

Naruto: The Story Retold

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This fic follows the manga storyline, with my own ideas for filler arcs. It also includes one of my OC's. Enjoy, and please leave comments. If you comment on mine, I'll comment on yours and recommend you in return.

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1 - Welcome To Konohagakure!

WELCOME TO KONOHA GAKURE!

“Where the hell is our sensei, anyway? All the others have theirs!” Naruto complained loudly. Patience never HAD been the orange-clad Shinobi’s specialty.

“He’s an hour late!” Sakura added. **That stupid diet I’m on, I haven’t eaten all day! I’m starving**

Predictably, Sasuke had nothing to say on the subject. Also predictably, Naruto got fidgety and decided to punish their new teacher. With a devilish snicker, Naruto grabbed an eraser from the dustbin and placed it in the slightly-opened sliding door, near the top. When the teacher opened the door, it would fall right on his or her head. The perfect crime in the eyes of the twelve year old prankster, who began to giggle, while musing that “This is gonna be great! I can’t wait!”.

“Come on, Naruto, grow up!” Sakura commented. Inner-Sakura felt different. **Hell Yeah! This is the best! This’ll teach him to be late!**

These three were ninja today, for the first time. They were genin, low ranked, or apprentice, ninja. They were waiting for their jonin (a ninja of a very high rank) instructor to show up. They had no idea what the guy was like, aside from that he was horribly late.

Higher up in the auditorium-like classroom, another new genin fingered his new headband, eyes down. He had tucked himself away in a dark corner on top after class. Just sitting in the shadows, he had a lot going through his head. He was vaguely aware there were three others in the room. His mind was in the past. Just the thought made him squeeze the headband tighter. So many of the burdens they call ‘emotions’ ran through him.

I left my dojo six months ago...They’ll never understand why. They’re content to get their belts, and their medals, and call themselves martial artists. I want to call myself a warrior. I don’t want to be some Saturday-morning fighter. I’m lucky I’ve found a place that I love...

At this, the boy’s lip curled into a smile. No one could see it under his mask. In fact, you couldn’t see much of him. Fingered black gloves, a gray, chain mail shirt, that had wrist tape around the forearms, an open black vest, and long black gi pants that were taped up at the end. Finally, shoes-wise, he disdained the sandals most wore. Instead he wore tabi boots (Boots with the big toe separate from the others). Finally, he put on the bandanna hitai-ate on over his bushy brown hair and tied it tight. With his eyes half-lidded, and the bags under them, you would think the boy hadn’t slept in months. Strictly speaking, that wasn’t far from the truth. Every night, for hours on end, the boy had devoured every scroll, book, or paper on the subjects on Ninjutsu, Genjutsu, or Taijutsu. Every sensei, it seemed, had been questioned about something. Even stranger, the boy had a white scroll of his own. Every time a

scroll was laid out in front of him, you could bet that the white scroll would be with it. Detailed notes on everything from striking points on human and animal anatomy to jutsus were added to the ever-growing scroll. Doujutsu, and even bloodlines were recent additions. The Sharingan was a fascinating topic.

The boy looked up, dark eyes, with bags under them (Not to the extent of Gekkou Hayate's, but visible), hearing the sliding door being opened. Even his sardonic mind couldn't deny that it was funny watching the eraser bounce off the jonin's head. Something about the jonin's expression, what little you could see, made it hilarious!

Poof.

Kakashi stopped dead, only half in the room, as the eraser bounced off his head.

"Haha! I gotcha!" Naruto declared, pointing at the sensei. He continued to laugh and point at the silver-haired jonin. The jonin looked like he had just woken up.

"I told him not to, sensei," Sakura said earnestly.

This is our teacher? Sasuke thought. Naruto took the words from his mouth, er, mind.

"You're supposed to be our teacher? You couldn't dodge that eraser, how are you going to dodge kunai!" Naruto wondered, laughing loudly.

The sensei finished walking into the room. He stood in front of his students. If he hadn't been leaning forward, he would have been a tall man. Right now, he was slumped over, and his eyes were half-closed, like he was bored, or almost asleep. When he talked, he almost SOUNDED asleep.

"Based on my first impression...I'd say I hate you guys..." the jonin drawled, half-lidded (visible) eye surveying the three.

The black lines of doom ran down the three student's faces. Kakashi smiled inwardly, knowing exactly where he would go with this. He didn't feel hatred for these three, really, he felt a challenge, and even felt that the three might be talented enough to meet the challenge. When he looked up, Kakashi noticed the other boy in the room, away from the others. Apparently, he was hard at work. Making hand signs, while saying their names aloud in a barely audible whisper, then nodded or shaking his head, making rapid notes on a scroll.

"Tora, Ushi,..." The boy stopped upon realizing he had garnered attention. He slowly looked up, meeting the gaze of the sensei that had just walked in. This wasn't one he had met before. For some reason, Ryouko felt that it would be appropriate to at least offer his name. He got up, carefully rolling his scrolls up, and walked down the stairs.

Naruto and Sakura nearly jumped. They had seen this guy around before, but didn't really know him, except his name from class. How long had he been there? Sakura shot a glance at Sasuke, who

apparently didn't care that this guy had been here so long. Sakura decided she didn't care either, although something about his eyes made her want to say something.

He looks so sad...I wonder what's wrong?

tok. tok. tok.

The boy ended his journey in front of Kakashi. Up close, Kakashi realized this boy was new to Konoha. Not only that, he was older than most of the academy students. He LOOKED young, but the way he moved, his posture, and what facial features Kakashi could see said that the boy was roughly fifteen.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," the boy said immediately, in a raspy tone. He bowed crisply, respectfully.

"I can't say I've seen you around Konoha. My name is Hatake Kakashi, and you are..."

"Kaguya Ryouko," the boy replied, now standing up. His neck was bent slightly forward, something that came from studying too long every night. He resolved to have a doctor look at it when he found time.

"Isn't your sensei here yet?" Kakashi asked kindly. **I kind of wish I had this one...a hard worker would be great. So far I've got a screw-up knucklehead, an infatuated teenage girl, and a moody boy with a nasty past.**

Ryouko unconsciously felt his headband. "I don't have one, Kakashi-sensei. I was the newest in class, and I graduated unexpectedly early, so I was the odd-numbered genin. So, it's just me for now, no team or sensei."

Kakashi patted the boy on the head. "Well, you'll do fine when you get one. What jutsu were you working on up there, anyway?" he asked.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu, sensei." The boy's reply seemed hesitant, and Kakashi instantly knew why.

"I've never heard of that. Is that one you created?" Kakashi made sure his tone was encouraging.

"It is. I hope that's alright..." Ryouko's voice still held tones of trepidation.

"As long as you understand chakra, and don't actually use it-" Immediately, what little you could see of Ryouko's face reddened slightly.

"You- can already perform it?" Kakashi asked. **I already know the Uchiha clan boys can, more information than Sasuke knows leaked out after their slaughter...but this kid can't possibly use a jutsu, it takes too much chakra. Unless...those two scrolls he had...**

"Yes, sensei. I hope I didn't break a rule or something in the process. It just kind of happened. I was trying a genjutsu, and I switched the 'dragon' handsign for the 'dog' handsign. It was really late, and I was tired, but I was almost done with that part of the scroll, and I wanted to finish. So, I just kind of stumbled across it by mistake the first time, and I've been polishing it for the last three months or so."

