

"That was a good move. I can track them now, thanks to that seed. When we worked together in ANBU, I meant to say that you were the easiest to work with. No attitude. Tsunade tried to remove you from ANBU, but Ibikki-sempai and Anko-sempai both put their foot down. Just keep this in mind: genin or not- you have people who believe in you." With that, Yamato walked away. Ekyt continued to watch the building.

Sakura dusted herself off, her chakra and energy finally coming back.

"Ekyt-kun...thanks. For rescuing me, I mean. You could have just gotten your chakra. Why did you come back for me?" This question had been eating at Sakura for some time.

"Because you're one of the people I care about. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try to help you. You did so much to just get me to my chakra, it would have been a poor way to repay you by ignoring what happened."

For some reason, Sakura thought of Sasuke. She wished that he would treat her like this. **No...I don't know what to think of Sasuke. I don't know if I'm in love with him or not anymore. It's still confusing. But that's not important. Right now, Ekyt needs that chakra back.**

28 - A Title of Meaning

Ekyt controlled his rage, and then he felt- nothing. Kakashi noticed the difference. After a moment's thought, he decided to talk about it. Mostly for Ekyt's own safety.

"Your emotions are gone again. Of course...It makes sense..." Kakashi looked forward.

"What makes sense?" Naruto asked.

"Emotions. We're never completely at an emotional impasse, we always feel SOMETHING. But if there aren't enough emotions to go around, then you won't feel anything. There's a gap in your emotion cycle, Ekyt. And it's potential dangerous."

Ekyt looked back, then stopped on a branch.

"I have an idea of where you're going- but how is it dangerous?" Ekyt was a little confused.

Kakashi halted his team, indicating for everyone to sit down on the ground below.

"As a genjutsu user, you know the limits of the brain very well. When emotions are tampered with, the brain loses stability. Without ANY emotions, or with only some, it's possible you might lose control. If you feel one emotion, say, rage, for a period of time, during that period you might lose control of yourself. The same goes with any emotion."

Ekyt looked a little chilled. Some dregs of rage were on his face, but he hid them. From his forearm, he pulled a pouch of throwing needles. He tossed them to Sakura.

"Sakura...if I get that way, put two of these in my neck. If I become a threat to any of you, do whatever it takes to stop me. ANYTHING." Sakura looked horrified at the idea, before she realized what Ekyt meant.

Kakashi picked up the needles. "Just like Zabuza and Haku...you read the mission briefing. And you know that Sakura is the only one with the medical expertise to hit the precise points that will put you in a state of 'temporary death'. Sakura, use senbon instead, these things are likely to REALLY kill him. They're too thick."

Naruto was silent as Kakashi announced they should rest here. **I didn't do anything in that last fight...I've got to talk with Ekyt, and make a plan with him. I hate the Akatsuki...they haven't taken what they want from me...but they did from two of my friends now! And that's too many who have suffered! The next time we meet the Akatsuki, he's getting his chakra back! Believe it!**

Sarutobi didn't look surprised.

"They plan to use him as a puppet, do they? He'll never fall for it. He has the ability to become Hokage some day, but not the drive. Or, rather, the desire. He most certainly has the drive."

Jiraiya lowered his head in agreement. "True. But Tsunade and I are going to give him the desire. If he takes the title of Hokage, the council will drop their guard, thinking he's a stupid kid, and reveal who's conspiring within."

Sarutobi shook his head. "They'll suspect your plan."

Jiraiya smirked in return. "Not quite. Especially when we let Ekyt do his own thing. We're going to remove Tsunade from the equation, and I'll leave the village again. But I'll be watching. Once Tsunade's stepped down, saying she needs a temporary respite, it'll only be a matter of time. It won't take them long to try to manipulate Ekyt, especially with the two of us gone. And Tsunade plans to fight

his appointment, making it even more real.”

Sarutobi puffed on his pipe thoughtfully. “Ekyt has a reputation...but it won’t extend far enough to get him respect as Hokage among the other nations. They’ll try to attack.”

Jiraiya smirked. “Take a look into that crystal ball of yours. Once he takes out the Akatsuki, word will spread, giving him enough credibility to take the title. If need be, we send him on other missions in other nations to get his name out there.”

Sarutobi still had his reservations, but he agreed it was the best way to flush out the snitch they suspected. There was one more question, however. After spending so much time with Ekyt, Sarutobi knew one thing for sure: Ekyt took everything about his work seriously, and that meant his bosses. “Will he really agree to this? Unless everyone else agrees, he may not agree to take the Hokage title...” Sarutobi added more of the rich tobacco to his pipe.

“What do you mean? A chance to be Hokage? I mean, with myself as an exception, who WOULDN’T take the chance!” Jiraiya protested.

“Ekyt’s honor means a great deal to him. He would never, as he put it, “whore out his art.” If he didn’t believe he was Hokage material, he could very well say no. He refused the promotion to chunin.”

Jiraiya conceded Sarutobi had a point. “True. And he doesn’t want to take away Naruto’s dream. But, if he DOES take the title of Hokage, he’ll be in a better position to help Naruto. And besides, this would be an S-ranked mission. If there’s one thing I know, it’s that Ekyt won’t turn down a mission.”

Sarutobi found himself agreeing. “Alright. But keep a close eye on him.”

As they camped that night, Naruto made it a point to sit near Ekyt.

“Hey, listen, I’ve got an idea!” Naruto declared. Ekyt looked up, and invited Naruto to continue.

“I’ll use a Shadow Clone Jutsu, and...”

Ekyt’s eyes widened. It was a good plan.

Ekyt walked into the base alone. It was unguarded, just as before. The Akatsuki probably booby-trapped the place. That was fine. Ekyt’s chakra was in site. As he reached for it, Itachi, Deidara, and Sasori leapt out and surrounded him.

“Fell for it, un?” Deidara taunted. The mouth on his hand licked greedily, waiting for more clay.

“Only a fool walks into a lion’s den alone,” Sasori growled.

“And you’re not a fool...This is a clone,” Itachi said, Sharingan glowing.

POOF!

There was Naruto! “Yeah, you’re REAL good! I don’t get all the hype about you! Big deal, you’ve got some freaky-looking eyes! You haven’t beaten ME yet!” Naruto grinned. “And you, the freak with the long hair! What ARE you? A guy, a girl, what? You TALK like something in between! And puppet-freak-aren’t you a little old to be playing with toys?”

“A transformation, un? Are your eyes going, Itachi? That isn’t a clone,” Deidara taunted.

“Yes, it is. That’s a clone.” Itachi pointed at the clone, which was unaffected by his genjutsu.

‘Naruto’ laughed. “You guys are suckers!”

The clone exploded!

Ekyt ran out of the shadows, giving Deidara a hard smack across the face. He grabbed his chakra...

“Master Sasori! Stop him!” Deidara shouted, pointing at Ekyt. Sasori ejected his ‘heart’ into the nearest puppet body to Ekyt. Ekyt hadn’t seen it hanging on the wall just above him. He was already in the process of taking his chakra back, which would have meant he would have to either break the connection and fight, or hope that Sasori missed.

“Ekyt-kun! No way!” Sakura threw kunai and shuriken. They hit Sasori’s ‘heart’ and pinned it to the wall. Nowhere vital, but it gave Ekyt enough time to allow his emotional self to step into his body. His body glowed momentarily. But at the end, Ekyt’s eyes were alive again, and there was a smile in his voice. A voice that held tones again!

“Thanks Naruto, and you too, Sakura! Now, let’s get out of here!”

The group of five took off at top speed.

None of the Akatsuki gave pursuit.

“They took the bait, un? I’m still not sure we should have done that...we should have destroyed it,” Deidara didn’t like the thought of that punk kid getting that chakra back. **He’s dangerous, even by my standards. He’s not naturally talented. But somehow, he’s a threat nonetheless...It must have taken sheer force of will to make a Shinobi masterpiece with such meager material. I wonder if he’s aware that his name is spreading...No matter. If he gets in the way, he’ll simply die. Perhaps he’s even worthy of one of my explosions. Since I can’t do it to the Jinchuuriki. That would be a great work of art!**

“That chakra was worthless to us. And we need them all. When I meet my brother in combat, they all play a part. Let’s report this to Pein.” Itachi suited actions to words and disappeared in a swirl of leaves. The others agreed. Their plan to use that chakra had been worthless, but they HAD learned something. And they could put that knowledge to use.

They were closer to the Jinchuuriki each time they met him. The Leaf Shinobi had taken the bait. Still, Sasori was bothered by something. **We categorized that chakra of his as a kekkaigenkai...but then, he used the Kaguya clan’s kekkaigenkai, out of nowhere. What does this mean? Perhaps only one kekkaigenkai can inhabit him at a time. The Second Chakra takes priority in his body, because he’s used it so often. That means that the Kaguya kekkaigenkai lies dormant, until his chakra is incapacitated. Fascinating...and disturbing. If he’s close to the Jinchuuriki, we’ll have to destroy him. Perhaps we’re attacking this problem from the wrong angle to begin with. If the Jinchuuriki has no one to protect him, he’ll be that much easier to catch...a point worth of more thought.**

Jiraiya and Sarutobi were waiting for Ekyt at the gates. They grinned broadly when they saw that he had his emotions back.

“Naruto is to thank for the plan that got them back,” Ekyt told them. “And Sakura is the reason I’m still alive.”

“That’s great! Now, Naruto, come with me, we’ve got something to discuss. It’s about a request Sasuke made...” Jiraiya steered Naruto away.

Sarutobi put a hand on Ekyt’s shoulder. “I told you that your path would be difficult. You haven’t wavered. And it seems you’ve learned a great deal. Right now, I need you and Sakura. Kakashi, you

should come to. This is a grave matter, I'm afraid."

Sarutobi, Tsunade, Kakashi, Sakura, and Ekyt listened to Tsunade talk. After her apology, what she told Ekyt nearly made him faint. Her reasoning was sound, even more sound than his protests.

"Now, it's temporary, and it's beyond dangerous. By putting you in this position, we're almost INVITING others to attack us. Since your leadership will be absolute, you decide how to deal with it. So, in essence, you're the temporary 5th Hokage. The council will talk with you. The elders, I mean. You will have your own personal council."

Ekyt reached for the headgear of the Hokage. He couldn't believe it. He was the Fifth Hokage?

"Are you sure about this? Am I really the one, Tsunade-sama?" Ekyt asked.

"I'm afraid so, Lord Hokage." Tsunade smiled. "I know you'll do a great job. Just remember what we talked about."

After a nod, Ekyt asked "I WILL have some free rein, right?"

Tsunade smiled. "Of course. If I could trust anyone besides myself to make the right decision for the Village, it's you. Now, it's time for the ceremony. Oh, and pick your council now. So you can announce them at the ceremony."

The buzz in the Leaf Village was incredible. A new Hokage? Was Tsunade alright? What happened. Then they saw who the new Hokage was. The reaction was incredible.

Ekyt smiled at them, though you couldn't see it under his mask.

"Thank you, all of you. I've assumed the title of temporary Godaime Hokage. I promise all of you- I will give you all the same loyalty you've shown me. The Leaf Village is the first place I've ever felt like I've belonged, and I'm proud to be able to give back, after four years. I assure you, Tsunade-sama is in perfect health, to address the question I know is on all of your minds. Now, I am proud to announce the members of my personal council: Master Sarutobi- personal advisor. Iruka Umino- Academy Director. Kakashi Hatake-Field Instructor. Ibikki Morino- ANBU Consultant. The rest of the council is retained. Yes, Ebisu, you too. Now, I know you all came for the party. Please, eat and enjoy yourselves!"

Another roar came from the crowd for the short speech. The reaction Ekyt had was surprisingly good. As he stood on the balcony in his new Hokage robe and hat, for a moment, he pushed aside the thought that becoming the Godaime Hokage was a sham, and that he was a pawn in a game of chess played by the TRUE Hokage. For now, he would enjoy his position. He also owed a few others an explanation.

"Lord Hokage?" Shizune asked cautiously.

"Yes, I'm sorry. How can I help, Shizune?" Ekyt asked, playing his part.

"Well, it seems the Tsunade left you...three years worth of paper work that needs to be done. Then there's the missions, and we have a new crop of genin that need assigning, and..."

A large sweatdrop formed at Ekyt's temple. **Well, at least I'm making a difference...damn, I hate paperwork...** Shizune was still talking as Ekyt thought of how long it was going to take to catch up on all this. **Tsunade did this on purpose...that dog...I owe her for this...big time!**

29 - Falling Leaf and Striking Lightning

After the brief party, Ekyt held council with his advisors. He was told not to give any hints away that he was, in fact, already playing for 'the other side'. Tsunade had cautioned him not to. Ekyt understood the plan, and he was going to play his role to the hilt.

"What business is there, Iruka?" Ekyt asked, in an air reminiscent of the Third Hokage.

"Well, our graduation rates are the same, Lord Hokage. But enrollment is down. After the war with Orochimaru, a lot of our families stopped letting their children enroll. They're afraid of the kids getting hurt. I guess they're thinking 'if we aren't Shinobi, Orochimaru won't hurt us,' which isn't the case, as all of us know from experience."

Ekyt/Lord Hokage scratched his chin. "Iruka, we need to put a positive spin on enrollment. I'm putting Sai with you. He has no immediate missions. I want the two of you to create a poster and flyer campaign, with my approval, warning parents that by 'keeping their children in the dark, they're exposing them to greater harm.' Everyone should know how to defend themselves. We need to convey the message that knowledge is power. If the village is attacked, and even if it's not, these children are the future, and that is an investment we must protect and nurture."

The council muttered agreement- how hadn't THEY thought of that? Lord Hokage continued once the muttering died down.

"Iruka, I remember the curriculum. No matter the need for Shinobi, I don't want it sped up. If you have an outstanding student who outgrows the curriculum, please have him or her brought to me. I have two tutors in mind. I want you free to focus on the mainstream classes."

Iruka nodded. "I have one boy, Okkuu Kazuki. He's like Naruto, except talented from the get-go."

That earned a laugh all the way around. That's when Ekyt surprised everyone.

"Well, then. Ebisu, I will leave his case in your care. DO try to not piss him off."

Of everyone on the council, Ebisu was the most surprised that he had kept his spot. He had treated this kid like crap. And now, he was in the perfect position to get revenge, and he wasn't! As if reading his thoughts, Ekyt spoke.

"Ebisu, I take this job seriously. It's a clean slate, one in which you haven't annoyed me. The past is the past, we have to look to the future. Now, the new crop of genin. How many teams?" Ekyt/Lord Hokage asked.

"Just one, Lord Hokage," Iruka said.

"Are they inclined to any particular path? Genjutsu? Taijutsu?"

"They're all long-range fighters, using Ninjutsu."

Ekyt nodded. "Assign them, Cell 15, Jonin: Temari."

"Ibikki, what are ANBU's standing orders?"

Ibikki smirked. **I SAID this kid was special**

"They're watching for the Akatsuki. One group is dispatched to Orochimaru's Otogakure."

"There are enough agents to go around?"

"Yes, plenty. There's not enough work, for that matter. Some of them are getting soft," Ibikki said, sneering at the last part.

Ekyt put his hands on the table. He shuffled through some scrolls.

"I see. Those agents that aren't pulling their weight- I have several A-ranked missions, and I'm sorely

lacking jonin to complete them. Send the one who aren't seeing action to me in the morning, they can cover the A-ranked missions."

Ibikki nodded his agreement.

"Alright, I believe that covers everything. Kakashi, Ibikki, I need to see the two of you privately. Everyone else- you're dismissed."

"Ibikki, I want ANBU to investigate Elder Danzou. The best two agents not already deployed. I need him on a 24 hour watch. Any suspicious activities or contact, report them to me. And, please ask the other elders to meet with me in my office at their earliest convenience."

"Aye, Lord Hokage." Ibikki left the room, leaving Kakashi and Ekyt.

"Well, Lord Hokage, congratulations," Kakashi drawled.

"I want you to know- it's a sham, Kakashi. This is all a mission," Ekyt said quickly.

"Tsunade is still the Hokage?" Kakashi hadn't been told of this plan, and it genuinely surprised him. **If it took even ME by surprise...it's a good move. No one would suspect Ekyt, especially not after the wars he's had with Lady Tsunade.**

"I'm a pawn in a game of sophisticated chess. That's why I asked you to stay. For now, we both have roles to play. And that role dictates I ask: Sai is being re-assigned, by Tsunade's orders. That's why I ask you to think this over: Who would make a good addition to your team? I know you've been a three-man cell, but the missions that are coming up may be too much for even you three. Four, I should say, Yamato is retained in the group, with you in charge. My plan is an Elite Five. You, Naruto, Sakura, and Yamato are the core group. But a fifth member would be useful. You have a medic, experience, and raw power. Think about what's missing from the equation, and if you know anyone that fits."

Kakashi looked over the scroll. "I have an idea of who I want. But, like you said, let me sleep on it."

Ekyt nodded. "There ARE...two other things. First, Sasuke Uchiha. He will be fighting his brother in one monthes time. I'm asking you to step in if Sasuke is beaten. I have reason to believe the Akatsuki will be there. Not just Itachi. All of them, or at least more than just Itachi. You are the only Shinobi who could hold Itachi off. Sakura and Naruto will be with you. I have a feeling...no, it's more of a premonition...that the village will be attacked soon. I need to know your team can handle the bad blood between the Uchiha brothers. The threat from Orochimaru is growing, but even he wouldn't dare break the treaty he signed with us. Sunagakure is trustworthy. But there's a growing threat in the Land of Lightning. The Raikage is still smarting over the Hyuuga's trick, years ago. In it's weakened state, the village will be attacked. If I'm playing the part of Hokage, I am going to fight the Raikage. He will require my attention. In the event of my death/incapacitation, I've named you my successor. If I die, do not reveal the plans that are in motion until the leak in our council has been patched. After that, I would like the truth told: I was never Lord Hokage."

Kakashi saw the boy trying hard to stay stoic. He put a hand on "Lord Hokage's" shoulder.

"Of course. I'll take care of all that."

Of course, being Hokage meant Ekyt was out of action. He trained whenever he wasn't doing paperwork and handing out missions. The job was enjoyable, despite the stress. The stress had more or less dissipated after doing three years worth of paperwork in one, 3-day, nonstop session. With that out of the way, Ekyt/Lord Hokage wondered how long he would be in this position. He also wondered just

how quickly the Raikage would attack. **It will be soon. I'm the 'lame duck' Hokage right now, he'll think it's the perfect time. I just need to know who his pipeline of information is...Ah, time to meet with the elders. Perhaps today is the day...**

Elders Danzou, Kato, Yakamo, and Koroichi filed in. Silently, they took their places. Danzou spoke first, somehow imposing despite his age and blindness.

"Congratulations, Lord Hokage. I certainly hope our relationship will be a peaceful one." Danzou was clearly trying the intimidation card. Something Ekyt had expected.

"I hope so as well, Danzou. All of us have the village's best interests at heart, do we not? There's no reason for us to disagree in a forceful manner. Now, please, let's begin," Ekyt told them.

The formal conference room had no windows, and seemed...dusty. It had been unused since the 3rd's time as Hokage.

"Our first query is of the growing threat of Orochimaru. What will you do to quell that threat?" Danzou asked.

"I will honor the treaty we signed with him. Until he oversteps his boundaries, there is nothing I can- or am willing- to do. The bigger threat is the Akatsuki. The immediate threat is the Raikage."

Danzou stood up.

"That is not what I asked you about," he said, almost threateningly. Ekyt remained sitting. He stared back at the elder.

"I'm aware of that, Danzou. I am also aware that you are in direct opposition of most of the groundwork the 3rd Hokage laid down. If you are hoping I will destroy that groundwork, you are mistaken. I plan too add to it. My priority is the village. We live in a different time, and need to adapt to the situation we are presented with, not what's happened in the past."

Danzou didn't expect Lord Hokage to see through him that quickly. He sat back down. Yakamo, the female elder, raised her question.

"You've handled enrollment splendidly, and ANBU's improvement is noticeable. If you think that the Akatsuki are the biggest threat- how do you plan to deal with them?"

Ekyt smiled at Elder Yakamo. "I'm glad you asked. I'll need a visual aid for this demonstration.

Dual-Summoning Jutsu!"

With that, Ekyt's dog, Holly, and his Water Dragon, Umisu, appeared. Umisu was on Ekyt's shoulder, while Holly sat at her owner's feet.

"Good. Holly, if you don't mind, the red scroll. And Umisu, if you wouldn't mind using your jutsu."

As Holly dug around in a small rucksack, Umisu spat out a water clone of Ekyt. This Ekyt was holding a diagram. The real Ekyt spoke, while referring to the diagram.

"We know very little of the Akatsuki. We DO know that one member, Itachi Uchiha, is a significant threat by himself. We also know his abilities, and a counter is in the works. Other known members: Sasori of the Sand Village, Deidara of the Stone Village, and, in our holding cells, Kisame of the Mist. I feel certain there are others, but these are the ones that are moving most consistently.

"And where did you obtain this information?" demanded Koroichi.

"From a reliable source that I will not name. It would put him at risk. But, rest assured, he has the approval of myself, the Third, and Tsunade-Sama. His word is good."

"Have you proof?" Koroichi spoke harshly again.

"Nothing that I am at liberty to show you. I have the man...or woman's...security to think of, and I hope you'll forgive me for putting that first. Now, as to how I am handling the situation. My clone holds a diagram of the Akatsuki, and each one's talent. You'll see, across from it, the match I have in mind.

Sasori- puppets and poison Sakura Haruno- Medic-nin
Deidara- explosives Naruto Uzumaki- long-range
Itachi Uchiha- Sharingan Kakashi Hatake- jonin/Sharingan

Now, I have others in mind. I have heard names of the other Akatsuki: Pein, Zetsu, and Hidan. Upon Kisame's capture, it is rumored that the Akatsuki have recruited another member. His identity is not known, but it's believed that he, too, has the Sharingan. If this is truly the case, I have three other Shinobi waiting in the wings. If necessary, I will go myself. The other three are Rock Lee, Shikamaru Nara, and Temari."

"You yourself? You are barely old enough to remember the great battle with the ninetails! You cannot hope to defeat the Akatsuki!" Korochi sneered. The other elders, even Danzou, were silent. This was going a bit far, they thought.

Lord Hokage smiled. "Oh? You think that little of me, Korochi? As my summon, Holly, will detail to you in this scroll..."

The elders read the scroll, eyes widening in shock.

"You- your chakra? Lord Hokage, I had no idea! I apologize for my brashness!" Korochi bowed. Ekyt made sure he kept his voice friendly. "We all make mistakes, Korochi. You aren't wrong to assume, everyone does. As long as your assumptions are sound. Someone young does not mean that someone is weak by definition."

The elders couldn't argue, they had just been proven wrong. Yakumo smiled, while Danzou and Korochi both kept neutral expressions on their faces. That left Elder Kato. Kato, in his day, had been a worthy jonin, and a fierce defender of the Leaf Village.

"You mention the Raikage and the Village Hidden in the Clouds...all of the elders know the grudge. Why would the suddenly act on an age-old grudge?" Kato mused. **Ah, if I was young, I would attack them with the vigor I always did! The Leaf Village means everything to me!**

"The change in Hokage, and our weakened economy seems to make us an unstable Village. However, we are still the strongest among the great five nations. As a proverb reads, it's not GETTING to the top that's hard, it's staying there. Some will try to take us out at the knees. I have a plan for that, too, which I will reveal once the time is right. Now, are there any other questions before we adjourn?"

Ekyt looked from one elder to the other. **They all merit investigation...but I don't have the manpower to go around. I'll have to be selective. Assuming they'll act at night, and in private...I'll need four agents. But ANBU would be too flashy, I can't have attention drawn to ANBU, I need them as regular security. Perhaps my "Elite Four" need a workout...A-ranked it is. I'll contact them in the morning...**

Sakura, Kakashi, and Yamato were wide awake, and ready to go. Then there was Naruto. He was sleeping, a snot bubble increasing in size as he snored.

Ekyt debated on how to wake him up. That problem was solved quickly, by Naruto himself, with a little help from Sakura.

"zzzz...hmmm...yeah, ramen....red miso...you're buying, Sakura-chan? Let me repay you with a kiss...mmmm...ramen breath..."

Ekyt/Lord Hokage looked away, wincing. He heard the tell-tale WHAM! Of Naruto being punched. **I'll bet he's awake now...**

"Now that's you're all here...and awake...I have a mission. Yamato, I want you to watch Elder Danzou. Kakashi, I'm assigning you to Elder Koroichi. Sakura, I need you to watch Elder Kato. And Naruto, I need you to watch..."

Naruto was asleep again. Ekyt, borrowing from Takeda Shingen's book (A lord in feudal Japan), grabbed the iron war fan off his desk, closed it, and gave Naruto a crack on the head.

"...And Naruto, you will watch Elder Yakamo. If any of you see anything strange, report to me immediately. If they're proven traitorous, use the force necessary to bring them to me- alive. Kill only as a last resort. One of the four is a traitor to the Leaf Village. We need to know which one. Any questions?"

"Yeah, I've got one, old man. Is this A-ranked?" Naruto yelled out.

Ekyt resisted the urge to hit Naruto again. "Yes, it is. And I'm 'Lord Hokage', not 'Old Man'. I've only got four years on you!"

"That still makes you old!" Naruto teased.

"Well, you have your orders. Thank you for getting here on such short notice. You may begin. But stay in radio contact with each other. If one of you is wounded seriously or incapacitated, the mission is terminated."

"Understood. Let's go," Kakashi drawled in his own, inimitable way. The four leapt off across rooftops, going in separate directions.

Ekyt watched them go, until he heard Hayate.

"Sir? (koff)"

"Yes, Hayate?"

"The Sand's Kazekage is here to meet with you. (koff)."

"Please bring him in, Hayate."

Gaara joined Ekyt in his office.

"Welcome, Lord Kazekage. I hope your trip was pleasant," Ekyt said.

"The trip isn't important. The chunin exams are coming up, and I'm here to speak with you about it...and security."

Ekyt raised a brow, but offered Gaara a chair.

"Something to drink?"

"No," Gaara responded.

"Alright. The chunin exams are in...two weeks time. All the preparations have been made to accommodate the students and their respective senseis. Security...I have a feeling you're not referring to the chunin exams."

Gaara nodded. "The Akatsuki pose the threat. I've heard that they've formed a pact with the Raikage...and someone in Konoha."

This was news to Ekyt. "I knew we had a leak in Konoha, I have an investigation underway. But the Akatsuki aligning themselves with the Cloud Village...what motive would they have?"

Gaara had an answer. "After our respective Village's, the Cloud Village is the strongest nation. Their combined power may be enough to topple our Villages. The Stone Village is safe, due to their pact with the Cloud Village. That, too, is a point of worry. It may mean that two villages, plus the Akatsuki, may be aiming for our villages. That's why I'm here. I want us to form a pact. In short, it dictates that our two

villages will come to the aid of the others in times of crisis. This includes economic crisis. Trade between our villages will increase, and we'll have more security. Our two Villages are the strongest. Akatsuki or not, the other villages will be reluctant to attack us.”

Lord Hokage agreed. “Of course. We can hold a formal signing tomorrow. For now, let me make sure you have accommodations for the night.”

The next morning, Ekyt was waiting on top of the Hokage mansion. It was then that Iruka brought his class up.

“Oh, Lord Hokage, good morning!” Iruka said, smiling. “Class, say hello to Lord Hokage!”

The class said hi. Some of them looked at Ekyt strangely.

“Don't let me interfere, Iruka. You're giving the Hokage lecture, I presume? One of my favorites,” Ekyt told Iruka. Despite Ekyt not really being Hokage, Iruka's chest swelled with pride.

“Well, you're welcome to stay. Now, class, this is Hokage Rock. The stone faces represent one of each of our Village's top Shinobi, and”

“How come this guy isn't up there?” one boisterous boy shouted.

“How dare you talk about our Hokage that way!” Iruka shouted. Ekyt smiled.

“It's alright, Iruka. I think I can give a suitable explanation.” Ekyt pointed to the faces.

“To become Hokage means that you're the top Shinobi in the Village, the best of the best. Konoha has a rich history of producing top-quality Ninja. Any one of you could be up there some day, and I know you'll all strive to be the best. To protect what you love, to earn that love, there is no greater feeling, and no greater reward.”

“What do you mean? Money's great!” came the inevitable shout.

“Money is nice...but money doesn't buy the one thing we all have in common. A need for love. Money can buy weapons, and property, and even people- but it cannot buy the love you earn, and the respect that comes with it.” Lord Hokage looked up again.

“The Third Hokage was one of my Master's...is, I should say. Never stop learning. If you know one more jutsu than your opponent, you'll be difficult to defeat! If all of us act as one, our Village will prosper, and give back to us.”

Iruka stepped back and let Ekyt lecture. He had a reserved smile on his face. **He's playing the part really well...it's a shame he's not likely to ever REALLY be Hokage. He has the instinct to protect, and he could have the ability, if he had a little more experience. Oh well. For now, he's doing his job. Just like always. The greatest reward a teacher can have is to look back and see his students right behind him, until he doesn't have to look back, but forward, to see where his students have surpassed him...**

Kakashi saw nothing out of the ordinary with elder Danzou. After a full day, Kakashi had nothing to report. He keyed his field mike.

“Anything?” he hissed into it.

“Sensei, I've got something! This is seriously bad news! Everyone would really be helpful! Elder

Yakumo is up to something. I know that scroll! It's the one I stole, when Mizuki-sensei was trying to trick me!"

Three voices answered Naruto's

"The Forbidden Scroll? I'm on my way, Naruto, don't attack!" Kakashi said.

"On my way!" Naruto barked.

"My clone is en route, I'll be blocking her escape path." Yamato's clone responded, followed by him confirming it.

Yakumo bowed.

"Here it is, as promised. That fool Hokage had no idea...he would never suspect sweet, old, Elder Yakumo to take Konoha's most precious secret scroll!"

A man in the shadows smiled, teeth gleaming as he greedily reached out for the scroll.

"You did very well, Yakumo...sister..." the man left the shadows. It was the Raikage!

"Thank you, brother! It's time our nation was united, and"

"And I've heard enough, believe it!" Naruto declared.

"I think we have enough to arrest the both of you...after that, what happens is up to our Hokage..."

Kakashi said.

Yamato, who always claimed he could 'rule by fear if necessary', did so now as he re-absorbed his wood clone.

"You'll find our Hokage to be a fair man...But he doesn't take kindly to treason in his Village. I doubt he'll kill you outright. You're more likely to rot in a jail cell the rest of your lives. But that's for him to decide."

Elder Yakumo and The Raikage looked to run, but they were surrounded by four of the best Konoha had to offer.

"Fine. Take us to this 'scary Hokage' of yours! The boy couldn't have hit puberty before yesterday!"

The Raikage snarled. Sakura, who was closest, grabbed the Raikage's arm.

"Don't push it. Lord Hokage might not kill you- But-I-WILL! Now, shut up and just come quietly."

"Lord Hokage!"

"Some new outrage by Konohamaru, I presume?" Ekyt muttered, looking up from his personal scroll to see Genma Shiranui looking panicked.

"No, not this time, sir! I wish it was! God, I wish it was! No, it's Team Kakashi! They've made two arrests!"

Ekyt stood up, pushing his chair out of the way, tilting his hat aggressively.

"Thank you, Genma. Please inform every non-Shinobi family that I am ordering a lock down. They are to stay in their homes, businesses, or wherever they are now. I want Shinobi lining the street. I don't expect this arrest to go peacefully. Put our scouts on watch and..."

Ekyt hesitated for a moment.

"...And please summon the Kazekage to the top of the Hokage Mansion. I need him observing this arrest."

“Got it!” Genma disappeared, using the Body Flicker Jutsu to start spreading the word.

Ekyt looked at the Hokage faces, wishing he DID belong in this position.

Oh well, I’m the Hokage now. I’m going to act like one until I’m told my mission has ended.

Right now, the furious Raikage, and his treacherous sister, Elder Yakamo, were being marched toward him. That was problem enough.

30 - The Leaf in Chaos! (part 1)

The Raikage and Elder Yakamo found themselves intimidated by the young Hokage. If the Third thought highly of his skills, and had been so vocal in his promotion, there was clearly more than meets the eye. Naruto led the two, with Sakura on the left, Kakashi on the right, and Yamato taking up the rear. The two captives were restrained with wood.

"Elder Yakamo...Lord Raikage...It is a shame that we aren't meeting under more welcoming circumstances," Ekyt offered pleasantly. "But, undeniable proof is undeniable proof. Elder Yakamo, you will be subjected to ANBU's Interrogation unit. Lord Raikage, you will-"

"I will do nothing you say! You fresh-faced little twerp! My village will crush you! With the help of the Akatsuki and Iwagakure, nothing can stop us!"

Ekyt didn't move for a moment. Slowly, he raised one hand, already bleeding, and ran his thumb across a scroll. The Raikage flinched, but Ekyt merely used a Summoning Jutsu. A Duel-Summoning Jutsu.

"Shuurai, please inform our...other ally about this development. Umisu, please find the two I designated and alert them to our situation. Tell them not to act hastily, but to keep watch."

The two summons disappeared to do just that. Ekyt put the scroll away, aware that hundreds of Shinobi eyes were on him.

"I can't let you threaten this Village. Do not make enemies of us, Lord Raikage." Lord Hokage's tone was low and dark, leaving no room for argument. The Raikage broke free suddenly and attacked.

"NOW, MY PEOPLE! ATTACK!" he shouted!

Shinobi poured into the village, all wearing Cloud or Stone hitai-ates. Ekyt was nonplussed. He watched as a swirl of sand appeared next to him. Instantly, Gaara was next to him, his face neutral.

"In accordance with my village's deal with the Leaf Village...I'm going to kill anyone that thinks of attacking." Gaara, as always, had an inimitable tone to his voice that was enough to send the strongest Shinobi running for cover.

Naruto was raring to go!

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Poof poff poff!

Naruto after Naruto appeared.

"Hey, losers!" they shouted in unison. "You're messing with the best, Naruto Uzumaki! Believe it!"

Naruto himself was running toward the gates. **Even with my clones, we're outnumbered! I guess I've gotta trust Ekyt...ah man, he's so lucky! Why is he Hokage? Why did they choose him?! It was so quick, and quiet, too...is something up? Where IS Granny Tsunade anyway? Or the Pervy Sage? Is this some plan? Ah, screw it! Let THEM figure it out!**

Soon, Naruto wasn't alone. Sasuke had joined him. Naruto looked over in surprise.

"It's my village, too, Loser. Try not to slow me down," Sasuke said, sneering like he used to. Naruto grinned widely.

"Don't worry about that, Sasuke! If you get hurt, just stand back and watch the REAL master at work!"

Sasuke rolled his eyes, Sharingan now visible. "Whatever. You always talked big, even when you were worthless. Let's see if you've made good on your word. Because, after this stupid invasion is gone, Naruto- I want to fight you again."

Naruto was taken aback. **He's thinking of a rematch in the middle of an invasion? That's Sasuke-**

self-centered! And they called ME annoying, 'tabeyo!

"Sasuke...never mind, I'll question you later. Right now, I've got a greater need to kick @\$\$! Believe it!"

Kakashi and Sakura were back to back.

"Any ideas, sensei?" Sakura asked, creating another crater with her fist, to buy time.

"I can't use Iwagakure's justu, between the two of us, we'd destroy the village. We're going to have to do this without my Sharingan. Sakura, you focus on healing our wounded. I'll handle our attackers..."

Kakashi said. He was already forming chakra into his hand, preparing for the Lightning Blade.

"Right!" Sakura replied.

"Don't forget your genjutsu! Use your 'release' technique whenever you come across someone trapped in a genjutsu. And, of course, put that power to work!" Kakashi said with a smile. **She's like a mini-Tsunade. She's grown so much...It's strange that she hasn't mentioned Sasuke. And I think I know why. She's outgrown being a fangirl. What she needs is a shoulder to cry on right now. And if I'm not mistaken, there's one boy who's in the same boat as her. And that boat is named 'lonely'. Those two...well, some things you have to figure out on your own. A smart girl like Sakura is oblivious to it...oh well, she's a rare combination of beauty and brains, but even she can't think of everything. Too bust sorting out and validating her feelings for Sasuke, no doubt.**

Gaara created a dome of sand around the Leaf Village. Allies could pass through, but enemies would be enveloped as soon as they touched the sand. Once they were enveloped, there were plenty of ways for them to meet their end. There was the Hyuuga clan, the Main and Branch houses working in tandem. There was the original InoShikaCho, each of them destroying enemies in their own way. In the mean time, Iruka and Temari herded the academy students and new genin into hidden, fortified buildings. Temari was having an anxiety attack. **Gaara...just as I'm getting comfortable...he has to show up! Why?! No matter what, I will NOT leave this village! My brother is still a murderer, even without that demon! And that sensei, Baki, that spineless yes-man. Kankuro, that egotistical prick! And here...there's some of the nicest people, and the strongest ninjas. It's just what I've always wanted...**

The Raikage immediately tried to test Ekyt's taijutsu. He aimed a lazy straight punch at Ekyt. Ekyt, who didn't feel like playing, had already discarded his Hokage robe. Under it, he was wearing a partially open kekko gi and his Hakama, which he had tucked into his tabi boots. On his head was a helmet version of his normal headband. The Leaf Village's symbol shone proudly, even amongst the other metal. Ekyt blocked with his hat. The Raikage leapt backward, his arm killing him. He saw multiple cuts on his arm, and wondered how they got there.

"Razor blades sewn into the fabric...it's been used for years." Ekyt's dry comment was accompanied by him throwing the hat like a giant shuriken at the Raikage, who stepped to the side and gloated.

"You couldn't hit the ground with your hat!" he taunted. The Hokage he was talking to disappeared.

The Raikage looked around, wondering where he was. That was when a foot tagged him across the face, knocking him to the edge of the Hokage mansion. The Raikage righted himself, immediately seeing his error.

When that Hokage put his hat down to block, he used a Shadow Clone Jutsu. The clone threw the hat, as a distraction, while the REAL Hokage snaked his way behind me and nailed me. Not bad for a punk kid. But I'm harder to defeat than that!

The Raikage leapt away from the edge, making handsigns in the air.

"Cloud's Cutting Strike!" The Raikage's hand became a yellow blur, aiming for the stunned Hokage.

The strike cut right through the young man. Too easy. POOF! Shadow Clone.

Ekyt was already weaving his hands together. As the Raikage turned, his long robe was singed by a fire attack. He saw the Leaf Hokage's hand jabbed at him, hand rigged.

"Not bad, you little pest! But you're facing a REAL kage! I'm not some little baby, fresh from the womb!" the irate Raikage called. **How can this little kid be giving me trouble?**

"You could have fooled me, you cry like one," Ekyt pointed out. The Raikage took the bait and charged. His hand was glowing with the yellow energy, just like before. Ekyt used his "Dragon's Circle" jutsu to put fire in his hand. He let it consume his hand as he blocked the Raikage's strike with a parrying hand. Ekyt aimed for the Raikage's face with an elbow, but missed narrowly as the Raikage leaned back. The Raikage tried to snap a kick at Ekyt, but Ekyt blocked it with his shin, and used his foot to 'scoop' the Raikage's foot, causing the Raikage to lose his balance. At the same time, Ekyt's hand swung back across the same arc as the elbow, a ridge hand strike narrowly missing his temple as the Raikage righted himself and did a back handspring. To his surprise, the Hokage stepped in and tried a simple front kick. Raikage dodged backward, leaning as Ekyt's fist nearly connected with his face. The Raikage landed his first strike when his Cloud's Cutting Strike Jutsu cut Ekyt on ribs. Nowhere vital, but it hurt, and gave the Raikage time to aim another strike. This one was foiled by an elbow glancing off his forehead, followed by a backfist to the nose, which teared his eyes up. Raikage had sense enough to get out of the way, because a split second later a right roundhouse kick nearly beheaded him.

"Enough of this childish taijutsu! This is a battle between kages! Don't you know any jutsus?!" Raikage taunted.

"A few," Ekyt replied grimly. He was so worried about the village that his mind wasn't in this fight. As the Raikage spoke, Ekyt knew that a mistake. He HAD to focus, or he would be killed.

That was when the relief forces showed up. For the first time in many, many years, the 3 Legendary Sannin were on the same page. Orochimaru, Tsunade, and Jiraiya began clearing out the village. Sound Ninja soon joined the Leaf and Sand villages in their fight, causing quite a stir among the Stone and Cloud Shinobi. They soon breathed a sigh of relief when help came, this time in the form of the Akatsuki.

Sakura focused on the Akatsuki member. It was that puppet master, Sasori. He and his poisons. She had heard Ekyt had matched the two of them up. For some reason, she suddenly felt angry, and protective, all at the same time. Sasori was in HER village, trying to kill HER friends. It wasn't going to work that way, too many had died today already. Her gloved fist clenched in anger.

"You, the freak with the puppets!" Sakura shouted. Sasori looked at her.

"The little girl who decided to meddle in my affairs with your little boyfriend! I should have just killed you. You see where charity gets you? I have to kill you now, instead."

Sakura clenched her fist even harder. **Sasuke...Naruto...Kakashi-sensei...I've been feeling lonely, and depressed. I have no right to have those feelings. I have family (thinks of Naruto and Sasuke), friends (thinks of Kakashi), and ability! I've got a home, a family, and I will do ANYTHING to defend it!**

Sakura charged toward Sasori. A puppet clattered to her left. She knew it was laced with a poison, and that she had to dodge it. She did so by jumping, then slamming her fist off the toy-turned-killer. It shattered. Sakura knew enough to destroy it at certain points in front of and behind it's joints, so the chakra strings would be severed, and the parts would be unusable in some attack from behind. Sasori seemed vaguely surprised. "You've grown."

Naruto and Sasuke began to clear out the Iwagakure Shinobi that were trying to tunnel into the village. Sasuke's Sharingan glowed dangerously. In the blink of an eye, he had drawn his sword and cut down three men.

Naruto's mouth dropped open. **Sasuke...he kills so easily, like life means nothing...I've never killed...does this mean that Sasuke is more powerful? A true Shinobi?**

Naruto's mind thought back to the Third Hokage. His kind, smiling face, and the words of wisdom that, at the time, sounded lame.

"It's not hate that will prevail...it's love, and justice. Taking someone's life should be a last resort, not your first option. When you take a life, it should be in defense of someone you care about.

The wind picked up. That was thanks to the Raikage's jutsu. Weather elements. Ekyt was drenched with rain. He immediately saw the tactical sense. If he was soaking wet, a lightning attack would have more effect. Since the rain continued to fall, there was no real way to counter the attack. It also put Ekyt's signature fire jutsus out of the picture for now.

The Raikage darted forward, quick as lightning, and gave Ekyt a hard shot across the face, sending him skidding to the edge of the Hokage Mansion's roof. His brain still rattled, Ekyt was sent reeling again, with a hard kick to the stomach. He formed a plan as he was being hit. But before he could put it into action, the Raikage caused a jolt of lightning to land just in front of Ekyt. He was falling to the ground. As he fell, Ekyt quickly made handsigns. "Striking Shadow Snakes!" he called out. Four snakes burst from his wrist. They bit into the building, but they didn't slow his descent enough. Even though he knew he was making himself a target with lightning attacks, Ekyt drew the Striking Serpent Blades. Four snakes from each wrist helped Ekyt hold the blades. He jammed them into the building. The swords sank in, almost hilt-deep. But he wasn't falling anymore. Using the blades (Accented with some chakra) as a springboard, Ekyt leapt upward, landing back on the roof. The blades soon followed, the snakes sheathing them.

Ekyt had to end this damn weather jutsu. Then the obvious hit him.

"Striking Shadow Snakes!" The snakes burst from his wrist again, snaring the Raikage's hands. Ekyt gave a sharp tug. The Raikage had to let go of his handsign, or his hands would be broken. The sky cleared up immediately.

"Smart move, you little prick! I'm STILL going to kill you! Your Village has suppressed mine for far too long!"

"Because we're superior? Has it occurred to you that you might try bettering yourself, rather than trying

to take us out?” Ekyt started. The Raikage tried to interject, but Ekyt kept going. “No, you listen to me! Do you REALLY believe the Akatsuki will honor this ‘pact’ they signed with you? ONE member has shown up, the most vague gesture of caring possible! They’re using you!”

The Raikage shouted back “Shut up! You know nothing, you young fool! Nothing!”

Ekyt immediately sensed something was wrong. He used a body replacement jutsu just as an enormous axe cut into the ground where he had been. He had wasted his words on a water clone.

“If we’re playing with weapons, I’m more than happy to oblige!” Ekyt drew the Striking Serpent Blades again.

The Village was still fighting, but the tides were beginning to turn. The Sand, Leaf, and Sound Ninja were the best quality. The Three Sannin also on their side, it was quickly becoming apparent that the Stone and Cloud Village were going to get a bigger fight than they bargained for.

“I never thought I’d see the day, Orochimaru,” Jiraiya commented.

“Your Hokage was smart to continue his agreement with my village. How could we say no. Besides, you have something I want, and I’m hardly in a position to take it...rather, him, back by force,” Orochimaru replied.

“You mean Sasuke. Has it crossed your mind that he’s here of his free will? Do you see him in restraints?” Tsunade challenged.

“Sasuke-kun will come back. Deny it all you like Tsunade, but my influence extends too far into him. And our treaty will expire someday.” Orochimaru’s foreboding words were not lost amongst the fight that was growing in front of them.

But a war doesn’t end in hours. With Sakura facing off against Sasori, Sasuke and Naruto distracted, and Ekyt and the Raikage fighting, the very existence of the Leaf Village was at stake.

Dodge, leap, roll. WHAM!

Another puppet destroyed.

“You’ll never get the REAL me!” Sasori shouted mockingly. Sakura had a feeling he was right.

But I can’t give up! This time, I’ve got dreams! This Village has life! And my dreams, and this village, aren’t going to die, not here, not now! CHA!

Sakura knew she would reach her limits sooner rather than later, and she had to think of another way to attack. **Wait, wait, that skill that I used against Sasuke-kun...medical jutsu...what if I could mix the two. I could use a genjutsu, then couple it with my own jutsu. But I need a distraction...I’ve got it!**

Sakura leapt high into the air and reached into her vest. She extracted several exploding tags attached to kunai. As she reached the height of her jump, she threw the kunai into the concentrated mass of clacking puppets. The kunai stuck, and the explosive tags detonated.

Under the cover of smoke, Sakura weaved her hands together. To herself, she said “Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!” After that, she activated her chakra scalpel and waited.

Sasori cursed. That attack had REALLY hurt his puppet supply. Then he felt the genjutsu. He HAD to release it; Sakura's damage had been too thorough to use his "Hundred Puppets Attack" jutsu anyway. **She's strong...very strong...and she knows my fighting style, while hers has changed since we last fought...that puts me at a distinct disadvantage. And my partner- where IS that blond idiot?**

"Release!" Sasori grumbled.

Sakura had been waiting for that. She smashed the ground, to see which puppets would go sailing, and which one would stay still. She had heard the direction the 'release' had come from. The smoke was clearing.

All Sasori saw was an electric blue cut through the smoke. Then, it took out puppet after puppet, slicing them into bits. Before Sasori could move himself, he was cut clean in half. It didn't kill him. In fact, it could work to his advantage. Sasori made his top half move. He dragged himself over to Sakura and jabbed a sharp, poisoned sword through her back...

31 - The Leaf in Chaos! (Part 2)

Ekyt rolled to the side. The broadsword was unquestionably heavy, and it could crush him, if it hit. Now on his back, Ekyt swung one blade at the Raikage's legs, causing him to jump. The jump was going to make quite an impact, as the broadsword came crashing down. Ekyt used a replacement jutsu. The broadsword shattered the log he had replaced himself with shattered. With shards of wood still flying, Ekyt landed gracefully and grabbed the Raikage. He put one blade to the Raikage's throat.

"Don't move." Ekyt said forcefully.

The Raikage grunted, but didn't move.

"This is a matter you should have taken up with the Hyuuga clan. However, it is not something I will let go unpunished. If you surrender yourself, your people won't suffer. They'll go back to their normal lives," Ekyt promised. A wind kicked up, and with the wind, up went Ekyt's warning flags **I can't see the Raikage's hands from this position, and his robe makes it hard to detect shoulder movement. He could be making hand signs and I wouldn't know about it. I don't like that...**

"And what happens to me?" the Raikage demanded.

"You go to jail for this heinous attack, until the new Raikage agrees to our terms to release you."

The Raikage smirked. Ekyt sensed a movement. He couldn't move himself, so he turned to look. There was the Raikage- or a clone- standing a few meters away. Ekyt didn't know which was which. So he didn't move, he continued to hold his hostage. The Raikage smirked, thinking he had the Hokage distracted.

"So you aren't as foolish as I presumed. You fight well, for a child. Hya!" The Raikage twisted around. Ekyt grabbed his arm, flipped him and aimed the sword at his throat while stepping on his chest. The tip glowed dangerously, while the snakes helping to hold the sword in place hissed angrily.

"Don't do that. I'm being nice," Lord Hokage snarled. That's when the clone made his move. With the broadsword that had been knocked away in the scrum, he swung at Ekyt. Ekyt saw this, and raised both swords in a block. That left him open to attack from the other Raikage. Using his "Lightning Hand" jutsu, he slashed Lord Hokage across the back.

Ekyt grunted in pain as the strike cut through his chainmail and into his back. He had moved to the side on pure instinct, so the strike missed his spine and anything else vital, but it hurt. He felt himself blacking out.

No...I can't...I'm their Hokage. The village...love...all they've done...

Ekyt's thoughts changed as he moved away from the two clones. Every move hurt, so leaping backward in a high arch...not the best move. Blood followed the arch, landing on the ground below Ekyt before he landed, crouched.

You think you're beaten? THIS is pain! You wuss! Why don't you commit seppuku? You deserve to die! You're going to die a miserable, old, decrepit bastard genin anyway! You'll never find love. All you'll find is pain! You damn retard! DIE!

"Demonic Illusion: Bringer of Darkness Technique!" Ekyt shouted! His emotional chakra went into the genjutsu, making the normal 'release' impossible. Ekyt's mind had forgotten how the emotional chakra worked. Ekyt hoped this would buy him time. He sat down, folding himself into seiza, and closed his eyes. The Raikage was still pawing at the darkness.

“What is he doing?” Tsunade wondered. **Is it time to get involved?**

Jiraiya looked closer. “Sarutobi told me about this...but this skill isn’t a battle skill...”

Orochimaru looked closely. “Meditation?”

Jiraiya shook his head. “MORE than just meditation. He’s delving into his subconscious, into the heart of his second chakra. But why...he only does that when he needs guidance from an emotional source, the juncture that CAUSES his emotional chakra to exist...”

“What does it mean?” Tsunade said aloud.

“It means that he’s got a plan, and that he needs some special help to perform it,” Jiraiya said. He pulled out his spy glass, usually reserved for bathing women, to see the phenomenon up close.

“Special help? Like a summon?” Orochimaru asked, curious himself.

“Something like that.” Jiraiya’s mysterious reply annoyed both Orochimaru and Tsunade, but neither said anything. They just watched.

Lee raced around the streets, kicking when necessary. He found a cluster of enemies halting the progress of Iruka and Temari. Some were tormenting the children. Lee’s nindo dictated that he go and put an end to that.

“Hey, leave them alone! If you’ve got a problem, fight me!” Iruka challenged.

“Right! Pick on the kids, you bastards! You just couldn’t handle a real fight!” Temari added.

“Shut up, both of you, or I’ll start killing the little idiots! Now, you two back off, and maybe I won’t start slitting their little, useless throats!”

Temari and Iruka had no choice but to back off. Lee had no such obligation.

“Excuse me! That is not the proper way to fight!” Lee declared, as he used his Dynamic Entry kick. The offender went flying, hitting the base of the Hokage Faces hard. Before his two comrades could react, Lee had swept one set of legs. The other man earned an incredibly fast combo of kicks to the face, ending in a kick that sent him next to the other unconscious Stone ninja.

The last Stone ninja blocked Lee’s kick with a halberd. Lee used the weapon as a springboard and flipped gracefully away.

“I see that you wish to use your specialilty. Gai-sensei, I am going to use my specialty!”

The Stone ninja, who was bandaged all over, except one eye, laughed.

“You’ve lost, you eyebrowed freak! There’s no Gai-sensei here!”

Lee ignored him and instead sat down. He pulled off his leg warmers, revealing his weights.

“Weights? You ARE whacked! Let’s see...the writing on them says ‘guts’...that’s fitting, kid, because I’m gonna spill YOUR guts all over the street!”

Lee tossed the weights in the air. When they came down, the sound and the size of the crater they made scared the cocky stone soldier.

“It is too late to apologize!” Lee declared. That was the last the Stone Shinobi saw of him. The next thing he knew, he was flying toward the mountain, in a showdown he wasn’t going to win.

Lee walked over to check on Iruka, Temari, and the kids.

“Is everyone alright?” Lee asked, hitting his nice-guy pose.

The children shrank back in horror.

"This guy's scarier than the Stone guy that attacked us!" the boy declared. The others ran past Iruka, into the safehouse. A giant sweatdrop and the black lines of doom crossed Lee's face. Temari rolled her eyes.

"Kids will be kids, Lee. Thanks for the help." Temari kissed Lee on the cheek, then returned to helping Iruka hide the children.

Naruto and Sasuke continued to mop up enemies. Sasuke killed, while Naruto incapacitated. The number of enemies became fewer and fewer, until they almost completely dried up.

"Y'know, loser, I came back to fight you. I want to obtain the Mangekyo Sharingan and face my brother."

Naruto looked at Sasuke, his face serious. "You're going to try to kill me?"

Sasuke shook his head. "No. I don't need to kill you- only to defeat you. My brother lied to me, just like he lied to everyone. I don't need to kill to obtain the Mangekyo Sharingan. I need to win in a fight where my opponent is as skilled as I am. And the fight has to be honorable."

Sasuke stopped, then turned around.

"How about it, loser? After this invasion, we fight- we see who's stronger. Because I realized something..."

"What's that?" Naruto probed.

"That you were right. About bonds, about us being the same. Friends. Something I never wanted a part of. Truth be told, you forced it out of me. And I'm...grateful..." Sasuke said uncomfortably. But he smiled like the old Sasuke as he did.

Naruto stared, disbelieving, at first. Then he spoke. "You know Sasuke, these past two years, my mission was to bring you back to the Leaf Village. After that, it was to become Hokage. The last time we fought, you won, and, to me, the stakes were high. I made a promise to Sakura-chan, and to myself, that I would bring you back. Now that I have...(Naruto smiles) I'll have no problem kicking your @\$\$, dattebayo!"

Sasuke shook his head. "Same old loser."

Sakura yelped in pain. She fell to the ground, hard, tears streaming down her face.

"N-no...I was so...so close..." she sobbed, looking at the ground. She tried to force herself up. She was shaking and panting with the effort, and not really succeeding. But she kept trying, crying out as it hurt. Sasori was laying on the ground in a half-ruined body. This one had black hair and a thin torso, with the kanji for "builder" written on it.

"It's pointless to keep trying. The poison will kill you. Just lay down and die quietly. You put up a great fight. Perhaps you DO rival Tsunade in skill...I guess we'll never know!"

Sakura looked at Sasori, then she smiled. "Is that what you think? That I'm going to lay down and die? You're wrong!" POOF!

Sakura's foot cracked down on Sasori's body just as her clone disappeared. All but the head and torso was gone now. Sakura pinned the torso down.

"I know how you work. You plan on ejecting that damn heart of yours." Sakura had a kunai in her hand. "Try it, and I'll slash it into a million pieces before you hit your next body!" Sakura declared.

Ekyt landed in the office. But this time it had changed. It was an old, Japanese-styled room. Rice paper walls, and candles lined the room. In the center of it, Ekyt saw himself, dressed in his full samurai gear. "I said I'd get you back," Ekyt said to his older clone. The clone said nothing. Instead, it reached for the sword in front of it.

"Do you remember, during your test, how your cuts felt so sure? Your aim precise?" The clone asked. Ekyt nodded. During his test for brown belt with his sword, he had been nervous, beyond nervous. But he had gone on to have one of the best tests in his dojo's history.

"Of course." Ekyt replied, not sure where his clone was going.

"It was as if you had channeled the spirit of Musashi. It was then that I knew- you have a warrior's heart. That was the first time you could have ever accessed me. You knew nothing of my existence, not at the time. And I revealed myself at the right time...I know that now..."

The candle wax dripped lower, changing the room's illumination. With a sigh, the older Ekyt got up and put his sword in his belt, which was mostly hidden under his hakama.

"The time for talking is over now. Your technique is wearing off on the Raikage. But since you're here, you know of some danger. And you need something from me..." The older Ekyt was forcing Ekyt himself to say it.

"I want the clone again. It's the only way to end this peacefully. The Raikage won't stop until he's killed. And I'm not going to kill him if I can help it. That's why I'm here. I want you to become my emotional clone again..."

The older Ekyt looked at his younger, 'real' self.

"No. You don't need me. Use your chakra. Now, go!"

Ekyt woke up, disbelieving. **H-he left me! To die! Why? Why would he do that? There must be a message!**

The Raikage had finally thrown off the genjutsu and attacked. In his frustration, Ekyt felt his blue flame chakra grow. He stood up, understanding what happened.

Anger...I needed anger...I haven't felt it, so that's why my chakra was weak. But now, I feel...angry. Frustrated. I needed emotions to make my chakra work! Master Sarutobi was right! I need emotions to fuel my chakra. Now that I've got the fuel, I can use that jutsu...

Ekyt leapt straight up. By now, the whole village was watching. A Shadow clone joined him. They both sailed down, blue chakra in their hands.

"Swallow's Emotional Strike!" they said together.

SCHWING!

POOF!

One Ekyt disappeared. The other was stopped just short of his target. He hadn't seen this coming, and now it was a mistake.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Blood flowed from Ekyt's stomach as the spiked end of the war broadsword went in his stomach and out the other side. Ekyt's hand stopped inches from the Raikage's face.

"Time to die! Once you've fallen, the village will be mine!"

Ekyt was trapped. He couldn't pull himself off the broadsword. But he couldn't die, not until he'd won! Slowly, Ekyt reached a hand out. The hand gripped the base of the broadsword.

"Don't try to escape!" the Raikage said, laughing cruelly. "Haha haha ha-"

The Raikage was cut off. Ekyt was still impaled on the pointed end of the broadsword, but his hand was around the Raikage's neck. Blue Chakra grew at Ekyt's feet. He continued to choke the Raikage.

"You (koff) didn't think...that was it? Did you? This (koff) is a pinprick! I've had (koff) my emotions yanked out...my (koff) Tenketsu severed...my chakra coils ruined...and this...this is how you thought...it would end? Every one of my (koff koff) villagers is a hero today. I remain the only one who hasn't performed that act of heroism. Even if this kills me...I'll have won our match...this ends here, Raikage!" Ekyt glowed with energy.

"First Gate, gate of opening: Release!" Ekyt jumped backward, pulling himself off the broadsword. His speed increased ten times, Ekyt ran to the Raikage.

"Leaf Hurricane!" Ekyt kicked the Raikage under the chin, in a move he had learned from Lee. In the same motion, he leapt up beside the Raikage, holding his arms. With a violent pull, both arms broke cleanly in two at the elbow. Hooking the Raikage's neck and legs, Ekyt steered them both over the edge of the Hokage mansion. 100 feet down. At the 80 foot mark, Ekyt let go, only to drive his fist into the Raikage's stomach, increasing the speed of both their descents.

Sakura looked triumphantly at the trapped Sasori. Suddenly, a giant white bird knocked her over.

"What the hell- oh, no!" Sakura was too late.

Deidara picked up what was left of Sasori.

"Don't worry, un! I left you a parting gift!" Deidara called back with a laugh and a sneer.

Sakura looked down to see explosive clay sculptures all around her. Deidara put one hand up in the sign of the tiger. He was ready to detonate...

Sakura almost gave up. But somewhere, she felt that was what the old Sakura would have done. She wasn't that girl anymore. She was a full-fledged, powerful kunoichi. She could deal with this. She had to.

Sakura punched the ground as hard as she could, causing a crater to erupt in front of her. The explosives slid in. Sakura backflipped away.

"KATSU!" Deidara called. His explosion was contained underground.

"Damn it!" he swore, but could do no more. He flew away with what remained of the (still living) Sasori.

The three sannin were already on their way to the area of impact.

KA-BOOM!

Ekyt leapt aside at the last second, closing the First Gate before it completely fatigued him. He held the hole in his stomach closed. The Raikage didn't move.

Tsunade bent down to check his pulse.

"He's unconscious...he's lucky that's ALL that happened..."

Ekyt looked from Orochimaru, to Jiriaya, to Tsunade.

"The invasion is over. Leaf, Sand, and Sound win," he said, smiling.

"Not if you croak, kid! Hang in there!" Tsunade told him, trying to heal the hole in his stomach.

Ekyt pulled away. "I'm fine. There are still problems to be taken care of. Such as getting rid of these intruders."

Orochimaru looked around. "They're on their way out now."

Ekyt looked Orochimaru in the eyes, something few dared to do. Orochimaru stared back.

"I'm not going to curse you. You would survive, but you would reject me. I'm only going to say this: Kabuto was right: you're a respectable enemy. For now, you're a respectable ally. The war with the Akatsuki isn't finished. But my Sound Ninja and I are leaving..."

"Thank you for your assistance, Orochimaru." Ekyt bowed to a sworn enemy. **War makes for strange friendships. Still, I can't wait until he's out of my village!**

32 - Leaf in Chaos (Part 3)

The village was vacated by all but it's allies, at long last. Ekyt, who had bandaged his stomach only after everyone else had been taken care of, walked out on the balcony he was to speak from. He knew it was the end of line for his time as Hokage, and it was harder to accept than he thought. Especially when it was coupled with the knowledge that he would be hated by the town for deceiving them. A small part of Ekyt still had hope they wouldn't react like that, that they would understand he had done it for them. But it was a small glimmer of hope in a cloud that didn't seem to have a silver lining.

"All of you showed great bravery today. In these times, we can never drop our guards. I have a few things to say, but first, I wish to thank our allies, the Sand Village and the Sound Village, for coming to our aid. In the past, we've had our differences. But war makes strange bedfellows. And our allies came through for us. Despite old wounds that haven't totally healed, our villages pulled together. Master and pupil, friend and enemy, we all fought side by side to make a better village. We mourn our dead, and celebrate our heroes. All of you should be proud. In your own ways, you saved your home."

The crowd cheered. Tsunade put a hand on Ekyt's shoulder. Ekyt knew it was time. He nodded once to Tsunade, then held his hand up for silence once more.

"And, on the heels of all this chaos, I ask you to endure one more bit of chaos."

The crowd went silent. Ekyt discarded his robe and hat. The hat he handed back to Tsunade.

"I was never your Godaime Hokage. I was part of an elaborate plan to flush out a traitor inside our village. Now that the traitor has been apprehended, I return the Hokage title to it's right owner: Lady Tsunade."

The crowd gasped.

"But...but you made decisions! And"

"I can't believe it!"

"You're kidding?!"

"No way!"

Ekyt put a hand up. "I was allowed to act the part of a Hokage, even with the power, as the ruse would have been incomplete without it. I hope all of you can forgive me. It was all in the interest of your safety."

Ekyt felt tears welling up. This was harder than he thought. Finally, he pulled off his helmet and held it in his arms.

"I hope that I...I gave something back to all of you. Whether you liked me or hated me, I've given you all I could in every battle. It means a lot that you've accepted me as one of your own. And I hope...I hope you can find it in your hearts to continue to accept me."

Silence met Ekyt. He looked at the crowd, then lowered his head. Tsunade put a hand on his shoulder, steering him into her office.

"Give them time, Ekyt. You knew this was a risk when you took the job. And...I really mean this...thank you. You did very well, and saved our village."

Ekyt couldn't look at Tsunade. "Thank you, Lady Tsunade. If you'll excuse me..."

"Not just yet. Not until you understand that this IS NOT your fault. You did your job, you did what you

were asked. And you did it well.” Tsunade spoke firmly, staring Ekyt in the eyes.

Ekyt looked up. “I don’t care about that. Or what the village thinks! If I died, they would keep living. Somewhere inside, they’re thankful that I was the one on the end of that sword, keeping them alive. Most don’t know me, and they were glad to have a savior that wasn’t near to them. And that’s fine. I’ll live, Lady Tsunade. I always do.”

Right about here, Ekyt was hoping for a chunin vest. Hadn’t he earned it?

“There’s nothing for me, but back to life as a genin,” he said. Tsunade nodded.

“I know. You want the vest, and the rank. But I can’t give it to you.”

Ekyt’s mouth dropped open. “After...after all that...nothing?”

“I can’t give you a rank for completing a mission. Otherwise, everyone would be jonin, and-”

Ekyt held up a hand. “I’ve heard enough.” (Sakura walked in. She had heard the conversation.)

Tsunade looked taken aback. Ekyt continued.

“I’ve heard enough. I’m going to say this to your face. In front of Master Jiraiya, Master Sarutobi, Sakura, Shizune, and anyone else who happens to be listening: I was never in this for the rank, something I’ve long deserved. Now that you can’t do anything to me anymore, I’m going to be honest with you. It’s obvious I’ll never progress beyond genin. Not while you rule. For whatever reason, you can’t trust me. If you give me a mission where I might die, that’s fine. But giving me a rank I deserve? Never. I don’t know why. All I know is this:”

Ekyt was grabbed by Jiraiya. “Don’t say it, kid. You don’t want to do that. I know what you’re thinking, don’t say it. Don’t make the mistake I did.”

For some reason, this jolted Ekyt back to reality. He simply glared at Tsunade, then shook his head.

“Lord Jiraiya, if you have a few moments...you too, Sakura-sensei...”

Tsunade looked back in shock. “Finish it. Say whatever it was you were going to say.” She seemed interested, in an intimidating way.

Ekyt shook his head. “No offense meant, Lady Fifth (The fact that Ekyt didn’t use Tsunade’s name meant he was pissed- big time), but it’s not something I should say to you. If I stop myself, you can’t punish me for it.”

With that, Ekyt left with Jiraiya and Sakura.

“Cheers,” Ekyt said dully. He gulped down his sake, indicating that he wanted more.

“You called the two of us here...why?” Jiraiya asked. He winked at a waitress, who then smacked him in the head. A small welt rose as Jiraiya smiled. “Great material for my next book!”

“Lord Jiraiya, I’ve asked you and Sakura here because, after this, we’ll be enemies.” Ekyt took another drink. The bags under his eyes seemed pronounced. He was holding a cigarette, but had no intention of smoking it. It was just a little bit of cover. The smoke distorted his face to anyone watching.

“Enemies? What do you mean?” Sakura demanded.

Ekyt looked at the two of them.

“I was going to call Tsunade a dog. I was going to curse her up and down. Maybe even fight her. I’m frustrated here. I went from genin to Hokage, then back to genin, in a matter of days. From little power, to the most power, back to little power, all in rapid-fire succession. Tsunade’s made it clear that she isn’t going to promote me. So...”

Ekyt took another drink. He set the glass down, again calling for a refill.

“...So?” Jiraiya prompted.

“So I’m going to leave the village. Join the next one that’ll take me. Maybe I can be chunin, or even a

jonin, there. I've gotten an offer from the Akatsuki. This one I can take seriously, because they won't touch my chakra again. I don't belong here. Especially not now that I've jerked the villager's trust around."

There was silence between the three. They were the only three in the bar, so there was silence. Ekyt had paid the bartender to go away while they talked.

"Rank doesn't matter, it's skill that counts! You defeated a kage! You should be proud!" Sakura told Ekyt, trying to cheer him up.

"She's right. You possess great abilities. So what if you don't wear a stupid green vest? Do you see me, Tsunade, or Orochimaru wearing it?"

"You're legendary. I'm a genin, nameless except to those he's fought. There's nothing here for me, Lord Jiraiya." Ekyt looked up, almost tempted to actually smoke the cigarette. He hadn't felt so desperate before; he NEVER turned to drugs, or tobacco. Sake had been a recommendation from Tsunade to calm his nerves, and it was now a social thing, not an everyday thing. And Ekyt never got drunk, so there was little harm.

"Ekyt...if you try to leave...I WILL stop you. With force, if I have to. I respect you, so I'm telling you this ahead of time," Jiraiya warned.

Ekyt looked up, then downed the cup of sake.

"I'll stay a little longer, just long enough to sort things out. But it's best if I move on...the village hates me now. And I deserve it, for tricking them, good reasoning or not."