Kakashi indicated for his new team to sit down. They seemed suddenly interested. Sasuke did, anyway, which caused Sakura to become interested.

“Would you mind demonstrating it? I’ve never seen someone so young come up with a jutsu, accident or not.” Kakashi angled himself away from all but Sasuke and then raised his headband.

Sasuke turned to look at their sensei for instructions. That’s when he saw the silver-haired jonin lift his headband and-

Sharingan? Is he an Uchiha? I thought all but two of us were dead! What is he? How did he get the Sharingan? Sasuke decided that maybe this sensei WOULD be worthwhile.

Big brother...It won’t be long now...

Ryouko was a little surprised at being asked to demonstrate, but he did so. For someone so young and inexperienced, Ryouko’s handsigns were fast and smooth.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” he called. He made a striking motion with an open hand in a nukite (palm facing in) jab. From his hand, tongues of fire shot out. It continued until Ryouko closed his hand, which ended the jutsu. It had been blazing, scorching heat, and such intensity. The air, Kakashi noted, wasn’t littered with chakra, as was the case with most genin who didn’t understand chakra control, and wound up wasting a lot of it.

Kakashi was impressed. **It seems he’s got a natural talent for this...I wonder just how strong he is...he mentioned genjutsu, let’s see if he can recognize one.**

Ryouko saw a swirl of leaves in front of him. **Genjutsu...you know this one, it’s that...ah, the “Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique”. Is this sensei testing me? At any rate, I’d better break it. God only know what my mind would conjure up...**

Ryouko clasped his hands together. “Release!” he said aloud. The swirling leaves faded, and the classroom returned. Ryouko didn’t drop his guard just yet. Instead, he felt for his forearm. Under a thin layer of wrist tape that was wound around his forearm were throwing needles. These were short and pointed on one end, in that way different than their cousin, the equally-dangerous, double-sided, longer senbon.

Kakashi was surprised that Ryouko threw off his genjutsu so quickly. He hadn’t used anything close to full force, but it was still impressive. As Kakashi was thinking it, Ryouko spoke it:

“I’ve studied almost every night, for hours, usually until three or four in the morning. Every jutsu I could, every exercise I could do, to be stronger, faster, better. It’s not like I have a social life to sacrifice, I left that behind at my old dojo. That’s the only reason I had any clue what was happening. I’m not really talented, I just have no life aside from studying.”

Despite the success, Ryouko didn’t sound happy, and didn’t boast, as Kakashi thought he would.

"I see. Well, the best of luck with your studies, then. If you have questions, feel free to ask me. For now, I'd better take these three out for training." Kakashi indicated Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura, who were all wondering just what happened. Sasuke especially.

The Uchiha clan specialized in fire techniques, and he stumbles across an original one by accident? Sasuke couldn't help but wonder how, and think that it was a little unfair that someone so new just had a jutsu fall into his lap, no matter how hard he worked.

"I will sensei, thank you. Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura- good luck," Ryouko offered.

"You too!" Sakura said perkily.

"I don't need luck! I'm gonna be hokage, believe it!" Naruto shouted, standing on a desk, not far from Ryouko. Ryouko smiled just a little. He couldn't help envy Naruto at times, being so carefree. He envied Sasuke for his natural ability. He didn't envy Sakura, but he felt warmth toward the kunoichi nonetheless.

"Somehow, I don't doubt it, Naruto." Ryouko gave a small wave over his shoulder before walking back to his spot at the top of the classroom.

About two hours later, Iruka was walking by the classroom. It was starting to get dark, and part of his job was making sure that everything was locked up. He uttered a small sound of surprise/curiosity upon seeing a classroom door open, and a light on.

Who would be here at this hour? It's almost 7:00, the academy has been out for four hours!

Iruka walked in, a kunai at the ready, just in case. Though why a robber would be going through a classroom, or what a spy would be looking for, was beyond him. Upon seeing who was occupying the classroom, Iruka put the kunai away. He wasn't surprised. He had heard stories about Ryouko, studying on rooftops, or at home, through all hours of the night. But he didn't believe it. No student would work that hard. Unless his encouragement had sunk in?

"Ryouko?"

At the word, Ryouko looked up. "Oh, hi, Iruka-sensei. I lost track of time, do you need me out of here?"

Iruka couldn't help but smile. "You just graduated this morning, you aren't sick of the place yet?" Iruka joked.

Ryouko shrugged. "I've got no place better to be, sensei. Besides, this is fascinating stuff." Ryouko indicated the scrolls in front of him.

Iruka walked up to where Ryouko was sitting. He looked at the scroll Ryouko had written, it's size and contents impressive, and even moreso upon considering that this was the new kid in the village.

"It was strange...are most new genin unable to do jutsus?" Ryouko asked suddenly, thinking of the silver haired Jonin. Hatake...Kakashi, that was it.

"Huh? Why do you ask?" Iruka wanted to know, still looking at the scroll.

"Well, this jonin...Kakashi ...I showed him one of my jutsu, and then he tried a genjutsu on me, so I-

"He used a genjutsu on you?! Are you alright?!" Iruka was going to have to talk to Kakashi about this. **Students aren't guinea pigs, Kakashi! What would Lord Hokage say? Not to mention testing that technique on a brand new genin!**

"I'm fine sensei, the "release" technique worked. It's just...he seemed surprised that I had created a jutsu, and that I could use it. Is that uncommon, or wrong? Did I break a rule or something?" Ryouko asked. There was no panic in his voice, but his eyes were more alive. The first week he had been in the academy, Iruka thought the kid would be a failure. He certainly LOOKED asleep. But he had turned out to be one of the most hardworking, applied students, and was compared to Hyuuga Neji by other instructors. Most agreed Neji was better, but that Ryouko had potential. He had graduated tied for second in the class (with Haruno Sakura), second only to Uchiha Sasuke. For only six months of studying, that was an impressive feat. Not quite as impressive as Naruto graduating period, but still.

But if he's creating jutsus...I should see this, to make sure he's not hurting himself.

"It's kind of rare for someone so young and inexperienced to create a jutsu. How about showing it to me? I've got to meet Naruto in a few minutes, but I'd like to see this jutsu."

Ryouko got up and made the handsigns, faster than last time. Once again, he called it:

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ryouko made the striking motion. This time, though, his thoughts were on training. **Last time you held the jutsu for ten seconds...let's try fifteen...next time, 30 seconds...**

Iruka watched the stream of fire come out of the boy's hand. He didn't seem to be hurting himself, and he was only showing slight fatigue. **He's got great chakra control...and that scroll of his would have taken two years to complete! The stories must be true about his studying. It's rotten that I have to tell him the bad news, especially when he's worked so hard.**

"That's really impressive! Listen, Ryouko, I would have told you this at the ceremony tomorrow, but since you're here...There aren't any jonin or chunin available to be your sensei. I'm not sure what Lord Hokage will do with you, but you won't have a team...probably for some time..." Iruka didn't want to tell Ryouko this, and knew he Ryouko didn't want to hear it. He looked Ryouko right in the eyes when he said it, to see the genin's reaction. There was no change. Ryouko's expression hadn't revealed anything.

"Will I get any missions?" Ryouko questioned.

"I'm not really sure, we haven't had a situation like this before. Why don't you ask for an audience with Lord Hokage? Just give him this (A small scroll) and tell him you're a new graduate, okay?"

"Okay, sensei. See you at the ceremony tomorrow," Ryouko said. He rolled up his scrolls, then looked up again. He had meant to ask this during class, but had forgotten in his semi-excitement of passing his finals.

"Sensei, do you have any notes on chakra control I could borrow?"

Iruka gave an encouraging smile, showing why his forte was teaching. **I can't wait to hear what Kakashi thought of him.**

"Sure. Hold on a second, I've got one in my desk," Iruka rummaged through a drawer, finding a diagram and an accompanying scroll.

"Thank you. I'll have it back to you by tomorrow, hopefully," Ryouko said, bowing to Iruka, then leaving the room, absent walking down the corridor, studying the sheet as he went.

Iruka shook smiled a little. **Just the opposite of Naruto. But, interesting. Chakra control, huh? Seems like he can control it just fine, at least at a genin level. He's still a little wasteful with his chakra, and he doesn't have the biggest amount to draw from. But still, he's really made good strides in such a short time. I'll be surprised if he doesn't go far. With or without a sensei, though I don't doubt he would benefit from one's advice.**

2 - Alone: The Teamless Genin!

ALONE: THE TEAM-LESS GENIN!

The next morning, Ryouko met the Third Hokage. He immediately warmed up to the old man. Ryouko didn't trust people easily, but had found that Konoha had been different. The fact that someone of such importance had time for him so quickly...Ryouko could tell that this village meant a lot to the old man, and he found that feeling to be infectious.

"Well, Kaguya Ryouko, is it? Congratulations on graduating from our academy so quickly," the strangely calming voice of the Third Hokage supplied. Dressed in his red and white robes, it was hard to believe that this man was a warrior. Even warriors could preach peace, Ryouko knew, but he was inclined to think of this man as a kindly grandfather more than an authority figure. All the same, he had no trouble respecting the Third Hokage whatsoever.

"Thank you, Lord Hokage," Ryouko said, bowing. He was standing ramrod straight, hands clasped behind his back, ignoring the chair that was next to him. He didn't want to do anything outside the rules in his new home. He wasn't yet familiar with all the intricacies of Shinobi life.

"Please, you can sit down, no need for such formality here. (Ryouko sat down very gingerly, as though the chair was made of needles.) Now, from this scroll, Iruka tells me you study a great deal, and have a lot of potential. He also mentions a particular scroll that you've worked on. May I see it?" It wasn't an order, though Lord Third could easily have made it one. But that wasn't his nature.

Ryouko immediately dug in one of his makimono pouches. Three scrolls spilled out, then a fourth. Finally, he found the one he wanted. He handed it to the 3rd Hokage with a bow. The Third opened it, and read through it. Then saw there was more. And more. And more.

This isn't academy level work...and this last one...he's originated a jutsu. At his age and experience level, that is indeed impressive. I have no team for him, and no jonin or chunin leader...but you can't ignore such hard work and talent. The best solution is to have him work with each sensei and their respective students. From Kakashi's visit this morning, he agrees. For now, that will be my decision, until I think of something more suitable.

"This is very impressive. Now, that being said, I can't assign you missions just yet. First, I have to evaluate you to allow you to work alone. You'll be tested by three senseis. Two out of three must say you're ready to handle D and C rank missions on your own before I'll allow you to take them alone. If there's an injury, you can fill in on a team, until such a time as I have a sensei for you." Lord Hokage had walked away from his paintings, to the window behind his desk, which was allowing a pleasant breeze into the room.

"I understand, Lord Hokage," Ryouko replied, bowing again. The Third gave him a warm smile.

“It seems you’ve fit in nicely, despite your past. And from what I hear, you haven’t kept it a secret. I must admit, I AM a little curious as to why you’d so readily admit that- it’s not anything to be ashamed of, but it’s rather...taboo.”

“No, Lord Hokage. I want them to know now that I trained as a samurai. It would be worse if it came out when I didn’t want it too. Hiding something like that, keeping a skeleton like that in a closet on a blank slate such as this would be a mistake. It sickens me to see what samurai have become. Thugs and bandits, no loyalty or honor...I promise you, that will NEVER be a problem with me.” Ryouko’s last words were spoken harshly, disdainfully, as he clenched a fist, showing something other than reverence for the first time since the meeting. He only knew of two honorable samurai left, and that was himself, and his student at his old dojo, Tamaki Midasu. Not counting the senseis, they weren’t warrior types. They were intelligent enough, some downright brilliant, and Ryouko counted himself lucky to be able to absorb their knowledge. He had considered asking one or two of them to accompany him here, but decided against he. He wanted a completely blank slate, as clean as he could get it.

“Good for you! And now you’ve earned that headband! Before the ceremony today, You’ll be with Team 7. I believe you met them yesterday. Haruno Sakura, Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, and their jonin sensei, Hatake Kakashi.”

“I did. I’m going to be training with them? Is there anything I should bring, or anything I should know?” Ryouko wasn’t one to walk into something unprepared.

The 3rd smiled again and patted the genin’s head. “Follow your instincts. You’ve been successful following them so far.” **He’s met Kakashi...I’m looking forward to this particular report...Kakashi mentioned him, and that’s not like Kakashi. Already an interesting case.**

Naruto was still tied to the post, angry that he had been bested.

Kakashi looked at his three genin, smiling. “Do you know what the point of that exercise was? No? Well, when he gets here, someone else is going to play, too. Sasuke, you need this lesson the most, so you’re going to watch and tell me what went wrong.”

“Hmph.” Sasuke wasn’t happy with that, and it showed.

“Who’s coming, sensei?” Sakura wanted to know.

“Yeah! Who? Who?” Naruto couldn’t wait. **Maybe Iruka-sensei is gonna help!**

Seconds later, in a puff of smoke, Ryouko arrived, scroll still open.

“I hope I’m not late, sensei,” he said, hastily shutting the scroll.

“The Body Flicker Jutsu? You’re an interesting one. Let’s see if you can figure this out. The object of

this exercise is to take these bells from me. You'll notice there are only two. That means only two of you can pass. If you don't get a bell, you get sent back to the academy." Kakashi delivered his line, but was almost disappointed to see the lack of reaction Ryouko had.

"Alright. Any rules?" Ryouko replied instantly. His thought-process had already begun to kick in, giving him ideas as to how to handle this.

"Come at me as though you would kill me, or you'll never get these bells from me. That's it. Kunai, shuriken, whatever you want."

Ryouko nodded.

"Good. You'll be with Sakura and Naruto, while Sasuke watches. Ready? GO!" Kakashi shouted the last word. Sasuke looked a mix of embarrassed and angry, but he still watched, curious to see what would happen now.

Ryouko, Naruto, and Sakura dove into the bushes. Hunkering down low, they talked in low voices.

"We can't do this! Kakashi-sensei is too strong!" Sakura cried in despair.

"I'll beat the hell out of him this time!" Naruto whispered loudly, clenching his fists, although his aching butt reminded him that he had been on the losing end. That wasn't enough to dampen his spirits, although Naruto guessed going to the bathroom would be a painful affair for a few days after that "Thousand Years of Death" technique.

"Hold on. No matter what, you two get those bells, alright?" Ryouko told them quickly, his plan coming together.

"Huh? But that means you'll go back to the academy!" Sakura exclaimed. She didn't yet understand the concept of 'sacrifice for the greater good'.