Ekyt got up and bowed to Sakura and Jiraiya, then lifted the flap that covered the entrance to the bar and walked out into the night.

The next morning, Ekyt's summon, Holly (Dog), left a note for Tsunade, asking to be taken off missions for 'personal and medical' reasons. Tsunade just sighed.

"I can't deny it, it's a legitimate claim, after being stuck in the gut with a broadsword. But I know he's just dodging me. He must have had a hell of a speech lined up for me the other night."

Sakura, who had perked up, tried to slink out of the room. Tsunade caught her out of the corner of her eye.

"Sakura..." Tsunade said slowly. She watched the pink-haired kunoichi jump, then turn around, pressed against the wall, almost like she was a piece of paper. The look on her face was tell-tale 'I've got a secret and I'm dying to tell someone, just not you!'

"Y-Yes, Lady Tsunade?" Sakura said, falsely chipper.

"You know something...something Ekyt was going to say, don't you?" Tsunade said all this pleasantly, leaning forward on her desk, hands supporting her head. She was smiling.

"W-what gives you THAT idea!" Sakura said, as a bead of sweat shot out of her right temple.

Tsunade smiled even wider. "Ah, well, it doesn't matter. If I was him, I would have cursed me up and down. Maybe even...called me a dog..." Tsunade's eye twinkled, while Sakura's widened.

"Of course, he could just, maybe, I don't know...try to leave the village?"

Sakura knew that Tsunade knew. But how did Tsunade know? **Oh, shoot. I'm in trouble for not telling her, aren't I?**

"Master Jiraiya stopped in a while ago to let me know. So, here's your assignment Sakura: Get it out of him- where he plans to go, when he plans to leave, who he's joining, and why."

"M-m-me? Lady Tsunade, shouldn't Lee, or Kakashi-sensei handle that? How can I get it out of him?" Sakura asked.

"Well, he seems to trust you. Besides, you're a kunoichi. You could just...seduce him. A kid like him, 19

years without getting any, I'd bet he'd fall for right 'bait'."

Tsunade nearly laughed. **This is too funny! Now, the kicker: I throw in a rival! (snicker) I should talk to the council and get the kid his rank, just so he'll stick around and I can torment him! He DOES deserve it...And no matter what I say, I know he'd never just 'do it' with Sakura, or anyone for that matter. The kid's got too much integrity and respect.**

Tsunade cleared her throat. "Well, if you won't do it, I know Temari will. She's a little more...forceful, but she'll get the information out of him...I hope, for Ekyt's sake, that she's feeling gentle...unless he's not into 'gentle...Or maybe Ino, she's pretty enough...In the T and A areas, those two might garner more attention anyway...Oh well, I'm leading the poor kid like a lamb to the slaughter with those two, but you do what you have to..."

Sakura went rigid at the mention of Temari and Ino's names.

"I'll do it! Don't give the mission to that pig! Or that sand worm!" Sakura snapped. Then it hit her: she had just been played like a fiddle, by the best. Tsunade, the one all kunoichi wanted to live up to, had just tricked Sakura into doing and saying something she didn't want to.

"Oh, really now, Sakura? I'm shocked! Maybe you have a soft spot for that boy, hmm? Or do you just not want Ino or Temari to get their hands on him? The poor clueless kid. No matter which one of you I send, he'll fall like a house of cards!"

Sakura was suddenly feeling very bad about the whole thing. She nodded and bowed, taking the scroll for her assignment with her. But it haunted her all day, and all night.

DREAM:

This was it. The end. It HAD to be.

"Sasuke-kun..." Sakura choked out. she had fought so hard. But in the end, he had been too much for her. In desperation, Sakura looked around. There was no one to rescue her. Sakura gulped and accepted her fate.

"Sakura...you didn't get over me, after all this time? What a shame. Just when I was starting to think you had gotten stronger. You're still weak...and annoying..." Sasuke drew his sword. It gleamed in the sun. He smirked as he swung it down. He felt it sink in- to the ground?

Sakura suddenly noticed she was moving- fast. VERY fast. She had curled up in a little ball. She was STILL curled up into a ball. Then how? How was she moving so fast?

"Are you alright?" came the Kaguya boy's concerned voice.

'Ekyt-kun? How did you- I mean...'

Ekyt kept running, leaping over trees.

"Kakashi-sensei and I have this thing about not letting our comrades die. You're still my sensei, I couldn't leave you for dead," Ekyt replied. He landed on the ground and set Sakura down.

"I've got one last thing to take care of, then I'll be back. Just be careful, sensei," Ekyt told Sakura, before rushing back in the direction he came. Sakura crawled around a tree to watch.

"You've gone too far, Sasuke! You've toyed with her emotions long enough!" Ekyt declared. It was Ekyt, but he was wearing a long, black coat. At one point, when he turned to point at Sasuke, Sakura

saw he was wearing a black dress shirt, black dress pants, and black dress shoes. He wasn't wearing a hitai-ate, or at least it wasn't visible. The shirt had a collar on it, and it made Ekyt look...different. More innocent...and somehow...sexy? That wasn't like him! But his coat added his signature darkness. Sasuke responded by swinging his sword at Ekyt. Ekyt did a front handspring and kicked Sasuke with his heel while moving forward, sending the sword clattering away. Ekyt landed, not a scratch on him. In fact, for him, he practically glowed. Sakura gasped, realizing his mask was gone. THAT was what was so different. Sakura had seen Ekyt dressed up before, for funerals and whatnot, he wore the all-black getup she was seeing now. But without his mask. Then something even stranger happened. Ekyt smiled.

END DREAM

Sakura woke up, practically leaping out of bed.

What does this mean? I've never dreamt about Ekyt-kun like that before. It's like...like a fantasy...even an evil fantasy...that dream seemed real. Ekyt is a nice guy, and he HAS saved my life a lot, but there's nothing more than that, right? Still...I should thank him. Those dreams, though...the last time they felt so real, there was REAL danger...How am I gonna figure this out?! Of course, Ekyt! He knows the brain and how it works, maybe there's a some rhyme and reason to these damn dreams! He figured it out before, when they happened the first time!

Sarutobi smiled as he gazed in his crystal ball. "Looks like you were right, Jiraiya. And Tsunade, you played your part to the hilt. If I hadn't known, and I had been in Sakura's shoes, I would have fallen for it, no question."

Tsunade blushed a little. "Well, Jiraiya tipped me off. If anyone can stop Ekyt from leaving, it's Sakura. I'll have to find a way to get him that rank, I hate denying him. Especially after all that happened in that last mission."

That soured the mood in the room. Especially when Ebisu came in.

"Lady Fifth, if I may have a few minutes..."

OKAY, TIME FOR A Q/A WITH THE AUTHOR!

Question: How did Ekyt come about?

Answer: Ekyt is modeled after me. Kind of a loser, with a good heart, trying to fit in. Except he's way cooler than me! (laughs)

Question: What's the deal with Ekyt's second chakra?

Answer: Ekyt, due to his past, feels emotions strongly. Coupling that with his stoicism, the excess

emotions take a life of their own. Ekyt learned to channel that energy, thought it's painful for him. It's a throwback to his own anxieties. A reminder that they still exist, no matter how far he's come.

Question: What's the deal with Ekyt's love life? Is he EVER gonna speak up?

Answer: That's a good one. Ekyt sees himself as a milk-drinking dork, who gave up on life to study, just to belong. Some like Sakura, in his eyes, is out of his league. But, at the same time, Ekyt won't settle for less. So, who knows if he'll ever speak up.

(Note: In a reader's poll, EkytXSakura was the most popular pairing, followed by a three-way tie between EkytXTemari, EkytXTenten, and EkytXHinata)

Question: Ekyt mentions his 'samurai days'. What happened there? Shouldn't he and the Ninja hate each other?

Answer: Ekyt has proven his loyalty to the Leaf Village several times over, so he's earned a measure of trust. He has seen what samurai have become (Thugs for Gato, for example), and does what he can to end the theory that 'All samurai are bad'.

Question: Why does Linda hate Ekyt so much?

Answer: Linda (Wow, we haven't heard from her in a while!) doesn't hate Ekyt. She worries for his well-being in a backwards way. She wants him crippled, so he won't get killed on some mission. It's a strange way of caring.

Question: Ekyt is seen studying all the time, and writing in his scroll, titled "ShoBu". What does the name of the scroll mean, and why does he study so much?

Answer: Ekyt wants to fit in. He wants to be among the best ninja, one that anyone could walk up to with a problem, and he could solve it. He has a deep love for Konoha, which is (in his words) 'the first place to accept him'. And the scrolls title, loosely translated, means Win Lose. 'Sho' means 'Win' in Japanese, while "Bu" means 'lose'. Together, with Sho as the first part of the word, means "To win, but to lose." With Ekyt's lifestyle, we can assume that refers to his training. If he stops training, his nemesis, Chakaro, will overtake him, and Ekyt will 'lose'.

Question: Ekyt seems to charm villains. How, and why?

Answer: Well, Ekyt has respect for capable opponents. Take Kabuto for example. He's skilled, and, at least around Ekyt, fights honorably. You'll notice that they add honorifics to each other's names. There's a respect there, which makes Ekyt unique. There isn't just 'love' and 'hate', there's also 'respect'. Ekyt can respect abilities, personalities, and honor. But, if push comes to shove, he'll act on

his instinct to defend above all else.

Question: Why hasn't Ekyt been made a chunin, or a jonin, yet? Others have tested without teams...

Answer: Ah, that is a question for another time. That will be answered in future issues, stay tuned!

Question: Does Ekyt ever relax?

Answer: (Thinks) Well, he doesn't read Makeout Paradise, but he DOES tend to, er, flip through manga with (ahem), mildly suggestive content, such as "Love Hina", a comedy/romance. (It's only borderline perverted (laugh) He can kind of identify with that Manga's main character. (laugh) The two losers!

Question: Ekyt's "Older Self"- what's up with him?

Answer: The "Older Ekyt" that Ekyt sees in his subconscious is his emotions. The juncture where his emotions meet his life energy and become chakra. He can consult this 'older Ekyt' for advice. Kind of like an "Inner-Sakura", except Ekyt will sit down and have talks with this entity, and occasionally call upon his powers, which are still mostly mysterious.

33 - Coming as a Friend

Ebisu looked around the room. It was never difficult for him to keep an air of dignity. He WAS a jonin. But today, he wished he had kept his words soft, he was going to be eating them- big time.

“Lady Fifth...there’s no easy way to say this...” Ebisu shifted his glasses, a nervous habit of his.

“Then just say it, Ebisu, it’s been a long day.” Tsunade looked out her window. It HAD been a long day, at it was barely noon yet.

“I misjudged Ekyt Kaguya. I think him worth of chunin status. I let my personal feelings get in the way...”

Even Master Sarutobi couldn’t completely hide the shock from his face. **Ebisu...saying he was wrong...I never thought I’d see the day!**

“What brought this revelation about, Ebisu?” Tsunade asked, definitely interested.

Ebisu again played with his glasses. “Well, after how I treated him, he kept me on his council, and gave me a responsibility that meant a great deal of trust. I admit, I misjudged him. So, if it pleases the council...I nominate him for the rank of chunin.”

Tsunade leaned back in her chair. “That’s great, Ebisu! He’ll be thrilled! Well, he would be...if he wasn’t leaving the village...and if some of the council didn’t hate him for being the ‘pretend Fifth Hokage’...” (sweatdrops all around)

Ekyt hit the bar one more time. He didn’t drink like this normally, but leaving was never easy. Being a loner had made it a LITTLE easier, but the thought that he would never have any relationships ate at him. Rucksack over one shoulder, his staff over the other, he drank a little more. The dim lightning gave him a strange mix of outline and silhouette to anyone looking. His face was shaded on one side, but lit brightly by a nearby candle. Not that anyone looked. Ekyt made sure the bartender hadn’t spiked his drink. But the bartender was a friend, and he didn’t blame Ekyt for what happened.

The Village seemed to be in a fifty/fifty spilt- “Ekyt did the right thing” vs “How Dare he?!”. Most of Ekyt’s friends, that knew him personally, understood his position, and they were supportive. The others, whom Ekyt hadn’t been close with, had been furious at the deception, and began to treat him as though he was Naruto.

Ekyt drank again, setting the cup down, deep in thought. **Well, that’s making leaving easier. It’s the ones that like me that make it difficult...I really thought I had finally found my place...** After that, it was time to get up and head for the gates.

“You understand what I’m asking, right Sakura?” Tsunade prompted. **She’s had time to think things over...let’s see if she’s got the guts to stand up to me. It’s another lesson, Sakura- you just don’t know it. Can you REFUSE an assignment you know is unethical?**

“Yes, I do...and I can’t take the assignment. And no other kunoichi should!” Sakura’s courage had leapt into her throat, and she kept going.

“That boy is a sweet, loyal, and kindhearted warrior! His heart, whatever hasn’t been torn away, would split in two at the deception of a kunoichi that he thought he could trust! It would kill him inside! He’s at such a horrible impasse he wants to leave. The picture of loyalty wants to leave! Doesn’t that tell you that something is wrong?”

Tsunade stared at Sakura, but said nothing just yet. Sakura wasn’t done. Voice strained with emotion, she continued.

“It’s not fair that he gets blamed for this. It was just another mission! He even took it, KNOWING everyone would turn against him!” He was loyal, and any village would be lucky to have him!”

Tsunade smiled. “You’re very bright, Sakura. Truthfully, I’m glad you told me off. I wanted to see what you believed, in terms of right and wrong. I think you know your stuff. Now, how about stopping him from making a huge mistake, huh? No seduction, no orders. Just a friendly suggestion...”

Sakura stopped Ekyt as he was about to step outside the gate. (Conveniently, cherry blossoms were all around her, and a light breeze tossed her hair)

A sad-looking female...surrounded by cherry blossoms...I thought that only happened in “Love Hina”? Ekyt wondered. **She’s really gotten beautiful. But she’s not like other girls. She’d give me the time of day. I just don’t know...she must be as lonely as I am...but somehow, telling her how I feel...it’s like dragging her down with me. I can’t do it...whatever pain I’m going to feel, I’ll keep inside me.**

Ekyt kept walking, but his conscience wouldn’t let him ignore her.

“Hey...you alright, Sakura-sensei?” he finally asked.

Sakura had been trying so hard to look deep in thought she actually WAS. Ekyt startled her.

“Sorry. I was just making sure you were okay...” Ekyt said gently.

“I guess so. I was just thinking about how you’re leaving. And, well...I has THOSE dreams again. At least, I think so.”

Ekyt immediately perked up. Leaving could wait, those dreams were dangerous.

“You’re not as shaken up as last time...I can’t sense your chakra disturbed...it might just have been a nightmare. But, if it’ll help, why don’t you tell me about them?” Ekyt’s voice sounded deeper- he hadn’t spoke for a day or so, so it was sounded like he was talking half-asleep. Somehow, that was comforting to Sakura, and she told him about her dream. When she got to the end, she was forcing back tears. Ekyt knew what an emotional toll these dreams took on her.

“Give it time, I guess. There’s not much else you can do. Green tea, dark chocolate, even a little sake to keep your heart pumping at a safe speed.”

“This time for sure, loser!”

“There’s no getting out of fighting me this time, Sasuke!”

Naruto and Sasuke were just about to have at it, when Jiraiya came racing by.

“You two! Come on! We’ve got to stop him from leaving the village!” Jiraiya didn’t explain any further, and he didn’t need to.

Ekyt landed, having evaded another attack. But against Naruto, Sasuke, and even one of the sannin, Jiraiya, he was going to tire quickly.

Sakura had seen enough. She grabbed Ekyt in a hug. She didn’t hold him tightly. He seemed too surprised to fight back. His eyes were wide with surprise. Sakura, after a moment’s hesitation, pulled his mask down on one side and kissed him on the cheek.

Time stopped. It was like a genjutsu, Ekyt thought. He had just been kissed...he felt his jaw drop slightly, his eyes widen, and his heart race. **Sakura...her lips are so...so soft and comforting...I’ve never felt anything like this before...it’s like...I can’t describe it. I never thought of kissing as anything but swapping saliva, but this...it’s different...it’s...gotta be a fluke. No girl could love me...**

Everyone froze. They had just been fighting Ekyt, and Sakura took the exact opposite approach. Naruto was shocked, Jiraiya was talking notes, and Sasuke...he smirked. **Finally got her attention, loser? Good for you, if you’re into that kind of stuff. Although, if I had gone 19 years without girls attention [as you’ll recall, Sasuke had lots of attention from kunoichi, although, unlike Ekyt, he wanted no part of it], I might just be tempted by that. And Sakura...she’s still smart, I can tell. Either she knew that would stop him dead, or she really means it. In her case, probably both.**

“Well, Tsunade DID say you were the only one who could stop him, Sakura...” Jiraiya said quietly. But, for the first time, as Sakura was hugging him, Ekyt’s head bowed.

“Why...” Ekyt muttered.

“Huh?” Sakura was surprised to hear Ekyt talk.

“Why was I cursed with emotions, and caring? I call myself a loner, but I’ll never truly be a loner. I can’t decide how to feel about that. My whole life...it’s been one mistake after another...”

“Ekyt-kun, that’s not true. You’re loyal, warmhearted, and a lot of other things I couldn’t begin to list.” Sakura snuggled in to Ekyt closer, knowing that he wouldn’t attack now.

“I should just leave...I have to love the village...and everyone in it...enough to let go. People who WANTED to hate me...they’ve got their reason...”

Sakura clutched even tighter. “Don’t go. All the times you’ve been the only thing between me and life or death...the times you’ve been there for everyone...their anger will fade. Just give them time, okay? If it doesn’t, then no one will stop you- you can leave.”

Ekyt still didn’t really let go. Sakura had started the embrace, she could be the one to break it, he reasoned.

“They’re entitled to hate me. All of them. Thanks, Sakura, but I should leave. I’ve got love...everyone enough...to let go. I’m only a burden now.”

Everyone was shocked at that. The hug, the kiss, and then Ekyt actually saying what was wrong. It was hard to tell who was more uncomfortable, Ekyt or Sakura. It was like they were having a blushing contest. But as Ekyt turned to walk away, he found himself surrounded by the four.

“This is for your own good! Rasengan!” –Jiraiya

“Rasengan!” –Naruto

“Chidori!” –Sasuke

“Painful Sky Leg!” –Sakura

Ekyt couldn’t block all those strikes, and he was surrounded. **Attack is my only option...but they’re my friends! I can just attack them! Damn it!**

“I’ll stay!” Ekyt shouted. All the attacks stopped. All around Ekyt, crackling energy had stopped inches away from his body.

“Good. Now, go home and get some rest. This has been hell for you,” Sakura said, surprised Ekyt gave up.

“I have nothing...except life. And maybe...a little hope? Sakura, thank you, I’m glad you helped me...as a friend, instead of as a kunoichi...”

Ekyt went home, and decided it was too small. For how much he trained, he needed space. But he couldn’t justify buying a house, and an apartment wasn’t worth it. So, Ekyt forgot the problem. Instead,

he climbed up on his roof, looking at the sky.

So...I said it. Not what I WANTED to tell Sakura, but something I've NEEDED to say. I live only to protect others, is that it? What other reason do I have? I guess...I wanted to leave, just to escape. Myself, my past...it's all blurred together. I should be happy, but I'm not. Then again, I'm not where I wanted to be. Not even close. Maybe it's time to talk with Ibikki again, or someone. Get more missions, once I've healed. Sasuke...Naruto...Jiraiya...Sakura...I'm outclassed by all of them. Against Sasuke, only my chakra and his blind hatred saved me. If I'm going to be here, I'm going to be stronger. Stronger...And I swear...I will NEVER let my honor be stomped on.

Never. I'll swear it upon my new name. Everyone else has these nice names. My vigilante routine isn't doing it. Maybe I'll starting answer to my other name...Ryouko Kaguya DOES have a menacing air to it...

That's when Ekyt...er, Ryouko, saw something, a few meters away from Naruto and Sasuke. He didn't like the look of things, so, grabbing his swords and rolling up his scroll, he leapt from rooftop to rooftop, silently pushing off. He dropped behind the person who was spying on Naruto and Sasuke. It was really the LAST person he wanted to see, especially with no one around.

Orochimaru smiled, concealed safely in the confines of a tree.

"Tomorrow, I make my move. I can kill the demon fox, and the Kaguya boy. And Sasuke...he'll come, one way or the other...If he seeks power, all I need to do is promise it. Oh, but what's this? Sasuke-kun DID say he was going to be fighting his brother in just under a month. I'll need to speak with Sasuke before that happens. He's no match for his brother yet..."

"You underestimate Sasuke," a voice said.

Orochimaru whipped around, seeing Ekyt.

"Ekyt?"

"Don't try your cheap genjutsu on me...Itachi."

34 - Roll Reversal

A wind howled across Konoha. The moonlight cast eerie shadows on everything, moving and still. The streets still had a red tint from the blood shed in the last big battle. But all was quiet.

Two figure's shadows were elongated by the moonlight. Ekyt, holding a kunai to the back of another, Itachi.

It began to rain. Neither Ekyt nor Itachi moved; the rain was the least of either of their concerns. Ekyt realized that the rain was a detriment more to him than Itachi. Itachi could escape into it, and Ekyt's dog would lose his scent. To make matters worse, a fog was rising. But something about it didn't seem right. It rose too fast, and actually seemed to weight him down. **Not genjutsu...ninjutsu. I can't do anything about it. As long as I've got the upper hand, I don't need to do anything about it.**

"I'm not here to fight you. I'm here to fight my brother."

Itachi had finally broken the silence. Besides the pitter-patter of the rain, that was the only sound you could hear. Until the wind picked up again, knocking tree branches around, going through spaces that caused howls. It was eerie by anyone's definition. No one else was outside. Vaguely, Ekyt thought about that. **If Itachi attacks, I'm alone. They might not even hear a yell for help over the wind...Itachi either picked the perfect moment, or created the perfect moment. I wouldn't put 'creation' past his skills, either...**

Ekyt's eyes narrowed, until they were merely hazel slits. "You mean you were going to attack him from behind. I don't care if you fight him or not, but I'm not letting you jump him from behind. And I know you won't dare use your Mangekyo Sharingan on me, not before a fight. I'm also aware you're causing this annoying mist. So, why don't you just stop it, and we'll go our separate ways."

Itachi turned around. Ekyt still held the kunai in place.

"You don't understand the Uchiha clan, you can't hope to understand this rivalry between brothers. You have none of your own..."

"That's true. But I also know when something bad is going to happen. Itachi...why do you REALLY want to fight Sasuke? You have nothing to prove. You'd only agree to this fight if there was personal gain in it for you. That's what I can't figure out. You're a difficult one, and, for some reason, it's always me that seems to fight you. It's interesting that one of us hasn't killed the others. Either I've gotten lucky...or you're keeping me alive."

Ekyt heard Itachi chuckle.

"I could kill you...but I'll admit, it would take effort on my part. And the reason you're alive, every time we fight...it's because you're an interesting adversary. You have studied the Sharingan, and you know exactly how to fight it. When I get you in the Tsukuyomi, you don't immediately give up and let me have my way. You make me work for it. You're an interesting opponent. You're reluctant to kill, although you've had the opportunities...Let me ask YOU this: Why do you keep leaving me alive? You could have killed me."

Ekyt, stunned by the admission, raised his head and looked Itachi in the eyes.

"I promised your brother I wouldn't kill you. I don't hate you for you, and neither does Sasuke. He hates what you've done, and what he hates more...is not knowing why. But even then, that's not what drives him. Do you know what it is that drives him, Itachi? What makes him hate you so much?" Ekyt made sure he sounded bored, to try to annoy Itachi.

Itachi didn't seem to care, although he did meet Ekyt's gaze.

"It's because he doesn't know WHY you did what you did. And it's because he looked up to you. You were the bar he always measured himself up to. The trouble was, he never DID measure up. And that...that's what's haunted him. And that's what's stopped me from killing him when we've fought. He has a dream, an ambition, and I'm not the one who should take it away."

Behind him, Ekyt heard a cloak flutter. Another Itachi? As he turned back to the front, crows flew apart, ending their clone of Itachi. Now Itachi had the upper hand. Ekyt cursed.

"There's really nothing stopping me from killing you...I have no reason to let you live, interesting adversary or not. You're in the way, you should die. I'm going to use you to send a message to Sasuke."

Ekyt turned around to face Itachi, both of them having their kunai towards each other's necks. Ekyt backed up, so the tip of his was at Itachi's throat.

"Really? You intend to make an example of me? After you compliment me? Not the usual business. And I really don't want to fight you...But at the same time, I don't want you thinking that I'm afraid of you."

Itachi hadn't activated his Sharingan. "I didn't think you feared me. And even if you did, it wouldn't stop you, would it? You don't fear any one person. My Tsukuyomi is designed to play off your fears. But somehow, you break it, or survive it, when it's hospitalized or killed greater ninja than you...That doesn't make sense."

Ekyt and Itachi circled, their kunai touching, evaluating each other. If one made a move, the other could read the move and counter it instantly.

"My emotions are strong, Itachi. Stronger than your Tsukuyomi, perhaps. That, or I have a purpose that you think I haven't fulfilled...like Sasuke, you're leaving me alive for something..."

Itachi and Ekyt stared at each other, silence again prevailing as they stopped circling. They stood about three feet apart, kunai at the ready. Itachi looked older, for some reason. Ekyt guessed it was the lines under his eyes. Of course, Ekyt couldn't really talk, the bags under his eyes speaking for themselves.

"Someday, you'll be a true threat. The Akatsuki have already marked you for death, capture, or addition. And each time, you've escaped all three. If what I've heard is true, your fate is tied with that of the Jinchuuriki's, Naruto. So it's not ME keeping you alive...it's fate." Itachi said all this as though it was the simplest thing in the world.

“Fate? Fate is a poor scapegoat, Itachi. There might, however, be something to what you say. But that doesn’t matter to me. Fate, destiny, whatever...if it exists, I am cursed. You, who had everything, gave it all up. While I strive to get something, anything. Recognition, friends...everything you gave up, I went. Everything I am...you are. A loner. A ninja. A free-thinker. In another day, we would have fought side by side, Itachi. Maybe some of you sees a little of me in you. Maybe, if you plunge that kunai in my heart, you’ll be killing a little of yourself. That- or you feel you have to prove yourself.”

The time for talk had ended. Itachi, still not using his Sharingan, ran forward faster than Ekyt could have fathomed. Ekyt’s kunai swept up to block Itachi’s, forcing the two into another deadlock. Ekyt seized Itachi’s ponytail and smashed his head into his up-thrust knee. Itachi used a genjutsu. Ekyt used the ‘release’ technique, then returned a genjutsu of his own. This genjutsu had a special purpose, however. The results surprised Ekyt, while confirming his suspicion.

This isn’t Itachi...he had to fight my genjutsu to get rid of it. This early in our fight, he should have just batted it away...This also explains why he hasn’t used his Sharingan...this is a host body for that jutsu of theirs...Itachi is controlling him...but he didn’t put a lot of chakra into it...which means that he’s low, or there’s more than one around...I’d better end this fight quick, and get moving...if Itachi is watching, or there’s more than one of these ‘fake Itachis’ around, then I’d better spread the word. Not least of all to Sasuke...

Sakura, Naruto, and Sasuke- reunited! The three had met at the village gates, ready for a mission. Kakashi showed up briefly to tell them they had the day off. Most of the Village was locked up, stores were taking inventory, it was just a day to rest. After the war, everyone could use a break. This was welcome news to Team Kakashi. What was less welcome was what they saw near one of the walls in the village, in the shade of a tree.

“That’s...Itachi!” Sasuke snarled suddenly.

“No. It’s a fake. But what it’s doing here...” Kakashi wondered. He had lifted his headband. **Where there’s a fake...the real one has to be involved somehow...But where, and why?**

“What are we standing around for? Shouldn’t we help?!” Naruto was itching to go. To his shock, Kakashi shook his head.

“No. We observe. Ekyt’s fine. He can handle this. This is a rare chance to see Itachi’s fighting style...” Kakashi lifted his headband to watch. Sasuke curbed his urge to attack, admitting that knowing how his brother fought in-depth would be a good advantage.

Ekyt needed to end this fight quick. This thing wasn’t a clone, and it didn’t have a ton of chakra, but it was still a threat. A living puppet, with Itachi controlling it, was not a good thing. It had to go. Ekyt wanted to conserve chakra, but this threat had to be removed first. So he decided to cut to the chase. He didn’t need to use the handsigns for this jutsu anymore.

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!”

This time, the fake Itachi staggered for a second, before using the release technique. But by that time, Ekyt had peppered the ‘puppet’ with throwing needles. The needles were dipped in poison. Nothing lethal, but standard-issue for ANBU to capture.

Itachi collapsed, the jutsu that had been controlling him wearing off. Slowly, ‘Itachi’ faded, revealing an Iwagakure ninja who was in considerable pain. Ekyt got down near him, to interrogate him.

Sakura suddenly saw them- five of them. Itachis. All of them were swooping in toward Ekyt. They had all been birds, hiding in the trees. In mid-flight, they all became Itachi, kunai at the ready. Not knowing what else to do, Sakura bolted in front of Ekyt. She took up a sturdy stance, and prepared herself for pain. A loud yell escaped her throat as the kunai were thrust into her body.

Just as he turned around, Ekyt saw Sakura, five kunai stuck in her. His eyes widened.

“Dear God...” Ekyt scrambled in front of her, absently using a “Dragon’s Encampment Wall” to keep the Itachi’s at bay for a few moments.. **I-I couldn’t do it...I couldn’t protect anyone! Damn it! Please, don’t die on! Sakura, if you die...I’ll never forgive myself! Just hold on, please!**

“This isn’t good...We’d better get her to the hospital...” Kakashi didn’t like the look of the stab wounds. NO stab wound was good, but five at once...When Sakura moaned in pain, Kakashi, Naruto, and even Sasuke turned to Ekyt.

“Go. THIS has just become personal...” Ekyt muttered dangerously. Just the sound of his voice sent chills down the spines of his comrades.

“They’re clones, all of them,” Kakashi said. **I’ve never seen him so angry...to stop him now would be a mistake...And if there’s more, they’re most likely targeting Sasuke. That means he’ll need help. And Sakura...I hope Ekyt got the ‘message within the message here-kill them, Ekyt. They’re not people. And they’re hurting others. What was it the samurai say? ‘It’s better to take the life of one who takes lives of others, than to let that one person live and claim 100 lives? I know you’ve read it, now use it, Ekyt!**

“I’m helping him!” Naruto declared.

“Naruto, we’re likely to be attacked by the real thing on the way. Let Ekyt handle these, there’ll be more.” Kakashi and Sasuke had already discussed it, agreeing that this was the way to go.

Inside of Ekyt, something snapped. He was, for the first time, going to soil his blade by taking the life of

another. Clones or not, they were flesh and blood. And Ekyt was going to kill them.

If Sakura dies...I'll never forgive myself. NEVER. Please, hold on, Sakura. I'd do anything...to make sure you were alright...

With that, Ekyt began dismantling the Itachi's. Each one died in a gruesome manner. The first Itachi was pinned to a tree through the stomach by Ekyt's samurai katana, then pierced through the eyes with kunai. His sword lodged in the tree for now, Ekyt threw five needles next, hitting an Itachi in the groin, stomach, jugular, spine, and heart. The third Itachi tried to make handsigns, but Ekyt cut him off-literally. Using his short ANBU sword, Ekyt diced his hands off. As Itachi staggered backward, Ekyt thrust the sword into both shoulders, and then stabbed upward, cutting Itachi through the stomach and out the other side. Ekyt's other sword was now lodged in the ground, so he pulled out his last remaining weapon: the iron war fan he had placed on his desk when he was the 'pretend Fifth Hokage'. Flicking it open, he sliced at Itachi in a plus-sign pattern, then followed up with a neck-height cut that severed the clone's head. The last Itachi was sliced in half quickly. Ekyt's anger hadn't faded yet. Before the last Itachi disappeared, like the others, Ekyt used his Dragon's Ember Jutsu to roast it. As if in a trance, Ekyt picked up all his weapons. He looked back at where he had just fought, seeing the carnage replayed in his head.

Even though they were only clones...I attacked as though I meant to kill...I never once stopped to feel regret. And yet...I fought honorably. I had no undue advantages, and I won cleanly. It's unnerving...I caused five deaths...even if they weren't real...it still feels as though I accomplished something. There's no basis for that feeling at all.

Ekyt looked up at the moon. It was in a sickle-shape, and it cast pale yellow light down onto him. **I should go see Sakura...Itachi, I swear you'll pay, if anything's happened to her. Somehow, I know I talked to the real Itachi tonight. He IS keeping me alive for a reason. Sasuke, I might have to break my promise to you...if Itachi comes at me, meaning to kill, I'll have to kill him to stop him. You won't understand it, but that's how it is, I guess. I hope it doesn't happen that way. I hope I don't have any reason to get revenge on Itachi...**

That horse's @\$\$.

Kakashi pushed through the doors of the hospital, Naruto and Sasuke holding Sakura on a makeshift stretcher.

"This is an emergency! Where the hell is everyone?!" Naruto demanded.

"It's midnight...they're asleep. There should be a nurse on duty. If not, we'll wake Lady Tsunade. At first glance, Sakura's cuts aren't deep, but they DID come close to her tenketsu. Her chakra might be slow, or weaker for a while, as the tenketsu heal themselves."

"Something doesn't seem right...but I can't tell what..." Sasuke was studying Sakura. **If it was a genjutsu, my Sharingan would see through it...This whole night has been weird, that must be it...**

35 - Sakura Shines

Ekyt stood near the window at Sakura's bedside. He desperately wanted to do something, but he didn't know what. Studying didn't seem appropriate, but neither did actually (shudder) touching her. Every time Ekyt had hugged Sakura, she had been the one to initiate the hugging. He'd never kissed her. He was convinced that he himself was the kiss of death. Everyone close to him wound up hating him, or being evil. It led Ekyt to wonder if he had CHOSEN to become a loner, or if it had been forced on him. But there wasn't much he could do either way.

Ekyt closed his eyes and bowed his head. He heard Sasuke come in, but didn't acknowledge him.

"Has she woken up yet?" Sasuke asked, after a minute of silence.

"No. It shouldn't be much longer, though," Ekyt replied, chancing a glance at the partially-healed Sakura. She was still sleeping peacefully, which was a good thing, he guessed.

Sakura stirred a little, and tried to sit up. She flopped back down, eyes closed, breathing heavily from the pain. Or so Ekyt thought. Inside Sakura's mind, however, something else was going on.

Subconscious:

Sakura wandered around, wondering where she was. And why, for that matter. The last thing she remembered was the knives hitting her. This place was foreign. It was where the Leaf Village was- but the Leaf Village was different. Sakura realized that was because she saw the Uchiha Clan's dojo, and it was in tact. No blood, no police tape, nothing. Just the dojo. And- a younger Sasuke! Sakura started toward him.

"Bye mom!" Sasuke called, running toward the academy. BOOM! Sasuke had hit someone. Cringing, this younger Sasuke smiled and apologized.

"I'm really sorry about that! I'm just in a hurry to get to the academy!" Sasuke said, getting to his feet and bowing his apology.

"Oh, okay! Right! Have a good day, Sasuke!" Sakura said, smiling back. Little Sasuke waved, then took off, weaving in and out of people on the crowded street.

*Sakura put her hand down, sort of freezing up. **This is weird...why did I just see a younger Sasuke? If HE'S here, that means...***

"Hey, watch it, lady! Future Hokage coming through!"

Sakura was nearly bowled over by- Naruto? It was, unmistakably, a younger Naruto. Even now, Sakura had to hold back from hitting him. Sakura watched as Naruto pantsed a random guy, knocked over a fruit stand, demolished a garbage can, and dove through the legs of a pursuing chunin- a younger Iruka!

“Wow...this is the weirdest thing...if I’ve seen Sasuke, Naruto, and Iruka, that means I’ll see...”

“Wow, you have pretty hair!”

“Yeah!”

Sakura heard two familiar voices. One was her own. The other, she knew, belonged to younger Ino.

“Oh, thank you!” Sakura said, smiling and blushing at the compliment, though she wasn’t sure why. **I just complimented myself? How desperate is THAT?!**

“You should totally do that with your hair, Sakura!” the little, blond Ino said teasingly.

“No way! You know Sasuke likes long hair!” little Sakura shot back, causing both girls to giggle.

Sakura watched the two scamper off. **I must be about 9 here...that makes Naruto 8 and a half, and Sasuke 9...this is when we were just starting in school...the ninja part, I mean. This is so weird...why am I seeing this? Or living it? Or whatever’s going on?**

The next thing Sakura knew, she was looking at the Uchiha dojo. As she was walking up to it, the Third Hokage greeted her amiably.

“Ah, good morning!” the Third said pleasantly, holding his pipe out to the side for the moment, surveying the village.

“Y-yes it is, Lord Hokage,” Sakura managed to say.

“It’s days like this that make you wonder how war could even exist. Everyone is coexisting, the village is growing. Even the tenth anniversary of the demon fox can’t dampen the spirits of the Village. They’ve got so much heart, to continue on after that. Even though it’s been almost ten years, that isn’t the sort of thing anyone forgets...” The Third took a puff on his pipe, still smiling, even though his words were chilling, in a way.

“Only one of us is really suffering, I guess...” Sakura said, thinking about Naruto.

But the Third Hokage was gone. He was replaced by a blood-stained Uchiha dojo, and a pile of corpses. Sakura gaped in shock.

This is when Itachi...could I have stopped it? No...no, I’m like a spectator. I can interact, but I can’t change anything. This is so hard to watch...

Sakura didn’t have to watch long. The next thing she saw was Ekyt. It was strange, though. He was older than the others, about twelve, thirteen. He was wearing a yellow belt and holding a wooden sword.

Sakura smiled at the sight.

This must be when Ekyt started that sword martial art he talks about...look at him, and that little wooden sword. (giggle) I wonder if he ever knew what he would wind up doing with swords later on?

But the next thing Sakura knew was an older Ekyt, sitting in his room, shaking. Tears streaming down his face.

“Why? Why am I so different? Why do I have to suffer? Why doesn’t anyone understand?! I’m just a burden! Damn it!”

Sakura felt a tear herself. This must be the anxiety...Ekyt doesn’t talk of it anymore...but I know how painful it must have been, going through that with no one understanding. I wonder how he fights it off in battle? And why is he alone?

Next, she saw Naruto alone, in his room. There was ramen in front of him, but he wasn’t eating it. He was crying.

“How come I’m different? What’s wrong with me? Everyone’s so mean to me? What did I ever do to them?”

Naruto got up, wiping away the tears. He stood on his chair, nearly upending the ramen in the cup in front of him.

“I’ll show them! I’ll show all of them! I’m going to be Hokage someday, and I’ll be better than any of them! I’ll be the greatest Ninja in the Village, and everyone will finally be nice to me! Believe it!” He declared to himself.

“Why? Why, big brother? Weren’t you strong enough?”

Now Sakura saw Sasuke. He was sitting by himself, on a tatami mat in a gym. There was a small opening next to him, leading into the ground.

“How could you, Itachi? And why? Why did you leave me alive?! I was such a coward! I hate you, big brother! I promise, I’ll kill you for what you did to the whole family! I’ll kill you!”

Sakura thought that was the end of the disturbing images. But she was in for a surprise. Now she was seeing all of them, only the same age as Sakura now. Except Ekyt, he was nineteen. So it was like the present.

Naruto was eating with delight at Ichiraku. But behind him, a red tail was growing. Soon, Naruto was the demon fox. He snarled and growled. As quickly as it had happened, it ended. Naruto was cringing in pain, his skin bubbling, burns all over his body.

Sasuke walked around aimlessly. His curse mark suddenly began to spread.

“AGH!”

Sasuke fell to his knees, clutching the mark on his neck. But, just like Naruto, the image changed quickly. Sasuke was still on the ground, wincing in pain. Before Sakura could reach him, the image faded.

Ekyt sat by himself, two scrolls in front of him. One was his own, the white scroll emblazoned with “ShoBu” on it, the other a scroll containing advanced jutsus. That was when Ekyt put a hand to his heart. In his hand was his blue chakra, on his unmasked face, there was the unmistakable look of irrational pain. It was the kind of pain that made you think of cutting your own hand off with a dull kunai knife, just to stop thinking about the pain in your mind.

This image ended quickly, too.

“I have to be stronger. I have no one but myself to count on...I wish it wasn’t like that...but that’s how it is. Now, study! You have to be stronger!”

Finally, Sakura was outside again. This time, no one was around but her, and a few birds, singing sweetly. She recognized the place as Lone Pine Hill.

Then there was- a crow? Sakura frowned. Somehow, a crow didn’t fit in with everything else. It was just kind of...there. It looked Sakura in the eyes, then made a loud ‘caw’ sound. Sakura shooed at it, but it wouldn’t leave. It was like it was...mocking her.

Before Sakura’s eyes, the crow grew larger and larger. It opened it’s beak wide, and bent down to swallow her whole.

End Subconscious

Sakura screamed, trying to ‘wake up’. She could SEE the outside world, but this...whatever kind of world it was, had her trapped.

Ekyt ran across the room.

“Genjutsu...Sakura, it’s genjutsu! Fight it! You can do it!” he urged.

Sakura was clearly trying, and failing, to do just that. She was half out of it, but her mind was being pushed to the brink. The genjutsu was too powerful to break on it’s own. In her mind, the crow was swallowing her, and she was hanging on for dear life, as it began to laugh, like a human.

In the real world, Ekyt saw no other choice. He had tried to break the hold with his normal chakra, but it was too weak. His Blue Chakra would do it, but pumping ‘hate’ into Sakura’s body wouldn’t help it, just the opposite. It would do MORE damage.

I’ve got to think happy...but I can’t! She’s so close to a mental collapse! I’ve got to try! What’s happened that’s happy? I’ve only used this chakra when I’ve felt hate! I need to feel happiness! Come on! Think! What’s made you happy? Of course! That kiss! That hug and kiss! Focus on that! Focus!

Ekyt forced his chakra to his heart. It was blue in color, but it didn't hurt. It felt...good. Ekyt knew he had done it. A distant part of him wondered how, but he dismissed it. Instead, he put the chakra in hand and put a hand on Sakura's forehead, putting his chakra into her, to break the genjutsu. Only after he did it did Ekyt realize it might have some kind of effect on Sakura.

Subconscious:

*Sakura felt a surge of warmth. Just as the crow was going to swallow her, Sakura grabbed it's beak and forced it's powerful halves apart. That's when she saw it was Itachi that was trying to swallow her. Sakura smiled and cocked her fist back.
WHAM!!!*

End Subconscious

Sakura say up in bed, her cuts mostly healed. She had never felt so...free. Happy. But the medic in her was worried. As if reading her mind, Ekyt spoke up.

"It's not drugs. It was a genjutsu you were in, a really powerful one, I had to use my emotional chakra to break it. The others are standing guard..." Ekyt looked away. Sakura cocked her head.

"Ekyt-kun...what's wrong?" Sakura got up, too happy to feel pain.

"It's my fault you got hurt...I wasn't strong enough..." Ekyt's voice was strained with emotion. "I'm sorry..." Ekyt couldn't meet Sakura's eyes. He looked at the floor instead, gloves hands clenched in anger and frustration at his own inability to protect.

"It's not your fault! Besides, now, I feel...incredible! Your chakra is so wonderful! It felt like my dreams came true, at least for a little while!" Sakura was leaning next to him, looking out the window. She saw that Ekyt's face was unchanged, and there was even a tear in his left eye.

Just like...in that genjutsu...he's acting just like that! I wonder if it was all true. Everything I'd seen...it's happened already...

"Come on, you're only human. Besides, how many times have YOU taken the knives for ME?" Sakura joked, fixing her hair and smoothing her skirt.

"I know...But...ask the others. I would have done anything. I wish it HAD been me."

Ekyt stood away from the window; he still couldn't face Sakura. Only now did Sakura see Ekyt's wounds. They had been bandaged quickly and poorly. It was evident that Ekyt had come straight here after he killed the Itachi clones.

"I live for very few people, Sakura. I would die for anyone, if they had a chance at life. But the people I really care for...there are so few...I would do anything for the people I care about. Even if it meant death. I

would protect them, with everything I had. I'm a loner...so the few people I have mean everything to me. In Konoha, I've found more people to care for. I feel like I've let you down if I let you get hurt in a senseless mistake. I was so cocky, facing Itachi. I had him beaten, I saw through his jutsu. I was so stupid to think that. And...I...I'm..."

Just say it! Tell her you love her! Say it, now! What can she do? Just say it! SAY IT!

"Ekyl-kun...I was happy to do it for you."

(Grab)

Sakura was holding Ekyl's hand. Both their hands were ungloved for the moment. This was another first for Ekyl. **Her hand...I've seen it destroy boulders, crush bones...but now, it's so tender, and comforting...I've got to stop this. I'm in love with her. But I can't tell her...she's got Sasuke, and a million other options. What would she want with someone like me? I'm not playing the same game, hell, I'm not even in the same league. And who am I kidding? She could never care for a guy like me. I'm worthless...I couldn't even protect her! What kind of warrior am I?! I'm weak!**

Sakura giggled. Playfully, she tapped Ekyl's head with one finger.

"I know what's going on in there..." she said slyly. Immediately, Ekyl's jaw fell to somewhere between his chest and knees. **She knows?**

"You're beating yourself up in that lil' head of yours. Well, stop it! (giggle) I'm a kunoichi, I'm going to get hurt. It's how you reacted that meant so much to me. You care, and I know that. So stop beating yourself up! I don't know many guys that would sit at a girl's bedside like that. Even the times in the past, when you watched me while those dreams were happening...you never asked anything in return. I won't pretend to know the rest of your thoughts, but I know that you're kicking your own @\$ in your head."

Sakura pushed herself up onto the windowsill. Wagging her finger, like Ekyl was some bad puppy, she winked and finished her theory on his mind:

"You're a protective type. You need people to protect. Well, I'm not exactly the helpless girl type, but I AM still a girl. And every girl...wants to be cared about. So, I guess I'm saying..."

Sakura leapt down and pushed Ekyl's forehead protector up.

"Thanks for caring." As soon as the words left Sakura's mouth, she kissed Ekyl's forehead, the one part of him that had remained unscathed.

For his part, Ekyl was in a state of disbelief. But, sadly, he thought that he knew what was going on. **She's just being friendly...I can't say I've ever seen her kiss anyone, except Lee on the cheek once to shut him up...but still...(Ekyl looks over at her as she sighs at her torn clothes)I need to be**

stronger. I need to protect her. And Naruto. And Sasuke. And anyone else I can. Naruto is going to be Hokage, Sasuke is incredibly strong already, and getting better every day, Sakura is going to surpass Tsunade...that leaves me. What can I do? For once, I'm going to answer positively: I can do a whole hell of a lot. It's time to go to work.

"So, what happened to me, anyway?" Sakura wanted to know. "It was like a genjutsu, but with no one to cast it..."

"Those kunai were dipped in a poison that somehow created a genjutsu. That, or something like a post-hypnotic suggestion thing," Ekyt replied, sounding unsure. "I've never really seen anything like it. It shouldn't come back on its own, that much I've figured out. It seems like Itachi used Tsukuyomi, but played it you specifically. It didn't attack you physically, and I'm not sure what you saw, but if I had to guess, I'd say Itachi tried to play on your mind, on your memories, somehow." Ekyt had given this a great deal of thought.

"Oh. Well, as long as you killed it," Sakura said pleasantly.

Ekyt tried to smile. "It was interesting. I used every weapon in my arsenal to kill the Itachi's. You should have seen the look on the clone's face when I used my iron fan on it. I forgot I even had the thing..."

Sakura giggled. The thought of tough ol' Ekyt using a fan to kick a clone's @\$@ WAS funny. That's when Sakura saw two bunches of flowers, both equally beautiful.

"Oh, who left those?" Sakura asked.

"Um, well, that one (right one) is from me. It was the least I could do, considering this is my fault...and the other one is from Sasuke."

Suddenly, Sakura felt a lot better. Confused, but better.

"Hey, can we come in yet or what?! Don't hog her!" Naruto pushed Ekyt aside as he barreled into the room.

"How are you feeling Sakura-chan?"

And he and Sasuke, were off and running with questions. Ekyt slunk out the door. He had hoped Sakura wouldn't notice the flowers until he had left. Too late for that. Just one more thing to take care of. Kakashi stopped Ekyt as he was leaving.

"I hope you don't mind the fact that I let you face Itachi alone. I didn't meant to desert you- I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't sure you couldn't handle it," Kakashi told Ekyt.

"I appreciate that, sensei. It means a lot that you think that much of my skills. If it was someone else, I might question them, but you know what you're doing." Ekyt said with a wave over his shoulder.

Kakashi smiled. **He's a good kid...I hope his heat with the town goes away. He's really a staple of our community, in a way similar to Iruka. Not to mention this is ruining part of his dreams- 'to be the one anyone can come to with problems'. They won't come if they don't trust him...**

"Of course, sure. No one's bought that land. It would be good to see it used for something," Lady Tsunade told Ekyt.

"Good to hear. I'll hire builders and get to work. I plan on a 3-story place, plus a basement. I just need approval..."

Tsunade waved her hand. "It's your land, kid. Go for it. Just don't dodge out of missions for too long, okay? I've got some C and B ranks waiting for you. Apparently, you impressed Ebisu, and he voted for you to be made a chunin. Now, you just have to convince the other members of the council, the ones that hate your guts now --'."

36 - The Unthinkable Happens

It took three months for Ekyt's new home to be built. In that time, Team Kakashi was dispatched to watch the Akatsuki. Except for Sakura, that is. (Sai and Yamato were holding down the fort until she was back in action) She was in the care of Team Guy, due to mental duress from that genjutsu. She hated missing the action, but when even Ekyt and Ibiki Morino told her it was necessary, there was nothing she could do, except listen to them and take it easy.

Sakura had been told to soak in the hot springs once a day. Every day, Tenten, or Temari had to accompany her, to make sure nothing happened while to her while she was bathing. It was mostly Tenten drawing this duty. One day, their talk turned from their teams to boys in general.

"They're clueless!" Tenten and Sakura said at the same time, breaking out in a fit of giggles.

"Yeah, it's true. Neji STILL hasn't gotten the guts up to tell me he likes me to my face," Tenten said, wondering if she would have to spell it out for him. **Probably. He's too 'tough' to talk to girls- WHY is that so common? Are we THAT scary? ^^'**

"No guy has told me to my face he likes me. Or behind my back...at least not to my knowledge..." Sakura replied, trying not to sound glum. To Tenten's trained ears, Sakura might as well have shouted her depression.

"Hey, cheer up. I, er, know that at least ONE boy has said that he likes you behind your back. I can't say who, or even who he told, but apparently, you would be QUITE the catch," Tenten said teasingly.

"Aw, c'mon Tenten, give me a hint!" Sakura moaned. **This is serious! Who likes me?!**

"Welllll...Okay, I guess. He's never dated before," Tenten said with another wink. She knew darn well that her clue was no help.

"Aw c'mon, that could be Naruto, or Ekyt...or Sasuke!" Sakura replied, sinking into the water. But the thought had cheered her up.

"Speak of the devil, have you seen what Ekyt is making himself?" Tenten asked, stretching out a leg to wash it.

"Huh? No, I haven't. What's he up to?" Sakura asked, washing her chest, hidden by the water. She had grown, but still...**I'd imagine every girl is uncomfortable with the size of...those...**

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: THIS IS NOT MEANT TO BE PERVERTED. I'M NOT FEMALE, SO I HAVE NO CLUE HOW THEY THINK. LOL, PROB WHY I'M SINGLE! ANYWAY, THIS WAS JUST MEANT TO BE ONE OF THOSE MILDY-PERVERTED 'NARUTO' MOMENTS. IF ANYONE FINDS IT OFFENSIVE, I WILL REMOVE IT IMMEDIATELY. PLEASE ACCEPT MY APOLOGIES IN ADVANCE IF IT IS FOUND OFFENSIVE. -NG_

“It’s this monstrous...something! Lee was telling me about it. It’s on the far side of the village, hiding by this outcrop of mountain, near the Hokage Faces. Pretty strange that he would build this three-story bachelor pad,” Tenten said with a laugh.

“It must be some bachelor pad!” Sakura replied, kind of surprised. “I wonder what he’ll do with all that space?”

Tenten saw a chance to rib her friend, and couldn’t resist.

“Maybe he wants to have a family...and some privacy while that family is being created...hmmm, Sakura? You gonna be the mommy? Gonna play ‘R-rated ‘house’”

“Shut up!” Sakura said, finally laughing.

“Say what you want, Sakura...maybe some other girl will wind up with him. Temari...or Ino, even.” Tenten smirked, hoping to get a rise out of Sakura.

Sakura ignored that. “What about you, huh Tenten? I’ve heard you call him cute. And you say you study with him. Are you SURE that’s *all* that’s happening, hmmm?”

“Okay, okay, you win!” Tenten said, blushing furiously. “We really DO study, that’s it. I’m not saying he’s a bad guy, though. But, either way, what say we check out this monstrosity of his, see what it looks like? It’s been nearly 3 months, Lee told me it’s almost done.”

As the kunoichi were on their way, there were two things happening: Team Kakashi was coming back. Number two; Ekyt and Lee were fighting. This time, there was a bet in place.

“It is agreed, then. If YOU win, I will get Gai-sensei to change his opinion of you (Gai decided to hate Ekyt after the whole “Hokage” mess). Now, if I win...” Lee stopped, and smirked.

“Yes?” Ekyt asked, kind of worried.

“You tell Sakura-chan how you feel,” Lee replied. Before Ekyt could say “no chance in hell”, Lee grabbed his hand and shook it.

“It is settled! Taijutsu vs. Taijutsu! Let us begin!” Lee declared, smirking. **Even if I lose, I do not lose anything of value. If I win, then I help Ekyt-kun admit his feelings. This will be interesting! I cannot lose! I have never lost in a taijutsu vs taijutsu contest against Ekyt-kun, and I will not lose this time!**

“Lee...damn, I guess you got me,” Ekyt muttered. **Telling her can’t be THAT bad, can it?** “Oops, hold off, Lee, we’ve got company.” Ekyt pointed to the two approaching kunoichi.

“Hey, guys, what are you up to?” Tenten asked, smirking at Sakura. Sakura smirked right back.

“And- WHOA! What IS this place?” Sakura was in awe- the place was huge!

“Oh, my, (cough) home...dojo...gym...whatever you want to call it,” Ekyt told them.

“What are you gonna do with all that space?” Sakura asked.

“No idea. But I wanted to build it, for some reason. Go figure,” Ekyt said with a shrug.

Next, here came Team Kakashi. For some reason, Sasuke seemed...different. No scars or anything, and Ekyt didn't sense any chakra change. But he walked more...confidently. It was unnerving. But Ekyt brushed it off as not being used to having Sasuke on their side again. So he turned his attention to his fight with Lee.

“Why not give them the tour after our fight? I have been waiting for this!” Lee was already stretching and jumping around.

SO it was on.

Lee was faster than Ekyt, but Ekyt knew more techniques. Both of them zipped around the open area in front of Ekyt's home. Kakashi and Sasuke watched with their Sharingan, while the girls occasionally cheered.

“Nice shot!” Ekyt called when Lee cracked him in the mouth. He righted himself as he sailed through the air, kicking off a tree, ducking a punch from Lee, then hitting Lee hard with a shot to the gut. Ekyt tried for an elbow, but thwarted with a crescent kick. Ekyt returned a crescent kick, which he then turned into a roundhouse, stunning Lee. But Lee was waiting for this opening. As Ekyt used his heel to kick at Lee's stomach (a shot he landed), Lee returned the favor with a Konoha whirlwind. He trapped Ekyt in the lotus.

This was too easy...what got to Ekyt? He is usually more formidable... Just as he spiked Ekyt head-first into the ground, he saw what was so troubling.

“Good fight?” Sasuke muttered to Sakura.

“Yeah...” Sakura said back. She had hardly spoken to Sasuke since he came back. She wasn't angry with him, there just wasn't anything to say.

“Hm,” Sasuke said in reply. Then, he turned and did the unthinkable.

-Kiss-

Sasuke kissed the shocked Sakura, while Tenten's mouth dropped open in surprise.

-Kiss-

Ekyt saw this, and immediately hid his emotion. **I guess this means that the bet is off...It figures. I finally get the guts to tell her...Maybe it was just infatuation, and not love. Either way...**

Lee helped Ekyt up, who actually required smelling salts.

"Damn...that hurt..." Ekyt said, speech slightly slurred from his jaw hurting.

"The bet is off..." Lee said quietly.

"I thought so. Sorry Lee. I'm just not in the mood to give you a match..." Ekyt bowed quickly. He seemed to do an about-face mood-wise.

"So, the tour, if anyone's interested..."

The house was incredible. The rooftop garden, the third floor bedrooms, the second floor gym, and the first floor parlor/kitchen/dining room. All of it crafted in a traditional Japanese style.

"...and that's the tour. Did I miss anything?" Ekyt asked, looking around as if to confirm the suspicion himself.

"Yeah. How the hell did you afford this?" Naruto asked. He seemed to be perennially broke, so how did Ekyt manage it?

"Oh, this? I've just saved everything I've earned. It's easy when your only vice is studying," Ekyt said with a grin.

"What about the basement?" Sakura asked, still reeling from the kiss.

"That's not ready yet," Ekyt replied, almost too quickly. "It's a disaster down there. Kind of dangerous, loose boards and nails."

After everyone left and Ekyt had waved goodbye, he locked the door, and walked to the kitchen. Opening a cupboard, he downed a quick cup of sake, looking out the window.

Well, she's happy...I would have only dragged her down with me, anyway... Ekyt knew that, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't dismiss this as nothing. Whenever he thought of Sasuke kissing Sakura, Ekyt's blood boiled. Without thinking, Ekyt squeezed a glass in his hand. It shattered all over the place, and cut up his hand pretty good. He decided it was time to go to the basement.

The basement was no great secret, but Ekyt wanted to keep it to himself. He made his way downstairs. At the bottom of the stairs, Ekyt removed his shoes, then used a False Surroundings Genjutsu on the stairs. Once he was satisfied, he began to walk barefoot on the tatami mats.

The room was big, and empty, save for countless candle holders on the wall. In the center of the room, there were two silver candle holders, with two short candles in them. Ekyt lit them with a fire jutsu. Satisfied, Ekyt pulled off his vest, shirt, and pants, wearing only his tactical shorts. He had to organize his thoughts- now. He considered calling on his subconscious self, but decided this had to be his, and only his, decision, and only his thoughts. For once, advice was out of the question, though he was sure someone could be of help.

Okay...Sakura and Sasuke are together...just as you're about to admit that you...may have been in love with Sakura. So, that's out of the question. You're a warrior. You've seen what love does to warriors...it either drives them, or ruins them. You've got drive, you don't need more. You'll be fine. You've had worse than this. But the last time something like this happened, you had the village behind you. When Linda...no no no! Stop thinking of that! You had support last time. You'd have support this time...but how can you ask for support, when your biggest supporter is the object of your affection? It can't happen. That means Sakura is out, and so is Naruto and Sasuke. Kakashi, sure, but he's too busy. For once I truly...am alone. With Lee comes Linda. With Temari comes Shikamaru (and that little crush on Temari- she's with Shikamaru, everyone knows it but them). Then it's settled- I live alone, I fight alone. And I'll train alone. Lee has other sparring partners. After the match I gave him today, I'm too ashamed to fight him again. I can't believe I let myself get distracted by a friend having a dream come true! What kind of selfish bastard does that? And why...did I suddenly need people. When I was a vigilante, I never needed anyone but myself...It's time to be that person again. I've gotten lazy, and dependant on people. It won't happen again...

Ekyt nodded to himself, once firmly. NOW he needed to get dressed again. It was time to take a mission to get away, to clear his head. He couldn't sulk in his dojo forever.

Sakura brushed her hair until it was perfect. Her clothes were laid out. Her first date, and it was with Sasuke! What had gotten into him?! Not that Sakura CARED, she was officially the girlfriend of Sasuke Uchiha!

"Sasuke kissed me! I've waited SO long for this!" she cheered to herself. She heard a 'tok' sound on her roof.

“Huh?” Sakura got up to look out the window. She saw the fading, blurred form of Ekyt.

“That kid, always training! He needs a girlfriend!” Sakura said with a giggle.

37 - How Could He Lose?

As he ran, faster and faster, Ekyt wondered if he could be legendary someday. He already knew that he couldn't be. Or, rather, he wouldn't be. He already knew. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura were going to be legendary. Or so that's was how he interpreted Master Sarutobi's words. It made sense. Naruto had trained with Jiraiya, Sasuke with Orochimaru, and Sakura with Tsunade. Ekyt had trained with just about everyone, but not anyone legendary. It didn't seem fair. He worked harder than the others, but he was doomed to be less talented? For some reason, this made Ekyt run faster. On one side of him, Lee jumped up, keeping pace. On the other side, Naruto was running at top speed.

"I am sorry..." Lee called over.

"Don't be!" Ekyt shot back, offering a thumbs-up.

"Don't try to BS us, we KNOW you had your eyes on Sakura!" Naruto yelled.

"Oh well, first come, first serve!" Ekyt REALLY didn't want company right now. He let his arms go behind him and ducked lower, running even faster.

"Are you up for a match?" Both Naruto and Lee asked, keeping pace.

"Nah. Not for a while, guys. I'm going on a mission right now. You two should fight, that would be awesome!" Ekyt joked. That was when Ekyt sensed it. He looked up- ten clones of Naruto.

"What the hell?!" Ekyt shouted. **They're attacking?**

"You are making a mistake, and we are going to stop you! We are your friends!" Lee declared, shifting into attack mode. All this while running across rooftops. You can tell this was a safety-conscious group.

"Damnit, lay off!" Ekyt snarled. He made hand signs, ending with 'dragon', 'tiger'

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ekyt turned around and ran backward, shooting the flames up at the Naruto clones. Lee took the opportunity to attack. Ekyt stopped dead, while Lee sailed ahead of him. Ekyt kicked him in the stomach, taking him by surprise. From behind, Ekyt heard Naruto. Two of him.

"RASENGAN!"

Ekyt leapt straight up in the air, above the Rasengan. The Naruto clone leapt up after him. From behind, the real Naruto recovered and attacked.

"Dragon's Circle Jutsu!" Ekyt said aloud. His right hand and his left leg glowed with fire and chakra. Ekyt's right hand hit the Naruto clone, while his left leg caught the real Naruto in the stomach. As soon as he finished the attack, Ekyt hit the ground running. Lee quickly caught up. A hard kick from him knocked Ekyt off a rooftop!

“Oh no! I did not mean to-” Lee stopped himself in mid-sentence. He had knocked a clone off the roof. The REAL Ekyt had used a body flicker jutsu, and was in Tsunade’s office.

“How did he do that?” Naruto demanded, kicking the ground in frustration.

“He had trained endlessly...perhaps that is why...I will train even harder!” Lee started to do pushups, while Naruto grew increasingly more angry.

“Worry about your goals later, Bushy Brow! That’s not why we’re here! You know what happens to him when something major shakes him up!” Naruto shot back.

“Naruto, he is taking missions. Normally, he clams up and shuns the world. I think that he is making the right move.”

“I’ll take it...this one has some sentimental value, anyway.” Ekyt re-read the scroll, making sure everything was in order.

“You’re going to Ootogakure...with a smile on your face...I never thought I’d see the day you’d go back to Orochimaru...” Tsunade shook her head. “Well, you can handle it, so go for it. But if Orochimaru attacks, GET OUT. I don’t care how much you’ve improved. Your mission is to make sure he’s not plotting an attack. It ends there, it DOES NOT include stopping him yourself.”

Ekyt nodded. **No need to tell her that’s exactly WHY I’m going. I’ve got something to prove to myself. Besides, it’s a chance to see my cousin, Kimimaro, again. Maybe he’s changed. Can’t wait to tell him I can do the ‘bone thing’. I don’t even know HOW I did it, the one time I did...I remember Master Sarutobi talking about me having two kekkaigenkai’s, or something like that. One lies dormant in me, until I need it. Since the emotional chakra comes first, I’d imagine that’s the one that’s active. But that’s another firecracker I’ll light when I come to it. I’ve got to focus.**

“Listen...just be careful, alright? You’re one of my best, so just don’t get yourself killed on me,” Tsunade playfully admonished Ekyt. Things had been better between them, since he had eaten the heat for the whole ‘fake Fifth Hokage’ thing.

“Alright. Just out of curiosity, if I were to be made a chunin in Ootogakure, would it count here?” Ekyt shot a glance at Tsunade.

“Funny man,” Tsunade shot back. “Yes, it would count. I would have to give you the vest. But I don’t think you’ll take the promotion.”

“You’re right...” Ekyt had to admit. His match with Lee, and his fight with the two of them on the way here suddenly hit him. He couldn’t wait to leave. As he went to leave, Tsunade put her arm out. Without

warning, she flung two kunai at the door.

“HEY!” Naruto shouted. “WHAT’S THE BIG IDEA, GRANNY?!”

“Oh, it’s just you. I mistook you for a threat,” Tsunade said dismissively. Naruto got an unmistakable look of anger on his face.

“Yeah...HEY!” Naruto was trying to get to Tsunade, but was held back by Lee.

“We are here to issue a challenge to Ekyt. If he leaves the village, he will not come back. Not after Sakura. So I am going to offer him a bet.” Lee let go of the slightly-calmer Naruto.

“Really? Well, go ahead. Sorry Ekyt, no missions for you until after this bet. He’s got my interest!” Tsunade declared, reaching for a suitcase of money.

“What’s the bet?” Ekyt asked, without emotion.

“You will fight...Naruto! If you win, you are free to go! If you lose, you do not leave the village!” As before, Lee grabbed Ekyt’s hand and shook it before he could say no.

“Damn it! I don’t want to! I want to take my missions, and get the hell out of here! And- oh perfect, just what my day was missing!” Ekyt declared. Linda walked in.

“You’re just jealous because you can’t have me!” Linda said, sticking her tongue out. “And now, you can’t have Sakura!”

“Get bent,” Ekyt said flatly.

“YOU couldn’t if you tried!” Linda shot back.

“I’m all in on Ekyt,” Tsunade told Lee, dumping her money on the table.

“Me, too!” Lee added his money to the pile.

“HEY! WHAT ABOUT ME?! I TRAINED WITH THE PERVY SAGE, AND I OUTRANK HIM!” Naruto shouted, eyes white, pointing at Ekyt.

Ekyt, who had been silent until this point, looked up.

“I’ll fight you. And then I’m leaving. Forever? I don’t know. Maybe I’ll take an extended mission in Otogakure, or Sunagakure. But if fighting you is what it’ll take to get me out of here...I’ll do it.”

Sasuke and Sakura were walking by when they saw Naruto and Ekyt squared off in the stadium where the finals of the chunin exams were held.

“Wanna check it out?” Sasuke asked.

“Yeah! Ekyt’s SO gonna win, though!” Sakura joked.

“Don’t count either one out just yet...” Sasuke admonished. **If old man Third was right, then this might be a legendary battle. He did say there would be three legends, with Ekyt being a gray area. Either way, it’s a chance to see my two biggest competitors fight.**

“You ready, Pervy Samurai?” Naruto taunted. That always got Ekyt in the mood to fight.

“Go for it,” Ekyt replied tonelessly.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?!” Naruto shouted as he ran toward Ekyt.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Naruto called as forty more of him appeared.

“HAH! Try and get me now!” the Narutos shouted. They were running straight toward Ekyt. Ekyt made hand signs without dodging. He was fighting in a stationary position, showing just how much he cared about this fight. He didn’t.

“Dragon’s Encampment Wall.” Ekyt’s handsigns had produced a wall of fire, which popped up and singed the first wave of Narutos.

“What’s wrong with you?! You’re always up for a fight!” Naruto shouted.

“Easy for you to say. You’re a hero. I’m lucky to be welcomed here. You’ll have your dream someday! And your destined for more! But me...I’ll die a footnote in history! The most I can hope for is a spot on the memorial obelisk, with my name etched near the fallen Shinobi!”

“What the hell are you talking about?!” Naruto asked loudly. “You’ve done tons of stuff! Why do you think you’ll die nameless?!”

The clones kept attacking, and Ekyt was finally forced to use a weapon. He didn’t want to use anything that would kill, in case it was the real Naruto he hit. So he was forced to use his iron war fan again. Unlike Temari’s, it was small, and Ekyt kept it closed. It was just a taijutsu weapon. If Ekyt opened it, he used it to block, or he used it to cut at close range. He couldn’t use his chakra too much yet, he needed all he could save for when Naruto broke out HIS jutsus. So, he focused on taijutsu, knocking the clones away. Finally, only two Narutos remained. Ekyt suddenly put on a burst of speed and sent Naruto sailing with a smart crack to the face. Naruto’s headband flew off. The other Naruto disappeared, finally leaving only one.