"Yeah, are you stupid or something?!" Naruto asked. The thought of going back to the academy was unthinkable to him. **I spent long enough there! This guy WANTS to go back?! He's gotta be nuts!**

"You've got a team and a sensei, I don't have either. I wouldn't be losing anything but this headband, and I'll get it back. Now, what happened last time you fought Kakashi-sensei?" Ryouko wanted to know.

Sakura and Naruto told him. Little by little, Ryouko formulated a plan. At the end, he told them his idea, and they smiled, thinking it could work. Ryouko pushed aside their thanks and said "Just make sure you get the bells, don't worry about me. If he stabs me or something, use that as a distraction."

Kakashi pulled out his book and waited. No better way to pass the time than to read a novel of

questionable content. Kakashi hadn't used much chakra in the last fight, and he was sure he wouldn't need to in this fight either. These were just genin, after all Kakashi looked up suddenly, sensing someone coming. He sighed inwardly. Ryouko had walked out to face him, alone. For a moment, the two stared at each other, in silence.

"So, you're going for the 'Sasuke' method, are you?" Kakashi asked in disappointment.

Ryouko smiled. "He took you on alone? Then I guess so. You tested me earlier with your genjutsu...maybe I just want to see how strong YOU are..." Ryouko took up a guard, hoping he looked as cocky as he sounded. It was crucial that he did, if his plan was to work. Not that he didn't have reservations about talking so disrespectfully to a jonin, but it WAS in the context of the drill.

Kakashi looked taken aback. "And here I was thinking you had a good attitude. (Sigh) Oh well. Let's get this over with." Kakashi snapped his book shut and put it away. He had to stop reading for Sasuke, and he was betting that he would have to in this case as well.

Ryouko rushed at Kakashi, aiming a punch at him. Kakashi went to block it, only to find Ryouko had stopped the punch and aimed another one. Kakashi blocked that one. It was then Ryouko's other fist nearly tagged him in the head, forcing him to let go and move backward. Ryouko apparently expected this, so he aimed for a leg sweep, ducking low and trying to take out Kakashi's legs with a kick. Kakashi leapt up and away. He saw Ryouko throw a kunai into the tree near him. Kakashi's eye followed the kunai as it stuck in the bark. It was as if Ryouko was herding him...

Is he leading me into a trap? Kakashi wondered.

Sure enough, a Sakura-made trap sprung, a rope nearly snaring Kakashi's foot. Ryouko threw another knife, this one landing at Kakashi's feet as the jonin leapt backwards. It was then Kakashi heard a familiar cry:

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto's voice said.

There were now ten Naruto's surrounding Kakashi, and one Ryouko. Sakura was still hidden.

Kakashi was surprised by the move. **Well, if he wants to 'test' me...Sharingan!**

Kakashi's Sharingan helped him pick out the real Naruto and Ryouko. That was all fine and good. But the clones were still 'real', and their attacks still hurt. Kakashi had to get rid of them.

The real Naruto and Ryouko nodded at each other, then at Sakura.

"Transform!"

"Transform!"

Naruto was now Ryouko, and Sakura was now Naruto.

NOTE: Confused? Here's a chart to help:

Real-----Transformed
Naruto became Ryouko
Sakura became Naruto

END NOTE

The clones, with the exception of one, were soon gone. That left two Naruto's and Ryouko. Kakashi decided to take out Ryouko first. **Smart-alecky kid, I'll show him why you always respect your sensei!**

But when Kakashi kicked Ryouko, he heard Naruto's voice.

Transformation...interesting...where are they going with this?

Kakashi whipped around and attacked the next Naruto. This one disappeared with a poof! **One left...**

As Kakashi tried to attack the last Naruto, he felt a genjutsu being used on him.

Ryouko! I forgot about him! I'd better get rid of this genjutsu!

Sakura (who looks like Naruto) sighed in relief. Now, only the last part of their plan.

"Dynamic Entry!"

As Kakashi threw off the genjutsu, Ryouko sailed in with a kick. Kakashi blocked it with his forearm. Ryouko rebounded off the forearm and spun around, a roundhouse kick aiming for Kakashi's head.

Naruto and Sakura watched, amazed at the taijutsu. Then they saw the opening. Quickly, they made their move.

Ryouko made one last swing for the head. This time, Kakashi caught his foot. Ryouko grabbed onto his head and tugged his headband back down over his Sharingan eye. Kakashi mentally noted that was a good, effective, but annoying move. Then he sensed the other two, aiming for the bells.

The bell that kept the time limit went off. Everyone froze.

Ryouko let go of Kakashi and landed behind him. He looked to see what had happened, and he sighed in disappointment with himself.

Naruto and Sakura' hands were inches away from the bells. They hadn't met Kakashi-sensei's challenge for the second time in a row. Kakashi was all smiles.

"I'm sorry Naruto, Sakura...I took too long to make that opening," Ryouko was mad that he had taken too long.

“Hey...You were close.” That had come from Sasuke.

“Yeah, we were sooo close! So we all go back to the academy, graduate again, and then beat this damn test! Hey, maybe you’ll be in our team, instead of Sasuke!” Naruto exclaimed.

Ryouko chuckled as Sakura gave Naruto a smart crack on the head for insulting her precious Sasuke.

“You did great, we were really close!” Sakura added.

“Well, you know what this means, don’t you?” Kakashi asked menacingly. Even the sky turned nasty! What kind of powers did this guy have?!

“Yes, sensei,” Sakura and Naruto said glumly. Sasuke just grunted, while Ryouko nodded solemnly.

“You all pass!” Kakashi added gleefully. “Yes, Sasuke, you, too. I can tell that you’ve figured out the point of this test. But, for the heck of it, Sasuke, what was it?”

“Teamwork, right? You wanted to see if we’d kill each other to get those bells, or help each other.” It seemed so obvious now. Hindsight is 20/20

“That’s right! And Ryouko, you proved yourself to be a team player- and a leader- when you told the other two to get the bells. In a mission, people who drop their missions and leave are scum. But people who leave their teammates to die...they’re lower than scum.” Kakashi said, brightly at first, but seriously at the end.. But Ryouko still had a glum look on his face. He soon voiced why.

“I’m sorry about insulting you, sensei. It was a distraction, and I really didn’t mean it. If I should be punished for it, I’ll accept it.”

Kakashi smiled, thinking of his own team, back in the day. He put a hand on Ryouko’s shoulder.

“You elicited a reaction from me in the context of a drill. There’s no punishment for thinking...Naruto, did you hear that? Even YOU can think.”

“HEY!” Naruto shouted. Kakashi ignored him and turned back to Ryouko.

“I’ll tell Lord Hokage that you pass from me. Good luck with the other sensei’s tests. Oh, and since you’re somewhat new, I’ll let you in on a little secret. You’re mature enough to know.”

Kakashi opened up Makeout Paradise. Immediately, a glow opened from the book. Ryouko wondered if it was haunted. Kakashi certainly seemed possessed.

“This...is the greatest book ever written! (Kakashi is really animated here) The forbidden love of a man and a woman! The romance, the passion, the anger, the love, the hate! It’s excellent!”

Naruto scoffed. “Screw that! Hey, kid (Even though Ryouko’s older), ignore those pervy pages! Why have that, when you could have...Transform!”

Before the stunned Ryouko was a naked girl, who was incredibly beautiful.

“...this! I can see, you appreciate the finer things. You don’t want some pervy old book...” The girl wriggled closer to Ryouko, whose jaw was hanging open. She hung on to his neck and whispered

“...You want the real thing...well, I’m real...and I belong to you, Ryouko-sempai...Just...do whatever you want...” Now the girl was fingering Ryouko’s lapels. For his part, Ryouko was ramrod straight, an unmoving.

The girl got closer, her mouth right near his ear. Ryouko was nearly panicking. He KNEW this was just a transformation, but still, having a naked girl come on to you...especially at his age...

“I’m yours...” she cooed. And that was all she wrote.

Ryouko’s eyes widened. His jaw dropped. Then, a nosebleed sent him rocketing backward. BOOM! He hit a tree, then slid down it, eyes rolled back into his head. A hysterical Naruto burst out of his disguise and started laughing. Doubled over, he was pointed at Ryouko and shaking with mirth.

“Hey, perv! How do you like my ‘Sexy Jutsu?’” Naruto yelled to Ryouko.

Sakura wasn’t amused. “You damn pig! Don’t do that, he’s not a perverted @\$\$ like you!”

Sasuke shook his head. **Glad I didn’t see that jutsu from the front like he did...I might have been the one with the nosebleed.**

Kakashi smiled good-naturedly. Ryouko had written down a certain jutsu, and the way Naruto was doubled-over, laughing, gave Ryouko the opening. Kakashi made a motion, and Ryouko smirked, knowing what he meant.

“Konoha’s Secret Finger Technique: One Thousand Years of Death!” Ryouko shouted. Crouching behind Naruto, he jammed two fingers into Naruto’s tailbone, and sent him sailing.

“Textbook form,” Kakashi commented.

“I try, sensei,” Ryouko chimed in. “He asked for that one.”

“No argument here,” said Kakashi and his team in unison.

“NOT AGAAAAAIIIIINNNNNN!!!” Naruto wailed as he sailed across the landscape, high in the air. A bird swerved to avoid a collision with the large orange projectile that was Naruto.

“Whoa, Sasuke, did you see that? That was a really powerful @\$\$ poke! He did it like Kakashi-sensei!” she exclaimed, a hand to her eyes to shield the sun as she watched Naruto turn into a speck in the distance.

“Sensei got more distance,” Sasuke pointed out, in a rare moment of humor.

Kakashi smiled again. **They've already grown as a team. I hope that boy (Ryouko) finds his place. If we had kept going, and he hadn't just been using taijutsu only as a distraction, I wonder what would have happened? Oh well, I'll hear about it from Gai, when he fights Lee tomorrow...**

3 - The Test Continues: Worthy Opponents Step Up!

“So he’s passed your test, Kakashi? That’s surprising, but somehow, at the same time, not totally unexpected.”

The Third Hokage looked down into his crystal ball, seeing Ryouko study his scrolls, while working on his own scroll. It was growing longer every day.

“I overheard him tell Sakura and Naruto to get the bells. He stepped up as a leader, and his plan was well-crafted for someone being thrust into such a position. His next test is...Rock Lee, and his sensei, Maito Gai. I’ve heard that he’s had prior taijutsu experience, and it was evidenced by how he fought me. He wouldn’t have beaten me, he left a few openings. But it was an interesting fight, and I think he and Lee will have something in common,” Kakashi stated, holding *Makeout Paradise* open, but not reading it, out of respect to his conversation with Lord Hokage.

“I see. I assume that you are referring to his work ethic?” the Third asked/stated.

“That, and they are both underdogs. In different ways, but both have the tides of natural talent against them,” Kakashi said by way of explanation.

Ryouko saw what appeared to be two of the same people. He stepped back just in time as Naruto and the others came by, walking dogs. Well, Sasuke and Sakura were walking dogs; Naruto was BEING walked, and Kakashi was lounging in a tree, reading his book, silently shaking his head as Naruto was walked into a practice area. Ryouko gave a friendly wave.

A strong voice shook Ryouko out of his trance at the site of Naruto getting his walk. It was clear who was in charge between Naruto and the dog.

“I’m Maito Gai! You must be Kaguya Ryouko! Lee and I have been waiting. I’m here to see just how well you’re versed in taijutsu.”

Ryouko looked at the taller of the two, noticing he looked slightly different than who was, apparently, his protégé.

“Alright. Who am I fighting?” Ryouko asked. That question was immediately answered, though not by the taller one.

“You will be fighting me! I am Rock Lee! It is nice to meet you!” the younger of the two was bursting with energy. He held out his hand in a thumbs-up, and smiled, his teeth actually gleaming.

Ryouko returned Lee’s greeting with a bow. “I’m Kaguya Ryouko. Nice to meet you, two.” **Geez, if**

there's ANYTHING a depressed, miserable loner like myself hates it's a cheerful person. This clown and his sensei are annoying. But still, not a good idea to underestimate this guy, no matter HOW stupid he might look. Can't judge a book by it's cover. Or a ninja by his spandex (sweatdrop).

The one called "Gai" continued.

"Ah, youth! Now, listen, my Lee here is only capable of taijutsu. He cannot use genjutsu or ninjutsu. But don't think he's easy pickings because of that. Now, you are free to use whatever you want, but I will stop the match if you become incapacitated. Lee has a technique that's forbidden, and once he's in position for it, the match is over."

Ryouko nodded. "Okay. And if I win, you'll stop the match when he's knocked out or gives up?"

Gai laughed. Ryouko didn't get the joke, and wasn't amused anyway. He was rapidly getting angry over these two brushing off his comments. Or, at least "Gai" was. Ryouko was wincing and laughing at the same time at the matching jumpsuits and leg warmers. Even haircuts and eyebrows that were matching. It was among the most ludicrous things Ryouko had seen.

"Lee does not understand the concept of 'giving up'. He's a special kid. It's unlikely you'll beat him, but more power to you if you think you can. (Gai struck a weird pose about here) Positive thinking is key. You just keep thinking that way, that's a good start. Now, how about we drop the talking while you're both young and start the fighting!" Gai struck a comical stance, at least to Ryouko. But the boy was too weirded out by this joker to laugh. The weirdo seemed nice enough, just a little on the odd side.

"Just one thing- I don't like advantages against people who aren't enemies. So, if he's using only taijutsu, so am I," Ryouko murmured, shedding his vest. Without the semi-cumbersome makimono pouches, he could move a little quicker. That had to be an advantage, right?

Gai burst out laughing. "Honorable one, aren't you? If you hope to win, it would be in your best interest to fight using everything you can. But, if you want to try, you're more than welcome to! Either way, let's begin!"

Ryouko took up his old guard. One hand over his heart, the other near his head, extended out. His opponent, this "Lee" guy, had one arm behind his back, and one in front of him, palm inward. It struck Ryouko as strange. **The kid is wide open...what's he pulling?**

Until Lee moved. Ryouko had never seen someone move so quick. He leapt back just in time as the first of many kicks came. Usually, Ryouko could dodge, but this guy had incredible attack power and speed. His hand and forearms were already bruised from blocking. So the next time Lee came running in, Ryouko threw a crescent kick, catching Lee's guard hand. He swept it aside. Lee kicked, and Ryouko brought his foot back in another crescent kick, hitting Lee's inner leg. That gave him a short opening to step in. Lee skipped backward as Ryouko punched forward. Ryouko cursed as he realized he had dropped his guard.