“He must have put chakra into that strike...he knows Naruto’s not giving it his best yet, and he WANTS to piss him off...” Tsunade muttered. Soon, she was joined by Master Jiraiya.

“I told him if he tried to leave, I’d stop him- by force. Whether he wins or not, he’s not leaving...” Jiraiya intoned.

“You, too? I was going to stop him, too...well, this will be interesting, then.” That was all Tsunade said. She cringed when she heard Sakura and Sasuke land. **Oh shoot. No way Ekyt can fight with a distraction like that!**

“Oh no...If Ekyt-kun sees her...” Lee murmured nervously.

Ekyt looked up, and saw Sakura. He froze for a second, but then his eyes went back to being half-lidded, and he focused on the fight. Naruto had retrieved his headband, but now he was out for blood.

“That’s it! SUMMONING JUTSU!”

Ekyt gulped. **I didn’t think he’d...How the hell do I counter Gamabunta? I can’t risk Holly...That means Umisu and Shuurai...it’ll take my up some good chakra, but...**

“Striking Serpent: Summoning Jutsu!” Ekyt made the signs and smashed his hand into the ground the same time as Naruto. The explosion were tremendous. Naruto was sitting on top of Gamabunta’s head, while Ekyt was standing next to Shuurai, his snake. The height difference was incredible. Shuurai was twelve feet tall, but Gamabunta was as big as a mountain! This was going to take strategy.

This must have registered on Ekyt’s face, because Shuurai spoke up in his polite hiss.

“Master, I CAN expand. It’s easier to travel like this, but actually...” Shuurai grew, almost to eye level with Gamabunta. Shuurai reached down and grabbed Ekyt, tossing him up onto his head with his fangs. Ekyt marveled at the view.

“You never cease to amaze me, Shuurai! Thank you!”

“What’s this? Shuurai? You’ve grown!” Gamabunta rumbled.

“Yes, it happens, Gamabunta. I hope you are well,” Shuurai replied.

“Just fine, my friend. It seems our summoners are fighting...well, guess we’ve got to fulfill our contracts! YAHHH!” Gamabunta leapt forward, forcing Shuurai to slither away at top speed. Ekyt had never fought like this before, so he was at a disadvantage.

“Shuurai, what kind of attacks do you have? Damn, I never studied that! I’ve got it- WHOA!”

Naruto had used a Shadow Clone Jutsu, and three of them had tagged Ekyt in the face, knocking him off of Shuurai. He toppled end over end.

Shuurai leapt up and burrowed into the ground. Just as Ekyt was going to hit the ground, Shuurai caught him- and swallowed him! Then, he reared back and spit Ekyt out, straight at Naruto! (Think of Orochimaru’s part in the 3rd Shippuuden opening, that’s what inspired this)

Ekyt gave Naruto a smart crack, but he disappeared. Another grinning Naruto was behind him. “Gotcha!”

“A clone? Damn!” Gamabunta bucked Ekyt off, but this time Ekyt was ready. He made handsigns as he plummeted down.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation! Dragon’s Path!” A clone of Ekyt popped out of thin air and used the Dragon’s Ember Jutsu. Ekyt landed on the trail of fire and slid down it, back towards Naruto. As he was sliding, something happened to him. He remembered a picture he had seen in Sakura’s room, the time he had to break in to save her. It was a picture of Kakashi, Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura.

A team, huh? Even the Legendary Three had a team...I’ve only got myself. Sure, training here and there with others...but can I truly be a warrior without a team? ...

“RASENGAN!” Naruto shouted. Just as Ekyt reached Gamabunta, Naruto attacked. Ekyt leapt up, shaken out of his trance. Just as he landed, he saw the second Naruto holding the sphere of chakra. He had been hidden behind the first one! Most times, Ekyt could have done something here, but the image of that picture flashed through his head again, breaking his handsigns AND his concentration.

Oh...damn...

Ekyt was hit full in the stomach. He was blasted back to Shuurai. Shuurai only had time to catch him before the summoning jutsu ended. Ekyt was unconscious, and the fight was over.

“I don’t know if that was good or bad...” Jiraiya mused after the match.

“Huh? He’s staying in the village, how can it be bad?” Tsunade said nonchalantly.

“He just lost to Naruto...Granted, Naruto is formidable...but if you had done nothing but train for four years, and that was it, nothing else, and you got beaten by someone who was the Village idiot not too long ago...what would that do to your pride?”

Tsunade winced. “Oh boy. The kid’s gonna be a wreck...”

Ekyt woke up, immediately getting up and pulling the lvs out of himself. He was still wearing his own clothes, so he just got up and walked out. On his way out, he saw the sign:

Attending Nurse: Haruno, Sakura

Ekyt wrote a quick note, accompanied by the standard amount for hospitalization (Ekyt knew it by heart now) then left. Unfortunately, in the waiting room, there was Naruto and Lee. Ekyt quickly pressed himself against a wall as he heard his name mentioned.

Lee: Naruto, that was excellent!

Naruto: Yeah! I won!

Lee: Your technique was great! You had Ekyt beat, and that is not easy to do!

Naruto: Yeah...seems like something was going through his head at the end, though. Oh well, a wins a win, believe it!

Lee: You stopped him from making a critical mistake in leaving. Now that he cannot leave, we can fix his life!

Ekyt finally couldn't take it.

"Good match, Naruto," Ekyt said, falsely cheerful, as he stepped around the corner. The whitewashed tile and the light green walls of the hospital corridor were a shock to Ekyt's eyes, after being in his darkened room.

"Yeah! Thanks! Well, I had to win, had to fix your life, 'tabeyo. If you had left, the town wouldn't be the same!" Naruto replied.

"Thanks for the well wishing. Unfortunately, you overlooked the fact that the town hates me," Ekyt said with a smirk. Although he was FAR from joking.

"Haven't you done enough already? My life is in the shoots, thanks to your damn plot! I'm stuck in this pissant town, taking D-ranked missions where people hate my guts! I have no dreams, no ambitions! And you think you're helping me?! For once, I wasn't going to just give up...I was going to take missions again, and get out, clear my head. My only hope was...escape. You can't understand, you're ambitions are too rooted here. My only salvation was elsewhere...anywhere...Konoha holds too many memories...mostly bad. I used to have people to fight for, but now those people don't trust me. And rightfully so. But, I'm a man of my word, and of honor, even if my honor has been destroyed..."

“You must be kidding! Konoha is the perfect place! Where else would you go?!” Lee asked incredulously.

“Sound Village...Sand Village...Akatsuki. But now, any missions I had hope of doing, any C, B, A, or S-ranks...all ruined. I sent my resignation to ANBU, I’m not much good to them if I can’t leave the village. Ibikki-sensei is fighting it, trying to keep me on as just Interrogation. I’ve let one of my summons retire already. This fighting wasn’t good for Holly. It would break what’s left of my heart if she was hurt...Either way, there’s only one more thing to do. Then you’ll have your wish- I’ll be stuck in this place, and worthless.”

“Hey, that wasn’t-” Naruto began. But Ekyt had already walked away. As he left, Sakura walked up from another direction.

“Was that Ekyt? He shouldn’t be out of bed yet!” Sakura fretted, starting after him.

“Trust me, it’s better to let him go.” Jiraiya nodded sagely.

Tsunade had been expecting Ekyt. But not this. Before either of them could speak, Ekyt had tossed his headband on her desk.

“I resign. If I can’t take anything that isn’t D-ranked, then I have no choice. I lost the bet, and I’m sticking by my word.” With that, Ekyt used the body flicker jutsu to get away before Tsunade could speak to him.

She and Shizune both just looked at the headband.

“I hope he snaps out of this...I know he’s serious about this...But I really hope...he doesn’t...give up. First was that whole promotion thing, then not getting Sakura, and now he can’t leave the village, and take missions he’s earned. I don’t blame him, but still...” Tsunade shook her head, sighed, and reached for a container of sake.

Shizune put the headband on a shelf on the wall, smoothing it, then stepping back and looking at it.

This has to pass...Maybe he just needs some time...

38 - Lost Confidence

Ekyt stood, hidden among the trees, on the roof of his house. The garden was handy for calming down, or just training in general. But today, his mind wasn't working right. All he could think of was that he had lost to Naruto. And how guilty he felt about snapping at him. Granted, it HADN'T been Naruto, or Lee's, business, but Ekyt understood that they had his best interests in mind. As a leaf fell from a maple tree in front of him, Ekyt wondered why these images were disturbing him.

I wasn't like that when Linda and I...well, we were never together, so I can't say split. Maybe it's because I haven't accomplished anything else I've wanted. No rank, and I'm not a hero by any means. And I hate myself for doing this very thing: sitting here, despising myself. We're all entitled to some self-pity, but I've made it an art form, and that's not healthy...

Ekyt shifted again, standing up this time. He walked around the expansive garden, with lush green plants, and some flowers budding. He made his way over to his stone koi pond. One fish was black, the other was white. Almost forming a Yin and a Yang. Ekyt looked at the fish, feeling there was something to be learned. But he couldn't place what. Ekyt looked up, currently in the middle of a pine area. The pond had fit nicely. Unfortunately, a pink cherry tree that the gardener put in gave Ekyt a reminder of a certain girl. He shifted his gaze back to the fish once more, hoping to see something, anything.

I'm looking for meanings...within fish. That's too out there, even for me. Yin, Yang, black fish, white fish? Maybe I'll go get a drink, or something. I thought I'd hit rock bottom before, without my emotional chakra (The Akatsuki extracted it, but Ekyt lived and retrieved it), but this...is worse. My emotions weren't TAKEN, they were SHATTERED. And I'm to blame. Well, I can eat myself alive at the bar. I don't drink often. But if even Tsunade suggested I have a cup or two once in a while to keep my nerves at bay, who am I to argue?

It felt pathetic, sitting in the corner of a dark bar, with confidence that had been shot to pieces. **Have I become so afraid of failure that I can't even FACE this problem? I lost a fight to a talented Ninja, there shouldn't be a problem. But what's going on with these picture popping up in my head? It's got to stop.**

"More here, please," Ekyt muttered dully. He nodded his thanks when his cup was refilled. That's when, of course, an "Oh crap" moment happened. Just as Ekyt was rationalizing these weird feelings, Sasuke and Sakura walked in on a date. Ekyt immediately prayed that they didn't see him. Or, if they did, they wouldn't recognize him. He HAD changed his look.

Now that Ekyt wasn't wearing the hitai-ate of the Leaf Village anymore, he took up more of a citizen's look, rather than a combat look. He wore a gekko gi top, dark gray in color, with his black gi pants. Over that was a loose black jacket. On the back of the jacket, in red letters, were the kanji for "Kaguya" and "Dragon". **I'm sitting in a bar, hiding from a past...that never existed. That's pathetic. Then again,**

so am I.

With that, Ekyt tossed enough Ryo on the bar to pay for his drinks, then waited for Sakura and Sasuke to sit down somewhere. Once they did, he walked toward the exit, and didn't stop. He lifted the flap covering the doorway and walked out into the brisk night air. The sun was setting, giving the town an orange glow. It was a beautiful scene. But Ekyt, being Ekyt, couldn't see the forest for the trees. All he knew was that somewhere along the line, he had really messed up his life. He had NEVER let the wanting of someone to love him interfere with his fighting before. His fighting WAS his life. He had to turn himself around, somehow. As he was pondering that, two people wandered out of the bar. Ekyt sensed them, but not a threat, so he didn't turn around. Instead, hands in his jacket pockets, he started to walk the other way.

"Hey, hold on! Ekyt!"

Ekyt knew the voice. Lady Tsunade. And- Master Jiraiya?

"Yes, Lady Tsunade?" Ekyt asked politely, also bowing to Master Jiraiya.

"You seem to have left your headband in my office. When are you going to come get it?" Tsunade asked, giving Ekyt a smile.

"When I deserve to wear it," Ekyt replied flatly.

"I'm liking the new look, though, kid!" Tsunade joked. (It hit Ekyt then that his black jacket with the kanji on it was similar to Tsunade's robe)

"Come on, Ekyt. You lost ONE fight, and to a really talented Shinobi. It's not the end of the world. Or is it that whole Sakura thing?" Tsunade said/stated.

"Both. That, and I'm not even free to leave now. I've progressed as far as I can. If this is where I've peaked as a warrior, I'm ashamed," Ekyt admitted. "I should be stronger...I NEED to be stronger. I've been left behind. I'm not going to be legendary. The most I can ever hope for is that my name will be carved on the obelisk honoring the fallen Shinobi."

A wind ran through the Village. Bells clanged, and some decorations swayed with the wind, trees adding a whooshing sound.

"Being legendary isn't everything it's cracked up to be. Look at Orochimaru. You could have been evil. Look at me, you could have been a perv. Look at Tsunade, you could have been a reckless gambler, who's afraid of aging. The point I'm making is that a title doesn't mean anything. It's the person HOLDING the title. Look at Iruka. He's a Tokubetsu jonin. Not the highest rank, and no one knows him outside our village. But his classes have produced countless quality Shinobi. We all contribute in our own way," Jiraiya rattled off, thinking unusually deeply. Tsunade, also out of character, displayed a strange bit of motherhood.

"It's not like you don't people who care. You're not as alone as you think. Even if you're not 'together', Sakura still cares about you. Lee and Naruto cared enough to FIGHT you to stop you from making a mistake, and"

Ekyt spoke up quickly, fiercely. "How do they know it was a mistake? I could have learned from Orochimaru! It's not like I have someone to teach me here! Master Sarutobi is back on the council and too busy, I've got Ebisu beaten in the talent department, and it's not like there are enough sensei's to go around!" Ekyt was really rolling now. "Two of my best friends stopped me from making what THEY thought was a mistake. But what if it was right by me? Don't / get a say in what's right for me?! Now that I've lost, I don't. I'm just trapped, stuck in an endless torrent of a swirling personal hell that only leaving and recharging my batteries could have cured."

"You're missing the point. You're ALREADY talented. Maybe I can only give you D-ranks, but that doesn't mean that you can't be important here!"

"Yeah, listen to her, you moron!" The newly-arrived Linda taunted. She was wearing a tell-tale smirk that she had one-upped Ekyt somehow.

Ekyt cursed. "Now what, Linda? Going to rub it in my face that you're a chunin? Or are you satisfied, now that my life has been destroyed by your boyfriend? You got what you wanted: I'm alive, and I'm not in any danger. You win."

Linda hadn't expected that. She tossed her red hair aside. "I...didn't expect that. I really didn't know that Naruto would pull that off...I'm thrilled, of course...actually, what I came to rub in your face was the fact that I'm Lady Tsunade's new apprentice."

Tsunade growled something like 'stupid dog, I SAID not to say anything to him!' under her breath.

Ekyt put up a hand. "Excuse me, just one second," he said. He walked back into the bar. When he walked back out, he was clutching a bottle of sake.

"Go ahead, continue," Ekyt added, taking a swig from the bottle.

Linda, wearing a chunin vest with a long-sleeve white shirt underneath, and the dark blue pants that most chunin wore, looked at Ekyt questioningly.

"You don't care? That isn't like you..." Linda was disturbed by this change in Ekyt's personality.

"You remember Chakaro, right? And Kayla?" Ekyt asked around another swig.

"Of course! They were my students...our students, and they betrayed the village!"

Ekyt nodded. "You got it. Funny thing- Chakaro's a natural at everything, and I'm not. He studies just as hard as I do. And now, he's won. He can continue learning, where I can't. He has people training him, powerful people. I always thought it was fate that he and I would meet in battle, one last time. Knowing Chakaro, I'd probably be on the losing end. But training gave me hope. Hope gave me courage. Courage gave me love. Love for Konoha, and it's people. Even ones I hate, such as you, I would have protected with everything I had. The only way I could ever hope to beat Chakaro was to stay ahead of him, training with all the blood and sweat my body could put forth. And now...it's all come back to me...the why. WHY things got better when I came to this village. I had a purpose. I had friends. I had talent, and hope, and everything else. But where has it led me? To having two of my best friends betray

me, to having a girl who I was close with hate my guts (Meaning Linda), to not having anyone to learn from. All it's led to is this bottle of saki, and back down the path of the loner! You never took that path, you don't know the pain. You couldn't HOPE to. And you couldn't HANDLE it. So, congrats on learning from a legend. Congrats on being a chunin. And congrats for being one of THE most colossal doges to walk the earth."

No one saw that coming. Linda couldn't even fire back an insult. Jiraiya looked at Tsunade and nodded. Putting his arm around Ekyt, they walked the opposite way down the street. Then Ekyt called something back.

"For the record, I'm not drunk, I really thought that insult out!"

Jiraiya led Ekyt to the training area near the memorial obelisk. He motioned for Ekyt to sit across from him. Ekyt did, feeling the cool grass and the slight wind that was blowing to be pleasant. There was silence for a while, before Jiraiya broke it.

"So that's part of it, isn't it? What you said back there..." Jiraiya intoned, arms crossed and eyes closed.

Ekyt nodded, eyes down. "Yes. I was never the best of anything. When I came here, I found my niche. I was compared to the best, and told I had a bright future. And now, all of it's been destroyed. I know Naruto and Lee meant well, but now I can't be a chunin, and I can't learn anymore. And, even worse...I've lost my confidence."

Jiraiya nodded sagely. "You know, it's interesting. You keep getting knocked off the horse. But you don't jump back on, you're DRAGGED back on...(chuckle)well, I think it's amusing. But, back to the point. Do you really believe Orochimaru, or the Akatsuki, could be of any help to you? They're liars and thieves. Orochimaru is someone I know better than anyone. Someone like you he'd use in a heartbeat, and then forgot you existed once you were defeated. And the Akatsuki...come on, that's not what you want, and you know it."

Ekyt nodded again. "Point taken. But I don't want this sake bottle, either. I want to fight. It's who I am...it's all I've got. Master Jiraiya, please keep this under your headband. I've been having trouble in combat lately...That's why I lost to Naruto. Just before I attacked him, I saw that picture Sakura has, of her, Sasuke, Naruto, and Kakashi-sensei. I just...froze up..."

Jiraiya put a hand on his shoulder. "You know, I was in love with Tsunade for years. When Dan (her lover) died, so did Tsunade's love. That hasn't stopped me from trying, though. But, for a while, I was like you. I couldn't think of anything else but the life I might have had. If things had been different. If Orochimaru hadn't left, if Tsunade had loved me, if I had just stayed in the village, if I had become Hokage..."

Jiraiya stood up, stretching himself.

“...But they’re all ‘if’s’. Life does that to you. If it doesn’t kill you, it’ll make you stronger. You’ve been through a lot, and for one reason or another, this hit you really hard. If you knew why, maybe you could kill the problem. But, just keep in mind- even loners have feelings. No matter how hard you try, you’ll ALWAYS have them.”

Ekyt remained sitting, but voiced the second half of his problem. “Master Jiraiya, I’ve been second-guessing myself. I thought of that picture because I was...jealous, I guess. I’m genuinely happy for Sakura, she’s got what she always wanted. And, believe me, I’d sooner sacrifice my dreams to help the dreams of people dear to me come true than be all pissy to make my own come true. But what bothers me the most is that I never got the guys up to just TELL her how I felt. Maybe I felt conflicted, I mean, I like Temari and Tenten, too. But if I said that, I’d only be kidding myself. What it all boils down to is that I’ve found my Achilles heal: girls. All of a sudden, I’m a coward around them. Dying to protect them is nothing, but telling them I’m protecting them because I care- forget it, it just doesn’t happen. My mind says “Just say it”, but the rest of me doesn’t listen. And that’s the LEAST of my problems! I can’t freeze up in combat, it’s my life!”

Jiraiya smirked. “Well, we’ll just have to cure you then. And, about your love life- just let it happen. You worry too much.”

Ekyt, feeling a little more upbeat, replied with a joke. “Yeah. All that time wasted, I could be studying.”

Jiraiya chuckled a little bit. “You know, I’ve got to say. I’m only partly surprised that Naruto beat you. He had abilities even he isn’t aware of. But now that I’ve seen you in action a few times...you do, too. Somehow, you think strategically in any given situation.”

Suddenly, the ground began to twist and heave. Jiraiya and Ekyt nodded to each other, then leapt to the side, just as Manda, Orochimaru’s snake summon, burrowed up from the ground. Jiraiya didn’t see the snake’s tail flinging the rock at him. Ekyt, in vain, tried to knock it down, or at least slow it down. Instead, it rolled off his finger tips and cracked Jiraiya, knocking him out cold.

“Now I’m going to finish you, Jiraiya!” Orochimaru hissed. From his mouth, the Kusanagi protruded, gleaming dangerously. He was zeroing in on Jiraiya’s motionless body.

39 - Dirt Nap

“Why did you betray our pact, Orochimaru? Why are you trying to kill Master Jiraiya?!” Ekyt called from atop Shuurai.

“He knows too much, and he was just about to tell you! You’re a smart kid, you might be able to figure it out. So I have to kill you, too!”

Ekyt felt his chakra level decreasing. He had one last desperate idea. But it meant a huge risk on his part.

“Shuurai, take Master Jiraiya and go!” Ekyt called, leaping down.

“Yes, Master!” Shuurai picked up Jiraiya and burrowed away.

As Ekyt was falling, Orochimaru’s tongue snared him, and accelerated what gravity had already begun: Ekyt hit the ground hard. The tongue still in place, Orochimaru hoisted Ekyt up to his face level.

“Very wise. You knew you couldn’t outclass me, so you sent my target away. It’s a shame you have to die now!” Orochimaru laughed. Ekyt appeared to be unconscious at this point. Orochimaru reached into Ekyt’s kunai holster, taking one out. Then he stabbed straight for Ekyt’s heart.

Ekyt suddenly pushed away, a kunai blocking Orochimaru’s. But Orochimaru’s tongue pulled him back in. This time, Ekyt could only stop the kunai from penetrating his skin too deeply. The tip buried itself into Ekyt’s upper chest, but Ekyt’s downward thrust with his own kunai halted Orochimaru’s progress. Not that he wasn’t in pain. And that pain was going to get worse. His chakra low, Ekyt was having a hard time fighting. Orochimaru, who could lay claim to mastering exploiting weaknesses, made things worse. Ekyt saw the telltale swirl of leaves. The leaves were soon replaced with snakes.

Genjutsu. Ekyt’s weary mind said. His arms were trapped, so he couldn’t form the ‘release’ hand sign.

GENJUTSU:

Ekyt **KNEW** it was a genjutsu. He was wearing a chunin vest, for starters. That, in and of itself, was unbelievable enough. But what he saw next just defied logic.

“Ekyt-kun! Come on, already!” Sakura was towing him away. “You’re late for our date! That’s not like you!” Sakura mockingly admonished him.

“I’m sorry, I was a little...distracted,” Ekyt said, disbelieving.

END GENJUTSU

This was the most painful type of genjutsu. It prayed on what the target WANTED, but couldn't have. Ekyt, with a small surge of chakra, saw Orochimaru coming in for the kill. He did the only thing he could.

"Remote Detonation Jutsu!" The jutsu detonated exploding tags, and didn't require any handsigns. With his arms bound to his sides, and little chakra, this was Ekyt's last, desperate attempt to get free.

Orochimaru looked panicked, and was blown backward, his tongue releasing Ekyt, who also hit the ground hard.

When Ekyt had first been snared by Orochimaru's tongue, and had been 'unconscious', he had planted an exploding tag on the bottom of Orochimaru's tongue. He had planned to detonate when he was safely out of range. But here, Ekyt had taken almost as much damage as Orochimaru. But that didn't matter. It had given him the opening he needed. He reached into his tool pouch and extracted a red food pill. Popping it quickly, Ekyt felt his chakra come back. Good thing, too, Orochimaru was back. And he was angry about the exploding tag. He and Ekyt squared off, both singed from the explosion.

"Seems you've managed to damage me! Oh, and here come your friends! I'll just kill them, THEN get back to you!"

Ekyt saw Naruto, Lee, and Kakashi coming, with Master Jiraiya bringing up the rear on Gamabunta. Orochimaru's head was right near Naruto's before anyone could move!

"NO WAY!" Ekyt cut with his kunai, slicing Orochimaru's throat. Naruto turned around just in time to leap away from the head. Ekyt, meanwhile, saw blood gushing from Orochimaru's neck. Ekyt froze, eyes wide, mouth open. Blood was POURING from Orochimaru's neck. Ekyt saw his kunai just inches away. Orochimaru's head tilted backward, exposing the damage Ekyt's knife had done.

Immediately, Kakashi grabbed Ekyt and pulled him away. But he couldn't block out what Ekyt saw: Orochimaru sank to the ground, his neck hanging on by a thread. It was an image that would haunt Ekyt.

Ekyt opened his mouth, but couldn't speak.

"You had to..." Kakashi said quietly.

"I..." Ekyt began, then shook his head, sinking to one knee, not able to look away.

"You had no choice. You had to save lives," Kakashi told him. It was clear he wasn't getting through to Ekyt. He used his field mic quickly. "Yamato, at the memorial obelisk..." Kakashi looked down at Ekyt, who was still staring.

Ekyt looked at the kunai in his hand, stained with blood. **I...killed him. Orochimaru. I didn't even think of it...I never expected to kill him...I was desperate...and Naruto...I hope Orochimaru didn't get him...I never thought I would win, killing never crossed my mind...I took a life...I actually...took a life...I don't feel like myself...** Ekyt suddenly let go of the kunai, letting it sink into the ground, tip-first. The blood was still on it.

"We all saw it...you had no choice, Ekyt. You had no choice, no other move." Jiraiya put a hand on Ekyt's quivering shoulder.

"I killed him. I actually...killed him. All I meant to do was protect...and now I've killed instead," Ekyt said, in disbelief.

"You killed because you HAD to. Anyone would have done the same. You've saved three lives today, and who knows how many in the future. Orochimaru would never stop being a threat until he was dead. If you hadn't done that, Naruto would have died. Jiraiya would have been dead. YOU would have been dead. It's not easy to take a life, Ekyt. It's even harder to save one." Tsunade had arrived, as had Sakura. It was Tsunade who had been speaking.

Ekyt nodded, vaguely understanding. He got up, still shaky, and walked over to Orochimaru's body. He looked down at the lifeless eyes, shock written all over the dead face. And blood...everywhere, blood. Ekyt reached for Orochimaru's robe, the part that hung down. He pulled it up over Orochimaru's face. Then he knelt near Orochimaru's side to say a quick prayer for his soul.

Sakura made her way over to Ekyt. Gently, she knelt next to him.

"I got your summon...thank you. I don't know how you did it in the middle of a battle, but I'm glad you did. Sasuke will be here soon, I'm sure of it. And I don't know how he'll react. But, thank you- for saving Naruto and Master Jiraiya. Please, don't tear yourself up. You had no choice..."

I had no choice...I still killed him. I had to, for Naruto, or he would have been dead! I never once thought I would win the fight...I was only stalling for time, so Jiraiya could get to Tsunade...I never thought of what would happen...I just...did it. Should I feel so guilty? Even if I had no choice...Somehow, guilt feels...right.

Sasuke chose this moment to appear. His was emotionless, as always. Quicker than anyone could see, he was standing next to Ekyt, a hand on his shoulder.

"So you killed Orochimaru? I had plenty to learn from him. Now that I'm in Konoha, I guess that doesn't matter. But still, he DID teach me...maybe I DID have a bond with Orochimaru..." Sasuke muttered. "My headband says Konoha, and I'm not leaving it. That doesn't mean that you get off easy."

Sasuke slowly drew his own Kusanagi, and had it to Ekyt's throat before anyone could move.

Everyone tensed up, weapons at the ready.

"No, Sasuke-kun!" Sakura shouted.

"Don't do it, Sasuke!" Naruto demanded.

"Your dream was to be trusted, wasn't it? And to be talented? If you could defeat Orochimaru, I guess you're both to Konoha. To me, you're a threat. And after I kill you, someone who was powerful enough to kill a legend...I'll have the Mangekyo Sharingan." Sasuke's sword arched towards Ekyt...

Ekyt was still there, physically, and he rolled away. Sasuke followed him. Ekyt tried to push Orochimaru out of his mind.

"STAY BACK! ALL OF YOU! AND WATCH THAT BODY!" Ekyt suddenly realized that Orochimaru's body might still hold some hidden jutsu that could kill them all. And if Sasuke was going to hold Ekyt personally responsible, Ekyt needed to deal with it. But it was all he could do to dodge. Ekyt knew about the Kusanagi- the sword couldn't be blocked with another sword. At least, not Sasuke's. Somehow, his chakra in it made it nearly impossible to stop. Ekyt finally saw an opening, after dodging and dodging and dodging, and stepped in, holding Sasuke's arm away, then grabbing his head. They both jockeyed for position. Ekyt, his head still elsewhere, managed to realize that he had to get that sword away from Sasuke somehow. As he was processing how to do just that, Sasuke used a new jutsu:

"Chidori: Thousand Birds Current!" This sent a Chidori attack pulsing from all of Sasuke's body, and, in effect, anything touch it. That included Ekyt. He was thrown backward, violently, through several trees and into a rock.

Sakura couldn't believe this. Boyfriend or not, she couldn't let Sasuke do this. Murdering someone guilty only of doing the right thing was horribly wrong. Sakura could see past her love for Sasuke enough for that. No matter how much she loved him, letting him go on a psychotic rage was wrong.

"Stop, Sasuke!" Sakura pleaded, stepping in front of him. "He hasn't done anything wrong! Killing him won't help! It won't bring Orochimaru back!" Sakura wasn't crying. She was speaking forcefully.

"Get out of my way."

Sasuke backhanded Sakura, sending the surprised kunoichi to the ground. Sakura yanked on Sasuke's ankle, which deterred him long enough for her to see a glimmer of hope: Ekyt stirred. Then his eyes met hers.

"You pest. If you're in my way, I'll kill you." Sasuke switched his sword to a reverse-grip and prepared to stab down.

Ekyt opened the first gate of chakra. He rushed in front of Sakura and batted Sasuke's arm aside. Sakura took the opportunity to roll away and grab the kunai Ekyt had dropped. Meanwhile, Ekyt used the Sharingan's natural enemy: taijutsu. The first gate of chakra blurred moves, even for the powerful Sharingan. At the same time, it took a toll on your body. Ekyt knew he was near his limits, but he had to finish with Sasuke.

"Don't you know never to hit a girl, you prick?!" Ekyt asked, narrowly missing with a Konoha Hurricane.

"I don't care what you are. If you get in my way, you die. It's that simple." Sasuke's response irked Ekyt all the more. Finally taking the upper hand, emotions running rampant in his chest, Ekyt passed on some wisdom he had learned.

"I've just taken the life of a living person, Sasuke. Life and death, black and white. There's more to it than that. Life is white, death is black. In between, you have gray, at first. What color that gray becomes is up to you. Your heart is black, Sasuke. Your master is dead. Instead of mourning his loss, you try to earn something selfishly. We're not so different, but our thinking is opposite. I hate a certain enemy very much. Even then, I wouldn't wish him death. But now...now I KNOW, that if they attacked the people I've grown to consider family, I would die to protect them...But at the same time, I would KILL to protect them. Death, killing, it was all so pointless to me before. But now I see: I've known HOW to kill, but I never knew WHEN. Now I understand, and I understand WHY. Now, let's end this senseless fight!" Ekyt emotions grew in his chest, and finally surged into his hand.

"Dragon's Eternal Blue Flame!" Ekyt called around the mixture of emotions that he was feeling. His whole body glowed with flame. With every attack, that flame grew, until Ekyt's fire had doubled in size. Sasuke had other ideas.

"You're right, we SHOULD end this. I'm fighting my brother soon. What would happen if you managed to seal my curse mark again? Or my Sharingan? So let's just stop right here- HYA!"

"OH MY GOD!"

"HOLY S***!"

Kakashi and Yamato cringed. Ekyt's blue flame died down.

Sasuke had stabbed Ekyt right through the stomach, pinning him to a tree. He was suspended in the air, blood coming out of his mouth.

"Fool...TRUE Shinobi don't have emotions. And now yours are going to be the death of you."

Ekyt couldn't get free. He looked at the others, the ones he was now literally dying for. He smiled.

"YOU are the fool, Sasuke. TRUE Shinobi USE their emotions to make them stronger...not showing them...doesn't mean you don't...feel them..." Ekyt speech became slurred. Sasuke held the sword in place.

"Say what you want. You're dead."

"You're dead."

At those words, Naruto fell to the ground. All the times he had been shunned. Now, he was a hero. **No future Hokage...and no hero...would let this happen...I can't let this happen...GIMME YOUR CHAKRA, FOX!**

"ODAMA RASENGAN!" Naruto charged at Sasuke, hitting him with a swirling ball of energy. It was ten times the size of the Rasengan, and that much more powerful. It hit Sasuke right in the stomach, knocking him away from the sword. Ekyt was still stuck, but by now he was barely conscious enough to know.

"Sasuke...I thought you had changed. My last promise was to bring you back to the village, and I kept it! NOW I promise- I'm not letting you get away with this! We never had our rematch...(Naruto grew two tails)...but now you've pushed me too far. You've hurt my teammate, you've hurt my friends...I've seen enough! And I'm going to change you! BELIEVE IT!"

40 - Chaos Dictates Life

Naruto's third tail appeared, and he was now on all fours, growling.

"You bastard! You came back, and now you go and do something like this? What the hell is wrong with you? DO that to your psycho brother, not him!" Naruto snarled.

Sasuke didn't seem to care. "The fox? Fine, Naruto. The last time we fought, my 2nd level curse was stronger than your demon fox. If you want to tempt fate twice, be my guest."

Tsunade and Sakura were debating on how to get Ekyt down. At one point, Tsunade had felt for a pulse. She was surprised to find he had one. Truth be told, Ekyt should've been killed when he was stabbed. But regardless of HOW he was alive, he wouldn't stay that way suspended in the air by the sword. But getting it out...

"If we just pull it out, we might cut something important, or pull out an organ...if we leave him there, he's dead. If we could stabilize the wound from the inside..." Tsunade was running through every medical scenario she could think of in her head, but was drawing a blank.

Sakura was using her chakra to make sure there was no poison. Thankfully, she didn't find any, but couldn't do anymore.

Ekyt was conscious at this point, and actually cursed at the pain.

"Damn...get this...thing outta me..." he slurred. He didn't have the strength to do it himself.

"If we do that without stabilizing you first, we might kill you ourselves. Just give us time to" Tsunade began. To her surprise, Ekyt reached one arm down, to his stomach. It was still glowing with his blue flame chakra.

"That won't help, that thing is in there good. And even YOU can't reach in and stabilize it..." Tsunade didn't like the situation. THAT much was evident.

"I'm not...I'm trying...what the Third told me about...I've still got the Kaguya blood in me...YAGHH!" At the yell, the Kusanagi fell out of Ekyt. From the hole in Ekyt, if you looked inside, you could see that a bone had pushed the sword out. Ekyt fell to the ground, landing on one knee.

"This...kinda hurts..." he joked. He slumped back against the gnarled tree. The blood was still flowing, but not as freely. His breathing was heavy, but steady at the same time.

"I used the bone to block the blood flow for now, and stabilize the area. I can't maintain it for long, not like this. If you can heal me, please do it, quick, or I'm going to take someone else out with me before I die," Ekyt glared at Sasuke. **You...evil bastard...You can't be trusted...**

Sasuke ran forward, faster than the human eye could follow. The DEMON eye, however, had no trouble. Naruto roared, knocking Sasuke away with pure chakra. Sasuke, now in his 2nd level form, flew against the current of the chakra. The sound of birds chirping cracked the air. Naruto, once again, used the Rasengan.

“Kakashi-sempai!” Yamato tapped Kakashi on the shoulder, pointing at Orochimaru’s body. It had begun to fall apart, and restructure- as snakes.

“It’s a kinjutsu...the only one with the knowledge to know which one would be the Third Hokage. Yamato, use your wood to halt the process any way you can. Master Sarutobi needs to be here for this. My Sharingan can’t copy whatever it is that’s going on, and we need to know.” Kakashi disappeared in a swirl of leaves, accompanied by smoke.

Yamato used his “Great Wooden Prison” jutsu to cause blocks of wood to pop up and make the snakes change direction, slowing their progress. Undeterred, they slithered on, like stream water around rocks, to their destination.

Master Sarutobi looked up when the knock came at his door. Getting up with a grace defying his age, he opened it to find a worried looking Kakashi.

“Kakashi? Is something wrong?” **If Kakashi is shaken up, there’s reason to worry...**

Kakashi nodded his head. “I’ll explain on the way, Master Sarutobi....”

As they zipped through the trees, Kakashi explained. “Ekyt Kaguya was defending Jiraiya, before he sent him away, to get his injury treated. That was when my team and I arrived. And, well...Ekyt was forced to kill Orochimaru to protect Naruto. That’s the problem. ONE of the problems. Ekyt has never taken a life, and he’s shaken up. He had no other choice but to kill Orochimaru, but he can’t get that into his head. And, if you’ve seen him around the village, you know he really feels he’s hit rock bottom. He hasn’t worn a hitai-ate, or his vest. He’s dressed like a civilian. But that’s really not important, not right now. The OTHER problem is that Ekyt is possibly dying, thanks to Sasuke Uchiha attacking him. Sasuke isn’t fighting on behalf of Orochimaru, he’s attempting obtain the Mangekyo Sharingan, while swearing allegiance to Konoha. If Ekyt DOES die, Sasuke will have earned it (The Mangekyo Sharingan)in a way similar to his brother. Right now, Naruto is fighting Sasuke, while Ekyt is being treated by Tsunade-sama and Sakura. But it’s Orochimaru that concerns us.”

“You said he was dead, he is still a concern?” Sarutobi asked, already knowing. He had battled Orochimaru a few years ago, and had actually tried to end his life. **If I could have killed him, so many lives would have been saved. If it’s true that Ekyt HAS killed him, then that young man may just become legendary himself. Still...Orochimaru’s corpse acting strangely...he’s always been**

slippery, he always has a way out. Has he even fooled death?

Sarutobi was immediately worried with that grim thought in mind. **Evil like that hardly ever simply 'goes away'. And for Ekyt to kill, the situation must have been grave...Beyond grave. Naruto has grown, but Sasuke thinks nothing of killing...All I can do is place my faith in Naruto, and the others. They'll step in when the time is right.**

The Chidori and the Rasengan met, creating a colossal shockwave that pulsed through the air. Yamato, Sakura, and Sai all put an arm up over their faces. Tsunade and Ekyt were safe behind the memorial obelisk. Tsunade had moved Ekyt so she could treat him safely.

Sasuke put an arm up in front of his face, thinking that he had to have just won. His eyes grew wide when he saw an unharmed Naruto still growling at him.

How strong has he gotten? H-he's ready to kill me! I can sense it! It's the demon fox, it's getting out of control!

Ekyt was patched up, for the most part. When he stood up, he saw Naruto and Sasuke. Against his body's wishes, he got involved.

"Naruto! Don't do it! Don't let the fourth tail grow! I'm fine! We're all okay, don't become a killer for us! Don't be...like me!"

Sasuke smirked. "You're strong. Somehow, I wasn't sure I was going to kill you. Rest assured, I DID try. But there's someone else who wants a crack at you. And he's my personal protégé. Well, he WAS. I'm with the Leaf again. He's still with the sound. You know him...you should, he was your student.

Chakaro, his long greasy hair flying behind him in a ponytail, flew toward Ekyt. He landed right in front of him, a smirk on his face.

"How are you still alive? And how did you kill Lord Orochimaru? Maybe I need to avenge his death..." Chakaro suddenly thrust a kunai towards Ekyt's neck. When he looked down, he saw Ekyt had one at HIS throat. (Always wanted to write this, ever since I saw the third Shippuuden opening!)

Tsunade has seen more than enough. Apparently, Sakura had, too. At the same time, they both bashed the ground, sending the two flying apart. Ekyt landing, crouching, ready to strike. Chakaro recovered in mid-air and threw two kunai. Ekyt threw two shuriken to knock down the kunai. The sound of metal

clattering away somehow reminded Ekyt's body that it was injured. Fortunately for him, Tsunade had seen enough. She marched forward, one finger held aloft, next to her ear. When Chakaro turned to face her, she simply flicked him in the forehead, sending him sailing toward Sasuke.

Sasuke dodged the incoming human projectile. But he had walked right into Naruto's trap.

"RASENGAN!"

Once more, Sasuke had fell at the hands of Naruto. It was beyond belief for most. Naruto included. But he was too angry to care. Sasuke might be like a brother to him, but that brother might have murdered a good friend. That made him no better than Itachi, right? Naruto ran to Ekyt, who was already standing up. He looked like hell, but managed a smile for Naruto's sake.

"Nice win, Naruto. Thanks for the save. I guess I should have said that before..." Ekyt muttered sheepishly.

"Hey, we all make mistakes. That's why friends are there- to make them funny, or to make them better! Believe it!" Naruto clapped Ekyt on the shoulder.

Ekyt gave a small chuckle. "Well, time for me to start training again. If I got THAT close to being killed, then I'm not working hard enough."

Naruto couldn't even CONTEMPLATE training that hard. **When does this guy sleep?**

Master Sarutobi looked at Orochimaru's body. The snakes were doing SOMETHING to it. As he looked closer, he saw a horrifying site. Orochimaru blinked, then smiled widely. He opened his mouth and spoke. Ekyt turned around, his eyes wide as dinner plates.

"You...but I just..." Ekyt shook his head. Sakura tossed Ekyt's jacket over his shoulders.

"Did you REALLY believe I would die so easily? You've grown, Ekyt-kun. Two years ago, you wouldn't have DREAMED of taking my life. You would have tried to push Naruto out of the way. That would have been pointless. You've won the day, and my respect..."

Orochimaru was now reformed, the last snake slithering up his sleeve.

"I also sense discomfort...and I hear what was said...you WERE going to seek me out. Perhaps I could give you a little something for your troubles..." Orochimaru's neck shot towards Ekyt, his mouth opened to give Ekyt a bite that would make him like Sasuke. The thought revolted Ekyt. He drew his long sword and thrust toward Orochimaru's mouth. Orochimaru pulled back just in time.

Sheathing his sword, Ekyt felt his jacket flutter to the ground. He held the sword in a guard, covering his

chest.

“I’ve killed you once, don’t think I won’t do it again...” Ekyt warned. “Now that I’ve killed someone, I’d have no problem ridding the world of evil scum like you. Now, get out of here with your worthless servant (Chakaro). I can still sense your chakra, and even YOU wouldn’t dare fight with so little of it.”

Orochimaru stopped smirking, but admitted that Ekyt was right by taking Chakaro’s unconscious form and leaving.

Ekyt also left abruptly, needing to get away for a while. He climbed up on Hokage Mountain, and looked down. The Village was so full of life, and the panoramic view was breathtaking. Tears soon stained Ekyt’s face.

It really is...a life I'll never have, isn't it? And I nearly died today, myself, and I've got nothing to show for it, except that, when it counted, I WOULD kill to save someone. Look at the town...all of them...but they're still upset with me. My life just feels...empty. When I was fighting Orochimaru, protecting Master Jiraiya, I really felt alive, like I belonged. Now, I just feel awkward...and alone...and now I've caused a HUGE rift between Sasuke and Sakura...I can't make things worse, I've alienated just about everyone. Maybe it's time for me to just...let it go. Forget this whole thing, about wanting to be the best. What can you do when the deck is stacked against you? And now, how am I going to tell everyone that I'm going to...retire, I guess. I don't even want to, but the harder I try, the worse I make things. I just won't tell them. I'll just fade into the background...

“Fade into the background...” Ekyt said aloud, unaware that he had company.

“I don’t think so!” Naruto declared. “I know what you’re doing up here, thinking like that! The way you always do! Did I quit because the village hated me? No! Did I stop when I fell behind my team? No! So you can’t just give it up!”

Ekyt turned around, smiling. “You’re right, I can’t. Not ‘just like that’. So, Naruto, maybe you can help me...I want to fight you, one more time. I need to know if I’m truly warrior material. And you can help.”

Naruto looked surprised, to say the least. “How can I help?”

Ekyt drew backward into a guard. “By fighting me, one last time. If I win, I’m allowed to leave the village again. If I lose...”

Naruto watched the words leave Ekyt’s lips, surprised beyond words.

“...If I lose, I’ll retire, and stay in the village. All I ask, Naruto, is give me- one last fight. One last round, in front of all the people left that I trust. Can you do that, Naruto? You’d be one step closer to Hokage, beating me. Or, you’d be making a friend see his true purpose, losing to me. This time, I’m not distracted, and I’ll give you the fight you deserve!”

Naruto thought about it. He really didn’t want to do it, but he knew that if HE wasn’t the one who fought, Ekyt would find someone else.

“You’ve got a deal!”

“Don’t hold back. No matter what. If I’m beaten, I’m beaten. Agreed?” Ekyt asked, knowing that Naruto.

41 - An Offer He Couldn't Refuse...

Opening song

Opening: I'll be your Hero:

**You always were there,
Always beside me.
Holding my hand every step of the way.
Through these eyes, you could do no wrong.
In these eyes, you were brave and strong.
In my heart, those days live on.**

**You were my hero.
Hero!
You were my hero.
Whoa, whoa!
Yeah.**

**What does it take to be a hero?
What does it take to be a man?
I'm lookin' down into my young boy's eyes.
As I feel his love, oh I realize,
The torch is passed along,
on and on.**

(NOTE: I know, this combat scene is short, and right to the point. But in the near future, I've got a big fight scene planned. So stay tuned!)

In the stands were the few people left that really trusted Ekyt. Tsunade, Sakura, Kakashi, Guy, Asuma, Shikamaru, Chouji, Sarutobi, and Lee. They had just witnessed a remarkable match. And the ending hadn't come yet.

Both combatants were battered and beaten. Ekyt's face was a mask of crimson, a highway of blood going from his nose and down his mask. Naruto wasn't as hurt physically, but Ekyt's genjutsu had worn Naruto down. Naruto suddenly darted forward, using another clone jutsu. But these clones hid his real attack.

As Ekyt destroyed them, his guard dropped for a fraction of a second. That was when Naruto leapt just in front of Ekyt, as both his hands and legs were held by clones.

"RASENGAN!"

But he couldn't do it. Naruto stopped.

"Damnit, you finish that strike! Do it! You have me beaten!"

Naruto's Rasengan was inches from Ekyt's chest. Ekyt had been bested, and he knew it. The swirling ball of chakra was right there. Naruto was frozen, torn between bad choice one and bad choice two.

I-if I DO hit him, he retires! If I DON'T hit him...then I'll have lied to him. AHH, what do I do?!

"I said do it!" Ekyt shouted. "You've won! Do it, or I'm leaving the village!" Ekyt threatened. "You want to be Hokage? Then you do what you have to!"

Naruto looked at Ekyt, tears in both their eyes.

"I'm sorry...Forgive me!" Naruto drove the Rasengan home, into Ekyt's chest. Ekyt's slight teenage form was blown backwards, blood arching away from his mouth. But, as his mask flew away (He's flying pretty fast, so the wind resistance is tugging his mask off), Naruto saw a smile, just before Ekyt hit the wall on the other side of the stadium.

Ekyt hit the wall hard. He stuck to it for a moment, then fell down it, onto his head, then flopped onto his back. He closed his eyes, smiling serenely.

Well, if you're going to lose, you might as well go out to the best...thank you, Naruto. I'll never forget it.

Slowly, Ekyt got to his feet. Naruto was in tears himself, and Ekyt felt some welling up.

"It's okay, Naruto. Really. Thank you. Just remember that this brings you one step closer to being Hokage. And...you're a good friend. What was it you told me about friends? Something about them being there to make mistakes funny, or make them better? You've made this one better, Naruto. All I've done is make one mistake after another. You really proved that you're a true friend. Thank you."

Naruto embraced Ekyt (In a manly way, of course!), inadvertently hurting Ekyt in the process.

"Why? Why did you want it to be this way?" Naruto asked quietly.

"Because it was the only way I would know for sure. You're going to be a legend. I was never sure where I stood, until now. That's why it had to work out this way. You're a legend, a future Hokage, and I'm a guy that got lucky to find a place in the world." Ekyt clapped Naruto on the back, then looked up at the few that had gathered in the stands. They were all somber.

Ekyt's stoicism was long gone. He was sad, too. But he had a plan. Maybe if he retired, the village would stop hating him. If he wasn't going to be legendary, then he could at LEAST make sure people didn't hate his guts when he died.

Tsunade and Sakura were the two who approached Ekyt. Sakura was more emotional. Shinobi had come and gone with Lady Tsunade, but Sakura had never really lost someone close like this to retirement.

“You don’t have to do this...” she said, looking at him. Her pale green eyes bored into his dark hazel eyes.

“Maybe not...but I should. Thank you, for everything Sakura-sensei.” Ekyt’s eyes, while tearful, still seemed happy. And comforting, to Sakura. They were peaceful for the first time since she’d known him.

Sakura suddenly stepped forward and embraced him, resting her chin on his shoulder. A few tears soon stained the material of Ekyt’s vest. It was all Ekyt could do not to stain Sakura’s top with his own.

“It’s okay, really.” Ekyt kept his tone low and comforting, talking only to Sakura.

“It just...won’t be the same without you!” Sakura replied. She felt- Ekyt stroking her hair? **Huh? H-HE’S comforting ME? Shouldn’t it be the other way around. Either way...it’s so sweet of him!**

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere. I’ll still be around, still training. And besides, you know what I’ve always said. I’ll ALWAYS be there for Konoha, and the people in it.”

Sakura looked into Ekyt’s eyes again. She nodded, trying to calm down. He was right. But still... **He’s gotten handsome...and now I’m alone...Sasuke...I can’t go back to him. Not now. Not after what he did.**

That made Sakura cry a little harder. True to form, Ekyt shrugged his jacket off and laid it on her shoulders.

“If you need anything...you can always come to me...” Ekyt told her quietly, blushing as he always did, but his voice steady. Sakura couldn’t help herself, she looked up at him again. He was steadfast, like a rock, as always. But at the same time, Sakura knew he was speaking from the heart.

Tsunade hugged Ekyt, even kissed him on the forehead.

“If I hadn’t denied you the chunin exams, or the rank, all this time...you would have won that match...but it can’t be helped. You’re brave to do this, you know. Walking away.”

Ekyt nodded, thanking her silently. But Tsunade wasn’t done.

“It takes guts to do that. And I know WHY you’re doing it. You just want to be loved by the town again. Let me tell you this: If you WERE to retire from missions, there will always be a spot for you, doing other work, and keeping your skills sharp. And, when you’re sick of retirement, just say so, and you’ll be back.” Tsunade smiled knowingly as she told Ekyt what was probably the most comforting thing in the world at that moment.

“Thank you, Lady Fifth. And...I’m sorry for being a royal pain in the @\$\$.” Ekyt burst out laughing, as did Tsunade.

“You’re a talented pain in the @\$\$\$. And I swear, I WILL get you to be one of my top jonin someday soon! Just explain to me how you could beat Orochimaru, but not Naruto?” Tsunade said with a snicker.

Ekyt shrugged. “I think it’s because I wasn’t protecting anyone. That’s probably why. Naruto’s talented, though, too. The WORST part is- NOW I know what I would have done! I would have shifted my weight and throw one of his clones into him. Agh, it’s like thinking of an insult three hours too late, after the person who insulted you has already walked away.”

Tsunade nodded understandingly. She kissed Ekyt on the forehead again.

“Thanks for saving the pervert’s @\$\$\$. You know, I should apologize, too. But I’m not going to. Instead, I’m going to tell you this: Show up at the academy tomorrow. Your retirement couldn’t have come at a better time.”

While Ekyt was pondering what that meant, looking out across the stadium, Sakura approached him again. This time, when she grabbed him in a strong embrace, she stroked his cheek. **It’s a little rough...kinda rugged...he’s cuter smooth-shaven, though...Ah, what am I thinking? But I’ve got to do this...no matter how awkward.**

Ekyt froze up. **Sakura? What’s she playing at? Staring at me like that...could she...no, it’s not possible she’s figured out that I...is it?**

Sakura put a hand behind Ekyt’s head and gently kissed his cheek. It lasted long for a soft and brushing kiss, and it left both giver and receiver incredibly red.

Sakura kind of looked away, blushing shyly. “I really appreciate you being there for me. After what happened with Sasuke, I’m not going to go back to him. And...well...thanks for saying just what I needed to hear.”

Boom. Right there. For once, Ekyt felt he could tell Sakura how he felt. **I can say it! I’ve faced killing someone, my own death, retirement, and a hard reality. What’s there left to fear?**

But, before he opened his mouth, a second thought struck Ekyt.

She’s just leaving Sasuke...I shouldn’t tell her something like that...not just yet...it would be like I was WAITING for her and Sasuke to fall apart. But I SWEAR I will tell her...soon.

Sakura smiled up at him, eyes still watering. Ekyt tightened his grip slightly. When Sakura didn’t object, he finished returning her hug.

----The Next Morning---

Ekyt had retrieved his hitai-ate and replaced his mask. After getting cleaned up, he walked to the academy. Class was already in session. Iruka was sitting at his desk, looking over a scroll. Ekyt walked over to him.

"I was told to come here this morning, Iruka-sensei? Do you need help with class?" Ekyt asked, figuring that was the case. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Iruka smiled, but didn't answer. Instead, he turned to the class.

"Everyone, listen up! As you know, I've been promoted to Jonin. I've been asked to be a field instructor, at least temporarily. So, Okkuu Kazuki and Momoka Yuuka, as promised, the two of you are assigned to cell 16, which I'm instructing. To the rest of you: In my absence, your instructor is Ekyt Kaguya. I'm going to miss all of you. But, just as you graduate and become genin, I've also progressed. But I'll be back. In the mean time, I expect all of you to behave for your instructor."

"Iruka-sensei..." Ekyt began, in the opening stages of protesting, but somehow guessing it wouldn't do any good. "...congratulations. At least one less team won't wind up like me."

"I wouldn't mind having a few more like you. It's always a little sad when a student surpasses his teacher, but at the same time, it just means you've done your job right. You'll be a good instructor, Ekyt, that's why I chose you." Iruka shook his hand, then walked out of the room.

The class looked at Ekyt. Ekyt looked at the class.

"Hey, what's with the mask? Are you a clown or something?!" shouted one student with a brush cut. His friends laughed. Ekyt was tempted to laugh, but decided making a point would be better.

"You, there. I see you're good at observing things...so, please, come down here for a minute," Ekyt smirked to himself. **NOW I see why Kakashi-sensei has so much fun with his students...they walk right into these things.**

The student walked down cockily.

"I heard you retired," he sneered.

"You have a name, captain obvious?" Ekyt asked mildly.

"I'm Naoto Urashi! That's right, of the famous Urashi family!" the boy added, grinning.

"Really? That's nice to know. Now, just speak up when you see something you've never seen before...Oh, and don't turn too sharply, you might hurt yourself." Ekyt smirked, then- poof? A shadow clone.

Behind Naoto, Ekyt garnered the class' attention by taking off his jacket. When Naoto turned around, Ekyt reached up to his left shoulder and pulled out a bone. It was long, and somewhat sharp.

"Oh, shoot!" Naoto screamed, then passed out.

Ekyt bent down over him. "Can I take that as a "I've never seen that before, sempai?"

I'm going to enjoy this...however long it lasts...

42 - Naruto's Surprise

Note: So, the last few chapters have been pretty intense! Ekyt retires, gets a new job, almost dies, takes a life...a lot to swallow. So, enjoy this chapter, it's a little goofy, but that's what makes it perfect after all that make-or-break action!

Naoto woke up, seeing his new teacher tapping the blackboard with the very bone that had shocked Naoto into unconsciousness. In rage, he reared back and threw a kunai at Ekyt.

Ekyt simply turned and let the kunai whiz by. It stuck in the wall. This infuriated Naoto more, and he rushed Ekyt. Ekyt put the bone down on his desk, while the class watched eagerly. POOF! He was gone!

"Naoto, this rage issue needs work," Ekyt said calmly, standing on the ceiling, courtesy of chakra concentration. He let himself fall back down, landing gracefully on the first row of desks. "Attacking the teacher at random is NOT something I'm going to tolerate."

Naoto roared with anger and attacked again. Ekyt parried his fist and swept his legs.

"Are you done, Naoto? I'm in the middle of a lecture, and I really need to finish. Now, go sit down."

Naoto ignored Ekyt and weaved his hands together.

"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!" Naoto shouted, smirking confidently. That confidence evaporated as Ekyt smiled.

"Release. Now, enough of this, sit down before I have to punish you." Ekyt threatened.

"YOU IDIOT! THAT'S THE 'DRAGON BOY'! GENJUTSU IS HIS SPECIALTY! WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU TRY ATTACKING HIM LIKE THAT?!" shouted one girl in the front row.

"Alright, that's enough. Thank you. Now, I have to step out for a minute. Just finish copying what I've written, I'll be right back." Ekyt walked out of the room, as most of the students got to work. Naoto was still rooted to the spot, either with rage or shock.

The girl in the front row smirked. "Fool! Hey, everyone! Keep this quiet! I'm gonna have a little fun with your new teacher! Believe it!" Naruto declared, as he perched a bucket of water on a ledge just above the door. The class buzzed with anticipation. THIS was Naruto Uzumaki, a hero! One who had just defeated their instructor! They had all heard the story. But to see the legendary prankster in action...

Ekyt walked back in. SPLASH!

“Ah, damnit!” he cursed at the bucket of water. The bucket was still on his head, giving Naruto time to change back into the girl he had been impersonating before.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation,” Ekyt muttered. A clone of Ekyt popped out, snickered at him, then used the fire jutsu on him. Ekyt was dry again, as the fire didn’t singe him or his clothes.

“I won’t ask who put that bucket there. I’ll only say it had better not happen again...” Ekyt looked around the room, eyes looking forbidding. The class was still snickering, despite their sempai’s serious tone.

“Sensei, I have a question!” the girl (Naruto) asked, walking up to his desk. Roughly, ‘she’ pushed Ekyt into his chair. Then, grinning from ear to ear, she said “Sexy Jutsu!”

The beautiful, nude, girl-version of Naruto made her appearance, sitting sexily on Ekyt’s desk. So far, Ekyt had fought the nosebleed. But the next series of moves cracked him.

“Ekyt-sempai, you have SO much knowledge...maybe you could teach me...I’m all yours, sempai...just do whatever you want...or...maybe I’ll just get us started, you naughty boy!” The girl had slid off the desk, and onto the stunned Ekyt’s lap. She curled up, close to him, and began to whisper. WHATEVER she had said finally ruined Ekyt. Just as he had done to Iruka years ago, Naruto had claimed Ekyt as another victim of the Sexy Jutsu. Ekyt sailed backward, blood arching from his nose, until he hit the wall at the top of the classroom. He rolled, end over end, down the steps, a dazed look on his face when he hit the bottom.

Naruto undid his transformation. “HAH! GOTCHA, YOU PERVERTED SAMURAI!” he shouted, laughing at Ekyt.

“CUT THE STUPID TRICKS! THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!!!” Ekyt shouted. **Whoa...deja vu deluxe...where have I heard this before?**

Naruto turned around to do a celebratory dance on the desks while the students cheered. To them, Ekyt was little more than a substitute teacher. And what are substitute teachers for but abusing?

Ekyt, wiping the blood away, saw his opportunity to take a page from Kakashi’s book. He took a deep stance behind Naruto, and made the Dragon hand sign.

“Konoha’s Secret Finger Technique: 1000 Years of Death!” Ekyt shouted. He jammed Naruto in the rectal area with the tiger handsign, then sent him sailing, bouncing his head off the ceiling.

After class, Ekyt met Iruka for ramen. Naruto was going to be joining them shortly. While he wasn't there, Ekyt recounted how the day had gone. Iruka laughed, he couldn't help it.

"Been there. Naruto snuck into class? That's ironic, he wouldn't come to class under his own power before! I remember when I caught him, after he defaced Hokage Mountain. Still that kid has a way of MAKING you believe in him. Looking at him now, I can't believe he's still the little prankster he used to be a couple years ago. Guess some things never change."

"He does at that," Ekyt agreed. "I see the next Naruto already. Naoto Urashi."

Iruka chuckled again. "Oh, Naoto. I probably should have warned you about him. He's not QUITE like Naruto. He's actually mean-spirited. He's got an ego as big as Naruto's mouth, because his family, the Urashi clan, is a big importer of good Konoha needs. So he thinks he can trash-talk anyone."

"Guess how long I put up with it for?" Ekyt said with a laugh. "I pulled a bone out of my shoulder, and he fainted. Then he tried genjutsu on me. I really thought about putting one on him, but Naruto kind of interrupted that. It would have been fun to see what images his mind conjured up with a genjutsu..."

Iruka was enjoying the banter. He talked about his mishaps with his two students. But he had one more question for Ekyt.

"Have you told Sakura yet? I mean, she's free now..." Iruka was an intelligent man. It was kind of unspoken, but he and Anko Mitarashi had been dating on and off. Maybe not dating, but they were the same age, and hung out, and had similar positions.

"I haven't told her how I feel, no. It don't want it to seem like I was waiting for her and Sasuke to fall apart. That's partially the truth of it. But I WANTED them to be happy. Oh well. At least I've got a reason to watch the chunin exams this year, instead of trying to dodge them."

That was when it clicked with Ekyt. "Who's your third member, Iruka-sensei? You've Yuuka Momoka, Okkuu Kazuki...but who's the third?"

Iruka shrugged. "Well, no one is NEAR ready...and my personal choice *retired*, so I don't know..." Now Iruka was smiling widely. **Take the bait, Ekyt! Naruto went to a lot of work to make sure you'd come out of retirement like this. Naruto...a hard of gold, and a head of rock!**

"Retired? You don't mean- me?" Ekyt stammered knocking hot ramen into his lap. "YEOW! Sonofadog, that burns!" Ekyt cursed leaping up and trying to walk the pain off.

"Yes, I mean you. But since you're retired...(big fake sigh)I guess I'll just have to put an untalented genin at risk. It's a shame, you could have been chunin, and then trained your replacement on my team. Oh well, too late, you retired so- huh?"

"Pardonmelruka-sensei, gottaseeHokage!" Ekyt was off and running tripping over his own feet. Iruka sat back and smiled. **Tsunade knows, of course. It's about time that kid got a break. And I'll worry less about my kids taking the chunin exams if they're with him. They're still pretty raw, but passable. They've got natural talent, and a well-rounded warrior like Ekyt would help smooth**

their edges.

Ekyt sped up, aiming for the window. What he didn't know was that Shizune had just cleaned the window.

BONK!

Tsunade turned around just in time to see Ekyt hit the window. He stuck there for a moment (kind of like one of those "stuck on me" Garfield figures, lol), then peeled off the window, falling onto the ledge below. Tsunade shook her head, giggling merrily.

"Men are idiots...I guess we'd better open the window. I forgot that's how he usually makes his entrance. TONTON!"

Tsunade heard the pig's squeals and oinks all down the hallway. Invariably, Tonton managed to hit Genma Shiranui's foot, and every time he cursed: "You damn pig! If you didn't belong to the Hokage, I'd make you into sausage patties!"

Tsunade shook her head. **You'd think he'd learn to move by now. It's not like Tonton runs quietly, she's a pig! Oh, right, Ekyt. I'd better let him in.**

"Yes, Cell 16, Kaguya, Ekyt. But you just retired...don't you want to stay that way?" Tsunade asked, trying to stay serious. **Only Naruto could concoct such a scenario...he finds a way to pull this depressed kid out of retirement, give his life meaning again, and get him what he wants. Even I'M starting to believe Naruto will be Hokage some day.**

"If I have to, I will. But if I can be on Iruka-sensei's team, I want to be...If there's finally a place for me, that's what I've wanted all along." Ekyt looked embarrassed, prompting Tsunade to, of course, take advantage.

Tsunade gave him a smirk. "Well, how can I say no to that face? But understand this: I expect you to carry this team. They are in the exams because you have the ability to protect them. If anything happens to them, it's on your head. I don't want two dead genin. I want three living chunin."

"I understand. Also...if I may...I miss ANBU...now that I've taken a life, I want to go back- after I've proven everyone wrong and become a chunin. Thank you, Tsunade-sama, for believing in me. You were the last holdout. The others might hate me, but they believe in me. You might be the first to be both," Ekyt added with a smile. Tsunade rolled her eyes, then ruffled Ekyt's hair.

“Just go and win, okay? THEN you can fight Naruto again, and get your win there. And maybe that’ll give you the courage to tell a certain kunoichi how you feel, hmm?” Tsunade couldn’t resist teasing Ekyt, he was an easy target. She was shocked when he fired back, though.

Ekyt, whose good mood had peaked, smiled widely. “Okay. I will...It’s been you all along, Tsunade-sama. I’ve dreamt about you every night. Marry me, and let’s have ten kids!” Ekyt offered.

Shizune cracked up. Not even Tsunade had seen that coming. Once the shock wore off, Tsunade found herself laughing at the joke.

“One of a kind...that’s what you are. One of a kind...Thank God.”

Ekyt agreed. “Thank God indeed. So, when are the chunin exams?”

Tsunade tapped a calendar on her desk. One date had a red circle around it. The 2nd...tomorrow.

“Um, that’s tomorrow, right?” Ekyt asked, a sweatdrop growing in size on his head.

“Yup. ‘fraid so kiddo. Maybe you’d better go meet your squad. Oh, and while you’re out, Sakura will be teaching, so don’t worry about that. In fact, you might find yourself lecturing at the 3rd part of the chunin exams: I’ve asked Sakura to bring your class along. After seeing you fight, maybe you’ll garner a little more respect from them. I heard you’ve met the Urashi kid.”

Ekyt shook his head. “Let me guess: Iruka sent him to you more than once?”

“That, and he tried to deface my office when I called him a nasty little prick,” Tsunade added, flicked one pigtail aside. “Now, go meet your team!”

“But you never said if you’d marry me or not...” Ekyt protested, leaping out the door. A fraction of a second later, Tsunade’s calendar hit where his head had been with enough force to dent the wall.

“That kid...well, he’s finally getting his chance to prove us all wrong. I’d bet on him, but that’s bad luck-for him...”

43 - The Written Exams

Iruka and his new squad, Okkuu Kazuki and Yuuka Momoka, waited for their third member to arrive. Okkuu and Yuuka were excited to be meeting the 'Dragon Boy'. The two of them had been friends since childhood, and their parents were close. That was how they had heard of Ekyt's stunning win over Orochimaru, and his loss to Naruto Uzumaki.

"Man...he really fought Orochimaru...a legend...and won! I can't wait to meet this guy!" Okkuu had met Ekyt once before, but wasn't aware of it at the time. Ekyt had been a sub for Iruka one day, and Okkuu had been pretty rotten to him. But now, a year later, Okkuu wasn't a brat any longer. He was standing tall in his red and black uniform, with his black hair like a brillo pad. **With this guy on our team, we can't lose! He's even taken the exams before, so he can tell us what's coming!**

"It must have been scary...and then he had to retire...I feel bad for him...my father says that he should have been a jonin two years ago. I wonder why he's not?" Yuuka wondered. Yuuka was a kind-hearted kunoichi. Unlike the other girls, she wasn't boy-obsessed. She was content to wait for the right guy to come along. She was also more skilled than anyone realized. When she was younger, her mother had taught her the "chakra scalpel" and certain mixtures and salves for medical use. Yuuka was, sadly, forced to use those skills one day to escape her would-be kidnappers. She was emotionally scarred by the incident at the time, though time had also healed her wounds. Mostly, anyway. She still had nightmares about the filthy Mist-Village thugs, grabbing her and trying to take her away...

"Sorry I'm late, no one told me the exams were tomorrow," said the newly-arrived Ekyt. Okkuu's mouth dropped open.

"YOU?! YOU'RE THE 'DRAGON BOY'?!" he shouted.

Ekyt looked Okkuu up and down. "Do I know you? Oh, of course, Okkuu! That's right. It's been a while, hasn't it? Still hate my guts?"

Okkuu was taken aback by Ekyt's friendliness. "Uh, no. But I DO plan on beating you up for that trick someday! Showing me your ruined eye just because I played an innocent prank was mean!"

Yuuka bowed politely. "Do you remember me, too?"

Ekyt thought for a moment, tapping his chin. "Yuuka...that's right! I remember you were the only one who could answer my trick question about transformation jutsus."