That might be just the bait I need. he thought, figuring that he could trick Lee into attacking. But Lee

was too quick. He brought his leg up, under Ryouko's chin. Ryouko felt the boy leap up behind him. What he intended to do, Ryouko didn't want to know. So he turned in the air, throwing a roundhouse kick. He caught Lee in the ribs, but not hard enough, because, just as they hit the ground, Lee swept his legs. Ryouko landed hard, but rolled aside immediately, he kicked upward, keeping Lee away, until he surprised Lee by rolling forward and grabbing a leg. He tried to wrestle Lee to the ground, but the kid was strong. Ryouko thought that they would be evenly matched in terms of strength, but damned if looks weren't deceiving! Lee leapt upward. Ryouko clung on, pulling off the leg warmer. What he saw made him gasp.

Weights? This whackbag wears WEIGHTS while fighting? Good thing I DIDN'T underestimate him. He'll be a hell of a sparring partner.

"I see you have seen my weights. Gai-sensei, may I remove them?" Lee asked his older look-alike. Ryouko had figured out that they were different people, rather than clones. But still, they looked so much alike it was weird, nearly to the point of being creepy. It became creepy when you figured they were both wearing spandex.

"No, Lee, not in this match. If you two spar, that will be your choice. Today, we're evaluating him, not you," Gai responded. Lee saluted crisply.

"Don't hold back on me. I don't want some half-assed match. If I lose, I lose, but give it everything. A victory by default isn't a true victory, and neither is it a victory if your opponent is holding back." Ryouko smiled slightly.

I am so gonna get my @\$\$ kicked...this kid is good. But, still, I don't like cheap wins. And how embarrassing would it be if I knew about the weights and ignored them? I'd call it pride, but I don't have any? Stupidity, though- I've got plenty of that apparently...

Ryouko came to a short time later.

"Damn, I remember that kick, Konoha Hurricane, I think, but what the hell happened after that?" he muttered.

"I am sorry. I got a little carried away..." Lee's voice greeted Ryouko's ears.

"Whoa! You look as bad as I've gotta look!" Ryouko exclaimed. "There's no way I did that! Broken nose, cut lip, black eye..."

"Oh, that was Gai-sensei. He is such a good teacher! I used my forbidden move on you, and Gai-sensei had to discipline me. He is very wise!"

Those words made Ryouko doubt Lee's sanity.

If a sensei did that to me for a mistake, he wouldn't be my sensei for long...this guy is good, and that Gai-sensei is a taijutsu rarity. I study this stuff every night, and I STILL got my @\$ handed to me. Although, apparently, this guy's training is taijutsu-only, and just as fanatical as mine. Plus, he's had a year head start.

"Hey, good match. We'll have to do it again some time," Ryouko offered, extending his hand.

"I would like that! I must point out that your crescent kick block was new to me," Lee replied as he shook Ryouko's hand.

"The fact that you just kind of threw everything you had at me for twenty straight minutes was new to ME," Ryouko replied earnestly, scratching the back of his head.

Lee looked nothing short of proud. "It is my goal, even my Nindo, to become a splendid Ninja, using only taijutsu! I have people I wish to defeat!"

Ryouko raised an eyebrow. "Oh? If you don't mind my asking, who?"

Lee grew serious. "I wish to defeat Uchiha Sasuke, but even more importantly...Hyuuga Neji." Lee's fist clenched at the name.

"Hyuuga Neji...sounds familiar. Byakugan...hmm. I'm sure you can do it, Lee. If you'll pardon me, I've got one more appointment. But if you feel like sparring again, let me know. It beats beating a punching bag that doesn't hit back. You only learn by doing, right?"

"And giving it your all! Hard work and dedication! And do not forget to believe in yourself!" Lee struck his 'nice guy' pose.

Ryouko had turned around by that point, but he couldn't stop his latest thought. **Nice guys, those two. Little weird, but who isn't?**

"Aw man, Ino, you're troublesome. I don't see why we have to have some dogy *girl* on our team anyway. What is it you do, again? Flowers?" Shikamaru questioned.

"It's WAY more practical than your skuzzy shadow crap! And who are you calling a dog? You do nothing BUT complain!" Ino shot back, crossing her arms moodily.

"Hey, lay off, you two. We're here for the barbeque, remember?" Choji added, helping himself to more delicious, tender, Korean-Barbequed meat.

"Sure, flowers are REAL practical in combat! You'll make our caskets look great when we get our asses handed to us!" Shikamaru retorted.

Sarutobi Asuma breathed out, a hand to his head.

“Okay, we’re here about teamwork, not to complain. Your parents were a great team, and I’ve got every reason to believe you’ll be the same. But since you’re complaining, I’m going to have you fight a new graduate, Kaguya Ryouko. He’s being evaluated, and you three need work on your teamwork. Use your jutsu *together*, don’t just attack and complain about each other, alright? I want to see good chakra control.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve already told us! Still, best not to underestimate the new grad. I met him before, and the kid is a fanatic- hey!” Shikamaru was cut off in mid-sentence by Ino. She had her hands clasped over her heart.

“AND he’s the hottest thing since Sasuke! (Hearts in her eyes) Those eyes, that mask! Oh, why didn’t he get put with me? Then I could rub him in Sakura’s face! Of course *she* gets Sasuke! Little princess! They must have felt sorry for her, with her forehead! Ha! Well, once she sees me cozy up to the new guy-”

“She’ll totally finish landing Sasuke without any competition,” Choji helpfully added, causing Shikamaru to sigh.

“Damnit Choji, don’t get her any MORE wound up than she already is.”

Asuma lit another cigarette, exhaling thoughtfully. **Great. One’s in love, one’s hungry. The only one thinking about what the kid might be capable of is Shikamaru, and he’s too lazy to do anything about it.**

The flap that opened to the barbeque joint opened. Asuma looked up, and grinned.

This is the kid Kakashi was talking about? Alright, let’s see how he does...

In the middle of a field, Ryouko stood by himself. From three different directions came his enemies. Ryouko focused his chakra to his feet and leapt straight up, then shifted direction in the air. He made hand signs before landing near Ino.

Ino saw a swirl of leaves. When they cleared, everything looked the same. Except- there was Sasuke! And he was smiling at her!

“Ino...”

“S-Sasuke!” Ino replied. **He’s actually talking to me! And smiling! He’s so hot!**

“Has anyone ever said...you’re totally hot?” Sasuke muttered, his lips pursed in a kissable manner.

“All the time! But it means more coming from you!” Ino said, flicking her hair and laughing. The Uchiha boy smiled at the hair movement.

Ino and Sasuke embraced and began to kiss.

“I’m glad you’re my first real kiss. Sakura would NEVER measure up,” Sasuke whispered to Ino. Ino giggled pleasantly.

Meanwhile, Shikamaru and Choji watched Ino apparently making out with some imaginary figure. Huge sweatdrops grew on their faces.

“Genjutsu? Ah man, he knows her weak point! She won’t even fight THAT genjutsu!” Shikamaru groaned. “Then again, she’s out of the way...Now where did he go?”

Ryouko was hiding in the bushes. He decided to try something new. He couldn’t hold it for long, but it might get that Shikamaru guy to look the other way. Ryouko could tell Shikamaru was smart. He had overheard him trying to talk strategy with his team in the restaurant. That’s also how Ryouko knew about Ino’s infatuation with beating Sakura when it came to Sasuke. So maybe he could trick him with one of those things that Naruto used.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation!” Ryouko whispered. A clone popped out of the bushes and used the Dragon’s Ember Jutsu.

“Whoa, head’s up!” Shikamaru pulled Choji out of the way just in time. He landed crouching, which was perfect for-

“Shadow Possession Jutsu!” Shikamaru began to extend his shadow. It trapped ‘Ryouko’.

“Now, Choji! Just make sure I’ve let go first!” Shikamaru reminded him.

“Right! Human Boulder!” Choji grew in size, and rounder, until he resembled a ball. He tucked his head in and began to roll toward the trapped ‘Ryouko.’ Shikamaru let go of the Shadow possession, and Choji squashed ‘Ryouko.’

Shikamaru suddenly heard running from behind. He backed up just in time as a kick nearly beheaded him.

“Choji, that was a clone! Heads up!” Shikamaru called.

Choji changed direction. Ryouko ended the genjutsu on Ino, hoping to play the quarreling threesome against each other.

Ino suddenly was holding thin air, up on her tip-toes, lips pursed.

“Genjutsu! Oh! You’ll pay! He’s even standing still...perfect!” Ino lined Ryouko up with her Mind/Body

Transfer Jutsu. She attacked, letting her body slump to the ground.

Ryouko, who saw Choji coming, also sensed an incoming chakra. Focusing his to the bottom of his feet, he leapt straight up again.

Ino was in someone's body. Her jutsu had worked!

"Ha! I did it- what?! Damnit! Choji, you idiot! You got in the way!" Ino screeched upon realizing she had taken over Choji's body. She exited as quickly as she could, feeling like burning her skin off.

As soon as Ryouko landed, he knew he made a mistake. He was rooted to the spot.

Damnit...this must be that shadow attack he used before on my clone. He snuck within range while the other two provided a distraction inadvertently...apparently he's the brains here...

"You want to look? I'll let you," Shikamaru told him. Ryouko felt his head move down. He saw his shadow snared by Shikamaru.

"I couldn't get you before because Ino and Chouji were in the way, then you were out of range. But I judged where you would come down. Still, I'll give you credit, you gave us a hell of a time." Shikamaru let go of Ryouko's shadow and rolled his shoulders.

How troublesome. I just wanted to be a ninja so I could do whatever I wanted. So much for THAT...

"TOO much of a time." Asuma had reappeared. "How did it take you three 20 minutes to fend off a single new guy? Anyone have an answer?"

"He's really good!" Choji remarked. Ino nodded her agreement.

"Our teamwork fell apart. But that wasn't just us, to be fair, he (Ryouko) had a lot to do with that. Somehow, he knew our attacks. That clone jutsu revealed Choji's, and he must have sensed Ino's chakra about to hit him. Oh, by the way Ino- what were you making out with?" Shikamaru quipped at the end.

"Sorry about that, Ino. I, um, hope you enjoyed your time with Sasuke," Ryouko said sheepishly.

"Best genjutsu ever!" Ino remarked. She gave Ryouko a swat on the butt, which caused him to blush. He never HAD been graceful around cute females.

Asuma blew out another puff of smoke. "Well, Kakashi and Gai warned me you'd be a handful. Interesting techniques. That clone thing- is that one of yours?"

Ryouko nodded. "It is. I saw Uzumaki Naruto use a Shadow Clone Jutsu, and I wanted to see if I could

combine it with my Dragon's Ember jutsu. Since I really didn't know your team, I thought it might get them to reveal their attacks."

"That's smart thinking. And your chakra control was impressive. If you're around, stop by for a game of Go, or Shogi, if you prefer. In fact, I'm going to add that to our lesson for today. I've got this puzzle thing I think you'll like..."

4 - Mission 1: The Land of Waves!

MISSION 1: THE LAND OF WAVES!

Lord Hokage sighed. Iruka was yelling, but for all the good it was doing, he might as well have been talking to the wall. It was a perfect day outside, but a storm was brewing inside. A loud storm clothed in orange.

“D-ranked missions are common for genin! You’d be overmatched with any other mission!” Iruka was trying to drive home the point with Naruto. Good luck there.

“OVERMATCHED? I’m a future Hokage! Right now, I’m a ninja, and I want a REAL ninja mission, ‘tabeyo!” Naruto say down like a stubborn child, cheeks puffed out, and head turned away from Iruka and the others. Iruka gritted his teeth. That headband hadn’t made Naruto mature in EVERY way.

POOF! Asuma was in Lord Hokage’s office courtesy of a body flicker jutsu. His ever-present cigarette had gone out due to the wind resistance, so Asuma had to light up again.

“Asuma? Good news?” Lord Hokage asked while Kakashi tried to control Naruto. Naruto was acting like a five year old who couldn’t have cookies before dinner.

“He did very well. Twenty minutes before he was snared by Shikamaru’s jutsu. He collected information, and he combined a jutsu of his own creation with a Shadow Clone. Also, I had him take an IQ test.”

“And?” the Third asked, a wreath of smoke exiting his mouth.

“Shikamaru is a 200. Ryouko didn’t crack that, but his IQ is above average, genius in reading and writing. His math skills are weaker, only average. But, overall, he’s very bright.”

Lord Hokage puffed on his pipe. “Well, then, he’ll be permitted to do missions. I have one in mind for Kakashi’s team. I’m going to put him in the mix. Please have him sent here, Asuma. If Naruto thinks he’s ready for a challenge, then I think it fair to give him one.”

--

“C-ranked. Escort the bridge builder, Tazuna, to the Land of Waves. There may be some resistance, in the form of bandits or low-level ninja, hence the reason for the escort,” the Third Hokage explained. Naruto jumped for joy, while Sakura watched for a reaction from Sasuke. Kakashi shook his head, worrying. Ryouko raised his hand.

“Lord Hokage? I have a couple questions, if I can ask...” Ryouko began carefully, not sure if this was

okay or not.

“Yes?” The Third asked kindly as a wreath of smoke left his pipe.

“Land of Waves...I’m assuming that means water. If what I’ve read about them is correct, they don’t have Shinobi of their own. I guess my question is...kind of stupid, but...why would anyone be after this bridge builder? An older man doing construction work doesn’t seem like a threat. And the Land of Waves isn’t a wealthy nation, so robbing him wouldn’t be worth their while...it just seems like a piece is missing...” Ryouko had rambled on longer than he meant to, and quickly bowed. “I apologize, it’s not my place to question!”

“It’s not? I think it is. If information is available, it’s wise to take it. In this case, however, I have none. It may just be that the man is lonely, or worries for his safety. An escort mission doesn’t necessarily mean that the person is a target of bandits. He IS traveling alone, he might be worried about injuring himself while by himself, and being stranded without help.” The Third puffed on his pipe again. **I’m glad someone asked SOMETHing about the mission.**

“I understand. Thank you.” Ryouko bowed again, but Lord Hokage could tell the wheels in his mind were turning over what was just said, looking for a meaning.

As the five exited the Leaf Village, Sakura was clinging to Sasuke, Kakashi was pulling up the rear nonchalantly, and Ryouko, the only one who could put up with Tazuna, was silently drinking in the landscape. Escapes, weapons, and natural defenses filled his head. He hopped over a puddle of water, one that Naruto had taken great care to splash in himself.

“Hey, runt! Slow down, not all of us have a natural sugar high!” Tazuna shouted roughly to Naruto. Naruto took offense, and charged. Ryouko slid in the way, while Kakashi snared Naruto.