Iruka smiled at his new group. "Well, the chunin exams are tomorrow. All I can say- good luck, do your best, and..." Iruka froze up. His eyes met Ekyt's momentarily, and Ekyt nodded, conveying some message.

“And remember- your lives are the most important thing there. No rank can replace your life. At the same time, think of your team. And I promise both of you: I won’t let you die. That’s a promise.”

“Thanks. You see, Ekyt here has taken the exams before, and knows the speech by heart. Since he’s the one who’s with you and not me, he had to say it. Now, if things get sticky, I want you to trust Ekyt. He’s never steered a fellow Shinobi wrong, and he’s one reason you’re getting to test so early. You’re largely untested genin, while he’s been a genin for a long time. As your parents have told you, and me, for that matter, he is at a jonin level. So, if push comes to shove, trust him. The chunin exams aren’t always...well...safe.” Iruka was tripping over his words. Luckily, Ekyt picked up for him.

“When I took the exams last, I was sabotaged by a sensei. Before that, when you were just starting at the academy, Orochimaru attacked. The exams cause people to be unscrupulous, and evil. That’s partly why I came out of retirement: I’d never forgive myself if something happen to anyone in the village that I could have prevented. That, and I want that vest. So, here’s how the chunin exams work:

Part 1- written test- All applicants are given a written exam. You’re not supposed to know the answers, you’re supposed to cheat to get them, without getting caught. If you don’t know how to do that, then leave your sheet blank. The tenth question, which is verbal, is the only one that counts, anyway. The tenth question is that of your courage. Look over at me during that question, and do what I do.

Part 2- Forest of Death survival- We’ll have five days to collect two scrolls. One the “Heaven” scroll, the other the “Earth” scroll. But the forest of death is full of other Shinobi, as well as giant animals, and poisons. So you can’t drop your guard.

Part 3- the Fight- This is where teams are turned against each other. You might have to fight each other, you might have to fight me. Win, lose, or draw, HOW you fight will decide if you’re a chunin or not.”

“We’re-supposed to cheat on a test? Isn’t that- wrong?” Yuuka had never so much as stolen a cookie before dinner, let alone cheat on a test, so this was a shock.

“Yuuka, you might not have to worry, you’ll know all the answers. I will to. Okkuu, the questions are BEYOND genin level, and as I recall from grading your paper, it’s not your strong suit to...remember useless information. And, no offense, but you aren’t ‘subtle’ either. I want you to trust Yuuka and I with the information part of the test. On the last question, I want both of you to do what I do.” Ekyt was suddenly closer to being Ibikki than his normal Kakashi-ish personality. Iruka noticed this grave behavior, and had to ask Ekyt about it.

Sakura and Lee came running towards Ekyt. Ekyt should have suspected something, but simply turned to face them. Since he had come out retirement, he was wearing a long, black trench coat. Under one sleeve a kunai on a string was hidden, giving Ekyt the chance to simply flick his wrist and be armed.

“EKYT-KUN!” Sakura shouted. She left the ground, and caught Ekyt with a flying hug.

“Kiss me! I can’t take it! Kiss me!” she shouted. Then, grinning wickedly, and pinning him down by

sitting on his chest, Sakura said "Release!", and became

"NARUTO? GET OFF ME, YOU SICK PERV!" Ekyt shouted, kicking Naruto off, all while cracking up himself. He, Lee, and Naruto were in tears, they were laughing so hard.

"A-April Fools, perv!" Naruto declared.

"Y-Yes! We fooled you!" Lee added.

"Yeah, you got me!" Ekyt said, laughing. He put his arms around his friend's shoulders- then bashed their heads together!

"April Fools, doges," Ekyt muttered, still smiling. "Consider that payback for class yesterday, Naruto. And Lee...well, that Konoha Whirlwind you hit me with the other day really left a mark, so there's payback there! Good joke, though, guys. You had me there, for a minute! If you hadn't picked Sakura as the target, I would have fallen for it!"

"Is this perv really going to help us, Iruka-sensei?" Okkuu asked, a sweatdrop forming on his head.

"Yeah. Don't ask. THAT was just what Ekyt needed. Anyway, you've met him, you're dismissed. Go home and rest up, tomorrow's a big day," Iruka told them brightly. **Ekyt...c'mon, you've gotta get your head on straight, we need you here! With the Akatsuki around, and the Sound Village more than a little angry...you've got to protect those kids. We KNOW you can handle you- but do YOU know it?**

-----THE NEXT MORNING-----

"I am Ibikki Morino, the proctor for the written portion of the chunin exams..."

Okkuu sat back and watched Ekyt, like he had been told. Yuuka was listening as well. **Those two are gonna answer the questions. Ekyt's right, it's not my thing, putting pencil to paper. I'm better with putting foot to @\$\$! I just want this damn test to be over with. The fight is what I'm waiting for!**

Yuuka, sitting up front, and ten spots over from Ekyt's window seat, listened intently as the INCREDIBLY scary instructor laid out the rules. Yuuka was also watching Ekyt. She hadn't seen him do anything other than nod occasionally, or tap his pencil. He was listening, leaning forward slightly.

Ibikki explained all the intricacies, and how your team was in danger if you screwed up. A few ninja left the room, along with their teams. Ibikki's mind games had been too much for them. And this was before the test began! To most students, the classroom was closing in, and incredibly hot. Everyone looked menacing. Pencils became kunai, the proctors became unsmiling demons, with swords burning with the fires of hell. Yuuka and Okkuu started to panic. Ekyt looked over at them, then stood up.

"Release." The one, dull word snapped the remaining Shinobi out of it. A few ran screaming from the room. One even dove out through a closed window. More than half the people who had started by taking the test were now gone. Ibikki, knowing Ekyt was a harder nut to crack, smirked as he stepped forward, right in front of the young man. He was taller than Ekyt by at least four inches, as if the scars and demeanor weren't imposing enough. The other students gulped. It looked like their savior had been caught.

"Who gave you permission to use that technique?" Ibikki didn't need to yell to make himself heard. The classroom was silent.

"Every good sensei I've ever had has told me to protect my team. That was my only goal." Ekyt's answer was just as harsh as Ibikki's question. None of the other genin knew, of course, but Ekyt was a student on Ibikki's, with both of them being in the same division of ANBU: Torture and Interrogation. The division that took people's minds and twisted them until insanity was welcome relief. Ekyt wasn't as harsh as Ibikki, but as a result, his genjutsu was powerful, and his knowledge of it deeper than almost anyone's. That was why Ekyt had used a 'blanket release', ending the genjutsu for everyone.

Ibikki walked away, concealing a real smile on his harsh face. "I'm glad one of you knuckleheads figured out the genjutsu. Now, the test- you've heard the rules, I'm not repeating them. Pick up your pencils and...Begin!"

Everyone put their pens to their papers, but only four students were writing anything. Ekyt, Yuuka, and two other Leaf genin were blazing through the test. Ekyt was done in twenty minutes, Yuuka in thirty-three. Okkuu hadn't touched his paper, except for question 7, which he somehow knew.

All too soon for most, the time was up. And it was the dreaded tenth question. Ekyt looked at his two team mates, nodding reassuringly. They returned the nod, but they weren't reassured; they were scared as hell!

"The tenth question is pass or fail. If you choose to answer the question, and do so correctly, you move on to the next phase of the chunin exams. If you choose to answer, but you answer incorrectly- you AND your team are barred from taking the chunin exams ever again. HOWEVER (Ibikki had to raise his voice over the roar of protests), you can also choose NOT to answer. IF you choose not to answer, you'll be disqualified, but you can take the test again. Your team will also be disqualified, in effect. So, choose now. Who wants to leave? Better safe than sorry..."

There was silence once more. One genin finally cracked, and sobbed, apologizing to his team as he walked out the door. But that was it. No one else cracked. Yuuka and Okkuu had thought of it, no question- but one look at Ekyt, who hadn't batted an eye, and they settled down.

"Well, then. To those of you remaining- congratulations. You've passed the written test. Confused? Let me explain: This test was designed to see if you would think as an individual while considering your team. It's a real option that you might have to chose between yourself and your team. Make the wrong choice, and everyone suffers. There IS no way to avoid pain in the Shinobi world. But you CAN avoid losing lives needlessly. All of you who stayed showed that you'd share your team's burden, pain or even death. You deserve to be called chunin...for now. The next exam proctor will arrive shortly, so I'd suggest being re"

CRASH!

The window exploded, and a figure leapt in. As one the class took cover. Except Ekyt, he had leapt in front of Yuuka, and used a clone jutsu to protect Okkuu. He knew who it was, but you could never be too sure, not in this world...

44 - The Forest of Death

The window shattered, sending shards of glass flying toward the stunned genin. Ekyt was the only one who thought to actually get up and defend his team against the 'threat'. He was SURE it was just the next proctor, but better safe than sorry. Silence once again prevailed in the classroom. Though, that might have been because the girls were scared and the guys were in love!

At first glance, the woman who jumped through the window appeared to be wearing an open trench coat and a mesh, full-body jumpsuit. There were a few audible groans upon the realization that the 'mesh' was actually chain mail, and that it was opaque. While reeling from that, they heard the next proctor speak for the first time. She barked orders, like a drill sergeant, but stopped in mid-sentence upon seeing who was standing.

"Striking Shadow Snakes!" Anko yelled. Four hissing snakes burst from under her right wrist and snared Ekyt around the waist. He couldn't move, Yuuka was right behind him. So he let the snakes reel him in. Soon, he was face to face with a proctor that was just as scary as Ibikki, in her own way!

"Finishing that attack is a great way to ensure your death. You should know that by now, Ekyt," Anko said, holding Ekyt close with the snakes.

"Of course. Sorry Anko-sensei. You surprised me, and I don't take surprises well." Ekyt finally returned Anko's smile.

"And YOU surprised ME! With that @\$\$, Ebisu, against you, I didn't think I'd be seeing you here again. Oh well. Just pass this time, alright?" Anko chuckled as she let Ekyt down to the floor. The hissing snakes retracted once more, back into Anko's wrist.

"Alright, maggots, listen up! Follow me to your next test!"

The genin marched behind Anko as she led them to parts unknown. Except to Ekyt. He knew the Forest of Death was coming. He had a vague worry about it, but not like the others. HIS worry was that, since his name appeared to be spreading, that he might be a target. And he wasn't worried for HIS sake. If he got killed or captured, that meant his team was also in danger. Not only that, they would be removed from the exams. Ekyt clenched a fist, the sound of his leather glove tightening heard only to him as they marched across the grass.

"THIS- is the Forest of Death. Yes, people DO actually die in there. Ya just gotta hope that YOU are strong enough to survive, while obtaining both a heaven and earth scroll. Now, each team has received either a heaven OR and earth scroll. To be allowed access to the tower in the center of the Forest, you must have both. This means that half the teams left will be eliminated..."

Anko surveyed the genin. There was one team from the Sound Village, two from the Mist, one from the Rain, and one from the Leaf.

Ibikki must have really scared the hell out of those kids! There are only 18 participants, out of the 60-something that started! And only one Leaf? Damn, I hope they make it. Losing on your home turf is embarrassing. ESPECIALLY if you have someone who should be a jonin on your team...

All too soon, it was time to go. Ekyt and his squad raced into the field. Almost immediately, they were jumped. Well, Ekyt was. The two Mist village teams had been waiting for them.

Damnit...what can I do? Only one option...

Ekyt threw the scroll to Okkuu. "Run for it! I'll hold them off! I'll find you guys. Protect that scroll, and get the other, if you can!"

"But Ekyt-sempai, we shouldn't leave you!" Yuuka fretted. Not that she WANTED to fight against 2-1 odds, but still...

"Remember what Iruka-sensei said? Run!" Ekyt shouted. His two teammates took off like jackrabbits. Three of the Mist ninja tried to get away, but Ekyt used a quick genjutsu on them, then threw them into each other. The other three attacked at once, but were singed by Ekyt's 'Dragon's Encampment Wall'. Ekyt knew he couldn't do this forever, and he couldn't get away...but he had to buy his team some more time. If the two Mist teams were tied up with him, then they weren't attacking Yuuka and Okkuu. At least not yet. Before long, The six Mist ninja piled on, finally besting Ekyt after a fierce ten-minute struggle. But Ekyt had done his job- his squad should be long gone.

Yuuka and Okkuu ducked under an outcropping of tree root, panting heavily.

"Ekyt-sempai- we've got to get him back!" Yuuka said.

"I know. But- hey! Look at this!" Okkuu was looking at the scroll Ekyt had thrown to him. "This is a fake!"

"Huh? A fake? But why? Unless he has some plan...He kept them occupied for us to get away, while he kept the scroll."

"I get it!" Okkuu said suddenly, his voice intense. "You can't even torture someone into giving up info they don't know! They think we've got the scroll, so they'll go after us. Ekyt passed off a fake, since they wouldn't expect their prisoner to have the REAL scroll. But that doesn't matter. What matters is getting the other scroll, and rescuing Ekyt." Okkuu said decisively, standing up and clenching a fist heroically. Yuuka stood up, too, clenching her fists as well, but for a different reason.

"Well, WHAT do we have here?!" a menacing voice wearing a Rain village hitai-ate asked.

“Oh...damn,” Okkuu muttered.

WHAP!

“I said start talking!” WHAP!

Ekyt reeled with the blow from the belt, made into a whip for the purpose of torture.

“Go to hell.” Ekyt said flatly. This sent one Mist Shinobi over the edge. For five seconds, he threw every punch he could at Ekyt, who, with his arms behind his back, couldn't fight. At the end, his lip was cut, his eyes were black and swollen, and his ribs felt bruised, at least.

“He can't talk if you kill him, idiot! THAT'S why you cause pain. Like this...”

Slowly, agonizingly, Ekyt felt a kunai trace down the right side of his face. It bit into his skin, starting just above his eyebrow, then down his cheek, ending at his chin. It wasn't a deep cut, but there was a lot of blood, regardless. And it hurt. The Shinobi wielding the kunai stepped back, as if an artist admiring his greatest work. Ekyt was sure the clown thought the whole thing was artistic, in a freakish way. But he couldn't do anything about it. Not yet.

“I'm not telling you anything, scumbags. I don't care if there are six of you, or six hundred of you, I'm not going to rat out my village, or my team. The more time you waste here with me, the less chance you have of getting a scroll. Unless you plan to take one from each other? Is that it, you're playing 'for the good of the Mist village?'. That's real special, guys. And ladies, sorry.”

That's when Ekyt saw his opening. The kunai blade that had been used to carve him up was to the left of his head. If he moved just right...

To Okkuu's surprise, Yuuka ran forward and cut through the Rain ninja. Her hand was glowing with blue energy. The Rain ninja leapt backward, to his friends, holding his cut side.

“What did she do to you?!” the kunoichi of the group exclaimed to what was apparently her boyfriend.

“Agh...the little dog...used Chakra scalpel and cut my tendons...”

“I'll kill her, you just rest!” the kunoichi told her boyfriend. She threw ten senbon, all of them aimed at Yuuka. But Yuuka was rooted to the spot by a sudden rush of fear.

I'm going to die...

“Move! Ah, damn!” Okkuu leapt in the way, all ten kunai striking him. He yelled out with pain,

staggering, then falling forward.

“Okkuu!” Yuuka rushed to his side. He was alive, but injured. NOW Yuuka was mad.

“You dog!” she snarled. Without thinking, Yuuka rushed three, more-experienced Shinobi head-on.

Ekyt flung his leg out, trapping the ‘artist’s’ leg against the tree Ekyt was tied to. The Shinobi fell forward, just as Ekyt flung his head into a pressure point on the chin. The kunai dug into the tree. Ekyt quickly cut himself free with it, moving his wrist back and forth against the blade. His pressure point attack had rendered one of the six unconscious. That was one less problem. Five others were still in his way. One of them suddenly hit the ground screaming.

“Genjutsu...funny how the brain is used so often, and yet so weak...” Ekyt said placidly. THEN he zipped forward, a Dynamic Entry the pain du jour for his first target. After ricocheting off his face, Ekyt brought his other leg around, cracking him in the nose. From there, Ekyt dodged a kunai-attack backward. Said kunai was thrown at him. Ekyt flicked his wrist, arming himself with his own, and knocked the kunai down. As the rival Shinobi marveled where the knife came from, Ekyt kicked him swiftly in the knee, breaking it. (Fact- it only takes 7 lbs of pressure to break a knee cap!) That took care of three of six Mist ninja. Ekyt decided to end this quickly. Ordinarily, he would have conserved chakra here, but with his team possibly in danger, he decided not to waste time.

“Fire Release: Dragon’s Circle!” Ekyt used his signature Dragon’s Ember Jutsu, but kept the fire in his palm. One punch, down went one burnt assailant. A kick, a second would-be attacker was clutching his now-burnt groin. The third and last opponent, a kunoichi, got a crescent kick, arching fire in front of her face, then a back kick to the gut, creating a large burn mark on her stomach.

Ekyt panted with the effort, but ended his jutsu satisfied. As an after thought, he relieved both teams of their scrolls. One scroll he cut to pieces with his kunai. The other scroll he pocketed. It was the earth scroll, the one his team needed to take the next part of the exams.

The Rain Shinobi smirked as Yuuka rushed in at him. He slashed at her with a metal gauntlet, only to see her evaporate.

“Clone? Where are you?!”

From behind, Yuuka kicked him, but she might as well have pinched him. Her target was 200 lbs, and he didn’t even feel the kick’s power, which would have dropped someone of normal size for a 13 year old. He grabbed Yuuka around her slim wrists.

Yuuka stifled her tears. **No! I won’t cry! Okkuu was so brave, to save me like that! I’ll fight!**

“Striking Shadow Snakes!”

Four snakes wrapped themselves around one of the rain ninja. He was pulled behind a tree, where he screamed, then was returned to the other side of the tree, bloodied and unconscious. This caused a distraction long enough for Yuuka to kick her assailant in the groin, forcing him to let go and grab said appendage, tears streaming down his face. Just as she back-flipped away, a blur came flying in front of her and put the Rain genin into a tree, maybe six inches in to the three-foot thick tree. The last of the Rain genin ran at Yuuka, who raised a guard. But she didn't have to worry.

“Ekyt!” Yuuka said, relief dripping into her voice.

Ekyt didn't respond. Instead, he stepped to the side of the attacker while grabbing him around the neck. When Ekyt threw his weight forward, he sent the genin sailing away, where he cracked his head on a rock. Ekyt slid backward on one knee in the dirt, breathing hard from the effort.

“Yuuka, are you alright?” he asked immediately.

“Yes. I'm fine. But Okkuu...” Yuuka looked at him sadly. Okkuu's limp for was just where she had left it.

“Yuuka...those needles were dipped in poison...I can save him, but you'll need to patch him up. While I do my work, find the scroll that the Rain Ninja were carrying, and destroy it. I've already got both of ours.”

Ekyt went to work, praying that all his time studying the “Poison Removal Jutsu” had been good. After ten minutes of work, Ekyt had most of the poison out of Okkuu's system. Only one bit remained, and it was needed to be removed with a cut.

“Yuuka, use your chakra scalpel just under Okkuu's right knee. Some poison is going to come out. We caught it in time. He'll be fine.”

Yuuka hugged Ekyt, thanking him. Ekyt patted her on the head, then stood watch as Yuuka patched Okkuu up with her chakra scalpel.

Okkuu woke up, groggily. The first thing he was Yuuka's concerned face.

“Yuuka...you...okay?” he managed, sitting up.

“I'm fine, Okkuu...really...” Yuuka said around tears. They were tears of relief, and of something else. Okkuu, being clueless, didn't know what.

“Are you sure? You seem...Ah! (Okkuu tests his right knee, and it hurt like heck)...like there’s something going on in your head.” Okkuu winced, as it hurt to move.

Yuuka hesitated, then leaned forward and kissed Okkuu. Okkuu was shocked, and looked to Ekyt for a clue as to what to do. But Ekyt simply turned the other way, giving the two 13 year olds their privacy.

“I hope that was...okay...” Yuuka said nervously, smoothing her reddish-blond hair, and pulling her bangs out of her eyes.

“It was...thank you. I-I really care about you!” Okkuu sputtered.

“I care about you, too!”

Ekyt smiled to himself, feeling like the jonin in the situation. A part of him wondered if HE could have ever felt that love, if he had been normal. He also wondered if he ever would. No matter what he said about warriors, it was nice to be loved. But Ekyt didn’t understand that, not yet. In place of understanding was an unrequited feeling. **That could have been Sakura and I, if I had just said something...after the chunin exams, I’m going to tell her how I feel.**

“Come on, you two. Let’s get in the tower before we’re attacked. If anyone’s left. We destroyed two scrolls, kept one for ourselves, plus the other we had. Three teams were demolished, out of five. That means that only one other team could have passed...” Ekyt didn’t waste his words. The two behind him were in love, and he didn’t want to be in the way of that. So he simply walked into the tower, and waited for Okkuu and Yuuka to follow suit. Once they did, Ekyt opened the two scrolls (Since the other two were distracted).

BLAM!

“Oh, you made it? Congratulations!” said a familiar voice.

45 - Forest of Death: One Last Surprise!

Ekyt sensed it suddenly. Two figures. Both in the cloud of smoke. He knew them all too well.

“Run... don’t ask, get Lady Tsunade, and whoever else you can. Just run- GO!” Ekyt said, giving his teammates a push in the right direction.

“Why, sempai?” Okkuu wanted to know. He was hardly in shape to run.

“Tell her that the Akatsuki are here. Just go, run for it! Take this (pre-signed summoning scroll) and use it if you get into trouble!” Ekyt shouted, throwing the scroll over his shoulder. Yuuka caught it and helped Okkuu out the door.

Ekyt glared at Sasori and Deidara.

“What is it you want?” Ekyt finally asked, after seeing enough of the two artists smirking.

“We were expecting the Kyuubi, not you. One team from the Leaf, the one sure place to find Naruto Uzumaki...” Sasori growled, a long tail swishing behind him.

“You don’t keep up with the times, do you? Naruto was promoted over a month ago. He’s not here.”

“That’s a shame, un. But since your friend nearly killed Master Sasori...maybe some retribution is in order?” Deidara’s hand was lapping away at a bit of clay happily. “This is a new one, un. One of my favorites!” The hand finally spat out a crow. Ekyt watched as it slowly turned black, instead of the normal clay-colored substance Deidara usually produced. The bird turned toward Ekyt, and cawed.

“A sign of death in some mythology, the crow. Ironic that it’s exactly the last thing you’re going to see, isn’t it?” Sasori muttered. “My poison, with his explosives, create a volatile mix. If the explosion doesn’t get you, the poison gasses will. Even if you’re wearing that mask, it’ll seep through...not to mention kill anyone who DOESN’T know about it. So, if he detonates this latest creation, anyone who might be able to rescue you will be killed. And you, of course, will be. Survive the explosion, survive the gasses, it doesn’t matter- you won’t survive us!”

The crow ‘cawed’ again, still perched on Deidara’s arm. One black eye was fixed on Ekyt. Even it could see the sweat on Ekyt’s face.

“Lady Hokage! Lady Hokage!” Yuuka, soon followed by a limping Okkuu, burst into Tsunade’s office. Okkuu collapsed in a chair. Shizune tended to him immediately. She was relieved to find it was just

fatigue and an injured leg.

“What is it?” Tsunade got up quickly, alarmed.

“Ekylt-sempai sent me! In the forest of death! He says the A-Aka-...some cloaked guys are here! He’s fighting them, he sent us away!”

“Damn! Yuuka, you stay here. Shizune, you tend to them. If Ekylt’s there, and he bothered to summon me, there’s really trouble!” Tsunade took off at run, zipping toward the Forest of Death. **Damn...what could they want with him? His chakra is useless...and he won’t join them...What are they after? Or who?**

Sasori and Deidara looked at Eky.

“Scared, un?” Deidara crowed. (Yes, bad pun!)

“No. Thinking, you blonde dumbass,” Ekylt shot back. “I just can’t tell...are you a boy or a girl? I’d like to know if you’re going to kill me.”

Deidara (Complete with the red ‘anger’ symbol on his head), shouted back “I’m a boy, you idiot! How can you not tell?!”

Sasori shook his head. “Don’t fall for his stupid tricks, Deidara. He’s obviously trying to get you to drop your guard. Don’t fall for it.”

“Hey, don’t try to guess what I’m doing! I COULD be asking her on a date,” Ekylt said smugly. THAT sent Deidara into a rage, giving Ekylt the opportunity he had been waiting for.

Gotta tie up his hands, so he can’t detonate that thing...Sasori, his whole body is dangerous, but it’s still made of wood...

Ekylt was skilled with certain genjutsu to the point of not needing handsigns. He used the Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique silently on Sasori and Deidara. They both froze up. They hadn’t seen it coming. That left Ekylt time to use a Dragon’s Ember jutsu of Sasori. He couldn’t stop his body from burning until he broke the powerful genjutsu. As for Deidara, Ekylt could only do one thing. In his beaten state, it was going to hurt, but there was little choice. Summoning his Emotional Chakra to his fingertips, with the kanji for ‘wind’ on his index finger, ‘Heaven’ on his middle finger, ‘earth’ on his ring finger, ‘water’ on his pinky, and ‘void’ on his thumb, Ekylt used a “Five Elements Sealing” jutsu on Deidara’s arm. It was a temporary seal, but SHOULD last long enough.

That was really all Ekylt could do. After being in the forest for two days, coupled with his injuries, his chakra was incredibly low, as was his general stamina. So far, Deidara and Sasori hadn’t thrown off the Genjutsu yet. But they would, Ekylt knew. If Deidara didn’t have that crow-thing, Ekylt could have just ran for it. But if that thing detonated, who knew what kind of damage it would cause? It wasn’t a risk Ekylt was going to take, by any means.

Slowly, Sasori's burning wooden hands formed the 'release' sign, and he could move again. Deidara snapped out of the genjutsu too, but his arm was locked into position, so he couldn't detonate the crow.

Sasori's tail swung at Ekyt, who managed to leap back just as it crashed down, taking out several floorboards with it. Landing gracefully on the stairs to the next level of the tower, Ekyt dashed up them. He was fairly certain his own life was forfeit at this point. **But a fall from this height would kill those two...even if he DOES hit me with that poison, I'll knocking him and that blonde thing off the roof, or put them through the floor. At least the blonde is neutralized, for the moment. That just leaves that puppet guy...I'd almost rather have Itachi to deal with. I'm more experienced with genjutsu than poisons...probably WHY Sasori was sent. And Itachi...he'll be after his brother soon. In fact...today! Today's the anniversary of when the Uchiha clan perished...Sasuke is no match for Itachi, not yet...Itachi MUST know that...he's after something Sasuke has...but what? Damn, it's hard to think when you're running for your life!**

Minutes later, Ekyt hit the top of the tower. Panting, he turned to face the door. The Akatsuki members were up seconds later.

"End of the road for you, un," Deidara said menacingly.

"Oh, please, YOU aren't even a threat! You should really be talking, you weirded out Picasso wanna-be!" Ekyt snarled. With his chakra so low, all he could do now was braking out his Striking Serpent Blades and fight...and pray.

Tsunade reached the tower, took one look inside, seeing the crushed floorboards, and sprinted up the stairs. There was a trail made by charred wood that worried her. She could also see muddy footprints about that matched Ekyt's boots. Tsunade prayed she wasn't too late.

I don't care HOW talented he is, or how much potential he has! That's the Akatsuki he's facing. But worrying won't do me any good. I've got to get to the top of this tower, and now!

"Will he be okay, Shizune-sensei?" Yuuka asked, tugging at the headband on her arm nervously. She hadn't rested since she and Okkuu got here. She was too worried for his sake. **He's not such a jerk anymore...he matured...into something cute. Maybe he IS the right boy...that kiss said he was...or am I desperate for romance?** Yuuka knew otherwise. She really DID care about Okkuu.

Shizune looked up at Yuuka, smiling comfortingly. "He just needs rest and a cast around his lower leg. He'll be ready to go when the 3rd part of the chunin exams come."

"Oh, thank you!" Yuuka finally sat down, holding Okkuu's hand. She felt him squeeze briefly. Yuuka took that as a sign that he was okay.

“Now, are YOU okay, Yuuka? If you saw the Akatsuki...” Shizune shuddered at the thought. She was as tough as they came, but still, those cloaked villains would scare ANYONE.

“I’m okay. Ekyt-sempai took care of it. Iruka-sensei told us to listen to him, and he told us to find Lady Tsunade. I hope he’s okay, he got captured by the Mist ninja. Then he came and saved me and Okkuu, and he said that he had ruined the Mist Ninja’s scrolls. Then he took out the Rain Ninja for attacking us. We got our two scrolls, and that was it. Shizune-sensei, if we passed, who else passed? No Mist, No Rain...who’s left.”

Shizune tried to keep the worry out of her voice. “The Sound Village, Yuuka...the...Sound...Village...”

Tsunade ran up the stairs, hitting the top floor, and immediately saw Ekyt grappling with Sasori. Ekyt’s swords were keeping him at bay, but it was clear he was tiring. Ekyt made eye contact with Tsunade, trying to convey a message. Tsunade didn’t care what that message was. Instead, she bashed her heel onto the ceiling, creating a huge crater that was growing, and it was aiming for Sasori. Ekyt knocked one of Sasori’s attacks aside, then used what would amount to the last of his chakra:

“Dance of the Sick Moon!”

Ekyt’s two clones leapt toward Sasori, stabbing him straight through his ‘stomach’. They put their swords in, then kicked off just before Sasori’s tail destroyed them. All in the name of a diversion, as the growing chasm swallow Sasori up. Ekyt jumped to the side, tucking and rolling, with what amounted to the last of his stamina. He grunted in pain, but he was safe: the calvary had arrived.

“Lady Tsunade! Take the crow! Put it in a scroll or something before he can use his arm again! The seal I used won’t hold much longer!”

Tsunade nodded in response, snatching the crow from Deidara’s hurt arm. Tsunade paid the blood tribute, put the crow in the scroll, then sealed the scroll. Ekyt crawled over, and added a seal as well, with his Emotional Chakra. He finally passed out from no having no chakra or stamina left. But he had done his job, that was what mattered.

Tsunade punched Deidara, sending him down into the same hole as Sasori. Both of them disappeared in a puff of smoke. Satisfied, Tsunade picked up Ekyt’s body and put it across her shoulder.

He truly did...live up to the word ‘hero’, in every sense of the word today. Iruka can rest easy, he saved his team. And, for once, no nasty injures. He looks like hell, but he’ll be fine. Good job, kid. Now, rest up. You’ve got to be ready for those exams in a month...

Tsunade explained everything to Okkuu and Yuuka. The two went off, hand in hand, to give a report to Iruka. As they left, Sakura walked in. Out of habit, she put a washcloth on Ekyt’s forehead.

“So, he’s okay then...good. The class was wondering about him...” Sakura said quietly.

“Well, you know how he is- he’ll be in class tomorrow, to assure them all he’s okay. And...how are YOU taking this, Sakura?” Tsunade asked.

“Huh? Taking what?” Sakura asked, slightly defensively. Lady Tsunade turned away.

“Oh, just him being hurt. That’s all I meant.”

Yeah...He’s got it so bad for her...I wonder if she feels the same way...maybe I need to pair them up on missions to see where it leads...Sakura’s been mope-y since that whole Sasuke ordeal, and Ekyt is...Ekyt. Maybe this’ll snap them both out of it. For now, though, I’ll let Ekyt focus on his exams.

The next morning, Ekyt hobbled into the classroom, smiling merrily under his mask. He was bombarded with questions about the Akatsuki and how he had fought. The kids learned one thing: They respected Ekyt as a teacher now. Naoto, true to form, voiced the one question that Ekyt couldn’t answer.

“Who are you fighting?!”

Shouts of agreement hit Ekyt’s ears. Ekyt could only shrug.

“We’ll know in a month. You’re all welcome to watch.”

NEXT CHAPTER: EKYT’S SURPRISE OPPONENT

Naruto: hey, what about me?! I get top billing, not this clown! I want my part back, believe it! Next issue, I totally cheer Ekyt on! Yeah, that’s right! Me! I make people believe in themselves, look at Hinata! With my support, that pervy samurai can’t lose, believe it!”

46 - Chunin Exams: The Opponent is Revealed!

Sasuke waited. He KNEW his brother would show up. He just KNEW it. There was no more important date to Sasuke. All the turmoil of his normal life meant nothing on this night. He was going to kill Itachi. That was all that mattered. Itachi had to die. And he would.

The wind tossed Sasuke's hair, while his mind tossed memories around. Sasuke could clearly see himself running from the Uchiha dojo that night, a scared child. He watched himself become pale and cold, and watched his heart turn blacker. Was he evil? Sasuke didn't think so. But evil was in the eye of the beholder. Itachi had felt justified, but was viewed as evil. Maybe it was the same way with me, Sasuke wondered. Not that it mattered. Having people care about him was a luxury, not a necessity, Sasuke reasoned. A little seed of loyalty had been planted in his heart, though. The thought that Naruto and Sakura, and even Kakashi, hadn't given up on him, chasing him all that time...what little of Sasuke's heart WASN'T black felt welcome in the Leaf Village. He realized that the more powerful Shinobi were in Konoha. For a genin to defeat Orochimaru, that must mean that Orochimaru had little to offer, besides that curse mark. These thoughts were unique to Sasuke, though. He put them aside as he heard someone approaching.

"So you came..." Sasuke said threateningly, Sharingan glowing even at the black midnight sky.

Itachi didn't answer right away. He looked at the cracked Uchiha clan symbol. A fan, which was meant to fan the flames of passion for the Uchiha clan. After looking at the one he had cracked with a kunai all that time ago, Itachi spoke.

"Sasuke...is your hate strong enough yet?" Itachi asked slowly.

"How can you be so calm, Itachi? Just like when you killed the clan...except tonight, it's YOUR life that's going to end!" With that, Sasuke tore forward. Itachi went to side-kick Sasuke, but Sasuke's speed had increased, and he was behind Itachi before Itachi could move. Or so he thought. The reality was, Itachi had used a clone jutsu so quick that Sasuke hadn't caught it.

"Your hate is still weak...you haven't developed the Mangekyo Sharingan yet. You're a disappointment, Sasuke. You always had the potential to be greater than me, but you chose to cut corners on your way to power. My time is being wasted here." The real Itachi was standing on the roof, looking down at Sasuke.

"You're not running this time, Itachi!" Sasuke shouted.

"You're of no use to me if you don't develop the Mangekyo Sharingan...then, and only then, will your hate have grown enough to make you my equal. For now, you're a waste of time...little brother..."

Sasuke threw a kunai angrily at Itachi, who caught the kunai, before speaking one last harsh sentence.

"Still so far behind, Sasuke..."

Sasuke watched Itachi disappear. It began to rain, just as it had when Itachi left the clan. Sasuke looked up at the rain and the black clouds. The black clouds had no silver lining. Sasuke felt the same way, as though his life had no silver lining. Only one ray of sunshine peeked through the dark clouds of his life, and they were the death of his brother. It didn't happen today, and not as Sasuke had planned, but it would. Sasuke would MAKE it happen. He didn't believe in fate, not in the traditional sense. He believed that you made your own fate. And his fate was clear: Kill Itachi, and rebuild the Uchiha clan.

Rebuild the clan...that's why I've left part of my heart unblackened by angst...I need to love to rebuild the clan...

"Hold still, damnit!" Tsunade cursed as Ekyt squirmed away yet again. She had been chasing him around her office for the last ten minutes.

"I'm fine! Really, I'm fine!" Ekyt said, behind Tsunade's desk. Tsunade was on the other side, and starting to get annoyed. An idea crept into her head suddenly.

"IF YOU DON'T COOPERATE, I'LL HAVE SAKURA GIVE YOU A PROSTATE EXAM!"

Ekyt froze up, and Tsunade finally got a grip on him by leaping over her desk and pinning him down, an arm behind his back.

"I KNEW that would get you! Now, will you relax? It's not going to hurt, and it needs to be checked out! You took a huge beating, and I KNOW this is scary as hell, but you have to do it!" Tsunade pinned the elusive Ekyt to the ground, while Shizune and Sakura watched, sweatdrops on their heads.

"Did she really say...I would have to..." Sakura looked at Shizune.

"Don't ask me if she was serious or not, Sakura, I don't know. I don't WANT to know. She probably just said it to make him freeze up. You know how he is around kunoichi," Shizune said, trying not to giggle. **Lady Tsunade is into gossip, too. She's heard about Ekyt's feelings toward Sakura. Now she wants to know Sakura's feelings...seems like her time could be spent better...but she not drinking, or costing the village money...maybe I'll let this go...**

Sakura apparently found the humor in the situation, too. The prostate thing, that was funny. But, somehow, seeing this tough-as-nails Shinobi trying to squirm out from under Tsunade over a little medical procedure was funny.

"Ekyt-kun, relax! Just go along with it! I know, it's hard to just trust someone else with your life force, but it's only for a few seconds, and I'll be here. I won't let Lady Tsunade gamble away your soul, okay?"

"Like you could stop me..." Tsunade muttered with a derisive snort. "She's right. I need to make sure your body wasn't poisoned. The Mist and Rain ninja both use poison a lot. If you touched them, I have to make sure you're not dying without us noticing. Now, just behave for ten seconds...And if you use that

replacement jutsu you're thinking of, I WILL have you sedated. And it's not fun when you get sedated by me. I don't use needles, I use a kick to the nuts. Now, settle down!"

Ekyt finally did, just laying there on his stomach, looking defeated. Sakura and Shizune were laughing hysterically. Ekyt didn't share their merriment in his current position, THAT was for sure.

"Good. Now, don't use any chakra, just lay there...okay, here's the scalpel..."

Ekyt's head hit the floor. He was completely unconscious. Tsunade was sitting on his back, her hands in the Tiger sign. She was in a deep, meditative state. As good as she was, it took her only seconds to reach homeostasis (Complete relaxation), and a couple more seconds to scan Ekyt's body. It was free of poisons. Tsunade let both their conscious minds go back to their bodies.

"Was that so bad?" Tsunade asked, ruffling Ekyt's hair.

"What part? The mental torture you used to trap me, or the test itself?" Ekyt shot back. Tsunade chuckled at his predicament. Ekyt was clearly unhappy that he was being pinned to the floor.

"You know, kid, I'm kind of offended. I mean, you blush for OTHER kunoichi. If one sat on you like I am, you'd bust a capillary!"

Ekyt suddenly reddened. "Yeah, but I might have a shot with those other kunoichi. Unless you're saying I'd have a shot at you..."

Tsunade got the 'red lines of anger' on her head. "Of course not, you perv! Why are men so stupid?!"

"To make the women look smarter?" Ekyt asked, earning howls of laughter from Shizune and Sakura.

"You want that prostate exam?!" Tsunade threatened, but managed to laugh herself as she let Ekyt up from the ground. He scrambled to his feet, dignity shot to pieces.

"Sorry...it's just a really creepy feeling..." Ekyt murmured. "When the Akatsuki took my Emotional Chakra, I felt empty like that all the time. It's not like me to ignore a weakness like that, but I'm not over that. It felt like they had gotten part of my soul...but that's the past. The future is the chunin exams. Did Yuuka and Okkuu make it alright?" Ekyt suddenly thought to ask.

"The two lovebirds are fine. I had them report to Iruka. You should, too. Especially since the next phase of the chunin exams is tomorrow. It might be the last time you three are on the same team. Sakura, you walk him to Iruka, that procedure might have left him unsteady in his weakened state."

"So, the Akatsuki really attacked again?" Sakura shook her head. "It's a good thing we have human dynamo's like you and Naruto around!"

"It's nice of you to say that..." Ekyt said quietly. "...I just can't help wondering if I'm not as good a

Shinobi as Naruto...or anyone. Seems I get hurt a lot..."

Sakura shrugged. "Yeah, but you also do an insane training regimen, and you don't back down from anyone. You and Naruto are always getting hurt because of...well, you're bravery. I guarantee, I wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for you and Naruto."

"Likewise. As I recall, it's always you putting me back together after a fight. I'm thankful it's you and not Lady Tsunade...how do you handle her?" Ekyt asked.

"I don't. I just do what she says and I don't piss her off. You gave her a good run, though. She's never had to chase a patient like that before. Although I understand why...that must have been awful...(reference to the chakra being sucked out of him)"

"Yeah, it was bad," Ekyt admitted. "It was even worse, thinking I was too weak to stop them. I know, they're not regular ninja, but still...I feel like I should be stronger. But, ah, I'm just rambling. How's the class doing?" Ekyt asked suddenly. **Don't want to talk about myself too much...**

-----The Next Day-----

Everyone watched the scoreboard. Everyone knew who the Leaf Ninja fighting would be. (Okkuu and Yuuka had both fought, and lost, to the Sound Village Ninjas. Neither one was promoted to chunin) Ekyt was waiting on the floor, with Lee, Naruto, and Sakura keeping him company. Eventually, Kakashi and Iruka joined them.

"Who's left?" Iruka asked. Everyone exchanged glances, but shrugged.

"No one's seen the guy yet," Naruto said. "But if he's from the Sound Village, he'll be strong, believe it."

Ekyt smirked. "I don't care...I've come too far to just die now. Besides (Looks over at Naruto) with you cheering me on, HOW can I lose?" Ekyt said sarcastically.

"Could be worse, perv. Like...well, damn, it DID get worse!"

Sai was walking over, drawing a picture of Ekyt. Ekyt never knew how to feel. He supposed it was an honor that Sai enjoyed drawing him, and it wasn't like Sai was hitting on him, so it wasn't a big deal, but still...

"I wanted to show you my latest picture, before you fought," Sai said, a genuine smile on his face. He had drawn Ekyt again, but this time, Ekyt was wearing a chunin vest. "I hope I am predicting the future...you asshole..."

Sakura and Naruto were going to kill Sai. Sai was really just trying to be friendly, and Ekyt had bigger things to worry about. He had been called worse than that, and those people had MEANT it. But right now, he was facing some unknown enemy, in one of the most meaningful matches of his life.

The tension suddenly escalated. Orochimaru walked out. Immediately, Ekyt and Naruto were in front of him. But Orochimaru raised his hands in a surrender position.

"I'm only here as a sensei, today. That's within the rules," Orochimaru said with a smile. "Ekyt-kun, if only you were fighting me! Oh well, you won't ever have to worry about facing me again, my student won't hesitate to kill you."

Everyone in the stadium looked at Ekyt. Ekyt adjusted his head band and vest, then walked toward Orochimaru. All the air in the stadium was sucked in, like a vacuum. Everyone was waiting- what was Ekyt going to do?! Okkuu and Yuuka flanked him, neither of them hurt seriously.

"Orochimaru...I respect you, and therefore, anyone you've trained. But I'm going to say this, with all these people as my witnesses: Whether they love me, hate me, or don't know me, I WILL hold the honor of the Leaf Village on my shoulders today. If that means going THROUGH you to get to your student, I will. If it means taking your life...again...I'll do it. Make no mistake, Orochimaru- these people mean a lot to me. More than any respect for you does. If you make one misguided threat..."

"That won't be necessary." A bland voice told Ekyt. Ekyt narrowed his eyes as Orochimaru moved away. The person who had just talked was too far away to make out. But the voice told Ekyt just what he needed to know.

"Of course...It's been a while...Kimimaro."

Kimimaro stopped in front of Ekyt. "I never thanked you for saving my life...cousin (Shock reverberated around the stadium- THIS monster was related to Ekyt?!). But you never explained to me why you think me family..."

Ekyt offered his hand. "Because we're cousins. Blood relatives. That means I've got a loyalty to you. Just as I do to my village. And, for the record, Kimimaro...I'm looking forward to this fight."

Kimimaro looked surprised. "Really? I almost killed three of your friends (Naruto, Lee, and Gaara), and you still treat me as though we're...friends ourselves."

"I don't hate you," Ekyt said firmly. "We play for opposite sides, but that doesn't mean I can't respect you. Now, I think we've get these good people waiting long enough- let's give them a match to talk about!"

Kimimaro stepped back to his spot, as Ekyt did the same.

"As you wish..."

Hayate, the match proctor, looked at both competitors. Each one nodded. Hayate gulped to himself, thinking that the tension in the building was enough to crumple anyone, but did his job:

“HAJIME!” (Begin!)

NEXT ISSUE: THE COUSINS SQUARE OFF! KIMIMARO AND EKYT, BOTH OF KAGUYA BLOOD, FIGHT FOR THE FIRST TIME! BUT WITH OROCHIMARU AROUND, HOW FAIR OF A FIGHT IS IT GOING TO BE?

Sakura- Hey, everyone! Don't forget, Issue 50 is coming up! I know NG has something BIG planned, so don't forget to read! Tell your friends! Rumor has it- it involves me! I can't wait!

Temari- Hey, what about me? Geez, it's just like NG to forget- I've got to face my brothers! I left the Sand Village, and I KNOW Gaara isn't thrilled! But I guess a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do!

Kakashi- And, finally, don't forget the council. Now that Ekyt is kind of...despised, will they promote him to chunin? Not to mention everyone else involved. Including our resident bag of emotional void, Sasuke.

Naruto- Hey, forget the perv for a minute! If the Akatsuki are running around, that means they're after my fox! Well, I don't like their attitudes! I beat those cloaked bastards back like they're nothing! Believe it!

47 - Change of Plans...

BLAMMMMM!!!!

“What the hell?” was the common curse. A hole had just been blown in the outside wall of the stadium. Fiery debris sent the crowd running for cover, arms over their heads.

“NOBODY MOVES!” came a familiar shout.

“Damn it...not now...why now?!” Ekyt hissed. He spun to see three cloaked figures.

“We didn’t finish in the forest, un,” Deidara said, smirking. He held up his new arm. It moved oddly, as though it had an extra joint...like a puppets hand. “And my new appendage will prove very entertaining!”

“This entire stadium will explode if anyone tries to get down off of those bleachers. Nobody helps him.” This came from Sasori, his growl sending shivers down the spines of the most advanced jonin. But even Sasori stopped in deference to the last person to walk through the debris.

“Too long...it has been too long. The Akatsuki have been thwarted, time and again, in their quest to obtain the nine-tailed fox. And so many times have come at the hands of the boy before you. Fools, all of you, thinking he had turned his back on your village. As an enemy, I can appreciate why he agreed to fool you all. For the greater good. If one dies to save hundreds, the balance stays, does it not? You’ve been fools to drive him away. Such loyalty is hard to come by...Now, you can all watch his loyalty die. Today, we don’t target the 9-tailed fox- we target YOU, Dragon Boy!”

The impromptu speech had come from Pein, in one of his bodies. His outstretched hand was directed at Ekyt. He continued to speak now.

“This entire stadium will explode if anyone gets off the bleachers. We want ALL of you to watch as we kill the one thing that has stopped us from obtaining Naruto. He said that he would bear the pride of Konoha on his shoulders. He has never done so more than now. Now, pay attention, as you see what a threat the Akatsuki REALLY are. Too many of you think us to be fakes, a joke by your own government. We’re as real as you...and MORE deadly...”

Pein vanished, leaving Deidara, Sasori, and Itachi. The three stood tall, seeming to tower over Ekyt.

“So, I’m alone, am I? I welcome your challenge. I’ve swatted you away, again and again, but just like the turd that won’t flush, you keep coming back...I’ve taken a man’s life (True, although Orochimaru returned in a new host body), and I won’t feel any regret in taking yours. If one who is wicked dies to preserve a hundred who are good...”

“Oh, cut out the speech, un! You’re boring the hell out of me!” Deidara sneered.

“Oh, am I?” Ekyt said from behind Deidara. He yanked hard on the long mane of blond hair, pulling Deidara to the ground. As Deidara fell, Ekyt smashed his heel down on Deidara’s nose. Instantly, the kunai of Itachi Uchiha was at Ekyt’s back. But it didn’t end there. Ekyt had his kunai to Deidara’s neck, and he knew Itachi was behind him. But who was behind Itachi?

Kimimaro’s bone was at Itachi’s neck. “Now I see...I can call you ‘cousin’ now, Ekyt. The blood of the Kaguya clan flows through you. Only one of my own name would dare make that move.”

Orochimaru had the Kusanagi to the back of Sasori’s neck. “You cloaked fools are a problem, one I’ll have no issue dealing with. Besides, it’s rare to find such powerful help...”

The people in the bleachers had frozen. No one wanted to set off the explosives. Naruto had to be forced to settle down.

“He’s going to die, isn’t he, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto asked sadly. Sai went to work with Iruka, settling the crying children down. Sai’s fake smile worked on them, and he drew their pictures, earning a few laughs and genuine smiles. Iruka had several kids clustered to him, and he was telling them how they shouldn’t worry, everything will be fine.

Ekyt’s class was glued to their seats, their eyes on their teacher. Even Naoto, who was critical about Ekyt’s abilities at the best of times, summed up the situation.

“Sonofadog! He didn’t even bat an eye! Is this what Shinobi do? What Shinobi are?” he uttered. Sakura was next to him, and could tell this was hard on him. **For all his bravado, he’s really just a scared kid...**

“Naoto, that IS the Shinobi way. But that boy is an exception...he’s a warrior, and he’ll ALWAYS put the loyalty to this village ahead of it’s hatred for him. That’s just how he is. But, you know, that doesn’t mean he isn’t scared. He just doesn’t let that fear paralyze him. I’d be surprised if you didn’t see some of that fear actually working in his favor.” Sakura had seen Ekyt in this situation before. Granted, SHE was scared as hell for his sake, but still...**Everyone’s told me that, somehow, when you’re fighting next to Ekyt, you feel like you can’t lose, no matter how grim the odds. It’s nothing he says or does particularly, it’s just...a sense. I’ve felt it, too. It’s like I know I won’t be killed, or even seriously injured. Why is that? Whatever it is, I hope it’s working full-blast today, he’s down there with two Sound Ninja who wanted to kill him five minutes ago.**

“Alright. Negotiation. What will it take to make you free everyone?” Ekyt asked quietly.

Itachi, the de facto leader, was the one who answered. “You surrender yourself, right now.”

Ekyt looked up at the crowd. No one was booing, or cheering, or even urging him to give up. Ekyt felt like he might have their faith back. But his next move would make or break that. **It would be selfish...to do this any other way...**

"Alright! I'll give myself up, just let them go!" Ekyt shouted. He let go of Deidara and dropped his kunai. Orochimaru and Kimimaro backed off.

Only Deidara moved. He tied a chain around Ekyt's hands in such a way that handsigns weren't possible. He wound the chain around Ekyt's torso, pulling it tight, then locking it with a thick padlock.

"Fool...Now we have you, we could simply detonate the stadium...or you COULD have tried to call our bluff. It would take a LOT of explosive power to detonate the stadium...maybe we don't have that kind of power..." Itachi smirked, thinking he had the upper hand.

"I KNOW you have the power, Itachi. Calling your bluff crossed my mind, but I've got lives to think of. Now that you have me...what do you plan to do with me? Kill me? Torture me? Brag that you got me? And...I've got to say, I'm not comfortable with the blonde 'guy' here tying me up..."

Deidara gave Ekyt a hard punch to the face, but Ekyt nipped up to his feet and laughed. No one could figure out why, until Deidara slumped to the ground, clutching his head, then freezing up all together. Deidara was trapped in a vicious genjutsu!

"That's all I needed! You to drop your guard! NOW!" Ekyt shouted. Orochimaru and Kimimaro attacked their respective targets. Ekyt, meanwhile, busied himself with pulling a bone out of his shoulder with his teeth, then cutting the chain's lock.

"GET OUT OF HERE! HE'S THE ONE WHO COULD DETONATE THIS PLACE!" Ekyt shouted. Several people hit the barrier the Akatsuki had placed around the dome. It didn't hurt them, but the opaque black dome spread.

Ekyt decided to incapacitate Sasori, giving Orochimaru an easier time with him. Putting his hands together in a long series of signs, Ekyt used the First Hokage's Genjutsu, the "Bringer of Darkness" jutsu. Sasori was thrashing around blindly now, unable to break the genjutsu. Ekyt had hit Deidara with a Demonic Illusion: Mind Barring Technique, which had taken five minutes to fully work. That was why Ekyt had made the speech. Now Deidara was out of the equation. The Mind Barring Technique was Ekyt's own genjutsu. It caused potential brain damage to the enemy, and it hurt Ekyt internally, but it used little chakra. While it affected the mind, the technique was actually used to fray the connections between the brain and the nervous system for a brief period of time.

"So, you've incapacitated the other two...interesting...but now you're facing me. I've overcome Orochimaru...I've overcome you...what's left for you to try? You could have died peacefully..."

"Could have...but not gonna. Your blond friend thinks art is a bang. Well, I think hitting YOU would be a bang. After what you've done, you'd be hard-pressed to stop me! You've seen it before Itachi, but it never gets old, because even YOU don't know how to handle it!"

Ekyt's hand was to his chest, and that meant one thing: His emotions had hit the breaking point, and the Blue Flame Chakra would ride again!

Sakura, Iruka, Kakashi, Lee, Naruto, and Sarutobi all looked to each other. Slowly, they smiled. "I DID say that he might not be legendary...I never said he didn't have guts," Sarutobi pointed out.

"Facing Itachi...again. Wow. He's got my guts than brains, I guess..." Naruto commented jokingly.

Iruka and Sakura were still with the kids. By now, Lee had drifted over. They had all seen this before.

"What's that blue flame in his hand?! Doesn't that hurt?!" Naoto asked, shocked at what Ekyt could do.

"It hurts him...severely. But you couldn't stop him if you tried, now. That flame is raw emotion. I've felt it, once, when Ekyt was on his deathbed and I had to use his own chakra to save him...it hurts. But what it can do...it's a risk Ekyt willingly takes..." Sakura told Naoto.

"That's right. It causes all the chakra in his body to change direction, AND he has to pull emotions out. It's not natural, but as a result, hard to predict, and nearly impossible to stop. And powerful..." Kakashi added. "And if he does what I THINK he's going to do...he'll need all the power he can get."

"Orochimaru, Kimimaro, please watch those two...There's only one way to end the jutsu around the arena, and that's to take out it's original caster. I've got an idea. Just...trust me..."

Ekyt launched himself at Itachi. Itachi reared back and stabbed with a kunai. There was blood all over, he had hit Ekyt right in the stomach. But the blood was Itachi's! The kunai stopping so suddenly had caused him to scrape his knuckles against the bone protruding from Ekyt's stomach!

"I've learned a little more about the Kaguya Kekkaigenkai, Itachi. And I've learned about the Sharingan. I can't hope to kill you while you have it...(Ekyt's blue chakra roars)so I'll just...(Ekyt's fingers have the kanji for "Earth" "Heaven" "Water" "Fire" and "Void" on them)GET RID OF IT!"

Ekyt jabbed his hand toward Itachi's dangerous eyes, but Itachi's speed was proving to make hitting him difficult. But he was slightly rattled by Ekyt going on the offensive.

He's changed...again. His thinking is more and more...mature...every time I fight him. He adapts to

the situation quickly...which allows him to use his talents to the fullest. Asking everyone else to step aside wasn't cockiness, and he doesn't pretend he can beat everyone...but he doesn't back down, or stop...

Ekyt had Itachi backpedaling. Finally. NOW it was time. "First Gate, Gate of Opening: Release!" Ekyt opened the first gate of chakra, and zipped forward! Blue flashes were seen as Itachi tried to read Ekyt's moves, barely succeeding. Finally, a body-flicker jutsu, and Itachi lost Ekyt completely. The irony was that Ekyt was right in front of him, and right where he WANTED to be.

"Five Elements Seal!" Ekyt's outstretched right hand grabbed Itachi's left eye. When Ekyt closed his hand, Itachi's vision in that eye disappeared.

48 - The Old Ways

When Itachi grabbed his eye, and the Sharingan in his other de-activated, no one could believe it. The opaque black dome disappeared, and everyone ran for it. Well, not everyone. Most of the Leaf Jonin, and Ekyt's friends, stayed. Ekyt might have been hurt, but they were all curious about Itachi. He was supposed to be among the best, had a genin just done what had been deemed an impossible task.

"Did he just..." Kakashi lifted his headband, trying to glimpse at Itachi's eye. "My God...He did it. He used a five elements seal...on the Sharingan in Itachi's eye."

"WHAT?!" Naruto's gaze shifted back to the field. Ekyt's outstretched hand had ground into Itachi's eye. The Sharingan had faded in Itachi's other eye. It was about that point that everyone noticed blood coming from Ekyt's mouth.

"Oh, My God! Ekyt's hurt, too! Lady Tsunade!" Sakura leapt down from the bleachers. Naruto followed suit, as did Lee. Everyone else went to help calm down the village, and check for casualties. If the Akatsuki were around, there was a good chance someone was dead.

A mark spread, like a burn, on Ekyt's left shoulder. It was small, but clearly visible. It matched the five-pronged seal on Itachi's eye. In the center were three tomoe, similar to that of the Sharingan. It was the mark of the seal. Just like Naruto had the mark on his stomach, Ekyt now had one on his arm, just below his ANBU tattoo. (Both tattoos are only visible in certain situations. Ekyt really isn't the type to have a tattoo) Itachi disappeared, along with the other two Akatsuki members, but this time, his head was hung in shame. He had dropped his guard and gotten cocky over the years. Now, more than ever, he needed his brother to hate him...

Blood ran down Ekyt's mask as the flame receded. The crimson highway fell to the ground, soon followed by Ekyt, on one knee. He was tired, and even worse, felt no sense of accomplishment. Only regret for what he had to do. It was unheard of, but Ekyt hoped his enemies were alright. Despite what he had proclaimed earlier, Ekyt would indeed be upset if he had taken lives. The only difference was that he could LIVE with it now, as long as he was defending someone else when he took the life.

Sakura pushed her way to Ekyt, who was already back on his feet. She had spent time with him on missions, and could read the dark look in his eyes. Something had gone wrong. But what? What could have possibly gone wrong? Hadn't he just been as successful as any Shinobi could be?

Ekyt caught Sakura looking. He had long since stopped looking into actions for hidden signs. She was treating him as a medic treats a patient. That wasn't his ONLY problem. **I've just taken away part of a man's world...no matter WHAT I said...it's easier in theory than in practice...I never got my fight with my cousin, and now it won't happen...he and Orochimaru split...guess I win by forfeit or something...and I said that I would tell Sakura how I felt...but look at her. Beautiful, intelligent...she**

could do so much better than me. But I keep saying that. Is it because I love her enough to let her go...or am I chickening out?

Ekyt looked up again, but couldn't maintain the gaze. He lowered his head, shaking it, indicating that he needed some time by himself.

"I'll be right back. I've just got to...to sort some things out." Ekyt said evasively. Kakashi immediately leapt after him.

Kakashi: I know exactly what's wrong, you know. Well, part of it. You can't tell her, can you?

Ekyt: No...I just can't do it to her...It would mean a huge lifestyle change...

Kakashi: Oh please! You two work too hard, I can't see either of you stopping to date.

Ekyt: Problem 2: what the hell does one do when courting a female?

Kakashi: Well...stop talking like an @\$\$, for starters...

Ekyt: Yeah, I got that figured out. But I just...feel like I'd be dragging her down with me...

Kakashi: Did you ever think that...maybe she's in the same boat as you? Maybe she likes you, or feels lonely? She's smart, you know, she'll figure it out eventually...

Ekyt: I know. I just don't want to ruin her life. I can't run my own. And she could do better than me...

Kakashi: You're selling yourself short. I'm not sure if you know, but Sakura's parents never believed in her abilities.

Ekyt: But she's so powerful!

Kakashi: She wasn't always. YOU saw the potential in her, but not everyone else did. She was smart, and cute, but not practical. Call me crazy, but you helping her fight Sasuke on her own that day (Years ago, I'll do a special if anyone is interested!) helped her blossom.

Ekyt: Lady Tsunade did that, not me.

Kakashi: Not entirely true. Tsunade trained her, but how do you think she got the guts up to go and ask Tsunade to teach her?

Ekyt: If you're suggesting I'm a role model, sensei...I think you'd be mistaken.

Kakashi: There's just no getting through to you...Well, I'll make you a deal. Your match with Kimimaro is in a week. IF you're promoted to chunin...then I WON'T give Sakura the tape I just made of our conversation...

Ekyt: Go ahead...wait, WHAT?!

Kakashi: It's my job as a sensei to help you grow, and you won't do that if you keep your light under a bushel. So, she can find out from an audio recording, or you can tell her.

Ekyt: There's still our bet. I'll make chunin!

Kakashi: You'd better be sure. If you lose, I'm going to play the tape for the village...

Ekyt: >< Damn! Fine, Kakashi-sensei, you've got a deal.

Kakashi: You're going to tell her?

Ekyt: No...I'm going to win our bet...

Kakashi: (Shakes head) Well, good luck then. But Sakura WILL find out eventually. I didn't actually tape our conversation, I've got more respect for you than that. I was just hoping the bluff would work.

Ekyt: ...I know...I've got to be careful. As long as she KNOWS I mean it when I say it...that I really like her...the only reason I haven't told her is my own lack of courage. And maybe...a vague hope that she WILL do better than me.

Tsunade called Ekyt to her office, later that day. It was dark outside, and it looked as though it would rain soon. The kind of day that made a weary man ache. Ekyt, however, was anything BUT weary at this moment. No matter what he had done earlier, Tsunade's attention met that something was wrong, something was very good, or something was very important.

"Kid, I'm going to lay my cards on the table. It's not looking good for you as chunin. It has nothing to do with me, or Ebisu." Tsunade stood up, hands clasped behind her back as she looked out the window. Somehow, she couldn't make eye contact with Ekyt.

"I had a feeling...the Village is still angry with me...damn, I should be enjoying myself, and celebrating. How many can say they faced Itachi Uchiha and left their mark? It's amazing that a coward could do that..." Ekyt said the last part so softly that Tsunade barely heard him. BARELY being the key word.

"You mean Sakura...well, that's another thing. See, it's like this. Um, well..." Tsunade was avoiding Ekyt's eyes at this point.

"Just nod, Lady Tsunade, okay? Another guy?" Ekyt asked. Tsunade nodded slowly, then kept her head down.

"I'm really sorry...about all this...so, I'll leave it up to you whether you fight or not. You're not likely to be promoted...and your cousin IS in league with Orochimaru. It would be a pointless fight..."

“The situation with the council is that bad? It really doesn’t matter what I did to Itachi? People get promoted for less than that...” Ekyt clasped his hands behind his back. “Well, then, I suppose there’s only two things left: First, I’ll fight him in a week. If I’m not getting promoted, the council won’t mind if I tackle part of my regular duties while they dog about me behind my back. The second order of business—a group of kids and I have talked with Lord Kazekage, and I’m to take my class to meet him, and see the Sand Village. Temari, Shikamaru, and Lee are escorting us, until we get to a checkpoint. After that, they all have other business. I’m just formally informing you of my intentions for tomorrow’s class. And here’s the scroll for the protection assignments. Standard C-ranked mission.”

Tsunade turned around, her eyes filled with tears. “How can you do this? I’ve just told you things that would destroy your life! The girl you like is taken, you probably won’t be promoted! Has it hit your brain?!”

Ekyt blinked. “It’s a matter of choice, and a little have-to. Besides, I’m a loner. I CHOOSE to be a loner, and I HAVE TO do what needs to be done. Besides, unless these kids turn their backs on me, too, I’ve got no reason to be upset. Everything was my fault. I knew what would happen when I played the part of Hokage, I knew the aftermath. I knew if I didn’t tell Sakura how I felt, someone else would get her. The only person I could beat up is myself. A lot of people’s lives are unfair, what makes mine more unfair than theirs?”

Tsunade looked Ekyt in the eyes. She saw truth in them. “You don’t think you’ve had enough hardship?”

Ekyt gave a mirthless laugh at that. “Better I withstand this hardship, and alone, don’t you think? You know what happens to people when they can’t stand hardship. Orochimaru, for example. He can’t face mortality, so he’s evil. Better someone like me, who can accept mortality, bear the burden. Besides, what would happen if I had children? I would pass on this kekkaigekai, and all the pain that goes with it. I can’t imagine causing my own flesh and blood such pain. So, maybe it’s for the best...” Ekyt looked at the rapidly-retreated sun, then toward the door.

“I really should finish planning my lesson. But, by all means, please schedule that match. I’ve been meaning to learn more about my cousin, and our family’s heritage. Considering we’re the only surviving two, it’s hardly an opportunity to pass up.”

Tsunade was shocked at Ekyt’s dismissive attitude, but said nothing of it. “Of course, go ahead...” After a crisp bow, Ekyt did just that, exiting through the door, rather than his usual exit of leaping across the rooftops. As he was walking out into the hallway, Linda was walking in. Tsunade got up quickly, to make sure the fight didn’t escalate beyond words. Luckily, Lee was also present.

“Well, guess this time wasn’t yours, huh? What a pity. I outrank you, and I’ve got an apprenticeship with Lady Tsunade. And what about you?” Linda taunted.

“Me? Well, I’ve got some traveling coming up, a fight, some studying, maybe a little drinking...who

knows?" Ekyt said calmly.

"Traveling. Oh, you mean the mission I'm doing with my boyfriend, escorting you and those brats to the Sand Village!" Linda exclaimed. Lee suddenly grew fidgety.

"Your name isn't on my request list...Lady Tsunade, is there a new aspect of the mission that I'm not yet aware of?" Ekyt called to her respectfully.

"It was a request from Lee..." Tsunade said, wincing.

"I see. Well, I revoke my request for protection. I'll have an outside agency handle it. I don't need those kids exposed to the atmosphere that comes along with two ex-friends feuding. You understand, of course..." Ekyt said, back military straight.

"What? Let's not be hasty here! An 'outside agency'? Another village, you mean?" Tsunade couldn't believe this!

"Yes. Since the trip is to Sunagakure, I'd assume they would take the mission."

"Yes, but-" Tsunade sputtered.

"The kids come first. I need to have peace of mind on this trip as well, I need to be free to teach. I asked for certain specifications in my mission request, and they weren't met. Certainly Temari and Shikamaru won't mind the cancellation, they've got other missions."

"Alright. Fine, I'll cancel. But, damn it!" Tsunade was angry. Not at Ekyt, who was making the right move. Mostly at herself and Lee. Lee requested this, KNOWING it would piss Ekyt off, but hoping he could look past it. Tsunade was mad at herself for agreeing to it.

"Certain...standards...some that my girlfriend do not live up to?!" Lee roared. Ekyt didn't yell back, or even move.

"Yes. The standard was that a group of people I trust accompany myself and 30 students. You know that Linda falls short of that standard in my eyes." Ekyt's sheer calmness scared Tsunade. **But I can tell...he hasn't lost his mind, or anything! He's just...not backing down. It's back to square one... the stoic, respectful, statue of a genin. He had come so far with his personality, and now it's been pissed away...**

"So you do not believe Linda is worthy of your trust?!" Lee was going ballistic. Ekyt looked him in the eyes, and spoke one, firm word.

"No."

With that, Lee charged at Ekyt. Ekyt didn't move as Lee hit him with a solid right hand, sending him sailing down the hallway. When he protruded from the wall he had gone through, Ekyt wiped the blood off his face and the dust off his clothes.

"I owed you that, Lee. Defending your girl's honor is respectable. After that punch, it becomes self-defense on my part. I only say this out of respect." Ekyt was up again. Lee, who was stunned momentarily, ran forward. This time, Ekyt faked a low kick, then gave Lee a hard punch to the stomach. As Lee bent over, a roundhouse kick knocked him to the ground. Ekyt straightened his vest and stepped over Lee, who was still sitting down, not because he was defeated, but because he was shocked.

"I'll keep you informed of our trip, Lady Tsunade. Thank you for your time."

Before Ekyt could move, Linda threw a kunai at Ekyt's back. Ekyt stepped to the side and let it whiz by. He plucked it out of the wall and knocked down the next one, then threw the kunai, knocking a third out of the air.

"This can go on all night, Linda. I haven't insulted you personally, not yet. If you'll pardon me, I have a class to plan, and a mission to give out." Ekyt flipped the kunai so that he was holding the grip area out to Tsunade. She took the kunai, then helped Lee up.

"That was not like him!" Lee exclaimed.

"You dipshoot, why did you attack him? He didn't insult Linda, and you know full well how well they get along! Damn it! 'Outside Agency' my @\$#! Who's he going to get to watch his group?!"

Ekyt wrote a short mission scroll, put his personal seal on it, then handed it to Holly.

"For the Kazekage, Holly," Ekyt said absently.

"Gotcha kid...hey, you alright?" Holly asked as she put the scroll in a leather pouch around her neck.

"Of course. A little sore from the fight, but other than that, just fine. Thank for doing this," Ekyt responded, making his way toward the stairs. He could feel Holly's concerned eyes on him the entire time as he climbed up the stairs, to the rooftop garden. There, he sat down, finished his lesson plan, and then got to work on his scroll. As always, it was time to study. Since he had an early morning, Ekyt decided to wait until the Sunagakure messenger bird came. Then he would sleep. Or so he thought. A rustle in his bushes told him he had visitors. Without turning around, as he looked across the rooftops from his home, Ekyt called out:

"Come out. I already know you're there."

Naruto came out of the bushes. "Geez, how do you do that?! You're studying, and totally immersed, but you can pick out someone in the bushes when they hardly make a sound?!"

"Who else did you bring, Naruto?" Ekyt questioned.

“Just Sakura. We wanted to check up on you. Make sure you’re alright, dattebayo.”

Ekyt froze up momentarily, but recovered quickly. **It makes sense...I never asked WHO Sakura was with. Naruto would be the logical choice. For all he infuriates her, he still care for her. And she must care for him. Looks like your life is falling into place, Naruto. Good for you.**

49 - Fate's Fortune

NOTE: In this chapter, and chapter 50, I'm going to try using the Japanese names of the Jutsus. Just for a change. Let me know what you think!

-NG

"Hi, Ekyt. You okay? What happened to your eye?!" Sakura asked, noticing a bruise that was too fresh to be from Itachi. Ekyt turned away so Sakura couldn't see it anymore. He tied his old black headband around his head, covering that eye. The headband's pressure actually made his eye hurt less, which he was thankful for. Ekyt was tough, but a punch from Lee? He and Lee had sparred, but never fought, not like that.

"I was in a fight with Lee. He thinks I stepped on Linda's honor. I let him punch me. I owed him that much. Right now, I'm just waiting for Sunagakure's reply. I asked them to escort myself and my class to the Sand Village." Ekyt talked differently than before. His answers were crisp, polite, and emotionless. Before, you could hear emotion in his voice, and he would likely have told a joke or something. But now it was all business.

"Huh? Didn't you say Temari was on that mission? And I remember Bushy Brows saying something, too! You're getting outside help?! What the hell is wrong with you?!" Naruto shouted.

"I have a reason. Linda was added to the mission roster. I didn't want her there, so I 'cut off the cancer', so to speak. Besides, Sunagakure's Shinobi are more than competent for a C-ranked mission."

"You never asked us!" Sakura protested, still a little concerned over Ekyt's shiner. More over HOW he got the injury than the fact he was injured. **Those two were the best of friends, and Ekyt, no matter how much he hates Linda, wouldn't directly 'step on her honor'! What's REALLY happening here? Ekyt...you had actually made progress with trusting people...it's gone, isn't it? The trust...**

"The two of you don't need any more missions. Your names came up, but Tsunade-sama said you had three missions that day already," Ekyt replied. He gave another look out to the sky.

"Excuse me." Ekyt strode forward after a curt nod into the night, and held out his arm. A hawk bearing the crest of Sunagakure around its neck flew onto Ekyt's arm. The hawk was a sandy color, with fierce, black eyes. One fierce eye looked at Ekyt. That fierce eye closed in pleasure when Ekyt stroked the hawk's head.

"Thank you, Taleo. Still the fastest, I see. What do you have for me?" Ekyt continued to pet the bird as it held out a leg with a small pouch on it. Ekyt took the note while the bird sat on his shoulder. "Alright, that sounds fine. Here you are, Taleo. Some Ryo for your owners, and a little treat for you. Have a safe trip back."

Ekyt gave the bird a light toss, just enough to give it momentum. It soared off majestically into the night.

Ekyt watched it go silently. Naruto and Sakura exchanged glances behind him. Together, they nodded.

“Ekyt, are you sure you’re alright? I’m not going to try any Shinobi crap; something is different about you. Did something go wrong?” Naruto questioned. He was looking Ekyt up and down, as if he could see Ekyt was hiding something.

“You can tell us, you know. We’re your friends, you can tell us anything!” Sakura added, smiling.

Ekyt closed up his scrolls and looked up. **They want the truth...they’ll have to settle for half the truth. Naruto’s life is finally coming together, I don’t want to endanger that by admitting I really care about Sakura.** So he shook his head with a small shrug.

“Oh, that. It’s nothing, really. Just the council and I feuding. You would think that saving a stadium full of people would give you the ground for a promotion, but apparently, there are still some deep scars on their end for that whole Hokage thing. Oh well. I made the move, and I’m paying the piper.”

Naruto grabbed Ekyt by the vest. “NOW I know you’re lying. You would never be so calm about this. Unless you’ve gone soft on us? Is that it? Time off and teaching making you weak? Snap out of it! Get your game back, dattebayo!”

Ekyt reached down and removed Naruto’s hand from his vest. “Naruto, it’s like swimming upstream. You might make it, or you’ll die trying. I’m fighting my cousin, and they MIGHT promote me. It’s just not likely. Besides, I’ve been a genin for a while now...and you know, if I can fight fine as a genin, that’s great. If they decide to promote me, I wouldn’t say no.”

Ekyt thought for a moment. “Oh, that’s right! Sakura-sensei, thank you for covering my class in my absence. Please, take this...I told them not to, but the kids chipped in. Stubborn group that will be fine Shinobi some day. Oh, Naruto, they had something for you, too. After that day of pranks you pulled on me (see previous issues), you seem to be a hero to some of them. So, please, take these...”

For Sakura, there was a new herb scale. Her old one was rusted. This one had her name on it, and it was red, to match her clothes. She had wanted one of these for a long time, too!

For Naruto, needless to say, anyone who was a fan of Naruto’s knew their champion’s food of choice: ramen. Fifty coupons, each worth a free bowl at Ichiraku. Naruto was looking at the coupons almost lustily. The drool was what tipped Ekyt off.

“Thanks!” Naruto and Sakura said in unison. Ekyt said a ‘no problem’ to them vaguely as he rooted around in the same summoning scroll. He pulled out a new hitai-ate, this one with black cloth instead of blue. The only other like it in the village belonged to Ibikki Morino.

“Well, I should get ready for class, I guess. Hard to believe it’s almost 6:00 already.” Ekyt muttered. “Can I get you anything before I go? You’re welcome to stay, if you’d like. The basement is kind of dangerous, so you know. I’ve cleaned it up, but still...” Ekyt explained as he walked down the stairs to his kitchen. He looked at his bottle of Akakamodori family brewed sake. He looked at his coffee, which was black and sugarless. Knowing full well that Naruto and Sakura were watching, Ekyt put in a healthy table-spoon of the rice brew into the coffee.

“Okay, that can’t be good. You’re drinking already?” Sakura questioned. “That is WAY too Lady Tsunade-ish. If you start gambling...”

Ekyt shrugged. “I’ve never actually done this before. I was wondering how it would taste. Besides, I’m a little stressed today. Okay, completely stressed. Try taking 30 kids out on a field trip and see how calm you are.” Ekyt thought his concoction tasted like crap, but drank it anyway, feeling himself lose tension. Not to the point where he wasn’t aware, but to the point where he could think clearly.

“Pardon me. I’ve got to run. Feel free to stick around, if you’d like. Help yourself to whatever you’d like.” Ekyt grabbed his black trench coat from across a chair and pulled it on, buttoning it high up on the collar.

As soon as he left, Naruto and Sakura agreed there was something different about him. Wrong, even.

“He’s acting like his old self. Back when all of us were genin, before I went away with the pervy sage. That...”

“Stoicism. And his attitude...maybe we’d better look around the house. Make sure there’s no drugs. We know he drinks sake, but that’s given to him by Tsunade as a prescription. The Akakamadori brand relieves stress and anxiety. ANY sake will, but Tsunade-sama likes that brand, so she uses Ekyt as an excuse to order more for herself...”

“The basement!” Naruto said, snapping his fingers. “If he’s got any secrets, they’re down there, I’m positive!”

Ekyt met his eager students at the academy. “Alright everyone, I want you split off into groups of three. Good. Now, we’re going to Sunagakure, the Hidden Sand village. They’re an ally of ours, and as such, an important part of our history. During the last great ninja war, one you were all alive for. Our Hidden Leaf Village formed a pact with both the Sound Village and the Sand Village. They came to our aid at the time I was serving as Hokage. Our opponents were the Hidden Stone Village, who outnumbered us, the Hidden Mist Village, who have a reputation for creating merciless warriors, and they were both aligned with the Akatsuki, the band of S-ranked criminals that has attacked us time and time again. The help of the Sand Village’s Kazekage enabled us to cut off their strength in numbers, while we and the Sound Village fought off the remaining numbers. Any questions?”

A hand went up in the air. It belonged to a young blond girl, one Ekyt had picked out as smart already. She didn’t have the making of an excellent Shinobi, but she was like a general, planning moves and creating traps.

“Please, sempai, tell us why you were Hokage.”

Ekyt wasn't sure he wanted to answer that. Thankfully he saw Kankuro coming, and gave the abbreviated answer. "Because it was what was right for the village. Here's out escort now. Class, this is Kankuro-sensei, a Sand Village Jonin. He'll be escorting us to the Sand Village."

But upon closer inspection, Ekyt saw Kankuro was in no shape to travel anywhere. The paint on his face was smeared, and his clothes were torn. Thinking quickly, Ekyt told the class to go get Lady Tsunade. When they had run off, Ekyt tried to talk with Kankuro.

"Kankuro, what happened here?" Ekyt knelt down, using his chakra scalpel to patch up some of the cuts on Kankuro's torso.

"I got jumped...I'm not sure WHO did it. A lot of people (cough) are upset with me for standing by Gaara. They love HIM, but they think (cough) I'm after his power. I made it here. I should really get checked out, I feel like there's poison in me. I pulled this (throws senbon down) out of me, but the poison had penetrated already."

Ekyt nodded. Out of curiosity, he used his "Poison Removal" (Sakura can use the Advanced Poison Removal, they're two different jutsus) technique. The poison inside Kankuro was strong, and all Ekyt could really do what keep the poison contained until Tsunade came. Thankfully, she was there in a flash, and took over.

"Good job, Ekyt. I sent you kids back to the classroom. They're going to want a show after all this, so I've sent Naruto and Sakura over, along with a few others. Once you get back, it's your barbeque. Oh, yeah, by the way, Kimimaro will be there. It's short notice, I know, but he was insistent. Now, you go ahead, I'll be along with Kankuro. His injuries are minor."

Sakura and Naruto stared at the basement stairs. Their friend CLEARLY didn't want them down there.

"Do you think we should?" Sakura asked, a little nervous about the prospect of going against her friend's wishes.

"Hell, yeah! If he's doing drugs, they're down here, and it's not like he'll find out, believe it!" Naruto had his hand on the door that led to the aforementioned basement when Sakura spoke up again.

"Wait, Naruto- Release!" Sakura dispelled a genjutsu that was around the door. To her surprise, there were two more. She repeated the word two more times, finally getting rid of the all the genjutsu around the door.

"This is a REALLY bad idea, Naruto. Maybe we should just- NARUTO!"

Before Sakura finished talking, Naruto was bounding down the stairs. After a moment of trepidation, Sakura ran down after him. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what was down there...

For Ekyt's safety...We should know...it's for his own good, after all...

Naruto soon yelled out his disbelief. "WHAT THE- Sakura, look, at this!" Sakura ran down the rest of the stairs. She stared in open-mouthed disbelief. It was like they had stepped into the most pristine training environment possible. Tatami mats covered most of the floor. The front wall had mirrors on it. The mirrors showed Sakura and Naruto's reflection as they walked across the mats. In a area (The basement was one big open area, save for a few scattered support beams) off to the side, there was a log three feet thick and ten feet tall. It touched floor and ceiling, and had marks all over it. Sakura took a closer look.

"Blood...it must be his training post...There are weapon marks, too." Sakura didn't like the blood all over, but both she and Naruto already knew how Ekyt trained.

Naruto pointed to a rack on one wall. "And here are the weapons! I've never seen him use most of these! Sai, tonfa, nunchaku, bo, tri-sectional staff, throwing needles with tassles, archery equipment, kris blades..." Naruto picked up one bo that was away from the others. He sagged under the weight. "It's got iron in it's core!" he exclaimed.

"Naruto, look at this! I've never seen so many scrolls...they're all missions he's completed!" Sakura was holding up the green and yellow mission scrolls. There was over two hundred spilling out of the cabinet Sakura had opened.

"He's got training scrolls over here- and look at this wall!" Naruto almost shouted, pointing at a wall that was covered with scroll about chakra control, maximizing power in strikes, and various training exercises.

"I wonder why he didn't want us down here...I'm going to ask him. There's nothing wrong with this place, and he's not hiding anything. Why is it so protected down here?" Naruto was thinking out loud. That's when Sakura called attention to one spot in particular.

"Look at this...It looks like a...**Kuchiyose no Jutsu** (Summoning Jutsu) mark...in between two candle holders...I wonder what it's for? Oh, crap! We've got to get to the academy! I forgot! I've got a few friends coming today. ONE of us will be able to pick out what's wrong with Ekyt. And if Kankuro was attacked, you know Ekyt will be going with him to help him get revenge. C'mon!"

The two ran up the stairs at top speed, making sure to close the door as they left. Sakura didn't know how to replace the genjutsu, so she prayed that no one would try to get downstairs.

When Ekyt walked into the classroom, he saw his students sitting in their places, but he also saw Temari, Tenten, Sakura, Naruto, Shikamaru, Choji, and Sasuke. On the other end, he saw Linda, Kimimaro, and Lee. Upon seeing Ekyt, Lee shoved Kimimaro aside. Kimimaro, who had come close to killing Lee once before, didn't seem bothered.

"Step aside! I will be the one to face him! Ekyt, I do not know what has come over you, but you have

forced me to beat it out of you! This is not a sparring match, this is a fight! For my girlfriend's honor, and for my own."

Temari, Tenten, Sakura, Naruto, Shikamaru, and Sasuke stood behind Ekyt. Slowly, Kimimaro walked over. He had something in his hand.

"You asked me once about our family's heritage...That is a discussion for another time. But you can bear the mark of the Kaguya clan. It's yours to use as you please." Kimimaro used his index finger to draw two horizontal lines (One on the outside ends of each eye) out of a red mixture. Ekyt guessed that it was what Kimimaro had under his eyes. After a silent thank you, Ekyt looked over to Lee.

"Honor is a word that is used too freely. I never meant to insult Linda's honor. But you're going to believe what you want. If you think it's necessary, go ahead and attack."

Apparently, Lee DID think it was necessary. He ran forward at full speed, with his game face firmly in place.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

Sakura here! Lee has lost it! And what's with Ekyt? It looks like he's back to his old self again! After all that progress, it's gone in a matter of minutes! And...the truth about Naruto and I...(giggle)Well, we'll leave that for Issue 50, and that's coming up next! Right, Naruto?!

Naruto- Believe it! Issue 50! Ekyt fights bushy brows, and his whole life changes! There's more to Sakura and I than meets the eye. And don't forget the council! They're still discussing Ekyt's promotion! I NEVER thought I'd be promoted before him! And WHAT IS WITH ALL THE KUNOICHI HERE?!

Lee- I must defend Linda's honor. Ekyt, I consider you a friend. But I must think of Linda first! If you see fit to snub her, then I will see to it that you come to respect her!

Kimimaro- Another of true Kaguya blood...perhaps there is much Ekyt and I can learn from each other. That paint does more than just give him the LOOK of the Kaguya...

50 - Reckoning and Genesis

How had it come to this? Rock Lee and Ekyt Kaguya, two inseparable friends and sparring partners, were now deadlocked in a fight. Lee's face was grim with determination, and his eyes alight with fire. Ekyt's eyes were half-lidded, and his face was hidden by a mask. But even through the mask, you could see an indifference to the outside world.

"Konoha Senpu!"(Konoha Hurricane) Lee shouted, aiming a vicious kick at Ekyt. In contrast to his normal style, Ekyt backed up just out of range. **Where did THAT come from? Normally, I would have blocked and countered there. Wait...that paint Kimimaro put near my eyes...is it part of the Kaguya clan's Kekkaigenkai? I don't fully understand Shikotsu Myaku (Corpse Bone Pathways), but when I saw Kimimaro fight, he moved *just* enough to get out of the way...Does this paint, or whatever it is, have some kind of effect like that?** Ekyt couldn't help but wonder. Lee seemed to notice the subtle change as well, and narrowed his eyes. He hadn't fared well against Kimimaro. Then again, he was fresh out of the recovery room at the hospital, and nowhere near full strength then. NOW, however, he was angry and determined to protect his girl's honor. He ran in again.

"Dainamikku-Entori (Dynamic Entry)!"

This time, Ekyt surprised himself. He didn't even KNOW this jutsu, it just...happened.

"Tsubaki no mai (Dance of the Camellia)!" Ekyt replied. Without thinking, he had pulled a bone out of his left arm and began to stab faster than he thought possible. While he was, he actually had to stop himself from killing Lee. It was all Ekyt could do to make sure his stabs wouldn't hit any vital organs. This clearly surprised Lee as well, as he backpedaled, narrowly avoiding the sharp tip of the bone every time. Ekyt made one last cut, this one neck-level. Lee dodged backward, avoiding it, while balancing on his hands. From that position, he began to kick. Ekyt deflected each attack with the bone. Finally, Lee righted himself and aimed a high roundhouse. Ekyt blocked with the back section of the bone, then kicked himself. Lee leapt straight up, in the beginning of a heel kick. Ekyt stepped under him, then behind him, ramming the butt end of the bone into Lee's ribs. When Lee leaned one way in pain, Ekyt kicked Lee hard in the face, causing a welt to raise. While Lee laid on the ground, staring up in a mixture of surprise and accusation, Ekyt explained himself.

"You said this was a legitimate fight, not a sparring match. Against an enemy, I would use whatever means necessary. Wouldn't you? Don't look so surprised. This is your barbeque, Lee. I don't want to fight you, but if you're going to insist that I'm a liar and that I stepped on Linda's honor, then you attack me, you don't give me much choice, do you?"

For some reason, this enraged Lee.

"You will fall by my taijutsu, just as your cousin did!" Lee shot back, pointing at Kimimaro.

NOW Ekyt was angry. "My cousin didn't lose to YOU, it took you AND Gaara to stop him. Defending honor is one thing, telling lies is another. Two Kaguya are left in the world, and you've insulted them

both. I never had the honor of defending my clan's name until now. Enkou Doragon no Jutsu (Dragon's Flame Jutsu, usually Dragon's Ember Jutsu)!"

Lee leapt gracefully away from the flames. Ekyt persisted with the attack, trying to buy some time to think.

Ekyt flipped the bone to a reverse grip, as if he were holding a kunai. It glinted dangerously in his hand, pressed up against his forearm. Taking up this awkward stance, combined with the strange circumstances, caused Ekyt to think again.

(NOTE: THIS IS IN FIRST-PERSON, JUST BECAUSE I'VE BEEN WANTING TO TRY IT!)

I can't believe I'm doing this. Lee's still a friend, isn't he? He DID just insult my cousin. But why would Kimimaro start to like me suddenly? I can sense that he's genuinely interested- wait, what did he say? That I must be a true Kaguya to fight like that? I've never given my own safety a thought in life or death situations. That was one trait of the Kaguya, one that I must have inherited. But I DIDN'T inherit the 'fight for no reason' gene. In essence, I got the best two traits of the Kaguya clan...

Lee...Linda must have gotten in his ear, that's the only way he would turn against me like this. I've got to talk him down, somehow. I can feel it- almost a rage inside me...if I don't stop it, I'm going to kill him. I need to hold the rage in until I can stop him from attacking.

And the paint on my face...does Kimimaro think like this, too? He's loyal to Orochimaru, I'm loyal to Konoha. He fights to defend, I fight to defend. He's not violent by nature, and neither am I...it's too much of a coincidence to ignore. This paint must be the blood of my distant ancestors, somehow mixed with their chakra. When I use it, I think like a Kaguya would. The way Kimimaro spoke, the effects aren't permanent, otherwise he wouldn't have a supply. He has 100% Kaguya blood, while mine has been diluted by at least 50%. That must be why he did this...

I saw Lee approaching again, the shock wearing off from my impromptu speech. He's so fast, it's incredible to watch. Until you're on the receiving end of his kicks. In a real fight, like this, it's even worse. Suddenly, Lee put on a burst of speed and was right next to me. In desperation, I flung the bone up in a block, his leg on top of it. Both of us shook with the effort required to maintain the position. Lee pressed down harder, making forcing me into a lower stance. Then, a thought struck me. I had never been in this position with Lee before, and it occurred to me: **If he's got one leg up like this, all his weight must be distributed to his other leg. If I knock that leg out from under him, he'll be off-balance, and I can throw him.**

I did just that. Lee's face was etched with surprise as my leg kicked his. Before he fell, I grabbed him by the jumpsuit and threw him- clear across the classroom! Lee hit the back wall hard as my students took cover under their desks. What a site it must have been, their teacher doing all these strange, but incredible, things like this. I could tell my eyes had hardened, and that, subconsciously, Lee was now an enemy. Then, I did something even more strange: I reached back, tearing my shirt in the process, and pulled out another bone- my spine. This felt strange, to say the least, but somehow, it felt right at the same time.

"Tessenka no Mai: Tsuru (Dance of the Clematis: Vine)!" I heard myself chant. Using the bone like a chain, I whipped it towards Lee, who was just getting up. The bone wrapped around Lee, little ridges and bumps in it digging into his arms as I twirled the bone, tying him up. Soon, Lee was bound by the bone-vine. I yanked him hard towards me, and threw a punch into his stomach. Lee coughed up blood,

then went limp as tightened the vine.

(END FIRST PERSON- DOING THIS HAD ONE OTHER PURPOSE, LOOK FOR IT AT THE END OF THIS CH!)

Ekyt looked horrified at what he had done, but at the same time, was unforgiving. That was when he felt it- the sharp point of a kunai in his back. There was no spine for it to pierce, so Ekyt was alive, but his anger flared up. He whipped around, seeing Linda holding the kunai, looking shocked.

“What do you have against me succeeding?!” Ekyt finally shouted.

Linda sneered. “Succeeding? HAH! I outrank you, I have a sensei, and I have a boyfriend! YOU’RE a genin, you have no master, AND you’re single. And you always will be! You’ll die alone! Do you think anyone cares for you as anything more than a friend? WHY they care that much, I’ll never know! But you- you’re pathetic!” Linda reared back and spat at Ekyt. The spit hit Ekyt just to the left of his left eye, marring the paint Kimimaro had put there. As it dripped off, Ekyt felt his thoughts change. Linda must have sensed it, because she grabbed Ekyt wiped the paint off his face.

“So...that’s how you were doing all that...this paint...well, now Lee is going to cripple you! Look for yourself!” Linda slapped Ekyt across the face. Ekyt turned, and saw Lee. But it wasn’t the normal Lee. THIS Lee had opened five gates of Chakra:

“Hakkei: Kaimon Opening Gate)

Hakkei: Kyuumon (Rest Gate)

Hakkei: Seimon (Life Gate)

Hakkei: Shoumon (Wound Gate)

Hakkei: Tomon (Limit Gate)

Hakkei: Keimon (View Gate)!”

(Hakkei is “release” or “open”, I forgot which translation I used)

Lee’s body was red, and his hair was standing up. His eyes were all white, and they glared at Ekyt accusingly, hatred deep inside them. Ekyt knew the red was from blood cells rising and bursting. He had SEEN Lee use the Five Gates, but he had never been the recipient of their damage. Not least of all the one attack Ekyt had never even seen Lee use in person:

“Ura Renge (Reverse Lotus!)” Suddenly, Ekyt was flying- and getting pummeled all the way. It was just like Lee had done to Gaara (Ekyt watched the tape of the chunin exams). The hitch was that Ekyt was likely going to die at the end of it, unless he did something quick. Too late. Lee had snared Ekyt with his bandages, and yanked him upward. Ekyt knew this was it. It was over for him. He turned his head so Lee wouldn’t damage his nose or teeth. Ekyt wanted to look good at his funeral...

“ENOUGH, LEE!” Gai suddenly barked. “You’ve made your point, defended your honor, and that of your lovers! You special kid, you showed him the power of youth!”

Lee closed the gates just before hitting Ekyt. That gave Ekyt enough time to right himself and land on his feet. Immediately, everyone but Lee, Gai, and Linda were next to him. The students were amazed, and the kunoichi were concerned. Tsunade in particular.

“That was a great fight, Ekyt. It really was.”

But Ekyt didn't look thrilled. He muttered his thanks, then walked toward Kimimaro. Kimimaro wasn't smiling, but he didn't have the usual harsh look on his face. Instead, he handed Ekyt a small leather pouch.

“Here. Things you should have, and know. We'll have our fight someday, cousin. For now, Orochimaru awaits me.”

“Thank you, Kimimaro. Just do me a favor and don't let him take over your body until we've fought,” Ekyt requested. Kimimaro nodded, then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“He deserves it, and you know it!” Tsunade whispered angrily at the council.

“We will not promote him for his treason,” one elder told Tsunade.

“His 'treason' was done to protect the village. As all of you well know,” Sarutobi's whisper wasn't his normal, friendly whisper. It was lower and more harsh.

“We outnumber the three of you (Tsunade, Sarutobi, and Ebisu voted 'yes', while Danzou, Kato, Korochi, and Goumo voted 'no'), therefore he is not a chunin.” Danzou didn't smirk, but it was evident that he was in his mind through his voice.

“Damn it! Fine, you have your way. Destroy the kid after he's just been kicked in the nuts because my new idiot apprentice (Linda) interfered in that fight! I WILL find a way to promote him, to chunin and beyond!” Tsunade glared at the group, then walked away to tell Ekyt.

“They voted no, Ekyt. I'm sorry,” Tsunade told Ekyt, putting a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. Ekyt had since showered and changed, now wearing his civilian gi and jacket, instead of his tactical vest.

“I let a distraction defeat me...I don't deserve a promotion for that,” Ekyt said quietly, his voice toneless. “But, the fall wasn't so far this time, I didn't have my hopes up to begin with. And Lee- well, he defended Linda's honor, so, as his friend, I'm happy for him.”

Tsunade was wise to Ekyt, though. “What about YOU? What do YOU think about this?”

Ekyt raised an eyebrow. “My thoughts are irrelevant. I didn't pass, so nothing's changed.”

Tsunade wasn't buying that for a second. “You might be 'the statue' again, Ekyt, but you feel SOMETHING. I won't pry, I know you'll talk when you're comfortable. But let me say this: Do you feel alone? No, I'm not talking 'female companionship', I mean, lonely. Like you have no one?”

Ekyt thought for a moment, eyes unblinking. “No. Not anymore. Most of the village hates me, but the people I care about were here today. Most of them, anyway. But I have...other reasons...you understand...”

Tsunade replied with “Of course, I understand. Now, about Kankuro- he’s going to be fine, but he’s going to be laid up here in the Leaf Village for the next few days. He’s in no shape to travel or fight. I’ve put ANBU guards around him. And I want you to be protected as well.”

“Why?” Ekyt asked, eyes widening slightly in surprise.

“Because...well, we found this at the fight scene when we sent a follow-up unit to make sure the attackers really had left. Does it look familiar?” Tsunade was holding out a piece of fabric. The fabric was black, but one corner had red on it. But that wasn’t ALL it had on it. Ekyt looked closer, and tried to sense something. He felt it- there was chakra on the fabric. And it was his own Emotional Chakra.

“Itachi...” Ekyt said quietly. Then he clutched his arm, gritting his teeth in pain.

“What is it?!” Tsunade kept her voice quiet.

“He’s coming here. Look.” Ekyt rolled up his sleeve. On his shoulder, the Five Elements Seal had appeared. The same one he had put over Itachi’s eye.

Itachi was in the room. He grabbed his hostage before anyone could catch him, or even see him.

“Ekyt Kaguya.” Itachi held Sakura close, a kunai to her neck. Ekyt and Naruto looked on in rage, but couldn’t do anything else.

“Itachi...don’t drag her into this,” Ekyt answered.

Itachi tightened his grip on both the kunai and Sakura. “Unseal my Sharingan. I’ll kill her. You know that I have no problem killing her.”

“YOU BASTARD, I’M GONNA-” Naruto shouted. Ekyt grabbed him, and pulled him in close.

“Listen to me, Naruto. I need you to trust me. I can rescue Sakura. I can tell right now, he’s put a genjutsu on her. That’s why she didn’t yell for help. Now, I’m going to unseal his Sharingan. He’s going to have a free shot at me. When he takes that shot, get Sakura, and go. Get the kids out of here.”

“But!” Naruto sputtered. Ekyt put a hand up to silence him.

“Trust me. You have a girlfriend now, Naruto. You have to protect her. And I have to protect my friends. Now, I’m going to do this, and I might die in the process, but I WILL cover Sakura until she gets to you. Whatever else happens, I promise you that. In fact...” Ekyt held a kunai up. He made a small cut on his

thumb. He ran that thumb over his headband, over the Leaf symbol.

“... I swear on the blood of my ancestors I will do this. Now, do you trust me?” Before Naruto could respond, Ekyt walked away, towards Itachi.

“I’ll do it, Itachi. I’ll remove the seal. But let her go as soon as my hand touches your eye. You have my word that you won’t be attacked, not by me or anyone else...” As he spoke, Ekyt threw his kunai holster, his throwing needles, and his scrolls to the ground. He shed his jacket, and let that flutter to the ground.

Itachi didn’t respond. As Ekyt’s hand touched his face, blue chakra leaping high, he gave Sakura a shove.

“Go!” Ekyt shouted. Seconds later, Itachi’s kunai hit him in the side, digging in. With both eyes having their Sharingan, that meant Itachi could use Tsukuyomi (Moon Reader, Nightmare Realm Eng. TV). With Ekyt already fatigued, it was easy to snare him with it.

Black. Everything was black. Ekyt found himself bound to something like a giant X. His arms and legs were spread, and he couldn’t move. Fear gripped him immediately. That fear intensified as Itachi appeared in front of Ekyt. First one, then one hundred.

“In this realm, I control space and time. You’ll be here for three days. For those three days, I will stab you with this sword, and throw these shuriken.” Itachi made good on his word as he stabbed Ekyt in the stomach. But Itachi found his attack repelled. Blue chakra had surrounded Ekyt’s body.

“I can freeze this one second until you run out of that annoying chakra.”

Ekyt didn’t let up. He couldn’t use the ‘release’ technique. But even though it was only seconds in the real world, Ekyt was making good on his word. If Itachi was here with him, that meant he wasn’t after Naruto and Sakura. But, finally, Ekyt felt his chakra recede, and his body go limp.

“For all the suffering you’ve caused...” A moon shone brightly overhead as the jutsu reached the pinnacle of its power. The one hundred Itachi’s raised their arms and threw.

Ekyt’s normally impassive eyes grew wide with fear. Then the shuriken hit. They tore away flesh, and cut bone. Ekyt tried not to scream. He COULDN’T, it hurt beyond words.

“One hour has passed. Only seventy-one more to go...” Itachi and his clones threw more shuriken, the cold metal striking Ekyt’s flesh...

In the real world, Itachi had held Ekyt up for ten seconds. Their eyes had been locked. Finally, Itachi let Ekyt go. Ekyt fell to the ground, blood coming from his mouth, and his left side was cut beyond belief. Ekyt wasn't moving, but that didn't stop Itachi from picking Ekyt up once more. Ekyt was only vaguely aware when Itachi held up a ball of energy. Ekyt, very faintly, heard the sound of birds chirping. Seconds later, he felt white-hot pain coursing through his body.

Chidori... his shock-numbered brain supplied. Then things went black.

Naruto and Sakura ran, just as Ekyt had instructed. Once they were safe, and Sakura had recovered from the genjutsu, they both ran back. Naruto was ready to fight. But they saw the classroom empty. The only thing in it was a trail of blood. Sakura pointed it out silently. Naruto nodded. Together, the two walked up the stairs of the classroom. Ironically, it was the same one where they had been waiting for Kakashi, their first day as ninjas.

The blood was splattered against the wall, where the wood was dented from a human spine hitting it. It was there, face down, that Ekyt had landed. Blood soaked the floor around him. Sakura knelt down next to him, checking for a pulse. There was one, but she shook her head at Naruto.

"He'll never make it..." Sakura said, quietly sobbing. Naruto was saddened, but determined.

He's been like this before, and he always manages to live. There's got to be a way! Naruto looked at Ekyt, then bent down and turned him over. Ekyt's eyes were closed, and his breathing was shallow, but very labored at the same time. Naruto could practically see Ekyt's life slipping away. But, as he often did, Naruto got an idea under pressure.

"Sakura-chan! The basement! That weird summoning mark! Ekyt had it protected, maybe it could help him somehow!"

Sakura's eyes danced with hope. "We've got to hurry, he won't last more than another twenty minutes. Let me carry him, I can stabilize him with my Shosen Jutsu (Mystical Palm Technique)."

----Ekyt's Basement----

"If I had to guess, this summoning area involves his Emotional Chakra. There area traces of it around..." Sakura was investigating the area. Ekyt was laying in the center of the summoning area (As mentioned in chapter 49). He still hadn't moved, aside from one nasty, blood-filled cough.

"Hey! When we were fighting Orochimaru, he summoned that clone, remember? It was like an older him, from his scroll! Ekyt's got tons of cuts to choose from..."

"Oh! You mean for a blood tribute! Naruto, that's perfect! That emotional clone was older than Ekyt, and knew everything about him! Ekyt's chakra is in the air, and his blood is here. If one of us runs his thumb down that scroll (Points to ShoBu, which they brought with them), it might just summon that clone!"

"I'll do it! You save your chakra, in case something goes wrong medically." Naruto grabbed the scroll,

and Ekyt's thumb. When he did, Naruto saw the cut, then the line of blood on Ekyt's headband.

He came through with his promise...Even though he's had his eye on Sakura-chan for a long time, he still saved me and her in our darkest hour. I want to return that favor!

"Alright, here we go! KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU (Summoning Jutsu)!" Naruto used Ekyt's thumb to pay the blood tribute to the scroll. A bright blue light shone through the scroll. Ekyt's body glowed as well. From his body came the emotional chakra. From the scroll came a completely black human form. The two merged together, and the older Ekyt was back!

"What a mess..." Older Ekyt said quietly, walking over to his host body. "Itachi did a number on him...Sakura, please watch him for a moment, I need to grab something...Ah, there it is!"

Sakura knelt near Ekyt, worry written all over her. She took off his headband and put a damp washcloth on him. She checked his pulse again, as she had for the last few minutes. This time, she felt nothing.

"HE'S DEAD!" Sakura shouted. Ekyt wasn't breathing, and he had no pulse.

"Oh, don't worry about that," The older Ekyt said, walking back over with a white scroll. "His emotions exited his body too quickly. This will revive him. After that, it should be a routine stay in the hospital for him. But it's going to hurt him."

"You can't believe you're going to revive him!" Sakura shouted, angry with grief.

"Oh, I do. I've done it before. He's not dead. Do you remember when Haku 'killed' Zabuza? It's a state of temporary death that Ekyt puts himself in to summon me. Now, Sakura, you used the Shosen Jutsu (Mystical Palm, aka Chakra Scalpel)...his body should be as clean as it's going to get. Naruto, I need you to hold him up. Sakura, your Shosen Jutsu will be enough to cut what I call the "Emotional umbilical cord". I'm going to merge back in with Ekyt. The temporary state of death should have healed his subconscious by now. That just leaves me. Now, hold him steady. His body will start to move once I re-enter him...Once I've done that, Sakura, that's when I need you to use the chakra scalpel to make a cut 3 inches below Ekyt's navel. About two inches out from his body, just slice straight down. Here we go."

Older Ekyt walked into the younger Ekyt's body, slowly inserting himself. Ekyt groaned in pain, but Naruto held him steady. Sakura cut down with the chakra scalpel. Ekyt's eyes opened.

"Thank...you..." Then, Ekyt passed out from the pain.

----In the Hospital----

Ekyt sat up with a start, then laid back down as EVERYTHING hurt.

"I'm gonna kill him...damn it..." Ekyt uttered.

"So, you're awake. You're three hours early," came the voice of Kakashi.

“Sensei? Did everyone make it?” Ekyt asked, pulling himself up to a sitting position. Light flowed in through the window, and a pleasant breeze filled the room. Kakashi walked over and sat on the edge of Ekyt’s bed.

“Yes, everyone made it. And...congratulations. You passed. You’re a chunin.” Kakashi smiled and handed Ekyt a brand new chunin vest, still in a plastic package.

“But the council-” Ekyt started.

“The council was...persuaded...by a number of people, to give you the rank. Anyone who will stand up to Itachi Uchiha deserves to be a chunin. They still hate you, but Ibikki and I can be convincing when we need to be. But, that’s for another time. You’ll be in bed for a week. Don’t worry about your class, Sakura is teaching them. Once you get well, you’ve some decisions to make. But, for now, just recover.” Kakashi started to leave.

“Oh, one more thing...”

Kakashi dumped “Makeout Paradise”, “Makeout Violence”, and “Makeout Tactics” on Ekyt’s lap.

“Oh, don’t look so disgusted. You’re a healthy, single, 19 year old boy. Besides, the boredom will drive you nuts. I know- I was in the hospital for a month after the Tsukuyomi. Well, I’m off. Take care.”

Ekyt sat back, amazed he was alive. He wondered how he had made it, but decided not to think about it. Instead, he grabbed a certain orange-covered book and began to read.

“Ugh, another perv?!” Tsunade joked. “Time for your medicine. Drink this.” Tsunade handed Ekyt a glass. Ekyt downed it in a gulp, then looked at the glass.

“Akakamadori sake? THIS is medicine?”

Tsunade, who had a cup of her own, shrugged. “Well, you don’t seem to have any holes in you that we missed, the sake would have leaked out. It’s powerful stuff! Oh well. Hey kid, thanks for saving my apprentice. I, er, let Linda go, after she interfered in your fight with Lee. But, I’ll tell you more about that when it won’t hurt to laugh. You’re going to have quite a few visitors, Ekyt. Mostly females, apparently...should I know something about that, hmmm?”

Ekyt rolled his eyes as Tsunade kissed him on the forehead.

“Just get well soon, kid. Konoha’s going to need you...”

In Otogakure, four figures were sitting in a dark room.

“So, we’ll deliver Sasuke Uchiha to you. You’ll help us obtain the Kyuubi, correct?” Itachi?!

“Yes, that’s right. In return, the Akatsuki leave Otogakure out of their plans, and lend us military strength.” Orochimaru...

“Can we trust them, Lord Orochimaru? They ARE S-ranked criminals, after all.” Kabuto.

“Don’t doubt us. We’ll deliver the goods.” Pein.

The night was eerie, and the air was cold. The perfect setting for the two most powerful villainous forces to meet up.

Four fearsome criminals, and two targets in Konoha. With tension this high, a war was going to break out. The question was, who are the teams?

Temari- Hey. Well, it looks like the kid did it again. Y’know, he wouldn’t be a bad catch, but that cousin of his...

Hinata- N-Naruto-kun...and Sakura-chan? B-But, how?

Naruto: What’s with these weird looks, ‘tabayo?! And what’s all the whispering about “Naruto and Sakura”. Do they know something we don’t? I mean, we’re friends and all, but I get the feeling something’s up here...

JUTSU LIST:

Dainamikku-Entori (Dynamic Entry)

Karamatsu no Mai (Dance of the Larch)

Konoha Daisenpu (Leaf Great Whirlwind)

Konoha Reppu (Leaf Gale)

Konoha Senpu (Konoha Hurricane)

Omote Renge (Front Lotus)

Sennen Goroshi (One Thousand Years of Death)

Suiken (Drunken Fist)

Tessenka no Mai: Tsuru (Dance of the Clematis: Vine) (spine)

Tsubaki no Mai (Dance of the Camellia) (Quick stabs)

Ura Renge (Reverse Lotus)

Yanagi no Mai (Dance of the Willow) (Palm of hands are bone strikes)

Kokuangyo no jutsu (Bringer-of-darkness technique)

Kori shinchu no jutsu (Sly mind affect technique)

Magen: Kokoni Arazu no Jutsu (Demonic illusion: False surroundings technique)

Magen: Narakumi no Jutsu (Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique)

Magen: teisha kiu no jutsu (Demonic Illusion: Mind barring Technique)

Enkou Doragon no Jutsu (Dragon's Flame Jutsu)

Aoi enkou Chakra

“”tsubame suto (Blue Flame chakra: Swallow Strike)

“”gogyou hitoare (elemental burst of anger)

jougentou no mai ([rough] Dance of the Sickle moon)

Komichi no Doragon (Path of the Dragon)

Enkou Doragon no jutsu: Kage bunshin Hajime (Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone begin)

Hakkei: Kaimon Opening Gate)

Hakkei: Kyuumon (Rest Gate)

Hakkei: Seimon (Life Gate)

Hakkei: Shoumon (Wound Gate)

Hakkei: Tomon (Limit Gate)

Hakkei: Keimon (View Gate)

51 - A Misconception meets a Dangerous Alliance

Tok. Tok. Tok Tok. Tok. Tok Tok Tok Tok. (Footsteps down a hallway)

Sakura was instructing the class, but they weren't in any mood to learn. And, to be fair, Sakura didn't feel much like teaching at the moment. What had happened yesterday was fresh in her mind. Though the other medic-nin had cleaned up most of the blood, there was still the dent in the wall from Ekyt's fight with Itachi, if the slaughter could be called a fight. And some traces of blood were still left on the stairs. The students were understandably shaken up. And Sakura was, too. She had seen her friend clinically dead for over a minute, before some weird circumstance saved his life. Accidentally, Sakura gripped the chalk too hard, and a white cloud exploded on her red vest. Stifling a curse, Sakura looked up at the class. **They know Ekyt did something special...they just don't know what...**

"Sakura-sensei, please, tell us about Ekyt-sempai!" shouted one student in the back. He was backed up by several others. They had taken to their teacher, despite always seeing him on the losing end of fights. It was the students that had seen him after class that had known just how he was. When Junimaru's parents were divorcing, Ekyt had helped him through the hard time. When Tsute was in danger of failing, Ekyt had stayed with her after school and taught her one-on-one.

Sakura wasn't sure if she could tell them. She was close to tears herself, knowing she was alive only because Ekyt had almost died.

"Well, you all saw his fight with Lee. And Lee's girlfriend getting involved, causing him to lose the fight. That dog...(Sweatdrops as she realizes she said that out loud)Anyway, well, the truth is that Ekyt is why I'm alive. Do you all remember Itachi Uchiha from your history class? (Class nods) Well, he was here, and he had me hostage. Ekyt had sealed his Sharingan (Class gasps), and Itachi forced him to unseal it, or Itachi would kill me. After he unsealed Itachi's Sharingan...well, I'm not sure what happened....I just know that he was clinically dead, and that, somehow, a strange clone of himself brought him back to life...it's all very strange, and no one really knows what happened..."

Tok. Tok. Tok. Tok Tok. Tok. Tok Tok. Tok.

"Hey, you can't be here!" a voice shouted at the person walking. They stopped when the person turned to look at them. "I'm sorry, my apologies, go right ahead. Didn't recognize you..."

"It happens," the person said over his shoulder. Classroom 104 was right ahead. The person reached out a hand to open the door.

The door slid open slowly. Everyone in class looked to Sakura, who stepped away from the chalkboard,

five kunai between her fingers. Those five kunai clattered to the floor as she saw who walked in.

“E-Ekyt?!” she stammered. The class all looked over as one. Their teacher was here?!

To say Ekyt was in rough shape would have been an understatement. One eye was blackened, and there were still traces of blood on his mask, but he was walking, assisted by a crutch. The biggest change was a good one: The chunin vest that had replaced Ekyt’s black combat vest. Of course, Ekyt had special-ordered a black chunin vest.

“Afraid so. I snuck out of my hospital room. I’m still your teacher, I have to make sure you’re all okay, don’t I?”

The class cheered. “Tell us what happened!” they demanded. Ekyt looked over to Sakura. She smiled back, head cocked to one side.

“I’d like to know myself. They know the before Itachi and after Itachi, but not the rest. Go for it, you’re not interrupting. The kids have been worried...me, too, for that matter,” Sakura said with a smile. Ekyt nodded.

“Well, first of all, you should all know that, while I still answer to Ekyt, that’s really more of a nickname. ‘Ryouko’ is my real name. But, more importantly...I unsealed Itachi’s Sharingan. Then, right about here (Ekyt pointed to a spot on his right side), I was stabbed with a kunai. All of you know genjutsu is my speciality. Itachi Uchiha is, undoubtedly, the most skilled with genjutsu. He used a jutsu on me called Tsukuyomi (Moonreader). It’s a nightmare realm, where Itachi controls space and time. For three days in this world, I was tied to a giant “x”, and stabbed, beaten, and hit with shuriken. In OUR world, only ten seconds had passed. In THAT world, 72 hours had passed.”

“Wait wait wait, this happened while he was holding you against the wall?!” Naoto called out. “How could three days go that quickly?! And why didn’t you just use the “release” technique?”

“Good question. I couldn’t. And...well, I was buying time. If he was tied up with me, that meant all of you would escape. And you saw my fight...pulling bones out of yourself is tiring, and that kunai stab from behind didn’t help. Mostly, it was because of this.” Ekyt indicated his headband. “I made a blood oath to protect all of you while you escaped to Naruto Uzumaki. Part of being a Shinobi is doing what’s right for everyone else before yourself. But, you see, if I HADN’T let myself get captured like that, a lot of people would be dead. Even if I had died while captured, I would have died with a clear conscience, knowing I did all I could to preserve the lives of others. It’s a hard thing to understand. I’ve always said that I’d never kill...but I’ve changed that. I’d kill someone evil if it meant saving the life of someone good. But I would only kill in defense...”

Sakura shook her head, knowing that Tsunade hadn’t authorized Ekyt’s visit. **Look at him...he really does care, doesn’t he? He won’t tell anyone that he’s in pain. And he’s so good with those kids. Even though he lost two fights in front of them, they respect him. And...that chunin vest REALLY gives makes him look...different. Not more mature, but somehow more attractive. I**

wonder why he told Naruto that he had a girlfriend to protect...Maybe someone got the wrong idea. Naruto and I HAVE been spending a lot of time together, but we're not 'together', like that. He's too career-driven. That, and poor Hinata would pine if he was with someone besides her. (giggle) Oh well, I'll have to make sure to clear up the misconception. Naruto's grown, but him and I? I'd have to think about that first. There are other boys, too. I'll always be on Naruto's team, but that close?

The class shuffled out of the room, talking excitedly about what happened. Sakura grabbed Ekyt's arm.

"Now that class is over, I'm a medic again, and I say it's time for you to go back to the hospital before you ruin your stitches. Come on, now." Sakura gently forced Ekyt to walk back to the hospital. On the way, she asked:

"By the way, where did you hear that Naruto and I were boyfriend/girlfriend?"

"From Lady Tsunade," Ekyt replied.

"You should know, he and I aren't together like that. We've both been studying, so we decided we'd help each other, so we can both be jonin. We weren't dating or anything."

Ekyt, stoic as always, had to try REALLY hard not to ruin that stoicism. **She's NOT dating him? Then-what? Wait...she might just be trying to save my feelings. She's got to have it figured out.**

"My mistake," Ekyt said evasively.

"By the way..." Sakura started, blushing.

Ekyt froze. **Huh? Is she...No, she's not going to say...maybe...oh, man!**

"...Thanks for saving me." Sakura kissed Ekyt on the cheek, just above his mask, causing him to blush, too.

"It was no problem." Ekyt tried to answer crisply, but he faltered halfway through. That earned him a curious look from Sakura, so Ekyt covered with "Sorry, my throat is a little sore from the coughing." That seemed to satisfy Sakura, so she continued to walk him to his room.

A week later, after visits from Temari, Tenten, and a few others, Ekyt was on his feet. He was taking a walk around the village with Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura before he had to meet his squad.

"Hey, loser...you fought my brother...how are you alive?" Sasuke wondered, shooting a glance at Ekyt.

"I'm not sure. But I am, that's what matters. His fighting pattern is still the same." Ekyt was still a little ticked with Sasuke, so he kept his answers short and clipped.

"Hey, pervy samurai, it's awesome you're a chunin now! It's about damn time, believe it!"

“Yeah, I-”

“Ekyt, come here!”

Ekyt looked over to see who barked the order. Ibikki Morino and Anko Mitarashi. It had been Ibikki who was doing the talking. Hayate Gekko was also with them. He was in a tree, keeping watch for spies.

“Listen, kid. Take the armor (ANBU armor), and put it on underneath that vest. You’ve got a B-ranked mission, and you’re leading it, with your squad. You’ll be accompanied by Sai. Team Kakashi will be accompanied by Yamato.” Ibikki spoke low and fast, while Ekyt put the armor on.

“What’s happened?” Ekyt questioned, looking from one jonin to the other.

“Welcome back to ANBU, for starters. Secondly, there’s been a series of kidnappings. All done by the Akatsuki. Your sensei, Iruka, is one missing. There are others missing, too. Kankuro from the Sand Village, Genma Shuranai, and Ayame, Teuchi’s daughter. Your squad is going to burst ahead and face the Akatsuki. Team Kakashi is going to be stacked with two jonin, and an Akatsuki target. Your job is to survive until they arrive, then bring the captives back here safely. Once you’ve done that, the other ANBU agents will mobilize.”

“Ibiki-sensei, Yuuka and Okkuu aren’t ready for a mission like this, against the Akatsuki. Even with Sai and myself, they’re still fresh genin.” Ekyt had become protective of Okkuu and Yuuka in their short time together. He cared enough to stand up to Ibikki Morino.

“You’ve got guts, kid, talking to Ibikki like that. But your kids WANT to go. It’s their sensei too, you know. You couldn’t stop ‘em if you tried. Now, get going, and hurry it up!” Anko barked.

“Alright. I’ll get my team together, and we’ll go.” Ekyt put his index and middle fingers together under his right eye and disappeared in a flurry of leaves and smoke.

“Think he was right about the genin?” Anko asked, taking a swig of red miso soup.

“Of course he was right. But it’s time they learned that the life of a Shinobi isn’t all D-ranks. And Ekyt...it’s time he learned what it means to be a leader. He’s got all the making of a top jonin. He just needs experience. And damned if that council is going to stop him now. Kakashi and I let them know how he felt about their decision, in our own subtle ways,” Ibikki said with a grin that would frighten the dead.

“Oh? How subtle were you?” Anko shot back.

“Well, the genjutsu we used SHOULD be wearing off soon...” Ibikki looked up at the sky, telling the time from the sun. “Time for us to go, too. I’ve got new intelligence reports. It’s not good news.”

Iruka woke up, feeling dazed. He knew WHERE he was, and WHY he was here. But he wasn’t sure

HOW he had gotten here.

There was a lot of them...the cloaks, and those eyes...no doubt about it, Sharingan. But why me? Did they take anyone else?

Iruka looked to his right. Kankuro was just beginning to stir, and he was trying to shake the cobwebs out of his head. To his left, Iruka heard a soft, female voice groan. Lastly, across from him, he saw Genma, just barely awake.

Not good...not one of us is a medic-nin. Genma's senbon would have come in handy, but that's long gone. I can't reach my exploding tags. I guess we've got to play along until we're rescued, or the Akatsuki give us an opening. How many of them came? Iruka counted them, having seen the BINGO book with their pictures in it. Deidara, Sasori, Itachi, Kisame.

The Leaf Village would send a rescue squad, that was certain. But it wasn't likely that they could compare to these four. Trying to force doubt out of his mind, Iruka let himself rest, and he got as comfortable as you could with your legs shackled and your arms tied behind your back. He didn't know how long the wait was, but he needed to conserve his energy- for now.

"Okkuu, Yuuka, I'm not going to lie- this mission is the toughest that I've ever faced. We have hostages to worry about, and the enemy is strong. VERY strong. We have an ANBU member with us. This is Sai. Sai, this is Okkuu Kazuki and Yuuka Momoka."

Sai tried a genuine smile, but only succeeded in scaring the two genin. At least he hadn't joked about a certain part of the male anatomy.

"So, be on your guards, and worry about yourselves first. Just remember the first thing I said when we became teammates: I won't let you die. Alright? Time to go."

Sakura: WHAT? Iruka-sensei has been kidnapped? Oh, this isn't good! We've GOT to rescue him! And now that everyone understands Naruto and I aren't together, what am I going to do? It makes me that much more lonely!

Naruto: Me and Sakura? A couple years ago, sure. She's gotten more beautiful, yeah, but we're different people. Guess this means that the Pervy Samurai still has a chance. Ah, what am I saying? Iruka-sensei is in trouble! If they hurt him- I'll kill them!

Sai: Ekyt-kun is enjoying this, in a way. Being a chunin means a lot to him, and he enjoys the leadership. If we hurry, we can rescue Iruka. It would be a shame to lose him. He reminds me of my brother. They were both talented, but also very kind.

52 - A Trap is Laid...

Whoosh!

“Now, our job is to push through to the hostages. There should be three of them. No telling if they’ll be in any shape to walk...we might have to carry them back...whatever the case, the fight isn’t our job. We’re the distraction. Don’t get caught up in combat.” **Or we might have to carry their bodies back...or vice versa. The Akatsuki take Iruka, which draws out Naruto. Genma would draw the attention of Hayate, who would draw Ibikki’s attention. Ayame...damsel in distress. But why? Why purposely involve ANBU? They took Iruka for Naruto, but why Genma? And I’d imagine Ayame was in the wrong place at the wrong time. No matter how you slice it, this feels like a trap. And I’m leading two genin into it...No, two kids...two kids with lives, and hope...and love. Those two bonded. I can’t let what happened to me happen to them.**

Ekyt held up a hand, and the he and his students fell to the ground below.

“Put your winter gear on here, it’s going to get cold very quickly up ahead.” Ekyt suited action to words and pulled on his old, black, trench coat. He took a look around the woods, recognizing this as the spot where he had been hit with genjutsu the first time...

The first time he went to the Land of Herbs.

An unconscious shiver struck Ekyt suddenly. The thought of that demented old man, Koori, torturing that little girl. And all his victims, and their sick, grotesque deaths. Ekyt remembered he nearly saw his own. Falling out that castle window by the deceased Koubakage. It was almost a year ago, but the events were as fresh in Ekyt’s mind as if they had happened yesterday. Ekyt, Lee, and Sakura had come here to look into the kidnapping of a little girl. Their battle soon turned supernatural, as an innovator of Kinjutsu (Forbidden jutsus) had been behind everything. The rotting corpses attacking, and the fight with a man long deceased.

“Ekyt-sensei? Where are we going?” Yuuka asked cautiously, seeing her teammate deep in thought.

“In a word? Hell.” Ekyt said quietly. “We’re going to the Land of Herbs. I’ve been there once before, and I’d hoped to never go back. I’ll tell you the stories sometime, but not now. Just remember: Don’t drop your guard, and don’t panic. Okay? That’s what will get you quicker than anything. If you feel the slightest hint of Genjutsu, tell me right away, if you’re able before it takes hold. And, lastly: DO NOT look into Itachi’s eyes. Whatever you do, avoid his eyes. It’s the quickest way to die.”

Yuuka looked worried, to say the least. She was shaking from fear. Okkuu took her hand.

“It’s okay. Look, we’ve got Ekyt-sensei and Sai-sensei. And besides, I won’t let them get you. It’s just more training, right?” Okkuu’s smile was infectious to Yuuka, and she smiled back.

Sai looked on, trying to sort it all out. **Bonds...**

"Confusing, isn't it, Sai?" Ekyt asked. A short gust of wind tossed Ekyt's coat.

"I cannot relate at all. It must be like the bond I felt with my brother...but with a female...Is that right?" Sai didn't attempt a fake smile.

Ekyt shrugged. "You're asking the wrong guy. I've never had one of those relationships, either. But I DO know that having someone, or even something, makes you that much stronger. When I came to Konoha, I had nobody. And now, I've got meaning, friends, and even family in the last place I would have expected." Ekyt turned away to give the kids their privacy. **Young, innocent, uncorrupted. Thank God I stopped reading Makeout Paradise before it was too late. It was like reading a color book...except dirty...three pages was enough, I took the boredom instead.**

"Sai, if we get in combat, use this." Ekyt handed a bottle of what looked like ink to Sai. "It should come in handy."

They four walked along, when Ekyt stopped. He had stopped near the castle that had nearly become a graveyard for a little girl, and himself, Lee, and Sakura. It was here that Koori had held Kora, the little girl who carried the big secret he needed to know. Even now, Ekyt wasn't over the feeling of dread and hopelessness. But then he noticed something else, something more familiar, but even less welcome.

"Do you feel that? Chakra...recently used..." Ekyt muttered. Sai shook his head.

"No, it is like a genjutsu. A trap?" Sai wondered aloud. Before anyone could do anything else, Sai was knocked aside, and Ekyt was trapped!

"Soul Prison Jutsu!"

"What?!" Ekyt was surrounded by swirling ghosts. "Damnit!" A vicious kick did nothing to shake the strange, gray structure. But Ekyt felt his chakra sap once he touched the wall of the dead souls surrounding him. Giving up on that, he thought back to the others. Three prisoners, one of whom could walk and run. The other two were unconscious. Ekyt's two students. There was only one choice.

"Go, run for it! Take them back and send ANBU!" Ekyt shouted. Koori closed his fist a little bit; the prison shrunk. Ekyt had to crouch to fit in it without the souls taking his chakra.

"Fat chance! I'm sending these scumbags back to hell!" Okkuu shouted, running forward. Yukka ran after him. They were running straight into the danger of four Akatsuki and one demented old man. Ekyt tried a genjutsu, but felt it blocked by the souls. **Okkuu...Yuuka...you know what it means to be Shinobi...but don't take that chance over my life! You're younger, the future of the village! Don't do this!** Ekyt couldn't even say it out loud. Distracting them was as good as killing them himself.

"YAH!" Okkuu and Yuuka looked at each other, the nodded. They made hand signs, incredibly fast for

their ages (both age 13), and created two clones each. Six total, including the real ones.

“Body Flicker Jutsu!” the two said in unison. The clones and the real bodies switched places and sped up. The yellow of Yuuka’s jacket and the gray of Okku’s jumpsuit blended together, creating a mixture of colors that were nearly impossible to keep up with. Then the two kids made their moves.

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!” Koori was forced to release it.

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!” Yuuka shouted it this time. Again, Koori was forced to release it. That was when two tiny fists cracked him in the face. Blood and teeth went flying as Koori flew backward, falling into Kisame.

“You little brats!” the old man thundered. He raised his yellowed, wrinkled hands and tossed his long, black and gold cloak out of the way. “I’m going to teach you not to interfere in my divine work! I will make hell a reality on this earth! Time to die, children! You, girl, you have such pretty green eyes...I think I’ll make them mine. And the boy...your bones are strong, they will create a fine soldier.”

Koori was closing in. Yuuka and Okku backed up as he began to weave his hands.

“Forbidden Jutsu: Art of Soul Cannibalism!” Koori shouted. Just as he was making the last sign, the two kids had backed up into Itachi. Remembering what Ekyt said, they avoided his eyes. But he didn’t attack them. He was watching Koori. Despite themselves, Yuuka and Okku turned to look, too.

Koori was being held in the air around the neck. Ekyt!

“I won’t have you threaten my team! I gave you the taste of hell once before! NOW I’ll give you something to fear!” Ekyt looked Koori in his weathered old eyes. Koori slammed them shut, shaking with fear.

“Your genjutsu! No, it’s too much!” Koori screamed.

“You flatter me.” Ekyt said flatly. But instead of making hand signs, chakra became visible under on his feet. Ekyt’s first foot slammed Koori in the groin, actually lifting him off the ground with the strike. Ekyt’s second foot smashed him in the face, sending shards of broken glass into Koori’s left eye. Ekyt had just destroyed his life without killing him, or expending any more chakra than jumping from tree to tree required. The next instant, Ekyt had snatched Yuuka and Okku away from Itachi Uchiha.

“NOW take the others and go! I’ll hold out with Sai to give you cover!” Ekyt shouted.

Sai nodded to the two kids, who took off running. Iruka carried Genma and Yuuka carried Ayame. Okku ran ahead, making sure the path was clear.

“Sai, use that ink, and draw!” Ekyt called over to the artist.

“Okay, Ekyt-kun. Great Beast Painting Jutsu!” (Unsure of the perfect English translation, sorry!)

Ekyt had made a series of handsigns, ending with the tiger hand sign. “Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!”

Sai’s drawing burst into flames; Sai had been drawing with a bottle of toad oil! The now fiery lions leapt around the Akatsuki members.

“Good job here! You guys scram! We’ll meet you at the rendezvous point when you bring ANBU!” Kakashi, Sakura, Naruto, Sasuke, and Yamato arrived. They all went to work.

“Wood Prison Jutsu!” Yamato used the jutsu to create vines from the rich soil, trying to snare Deidara.

“Temple of Nirvana Jutsu!” Sakura aimed the sleeping genjutsu at Kisame, who had advanced the closest.

“Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Naruto added. A hundred Naruto’s attacked Sasori.

Sasuke and Itachi looked at each other.

“I finally understand Itachi. I know what I need to do to obtain the Mangekyo Sharingan...and I’m going to do it. It’s been in front of me all along. I needed to kill the person I thought was the biggest threat to me. And that’s you. You had to kill your best friend because he was the most powerful in the clan, except for you! I still don’t know WHY you want me to hate you, but I don’t NEED to know to kill you!”

Itachi looked back at his brother. “You’re wrong. I killed my best friend because I HAD to. He had what I needed. And someday, you might carry that need within you. Then, and only then, will I bother with killing you. Amaterasu.”

The last word was a jutsu, a powerful black-flame that could burn for days. Both the Akatsuki and Team Kakashi had to leap away before the heat singed them.

“Our trap has succeeded. It was only information we were interested in. Every time we meet, Naruto, we learn a little more about you. It’s only a matter of time before you come to us, or we come to you.”

Ekyt and Sai raced to catch up with Okkuu, Yuuka, and the ones they had just rescued. Yuuka had found a spot, camouflaged well. Iruka was up and helping Yuuka heal the injured Genma and Ayame. Genma’s injuries were mostly small cuts, and a massive lack of chakra. Ayame had a broken arm, and she was weak from a genjutsu used on her. Iruka spotted Ekyt returning and walked over, taking him aside.

“You did well, you know. And, congratulations on the promotion. Under other circumstances, there would have been a ceremony, but, well, you know...” Iruka smiled, but looked sad.

“Iruka-sensei? What’s wrong?” Ekyt asked, feeling like it was something he should know.

“Well, you were one of my students Ekyt. Seeing you grow to be such a fine Shinobi...you’ve surpassed me, if not in rank than in skill. It’s what every teacher wants, but at the same time, it makes them feel old, or useless.”

Ekyt could relate. "Iruka-sensei, Okkuu and Yuuka were not forced into this mission, by me or anyone else. They came by choice. And then they rescued me. I see what you mean by satisfaction of teaching. Those two bonded so quickly, and became very good, very fast. They'll be ready to test in a year's time, easy. Maybe six monthes."

A thought struck Iruka suddenly. He smiled widely. "Well, you know, since you're a chunin, you can't take the exam again. Guess I'll have to find a replacement, at least for that exam. Any ideas on who it could be?" Iruka talked to Ekyt as a friend and colleague, rather than a student now.

"Well, it's the last person you would think, Iruka-sensei. I guess when I pulled a bone out my shoulder, it sobered him up. But, my personal pic would be Naoto Iruune." Ekyt replied, chuckling at the shock on Iruka's face.

"Really? Well, you DID say he was like Naruto..." Iruka muttered. "When he's done, send him over to me. Hope I can 'tame the beast'."

"Iruka-sensei, you worked with Naruto, it should be second nature by now!"

The trip back to the village was uneventful, with only Sai's questioning of Naruto's manhood to lighten the mood. It was a job well done for Team Iruka and Team Kakashi. Once they got back to the village, things were different. It was intense, to say the least.

"Yes, even Hokage's get a break!" Tsunade told the select few in her office. "Shizune and myself need a short rest, three weeks tops. And, I need someone in charge while I'm gone. I've already made my choice, settle down! The Hokage will also need an aid, but I'll leave that up to him after I leave. So, here's your Hokage:"

Ekyt: This again? They couldn't PAY me to be the Hokage right now, I'm just starting to get respect back. Who is it? Naruto? Sakura? Sakura...I never told her...and the Herb Land was perfect, too. I must be cursed...

Naruto: IS it me? Is it me? is it me?! Or maybe Kakashi-sensei! Then I could be his aid! Oh, come on, pick me!

Iruka: Well, I've got to break in a new team member already. All of the 'problem cases' seem to grow so fast, don't they? Well, here's hoping Ekyt's call is on the money.

NEXT TIME: THE TEMPORARY HOKAGE, AND HELL IN THE LAND OF HERBS II: A NATION DIVIDED! BEGINS! DON'T MISS IT!

53 - The Heiress with the Attitude!

Master Sarutobi walked out onto the platform, his white robes billowing, and his white and red Hokage hat atop his head.

"I hope you all haven't grown tired of me as your Hokage. But when Tsunade asked me take her place for a little while, I couldn't refuse an old student."

The reception to Lord 3rd's return was tremendous. Even Kakashi and Ekyt, the two most stoic Shinobi you could find, actually cheered. Lady Tsunade and Shizune took the uproar as an opportunity to get away before they were mobbed.

"I've also chosen my aid. Someone who was taught the village what it means to show love and respect. We all have our crosses to bear, but perhaps none moreso than my choice: Naruto Uzumaki!"

So the first day passed. On the second day, Ekyt found his way to Lord Hokage's office.

"Ah this is a familiar site!" The Third exclaimed as Ekyt walked in. When Sarutobi had taken the place of the fourth Hokage, Ekyt had been a frequent visitor. Now, for the first time, Ekyt could walk in as a chunin, and it was partially thanks to the Third that he was.

"It's good to have you back, Lord Third," Ekyt said, kneeling before who had become his mentor of sorts.

"Well, it's good to BE back. Retirement was getting a little boring, even for my old bones! Now, you're here for a mission..." Lord Hokage's eyes twinkled; this was just like old times.

"Not quite, sir. Not until after school is out. I'm here for a certain scroll. I'm not sure Lady Tsunade remembered, but I had made a deal with her about borrowing a scroll that's not...available to everyone."

Lord Hokage closed his eyes, trying to remember. "She DID mention that you had an interest in a scroll...which one was it, she didn't say..."

"You might ask your aid, sir. I'm sure HE remembers where he found it, a few years ago. Right, Naruto?"

"Huh? Whaddya mean?" Naruto was confused. Ekyt could feel a sweatdrop growing.

"Mizuki? Iruka-sensei? Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu?" Ekyt asked.

"Nope, not ringin' a bell, sorry!" Naruto replied.

“The scroll you stole...to create the Ninja Harem?”

“Oh, right! Yeah, I remember. It was some big-deal scroll by the first Hokage or something! I know where that is!” Naruto ran off to find it.

Ekyt let his shoulders slump a little, and his eyes drop to half-lidded.

“I’m wearing a pity vest...I’m ashamed I took it, Lord Hokage. I only got this because they felt sorry for me, getting beaten up by Lee, and then Itachi Uchiha. I’m in Naruto’s position: the village hates me, and they don’t trust me. I’ve got to fight every day just to stay a teacher to the kids. If there was someone else for the job, I’m sure I would be gone. I don’t want this vest, if it’s meaningless.” Ekyt shrugged it off and laid it on the 3rd’s desk.

The Third puffed on his pipe, rich tobacco smoke filling the air. “No one doubts your SKILLS. Tell me: WHY did you fight Itachi Uchiha? Something tells me the blood across your hitai-ate had something to do with it...”

Ekyt recounted what happened, including his promise to Naruto.

“Should I have killed Itachi when I had the chance?” THAT had been weighing on Ekyt’s mind. Obviously, sealing the Sharingan hadn’t been enough to stop Itachi. “I admit, sir, I thought about using...a certain jutsu...” Ekyt was suddenly fidgety. He had only told Kakashi about it, when Kakashi had come to visit him in the hospital.

“Oh? What jutsu was that?” Lord Hokage was interested, to be sure. **Slowly, he’s learning a lot of jutsus. He’ll never know as many as Kakashi, but he might rival myself. His research has been endless. The elders actually fear Ekyt, as a threat. But somehow, I would entrust the village to him as soon as Tsunade, or Kakashi. Death has suddenly become a worry for him. He’s been forced into Jonin, maybe even Kage-level combat all too often, and it’s forced him to think fast, and grow up even faster. But over a jutsu? This is a new issue...**

Ekyt gulped, and tried to steady his voice. “The Fourth’s, sir. The Reaper Death Seal.”

The Third’s eyes widened in shock. “Someone so young shouldn’t even be ABLE to perform that jutsu! Never mind that you shouldn’t know about it in depth enough! Why would you do that, knowing that your own death would follow?!”

“That’s just it, Lord Hokage. My second chakra. Ever since the Akatsuki extracted it, and I retrieved it, I realized it’s a life-force by itself. It can take on a corporeal form, something more than a clone. It’s like a person within me. Using the Reaper Death Seal would have taken THAT life force away, rather than my soul, if my research is correct. I’m in no rush to die, and I don’t want to outwit death, but Itachi...he just keeps coming back! I thought that by sealing his Sharingan, he would be less of a threat. Instead, it put someone else in danger. The only thing that stopped me was my promise to Sasuke Uchiha. His brother is his to kill. That, and...well, I don’t want to be like Orochimaru, cheating death to get eternal life. I know I’ll face death some day, and I admit it’s a scary prospect, but I thought about the way I was taking around it...I wouldn’t be myself if I let my Emotional Chakra die, would I? Does this sound...insane, sir?”

The Third Hokage's shock had long worn off. "In my thoughts, I know I could trust you to do what was right by the village. Your thoughts are perfectly sane. You've found a way around the Reaper Death Seal's consequence. If I had that ability, I could have done more than seal Orochimaru's arms. I don't have the chakra I once had. If I hadn't been alone on the roof with him that day, and I had been half my age, I would have stopped him. It's my fault he's spiraled out of control. That's partially why Naruto is my aid right now. If Orochimaru should attack, if I die in the attempt, Naruto could finish him, or at least drive him out of the village. And, then, his dream would be realized. He would be Hokage. But now, before any more happens, I want to ask you again, the same question I asked you as a genin: What are YOUR dreams? Have they changed?"

"No, Sir. But I admit, I'm tempted by MORE than that. I, well, I would like to be legendary, or at least remembered, in addition to be trusted. After spending time with Lady Tsunade and Master Jiraiya, and even serving under Orochimaru, it just feels like you could belong anywhere like that. But mostly, I'd like the respect of the Hidden Leaf Village back. I lost it when I pulled that stunt as the 'pretend' Hokage. Even if it saved the village, THEY don't know that..."

Naruto returned with the scroll. "Here ya go!" he called happily, tossing it to Ekyt. Ekyt had to make a diving catch. Lord Hokage exhaled, and briefly wondered if Naruto was the right decisions.

So far he's only aided my nerves in fraying...

After school, Ekyt got in some study time at home. The Scroll of Sealing was amazing, and it's jutsus were complex, deadly, and fascinating, all at once. Ekyt couldn't learn them all, his chakra was a limitation, but knowing their theories helped him create his own jutsus.

After studying, it was a routine patrol with ANBU for Ekyt. He had to quickly don his gear and rush off after class was dismissed. Ekyt actually enjoyed this. He hated the sleeveless getup he had to wear, but his stoicism was taylor-made for ANBU black ops.

The four ANBU agents arrived at the meeting spot, all on time.

"Anything?" asked the man in the rooster mask.

"Nothing," said the 'tiger'.

"Same here," replied the youngest, wearing a dragon mask.

"My area was clear," 'boar' said.

The rooster agent nodded. "Alright. Reports?"

"I'll take them Lord Hokage, I have orders to meet with him anyway," said 'dragon'.

The others nodded. As if by some silent command, they all leapt off in separate directions.

Whoosh!

Flying through the air, Ekyt Kaguya aimed for another tree branch. He pushed himself off it, hitting his

top speed. He knew how to get back to Konoha without really thinking about it. Not such a good thing on a night when his mind was thinking about all his failures. Had he wasted his life? His chance at love? Tok.

He landed on a branch, staring dismally across the landscape. It was a dark night; few stars lined the sky. A heavy breeze tossed his hair around. But he either didn't notice or didn't care at the moment. Instead, he scanned the area for a threat. Nothing sent up any warning flags. So he continued, hitting top speed, into the Hokage's office. He knelt next to the Third until he was acknowledged.

"Nothing to report," he said, speaking barely above a whisper. His thoughts had smothered his joy of being with ANBU again.

"Good. Now, I've got a new mission for you. This one is...delicate, and requires your genjutsu abilities. As well as a...friendly touch." Lord Hokage stepped aside to reveal Sakura. But she wasn't her normal, happy self. Something was clearly wrong. Ekyt, still in his ANBU wear, got down to inspect her.

"Remote genjutsu...the chakra pattern isn't familiar to me. But it was deep-rooted..." Ekyt looked up, his dragon mask still on. Then he spotted something on Sakura's skirt. It was a small bit of soil. The strange thing was the plant that was growing out of it.

"The soil is extremely fertile...there's only one place I can think of...Sir, the-"

The Third Hokage nodded. "The Land of Herbs. Sakura was on a routine patrol there, as per our deal with the Koubakage. I must ask you to return once more to this land. The genjutsu is too powerful for anyone but yourself, modesty aside. Kurenai would have been sent, but she's recovering from an attack by bandits. Ten jonin...she's lucky to be alive. Now, your mission- It's S-ranked. Take Sakura, and one other with you, and go to the Land of Herbs, and put an end to this genjutsu. Other villages have reported attacks, but none are sure of the source as we are."

This was the first time Ekyt wanted to refuse a mission. But he knew that it wasn't an option. And seeing Sakura so shaken up DID influence his choice.

"Oh, and Ekyt...Go as ANBU, but know that this vest will be waiting for you. You are a chunin now, and I can't have you refusing the rank."

In the Land of Herbs, the daughter of the First Koubakage's son looked into her mirror. She slumped down on her futon. The woman was young, early twenties, but she looked sad. Her husband had passed away recently, and she hadn't let go of the anger and sadness yet. Could you control nothing in this world?

Naikou shifted her position, her loose purple robe falling off her shoulders, nearly exposing her. But there was no one around to care, so she didn't fix it. Instead, Naikou shifted her long, black hair out of her eyes and off of her slightly upturned nose. She had been, and still was, a beautiful woman, with a pleasant figure and nice features. Her eyes, sky blue, had once been full of life, of love. Now, that was gone. She was empty. No one slept next to her at night, no one helped her tend to her duties. She had no child to nurture. She had only pain.

Pain she was going to share with the world.

Naikou hadn't told anyone of her pain. How could they understand? Her room was filled with expensive trinkets and baubles that the common could never even dream of. How could someone who had everything be in so much pain? They would never understand. The only universal language was pain itself.

Naikou looked into her mirror. The mirror itself was not ordinary. It had the ability to look across the nations and villages. It's beautifully crafted, age wood, and expensive glass surface would have been envied by anyone superficial enough to believe themselves a god or goddess. Naikou was more than that; she was a gifted ninja. With this mirror, she was more dangerous. She could strike without leaving the safety of her room in the castle (One of two castles in the Herb Land, the other belonging to the direct heir of the Koubakage title). And strike she did. She struck without reason, or so it seemed. In truth, she HAD a reason:

She wanted others to share her pain. She knew it was wrong, and selfish. But her pain blinded her to that fact. Naikou stood up and rang a gong, summoning her only companion.

A well-dressed older man with a dark glass left eye entered the room and bowed humbly. "You called, my lady?" he asked in a warm voice.

"Gather some more prisoners, Koori. And my husband's body, please. There's not enough blood to go around. I don't want to have to cut my own arms anymore, too much pain and blood...I've already got enough of both, and lost enough of both." Naikou smiled a little, realizing that what she said made no sense. Koori kindly smiled.

"Of course, my lady. I have a trespasser as well. I think he requires your...delicate personal touch."

A squirming boy, maybe 12, was being held by Koori.

"I'm sorry, please! I didn't mean it! I just wanted my ball back! Please, I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Naikou stood up, despite her revealing appearance.

"Well, aren't you cute! And who are you?" Naikou asked kindly.

"Please, help me! Please!" the boy begged. Naikou's smile vanished.

"You didn't answer my question...Koori, please place him in my adjoining room. I'll deal with him in a minute."

The red-haired boy was wide-eyed with terror. His yellow eyes danced around the room, looking for an escape. But he didn't find an exit. Seconds later, Koori grabbed him roughly by his overalls and practically threw him into the room Naikou had indicated.

"Lord Hokage, I know who I'll pick as my third member. The class has a break this week, so there's no need for a substitute teacher...I guess everything's in order, then." Ekyt was uncharacteristically shaken up. Sakura was too, now that she was awake and knew she had to go back to the Land of Herbs.

“You’re facing your fear, Ekyt. If I didn’t think you could handle it, I would have terminated this mission. But during your six months with me (a few chapters back), I learned that you wanted to become stronger. Well, facing this fear will make you stronger. Just remember what you learned in our time together.” The Third put a hand on Ekyt’s shoulder, prompting him to say it.

“Fear is the undoing of any Shinobi.” Ekyt paused, then nodded once, firmly. “I’ll report every twelve hours.”

“Excellent! Leading your first mission...you remind me of Kakashi, in a way. But, that story is for another time.”

“Look, we need to bury the hatchet.”

“I said ‘No’. You disrespected Linda, and I cannot do it!” Lee shot down Ekyt’s proposal for being the third member. Sakura had shot down Sai as being the third member. Shikamaru said ‘no’. That left Ekyt with one option.

“Listen, Lee, I’m sorry if you feel that way. I never meant to disrespect her. Even if you don’t want me as a friend, consider this as a mission that is for the good of the village. If you don’t like me, can you put that aside and WORK with me?” Ekyt extended his hand.

Lee looked at it for a moment, then took it, in a firm shake. He restrained himself from hugging Ekyt, remembering Ekyt didn’t like that, and that he wasn’t Gai-sensei.

“You are difficult to stay mad at. I will help. I am the best choice, since I have been there as well!” Lee slid next to Ekyt, an arm around his shoulder. “And, of course, you still have feeling for Sakura-chan...perhaps you will reveal them this time. You almost did last time we went to the Land of Herbs. Or, perhaps I will reveal them for you!”

Ekyt glared at Lee. “You do, and the Secondary Lotus won’t save you this time.”

Sakura: Why is it always me getting attacked like that? Well, this time, I’m going to punish whoever it is that’s doing it!

Ekyt: Lord 3rd has returned. I can’t help but wonder, after the Akatsuki’s involvement, if such a shakeup in government will lead to another war. Orochimaru’s vendetta against the 3rd goes deep...as deep as blood...But that’s not my concern right now. Right now, my concern is this mission, and protecting Sakura. Those are my orders...

Lee: Back to the Land of Herbs? Last time, I was injured there! This time, it will be different! We will clean up the Land of Herbs, once and for all! The power of youth runs strong within me!

NEXT TIME: RETURN TO THE LAND OF HERBS! THIS IS WHERE EKYT ALMOST ADMITTED HIS FEELINGS FOR SAKURA. BUT TO ALL THREE OF THEM (LEE, SAKURA, AND EKYT) THIS PLACE IS A LITTLE SLICE OF HELL! CAN THEY OVERCOME THEIR OWN FEARS, AND ALL THE OTHER OBSTACLES, AND END THIS HEIRESS' REIGN OF TERROR?

54 - The Land of Herbs: Hell on Earth!

"I never thought I'd be here again..." Sakura uttered, seeing the Land of Herbs before her. All too quickly, the memories came flooding back. Of the little girl, bound and gagged, blood all over her, obscenities written on her forehead. Of the brutal genjutsu directed at her. Of the injured Lee. Of the stoic Ekyt staring at nothing, with God-only-knew-what running through his mind. Everything about this place seemed wrong, and haunted. The soil was fresh and fertile, but the sky was dark and forbidding, black clouds occasionally bringing thunder forth, but no rain. Nevertheless, the land prospered, and its citizens were mostly happy. They had found their second Koubakage after nearly fifty years without a strong leader. Not before trying to force Sakura into the role, however.

"This place feels so wrong. It is as though my intestines want to burst through my stomach to escape the anxiety..." Lee remembered all too well that he had nearly been decapitated by a kinjutsu-controlled skeleton. He distinctly thought back to chasing the insane old man behind all this, before he fell down, injured after opening the first gate of chakra. The feeling of being worthless shamed Lee more than anything, and it had strengthened his resolve to train hard. But that did not mean he wanted to face that fear again. **But I must! I need to be strong, to overcome all my obstacles! Neji is now a jonin, and I am only a chunin! I will show him that I am strong, and I will make Gai-sensei proud of me!**

"This place is hell." Ekyt summed up the situation in his usual manner. He thought back to his fight with the long-dead Koubakage. He had been outmatched, and even nearly killed when he was thrown through an ornate stained-glass window. But the Koubakage had been a kind man, even in death, and told Ekyt that the kinjutsu had been poorly done, and that Ekyt needed to defeat him. Ekyt would never forget closing the casket door on a still-living being, never mind the fact that the being had asked for it. Knowing you were ending someone's life, even undead, was unnerving. But that hadn't lasted long, as Ekyt had rushed off after Sakura, just in time to save her mind from collapsing under the strain of a horrid genjutsu.

The three were all clothed for the occasion. Ekyt was wearing his ANBU gear, armor, dragon mask, and gloves. He had again used his trench coat to cover himself up, finding the ANBU cloak problematic, since it was little more than a poncho with no pouches. You couldn't see Ekyt's expression between the two masks, but his voice was full of determination, somehow masking the fear he felt. Ekyt had faced death in the form of Orochimaru, Itachi Uchiha, and Sasuke Uchiha without a second thought. But this place was so traumatic, so horribly haunted in his mind, it was as if he had second thoughts. But he pushed those aside once more, ready to face death again.

Lee was dressed in his usual clothes, but had added a green warmup jacket over the top of his jumpsuit. Lee's serious face was set into a mask of something close to despair. But that soon turned into a grimace, one that plainly came from an internal challenge. **If I get scared, I will do 1000 laps around Konoha on my hands...**

Sakura was also dressed like normal, except she had changed into longer blue gi pants, and added a pink jacket over her vest. She put on her gloves, face determined. **I'm not going to let that genjutsu get me again. Last time, Ekyt had to save me before I died. This time, it won't be like that! When**

we fight, I'll hold my own! I'm strong now, everyone's said so, and I believe it!

All three were now chunin. Lee and Sakura had achieved the rank of Tokubetsu jonin, but when Ekyt was kicked out of the village, they had protested. In retaliation, they were busted down in rank by the senior counsel. But, despite differences between the three now, they all agreed it was worth it. Ekyt and Lee had buried the hatchet, and Sakura was thankful for that, because that genjutsu seemed to have hit her hard. She was a genjutsu-type ninja, but most of her training had become chakra control and medical-related jutsu.

Lee was a taijutsu progeny now, able to open Five Gates of Chakra, and his speed was remarkable. He could simply outrun most attacks. If he got a hold of you, the fight was over, unless you were special. And getting in close was easy when you were so fast your opponent couldn't see you.

Ekyt was the hardest to read. Genjutsu had become his de facto specialty, but he was blessed with two kekkaigenkai's, and a knowledge of jutsus that went beyond chunin level. In his back tool pouch, Ekyt had stored a sample of the Kaguya blood-chakra mix Kimimaro had given him. If there was ever a place to need those abilities, it was hell on earth.

The three were standing at the top of one of the mountains near the Land of Herbs. It would have been irresponsible to just walk in without studying the landscape. But it was all too familiar to Lee, Sakura, and Ekyt. It was burned into their memories forever.

The land was garden, nearly all of it. Row after row of carefully tended-to soil. There were farm houses, long antiquated and weathered by the elements, but they were surrounded by farm land. It was strange that this place had such fertile soil. The climate was cold nearly year-round, and there was little rain, despite the forbidding dark clouds above.

The land also had no Shinobi of it's own. It simply didn't need any. If one Village attacked the Land of Herbs, all the other would crush that village. It was too important. The crops that came from this village were both unique and necessary. One plant in particular, the Daisho tree, produced berries that created healing salves, and seeds that were natural remedies to poisons. The tree itself was unassuming, twisted and gnarled, and generally ugly, with green leaves decorated with yellow lines. And there was only one of these trees, so it was somewhat sacred. It was planted in a place of prominence, and it had many attendants, all of whom seemed to be massaging the roots that poked up from the ground.

Why this land, farmland, was the giver and receiver of so much trouble was unknown. It could have been just an unlucky nation, but it prospered so much with it's crops and economy that the answer was unlikely to be that simple.

Naikou watched the three strangers in her mirror. She narrowed her dark eyes at their headbands. Her blue eye shadow had been smudged with tears, but quickly re-done. Naikou was vain, to say the least.

"The girl was one of my targets...she's very beautiful...she's probably never felt pain in her life. I want to share my pain with someone as beautiful as I! But what's this?" Naikou shifted her gaze in the mirror to

the boy in the mask. “He gives off a strange aura...His face is very well hidden...I believe I should meet him. Perhaps make him one of my prisoners...But first, a test of their skills...Koori, please allow the Soul Soldiers to attack. I wish to see how well they fare...”

Koori glanced at the screen, and smiled widely. “My lady, those are the three from before. The boy in the mask ruined my eye and undid my genjutsu. The girl defeated me, and the boy with the eyebrows rescued my hostage. I have a picture of the three of them. It will help me in casting my jutsu...” Koori adjusted his spectacles before reaching into his black and inlaid-gold cloak, and extracting a picture with one aged hand. Naikou snatched it away. Her eyes widened, and she stopped breathing for a minute.

“The boy in the mask, he’s this one, right?” Naikou demanded, nearly frantic, jabbing at the picture with one well-manicured finger.

“Yes, my lady. Ekyt Kaguya, a name I will never forget...” Koori muttered angrily. **I’ll see that kid to hell...How he’ll pay, oh, how he’ll pay. His life will meet the price.**

“Neither...will I.” Naikou memorized every detail of the boy with the mask, then handed the picture back to Koori.

“Cast your jutsu...I want to see how strong they are...You may go, I need some time to prepare myself...”

Koori bowed and left, walking down the hall to his ‘workshop.’

Koori’s workshop was a sinister place. Torture racks, jars with human body parts in them (Including one with a collection of green eyes), and blood lined the walls. In the center of the room was Koori’s desk, where ancient manuscript after ancient manuscript was stacked. All of them seemed to be bloodstained parchment, indicating that they were old, and that they were kinjutsu. Selecting one, Koori went to work. Making hand signs and muttering strange words, Koori selected one jar of blood and dipped his hand into it. On his left shoulder, he made a half of a summoning jutsu mark. On his right shoulder, he made the other half. Finally, Koori ran his thumb down his forehead, blood dripping off it.

“Soul Soldier Summoning Jutsu!” Koori cried out. The souls of the dead left to seek out their former bodies. Koori smiled widely as the souls sailed around. He was looking forward to revenge on these three.

Ekyt put a hand up, stopping Lee and Sakura.

“Do you feel that? It’s chakra alright...but something isn’t right...” Ekyt bit his thumb and touched the ground with his palm. “Kuchiyose no Jutsu (Summoning Jutsu).” With a small bang and a cloud of smoke, Holly, Ekyt’s attitude-toting Keeshonden dog appeared.

“Kid, I swear, if this another note to Tsunade, I’m going to bite you SO hard...” Holly scratched at her

collar. “Whaddya want, get to the point.”

Ekyt petted her. “Holly, do you remember the Land of Herbs? Can you sense any chakra? Very old chakra?”

Holly’s sensitive nose sniffed the air. “Oh yeah. Tons, kid. We’re talking 100 different types. And it’s old...no way it’s the chakra of a living person.”

“Thank you, Holly. Neiri (end).” Ekyt ended the jutsu. Looking at Lee and Sakura, he nodded. “It’s that kinjutsu again. On a major scale. We can’t stop the jutsu, but we DO have to deal with the results. If these things are old, their bones will be brittle, and susceptible to taijutsu. Fire also seemed to be effective.”

“Ekyt, can you re-create that jutsu? The Dragon’s Encampment wall, using the explosive agents in the exploding notes? That will take out a large portion. Then we can move in with taijutsu, and destroy them!” Lee declared.

“I can create a crater, and Lee, you can pull up a section of earth I dislodge to give us a point of cover. Ekyt, you maintain the jutsu while we’re doing all this.” Sakura had hoped to make the battlefield a little more beneficial to each member of her team’s respective strengths.

Sakura and Lee went to work, while Ekyt walked in front. He shed his trench coat, and the cold air stung his bare shoulders. But he wanted access to his swords, shuriken, kunai, bones, and anything else he could use. He couldn’t maintain a fire jutsu forever. Knowing that, his nimble fingers went to work, attaching explosive tags to kunai. Once he had ten, the ground began to twist and heave, and bony hands crawled up from the ground, and red eyes became visible. Ekyt threw the kunai, spreading them out in a precise range.

“Remote Detonation!”

The tags exploded, sending bones clanking into the rapidly-darkening night. Even the soldiers that had been blown away marched forward unless they were completely destroyed. The agent that caused the explosive notes to detonate was still in the air, so Ekyt made his handsigns quickly.

“Fire Release: Dragon’s Encampment Wall!”

There was a second explosion, two times larger than the first. The shockwave alone destroyed soldiers. But the fire burned high, nearly 100 feet in the air, and scorched the oncoming soldiers. With that, Ekyt leapt backward, behind the makeshift barricade Sakura and Lee had made.

“Good job, Ekyt! You rest, Lee and I will mop up the rest!” Sakura called over to him. Obediently, Ekyt sank to one knee, nodding.

“OHWAHHH!” Lee ran out in the thick of the enemies. One had an axe, and swung it. Lee leapt up and over it, spinning around and delivering a kick that sent the bone soldier’s head clattering away. Before he hit the ground, Lee backflipped up and in between two soldiers. They both leaned forward to strike him. Lee’s fists halted their progress, breaking them in half at the rib cages. A third grabbed Lee, but

Lee simply kicked one bony leg out from under it, then used a backfist to end that enemy.

“Kee-yah!” Sakura shouted, focusing her chakra to her fist, then bringing that to the ground. A chasm grew in the rich soil and swallowed up the soldiers. Four more jumped from different directions. Sakura’s fist cleared the enemies away. When two grabbed her, Sakura activated her chakra scalpel and cut them to ribbons.

Ekyt had stayed out of the fight until now. He dug his heel into the ground, and pushed off, gathering momentum. Flinging out one armor-padded arm, Ekyt grabbed two skeletons around the neck and snapped their necks. Shifting his weight, he threw the two bodies into three oncoming soldiers, ruining all five in the process. Ekyt sensed an attack from behind. Stepping his leg out he threw his hands out in a double knife-edge strike, hitting the enemy high, while its legs kept going forward.

“This is taking too long!” Sakura shouted, bashing another enemy to bits.

“Any ideas?!” Lee answered, kicking one bony menace under the chin.

“Get behind the barricade, now they’ve got shuriken!” Ekyt pointed out. All three leapt safely behind the barrier of soil. The shuriken sank in, but then started to penetrate. One hit Lee on his shoulder. Sakura went to tend to him, while Ekyt thought about what was going on. He could harden this wall, and buy them a little more time. Something the Third Hokage had taught him about mixing elements. **His fight with Orochimaru...the chunin exams...I’ve got it!**

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” Ekyt used the palm of his hand to shoot fire at the wall of muddy earth, hardening it. It was a makeshift version of the Third’s own “Earth Encampment Wall Jutsu”. The sound of shuriken bouncing off echoed through the mountains. Lee was okay, and ready to fight.

“This is still taking too long. And we can’t go out from behind the barricade...Genjutsu won’t affect the things, their brains are gone...The terrain doesn’t help us much, either...I’ve got an idea! Kuchiyose No Jutsu!” Ekyt summoned his Water Dragon this time. The diminutive dragon knew just what to do. It spat out a Mizu Bunshin of Ekyt, then disappeared. Ekyt instructed the clone to melt, and create a river in the mud.

The river caused the soldiers to slip and fall, giving a momentary lapse in the shuriken barrage.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” Ekyt said again. He forced the mud to harden, trapping the soldiers in the ground where the river of mud had flown. They vainly tried to escape.

“I get it! Lee, you take care of those! I’m going to try something new! Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” Sakura shouted. When her palm hit the ground, an enormous slug (Not Tsunade’s) hit the ground.

“Kaorra, can you use your acid attack? I know we’ve never tried this before, but there’s not much choice!”

Kaorra responded by sending jets of acid over the stone wall. Using his forehead protector as a mirror to peer around the corner, Ekyt saw the damage being done. Only the soldiers trapped in the mud

remained. Lee quickly dispatched them with his taijutsu.

The three Leaf chunin were exhausted, but they couldn't rest here.

"We need to restore our chakra...did anyone catch a safe spot on the way here?" Ekyt asked, still combing the area to make sure the bony bastards couldn't attack..

"The best spot is a small outcropping of tree and rock I saw on the way here. It's not too far, but far enough, and off of this dangerous soil!" Sakura was all too happy to have the correct answer here.

"Alright, we should rest our chakra. There's no way that same attack can be used on us again. There can't be enough bodies, souls, or tributes. If that was kinjutsu, it must have taken a TON of blood to summon those monstrosities. Blood from human sacrifices..." Ekyt thought back to Orochimaru, and the horrors he had seen in his short time as a Sound Ninja.

"We should rest tonight, then talk to people in town tomorrow. See if anyone else has been hit with a harsh genjutsu."

HEY EVERYONE, QUICK QUESTION: JAPANESE JUTU NAMES, OR AMERICAN JUTSU NAMES? WHICH ONE DO YOU LIKE BETTER? LET ME KNOW IN YOUR COMMENT! CIAO FOR NOW COMPADRES!

55 - A Twisted Heart and...

Naikou watched mildly as her servant's premier jutsu was only vaguely effective.

"They're a strong group. The girl is strong AND beautiful. The taller boy, with the eyebrows, he's incredibly fast. But it's the masked boy that interests me...such an interesting body...strangely attractive. No matter. Tomorrow, they will find this place, and I'll make him mine."

Naikou looked into the mirror, now a regular mirror. She tugged her purple robe a little lower, revealing more cleavage. This was how so many met their end; seduced by this heartless murderer. But her heart had begun to beat; THIS target she didn't plan on killing. Ekyt Kaguya was to belong to her as a lover.

Whether he agreed or not.

Naikou did her makeup, and added some jewelry. The light purple sash around her waist concealed poisons, needles, and a dagger. She hoped that she wouldn't have to mar her target's body with them. She wanted the boy intact.

In the mean time, perhaps the girl should sample my genjutsu again...

Sakura felt it- genjutsu. But it was too powerful to release on her own. Ekyt was awake, and keeping guard, while Lee slept peacefully.

(GENJUTSU)

Sakura saw herself chained up in a strange room. It looked the workshop of the devil himself. Blood stained the walls, and even the thick chains that bound Sakura to some kind of torture device. It was a rack. Sakura felt it tighten, stretching out her body, her arms over her head, and her legs spread, so there was no chance of fighting back.

"Ah!" Sakura cried out in pain, feeling her limbs beginning to strain under the pull of the chains. **Please...no! This isn't real! But- I can't dispel it! It MUST be real! No!**

Koori walked into Sakura's view. "Hello, sweetheart. You caused me so much trouble before...I had thought about killing you, as my Lady wanted, but I decided- torturing you, making your mind snap, would be more satisfying to both my Lady and myself. Your eyes are so lovely...soon, they'll belong to me. But first...I want to show you my latest experiment...such a promising young boy...I DO hope I do this right...if not, oh well, plenty of others to try this on..."

Koori opened a curtain. The boy Naikou had put in her adjoining room was tied up, but only his torso remained. His arms, legs, and eyes had been cut off roughly. Blood poured from the holes where his

limbs had once been. Sakura felt a wave of nausea, and swallowed hard, hoping to quell the feeling.

“Is anyone there?! Please, help me!” the boy shouted.

“I told you to SHUT UP!” Koori took his familiar four-pointed dagger and cut off one of the shrieking boy’s ears. “I will cut more and more off, until only what I need remains, unless you learn to shut up! If you are smart, you will forget all you are about to see...You know (chuckle), better safe than sorry...” Koori’s dagger thrust down twice. Where there were once life-filled brown eyes, there were now empty sockets of blood. The boy screamed, though if it was because he felt more pain or that his vision was gone was debatable. The blood dripped to the cold castle floor, where it would soon dry and become part of the structure, just as so much other blood had.

Koori’s hand reached for the zipper on Sakura’s vest, his yellowed hand working it’s mechanism. Sakura knew what was coming, and tried to fight. But it was hopeless. She could feel her mind starting to crack...

Koori had begun to mutter his strange words, in a language unknown to Sakura. That was when she realized he needed her as a sacrifice, just as Kora had been...

(END GENJUTSU)

Ekyt knew it- genjutsu. He leapt up from his kneeling position, rushing to wake Lee.

“Lee, I’m going in personally to stop this genjutsu. Whatever it is has pushed Sakura to her limit. I’ve got to enter her subconscious and tell her that it isn’t real. An external release won’t work, the genjutsu is too advanced. Keep an eye on my body...”

“Right!” Lee replied. He watched Ekyt made the handsigns, then caught his body as it went limp. **Ekyt-san is taking a risk...whatever happens to him in her mind happens to his body in real life. If he is killed, his soul is trapped inside her...**

(GENJUTSU)

Sakura almost WANTED to die...the shame was unendurable. She had never let a guy look at ANY private part of her body, but now, Koori was close to doing just that. The zipper on her vest jammed a little, still high up, leaving her covered up.

“Now, I need your body to perform the sacrifice, in place of that girl you meddlers saved. How inconvenient this happened.

WHAM!!!

Ekyt rushed in and floored Koori with a brutal punch, breaking his nose.

“Sakura, this isn’t real. Just hold on, I can’t break it just yet. You’re really laying down, asleep, away from danger. This is all an illusion. And I’m going to end it. But I need you to stay calm.”

Sakura heard Ekyt's voice before she saw him. Instantly, hope came rushing back to her. **It's like I told Naoto...When you fight with Ekyt, you feel like you can't lose...**

Ekyt parried a strike from Koori's dagger with the palm of his hand. He clamped down on the arm holding the dagger, then shifted his weight and threw Koori into the wall. Koori bounced off and tried to attack again. This time, instead of stabbing straight at Ekyt, he stabbed down. Ekyt moved aside and used Koori's momentum against him. Maneuvering Koori's arm, Ekyt forced Koori to stab himself in the leg. Koori screamed, falling backwards onto one of his own racks. Ekyt quickly chained him up. Koori's good eye widened in shock and fear as Ekyt grabbed him by the neck, choking him.

"You bastard. I SWEAR- If you even TOUCH her again, I'll do more than end your pathetic illusion. I'll kill you, and burn your remains!" Ekyt took the dagger Koori had dropped and made a violent slash just Koori's eye.

"You are the worst kind of vermin. And I swear...I won't even kill you all at once, I'll kill you slowly, and I'll make sure you know it's coming, you damn, filthy pervert." Ekyt threw the dagger aside, instead using his fist to disassemble Koori's face.

The room began to evaporate around them. Ekyt ran over to Sakura, the sound of his boots clacking sharply across the stone floor a sound of relief to Sakura. His hand already in the tiger sign, Ekyt melted the chains away, then picked up the barely-conscious Sakura and shouted "Release!"

(END GENJUTSU)

This time, there was no qualms about it. Sakura grabbed Ekyt and pulled him in close to her, holding tight. A cold sweat had dampened her hair, and she was close to crying. Ekyt noted her grip was strong enough to snap him in half, but that she wasn't, either consciously or unconsciously doing so. Then the fear hit: A kunoichi, the very one he had a crush on, was the one squeezing the life out of him. But, for once, that was on the back burner. Ekyt himself had been afraid of that genjutsu, and he wasn't even the target. How Sakura must have felt...

"Why am I so weak?!" Sakura wailed. "I've trained so hard, and I'm STILL the weakest! WHY?!"

"Sakura, you're too hard on yourself. That genjutsu was aimed at you directly. And...what you saw might have been partially real...that boy, his cries for help seemed too real..."

Sakura didn't relinquish her grip just yet. If anything, she tightened it, moving closer to Ekyt. Asking only with her eyes, Sakura removed his dragon mask. Beneath it, she saw what she was looking for.

"Your eyes always show pain, and loneliness...why?"

Sakura's question caught Ekyt by surprise. "I'm usually in pain, and, I guess, lonely, in a way..."

"I know what you mean...after Sasuke, I felt that kind of loneliness, too. But it was awful, because my dream, the one I'd wanted all my life, had come true, and it sucked. Sasuke turned out to be the biggest

jackass possible...” Either overcome with emotions, weakened by the genjutsu, or just plain cold, Sakura shivered. Immediately, Ekyt shrugged off his coat and laid it across her shoulders, ignoring Sakura’s protests of worry about him.

“We need a fire. Lee, I’ll get the wood. Can you just keep an eye on her? The genjutsu shouldn’t be recurring. But if it is, pain is the only way out of it. Sakura, if you feel it coming on, use the release technique, then move as quickly as you can. If whoever is behind this genjutsu is targeting you, well, it’s harder to hit a moving target.” Ekyt said all this as he rubbed mud on his face, to darken it so as not to be found against the night’s grim backdrop.

Ekyt leapt off into the night. It was only then that Sakura noticed that Ekyt had donned his war gear from when he was Hokage, minus the helmet. Instead, Ekyt was wearing a black, straw hat, helping him to blend into the darkness. That image rapidly faded into the night, as Ekyt ran farther away.

“Pardon me, Sakura-chan?” Lee asked, hoping he was doing this correctly..

“What is it, Lee?” Sakura replied dismally.

“I, well, I was just curious: How do you feel about Ekyt-kun?” **If I can find out if she feels the same way as him, maybe I can help them work this out!**

“He’s comforting, Lee. And one of the most loyal friends I have. He’s been there for me every time something went wrong. And, well, if he had stayed as Hokage, I think our Village might be doing better. He doesn’t get enough credit, and he’s kind of taken for granted. And, I admit, he’s...you know...charming, and kinda cute.”

Lee wanted to shout out his REAL question, but had to keep it quiet.

“I mean, about him, as a person. Do you...like him?” Lee asked, trying to phrase this just-so.

“Of course!” Sakura replied, as if Lee had asked the stupidest question in the world.

“I mean...do you LIKE him...like you did Sasuke?” Lee knew there was a chance he would get hit, but his own curiosity had gotten the better of him.

“I don’t know, really. He’s loyal, cute, and he’s got that ‘air of mystery’. Not to mention powerful. I guess I...never really thought about it seriously before. Why do you ask?”

Lee was disappointed with the answer, but tried not to show it. “No reason, really. I was just curious...” **Damn, that did not solve anything! It is like she likes him, but will not admit it! It is frustrating, even for me! So how does SHE feel? I know the pain of not being able to express emotions, and I also know that love is one of the strongest. If she had just given me a definitive answer, I could have helped.**

Ekyt returned with the wood, using a quick fire jutsu to get it going.

“Won’t the smoke give us away?” Sakura piped up.

“No. I used a “False Surroundings” genjutsu around our immediate area. No one should see anything but an empty clearing.” Ekyt looked around, as if making sure his statement was correct. Then he turned back to the others, poking the fire with a stick, keeping it’s embers burning.

“Sakura...I hate to do this, but...the genjutsu...did the chakra seem familiar at all? We’ve fought here before, was there any similarity?” Ekyt had replaced his dragon mask, and his hands never strayed far from his Striking Serpent Blades.

After a moment’s thought, Sakura shook her head. “No. The chakra was foreign to me.”

Ekyt gave another nod. “When I went into your mind to break the genjutsu, I sensed the chakra, too. When I “killed” Koori in the illusion, his chakra SHOULD have been disturbed. But I don’t think it’s him casting the jutsu. The chakra felt...younger, and less malicious, for want of a better word.”

That gave them all something to think about: A new threat? But what, or who?!

Naikou giggled girlishly, the sleeves of her too-big robe in the way of her pointing.

“He’s so cute! He’s only a little younger than me, too! He would be the perfect companion! Now, to bring him here...but what’s this?!”

Naikou looked sadly at her mirror, seeing Sakura hug Ekyt, and seeing Ekyt blush.

“Are they- in love? DAMN IT! I want him for my myself! But he keeps protecting that girl! I need to get HER here. My husband used to say “Once you’ve got them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.” Hehehe! Oh, this will be SO much fun! A threat to her worthless life, and the boy will throw himself at me to save her! It’s so perfect! Koo-riiii!” Naikou sang out the name.

“Yes, my Lady?” Koori answered instantly, smiling widely. If his niece was happy, chances are that he would be rewarded with one of the occult trinkets her fool husband had been so involved with.

“Get me the girl. Kill the boy with the eyebrows, but leave the other for me...and how is our guest doing?”

Koori smiled sadistically. Adjusting his glass left eye, he replied. “Oh, he’s still fighting me. Perhaps I...scared him a little, when I told him his eyes would make a lovely addition to my collection...”

“Uncle Koori, you’ve always made me see the humor in such grave situations! I’m so proud to tell you that the one boy, with the mask, is going to be my lover! I’m going to carry his child, and he’s going to stay here forever!” Naikou already pictured herself pregnant, the masked boy holding her close, their

lips meeting in a warm embrace.

At this, Koori frowned. "Lady Naikou, you have everything you've ever desired in this room. That mirror most of all. I will not permit you to share your bed with that vermin! The little bastard wouldn't. He doesn't understand the beauty of pain, and the necessity of death. He lives to protect. He would NEVER allow himself to be seduced by you, no matter how beautiful you are."

Naikou's face took on a dangerous expression. "The Look" and "The Pout" rolled into one. "I'm afraid we disagree, uncle. The boy is lonely. His face is stoic, but his eyes speak volumes. And they tell me just how lonely he is. And you know that lonely, desperate young men are my specialty...I'll kill anyone, though never with a cold heart. But I'll only sleep with someone I love. And I love that boy."

"THAT'S RIDICULOUS!" Koori thundered, pounding his hand on a dresser, causing makeup to go flying and a small, hand mirror to go crashing to the ground. "YOU DON'T KNOW THE BOY! HOW CAN YOU LOVE HIM?!" Koori's chest was heaving with ragged breath and anger.

"How can YOU understand love? You've grown to be a bitter old man, uncle. I am the heiress. If you hope to see that money and power, you will forget we had this conversation, and you will do what I say. Am I clear?"

Taken aback, Koori brushed his cloak away and straightened his spectacles, trying to sweep up the remains of his dignity.

"Of course, my Lady, forgive me..." Koori asked simply, adding a humble bow.

The birds began to chirp the following morning. Or, rather, they began to caw. Crows circled overhead. Lee woke up instantly and began stretching. When he bent over to do toe-touches, through his legs, he saw Ekyt sitting up against a rock. With his face hidden by two masks, it was hard to tell if he was awake or not. Next to Ekyt was Sakura, who had Ekyt's trench coat over her, and a second, smaller fire built near her. It had taken over an hour, but she finally calmed down enough to go to sleep. She was still shaking slightly, though, as if her body wouldn't completely calm. Upon closer inspection, Lee saw that she had a grip on Ekyt's gloved hand that wouldn't have let him move if he had tried. But they had work to do.

"Sakura-san, it's time to wake up," Ekyt told her gently. Sakura stirred, sitting up and rubbing her eyes sleepily.

"Mmm...right. Time to finish this mission. Do we stay together, or split up?" Sakura was wide awake now, the thought of finishing this mission really not what she wanted to think of right now, but she didn't have much choice.

"We should stay together while we gather information. No offense Lee, but if someone hits you with genjutsu without Sakura or myself around, it would be trouble. And Sakura, if the genjutsu is that

powerful...we should stay together.”

The first trip was the only trip the three needed. They found their way to the Koubakage's castle, and was greeted warmly by the leader of the Herb Land.

“I still can't thank the three of you enough for what you did! Now, what brings you here?” she said, gesturing for the three to sit.

“Information, Lady Koubakage. Someone in this town is attacking with genjutsu from remote distances. We're under orders to put a stop to it. It's not Koori. Do you have any ideas as to who might be doing this?” Ekyt was frank and to the point.

“There's one...her name is Naikou, and she was widowed a year ago. Her husband dabbled in the occult, and created some strange, dangerous things. He was killed while trading with a merchant. He tried to attack, and the merchant managed to cut his stomach open. Since he died, Naikou has become secluded. She hasn't left her room in her husband's castle, and she's become the heiress of one of our wealthy lords.”

“Did she have any items that would enable her to attack from any distance?” Sakura questioned. She was nervous, and realized that she was holding Ekyt's hand. Apparently, the boy had put his shyness aside in favor of her comfort, because, despite his blushing, he didn't move away or protest.

“This mirror her husband got her might be it. It's enchanted somehow, some occult-like jutsu.”

Lee, Sakura, and Ekyt nodded. They had the information they needed.

“Thank you, Lady Koubakage. Pardon us...” Ekyt stood up, while Sakura and Lee followed suit.

Before they went into battle, Ekyt opened up the leather pouch Kimimaro had given him. “There's no better time to use some of this paint...those undead things are going to be attacking again, and we'll be ready. Sakura, I've got a plan in place. You and Lee wear these (headsets), and I'm going to put this bug on myself. I'm going to let myself get captured. Once I'm near that mirror, I'm going to smash it, because I'll bet that thing is how these genjutsu are hitting specific targets so far away.”

“And if something goes wrong?” Lee chimed in.

“That's what the headsets are for. Sakura, I checked in with Lord Hokage a little while ago. I'm going to check in again once I'm near that mirror. If it's enchanted, it's going to take something special to break it. But, for now, we'll probably have to fight our way to the castle, and then out of it.” Ekyt put the mix of blood and chakra on the sides of his eyes, the way Kimimaro had. Immediately, he felt his

thought-process become more vicious, but also more efficient. The Kaguya Bloodline jutsus were now fresh in his mind.

“Ekyt, wait, one more thing...if things get really bad, get out of there, okay?” Sakura asked him. She couldn’t find his eyes through the dragon mask, but he nodded.

56 - ...Wicked Intentions

“Here we go.”

Ekyt walked up the castle. It was a forbidding place. A cemetery was to both sides of the old, cobblestone mansion, not easing Ekyt’s worry of impending doom. Raising one hand, Ekyt reached up and gripped the heavy iron door knocker. He let it thunder against the thick, aging wood of the door three times, then stepped back to wait. Very quickly, Ekyt saw Koori. It took all his self-control to stop him from attacking the man.

“The Lady will see you,” Koori muttered darkly.

“I’m flattered,” Ekyt shot back.

Koori grabbed the back of Ekyt’s coat, causing Ekyt to grab Koori’s hand and start to break fingers.

“My niece was once happily married. To a fool, yes, but a better fool than you,” Koori began.

“I should hope so, I don’t think myself a fool,” Ekyt retorted dryly.

Ignoring that crack, Koori continued. “My niece means a lot to me...so I’m warning you- you kill keep your hands off her. She’s cultivated an...interest in you, in her desperation for love. And you would be foolish to accept any ‘proposals’ she makes you. If you value your health. Understand?”

Ekyt just shook his head. “I’m irresistible. Maybe I won’t be able to control myself...”

(Outside, Lee and Sakura were cracking up at the way Ekyt was answering these questions. Apparently, he was less stiff if people he cared about weren’t right there with him.)

Naikou’s room was built strangely. The room was completely circular, and painted a faint orange color, making it deceptively colorful for being inside a castle. Lining the walls were all sorts of occult trinkets and weapons. One book case was dedicated to the dark arts, with black books and scrolls filling it from top to bottom, and a thick layer of dust covering that. It was like an evil, sadistic man had met a sweet, innocent girl, and this was the strange result.

In reality, that was exactly what had happened. Naikou shed a tear for her fallen husband now. He had been thirty, while she had been eighteen when they married. But they had been so in love! Naikou’s smile was said to brighten up the darkest day when in the presence of her lover. She had been so happy to be wed, and proudly showed off her wedding ring. It was gold, but had a dark line etched across it, shaped like ~. She never knew what it meant, but found the symbol intoxicating nonetheless.

Naikou had wanted children, but just as she had decided with her husband, he was killed. Murdered.

But my pain and loneliness ends now! I have a new lover! And HE'LL help me get the baby I've always wanted! I'll never be alone again! He'll never leave my side!

Naikou heard the knock on her door, meaning that her new lover had arrived.

"Come in!" she sang out, making sure she was only somewhat revealing. **Make him work for it, Naikou...**

Ekyt walked in, masks still in place. That was good, because the first thing he did was survey the room, to find the trouble-making mirror. With his ANBU mask, he could look with his eyes while not turning his head, which meant he couldn't give away his intentions. **The room looks like a Barbie doll puked in an occult store...but there's that mirror. I can sense it's chakra already, it's heavily protected...And it's not genjutsu, either. I can't take the time to decipher WHAT is protecting it, I just have to get past it's defenses and destroy. But, for now, I'd better pretend that I'm interested in the girl...**

"Naikou-chan? You're more beautiful in person than I could have imagined," Ekyt said in his most truthful voice, taking one of her manicured hands in his.

"Ekyt-kun, I've waited SO long to meet you...I have such a wonderful life, waiting for you and me to share together...forever..." Naikou's open robe was designed to get Ekyt's attention. Under his mask, he was blushing, despite the fact she was still covered up. But girls in the Leaf village didn't dress like that. **The one's back home, though, before the Leaf Village, they did...I hated it then, too. Girls try too hard sometimes. Although, to be fair, guys are just as bad...agh, focus, nimrod! Let her pull the seduction act so you can finish this mission!**

"Of course. Fate brought us together..." Ekyt smiled. **I hate myself so much for this...**

"Well, the first thing's first, Ekyt-kun. Why don't you take off that coat, and that mask, and get comfortable. Oh, here, let me help!" Naikou undid the buttons on Ekyt's jacket, smiling at him the whole time. Ekyt, for his part, was blushing the whole time, and hating himself. But he kept repeating 'for the mission' in his head. This strange mantra kept him calm, and from thinking things like "I'm going to hell for this, aren't I?" from creeping into his head.

Soon, Naikou removed his dragon mask. Their eyes met. In Naikou's mind, there was magic. In Ekyt's, there was shame. But that was thrown aside when Naikou turned away from Ekyt.

"I've waited so long, darling. I want you to see my wedding dress...don't go away, because after you see the dress, you'll see what's *under* it." Naikou gave a dark-eyed glance, a sultry smile, then sauntered into her bathroom, shutting the door.

Ekyt bit his thumb. "Summoning Jutsu!" Umisu appeared on Ekyt's shoulder. "For Lord Hokage, hurry! Ask him to send what I requested in my last letter..."
Umisu winked his understanding, then disappeared in a small puff of smoke.

Naikou emerged from the bathroom, wearing a low-cut and very short wedding dress.

"Do you like it? I wore this for my first wedding, and my husband LOVED it! But he's gone now, so we can focus on you...and your needs. For I share those needs..." Naikou rubbed up against Ekyt, who's face was burning red.

Damnit! I've got to stall for time!

"Before we move on...I've got something to show you, too. I'll be right back..." Ekyt did his best to strut out of the room, though he felt like his @\$ was up in the air like a whale's tail.

Once in the bathroom, Ekyt tried to decide what to show Naikou to buy time. If she was into the occult, maybe his Striking Serpent Blades would fascinate her. No, that wouldn't do it. But the fading tattoo on his arm would. **It's as bizarre as you can get. If she's been in this castle as long as I'm guessing, she's had less of a social life than me. Hopefully, this miserable mark will make for conversation...**

After Ekyt had sealed Itachi's Sharingan (A few issues back), he and Itachi both received a "Five Elements Seal". Ekyt's seal was on his shoulder, while Itachi's was over his left eye. When Ekyt was forced to unseal the Sharingan, the tattoo had faded, but not disappeared entirely. THAT would fascinate this simple, yet strangely complex girl. But part of Ekyt was saddened. **She's kind of crazy...but I wonder if loneliness caused that? She really loved whoever it was she married. Even though she's attacking people, she's not malicious. I wish there was some way to make this work out...but the mission has to come first! That mirror must be destroyed!**

Ekyt walked back out of the bathroom, and sat next to Naikou on her bed. "I wanted to show you this..." Ekyt concentrated, and felt the fading seal light up on his upper right arm, next to his ANBU tattoo.

"It's so pretty! Let's see...Water...Earth...Wind...Fire...Void...what does it mean?" Naikou's brow was wrinkled in concentration, trying to make sense of what she perceived as an odd tattoo.

"That's not all. The marks near my eyes are from my clan, the Kaguya. Only two of us are left in the world. The rest of us were slaughtered in a senseless battle that we ourselves started..." Ekyt looked away. In the window, he saw just what he had been waiting for. He nodded once to it, then grimaced. Ekyt forced himself to hug Naiko, and made sure his mask smudged her make-up.

"Oh, you silly boy! Let me clean this up!" Naikou trotted off to the bathroom to fix her makeup. Ekyt raced to the window.

“Thank you for coming, Enma-sama.” Ekyt felt strange addressing a monkey that way, but this monkey deserved that distinction. This was the summon of the Third Hokage, the Monkey King Enma.

“Sarutobi told me of this evil mirror. And of you. But, for now, the mirror. If you remember the jutsu...”

“I do. Transformation: Adamantine Yoi!” Ekyt called. Enma became a staff, harder than diamond. Just as Naikou walked back into the room, Ekyt swung the staff at the mirror.

CRASH!!!

“Neiri!” Ekyt called, bringing Enma back to his normal form. “Thank you, Enma. Please tell Lord 3rd everything went as planned until now. I’ll keep him updated...”

“Alright. I’ll inform Sarutobi. For now, you’d better move yourself!” Enma disappeared.

Naikou walked into the room, looking at the destroyed mirror. She shrugged. “My, my, you DO pack a wallop, you naughty boy! Oh well, it can’t be helped. I DID make you wait, didn’t I? Perhaps I teased you TOO long. ‘Make them work for the gold’ is what my uncle always told me. And now I’ve simply made you too blind with your love for me, and you had to have a release. Now that I have YOU, that mirror means nothing. Only you and I exist in my world...”

Ekyt looked away as Naikou shed her wedding dress, leaving her in her underwear.

“No. You are wrong. Naikou, I don’t think you’re evil, but I DO think you’re mistaken. It’s hard to crush you, but I’m not in love with you, and I’m sorry I led you along, even if it was only ten minutes. My heart belongs to someone else. And your attacks were senseless and violent. I was sent here to stop them, and I did what I had to.”

Naikou suddenly looked shocked. “Y-you mean...it was all a dream? You never cared for me?!”

“How could I? I never met you, and you tried to kill my friend!” Ekyt said back quietly. That’s when it hit him. **Damn, my headset! She’s got it!** Ekyt now saw the headset destroyed between Naikou’s deceptively powerful fingers.

“Well, I loved you! If I can’t have you, I’ll kill you!” Naikou shouted. Somehow, with her being in her underwear, Ekyt couldn’t take the threat seriously.

BOOM!

Sakura burst into the room. What greeted her eyes was a coatless Ekyt and some psycho chick in her underwear and a wedding veil.

“What the hell?!” she managed, before her eye twitching started.

“Sakura-sensei, I SWEAR, nothing happened!” Ekyt called over. Sakura gave him an amused look.

“I figured THAT much out. Before your headset went dead, I caught you bluffing your way through everything. No offense, Ekyt-kun, but when it comes to girls, you’re not likely to be the one doing the seducing...or the stripping...” Sakura snickered. **Clueless...cute, but clueless.**

Ekyt shrugged. “Got me there. Thanks for believing me.” Ekyt put his coat back on while Sakura faced off with Naikou. Sakura was holding a kunai in a guard, while Naikou had picked up her kimono and grabbed the senbon from inside it. Without warning, Naikou threw the senbon at Ekyt.

Ekyt was just picking up his mask when he saw the senbon. He threw the mask up in a block, the porcelain cracking but not breaking as the senbon flew off it erratically.

“Ekyt, you go help Lee! There’s about a hundred soldiers from hell down there! And that nut-job, Koori!” Sakura dodged aside as Naikou swung at her. Grabbing her wedding veil, Sakura threw her into the shards of the mirror.

“Yes, sensei!” Ekyt ran from the room, wondering just how much Sakura heard. **“My heart belongs to someone else?” Why the hell did I say that out loud?!**

Lee was rapidly becoming swamped in the corridor of the castle. He destroyed soldier after soldier, but they just came back to life.

This is not good! Taijutsu is my only weapon! I need fire! There are no torches...If I could just reach the insane man controlling them...

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” Ekyt shouted. As he used his chakra and saw the skeletons burst into flames, he felt the Kaguya blood near his eyes spread. He reached back into his shoulder and pulled out a bone.

“Lee, can you open the Gates? I’m sure the head freak is going to show soon! Dance of the Cammelia!” Ekyt called. His hand became a blur as skeleton after skeleton was impaled by, ironically, a bone. But there were still too many, and Ekyt didn’t have any more exploding tags, and no time to use the summoning scroll he always carried to get more. The Kaguya blood took over once more.

“Dance of the Larch!” From every part of Ekyt’s body, bones suddenly shot out, impaling soldiers and keeping them away. **If I could round them up...damn it, the Kaguya paint must sap my chakra, since I’m not 100% Kaguya. I’ve got one more Kaguya Bloodline Jutsu in me.**

“Dance of the Clematis: Vine!” Ekyt pulled his spine out. The long bone whipped out, snaring several of the soldiers. Ekyt focused his chakra to his feet and leapt up as high as he could. From there, he finished what gravity began, and threw the soldiers into the ground, where their bones flew far apart, making reformation impossible. Ekyt was still in the air when a familiar dagger swung at him. Ekyt tucked

his legs in and pulled his stomach back. The dagger shot, like boomerang, back to it's owner.

"Now you've ruined my dreams AND destroyed my niece's heart! You'll see no mercy from me!" Koori shouted just as Ekyt touched down on the floor. Ekyt had landed crouched, so he could easily jump up and over the skeletons that were now focused on him.

"Lee, you handle him, I'll handle the graveyard rejects for now! Koori hasn't tasted your taijutsu yet!"

Lee struck his signature pose, complete with his teeth gleaming. "I will give him a show that he will never forget!"

Naikou got up, plucking glass from her mostly-nude body.

"Vile dog! YOU'RE the reason Ekyt-kun isn't mine! It's all YOUR FAULT!!!" Naikou went into a rage. Sakura smashed the ground, creating a crater between them. Naikou leapt back onto the window ledge, her kimono in hand.

"What the hell are you talking about? He and I aren't together! That, and the fact you're a psycho probably turned him off! Why did you attack everyone like that?!" Sakura demanded. "Before you answer that, why don't you put that kimono on. If you don't, every drooling otaku's gonna think this is a great show, two girls fighting!"

Naikou pulled the Kimono on, tying it securely this time. "I attacked because I was alone...you have friends, I saw you! The two that came with you, and your headband...you belong somewhere. When my husband died, I lost all that! I got his money, and his stupid books and trinkets, but I lost my friends, my lover, and my hope all in one horrible stab! Why should I suffer alone?! WHY?! THAT'S why I attacked-that mirror was my link to the outside world, and to people. If they felt my pain, they couldn't ignore me. I waited for the day some handsome boy would come, and we'd get married, and I'd live the life I'd dreamed of since I was a little girl. But that's all gone now!"

Sakura lowered her guard, then slowly approached Naikou. "Hey, it's not that bad. I thought I loved this guy, and he turned out to be a jerk, big time. He tried to kill one of my best friends, who did nothing to him. Imagine chasing this one boy your whole life, shunning all the others who you could have had, all to find out the guy isn't all he's cracked up to be. He's nothing you wanted, and now, you don't know if you'll ever get another chance at love..."

Naikou and Sakura looked at each, the hatred now gone.

"You're a nice-looking girl, you'll find someone! But you've got to get out and try. Not to mention...you might want to hide the occult stuff," Sakura added with a giggle.

"You're right..." Naikou realized she didn't know the name of the girl she was addressing.

"Sakura."

“You’re right Sakura. Now, let me thank you...” Naikou leaned forward and tried to kiss Sakura. Sakura retaliated by cracking Naikou across the head.

“I DIDN’T MEAN ME! I HAVEN’T GIVEN UP ON BOYS!”

(NOTE: IF THIS IS FOUND OFFENSIVE, PLEASE LET ME KNOW, I’LL REMOVE IT, NO QUESTIONS ASKED)

Koori wasn’t young anymore. His aged bones couldn’t withstand Lee’s attacks, that was quickly apparent. He had to keep Lee at a distance. Making hand signs, Koori tried genjutsu.

“Forbidden Jutsu: Hell’s Gate Release!”

But Lee was gone. Or so it appeared. The crafty Lee had actually sped behind Koori, already opening the first gate of chakra. Lee snagged Koori by his cape and leapt up high. Before Koori could use a replacement jutsu, Lee had Koori’s arms bandaged up.

“Primary Lotus!”

Ekyt leapt up high, with several skeletal menaces following him. Ducking one strike while still in the air, Ekyt grabbed the bony arm and threw it’s owner into another skeleton. Two others pulled out their own fingers and threw them at Ekyt like Senbon. Two hit Ekyt squarely in the back. POOF! Replacement jutsu. Ekyt had already landed, handsigns made.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!” A shadow clone of Ekyt appeared beside the genuine article, using the Dragon’s Ember Jutsu.

“Dragon’s Path Jutsu!” Ekyt leapt on top of the fire, drawing his two Striking Serpent Blades slicing away. But there were so many of them. One skeleton grabbed Ekyt’s leg and threw him into the wall. When he got up, Ekyt’s face was bloodied. And all his stress had come to a boil. This foreign, haunted place, the girl he had just led on in the name of a mission, his forsaken rank (he gave up the rank of chunin a couple issues ago), and the distrust. The betrayl, the hatred, the pain. The pain.

Ekyt had been a student of everyone who could teach him. From Jiraiya, Ekyt had learned the theory of the Rasengan. He also learned he didn’t possess the chakra to make the move effective. But he DID have the ability to use fire in place of chakra, and speed from the First Gate of Chakra. Using his knowledge of the theory, what had formed was what Ekyt had dubbed the:

“Dragon’s Immortal Flame Circle!”

A ball of fire grew in Ekyt's hand, until it was roughly the size of a human head. Upon opening the first gate of chakra, Ekyt tore forward through the enemies, any one of them that got too close turning into a pile of cinders.

Then, as quickly as the skeletons had come, they vanished.

After Lee used the Primary Lotus, Koori's head split wide open, a gusher of blood erupting. Koori would live, but today's fight was over for him.

At the steps of the castle, Ekyt, Sakura, and Lee stood across from Naikou. The girl, brought to her senses by Sakura, apologized for what she had done.

"My loneliness got the better of me. But you showed me what I have to do to get over that loneliness. Thank you all so much. And Ekyt...sorry about...you know..." Naikou's pretty cheeks flushed.

"Don't worry about, Naikou. Pardon me..." Ekyt walked away, toward Konoha, but stopped at the forest, staring up at the trees. **Just like last time...what the hell did she see in me? Although, I suspect that a psycho, nympho girl is the only one that'll settle for me...Oh well. I sound like Shikamaru...THAT is a drag. And I STILL don't have the guts to tell Sakura...oh well...tomorrow's another day...although it'll probably be a rotten one. Hmm...Naikou must have been attracted to my optimism.** With that, Ekyt's thoughts turned back to their normal, depressing, and somewhat rueful, state.

"Guess we'd better go. Take care, Naikou!" Sakura said pleasantly, staying out of kiss range.

Lee waved his goodbye, then followed Sakura on their march over to Ekyt.

"Ready to go?" Sakura questioned, putting a hand on Ekyt's shoulder.

"Never more so. This place is hell."

Sakura and Lee nodded their agreement, but Sakura added an amendment to that statement.

"From the way you're staring at nothing, it seems like hell is in your mind, too."

Ekyt shrugged. "hell is in the eye of the beholder, I guess. I'm not so vain as to think I have hell in my head, I'm not that important."

Lee shook his head in disbelief. “Ekyt-san, you might be the only person I know who can even think himself unfit for even hell...”

That elicited a dark laugh from Ekyt. “Well, you know, it’s tradition. Whenever the three of us leave this hellhole, I brood.”

“If you’re playing that game...” Sakura kissed Ekyt on the cheek after swiftly removing his dragon mask. “...then me kissing you and thanking you for saving my life is tradition, too.”

“Not to mention the blushing. Ekyt-san, perhaps you have a fever?” Lee teased.

“Shut it, Lee,” Ekyt shot back, a smile in his voice, and red on his cheek. **That’s a nice tradition...**

The Third Hokage listened patiently to Enma as the monkey king spoke about what he saw. His mission to observe Ekyt had been an interesting one, and he had plenty to tell Sarutobi.

“I’m sure he had no idea I was watching. He acted like a leader, despite being the lowest ranked. Sakura is talented, no doubt, and Lee is incredible with taijutsu. The one you had me watch, though, he’s different. In a way, he reminds me of Orochimaru, minus the evil. The dedication to research...maybe that’s why you had me watch, Sarutobi. Do you see yourself in the boy?” Enma intoned. The Third smiled.

“I think I do. It’s becoming increasingly clear that all of Kakashi’s students will be worthy of legendary status. Ekyt, however, he seems to be closer to myself and Kakashi.”

“Knowledge-wise? You have a point. He doesn’t have the biggest chakra, but he certainly knows how to use what he has. But, when you say he’s closer to you and Kakashi, there’s a hole in your theory: He wants to be legendary.” Enma had listened to the boy’s conversations with Sarutobi once before, so he had a good idea of what kind of person Ekyt was.

“He wants to be REMEMBERED, and TRUSTED. That’s not far from legendary. Oh well, his path will become clear soon, I’m sure. The other three have begun their paths. Ekyt still has a choice to make, a decision that will decide where he ends up.”

“Sarutobi, let me sign a summoning contract with him. I’m one of the few that can make summoning work to and from a location. We’re both getting old, and you have regrets, Sarutobi. He’s the only one of the four without a mentor. The two of you are similar, why not teach him, and let me report his progress?”

Lord Hokage puffed on his pipe. “Mortality...not something any of us wishes to face, Enma. But, you’re correct. But, let’s give the boy a little more time to recover. From his check-ins, his report promises to be interesting...”

“As you wish, Sarutobi. It’s a shame he won’t take the Hokage title (Ekyt swore not to be Hokage unless Naruto decided against it), I think he’d make a good one, even now. He’s learned what it means to be loyal.”

The Third Hokage looked into his orb and smiled as Sakura kissed Ekyt on the cheek.

“And perhaps he’s learned what it means to be loved as well...”

57 - The War for Tanzaku Town

The Third Hokage could tell who the ANBU agent under the mask was, even if Sakura and Lee hadn't been flanking him.

"We're here to give out reports, Lord Hokage," the one in the ANBU gear intoned.

"I've already received my report, from Enma. But I DO want the three of you here. I can't spare the ANBU for this mission, but I need it to be led by an ANBU agent. Ekyt, that's you. Take Sakura and Naruto, and investigate a possible Sound Village annexation of Tanzaku town. My latest report was from Master Jiraiya, but he was forced to flee before he could finish. Lady Tsunade is with him right now. Investigate the town, assist as needed, and escort Lady Tsunade and Master Jiraiya back to the Leaf Village quickly. If it's true, and Orochimaru is mobilizing once more, we'll need them. And Lee, I've got something else for you. But, right now, Sakura, take these..."

The third was handing Sakura a set of throwing needles. They mounted on your forearm, and thrown, similar to shuriken.

"Shizune made them, and meant for you to have them, but she was dragged away by Tsunade so quickly she didn't have a chance to give them to you. And Lee, your sensei, Gai, would like to see you. All I'll say is 'congratulations.'" Lord Hokage sat back, pipe between his teeth, seeing two happy faces. He couldn't see Ekyt's, but from Enma's check in, and from knowing Ekyt, he guessed that the boy wasn't feeling overly good. Fortunately, that was going to change. **If anyone needs an ego boost, it's the Kaguya boy. And, to most people, this wouldn't mean anything, but to someone who understands history, this is quite the honor.**

The Monkey King, Enma, was waiting with Sarutobi. The monkey even LOOKED vaguely like Sarutobi, with the white beard, and the same armor for combat. Ekyt, still behind his dragon mask, was shocked, and thankful no one could see that. Enma rolled an old scroll out in front of Ekyt, one decorated with only one other name.

"Listen, boy. Sarutobi and I, we're both growing old. We've both made mistakes. And now, Sarutobi sees himself in you. That's why this (indicates scroll) is for you to sign. It would give you the ability to summon me anytime you wish. If you're going to face the sound Village, it wouldn't hurt to have me. I've nearly finished Orochimaru off, and I know Sarutobi would be proud if we helped each accomplish a greater good. It's your decision, whether you sign or not, or course."

Ekyt was already putting the finishing touches on his name. Lastly, he pushed his fingertips to the scroll, signing the binding contract between the Monkey King and the Dragon Boy.

"Ekyt, that reminds, since you've given up the rank of chunin, I've placed you back with Iruka's team. After this mission, provided you're in shape to, the class is getting ready for their final exams to determine if they're genin or not. I've asked Hayate to help you proctor that. Iruka will be there as well, to evaluate you as a teacher."

“Understood, Lord 3rd,” Ekyt said crisply, shedding his ANBU gear, and replacing first his vest, then his kekko gi top with “Kaguya Dragon” written in the back on Kanji.

“Good! Now, there is one additional mission parameter you need to be aware of...”

“Damnit! He WOULD have that much back up!” Tsunade snarled, looking out from behind a building.

“I sent for others, don’t worry. You can trust Sarutobi-sensei to send the right people to help up,” Jiraiya told Tsunade. Both of them were laying low, conserving their chakra. They’d had to hold off Orochimaru’s troops for a while now, and they needed the rest. Sannin or not, there WAS strength in numbers. Tanzaku town didn’t have any Shinobi, but they weren’t submissive to the Sound Village either. Until Orochimaru himself showed up. With Kabuto and Chakaro at his side, he dominated the town. Even then, Jiraiya and Tsunade weren’t horribly overmatched. It was Orochimaru’s next man that out-did them.

Sasuke had returned to the Sound Village. With three giant snakes thrashing around, Jiraiya and Tsunade had to feign their own deaths to stop Tanzaku town from being destroyed. Now, it was nearly an addition to the Sound Village. The mayor of the small town was going to bow down to Orochimaru, and with him, the entire town. They grumbled, but couldn’t do anything else.

“Well, well, I’ve found you! Come out! Striking Shadow Snakes!”

Tsunade and Jiraiya were suddenly snared by the hissing serpents, and pulled into the street, arms trapped at their sides. Orochimaru, Kabuto, Sasuke, and Chakaro were waiting.

“Now I’m REALLY going to kill you!” Orochimaru’s sword, the Kusanagi, was protruding from his mouth. Jiraiya and Tsunade hadn’t recovered their chakra yet, and couldn’t do anything but watch as the blade came closer to them. It’s point gleamed dangerously, and the two wondered if it really WAS the end for them.

CLANG!

Orochimaru’s sword was blocked by a kunai held by Sakura!

“WHAT?!”

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!” Naruto and his clones performed a quick “Uzumaki Barrage.” After that, Sakura and Naruto both stepped back, and performed another jutsu:

“Summoning Jutsu!” they both called, putting their hands to the ground. For Sakura, a giant slug appeared. For Naruto, it was Gamabunta.

Tsunade and Jiraiya smiled; their pupils had done well. But those smiles quickly faded; THIS was all the help Lord Hokage had sent?

Future legends or not...two more people won't save this town! It won't even save our lives! What's Sarutobi-sensei planning? Jiraiya yanked Tsunade out of the way as the two giant summons began to move.

"Seems you're still outnumbered, three summons to two! Not to mention, four people to two. Oh well. If you're foolish enough to get in the way, you'll die."

"Shut UP, snake vermin! God, you make rat crap look good!" Naruto shouted from atop Gamabunta. But Naruto was focused on Chakaro.

"You! The midget Orochimaru! Try ME on for size!" Naruto taunted, fist out. "Your loser teacher couldn't defeat a Hokage, and I'M the next one, so you'd better stop me now!"

Sakura looked over at Kabuto. "This is between medics, now! We've BOTH been compared to Lady Tsunade at her prime! Only I've TRAINED with her! I'm not some scared little girl anymore, either! I'm a kunoichi, and you'd better not drop your guard!"

Ekyt looked down from a rooftop, seeing this. The thoughts of those two becoming legendary made him smile; that was followed by a grimace. **I won't be legendary...but I can be like Lord 3rd, or Kakashi-sensei. Maybe I shouldn't dwell on those thoughts. They're my friends, starting now I'm going to be happy for them. But that doesn't mean I can't rival them while cheering them on!** Quickly, he pierced his thumbs with a kunai as he leapt down. From 100 feet in the air. But it was anything but a suicide leap.

"Dual Summoning Jutsu!" he shouted. Ekyt landed on top of Shuurai, his snake, with Enma next to him. "Transform: Adamantine Yoi!" Ekyt, back to wearing his black vest and headband, and holding the long staff Enma had become, resembled something between the 3rd Hokage and Kakashi, while Naruto resembled Jiraiya, and Sakura resembled Tsunade.

"Guess that leaves Orochimaru for me. Lord Hokage wishes to give his greetings!" Ekyt yelled over. He swung the adamantine staff at Orochimaru. It extended toward him. Orochimaru leapt up and over the strike, but felt his leg snared. A long arm was protruding from the staff.

"I never DID get to thank you for nearly killing one of my closest friends, Orochimaru!" Enma shouted. He yanked Orochimaru back down to his snake. Ekyt pulled the bo back.

"Let's give 'em hell! Tanzaku town doesn't need scum like this running it!" Naruto shouted.

“Hell yeah! Let’s kick @\$!” Sakura added.

“Fools! You think I came alone? Not that I NEED the help, but why exert the energy if I don’t have to?” Orochimaru smirked, like he knew a secret no one else did.

“You talk a great game, lord windbag. I’m going to finish what Lord Hokage began!” Ekyt shouted back. He swung the staff at Orochimaru, who blocked with his sword. Ekyt let go of the staff, and Enma’s legs appeared, holding the staff in place. Ekyt ran the length of the staff, making handsigns. Orochimaru’s eyes widened; he couldn’t get away. Enma’s arm had him held in place.

“It’s time to end this, Orochimaru! Too many lives have been lost! The death of two may prevent the death of thousands! This ends here, with you, me, and one jutsu that you will NEVER perform: Reaper Death Seal!”

But before Ekyt could grab Orochimaru, the jutsu was cancelled. Ekyt was being held back, though he was still struggling to get his hands in the right sign. Orochimaru smirked.

“I TOLD you I wasn’t alone...heheheheh! You remember THIS man, don’t you?” Orochimaru pointed behind Ekyt. Holding the Leaf Genin was Itachi Uchiha.

“Your technique would have been fatal to you as well...had I not promised Orochimaru my services, I would have let you perform it. Even you couldn’t cheat death, no matter how lucky you’ve gotten. And I’m wasting my words on a clone...” Itachi snapped Ekyt’s neck, but all that happened was a shadow dispelled.

“Who said I didn’t believe you, Orochimaru? Someone like you ALWAYS has to have help. You couldn’t cut it on your own. And, really, did you think I would simply charge at you like that? I DO have respect for your abilities, you’re not one of the legendary sannin for nothing.” Ekyt standing back on top of Shuurai, with Enma next to him.

“You little fool! Do you REALLY think you can stand up to BOTH of us. Individually, you’ve gotten lucky against us. But we’re playing for the same team now. How do you think you can win? Both of us have nearly killed you. The two of us together will CERTAINLY kill you.” Orochimaru licked his lips, enjoying the prospect of fear on Ekyt’s face. But none came.

“Someone will take you down. Even if it’s not me. It’s not GETTING to the top that’s hard, Orochimaru, it’s STAYING there. You’ve still got to climb to reach the summit. But, no matter how many times you change bodies, you’ll face your mortality someday. Don’t think I didn’t see it, Orochimaru. The fear in your eyes when you saw me use THAT jutsu. You lived through it once. You won’t be lucky the next time.” Ekyt glanced at Itachi.

“And you...You’ve done everything right, Itachi. It’s a shame you’re wasting such a miraculous gift. Just keep in mind: you COULD have died by my hand. But I made a promise to your little brother that I wouldn’t kill you; SASUKE wants the honor...”

Ekyt used a genjutsu that most genin hadn't even HEARD of. But the 3rd Hokage had taught it to him, once he saw that Ekyt was going to go after the Akatsuki to get his chakra back (Past issues). The jutsu took a lot of chakra. Ekyt HAD the chakra, but the genjutsu could be broken. That was why Ekyt had spent weeks cultivating the jutsu, calibrating it to his Emotional chakra. When you mixed the two, the genjutsu was nearly unbreakable as long as Ekyt's stamina and chakra held up.

"Bringer of Darkness Technique!" Ekyt used the genjutsu on Itachi and Orochimaru. Both were caught by surprise. The jutsu, invented by the First Hokage (Though the anime/manga later called it the 2nd Hokage's jutsu, I maintain their original explanation for it's creation. -NG), made the target, or targets, see nothing but darkness. It would keep Itachi and Orochimaru at bay long enough for Ekyt to get rid of the help. The plan Sakura had cooked up was almost the opposite of a samurai proverb: 'Cut off the hands and feet, and the head will suffer.' (The original reads [paraphrased]: "If the head is unjust, the hands and feet...will suffer.")

Tsunade and Jiraiya were waiting for Ekyt when he ended his summoning jutsus and landed on the ground.

"You did good kid- but when did you learn to do that?!" Tsunade asked, realizing Ekyt was different now. And, no chunin vest. "Don't tell me you gave up the rank again!"

"I did, Lady Tsunade. Also, Lord 3rd has taken me on as a student, part-time. I figured that if you had Sakura, and Master Jiraiya had Naruto, why couldn't I get an instructor of my own. But that's besides the point. My genjutsu will hold for five minutes. How much damage can we do to the Sound Village in that time? (Ekyt hands Tsunade and Jiraiya ration pills)

"PLENTY!" Jiraiya said heartily. "Summoning Jutsu!" Another giant toad, one a step under Gamabunta. "Bring Down the House!" Jiraiya called. The toad shifted it's weight so that it crushed some Sound Soldiers under it.

Lady Tsunade caused a crater, then spewed poison gas into the luckless soldiers trapped in it.

Naruto was battling Chakaro, and Sakura was holding her own with Tsunade. Sasuke was fighting an internal battle: he knew his mission. But his brother was blinded. One Chidori, and Sasuke would have avenged his family...the mission, or personal gain? Which should he choose?

It was a full-blown war over Tanzaku town. The townspeople didn't openly cheer their Leaf Village saviors; they couldn't. And things looked grim for those saviors. They were outnumbered. Would their skills be enough to throw off Orochimaru's strength in numbers? More to come!

58 - Our Town! The Mighty Leaf Rallies!

Lady Tsunade had chosen Tanzaku town as her getaway spot because of its “Vegas” like atmosphere. Gambling and drinks aplenty, such a fancy place that the barmen would have forgotten her tabs by now, and the casinos would have torn up her debts. But everyone knew the “Legendary Loser”, something Tsunade had forgotten. She had just wanted a little rest, with Shizune along for the ride for old time’s sake. Being Hokage was a tiring position, and Tsunade wasn’t the patient type to begin with. She needed her rest. To her, ‘rest’ meant gambling all night, apparently.

Then Jiraiya had shown up, out of breath, and cut all to hell. He warned that Orochimaru was on the way, aiming to add Tanzaku town (a neutral territory) to the Sound Village. Lady Tsunade shifted into Hokage mode. Having Tanzaku town would give Orochimaru resources, and a place even closer to the Hidden Leaf Village, and that could only lead to trouble. Tsunade and Jiraiya had held them off as long as possible, while sending a note to Lord 3rd. Then help had come...

Before Sasuke could decide, Itachi had broken the genjutsu. He could see again, and he had Ekyt in his sights.

Ekyt turned around, hearing the sound of fabric in the wind. He and Itachi landed face to face. With neither making handsigns, they both cast the same genjutsu:

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!”

It was very rare that the same two genjutsu were cast at the exact same instant, and even less likely that Itachi Uchiha would feel it’s effect, or that someone had kept up with his genjutsu. But on such a rare occasion, the genjutsu had a strange effect on both caster and receiver: an unbreakable view of what could have been, if a single instant had been changed. In this case, the instant changed was that Ekyt had performed the Reaper Death Seal on Orochimaru, and Itachi as well. The way things could have been left both the genjutsu specialists gasping for air, their minds in agony from seeing such an awful fate.

(Ekyt/Itachi’s view)

“After reading his scroll, we can ascertain that it WAS true- the Kaguya boy was going to allow himself to die that day.”

The Third Hokage and Tsunade looked down sadly at Ekyt’s white scroll, which contained a side note that had earlier shocked them: His Will. It was dated, too, the morning of his death.

“He knew...but why...why would he do that, knowing he would die?” Tsunade couldn’t understand it. If she had done it, or Master Sarutobi, sure. But for someone so young to use the Reaper Death Seal?

“He had long devised a way to get around the sacrifice...his second chakra, his emotions, took on a corporeal form when he was near death once before. It’s a life force in it’s own right, with a soul. So Ekyt must have taken two people with him, or he would have come back, sacrificing only his Emotional chakra.”

“If he took out Orochimaru...then who...wait, ANBU’s report, they found Ekyt’s corpse next to...Itachi Uchiha’s. Itachi was also bearing the Seal, matching Ekyt’s and Orochimaru’s...Dear God....”

The 3rd puffed on his pipe. “So he finished what I began...I don’t know HOW he learned that Jutsu...Well, we must inform his team, friends, and...the village. His family. That was WHY he did it. To protect the village. That’s why he did everything, all in the name of the Hidden Leaf.”

Tsunade nodded her agreement. “He should have died as a jonin...I can admit that, now.”

The Third simply began to walk, to inform the village of Ekyt’s fate.

(Itachi’s view)

“You little pest! You can’t do this!” Orochimaru was trying to pull away. At 19, with long, sinewy muscle, Ekyt hardly looked as though he could hold Orochimaru in place. But he was, although he DID have help from the death god.

In desperation, Orochimaru yelled out for Itachi. But Itachi was snared as well. A glowing blue older Ekyt was holding Itachi still.

“This ends here, Orochimaru! Our souls will fight eternally in damnation! Perhaps there you’ll finally best me!” Ekyt said, calm as could be. The seal appeared on his body, and he fell to the ground. Orochimaru’s soul held on as long as it could, but the death god gave a mighty tug. Itachi, too, fell. Three corpses, side by side, bearing the mark of a seal. Orochimaru’s soul was sealed, and the threat of Itachi had passed.

(Ekyt’s view)

Ekyt was scared, but forced himself to hold on. The death god had his soul; even if he were to end the jutsu, Ekyt’s life would be forfeit. But this way, Ekyt could take two villains with him. But his last thoughts before his vision went black made him think that there WAS a fate worse than death.

I never told Sakura...I never had a girl, I never achieved jonin rank...But I’ll be remembered...one

out of three...It's for the greater good. Forgive me, Konoha, for leaving you. I hope that my last act has spared you suffering...I'm so sorry I haven't been a better person.

Then he felt the pull of the death god, and let go of his life, his conscience free of guilt, but his mind laden with burdens; problems he would never solve.

Ekyt and Itachi were both standing in an empty space. Darkness was everywhere, but both could see. They saw each other.

"Two genjutsus colliding...so this is a 'shared subconscious'..." Ekyt mused, looked around.

Itachi said nothing at first. Then, he spoke slowly, superiorly. "This is a different dimension. This is where Orochimaru sends his victims before he takes over their bodies. We should both escape, before Orochimaru uses that jutsu. He's planned it for my brother today. If we're caught in the crossfire, all three of us are done for. But, only one of us can leave..."

Ekyt looked up, not meeting Itachi's eyes. Ekyt was without his summons, but since Itachi didn't have one either, that wasn't a disadvantage. But Itachi was ruthless, while Ekyt still had a beating heart and a useful conscience. But the primal urge to survive kicked in.

"You're right, Itachi. I also know both our genjutsus would be useless in this 'void'. It's a contrast to your style. But I've actually always wanted to look in your eyes, and remind you of one thing: You're human, too. Someday, someone will kill you. I promise you, no one will let you die of a natural cause. It's time for us to both face our mortality, Itachi."

Tsunade yanked Ekyt's body aside, while leaving Itachi's wear it was. Jiraiya was off, fighting with his toads. Tsunade had been healing the hurt, for now. Then, Ekyt fell just at her feet. She feared the worst, but now saw it was genjutsu.

"Wait...there's more to it than that...it's a different genjutsu...gotta think back, to what I learned about that...I know what's happened here. If I break the 'connection' between them, only one of their souls will survive, while the other will be trapped. But which one would I save? Damn, it's useless...I've got to let Itachi and Ekyt fight it out. C'mon kid...for once, I'm in your corner..." Tsunade placed Ekyt's body safely behind a building, out of the crossfire. It was at that time that Ekyt's team, Iruka, Okkuu, and Yuuka, all showed up.

"Watch him, but don't touch him!" Tsunade admonished them. She gave Iruka a slightly longer explanation.

On the ground, Ekyt's body twitched. Okkuu and Yuuka had seen their sempai in some strange situations- but fighting inside his own mind, or whatever was going on? This was new to them.

Okkuu glanced up and saw that Yuuka's dark green eyes were brimming with tears. His own black eyes softened.

"Hey, Yuuka, he'll be fine, okay? Don't worry. I don't care WHO he's fighting. We've gotta have faith in him! Remember, he helped us rescue Iruka-sensei. He's no slouch. He might be a genin, but he's not like us. Okay? No more crying now, alright? There's nothing to worry about." Okkuu kissed Yuuka's forehead. In her shock, her tears stopped. Slowly, she nodded, then even smiled.

"You're right Okkuu. Since when did YOU become the mature one in our relationship?" Yuuka asked with a small smirk, though her cheeks and eyes were still marred with tear stains.

Okkuu feigned anger. "When I have to be, I am! I'm still a guy!"

"That means that you're a perv, not mature!" Yuuka shot back with a giggle, playfully pinching Okkuu's cheek.

"Ya got me there," Okkuu admitted sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.

With Orochimaru incapacitated (by Ekyt's genjutsu, from last ch), Jiraiya and the others focused on eliminating Orochimaru's help. Mostly chunin, with a few genin and jonin from the Sound Village mixed in, it was child's play for Jiraiya and the newly-arrived Iruka.

Naruto was still fighting Chakaro, and doing pretty well. But somehow, Chakaro kept avoiding critical strikes, and Naruto was starting to get angry.

Sakura and Kabuto traded medical jutsus. They were evenly matched in terms of chakra use and skill, but Kabuto had an edge with combat experience, while Sakura had an edge in the form of her training with Tsunade.

By now, it was apparent that Sasuke's cover was blown, and he started to join in the attack. He didn't see his brother, and thought that the coward had fled. So he took out his frustrations on his former Sound comrades.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Ekyt slid backward, throwing three shuriken as he crouched, beginning to leap. Itachi let the first whiz by him, while he caught the second star, and threw it, knocking down the third.

"Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu," Itachi called. Ekyt was in mid flight, so he had to be creative while dodged.

He used a clone jutsu, then a replacement jutsu. His clone got scorched into cinders, while Ekyt landed on the 'ground' of the void. When he landed, Ekyt felt something strange. He was standing on- water?

Itachi had noticed it, too. "Apparently, the void changes in elements, and responds to our attacks. My fire jutsu triggered this water...interesting element of change. I don't recall that the last time I was here..."

Ekyt cursed. **That's right! Orochimaru had tried to absorb Itachi. If this is the same dimension, then Itachi can probably predict what's going to happen! And, how the hell do you escape this place anyway? I'd better hold off on thinking about that until I've got Itachi incapacitated.**

"Water clone jutsu!" Both Itachi and Ekyt cried out at the same time. Their water clones attacked, quickly canceling each other out. Ekyt took the time to undo his vest, and threw it across the vast nothingness. Itachi ignored the vest, waiting for Ekyt. Ekyt ran forward, making rapid handsigns. They weren't one Itachi recognized, so he let his Sharingan copy them. Just as Ekyt got within range, he disappeared.

The vest...he used a replacement jutsu. Where did the vest land?

In front of Itachi, Ekyt was crouching. He delivered a hard kick to Itachi's sternum. Itachi flew apart. **Shadow clone- damn!** Ekyt cursed to himself. Seconds later, kunai buried itself hilt-deep into Ekyt. POOF!

"Water Encampment Wall!" Ekyt called. "Fire release: Dragon's Encampment Wall!" "Dual wall expansion!"

The two walls Ekyt had created began to move outward and expand, forming a two-tiered dome. But they were swallowed up by the blackness. Ekyt swore again; that had taken some good chakra.

"Itachi! Let's settle this! Stop running!" Ekyt shouted. **Itachi...maybe I can pray on his pride. What I need is to hit him with one attack...one special attack I haven't used in a long time...in my weakened state, it might kill me, too. But it's better than staying here, waiting for Orochimaru to swallow my soul.**

"Dragon's ember: Flame Revival." Ekyt put his Striking Serpent blades into the ground. Between them, a flame grew, as big as a bonfire. A bonfire fueled by chakra. It was a signal fire. If Itachi would attack, that would give Ekyt just the opening he needed. In desperation, Ekyt pulled off his shirt, leaving only the mesh chainmail covering his upper body. His dark gray shirt at the ready, Ekyt waited for Itachi to take the bait.

Ekyt waited. And waited. And waited. After a while, he tried to sense Itachi's chakra. He didn't sense any. Ekyt cursed himself for not figuring it out sooner. **He just left. He escaped once before...now, how do I escape? I've really only got one option.**

"EMOTIONAL CHAKRA RELEASE!" Ekyt shouted. From every part of his body, his Blue Flame Chakra expanded in every direction. Directly above the exhausted Ekyt, the darkness peeled away. He could see the outside world once more. Focusing his chakra to his feet, Ekyt jumped up and out through the hole.

Itachi was back in his body, the Mangekyo Sharingan doing it's job and getting him out safely. **I've come to rely on genjutsu too much, the Kaguya boy was really pushing me. Orochimaru will have to survive on his own, I'm at my limit since I broke out of that dimension. I have to report to the others, anyway. All of our targets have grown. And now that he's discovered his bloodline, the Kaguya boy even more so. My brother is falling behind. He turned to Orochimaru, someone I bested easily. Unless Sasuke has a strategy, he wasted a lot of time. But the Jinchuuriki...our frontal assaults aren't working, we need a plan to capture him. He's grown in strength, but not so much in intelligence. We may be able to trap him yet. If not, we'll have to proceed with our plan without him...**

Ekyt woke up with a start.

"Ekyt-sempai, you're awake! Are you okay?!" Yuuka began to scan Ekyt for injuries despite her question.

"I'm...fine. Just exhausted. How's the fight going?" Ekyt asked immediately.

"We're winning, big time! Orochimaru finally woke up from jutsu you used on him, and he's trying to escape. But the Leaf keeps pushing! They're going for the kill!" Okkuuu told Ekyt excitedly.

"The fools, we're in no position to do that! We can't just kill Orochimaru like that, it won't work. Lady Fifth and Lord Jiraiya are fine...it's Naruto and Sakura that worry me...damnit..." Ekyt was on one knee. "That killed my chakra. I've got to let it come back...I have no choice...My mind is at a weak point, I've got to relax...I used the Emotional chakra too much..."

Like Kakashi with the Sharingan, Ekyt becomes heavily fatigued if he uses his Emotional chakra too much. In this case, the release technique he used would take a lot of chakra. The emotions exiting Ekyt's body were painful. Coupling the pain with the natural fatigue, it was clear Ekyt needed a medic. For now, all he and his teammate's could do was stay out of site.

Three luckless Sound genin had other ideas.

"Well, too pooped to party? Too bad! We'll just bring the party to you!"

Ekyt looked around. Okkuu and Yuuka were ready to fight. He wasn't, but he didn't have much of a choice, and he couldn't let attention be drawn to them.

"Come on in, then," Ekyt said quietly. Seconds later, the Sound genin were trapped by four snakes that came from Ekyt's wrist! Ekyt grabbed one, punched him once, then threw him against the wall. From

there, he jammed a needle topped with a sleeping poison on it into the genin's arm.

Yuuka cut away with her chakra scalpel, while Okkuu used a silent genjutsu to put his opponent out of commission. Ekyt held the three up while Yuuka tied them up with a thick rope. Ekyt added the precaution of tying their fingers together, so that they couldn't use the Replacement Technique.

"Now, rest, Ekyt-sempai," Yuuka told Ekyt gently as he sank back down to one knee.

"We got your back!" Okkuu declared.

Ekyt smiled under his mask, and nodded. **Could it be that I've got the next Naruto and Sakura here? Personality-wise, they're different, but how fast they've grown...Iruka is a good sensei...maybe I will be someday, too...**

NEXT ISSUE: KABUTO VS SAKURA, AND NARUTO VS CHAKARO! THE SOUND THREAT IS BEING DISPELLED, BUT WITH THREE POWERFUL THREATS, TWO EXHAUSTED SANNIN, AND ONE SPENT STUDENT, THE FIGHT CAN GO EITHER WAY. WILL TANZAKU TOWN BE LOST TO THE SOUND VILLAGE?

59 - Life Amongst Chaos: Holly's Surprise!

When Chakaro saw Orochimaru retreat, he knew that he and Kabuto had to follow as well. The problem was the Orange-clad Shinobi in his way.

“Hey, you! Orochi-midget! You’ve made life hell for my friend, dattebayo! Now you’re attacking an innocent town? How low can you go?!” Naruto shouted, finger pointed accusingly.

“MUCH lower than this, you orange scum! Now, move!” Chakaro tried to get away, but found himself surrounded by clones.

“Yeah, right! No one tell Naruto Uzumaki what to do! But I don’t mind helping you leave!” Naruto declared, laughing.

“Oh, shut up!” Chakaro reared back and threw a kunai at Naruto. POOF! Shadow clone!”

“Then where-” Chakaro didn’t notice Naruto crouching behind him.

“Konoha’s secret taijutsu: 1000 Years of Death!” Naruto jammed Chakaro in the @\$ with his fingers and sent him sailing out of Tanzaku town, just as Kakashi had sent Naruto flying into the river a couple years ago. To say Chakaro was humiliated would be putting it mildly. **Naruto Uzumaki...After I kill my worthless old sensei, I’m coming for YOU. Your little tactic won’t work twice!**

Sakura wiped the blood away from her mouth with one hand, the other hand glowing with electric blue energy. Kabuto was scratched up from Sakura’s attacks. It amazed him how evenly matched they were. Both charged. Sakura had a hidden ace, though, one that she had read about. Just as Kabuto got in range, Sakura used her toes to throw gravel in his eyes. When Kabuto instinctively put a hand over his eyes to rub the stone out, Sakura jammed her Chakra Scalpel hard into his stomach, up to her wrist. With a burst of chakra, Sakura sent Kabuto flying into a building, where his back cracked the solid structure.

Kabuto stood up, holding his stomach, clearly in pain. But he smiled.

“You’ve gotten very good, Sakura-chan. Next time, I won’t hold back against you.” Kabuto’s body had begun to heal itself as they spoke.

“Just get out of Tanzaku town, Kabuto, before your babbling makes me lose respect for your abilities,” Sakura said dismissively. Kabuto smirked, as though Sakura had paid him a compliment, and vanished in a cloud of smoke.

Jiraiya and Tsunade found Ekyt and his team, along with their sensei, Iruka, holding three Sound ninja captive.

“Good work. I bet they know some VERY interesting things about the Sound Village. Things they’ll be ALL too willing to tell us...or they get hit with a taste of hell.” Tsunade was imposing enough, but when she made threats, it typically buckled the strongest Shinobi’s knees.

Ekyt went home, for the first time in nearly a week. He immediately checked the house for traps, or genjutsu, or anything else. **Only Itachi showed up to help the Sound Village...I’ve got this bad feeling...Oh, shoot!**

BOOOOOOM!

The destruction was unreal. Trees, shingles, pieces of wood, all ablaze. Sparks lit the night sky, sending up an ominous, thick black smoke. A giant fire became even larger as it lapped up the wood from the house. Ekyt’s house.

Tsunade and the Third Hokage came running, with water jutsus at the ready.

“Ekyt’s house...Oh no...what if he’s inside...” Tsunade fretted.

“I’m here, and I’m fine. Pardon me for being blunt here, but I’ve got to save one part of my house.”

Tsunade chanced a glance at Ekyt. **This is bad...he’s the ‘statue’ again. And worse than before. His house just got blown up, and he’s not even angry. That’s not healthy...No...he IS angry...but he’s controlling it...why? Does he think I’ll punish him?**

“Summoning Jutsu!” Ekyt called tonelessly, summoning his Water Dragon, Umisu.

“Umisu, I need a Water Encampment Wall, please.” Ekyt was so polite. With the destruction in front of him, it was eerie. Like the calm before the storm. But Ekyt didn’t notice. He simply created four water clones, and quenched the fire in a certain area. After that, Ekyt leapt in himself, grabbed his scrolls and weapons that were in the now-visible basement, and leapt back out. Seconds later, the structure

collapsed. The fire was out, but the building couldn't be saved.

Ekyt looked at it's ruins, a small bit of sentiment in his eyes, before he turned on his heel and walked away, the few possessions he had that weren't destroyed now slung across his back, safely hidden away in ShoBu, his white summoning scroll. No one dared say a word as Ekyt walked through town, past the shops and houses, and to the Village Gate. THERE he was finally challenged.

Jiraiya. Tsunade. Sarutobi. Asuma. Kakashi. Lee. Naruto. Sakura. Sasuke.

"Move aside, please," Ekyt asked calmly.

"No. We can't let you leave things like this. If you want to leave, you have to beat two sannin, their apprentices, the Uchiha prodigy, AND two jonin. That's how it's going to work. Now, you don't want to do that, do you?" Tsunade was staying calm, looking Ekyt in the eyes. She could almost see the fire in them.

"No. I don't want it to work that way. But if it has to, it will. For once, I'm not going to be stopped. I've let myself get trampled on, and it's made me weak. I need to correct that weakness. Perhaps if I explained my intentions, you would be more receptive to the situation at hand." Ekyt was calm as could be, sizing up his opponents.

"Go ahead, it's something you need to say, and something we need to hear." The 3rd Hokage's wisdom had always aided Ekyt in the past. Perhaps that was why he was willing to explain himself now. But, whatever the reason, Ekyt sat down on Lone Pine Hill with the others and explained.

"I've long been dissatisfied. My last ray of hope was destroyed. My inability to advance to the rank of chunin was demolishing. But not attaining the rank wasn't the problem...it was the village. They've made it clear they've no room in their hearts and lives for someone like me. I knew this when I took the position of "fake Hokage", but I did it, hoping my love for the village and it's people would be enough for them to understand. I've lived with the burden, and now the burden's gotten heavier. Twice now, I could have killed Itachi Uchiha, and Orochimaru, and rid the world of the scum I scrape off my boots. But I didn't. I couldn't. I'm no killer, even when THAT is what the Village needed. I've always said that I would always be there for Konoha. Now I've made myself into a liar. I'm no better than Chakaro, or Linda, Or Kayla. All I've done is bring this village trouble. All my studying, my research, it's done nothing...I've done nothing"

Naruto leapt to his feet, but Sakura beat him to it. In a veritable rage, she hauled Ekyt to his feet and held him to the lone pine tree on the hill.

"SAVING MY LIFE WAS NOTHING?! NEARLY DYING FOR PEOPLE YOU BARELY KNOW?! SAVING MASTER JIRAIYA, FENDING OFF THE AKATSUKI, SACRIFICING YOUR **LIFE MEANS SO LITTLE TO YOU?! WHAT THE HELL IS IT GOING TO TAKE TO MAKE YOU UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE LOVED HERE? CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND? ALL OF US STOOD UP TO YOU, DOESN'T THAT**

CLUE YOU IN THAT WE CARE ABOUT YOU?!"

Sakura was holding Ekyt up by brute strength, and the stoic genin actually showed shock. He would have expected this from Naruto. But from Sakura? But Sakura wasn't done yet.

"GET IT INTO YOUR HEAD! YOU MEAN SOMETHING TO ALL OF US! THE KIDS YOU TEACH, THE SENSEIS YOU LEARN FROM, YOUR TEAM! TRY TO UNDERSTAND THIS: IF YOU LEAVE, WE, AS A VILLAGE, HAVE FAILED TO PROTECT ONE OF OUR OWN! AND I WON'T LET THAT HAPPEN! SO HELP ME, IF I HAVE TO CUT EVERY LIMB, EVERY TENDON, WITH MY CHAKRA SCALPEL TO SAVE YOU FROM YOURSELF, THEN I WILL DO IT, WITHOUT HESITATION!"

Sakura's hand glowed with energy. As if daring Ekyt to try, she held it up to his neck. Ekyt closed his eyes, and breathed out.

"It meant a lot to hear that, Sakura. I don't doubt your sincerity. But, do you honestly believe it? It sounds like just what I needed to hear. Is it a kunoichi speaking to me, or Sakura?" Ekyt's voice never wavered, despite being held off the ground. Sakura smiled at him and let him down slowly, dusting his back off.

"Listen, if I was talking to you as a kunoichi, I would have you drunk or drugged by now, and I would have your, ahem, complete and undivided attention in a darkened room. Get what I'm saying?" Sakura ruffled Ekyt's hitai-ate, giggling at how quickly his fate went from white to red.

"Well, my pants appear to be on, so I'm assuming that means you're talking as a friend?" Ekyt managed. Managed to sound like an idiot.

"UGH! Get a room, you two! Geez!" Naruto whined.

Sakura grinned wickedly at Ekyt. "W-ell, the night IS still young, Ekyt-kun. There's still time for me to be a kunoichi...don't lie, now, you bad boy, you always wanted this!"

Ekyt gulped hard. **She's not too far off the mark, actually. But I can't drag her into this mess that I call my life, not like that. But, the more I see her, the harder it gets to tell myself no. But, it's for the better. She can't know how I feel...not yet. Damn it, I wish I knew how SHE felt. Right now, she's just ticking Naruto off. But how does she feel about me?**

Ekyt pushed away from the tree, then shimmied up it, standing on top.

"It's my fault this escalated like this...Tanzaku town, too. The ten who died could have been prevented, if I had just done my job..." Ekyt realized he had just pinpointed the problem. Satisfied for the moment, he leapt down from the tree. There, he found everyone clustered around something. Curious, Ekyt walked over. His eyes widened at the shock.

"W-what? That can't be!" Ekyt shook his head, disbelieving.

"Well, she IS a girl, Ekyt. And, well, it's too late, they're here now." Sakura told Ekyt, smiling happily.

“Looks like you’re a...grand-owner? Huh. That doesn’t sound right. Just ‘owner, I guess. Here, hold one! It’s a girl!” Sakura held a puppy, one that looked like a miniature version of Holly, into Ekyt’s gloved hands. The puppy cocked it’s head, whimpered sympathetically, panted, then licked Ekyt’s cheek. Ekyt absently stroked, disbelieving.

“What’s not right is that my dog is pregnant! Who the hell got her pregnant?!” Ekyt demanded, not believing this.

“Uh, well, funny story about that...” Kakashi muttered “...Apparently, she and Pakkun have been, well, seeing a lot of each other. And I guess they manifested their love in a physical way. I swear, they must think they’re human...”

“Don’t insult me, Kakashi,” Pakkun drawled. “I KNOW I’m a dog, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Ah, there’s my sweet little puppy. And her...oh. Did I do this?” Pakkun asked, a sweatdrop all his own on his face.

Sweatdrops all around. “YOU DIDN’T KNOW?!” came the collective shout.

“Well, Holly and I, well, you know...How many little puppies do we have here. One...two...three...four...five...six? Wow.”

Holly, who was laying on her side, smiled up at Pakkun. “Well, it was fun, Pakkun. I DO hope you plan on taking responsibility...or I’ll sic my owner on you.”

Ekyt was still standing in a state of shock. **Even my dog finds that special pers- dog. I’m such a loser...**

Just then, the new-born puppy had an accident, right on Ekyt’s vest. Of course.

“So, can you and your sister help me out, Kiba? I want these dogs trained properly for ninja work. It’s really Holly’s choice where they wind up after that, but I’m hoping she’ll agree that they’ll go to good homes. You know, ‘A boy and his dog’ type thing.”

Kiba grinned wolfishly. “Geez, your dog gets ‘attention’ sooner than you, huh?”

“Where’s YOUR girl, wiseass?” Ekyt shot back. Kiba chuckled at the joke.

“Okay, we’re even there. Oh well. Yeah, we’ll help! My sis and I NEVER turn away a dog in need!”

“Thanks Kiba. Then I leave Holly in your care until her puppies are good to go. Pardon me, I’ve got to...go.”

On his way to meet Tsunade and Lord 3rd at the memorial stone, Ekyt thought about his house. WHO had destroyed it, WHY had they done it, and HOW did they pick the precise moment Ekyt returned home to do it. Ekyt had thought about it, and he hadn't seen anyone in the house. To be fair, he'd only had two seconds to get himself out before the house detonated. **Later...I've got to handle whatever this is first.**

Ekyt found a group of people waiting for him. Neji Hyuuga, Naruto Uzumaki, Shikamaru Nara, along with their respective instructors. Master Sarutobi was waiting for Ekyt.

"Ekyt, Neji and Shikamaru, two of our sharpest minds, are going to be searching the remains of your house for foul-play. More accurately, who it was that set the foul play in action. In the mean time, the Nara family have agreed to sell you a good deal of land near their property. (Walks forward) Kid, it's time to pick up the pieces. Whatever you're thinking, you're life isn't over. It's just beginning. And in good time, I'll let you hunt down the bastards that did this. But, for now, behave yourself, okay?"

Ekyt had to nod. Too much had happened today, and his brain was too numb to process it. But his 'fun' wasn't over yet.

"I can see it in your eyes...my Byakugan doesn't miss anything...you're bottling up your emotions in an unhealthy manner. I would suggest taking time off tomorrow, and doing nothing but what you enjoy. Or, perhaps, add to that scroll of yours."

Master Sarutobi had the solution. "That scroll contains jutsu that some in the Leaf have never heard of. Perhaps allowing me to put a protective seal on it would be for the best. That, and maybe we could add a new jutsu," Sarutobi smiled, knowing that Ekyt wouldn't turn him down.

"I like that. There's not much to cover at the academy tomorrow. Master Sarutobi, would you mind dropping by? I've got something special in mind for the kids, before their graduation exams."

NEXT ISSUE: EKYT SPARS WITH A FELLOW LEAF NINJA, AND HIMSELF! SAKURA'S OUTBURST HAS GOTTEN HIM THINKING EVEN MORE ABOUT THE LIFE HE COULD HAVE, IF HE COULD CHANGE THINGS AROUND. AND, WHO'S BEHIND THE DESTRUCTION OF EKYT'S HOUSE? FIND OUT NEXT TIME!

60 - The Wrath of the Byakugan!

“Man, they did a number on this place.”

Shikamaru sifted through the ruins of Ekyt's house. Most everything was destroyed, so it was hard to tell just what had happened. Based on what Ekyt had said, the explosion had been set off in the main floor.

It explains why the basement survived so long. He mentioned he had the door sealed, along with traps and genjutsus all over the place around that basement. That's about the only place to find any evidence, if there IS any. What a drag...and now he'll be living near my mom...geez, his life DOES suck.

“Hey, Neji, can you find a heat source with that Byakugan? If we find out where this thing started, maybe can find some kind of evidence.” Shikamaru rolled his shoulder and sat crouch, letting Neji go to work.

“Byakugan!” Neji's enhanced vision COULD see heat sources. In fact, that was a weakspot of the Byakugan: high heat. A day after the fire, the explosion had been so intense that some parts of the building were still hot. But the most intense heat would come from the source of the explosion.

“I'm not seeing anything...Ah! Shikamaru, ten meters South-west, the heat is particularly strong.” Neji ended his doujutsu and walked over with Shikamaru.

“Not surprising, this was a supporting beam,” Shikamaru pointed out. “Let's see...remnants of exploding tags...do you see anything different?”

A moment later, Neji shook his head. “Nothing. If it was the Akatsuki, there would be traces of clay, and strong chakra. But there's nothing here. The chakra also rules out Orochimaru. It could easily have been someone in the village, if not for the fact that this building is in close proximity to the Hokage Mansion. None of our villagers would risk setting that on fire. There must be someone else responsible.”

“Hmm...If they think they killed Ekyt in the explosion, then they might drop their guard. Or, if they're sure he's alive, which, given his track record, they're likely to assume, they'll strike again, something more direct this time. But, regardless, it has to be someone who has access to knowledge of Konoha...”

“What's this?” Neji plucked at a small piece of fabric with some blood on it. “They must have tried to get into his basement, and got his with one of the traps, or the genjutsu, and gave up. That rules out anyone overly powerful, they could have broken his seal, releases hid genjutsus, and dodged his traps. That, and they wouldn't have left such incriminating evidence.”

“Whatever, we'd better report this to the Hokage. I heard that she almost had a fight with Ekyt last night, just to keep in the village.”

“That sounds like him. A temperamental fool,” Neji muttered.

“Or the guy who wanted some revenge. You were there in his position, Neji,” Shikamaru reminded him bluntly.

“I’m bound by a curse, that fool is bound by nothing but”

“Loyalty? Love for the village? Listen Neji, he’s the exact opposite of me, with all this motivation. You’ve got some beef with him, it’s not my business. You should take it up with him. Two top genin grads fighting would probably draw a crowd.” Shikamaru slouched away, then used the body flicker jutsu to reach Tsunade’s office quickly.

“He’s gotta be dead! My daddy said NO ONE could survive that explosion!”

“No way, he’s not dead, class would have been canceled!”

The argument had been going that way all morning between the students. They had heard the explosion. No announcements had been given about it, and they were worried. THAT, and they were worried about their finals- today was the day! Ekyt-sempai had said something about a surprise first, THEN the exams. But the students were more curious as to their teacher’s status- dead or alive. That argument quelled when Ekyt walked in as though nothing was wrong.

“Good morning everyone! Today’s the day for your graduation test. And after that exam, I’ve got a surprise for all of you. First of all, please welcome back Iruka-sensei, and Master Sarutobi, who will be proctoring this test with me. The written portion begins now. Anyone caught cheating will fail immediately. Now, go ahead and begin.”

The students shrugged. They should have known. This was their teacher. He would walk through fire to get to work. They wondered why they were surprised.

“Lady Fifth, we’ve found evidence. But it won’t be of much use, aside from ruling out the Akatsuki and Orochimaru.”

“If it’s not them, then who would do this?” Tsunade wondered, looking at the cloth, examining the blood.

“I’m not sure, only that it’s someone who had access to knowledge of Konoha’s layout. It’s not likely to be a Leaf Villager, they wouldn’t have dared setting off an explosion that close to the Hokage mansion.”

It was a mystery. Tsunade dismissed Shikamaru and Neji.

“Alright, the exams are over. Looks like everyone who tested passed. Congratulations to all of you, you are now Shinobi. Your chunin and jonin instructors will be joining you soon. For now, my surprise is...” Ekyt’s voice trailed off. He had planned on the 3rd Hokage demonstrating a couple jutsus, along with Iruka’s announcement about the new teams. But that had to wait.

“I see you chose not to take my advice.”

Ekyt looked to the doorway. Neji.

“I have a job to do here. I don’t believe in shirking my duties,” Ekyt explained, wondering what Neji sounded so aggressive. **What pissed in HIS cereal this morning?**

Neji’s was taller than Ekyt, and seemed to tower over him, despite that fact that Ekyt was clearly unimpressed.

“I am a jonin who gave you a direct order. You don’t disobey other jonin...do you have a problem with me?” Neji asked quietly. **Look at him...hardly awake, chakra at less than full power. He’s only made himself a liability.**

“With all due respect Neji, you didn’t give me an ORDER, you gave me a SUGGESTION. And I’ve disobeyed other jonin when I felt they were wrong. This is my job, and it’s my jurisdiction. Until I hear an order from Lady Fifth telling me that I HAVE to go on vacation, the last orders I received stand. And they were “Teach the class, see who graduates, and assist Iruka in the team formation”. I don’t take a day of just because I had a little bit of bad luck.”

Ekyt turned back to the class. “All of you who passed: congratulations! You’re now all genin, apprentice Shinobi. The road that lies ahead is difficult, but worthwhile. You’re an elite type of warrior now, and you should all be proud! Now, you’re free to go! But, don’t forget to report back here tomorrow to meet your instructors!”

“You did very well. I know you hated to feel Toru, but he DIDN’T do the jutsu correctly, and failed most of the written portion.” Iruka and Master Sarutobi were telling Ekyt what he had done right, and then telling him what he could have done better. The students that hadn’t graduated were still in the room. As was Neji. As soon as Ekyt turned around, Neji, smashed both hands into Ekyt’s stomach, knocking across the room. With his eyes now white with Byakugan, Neji, approached the fallen Ekyt.

“I gave you an order. Next time, follow it. And I outrank you, you should refer to me as “sensei”.”

The remaining students looked on in shock as Ekyt got up and to his feet. Then he uttered words NONE of them had dreamed of telling a jonin.

“I reserve the title ‘sensei’ for those who are a sensei in every aspect of the word. YOU do not fall in that category, not least of all because you sucker-punched me. I have students to attend to. You’ve made your point, now leave.” Ekyt’s voice hadn’t changed; there was no anger in his voice at all. Just his usual, crisp reply. Neji took offense and attacked again. Once more, Ekyt was shot backward into the wall. This time, he landed on his feet and tagged Neji in the face with a kick, knocking the jonin for a brief loop.

“We can settle this later, Neji. Right now, I have a class to teach.” Ekyt’s toneless voice only served to anger Neji further, who was ready to fight instantly.

“They praise you for being so talented! I fail to see how they could mistake your meager abilities for talent! Your clan is laughable, and your abilities even more so!” Neji shot back.

“THAT is your opinion. MY opinion is different, though that’s to be expected. Now, please leave. I have students to teach.” Ekyt’s frank dismissal sent Neji over the edge. As Ekyt turned his back to Neji, Iruka and Sarutobi watched in shock and horror as Neji launched a full assault on Ekyt.

“EIGHT TRIAGRAMS: SIXTY-FOUR PALMS!” In a matter of seconds, Neji’s deadly palms left Ekyt lying on the ground, blood coming from his mouth, and barely conscious.

“THAT is what happens when you disobey a jonin. I am of the Hyuuga clan, and I have a genius you cannot hope to match, no matter how much studying you do, or how hard you try. Your miserable clan was destroyed by their own foolishness.”

“I don’t deny it...(Cough)I AM at a disadvantage with you...especially when (cough) you strike when my back is turned. Coward...(Cough).”

“Ekyt-Sempai!” the remaining students ran down to their teacher, clustering around him. Sarutobi and Iruka soon joined the bunch.

“Ekyt-sempai, please, don’t die!” Naoto begged, in tears at seeing the destruction of someone who had taught him, and humbled him.

“Move aside, you little rodent!” Neji batted Naoto away from Ekyt. The small boy flew into the seats, where a little blood trickled from his mouth. Ekyt’s blurred vision saw Naoto’s limp form, bloodied from the senseless attack.

Neji looked on dispassionately as the little boy coughed up more blood.

“You’ll live. Ninja’s don’t whine and complain, they accept their destiny, and do what they can to make it their own! Caring for your foolish instructor is an incorrect path.”

Neji didn’t see Ekyt stir, and get up to his knees. Ekyt had fought without chakra for years. Having his

tenketsu closed didn't mean the fight was over for her. Especially since Neji had deactivated his Byakugan.

"WHOOOF!" Ekyt breathed out hard as he punched Neji with all the power he could muster. He heard the CRACK! of a nose being broken, then the THUNK! sound of a knee hitting a sternum, followed by the BRACK! of a backfist hitting its mark. Neji landed ten feet away. With no chakra behind the attack, Ekyt had used pure strength to attack.

Ekyt was standing, guard up. BARELY standing, but still standing. He put Naoto with the others, while Sarutobi and Iruka tended to him.

"When I took this position, I swore to protect my students, even at the expense of my own life. You can insult me, spit in my face, even tell me my clan is crap, and I'll let it go. But you DO NOT attack my students! That boy was innocent, and you decide to walk up and bat him aside? I don't care WHAT you do to me, you won't touch these kids again. And I'll do what I have to...anything I have to...to make sure you don't!"

Neji stood up, fury in his eyes. "You have just proved yourself a fool. How can you hope to compare with the genius of the Hyuuga clan?"

Ekyt glared at Neji, rage finally showing. "With the genius of the Kaguya Clan, and the curse that is my kekkai genkai. Your mistake was attacking my students. You see them as children, nothing more. I see them as the future of the Leaf Village, and lives, precious in their own right. So if you're daring me to stand up to you, then I accept. And, for attacking a jonin, I'll likely be punished. But understand this: You've proven yourself to be the lowest of the low by attacking an innocent student. I've proven myself to have the integrity to keep my word. I've sealed dangerous eyes before, Neji. Yours may be next."

Iruka and Sarutobi stepped in. Joining them suddenly was Naruto and Hinata. Just as Neji rushed forward to attack Ekyt again, Hinata blindsided him with a palm attack that closed some of his tenketsu.

"N-no! Neji, yo-you can't do this! And none of us will let you!" Hinata began stammering, but hardened her voice and held her stance.

"That's right! Now get out of here, and everyone last one of us will kick your @\$@ in until it's a lump in your throat!"

Ekyt pushed to the front once more. "You've won the day, Neji. I concede defeat. You've got no further reason to attack me or my students. I've admitted your better. Now, please go away, Neji...sensei..." Ekyt turned away once more, while his class looked at him.

For Ekyt to bow down like that, it took a lot of guts, and a reason. The reason was, Ekyt Kaguya made a vow, and he stuck by it. That was the only reason the genin swallowed what little pride he had left and allowed himself to be humbled. In less than 24 hours, Ekyt's house had been destroyed, and he had been forced to humble himself to protect his students. It would go down as one of the worst days of his

life. But it also made a mark where it counted...

"Iruka...have you ever seen him bow down like that and admit defeat?" Sarutobi asked.

"No, Lord 3rd...But I understand why. Should we tell Lady 5th?" Iruka replied.

"Yes...about what Ekyt did. NOT what Neji did. THAT is between him and Ekyt now. If Ekyt chooses to tell, that is his decision alone. It's not our place to interfere further..."

Both cast a glance at Ekyt, who was still a bloody mess. But his concern was for Naoto, not himself.

Sarutobi closed his eyes, suddenly aging. **He's going to beat himself up over this...if only he knew how impressive it was that he made the right choice. ANYONE can fight. It takes a special person to know when NOT to fight. He chose to swallow his pride and protect those students...despite this, I have a feeling that things are not over between him and Neji...**

Orochimaru and Itachi handed the two shadow figures their money.

"You did well, there's no way the Kaguya boy could have survived. Here's your money. With him out of the way, Konoha is weakened further..." Orochimaru chuckled with pleasure.

"And the Akatsuki's path to the Jinchuuriki, Uzumaki, is a straighter one..." Itachi added.

The two nameless Rain Ninja bowed their thanks. Little did they know that someone had caught them. Silently, Kakashi left the shadows to tell Tsunade about this new evidence.

NEXT ISSUE: THE TWO ROBBERS REVEALED! EKYT AND NEJI HASH IT OUT. AND WHERE DOES LADY TSUNADE STAND ON ALL THIS? FIND OUT NEXT TIME!

61 - A Seed of Hope is Planted

That night was a long one for Ekyt. He had made his place next to the Nara clan to his liking, but still had a hard time sleeping. **I gave up my pride to save that kid...it was worth it. But why do I feel so...worthless? I protected the kids, I should be satisfied...This never happened when Iruka-sensei was teaching. Maybe it's just stress...my house DID get destroyed after all...whatever the case, I need to sleep. My tenketsu need to heal themselves. No studying tonight. A sip of sake, and I'm going to let this rest for the night...**

The sound of the quiet deer nearby, the sounds of the night time, and Mrs. Nara's excellent cooking soon helped Ekyt drift off into the land of dreams. It's said that dream are a mirror to the owner's soul, a world all it's own, created by desire and rage. In this dream, Ekyt was a jonin and had Sakura as a girlfriend. Even in the dream, the unlikely hood made Ekyt unable to enjoy this journey. Sakura had soon melted away. One by one, every kunoichi Ekyt had liked turned their backs on him. All leaving Neji. Just as Neji used a palm strike, Ekyt woke with a start.

Dreams...a window to the soul, the subconscious' greatest desires...all unlocked in a realm created by the owner of the desires. If only that world were real. It's a lot more lucrative than THIS world. Oh well, one must keep moving forward, even when going backwards seems the better prospect. Up and at 'em Ekyt, you've probably got disciplinary action today.

Ekyt walked to the Hokage's office, trying to mask his injuries. Something told him that ratting out Neji was wrong. **Damn my conscience...** he thought viciously.

"I heard you had an interesting day yesterday...Shizune, give him a quick checkup while I talk to him." Tsunade was straight to the point this morning, and cheerful. That was almost unnerving to Ekyt, as Tsunade was usually as welcoming as Orochimaru first thing in the morning.

Shizune went to work on Ekyt, worried as usual. What she found was mildly disturbing. The CAUSE was incredibly disturbing. **He's not reckless...but he's still the most often-injured. And he resists care. This, though, really worries me. His tenketsu were nothing short of brutalized, it's amazing they healed themselves at all. I guess there's not question of WHO attacked...the WHY is the question...**

"Sarutobi-sensei and Iruka were up here this morning, telling me that you were defending your class from an attacker. They didn't say who, only that you proved you were the right choice to instruct them. Coming from those two, that is praise worth taking into consideration. So, I'd like to say, job well done! Now, who was it that attacked?" Tsunade had a feeling Ekyt wouldn't rat out his attacker. By the look

on Shizune's face, Tsunade knew that Shizune knew who did it. So even if Ekyt took the proverbial 'high road', Tsunade would know.

"I...I'd rather not say, Lady Tsunade. I don't want to rat my attacker out..." Ekyt said, squirming as Shizune gently touched his back, checking the damage there.

Tsunade nodded. "I understand. I just want you to know that what you did was 100 percent the right thing. That...and I've already been told who conducted the attack. Your students came to me in tears last night, thinking that their teacher was going to die. They told me the whole story. And I want you to know, disciplinary action was taken. Or, it will be. I'm giving you the change to fight Neji. If you win, he's demoted to chunin, and you're promoted to chunin."

"I couldn't, Lady Fifth. I want the village to believe in me," Ekyt protested. "Ow! What the hell?!" Ekyt muttered.

"Sorry, it's a booster shot you're due for. You squirmed out of it once before. I had to give it to you while you weren't looking, or you would have wormed out of it again." Shizune was holding the empty syringe up as proof, wearing a smile.

"Funny thing about the village...word got out about your fight with Neji, defending those kids...Ekyt, they're ready to forgive you. But you HAVE to fight, and win. All the parents pestered me for discipline for Neji, and commendation for you. This is the one sure-fire way to settle the two of you down. And you and I both know you want that chunin vest. I'm tired of this black (custom-made when he gave up the rank) vest hanging in my office. It should be on you."

Ekyt ignored the comment; there was a more important one on his mind. "Naoto, how is he? If that bastard hurt him seriously..." Ekyt clenched a fist, angered by his inability to protect Naoto. **Another one who shows promise...he's just starting to settle down and listen up in class...**

"Naoto is fine. Just a couple tenketsu closed. He was one of the first to come here. True to form, and just as pig-headed as his instructor, he refused treatment until he had heard my decision on Neji. Now, this is your change. Are you going to take it?" Tsunade was frank, because she knew that Ekyt didn't need the pressure of compliments right now.

Ekyt thought back to yesterday, and the day before. How horrible his life had become. But if he had the people in his corner again...his life could turn around. **Those who haven't forgiven me yet never will...it's foolish to think I'll win EVERYONE over, no matter what. What matters are the people that never left my side...how did I not notice that? I've been blinded by my own rage, that's why. Well, it's time to give that up, and teach that smug jackass a lesson.**

"I'll do it, Lady Tsunade. When and where?"

Tsunade rocked back in her chair, arms behind her head. "At the stadium, in one hour. I figured you'd say 'yes', so I've got my match proctor and your opponent informed. This one...is yours. For once, you've got everyone in your corner. Consider this a B-ranked mission: I want that arrogant bastard taken down!"

Ekyt nodded, a look of determination in his eyes for the first time in a long time.

“I’ll be ready and waiting. I’ve only got one thing to do first...”

Naoto had once confided to Ekyt that he missed his friends. Being a loner, Ekyt understood that. Okkuu and Yuuka were Naoto’s friends, and Iruka was Naoto’s only supporter. Naoto’s clan was hard on him, which is what made him so difficult to teach. But, somehow, his life had turned around. Right now, however, he felt pretty low, being taken down like that. Even if it WAS a genius jonin that had done it.

In a puff of smoke, Ekyt landed next to Naoto, who had been sitting in the academy.

“Ekyt-sempai! You’re alright!” Naoto exclaimed. He tried to get up, but it hurt a lot. Ekyt shook his head.

“You don’t have to get up. And, I’m fine. How are you?”

Naoto looked away. “I’m hurting...my body, but my mind, too. ONE attack took me down, what kind of ninja will I be?”

Ekyt HAD to smirk. “You sound like me. You’ll be a fine ninja, Naoto. You’ve improved so much, you only narrowly missed taking the exams this time around. But, listen, I’m going to be fighting Neji. I wanted to make sure you were okay. That doesn’t mean I’ll take it easy on him, though.”

Naoto smiled, the first time Ekyt had seen him really do so. The boy was a pain, but he had a good heart. He just needed direction, and now he found it.

“How did you get up yesterday? Lady Tsunade said that all your tenketsu were closed, and that you could have died. How did you fight after that?” Naoto wanted to know.

“I HAD to get up. When I give my word, I want it to be truthful. I want it to mean something. If I let my students get hurt, I’d be a lousy teacher. So I didn’t have a choice. I HAD to get up. I would have gotten up a hundred times.”

Naoto couldn’t understand that. He had never had to protect something like that. But he got the feeling it was something he would understand someday.

“So what are you doing here, of all places? It used to be I had to CHASE you into class, now you’re sitting here on your own time?”

“I wanted to go to the stadium, but it hurts too much, so I stayed here. My parents won’t do anything about it, they’re too busy fighting. They’re always so busy fighting about me, they forget I exist. It’s like they care too much, AND not enough. I hate it!”

Ekyt didn’t say much. Instead, he ducked down. “Climb up on my shoulders. The least I can do is get

you to the stadium. By the way, anything special you want me to do to Neji?" Ekyt asked, as his stunned student clambered up onto his shoulders.

"Nope, just beat his sorry @\$!" Naoto declared.

Ekyt couldn't help but smile once more. "Will do. Hang on. You've never done a body-flicker jutsu before, have you? Don't get freaked out..."

"YAH!" Came Naoto's cry as Ekyt hit top speed within a second, blasting to the entrance of the stadium.

The last time Ekyt had entered the stadium, he had been hated. This time, it was the opposite. Well, sort of. Anyone with kids in his class cheered with a loud roar, sitting with Naruto, Sakura, and the others. The rest stared indifferently, not particularly LIKING either combatant, just looking forward to a good fight. One that this promised to be. Graduating within two years of each other, Ekyt and Neji were the two top genin at one point. Ekyt was STILL the top genin, while Neji was a mid-level jonin. Ekyt's specialty was technically genjutsu, but he could work with almost anything. Neji's specialty was hand to hand combat. Ekyt was average height and slender; Neji was tall and more muscular. No one had a clear-cut advantage. Ekyt had two, less-established kekkai genkai's, while Neji had one, powerful, proven kekkai genkai. The only major distinction was rank. That was also what was on the line.

The proctor was Hayate Gekko, who nodded to Ekyt when he walked in. On the other side of the field, Neji was waiting.

"So, you came. You heal fast, I'll give you that much. And you carried your little rodent of a student into the stadium, like the Olympic Torch. How special. When this fight ends, you will understand that you will not defeat me, and that you'd better get used to life as a genin, and-"

"Shut up. You know, you're great with long-winded lectures that go nowhere. You're a self-serving prick, and irritating jackass that was lucky enough to be given a kekkai genkai that makes people fear you. If you think that I'm afraid of you, that your usual scare tactics are going to work with me, they're not. Do you remember when Naruto defeated you? At the chunin exams? I'm just as much of an underdog as Naruto was. Naruto already proved that your 'destiny' theory is wrong. I'm going to add to that theory and prove that you're not the threat you think you are. You've let the years make you bitter, Neji. But today- today is going to make you ache. Physical pain, AND mental pain. Because you'll understand that you're not as great as you've always told everyone. You're just a product of the "Big Lie" theory. You tell outrageous stories of your power, and we all believe it and shake with fear. That might have worked before, but it won't work on me. I've stared scarier people than you in the eyes and not backed down. So, I'm telling you now: I think you're full of crap, and I'm going to beat it out of you until you respect my students, and until you realize that attacking them was a mistake." Ekyt stopped for a moment, straightening his headband and vest.

“Well, enough of that. Did you like my speech? That’s what YOU sound like, droning on and on about destiny. Enough talk- let’s settle this the way Lady Fifth dictated.”

“Hmph. Your funeral...perhaps literally,” Neji replied, activating his Byakugan and taking up his stance.

Just as Tsunade was leaving, Kakashi appeared in her office in his usual manner.

“You’re late, Kakashi. Not that I’m surprised,” Tsunade added. “I’m just on my way to the stadium for the fight.”

“Sorry, Lady Tsunade. What I found might interest you, though...”

(ONE EXPLANATION LATER)

“So, the Akatsuki and Orochimaru are in league...that means that the attack on Tanzaku town wasn’t a coincidence meeting with Itachi and Orochimaru...it also means big trouble. And, that this new group they’ve formed is subcontracting...” Tsunade didn’t like the sound of this at all.

“It gets more interesting. They believe Ekyt is dead. I’ve been thinking...after his fight, we can use that to our advantage, with a little work. But he needs to be with my group for this plan to work. And, he’ll need a special elixir from you...”

“We’ll discuss it later. For now, that fight is about to get going. Let’s go!”

Ekyt ran straight towards Neji. Everyone knew that was a suicide move.

“Rotation!” Neji spun rapidly, releasing a cocoon of chakra that hit Ekyt squarely. POOF! Shadow clone. Just as Neji stopped rotating, he sensed movement. He shifted his weight and struck, this time hitting a log.

“OOF!” Neji reeled as he was punched in the face. As he turned to retaliate, he saw Ekyt was gone.

“Hope my clone kept you entertained...you had insulted my clan, the Kaguya. I think you need a demonstration of THAT blood.” Ekyt had painted the red lines on the sides of his eyes, using the mixture Kimimaro had given him. Ekyt felt his thought process and chakra change. He was more aggressive now.

“Now let’s see what you think of my clan!” Ekyt ran forward, this time toting a bone from his shoulder. Neji parried his first strike with the bone, then aimed a palm strike at Ekyt’s chest. Ekyt stepped to the side and tried to bring the pommel of the bone down across Neji’s hand. Neji retracted his hand quickly, narrowly avoiding the strike. He aimed another palm strike at Ekyt’s face. That was a ‘pacifier’ meant

to distract Ekyt from the TRUE strike, a palm to the stomach. Ekyt used a crescent kick to knock both strikes aside, then slashed his foot down. Neji backed up, with another near miss. Ekyt followed him with a shuffle-step and struck with the bone at chest-height. Neji ducked that strike and came in with another palm. This one hit Ekyt's chest, closing one tenketsu. But Ekyt's kick, which he had thrown immediately after the bone strike, hit Neji on the pressure point on the inside of his calves. The first blows had been struck simultaneously.

The fight was just beginning, but it was already becoming a classic. The two combatants shared one thought as they continued to block, dodge, perry, and strike:

He's good...

NEXT ISSUE: THE FIGHT CONTINUES! KAGUYA VS HYUUGA! NAOTO AND EKYT'S TEAM CHEER HIM ON, WHILE KAKASHI OUTLINES HIS IDEA TO TSUNADE! DON'T MISS IT!

62 - The Jonin in Genin's Clothing!

Even though Ekyt was using the Kaguya blood, that didn't mean he couldn't use other attacks. Or even his other kekkaigenkai. Against Neji, Ekyt suspected he'd need them all.

His chakra pool runs deep. My best bet is to make him burn that chakra off. My clone helped. I wonder...if I put a temporary seal on those annoying eyes of his...that might just do it! He can't hit my tenketsu if he can't SEE them...his style is almost useless without the Byakugan. And it means that I could attack normally, he'd have to rely on normal senses. I've just got to get close enough to do it...

"Why did you decide to attack me?" Ekyt asked. It was a valid question. Why DID Neji attack for no reason/

"You disobeyed a direct order, and refused to acknowledge my title," Neji replied, aiming for two strikes at the chest. Ekyt swept them away with the blunt end of the bone, then made a cut at Neji's stomach, forcing Neji to move. Ekyt was right with him, though, aiming for a shuffle side kick, then a high round house kick, Neji blocked the kick by jamming his arm under the kick, and then ducking under the leg. He and Ekyt simultaneously punched/palmed. Both strikes hit, and each was laced with chakra, creating something of a light show. But to Neji, something felt off.

"You didn't give me a direct order. And you haven't earned the title of sensei. As I explained yesterday. Do you have some resentment against me? Or is it the pure pain of knowing fate ISN'T on your side?" Ekyt questioned flatly. With Neji still holding his leg, Ekyt jumped and kicked at Neji's head with his free leg. When Neji moved aside, that broke his grip, and left Ekyt in place for a hook kick. The kick tagged the back of Neji's head. Ekyt used that to pull Neji in for a quick strike. Neji, however, had enough of this. He used his Rotation Jutsu. POOF! He had just nailed a shadow clone.

"What the hell? I knew something was off! Where's the real you?!"

Ekyt cursed under his breath; he wasn't done yet. That clone DID burn up Neji's chakra pretty good, though. **If I'm right...the "release" technique for genjutsu forces someone to halt the chakra flow to their brain. In effect, their senses are halted as well. Which would give me a split-second opening while Neji's Byakugan would be down. That's not enough time...But it's enough to MAKE the time, if I do this correctly.**

"Dance of the Clematis: Vine!" Ekyt pulled out his spine, using it as a whip. Neji began his rotation. The calcium-hardened bone didn't break, but it didn't penetrate the chakra cocoon Neji was hiding in, either. Undeterred, Ekyt used his next jutsu, one he had used when he fought Neji once before.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!" Four Shadow Clones of Ekyt all used his signature fire

jutsu. The flames couldn't touch Neji in his dome, but they DID ruin his vision. The Byakugan didn't hold up so well under a lot of heat. It decreased the vision. The only other thing Ekyt knew for sure was that Neji had a blind spot at the back of his neck. The last time Ekyt had fought him, he had made the mistake of attacking that blind spot. Neji had buried him with a solid attack because he saw it coming. This time, that's exactly what Ekyt was counting on.

"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!" Ekyt called. Neji had a choice: Either let the genjutsu hit him, or stop his rotation and release it. He chose to release it, jumping over the fire attacks as he did so.

"Bringer of Darkness Technique!" Ekyt shouted just as Neji used the release ability. Ekyt had succeeded in part one of his plan: Neji was blinded. But it wouldn't last long. A jutsu like that ate up a ton of chakra. This was where the other half of Ekyt's strategy came into play. Ekyt ended his Shadow Clone Jutsu, save for one other clone. That one clone was going to be important, however.

Neji was near panic. No one had done this to him before! **Blinded? Impossible! I can't release the jutsu if I rotate. And even without rotation, this is a Hokage's jutsu, it's nearly impossible to break! So I have to anticipate...what would Ekyt do? What did he do before? My blind spot, at the back of my neck! He'll strike there...he always says he's not a killer, but in the classroom the other day, he said he'd "make sure my students were never hurt by you again." He said he'd do anything- including kill me? Regardless, I know where he's aiming. And I can still hear. Here he comes...10 meters...5 meters...2 meters...NOW!**

Neji spun around and blasted Ekyt in the stomach. POOF! Shadow Clone! That was distraction enough for Ekyt to get in front of Neji. Neji had only heard one set of footsteps, and Ekyt was silent. Until now:

"Five Elements: Seal!"

Ekyt could hear the crowd gasp in shock as Ekyt put both hands over Neji's eyes. The Five Elements Seal was what Ekyt had used against Itachi's Sharingan. Now, he had sealed Neji's Byakugan in BOTH eyes. Knowing what was next, Ekyt leapt up, ending his "Bringer of Darkness" genjutsu. He didn't jump fast enough, as Neji's rotation caught his leg and hurled him across the stadium. Fortunately, he righted himself and skidded several meters in the dirt on one knee, panting from the effort all that had taken.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?! MY EYES! I'LL KILL YOU!" Neji shouted, pawing at his eyes when his Byakugan wouldn't work.

"With what? I just destroyed all of your attacks but one. I can't touch you, and you can't touch me. At least until your chakra runs out. THEN it's over. I can wait, Neji."

In one part of that, Ekyt was wrong. Neji still had his incredible speed, and he ran up to Ekyt surprisingly quick. Punch, elbow, knee, kick. Ekyt barely got his blocks up in time. Then Neji tried his Rotation again. Ekyt got hit again, this time across the stomach. Blood spurted from his mouth and stomach as he fell through the air. Suddenly, Neji was above him. Ekyt rolled to the side in mid-air as Neji's leg came crashing down. Ekyt seized Neji's hair and threw him, then landed on the ground himself, panting harder than before.

I need to end this...I need to be faster than he is, and I need to get past his rotation...My chakra's too low for anything elaborate, and he's faster than I anticipated. I thought he would stay true to his style and stay in one place, but he's forcing ME to move instead. Damn it!

Neji succeeding it hitting Ekyt again, this time bashing him in the stomach, three inches below his navel at his chi point, then following through with an uppercut that knocked Ekyt's teeth together with an audible "Click!"

"Get up! Now you're not facing the genius of the Hyuuga clan, you're facing MY OWN genius! You fool, how could you think yourself a match for me? Even without my Byakugan, you're still easy prey!"

That was when Ekyt heard it:

"Screw him, Ekyt-sempai! You can do it!" Naoto shouted. "You said you'd win, and you said you always keep your word!"

"C'mon Ekyt-kun!" Sakura shouted, backed up by Temari. Tenten was silent, then she joined in too!

"Sorry, Neji! Come on, Ekyt! Kick his @\$!" Tenten shouted. Then Lee. Then Naruto. Asuma, Kakashi, Sarutobi, all of them watching. Even Lady Tsunade.

Ekyt thought back to studying by himself on a rooftop, while the others were sitting on Lone Pine Hill, looking at the stars one night. That night, studying wasn't coming easy. Ekyt remembered feeling more alone than he ever had before. IT was as if he could SEE others, but couldn't interact with them. They lived in different, parallel worlds. And Ekyt, being Ekyt, didn't get his hopes up of ever being in that other world. But that night had left a mark on him. It wasn't just a female he longed for; Ekyt was a loner. Though he wouldn't have traded that, it would have been nice to feel as though he belonged. It had been a hard night for him. Under the star-light sky, Ekyt gazed by himself. He saw stars, and wondered what the big allure was; it's not like the stars were special. No comets or moons or anything. But the others talked and laughed and smiled. Ekyt took a wistful glance, then got back to his studying, becoming the dark silhouette against the black backdrop of the midnight sky.

"Do you give up?"

Hayate Gekko's voice brought Ekyt back to reality. Ekyt got up to one knee, shook his head, and gave his reply.

"Not now or ever." With that, Ekyt opened the first Gate of Chakra.

“Hah! Lee is a master of taijutsu using that very move, and you hope to beat me with it?!”

Ekyt opened the Second Gate, then the Third, for the first time in his life. Soon, he all but disappeared from Neji’s now-normal vision.

“Blue Flame Chakra: Activate!” NOW the barely-visible lines that were Ekyt were outlined with blue, and growing even fainter as the chakra made Ekyt even quicker.

“Rotation!” Neji countered.

“IT’S OVER!” Ekyt shouted through the pain. Right in front of Neji, Ekyt cocked his fist back.

“This is for my clan!” Punch!

“This is for my students!” Upper-cut!

“THIS is for ME!”

On the last strike, Ekyt’s hand caught Neji hard in the stomach, sending him into the air. Ekyt leapt up after him.

“Snapdragon Impact Flight!” (Formerly “Backward Konoha Snapdragon”)

Neji was dropped back-first onto the ground, his chakra exhausted. Ekyt landed on his feet, closing the gates and ending the Blue Flame Chakra’s activation. Hayate walked over and looked down into the deep crater Neji’s body had created. Neji wasn’t moving, aside from his eyelids flickering.

Ekyt was tense as all get-out until he heard it:

“This match is over. Ekyt Kaguya is the winner.” Hayate raised Ekyt’s arm. The crowd that was on Ekyt’s side cheered wildly, while the others rained garbage down on him. But Ekyt didn’t care. All the people he had seen stargazing that night were in his corner. Ekyt thanked Hayate, then walked over to the barricade. He leapt up into the seats where his friends were, and finally let a smile cross his face. The day was his. Ekyt had heard a lot, but Naoto’s comment meant the most:

“Ekyt-sempai, that’s the best fight I’ve ever seen.” It was a simple comment, but in this case, it was what Ekyt needed to hear. All the kids in his class readily agreed.

Sakura’s actions meant a lot to Ekyt, easy. A kiss on the forehead that turned his face a bright crimson hue might as well have been his nineteen birthdays rolled into one. It was a hell of a present.

Lady Tsunade’s gift was also precious. “If you return it this time, I’m going to neuter you, kid.” Tsunade handed Ekyt his (custom-made) black chunin vest.

That night, Ekyt was asked, several times, to explain his strategy, and how it had worked. The jonin who heard it excused themselves. Kakashi was among them, and he still had to tell Ekyt about his plan. But,

for now, he decided to let the young man enjoy his luck, not knowing how long it would last.

“He won’t be a chunin long, that’s for sure,” Asuma said around a puff of smoke.

“No? Think he’ll give the vest back again?” Kurenai questioned.

Asuma exhaled a ring of gray smoke. “No. I think he’ll be promoted to jonin.”

“Indeed. That was jonin-level combat.” Sarutobi intoned, exhaling smoke himself from his pipe. **Maybe even...legendary combat?**

“Kakashi, are you going to tell him your plan?” Gai asked. He had been furious at first, but then he heard what Neji did to deserve the beating, and had forgiven Ekyt.

Kakashi looked at Ekyt, who was currently blushing heavily, as Temari, Tenten, and Sakura all clustered around him. They knew what they were doing; it was fun- Color-changing Ekyt!

“Not tonight, Gai. Tomorrow. Tonight, he’s finally getting what he deserves. I’m not going to be the one to end it. He’ll jump right into the mission. He needs rest, and he needs the attention he’s getting now.”

“Couldn’t agree more. I’m surprised Ino hasn’t been after him yet,” Asuma muttered.

“Girls are fickle,” Kurenai said as Tsunade and Shizune joined the Jonin group.

“No kidding,” Asuma murmured with a wink.

“WHAT was that, Asuma? Am I boring you?” Kurenai asked, glaring at him. Shizune snickered, while Tsunade took a more violent approach.

“You’re a pig, Asuma! You’re lucky I’m in a good mood!”

“What? I was only agreeing,” Asuma shot back. This time, everyone laughed.

It was a good day in Konoha. In Mudville, it might have been Mighty Casey who struck out, but in the Leaf Village, it was “Mighty Neji” who struck out.

NEXT ISSUE: LIFE AS A CHUNIN! KAKASHI’S PLAN INTO ACTION! AND AN UPDATE FROM PUPPVILLE: HOLLY AND PAKKUN’S PUPPIES START TO LEARN THE TRICKS OF THE NINJA TRADE!

63 - Side Trip To Sunagakure (Part 1)

“Pakkun...thank you for helping give my life meaning.” Holly was still recovering from having six puppies. The little ones were crawling around now, panting and playing, though their eyes were still closed. Only one had opened it’s eyes, and it was early. This one had Holly’s fur and face, but Pakkun’s ears. It was the one that Ekyt had held, in his darkest hour. Holly liked to think that this little bundle of joy had helped make her owner’s life a little brighter. Then the little puppy had pissed on his vest, and while that incredibly funny in and of itself, the timing couldn’t have been worse.

“It was no problem, Hol’. I seem to recall enjoying myself, too. Great looking bunch o’ pups, aren’t they?” One puppy had wandered into Pakkun side, falling to the floor and whimpering. Pakkun picked it up by the scruff of it’s neck and put it on it’s paws.

“I never pictured you as the fatherly type, Pakkun. Are you getting soft?” Holly joked, cocking her head and giving Pakkun a nudge with her muzzle.

“No, no...I just never pictured myself as a father. Not that I’m not enjoying it. Kakashi doesn’t need me much these days, that was always my biggest worry. Not being there. But, since I don’t have to worry, I’ll enjoy this.”

“My owner doesn’t summon me much, either. He’s getting into more dangerous combat, and he’s worried about me getting hurt. He’s right. That, or my constant doging got to him. Either way, I DO still get to deliver messages. I’m assuming I get maternity leave...”

Holly’s eyes brightened suddenly. “Hey, we should tell my owner about how these puppies came about! It’ll be hilarious, the kid is probably a card-carrying member of the V club!”

“Only because he’s too good to sack with just anyone, he probably could’ve have Ino with a minimum of effort.” Pakkun added with a stretch. He and Holly laughed, then Pakkun added a serious “He’s a good kid, he’ll find that girl someday.”

“I hope so. He denies it, but I’ve seen him a little choked up more than once...it’s not healthy. Although, now that’s he’s been promoted, maybe he’ll cheer up, and even get a little confidence.” Holly would NEVER tell Ekyt, but she actually cared about him. It was just her nature to treat him like crap, but he knew that, so they were fine. In reality, it was Ekyt’s shyness that had helped her get Pakkun’s attention in the first place. So, in a way, she had Ekyt to thank for her life getting meaning again.

Once again, the little puppy with it’s eyes open tore across the room. This time it was playing fetch by itself, using it’s tail to throw a senbon, then retrieving it. Pakkun and Holly observed this, before concluding that this puppy deserved a special owner.

“I think my kid could use that one...there’s something different about her...” Holly stretched inside her basket, then got up, looking at the puppy from different angles.

“That one is a fighting type, I can tell. She’ll be a handful, but tough and smart as they come,” Pakkun informed Holly in his distinctive drawl.

“That she will. But somehow, my kid will figure her out.” Holly tested her legs again. She was still a little wobbly after giving birth, but seemed more or less okay.

“THAT I doubt. He’ll harness her combat skills, but he’ll never figure her out. She IS a girl, after all,” Pakkun replied with a smirk.

“Good point. Well, let’s hope that enough. He’ll give her love. He put up with me, after all...”

POOF!

“Lookin’ good kid!” Tsunade commented. “Maybe I should dismiss those two clowns I have as aides and keep you!”

Ekyt, wearing his new chunin vest, blushed, true to form. “I’m supposed to unseal Neji’s eyes, right?” Ekyt would be lying if he said he wasn’t apprehensive about it.

I just made this guy swallow a TON of ego. He’s going to be angry, and the second I unseal his eyes, he’ll try attacking...Not least of all because I got him demoted. Well, I’m not feeling guilty about it, the prick deserved it and more!

Tsunade nodded. She, Shizune, and Sakura got up from their respective seats and nodded for Ekyt to follow. Ekyt kind of smiled; this was nice, finally feeling like he belonged somewhat. Although, Anko Mitarashi had come on a little strong, with her drunken talk of ‘yobai’ (yobai meaning ‘to have sex’, which Ekyt politely declined just before Anko passed out. Anko was attractive, sure, but Ekyt wasn’t like that. The other kunoichi cracked up at the slight bloody nose he received). The party was an interesting one. Ekyt didn’t even WANT a party, but it was kind of forced on him. Ichiraku ramen, Akakomadori sake, Amiarasu dumplings, and even some namachus (Light beer). Then, of course, Naruto and his celebratory “Harem Jutsu”. Somehow, he used the Harem Jutsu, but had all the girls wearing open chunin vests. It was hilarious to everyone but Ekyt, who was only semi-conscious after the nosebleed.

“Back to the problem- yes, heal his eyes. Also, I need you to take that field trip to Sunagakure with your class, and escort Kankuro back home. (Kankuro was injured and attacked a few chapters back) Also, we have some questions for Kankuro, and they concern you. Some new evidence about your house...but, for now, unseal Neji’s eyes,” Tsunade added the last part as if it was an afterthought. She was furious with Neji, and was tempted to have Ekyt leave his eyes sealed. But, no matter the case, Gai needed it’s team member back. Only they would be getting a chunin instead of a jonin back, as Ekyt’s win assured Neji’s demotion, as well as his own promotion.

Neji sat on the cold steel table, looking out through the window.

Just like when Naruto Uzumaki defeated me at the chunin exams...this was a humbling loss...but a necessary one. Fighting for a purpose makes one more focused and determined. Even smarter. And Ekyt proved that. He also showed me that I can't rely on my Byakugan alone anymore. All the same, I'll be glad to have it back...

Ekyt walked in first. Neji looked up, then looked away.

"Before you unseal my eyes...I believe you were correct...and I apologize if your student was hurt...My fame went to my head."

Ekyt didn't know what to say; Neji had said it all FOR him! But, all the same, Ekyt was grateful for the apology.

"He's fine, so no harm, no foul." Ekyt summoned his chakra, and undid the seal across Neji's eyes.

"That's that. Now, you said something about Kankuro?" Ekyt questioned. Tsunade immediately turned more serious.

"Yes. Come with me."

Kankuro sat up, painting his face for the first time since he had been attacked. After nearly a month of daily treatments, he was ambulatory. The only upside was that while he was laid up in bed, he got the Crow working to perfection, and polished it, keeping it in tip-top shape.

Time to go home...I've gotta say, I had the Leaf Village figured all wrong. They've got a strong crop of Ninjas, and they're hospitable, even to me. They aren't charging me for all this treatment, and I'm being escorted home. Good deal!

Kankuro looked up as Tsunade walked in, followed by her assistants and Ekyt.

"Kankuro, do you still have the item we discussed? After you were attacked?"

"Yeah, sure, I've got it right here," Kankuro informed Tsunade, holding out the piece of cloth he had found.

Sheesh, she sure was uptight about that piece of cloth...wonder why? And what's Ekyt got to do with it, anyway?

"Does this look familiar?" Tsunade held out a different piece of cloth.

"Yeah...yeah, part of the same shirt or something? Where'd it come from?" Kankuro wanted to know.

"The same people who destroyed Ekyt's house. Kakashi overhead them, and knows where they were

last scene. AND where they were headed. Which is going to make this all the easier. Ekyt, a moment, please. Sakura, Shizune, help Kankuro pack, and give him one last check-up and treatment.”

Outside Kankuro’s room, Tsunade had a short mission briefing with Ekyt.

“Take your class to Sunagakure. You’ll be accompanied by Kankuro. He is in no condition to fight. Secondly, you’ll also have Kiba and Akamaru. This cloth is more than enough to help Akamaru get the sent of the two crooks. I want you to bring them back here for questioning. But, should it come to it- kill them, without hesitation. They’re in league with the Akatsuki and Orochimaru, and we can’t afford to let them escape. Now, your kids are going to be unaware of this, and if possible, KEEP them unaware of what’s happening. This is an A-ranked mission. For two chunin, it should be difficult, but entirely possible. Lastly, if the Akatsuki themselves show, or Orochimaru, it’s up to you- and only you- to keep them at bay while the kids, Kiba, and Kankuro escape. ANBU won’t be far behind once you’ve engaged them. Do you understand?”

“I do, Lady Fifth. I’ve got an hour before class starts...do you know where I could find Kakashi-sensei at this time of day?”

Tsunade thought for a moment. “You might try the Memorial Stone. But don’t expect him to be in a mood to train you. Oh, and if you DO find him, give him this scroll, will you?”

“Certainly, Lady Tsunade. And I think I can persuade him. Oh, by the way, from the party last night, I know you were busy and couldn’t be there, but I managed to keep this away from those animals. It’s just a little something as a thanks for giving me the opportunity to get promoted. Let me grab it...” Ekyt began to rummage around in a summoning scroll after he paid the blood tribute.

“You didn’t have to do that! You’re such a kiss-@\$\$!” Tsunade joked with a chuckle.

“I’m a kiss-@\$\$ who does his homework about what his superiors like...Here you are. Don’t tell Shizune-sensei you got it from me, she’ll kill me. You might not want to tell her at all...” Ekyt held out a wooden cask. There was no mistaking the smell, but the label on the cask said it all:

Akakomadori sake
Special Brew
Aged: 20 years

“WHERE did you get that?! I’ve been trying to get a hold of that for years!” Tsunade almost shouted, grabbing the cask, nearly breaking it with excitement.

“It was a thanks from Tanzaku town. Anyway, I’ve got to go. Enjoy!” Ekyt disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving Tsunade to fondly kiss the cask of the finest brew available.

“I need to make him a jonin! If he gets me a Pachinko machine for the Hokage mansion, I’ll make him a legend!”

Kakashi looked silently at the Memorial Stone, remembering his friends. His comrades...

Obito...I wish I could have saved your life. Your eye has saved mine so many times...and Rin...I wish I knew where you were. Maybe I don't have it in me to believe you've died, but I'm SURE you're alive somewhere...I never returned your affection, did I? It's all thanks to your brilliant medical work that I've even become "Sharingan Kakashi" or "The Copy Ninja"...And all of you who died fighting the nine-tailed fox...all heroes...and, I miss you...Dad...

Kakashi turned to walk away from the stone just as Ekyt walked up. They both stared at the stone for a couple minutes. Ekyt was silently paying tribute to the heroes, while Kakashi was trying to let his thoughts of his friend slip away. After a few minutes, both of them walked away.

"Kakashi-sensei...I, er...don't ask how I got this. But, I wanted you to have it. And I was hoping for your help..." Ekyt began, holding out a plain brown package.

"I'm not really in the mood for traini-..." Kakashi stopped dead as he unwrapped the package. "Th-this is...it can't be!"

"The latest in the *Makeout* series. "Makeout Unlikely". Master Jiraiya seemed to think I needed a copy. And, well, you've read the others in the series so much, you'll probably enjoy it more than me. I wonder why Master Jiraiya wanted me to get a copy so bad...Oh, yeah, it's autographed."

Sensei doesn't need to know I've still got a copy. Damn that Jiraiya. If anyone else figures out that this was based on my affection for Sakura...

Kakashi read the first page, and immediately broke into a grin. "This sounds familiar. I quote from the jacket: "The story of a clueless boy and a beautiful kunoichi. Cursed with a fear of kunoichi, Kissaki is nonetheless enthralled by them. One in particular, a pink-haired kunoichi named "Tsuka". This is the enthralling tale of boy meets girl, but boy is completely out of his element, until the girl teaches him how to..." Well, you get the picture. Is he paying you to be the star for this book? And does Sakura know?"

Ekyt knew the ribbing was coming. "No. But maybe YOU can help me, sensei. One of my jutsu, the Dragon's Immortal Circle, is imperfect. It's similar to the Rasengan and the Chidori. I was hoping you could teach me the theory behind the Chidori, so I could fix my jutsu."

Kakashi smiled. "Of course. See me after you get through teaching today. My team and I will be waiting. And...thanks for the book!"

Ekyt shook his head. **Master Jiraiya owes me for this...maybe I can blackmail him into teaching me the theory of the Rasengan. Reading it in the Fourth's scroll and seeing it, and performing the steps are different things...**

...I still can't believe he used me as "Kissaki" in that pervy novel of his...If Sakura ever finds out, she'll murder Master Jiraiya...Oh well, she doesn't read this smut, her and I are two upstanding

individuals, we don't need to resort to this dirt!

Boy, that would sound a LOT more convincing if I wasn't involved in the book's creation ^^'

That Jiraiya just won't take "No" for an answer. Threatening to tell Sakura how I felt was low, but then threatening to SPY on her...well, at least I protected HER integrity. My own is shot to hell, that's for sure.

64 - Sidetrip to Sunagakure (Part 2)

Ekyt's teaching that day was all about survival and camoflage. It was all basic, and pretty boring until Ekyt explained WHY they were learning this.

"Field trip to Sunagakure...I know, I promised it a month ago, but there was a hitch in my scheme, so to speak. Such as being near death twice, among other things. Now, before we go, there are two things you need to know: First, I'm going to introduce you to the Kazekage, a personal friend of mine. Make sure to treat him the same respect as your treat Lady Fifth. Second: I want all of you to stay together. And, believe me, this isn't something I would do under normal circumstances, but considering that we're traveling a good distance without the Body Flicker Jutsu, I'm going to pass out a kunai to all of you. It is **ONLY FOR SELF DEFENSE REASONS**. If you play with it, you don't get to keep it. As it is, your parents are apprehensive about this trip you're taking. But, I know I can trust all of you to behave. Now, you'll have a couple hours to get ready to leave after class today. Bring only a backpack each. It's only an overnight trip, so only pack the necessities. And that's just about it. You're free to go, no homework today!"

The class walked out, admiring their kunai knives and the holster that came with it.

"Something's up..." Naoto muttered to Tora, looking at the dagger, then up to his heavy-set friend.

"What do you mean?" Tora asked. "Ekyt-sensei didn't do anything out of the ordinary..." Tora wracked his brain his brain, trying to think of what Naoto could mean.

"He gave us weapons, for starters! Secondly, he said "self defense reasons". Whenever we got to train with knives, it was "only for survival reasons."

"Same thing," Tora replied dismissively. But Naoto was stubborn.

"No, they're not! "Self Defense" means 'getting attacked', "survival" means cutting branches, making traps, finding shelter. Something's up with this trip. He didn't even teach us Sunagakure history. You can't tell me THAT is something he'd pass up normally! And no homework? Before a field trip like this?"

"You know, you're right. I wonder what Ekyt-sensei knows that we don't. Whatever it is, he's protecting us, we'll be fine. You saw what he did to that Neji guy with AND without chakra..."

"You're missing the point, Tora! SOMETHING is going on. My parents always talk about another ninja war...what if that's it? And the Hidden Leaf needs more Shinobi to fight the war, so we're getting combat training!" Naoto was nearly hysterical. He found he liked the prospect of war.

Tora shook his head, his black mop of hair falling in his eyes. "No way, that's not it. We just had a ninja war, and they didn't recruit anyone else. Besides, what good would we be? And don't say 'bait', because that would NEVER happen!"

Naoto admitted Tora had a point. "I guess you're right about that...but there's still something weird going on..."

"I guess we just have to trust Ekyt-sensei," Tora suggested, hoping that would end the conversation. Tora was heavysset, nervous, and critical of his abilities. He was also incredibly quick, especially for a kid his size. Unlike Chouji Akimichi, who he was often compared to, Tora was very quick, and between him and Naoto, the brains of the operation at times, but more often the brawn.

"Trust me? On what?"

Naoto and Tora froze. Ekyt-sensei walked around to the front of them.

"Doing some planning, boys?"

"NO SIR!" Both practically yelled.

"Looked that way to me...huh. I guess I'll have to...trust you." Ekyt said with a smile, seeing nervous sweat form on the two nine year old's faces. "So, what are you two hiding? Spill it."

The boys looked at each other nervously. Ekyt knew one would rat the other out, if pressured. So he just took his time and let them sweat, just as his senseis had done to him.

"We were wondering about the trip, and why we got kunai, sensei," Naoto finally answered glumly.

"Oh, is that all? I thought you were planning some prank on me! The knives are for self-defense. We ARE headed to another country. Best to be prepared, right? And it's a pretty long trip without the Body Flicker Jutsu. Besides, you know self-defense. It's that, but with a knife. You two are getting near the top of the class, so I'm counting on both of you to make sure everyone is careful with the knives. Alright?"

The two boys nodded stupidly. Tora's gray shirt was stained with sweat by now, while Naoto's long hair was bristled, as if there was a chill in the air.

"Good. See you guys later." Ekyt disappeared. He had a meeting with Kakashi and his team.

Ekyt arrived at the training field. To his surprise, Team Kakashi, including Kakashi (Who was notorious for being late) was there already.

"Ah, great book, Ekyt!" Kakashi declared. Ekyt immediately turned red.

"I'm glad you like it, sensei. Master Jiraiya insisted I pass it on to you right away." **Don't do this,**

Kakashi, c'mon, I'm begging you!

"Hmm...Naruto, didn't you say you had written one for Jiraiya before? What do you think of this one?" Kakashi offered his book to Naruto.

"Looks like his normal boring crap, 'tebayo...Oh, this is interesting! Why does this sound so familiar?" Naruto shot Ekyt a wicked grin.

"Who knows? Maybe it was something you saw while you were *training with him*. I don't know where else you would have gotten that sense of familiarity..."

I WILL get the two of you for this. Oh man, if Sakura finds out that book is based on my feelings for her, she's going to put...THAT part of me in a sling! Oh man! Damn it, those two!

"Anyway, training. Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke, Yamato, and Sai, will all of you please inform Lady Tsunade that Ekyt and I will be training here? Then, go ahead and tackle your missions."

All five zipped away to do as Kakashi asked.

"Did you have them all here just so you could rib me?!" Ekyt demanded.

"Well, kinda. You're pretty, ahem, talented in this book..." Kakashi was still reading.

"I'm glad you think so, sensei. Now, about that theory..." Ekyt stressed the word 'theory' out, hoping to remind Kakashi of WHY they were here.

"Right, right, sorry. Now, the Raikiri, or in Sasuke's case, the Chidori, is built for a Sharingan user. While you COULD learn the jutsu, it wouldn't do you much good, because you wouldn't have any accuracy at the speed you need to go to make the attack effective. So, I'm going to show you the attack once, and I want you to point out what you notice about it. Alright?" Kakashi snapped his book shut and put it away, in his tool pouch.

"Sounds good."

Kakashi performed the jutsu against a long-dead oak tree. Ekyt watched from the side. If he had blinked, he would have missed the attack.

"It's fast...powerful...requires a lot of chakra...and you have to maintain a high level of speed. The Sharingan...it's used to keep 'tunnel vision' and adjust to the opponent's movement, right?"

"You've got it!" Kakashi replied. "Now, the speed is the key. That's what makes the attack so devastating. Now, you use fire, instead of pure chakra, correct? (Ekyt nods) Fire is the same way. You'll have to maintain a steady flow of charka to keep the flame alive, while focusing the chakra to your feet to make yourself run faster. Your chakra control is good, and we don't have time to work on your speed. But, that's the theory. Does it help any?"

"Yes. I need to move faster. Usually, I've used the jutsu stationary. But if I add the speed element you

talked about, that would allow for more destructive power. The way I designed the attack was to create a burn, rather than to outright kill. That's where the difference is." Ekyt mulled this over, making notes in his scroll, before looking up again. "When we have more time, I'd like to learn the Lightning Blade. Even if it's not useful to me, putting this theory into practice will make a world of difference. If you're willing to teach me, that is."

"It's not much of a chore teaching you. And you DID find me this excellent book...Alright, I'll teach you the jutsu. Who knows, maybe you'll luck out like me and get the Sharingan some day, and it'll be useful."

Ekyt smirked. "Well, maybe I'll just take Itachi Uchiha's. God knows I see him enough to...I should have ripped his eyes out, instead of sealing them...Next time, he'll be donating those eyes to the Leaf Village."

Kakashi stopped Ekyt once more. "Listen...I know you don't want to kill, not least of all in front of your kids, but remember: If you let them die without trying to stop it, you'll be labeled 'scum'."

"I'll do what it takes, sensei. As far as I'm concerned, they're MY kids when they're under my jurisdiction. I would protect them with my life if necessary...and I'll TAKE a life, too, should it come to that. That was partially why I asked you to train with me. I needed to better my best execution jutsu..."

Kankuro, Kiba, and all the kids were waiting when Ekyt landed with a 'poof' in front of them.

"Alright, remember what I said. Stay together. No playing with the knives. And...keep your guards up. You have a jonin (Kankuro) and two chunin protecting you, but no one is invincible. If something goes wrong, run to either Lady Tsunade or the Kazekage, whoever is closer, by village. Any questions?"

"I've got one, sensei! Why are we traveling at night?" Naoto asked shrewdly. **Hah! He's GOT to tell us something's up now!**

"Sunagakure is hot and windy during the day, not a pleasant combination, with hot sand blowing in your eyes. At night, the wind dies down, and the heat isn't so bad. You're going to get sand in your sandals, but that's the only irritation. Anything else?" Ekyt replied. **That kid is sharp. Not sharp enough to know that I'm on to his little game. Sorry, 'sensei' isn't talking.**

"Oh, okay. Thanks, sensei," Naoto muttered.

"Alright then. Let's see...Kiba, you take the lead, Kankuro and I will watch the sides, alright?"

"Sure thing. Okay Akamaru, find Sunagakure!" Of course, the REAL objective was to find the crooks that had caused all that destruction. Kankuro's poisoning, and the destruction of Ekyt's house. With a two scraps of material, and a little blood to follow, Akamaru was hot on the trail of the crooks. And that

trail led to Sunagakure.

Just out of site, Team Kakashi was watching. Kakashi, Yamato, and Sai were dressed in their ANBU gear. This was a precaution of Lady Tsunade's.

(IN TSUNADE'S OFFICE, 10 HOURS EARLIER)

"I want you to watch them. There's a good chance there criminals will have backup from Orochimaru, or the Akatsuki, or both. This is a great chance to get information. Ekyt is on a fact-finding mission. All of you are on a mission to take as many prisoners as you can, or eliminate any hostiles. With the Leaf in it's weakened state, we NEED information, and we have to risk going on the offensive for that. That's why I'm asking you to don the ANBU armor Kakashi, Yamato, and even you, Sai. Sakura, people are going to get hurt, they need to be healed. And you, Naruto...You've turned into quite the fighter. If worse come to worse...I want you to release the seal on the demon fox, up to three tails. Keep control of yourself at all times. This mission MUST succeed. If Ekyt can't capture or kill the crooks, it's up to the five of you to get involved. I trust Ekyt, but if push comes to shove, he'll make sure the kids get away before anything else. In this mission, it's necessary that we obtain SOME kind of information."

(BACK TO PRESENT)

"Kakashi-sempai, Ekyt isn't aware of us following his team?" Yamato questioned.

"He'll figure it out eventually. But no one's told him, no. But he had to have guessed we wouldn't have him go it alone."

Sai was drawing the landscape, which was admittedly nice. A setting sun, and the Sunagakure's outskirts were desert, so it could have been a work of art. Naruto decided to be an art critic.

"That's no so impressive, dattebayo," Naruto muttered, looking at the picture.

"You're right, Naruto-kun. Just like your dick isn't so impressive." Sai pulled his fake smile bit, irritating Naruto all the more.

By now, Sakura just found it hilarious.

"Something's happening up there! They're stopping...in the middle of a desert. I see at least one enemy for sure...two...three...four...five...there's ten in all. Come on, it's time to get involved. Sakura, you and Sai lead the kids away. Sasuke, you escort them. Yamato, you and I will help Kiba and Ekyt fight off the attack."

"Right. Here we go!"

NEXT ISSUE: THE OPPONENTS REVEAL THEMSELVES! AND: THE KAZEKAGE'S WRATH!

65 - A Village Too Far

“Kiba, Kankuro, take the kids to the Sand Village! Remember what we discussed! Go!” Ekyt shouted. Kankuro was the ranking member, but this was Ekyt’s mission, and he was following Tsunade’s direct orders.

The students screamed, some of them even running toward the battle, instead of away from it, before their mental compasses were straightened, and they ran the opposite direction.

“HA HA HA! RUN, YOU LITTLE WORMS!” came the shout of five robbers. All of them reared back and threw crude weapons at the kids, mostly sharpened spears.

“Dragon’s Encampment Wall!” Ekyt called out, creating a wall of fire that knocked the weapons away. A split-second later, he had dropped one of the robbers with the butt-end of his kunai, cracking him in the ribs. As another came to grab Ekyt, Ekyt shifted his weight and threw the barely-conscious robber into the oncoming attacker, then side-kicked them both. Seconds later, shuriken riddled his body. POOF! Replacement jutsu!

“Where’d he go?! Isn’t he dead?! That explosion should have killed him!” one robber exclaimed, looking around. The next thing he knew, Ekyt had smacked him on the pressure points between his shoulder blades, knocking him out, then leapt away just in time as another crook aimed a sweep kick at him. While in the air, Ekyt was jumped, and grabbed around then neck. Ekyt jammed his elbow backward close to six times in two seconds, breaking the hold, then spun, rolling across the man’s body so that he could grab an arm and throw him to the ground.

The last robber, dressed differently from the others, was near the kids. **damn, I’ll never get him in time...wait, Kiba’s stopped them...what’s he doing?**

“NOW!” Kiba shouted. All the kids reared back and threw their kunai! About five struck the robber before he had to stop and start blocking. By then, Ekyt was already within feet of him.

“Dragon’s Immortal Circle!” The crackling ball of flame struck the robber in the right side. A hole the size of a baseball quickly grew just under his arm, while the robber’s clothes burned to a crisp, soon followed by his body. All but dead. The pain was so intense, the robber began to beg.

“Please, kill me! Please, the pain! God, it hurts! Please, I’m sorry, just kill me! PLEASE!” he begged Ekyt. It was eerie, having a charred mass cling to his pant leg, Ekyt thought. But Akamaru barked in a certain tone; this was the man who had attacked Kankuro and destroyed Ekyt’s house. NOW he had tried to threaten Ekyt’s kids. A mistake. For once, there was no mercy in Ekyt’s eyes.

“So, scum. You tried to kill my friend, with the puppet, didn’t you? -Kiba, take the kids away, they don’t need to see this...”

The kids saw Ekyt’s ANBU tattoo glow brightly, even through the dark material of his shirt. They suddenly shuddered; could this be the same Ekyt-sensei that was so kind to them? It seemed like a different person. He was cold, and scary.

Kiba nodded. “C’mon kids, let’s go meet the Kazekage. Ekyt will get your knives back to you. Good job back there.”

“Yeah. Hey, Sunagakure is famous for dumplings, and even chickenwings. C’mon, let’s go eat!” Kankuro declared. THAT succeeded in distracting the kids. But as the kids left, Kakashi’s team arrived. Ekyt didn’t acknowledge them.

“You tried to kill my friend, didn’t you?” Ekyt repeated his question.

“No, no!” The robber protested.

Ekyt kicked him swiftly on his burnt midsection to turn him on to his back. Then, taking a horribly burnt arm and pulling it back in a way nature never intended, Ekyt continued his questioning.

“Don’t lie to me, dirtbag! It’s insulting. Now, unless you start telling me EVERYTHING, and go along with these fine people (nods to Team Kakashi) quietly, I’m going to snap your char-broiled limbs off one by one. (Yanks on arm sharply) So DO NOT TEST ME!”

The man groaned his understanding. Ekyt hauled him to his feet and handed him over to Team Kakashi.

“He’s yours. Sorry I didn’t say hi, it would have killed the interrogation mood...” Ekyt muttered.

“Wow. And you say KUNOICHI are scary...” Sakura chimed in.

Ekyt bowed his head, as if in apology. “I saw a threat to those kids, and, well, I thought to what Lady Fifth told me (Team Kakashi has been briefed). That’s probably why he was alive. Wielding a knife and threatening a group of kids...oh, yeah, there’s those four over there. They’re all in league with this guy, who’s in league with the Akatsuki/Orochimaru alliance. Not what Lady Fifth asked for, but the best I can give her. This thing’s (indicates prisoner) partner has got to be one of them, no one got away from the fight. And, no casualties on our end.”

“Alright, sounds like mission accomplished. All the same, you don’t have a medic...Sakura, why don’t you stay the night and make sure no one’s injured? Kankuro was severely poisoned, and wasn’t aware of it until over an hour later.”

“Right! I’ll stay!” Sakura wasn’t sure she liked Kakashi’s tone. **It’s like he’s hiding something...or knows something I don’t...but all he’s done is read his stupid book...must be my imagination...**

Sakura turned on her heel and stood next to Ekyt.

“Well, let’s go before we get attacked again...hey, what’s wrong?” Sakura waved her hand in front of Ekyt’s face. That shook his out of his weird trance.

“Oh, sorry...right,” he said, heading toward the gates of Sunagakure.

Kakashi...him and that damn book! He’s trying to get Sakura to figure it out. Damn that Jiraiya! Threatening to peep her! That’s the only reason I agreed to this, so that perverted sannin would agree not to feast his eyes on her! Somehow, I don’t see her understanding that...

“Ekyt-kun, your face is all red...what are you thinking about?” Sakura looked over, putting a hand on Ekyt’s forehead to check for a fever.

“It’s nothing. I got a little worked up, I’ll be okay,” Ekyt assured Sakura.

That night, once more, Ekyt dreamt. But this time, the realm of his dreams was decidedly different...

*“Sakura...I...” Ekyt felt his courage failing him again. **No! You’ve come so close! You’ve got to tell her!***

*“Ekyt-kun? What’s wrong?” Sakura put a hand to Ekyt’s forehead. **No fever...then why is he so red?***

“Sakura...I...(damnit!)C-can I...? I really like you!” The words burst from Ekyt’s mouth like a gunshot. He had said it quietly, but with such passion behind the words that he might as well have yelled.

*“Huh? R-really?” Sakura stammered. **W-what does he mean?***

“I’ve...I’ve been in love with you for nearly three years now. I couldn’t say it. But I HAD to. Please, don’t feel guilty when you say no...” Ekyt cringed.

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t! I love you, too!” Sakura zipped forward and hugged Ekyt. “You couldn’t tell me? That’s so...cute!”

“You were always out of my league, and I didn’t want to make you unhappy, sensei.”

Sakura led Ekyt to the cherry blossom path. This early in the morning, no one would be here, as the park was closed. But Sakura had always dreamed of bringing her boyfriend here.

“Please...let me just...” Sakura slid Ekyt’s mask down, so it was around his neck.

I’d forgotten how handsome he looked without his mask...and I’ve always seen his eyes, but somehow, now, I see them differently. There’s so much love there.

“You really love me? How could you? I’ve got a big forehead, and...well, that’s the only thing that’s big...” Sakura muttered awkwardly.

“I’m not that shallow. You were the first to befriend me when I came to the Leaf Village. And you’ve patched me up more times than I can count after fights. All those times I meant to tell you...but I couldn’t. I felt like I would be a disappointment to you...that you could do better than me. And I didn’t want you to feel guilty when you told me I wasn’t good enough...”

Ekyt looked away shyly. “I think you’re the most beautiful kunoichi in the village, and easily the most intelligent. You just seemed so...wholesome and beautiful, like no girl I’d ever seen before. You didn’t complain about clothes, and you aren’t a ‘material girl’. You’re strong, beautiful, smart, and everything I’ve ever wanted in a girl.”

No one had ever told Sakura that before. Not even remotely CLOSE to that.

“A-all those times you fought in my place, and all those cuts that I healed...they were for me, weren’t they? To protect me?” Sakura asked.

Ekyt nodded, blushing even deeper. It had been such a hot day, Ekyt had pocketed his gloves. That was when he felt Sakura’s hand snake it’s way into his own, then close tightly.

“I...I never knew. I always thought you were cute, and brilliant. I didn’t think you’d have time for a girlfriend, with your studying. Otherwise I would have asked you...a long time ago...if you’d go out with me...” Sakura’s voice trailed off, but her green eyes looked hopefully up at Ekyt.

“I-I would love to! But, um, thing is, I’m completely clueless. That’s another reason I didn’t ask you out. I have no idea how to...court a kunoichi. Kunoichi scare the hell out of me. You’re part girl, part warrior. Warriors are deadly, and girls are the unknown...”

Sakura had to laugh despite the seriousness of his voice. “Well, I’ve, um, only seen a couple dating sims that Ino owns...never the...you know...but the dating. I’d say going to the park qualifies as a date.”

“Are you supposed to kiss on the first date?” Ekyt asked, suddenly aware he didn’t know if he possessed any kissing skills, and didn’t know any of the fine points.

“In the sims, they did...” Sakura said with a giggle, “But most girls don’t.”

Ekyt sighed with a combination of disappointment and relief.

“But I’m not most girls...” Sakura had suddenly pulled herself in closer to Ekyt. Ekyt was only a couple inches taller, so Sakura didn’t have to get up on her toes to reach him. She reached up, put one hand around his neck, and brought their heads together. Then their mouths met in a warm embrace. It lasted longer than most first kisses, and was a little more provocative, being that both giver and receiver were older, but it was still a first. Ekyt ran his hand through Sakura’s silky hair, then down her back lightly. He was actually copying her movements; he was as clueless as they came. After what felt like hours, but was only seconds, the two broke apart.

Sakura kept a grip on Ekyt's hand. "(giggle) I heard Asuma-sensei's advice to you..."

Ekyt went pale. "Oh...the cigarette thing? I don't do that..."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "No, that's a perv guy thing! I meant the "Once they kiss you, they own you" advice about girls. I want to assure you...that it's completely true. I guess you're mine, now."

Ekyt nodded stupidly. "I g-guess so. I don't object!" Ekyt bowed suddenly, as if apologizing.

Sakura giggled again, then patted Ekyt on the head. "It's okay, I was kidding. But if you're that willing, it's kind of a Haruno clan tradition...if you're okay with it..."

Ekyt nodded. He would have done anything at this point, and he was apparently living on something other than oxygen, because he hadn't breathed in about two minutes. It's funny how you work so hard to make your dreams come true. But, at the same time, a nagging voice tells you that 'it's only a dream', never an encouraging 'it can be a reality' accompanied with it. For Ekyt, a dream coming true might as well have been the world ending.

"Here, take this...I've got one just like it...it's kind of proof that you're 'taken'..." Sakura held out a kunai. It looked ordinary, except for the red grip tape. That, and the loop at the end of the kunai was white.

"The white part is a circle, the symbol of the Haruno clan. And the red part is the Haruno's clan's color. And it's the tradition that the Haruno clan member gives his or her boyfriend or girlfriend the knife. It's supposed to symbolize the union of two clans under the branch of the Hidden Leaf."

Of course, Ekyt woke up before the dream was over. But this time, it was by a rapping at his door. Wondering who would be bothering him at this hour of the morning, Ekyt was greeted by Gaara himself.

"Come with me...you need to be here for this..." Gaara offered no other explanation. Ekyt finished getting dressed and followed, his dream fresh in his mind. He held on to the warmth of the dream as long as he could, suddenly feeling that things were going to get cold.

Ekyt was right. On two Sand Village exam room tables, there was Kimimaro, his cousin, and on the other, Hayate Gekko, who had become a brother to Ekyt.

"What happened here?" Ekyt asked, trying to comprehend this.

"I don't know...There was only this note..."

Ekyt read it aloud. "Give yourself and the demon fox up, or more loved ones will suffer..." Ekyt crumpled the note in his fist. Then, he cursed.

"shoot! No more time for this screwing around! I'm going to find out who did this, and I'm going to torture them until their bodies are nothing but an empty husk holding an insane mind. THEN I'll

demolish their bodies...Dual Summoning Jutsu!"

Shuurai and Umisu were at Ekyt's sides.

"Umisu, please get Kakashi and his team back here! Shuurai, I want you to protect the Hidden Leaf Village until I can return myself. If anything goes wrong, send word with someone, anyone, anyTHING. This is either a trap for Naruto and I, or it's a trap to leave the Leaf Village defenseless..."

Ekyt looked down at Kimimaro and Hayate. Both incredibly talented, and both only barely alive. Sakura went to work on them, while the students were spread around the village to Shinobi family willing to watch them.

"The Akatsuki have gone too far...we need to eliminate them..." Gaara had appeared at Ekyt's side, and had been the one to supply the commentary.

"I agree...innocent people are getting hurt. It's got to be stopped, and now." Ekyt reached into his vest pocket and extracted what looked like cigarettes. Actually, they were the equivalent of chakra pills. After Ekyt had injured himself in a sparring match with Lee, and couldn't take the pills, he had talked with Asuma and Tsunade, and come up with what amounted to a healthy, 'chakra cigarette'. It had the same effects as the pill, and was being distributed. You had to be at least a genin to have them, but that was only to keep consistent with smoking laws. Ekyt would NEVER smoke anything that would harm his body. This, however, was what he needed, since he couldn't swallow pills without gagging.

"Then let's plan...our two Villages need to work together. It's our only hope against an Orochimaru-Akatsuki alliance. If they've gotten to one of yours (Hayate), my brother (Kankuro), and even gotten rid of one of their own (Kimimaro) it's obvious they're planning something big..."

NEXT ISSUE: THE SHUKAKU LIVES- WITHOUT GAARA! AND- THREE YEARS AGO- WHY THE AKATSUKI ARE AFTER EKYT! PLUS, SAKURA'S DREAMS!

66 - The Akatsuki's Plan: Shukaku Unleashed!

THREE YEARS AGO:

After a fierce battle, Itachi had found his genjutsu thrown off by the fresh genin in front of him. With Tsunade around, and others closing in, and his chakra so low, Itachi left, to report to the Akatsuki the new threat that was blooming:

Itachi outlined his battle with Ekyt to Pein.

“He’ll be strong someday. His second chakra is well developed, although he’s not aware of how to access it freely. It has to be forced out of him,” Itachi explained tonelessly.

“I see. Is he worth our time?” came the reply.

“He will be someday. He threw off my genjutsu. His chakra coils will have healed by now as well.”

“Well then...we’ll monitor the boy. When the time comes, we’ll make our move.”

BACK TO THE PRESENT!

“To start, we should evacuate Sunagakure of everyone. We can’t afford to be protecting others while fighting this battle ourselves.”

Ekyt was sitting at the chair opposite the Kazekage at the conference table in Sunagakure. The only other people in attendance were Baki, and Enma, the Monkey King. Enma was battle experienced, so he was valuable, and could back up what Ekyt said. A wind howled through the room, courtesy of the holes that served as windows.

Gaara looked to Baki, who looked ready to protest.

“I agree. We could send them all to the Leaf, where they can help defend your village, while the Akatsuki get their show down here. It’s the only plan that makes sense...” Gaara had thought about this, too. **I swore to protect these people...my people...if that means they’re safer in the arms of another, then I will give them the means to get to that other person, or village.**

“Baki, you and the others- Jonin, Chunin, Genin, guests- all of you, go to the Leaf Village. You will coordinate that, Baki. And you, Ekyt, you know your village best- call those who have fought the Akatsuki before, and will have to reservations about killing...”

“We can assume that most of the Akatsuki will come. Typically, Itachi Uchiha, Sasori, Deidara, and Kisame, those are the ones to show up. But in a case like this, I’d expect at least two others...that means we need at least three more, including, you, me, and Kakashi-sensei. Plus, a couple people to protect the medics...I’ve got a few people in mind. Let me confer with Enma-sama, and then, if you’ll allow me to use the messenger hawks, I’ll summon the help we need.”

At Gaara’s nod, Ekyt bowed out of the room and hurried, mentally ticking off in his mind who would make a good fighter against the Akatsuki. There was himself, Naruto, Kakashi, and Gaara. That made four, but they needed more. Sasuke? No, too temperamental when it came to Itachi. Neji- Ekyt hated to admit it, but yes. That made five. The rest needed to protect the Leaf Village.

That’s what Ekyt thought, until the Akatsuki threw in a variable.

“Ekyt-san! We cannot escape! The Akatsuki are here- and they’ve harnessed a demon!”

“WHAT?!” Ekyt said loudly, letting go of the messenger bird. It flew off, carrying his notes.

“The One-Tailed Shukaku...it’s been sealed inside one of the Akatsuki...it blocked our escape...we just got away in time...the others are too far away, they can’t get in without a distraction. Lord Kazekage needs to know your plans...”

Ekyt looked distant for a moment as he thought. Finally, he told Baki:

“Tell Lord Kazekage that I will face this demon. I’m the only one among us it hasn’t fought. Besides, those are my students. I’ve got a plan. Please tell Gaara-sama to protect the others, and leave the Shukaku to me. It won’t be long before the other Akatsuki start fighting, and we need the other fighters in place.”

“HA HA HA! FREE AGAIN! THIS BODY IS GREEEEAATTTTT!” The Shukaku stepped on a building, laughing as it crumbled.

“That’s enough!”

The Shukaku looked down to the single human shouting at it. It burst out laughing.

“Yeah? YA LITTLE PUNK?! YOU WANNA TRY ME ON FOR SIZE?! DO YA? BRING IT ON!!!”

“Have it your way, you one-tailed menace. Summoning Jutsu!”

Ekyt stood on Shuurai, facing off against the massive Shukaku.

“NOW THAT’S MORE LIKE IT!” The Shukaku rumbled.

Sarutobi and the other Leaf Villagers arrived. When Sarutobi looked up, he had to blink.
He looks...like the Fourth Hokage...Defending the innocent like that, even putting his own life at risk...With a demon such as the Shukakau, he may give his life, just as the Fourth did. He knows the Reaper Death Seal...That must be his plan! He's going to seal the Shukaku in his own corpse!

"Acid tongue Jutsu!" Ekyt called. He bit thumb and ran it down his tongue. Shuurai responded by leaping forward and biting the Shukaku hard, with venom-filled fangs. The Shukaku laughed.

"Hahaha! You loser! Is THAT all you can do, Ryouko Kaguya? IS THAT THE BEST YOU'VE GOT!"

"Far from it! Summoning Jutsu!" This time, it was Shuurai that appeared. He created a water encampment wall- but just above the Shukaku! SPLASH!

The Shukaku was wet now, making him like a sandcastle, ruined by the wave that would hit the beach, inevitably destroying it.

Too easy...no way that thing is done...I can't even get close enough to use the Fourth's Jutsu...Wait, what's that?

For a brief moment, Ekyt saw what he needed: the surrogate Jinchuuriki: Hidan. He was asleep. All Ekyt had to do was wake him up, and the Shukaku would be sealed inside Hidan again. The Reaper Death Seal wouldn't be necessary if Ekyt could do that.

But what's to stop him from attacking again? I can't believe it's come to this...

Suddenly, the left arm of the Shukaku reared back, then flung itself at Ekyt's class. There was no time to leap in the way himself, so Ekyt did the only thing left:

"First Gate: Open!"

Several things were happening at once:

Sasori, in desperation, threw his long, bony, spiked tail out to stop Ekyt. Sakura then belted him across the face, splintering the wooden shell he was in. Ekyt leapt over the tail, hitting the ground running.

"Second Gate: Open!" Ekyt shouted, moving faster.

Deidara sent birds toward Ekyt, and was then mowed down by Sai's hand-draw beasts. Ekyt simply outran the birds, as Deidara didn't have time to make quality ones, or faster ones.

Itachi Uchiha tried to get in the way himself, but was snared by Kakashi's "Headhunter Jutsu".

"Third Gate: Open!" Ekyt shouted. He was only a couple meters away from Hidan now...

Orochimaru tried to stab Ekyt with the Kusanagi, but Master Sarutobi's Adamantine Yoi thwarted his attempt. Ekyt kept running, the fire in his hand reaching it's zenith, and his speed reaching it's max.

The students recoiled in fear, while Baki, Kimimaro, and Hayate stepped in front of the arm, hoping to save the students.

“DRAGON’S IMMORTAL CIRCLE!”

The sand fell in front of the kids, harmlessly landing in their sandals.

The Akatsuki froze, as did their opposition. The unthinkable had become reality.

Ekyt Kaguya, a boy of 19, had saved the lives of thirty children. But in the process, he had taken a life. He swore he would never take a life, unless a certain circumstance was met:

Protecting someone else.

If one who is wicked is killed, then one hundred who are innocent are saved...at least, that’s what I’ve heard...

Ekyt’s hand was clear through Hidan, Ekyt’s elbow jammed at Hidan’s chest. On the other side, Ekyt’s hand was cut, but otherwise fine. From Hidan’s mouth came a steady trickle of blood, as the life left his eyes.

The Shukaku and its sand disappeared, forming a mark on Hidan’s forehead. It had been sealed away in a corpse.

Hidan was dead.

Ekyt withdrew his hand, looking at the blood dripping off it. A little was his own, but most of it belonged to the man he had just killed.

The first man I’ve ever truly killed...

There was silence. The Akatsuki’s biggest advantage was gone now. They had learned to harness the various demons they had taken. The first one had failed, and had cost them a life. But at Ekyt’s hands...it was unthinkable...

“You...how could you...when Itachi said you had promise, all those years ago...I never thought...you could kill...” Sasori managed, shocked at the site of Hidan’s corpse.

Ekyt, still facing away, his hand in place for the jutsu, spoke quietly.

“I never thought I could...until I had to. One dies, or thirty dies. Death is second nature to you. To me, life

is precious. Don't think I don't regret killing this man, not even for a minute. I'll regret it for the rest of my life. But I can live with regret...the guilt of thirty deaths...that I couldn't have lived with. I swore to protect those kids, and all who are special to me, no matter what the cost. Had it meant killing myself to stop you, I would have done so. But that doesn't matter. What DOES matter is that you have been defeated. Leave Sunagakure, and threaten no one as you go..."

Ekyt didn't close the Gates yet. In fact, he built up MORE fire. The Akatsuki made a hasty retreat, disbelieving they had been bested once again. As Deidara tried to pick up Hidan's corpse, Ekyt jammed a kunai through his hand.

"Leave. His corpse is not yours. Now, go. Keep the kunai, deliver it to your master, whoever he is. Tell him that none of his bodies are welcome in the Leaf Village, or it's allies. Now, leave."

Deidara left in a flash of smoke, still shocked, even too shocked to register the pain in his hand.

Ekyt let his hand fall, followed by his head.

"Is everyone alright?" Ekyt asked, choking back emotion.

"Yes, sensei..." they said as one, still surprised. They'd never seen someone die like that, least of all at the hands of their teacher.

"Good. Now, sit down. I want to teach you all a lesson. Something I've never been sure how to express before...until now...(Kids sit)...I want you to understand...killing someone isn't a decision to be taken lightly. I know all of you may be thinking of me as a murderer now. But please, try to understand, that if I hadn't killed that ONE man, all THIRTY of you would have died. All of you...mean something to me. That's why I want you to know: I killed because there was no choice left, no other option. I killed one person to save the lives of thirty others. I didn't kill in cold blood. No one should. I hope you can all find it in your hearts to forgive me..."

"Ekyt-sensei...you said you killed to protect us, didn't you?" Naoto asked quietly, approaching Ekyt.

"I did."

"Then why would we be mad. We're kids, but we're not stupid. Maybe we give you a hard time about homework, or we play pranks on you, but that doesn't mean we don't hear what you tell us. And you always tell us to 'do what's right and protect what's important'. That's what you did. We couldn't be mad at you for that, Ekyt-sensei. You told us to keep our words, you kept yours. What you did vindicated all you've taught us, and made us understand just what our Shinobi ways will be like. If you were willing to do ANYTHING to protect us, then someday we'll be doing the same. Ekyt-sensei...thank you."

Naoto hugged Ekyt. Ekyt patted him on the head.

"All of you were very brave today. You should be proud of yourselves. I'm proud of all of you. Why don't you all get some rest, and we'll head home in the morning."

That night, Ekyt climbed into the mixed bath, wearing a long towel. For once, he didn't care who saw his upper body. He was numb with shock, and needed to think. Well, 'Shock' and 'think' don't go together very well. So Ekyt sank down into the bath, shedding his towel, but leaving on his black ANBU tactical shorts. Near the water were his clothes, and his newly-purchased chain mail gauntlets. After using the Dragon's Circle, Ekyt knew he needed more power protecting his arm than just Lee-ish tape. So, he had opted for a set of armor Lord 3rd had recommended.

Ekyt heard someone else climb in the bat. He didn't turn around, not sensing a threat. But the person who came in waded over to him.

"You okay, Ekyt?"

Ekyt damn near leapt twenty feet in the air.

"Sakura! Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, sorry!" Ekyt bowed, dipping his head into the water. Sakura shook her head.

"Well, you're normal...for you, anyway," Sakura intoned. **Whoa...he's not wearing...hardly anything! Damn, those shorts STILL leave a lot to the imagination...but still, he's not a scrawny kid anymore...he's really become a handsome boy...(giggle)I'm thinking about him, while in a mixed bath with him? Wow, that's something Ino would do. We used to dream about Sasuke joining us...well, one of us, anyway! But this isn't about Sasuke, not anymore...Ekyt...he's gotten stronger, and matured...but I've never seen him look so lost...**

"I'm sorry, Sakura. I just...didn't expect you to be here," Ekyt responded finally, leaning over the edge of the hot spring, chin propped up on his folded arms. He was blushing. He had to remove his mask. For now, he didn't mind; Sakura had seen his face before. It's not that Ekyt was ugly, it was that his emotions were sometimes so strong that they could give him away. That, and he always had an air of mystery. Now, he felt naked without his mask most of the time. But, it was that, or pass out from the heat in the hot spring and drown...

"Well, you needed cheering up, and, well, who better than the one who pieces you back together after battles like that?" Sakura was trying to lighten the mood. It wasn't working.

While Ekyt was dressed in his ANBU shorts, a pair of reflective black opaque shorts, Sakura was wearing a long towel, tucked firmly in place, covering everything completely. Sakura wasn't like other girls in that she revealed herself.

Finally, Sakura went over and sat next to Ekyt. He was staring up aimlessly at the moon. It was a sickle-shaped moon.

"Did I do the right thing?" Ekyt said quietly, so low that Sakura didn't even hear. Instead, she dropped a washcloth in front of him, and put one on her own head.

"The moon is beautiful tonight...Sunagakure is a nice place, isn't it?" Sakura questioned, smiling up at

the moon while adjusting the washcloth.

“It is... .” Ekyt let his head drop a little lower, his head tucked almost into his chest. Sakura looked over, more than a little concerned. Finally, gathering up her courage (For once, she was as apprehensive as Ekyt), put her hand on Ekyt’s bare back.

“You know you did what you had to...and what you told the kids...that was beautiful. It’s sad they have to learn that. But you know, they’re right: You lead by example. I...well, sometimes I wish I was more like you...you always fight, without thinking of yourself...you’re always training, and doing the right thing for the village...I could never completely forget myself like that...”

Ekyt was still looking away. But Sakura heard his voice this time.

“It’s easy when you ARE no-one and HAVE no-one...” This time, there was a mix of frustration and sadness in Ekyt’s voice. “I’ve always been a loner. The Leaf Village is the first place I’ve felt as if I’ve belonged...”

Sakura realized that Ekyt’s two statements were kind of oxymorons to each other. “Ekyt...have you ever thought about...I don’t know...having a family of your own?” Sakura asked timidly. **I’ve got to get him out of this deep blue funk. I’ve seen Ekyt in bad shape before, but this is worse. This is almost like he’d...he’d kill himself...I’ve got to make his see there’s hope!**

“Always. But then I realize I could never drag the girl I want into the swirling torrent of a personal hell my life has become...I couldn’t wish that was anyone...and my children...they would inherit my Emotional Chakra, and suffer all the pain I did...hopefully, they’d take after their mother...”

That wasn’t what Sakura wanted to hear from him. In fact, it was the opposite. So, in a bold move, Sakura actually grabbed Ekyt, turned him around, and hugged him. Ekyt was too shocked to do anything.

I’m in my ANBU shorts...and she’s...Oh shoot, please, no nosebleed!

Sakura didn’t say anything. She just let her chin rest on Ekyt’s bare shoulder, while she rubbed his back with one hand, and stroked his hair with the other.

“You can hug back, you know...” Sakura prompted. Ekyt immediately forced his arms to work, very gently hugging Sakura.

Sakura felt his muscles relax. **He’s finally trusting me...no...he’s too numb to remember I’m a female right now, he’s just running on some basic male instinct...it’s okay, you know, you can always talk with me Ekyt.**

He reminds me of Sasuke, kind of. And Sasuke reminds me that I’m not ready for a boyfriend. I still believed in fairy tale endings when I was Sasuke’s girlfriend...not anymore...Maybe I need this hug as much as Ekyt does...

He reminds me of Kakashi-sensei, even more so now...I know that he’ll think of it again, but if I

made him forget about killing that man, even for a few minutes, it was worth it.

Sakura and Ekyt both let go, blushing red.

“Thank you, Sakura. That really helped. I still can’t believe I killed...”

“You had no choice. Now, maybe we’d both better finish our baths and get out of here, before Naruto tries to create a story of his own about what happened between us.”

That earned a laugh from Ekyt. “He’s not far from Jiraiya, that’s for sure!”

Uhoh...PLEASE don’t let her know about the book! If she finds out she and I... ‘do it’ in that book, she’ll kill me, then make sure that I can never ‘do it’ in real life!

(If that was found offensive, please let me know, I’ll remove it –NG)

“Kakashi, did you notice that Ekyt looked, how should I put it...” Sarutobi wondered.

“Hmm? Like what?” Kakashi asked.

“Like the Fourth Hokage. On a giant summon, fighting a demon...” Sarutobi recalled.

“Now that you mention it...I see it. Wait...are you saying he was going to use the Fourth’s jutsu?”

“I believe so. He didn’t, but still, he’s killed a man. No matter what, it’s made him more stronger...we need to cultivate that strength...”

Kakashi agreed. But they would discuss it more tomorrow. Since it was Ekyt’s kill, he would be the one to carry the corpse back to the Leaf Village for inspection.

I don’t envy him...I’ve had to carry too many of the damn things... Kakashi dully noted to himself.

67 - NOTE TO READERS

HI EVERYONE, THIS STORY WILL BE CONTINUED SHORTLY. I JUST NEED A SHORT BREAK FROM THIS STORYLINE.

ON ANOTHER NOTE, I'VE GOT A SHORT FIC COMING UP THAT, IF YOU LIKED THIS FIC, YOU'LL LIKE AS WELL. COMING SOON!

(THIS CHAPTER WILL BE DELETED AND REPLACED WHEN I RESUME THE STORY AGAIN, WHICH WON'T BE A LONG WAIT!)

68 - The Boldest Moves

Ekyt silently carried Hidan's corpse, thinking something wasn't quite right. But damned if he knew what. He guessed it was just the thought of having killed someone for the first time. Just as Ekyt convinced himself that was all it was, Kakashi suddenly barked out an order.

"Ekyt, drop his body and get away!"

Ekyt did, but it was too late. Hidan had sprung his trap.

"So, you finally figured out I'm immortal, did you?" Hidan growled. Suddenly, the pendant around his neck suddenly formed on the ground, and Ekyt was in the center.

"Interesting that YOU were the one to kill me, Dragon Boy. Surely you had more sense than to think I would be THAT easy to kill!" Hidan withdrew a kunai from under his cloak. He plunged it into his arm. Ekyt grabbed his arm, swallowing a scream- blood?

"That's right. Whatever I do to myself, I do to you. This symbol connects us. What happens to my body, happens to yours. Funny damn thing- I can't die, and YOU can!" Hidan raised the kunai, and plunged it into his thigh.

"shoot!" Ekyt snarled. "Let me guess: Anything that I do to you, I do to myself?"

"Precisely, dipshoot. So, I'm going to kill you. Is there anything you can do about it?"

"Only make sure you die alone!" Ekyt shot back. He had used the body-flicker jutsu to land behind Hidan and grab his neck. He snapped it, only to buy time, he knew it wouldn't be permanent.

"Leave! Go! Get the kids out of here!" Ekyt shouted.

"NO! WE AREN'T GOING TO LEAVE YOU, EKYT-SENSE!! WHATEVER HAPPENS, WE'RE STAYING RIGHT HERE!" shouted Naoto. The kids refused to leave, and everyone else was too rooted to the spot to make them.

"There's a hole in your plan, Hidan. Just as big as the one in your head!" Ekyt dragged Hidan outside the symbol.

"So what? You STILL can't kill me!" Hidan crowed, his head healing.

"Oh no? I CAN do this. You're a menace, and I've been itching to use this jutsu! But first, I have to do one last thing...In case this goes wrong..." Ekyt snapped Hidan's neck, arms, and legs, and ran over to his group.

"I want all of you to promise you'll study hard, and become the best Shinobi you can. No matter what

happens, NEVER give in to evil. You'll learn when you get older that right isn't always easy. You may learn it right now. This is the hardest thing I've had to do, and I don't want any of you even THINKING of this jutsu until you're older."

Ekyt bowed to his Kakashi, Sarutobi, Hayate, Kimimaro, Naruto, Sasuke, Kankuro, and Gaara. He stopped in front of Sakura. Throwing a kunai over his shoulder to slow Hidan down, Ekyt asked to talk to Sakura for a second. But that second was over rapidly, and all Ekyt could do was hold her hands, look her in the eyes, then do the impossible.

Ekyt Kaguya finally kissed Sakura Haruno. He didn't say why; he didn't need to. But Sakura seemed to understand. All the same, she was frozen to the spot.

Ekyt ran back over to Hidan, making handsigns as he went.

"What is this?! I don't know this jutsu!" Hidan complained. "Whatever. Do whatever the hell you want, you retard. I can't die!"

Ekyt finished the handsigns. "Reaper Death Seal!" Ekyt grabbed onto Hidan.

Sarutobi and Kakashi exchanged glances; they couldn't stop it now.

"He was determined to take someone out like that...Master Sarutobi, didn't he say he had a plan to get around death?" Kakashi wondered.

"Yes...but it wasn't complete...failure is more likely than success, I'm afraid."

Sakura put a hand to her mouth. Had Ekyt really just kissed her? **Whatever he's doing must be incredibly risky...or he would never...That kiss...it wasn't a superficial 'thank you' kiss. There was something behind it...Something my kiss with Sasuke was missing...Could he...could he really be in love with me?**

Behind Ekyt, it was unmistakable- that was the death god, Shinigami. Hidan had never been so terrified. That's when he felt it- the death god, using Ekyt's chakra, latch on to his soul. Hidan fought the jutsu, but Ekyt held on as long as he could. With a last burst of chakra, Ekyt pulled out Hidan's soul. The death god greedily lapped up both souls, then disappeared.

"DAMN YOU!" Hidan shouted, falling to the ground. Ekyt fell down beside him, his world going black.

"Immortal, huh?" Ekyt said with a smirk, before letting his head hit the ground.

"Ekyt-kun?!" Sakura was the first one at Ekyt's side. She knew this jutsu's effects. But to her surprise, she found a faint heart beating.

“He’s alive!”

--

A day later, Ekyt came out of his coma. His eyes were impassive, and his words were toneless.

“Our theory was correct, Master Sarutobi. The death god was happy to eat my emotional soul. And what of Hidan?”

“Sealed inside the emotional soul that you sacrificed,” Sarutobi told him. They were alone for the moment. “After today, I want to ask you a question Ekyt. Do you think that you are ready to be a jonin? And no modesty.”

“I do. I’ve done everything that’s asked of a jonin. If all the children are alive, and everyone made it out of that crisis, I did my job.” Ekyt had his emotions taken away once before, and knew that his mind was more clear in this state. He didn’t have his usual self-deprecating attitude, and wouldn’t be shy to speak up. But he had still grown to appreciate the chakra his emotions gave him, whatever pain they caused. After all, that very chakra, created by those very feelings, had just saved his life.

“Well, I don’t think anyone will argue now. Ending the life of someone immortal...and with THAT jutsu...you’re a special boy, as I’ve come to understand.”

“Without my second chakra, I’m weaker, and therefore less powerful. That would make me less effective as a jonin. Perhaps my words were hasty, and said more out of desire than truth...wait...Master Sarutobi, this isn’t normal...I can feel an emotion...desire...how is that possible? I sacrificed my second chakra in place of my soul. I shouldn’t be feeling anything...”

Sarutobi exhaled a wreath of smoke. “I don’t believe your second chakra left you entirely. The Akatsuki extracted your chakra, rather than your soul, which made the circumstances different. Your emotions...they’re growing back. Try to summon your second chakra.”

Ekyt did, and found a small blue flame sitting in his hand. Sarutobi smiled.

“Well then, it seems you have emotions. And a good thing! In case your coma damaged your memory, or your memory became selective, you kissed a certain girl yesterday, and I do believe she’ll want to talk to you...”

Ekyt suddenly looked horrified. “Oh God...I DID kiss her...What was I thinking?! I love her, but still...had I died, it would have hurt her more! I’m such a selfish bastard, I do this unconsciously!”

“I don’t think you’re a selfish bastard...” Sakura was standing at the door. Sarutobi smiled, got up, and walked out. It looked like the kids needed some time...

Ekyt gulped, and turned ten shades of red.

“Sakura...I’m sorry. I can’t take it back, and I don’t want to. I know I’ve just made things harder for

you, and it was horrible of me...”

Sakura smiled kindly and sat down on the bed next to Ekyt.

“You know, I thought it was really sweet of you. I mean, I could tell that you really meant that kiss. No matter what you say, you can’t take that back. And...well, Naruto and Lee have been dropping hints about this for a while. I didn’t piece it together until you actually kissed me.” Sakura was blushing slightly, but not out of embarrassment. Desire, perhaps?

“I DID mean it. And I still do. It’s been three years, and I’ve...well, I’ve had a crush on you for three years. It’s kind of pathetic I didn’t say anything, I know, but I didn’t want it to be hard on you when you turned me down...I mean, you’re out of my league...what would you want with a scrawny, older genin anyway, right?”

“Wrong. VERY wrong. You see...I’ve been thinking...well, let me see your chest. Come on, I did the other night, it won’t kill you.” Sakura needled. Ekyt realized that his shirt and vest had been replaced with a doctor’s shirt, so he shrugged it off.

“I saw the cuts, all across your body...and I realized...who was the one taking the knives for me? Who defended me, no matter what? The answer should have been clear to me, but it wasn’t. So much happened. But yesterday, when you kissed me, then finished that man off, it hit me- I’ve never felt safer. You’re strong, no matter what you say. And all those cuts on your chest...they were for me, weren’t they?”

Ekyt looked away, but nodded. “I couldn’t let you get hurt. But I couldn’t say it either...three little words...damn, my emotions WOULD have to come back during this conversation,” Ekyt joked, a smile visible even under his mask.

“You don’t have to be shy. You know...I...I thought I understood love. With Sasuke. But that was infatuation. There’s a difference. And...maybe...it was love that I felt in that kiss?” Sakura suggested, head down, but her eyes looking up through her bangs.

“It was. On my part. I don’t know how you’d interpret it...but it was.”

“Then, do it again. Or, better yet...” Sakura shifted to face Ekyt. For a long moment, her green eyes met his hazel eyes. An IV restrained Ekyt’s arm, which was seriously annoying him. But when Sakura slipped the mask down around his neck, and leaned forward, he forgot all that. All he knew was that her tender lips met his, and he was in heaven. The kiss lasted a long time. That would have been enough for Ekyt, but out of habit, Sakura had a hand of his chest, so she wouldn’t fall over. All too soon, though it seemed like forever, the kiss was over.

“So...what did you feel?” Sakura questioned, smiling at Ekyt. His emotions had fully returned.

“I felt...it’s hard to describe...I’ve never known love, not like this. That must be what I felt.” Ekyt still couldn’t believe it.

“Well, you either felt love, or some of the taste from the dumplings I just ate. Either way, love was in

there.” Sakura playfully tugged Ekyt’s mask back up into place, and then hugged him, burying her head into his shoulder.

“I...” Ekyt began.

“Ekyt-kun, just say it. I’m not going to kill you. Besides, I just kissed you, do you honestly think I won’t understand now?” Sakura murmured, still happily snuggled into his neck.

“I...I love you!” Ekyt managed. He was amazed; the girl who could smash boulders was hugging him so tenderly...and he could feel it? His mind flashed back to the horrors of seeing the death god. But Sakura’s kiss knocked the scary demon out of his mind. Ekyt draped the one unrestrained arm around Sakura.

“WHOA! Ekyt-sensei, is this part of the curriculum?”

Sakura sat up, inadvertently headbutting Ekyt under the chin. The entire class of thirty was just standing there, gaping.

“How long have you been here?!” Sakura demanded.

“Long enough! So, were you two gonna...ya know...” Naoto teased. By now, even the senseis, Naruto, Sasuke, and Sai had filed in.

“I told you, Naruto-kun. Ekyt-kun’s dick is bigger than yours!” Sai smiled. Sakura blushed, Naruto raged, and Kakashi grabbed Naruto before he killed Sai. It was just like old times, except now Sakura understood that she had a new future, and it involved the shy boy who had made a name for himself.

“It’s great that you two are tight and all...but Ekyt, if you can move, we need to get back to our own village. And on the way, you might read one of my favorite books...” Kakashi led the troop out of the room. Ekyt yanked his IV out, feeling a rush of pain, but that didn’t matter. He put on his shirt and vest, and smiled at Sakura one more time.

“Is Lady Fifth going to kill me for kissing you?” Ekyt asked with a smile. He suddenly noticed Sakura had put her hand in his.

“Maybe. Although, she might have been playing matchmaker herself. We’re scheduled to do missions. Of course, that might change, Ekyt-sensei.”

“Huh? Oh, that! I forgot! It figures. I land the girl I’ve had a crush on for years and get the promotion I’ve wanted in the same day. All while lying in a hospital bed. Somehow, that’s not entirely surprising...”