“You CAN’T kill the client, Naruto, for the last time! It doesn’t work that way,” Kakashi explained with an exaggerated patience.

Tazuna gave Ryouko a swift kick in the butt. Ryouko nearly returned the favor, but remembered that you ‘can’t kill the client’, so he settled for ignoring the kick.

“That doesn’t mean for you to slow down! Are you slow or something?” Tazuna couldn’t resist asking.

Ryouko whipped around, quick enough to scare Tazuna. Seeming to tower over the bridge builder, Ryouko outlined something to him.

“I don’t think it’s smart to piss off the people who are protecting you. Especially since I put myself at risk of angering a comrade to make sure you didn’t get hurt, even though I wouldn’t blame Naruto for hurting you. If anything, I’d encourage him whipping your arrogant @\$\$\$. But it’s my mission to keep you safe, and I’m going to do that. But I can only speak for myself, and I won’t be much good against twenty ninja by myself, if you drive all the others away.”

Sasuke 'hned' his okay at Ryouko's reaction with a half-smirk. Inner-Sakura cheered that someone had told the drunk old man off. Naruto was thrilled to see the man humbled. Kakashi was thankful that someone had thought of the mission PERIOD.

Tazuna stared at Ryouko, while Ryouko just kept walking next to him.

"Is the land of waves a nice place to live?" Ryouko asked quietly, absently biting into his thumb. A trickle of blood dribbled down the side of it.

"What do you care?" Tazuna questioned rudely. He took another swing of whatever alcohol he was drinking, wiping the bit dribbling down his chin away with the back of his hand.

"I'm looking at a condo there..." Ryouko shot back sarcastically, sounding bored. He ran his bleeding thumb down a scroll and- reached inside it? He began to rummage around, looking for something inside the scroll. This was strange to everyone, save for Kakashi. Ryouko either didn't notice the attention he was garnering, or he didn't care.

"Yeah, it's nice, if you like the ocean. Or crappy food. What the hell are you doing kid?" Tazuna finally asked to satisfy his curiosity.

The others were wondering that themselves. Ryouko innocently extracted a black straw hat. "Just a summoning scroll. The sun was getting in my eyes."

"Hey, what the hell?! How can you just go "Poof" and have a hat?!" Naruto shouted.

"Idiot, don't you know anything? That's a summoning scroll. You can put any number of things in there, and it won't weight more than a regular scroll," Sasuke bluntly informed Naruto.

"Didn't you pay attention in class AT ALL, Naruto?!" Sakura added.

Kakashi stopped suddenly. Ryouko did, too. They had both heard something. Seconds later, four ninja leapt out of the bushes. Two of them snared Kakashi with long, pointy chains, and squeezed.

"KAKASHI-SENSEI!" Sakura screeched. But Kakashi was dead, diced into ribbons. The four ninja turned toward Tazuna and the four genin.

"Give us the old man, and no one gets hurt..." one threatened, holding up the metal gauntlet the chain was attached to.

Sakura and Naruto were both frozen. Sasuke and Ryouko, however, leapt into action. Sasuke threw a shuriken, trapping the long chains of the two ninja to the tree, then added a kunai through the shuriken. That immobilized the two Shinobi while Sasuke leapt up, and landed on their heads. He pushed off with both legs in separated directions, breaking the chains off the opposing ninja's weapons.

Ryouko slid in front of Sakura and Naruto, taking off his hat. The two opposing chunin laughed. It must have been funny to them. A young kid, fifteen years old at the most, with bags under his eyes and a

sinewy frame was going to stop them? One reached out for Ryouko, but Ryouko batted his hand away with his hat.

“AH! You little jerk! How did you do that?!”

Ryouko was holding his hat, which was now blood-stained. “Razors sewn in with the straw. Effective, when you don’t see it coming...hyah!” Ryouko threw the hat like a frisbee. As the two ninja ducked. Ryouko raced forward, kicking one in the face. The other grabbed him- or tried to. Ryouko had thrown an elbow up, narrowly missing the guy’s nose. As he leaned back, the luckless Shinobi hit a tree. Ryouko gave him a side-kick, before throwing him to the ground. A quick glance over his shoulder told Ryouko that he needed to get back in front of Tazuna, quick! Sakura was in trouble. The other ninja was headed for Naruto. Apparently, they had gotten away from Sasuke before he could incapacitate them completely. Ryouko moved to help Sakura, but Sasuke was already there. Ryouko turned to help Naruto, but, Kakashi-sensei to the rescue. With one under unconscious enemy under each arm, Kakashi had saved Sakura and Tazuna.

“Good work, you three. Naruto, I’m sorry I took so long to get back, but I didn’t expect you to freeze up like that...oh, right, by the way, these are Mist ninja, they use poison, so you might want to make a cut in your hand and let the poison run out before it kills you.”

Naruto suddenly never felt more alone. **I froze up...Sasuke and Ryouko did what they were supposed to do, but I couldn’t do anything. I was useless...**

“Naruto, that poison...” Kakashi reminded him.

Naruto took up a kunai. Violently, he jammed it into his hand. **I swear by the pain in my left hand...I will NEVER back down...I will NEVER run away...Believe it!**

“Naruto...it’s really cool how you got rid of the poison and all...but, if you lose anymore blood, you’re going to die,” Kakashi informed him, Naruto began to thrash around wildly.

“Ahh! I don’t wanna die!” Naruto wailed.

“Let me see your hand!” Kakashi grabbed Naruto’s hand. To his surprise, the cut had almost healed already. Mentally noting any possible reasons why, Kakashi told Naruto that he would be fine.

“Hey...you’re not hurt, are you? Scaredy cat,” Sasuke taunted with a smirk.

“WHAT?! SASSSUKKEEEEE!” Naruto wanted to attack him, but Sakura, once again, punched him in the head to settle him down. Brutal, but effective.

The trip to the Land of Waves of anything BUT quiet. Naruto was constantly muttering under his breath about their client, Tazuna, the bridge builder. Tazuna had referred to his guardians as a pack of little brats. Tazuna seemed to think Kakashi a suitable protector. Ryouko, he decided, he just didn’t like.

“What, you too good to talk to me, kid?” Tazuna taunted, slightly drunk. He had been drinking some

cheap wine the entire trip, and becoming more of a belligerent bastard with each swig.

“What do you want to talk about?” Ryouko asked, keeping his voice emotionless.

“Nothing, to a snot like you! Why are YOU here anyway? I enlisted the help of a squad, not a squad AND their little playmate!” Tazuna said with a derisive laugh. Ryouko wiped Tazuna’s rogue spit off his face and stared back.

“For the record, I haven’t said anything to you because you told us to be quiet. I was simply following a client’s instructions.”

Silence. Tazuna HAD said that. Kakashi looked over at Ryouko, whose tone and face hadn’t changed. Somehow, he had shut up this drunken, mouthy client with a few well-chosen, respectful words.

Interesting kid. He said he was nervous, but he’s not exactly showing it. Apparently, he’s grasping the concept of the client-shinobi relationship. Sakura and Sasuke picked it up first, to be fair. Naruto...well, he’s what I expected.

Upon reaching the Land of waves, the intrepid group piled into a rowboat. Naruto sat by himself, moody over Sasuke’s comment.

“We’ll be coming up to the bridge any minute, you should be able to see it.” The person rowing the boat, a friend of Tazuna’s, pointed out the huge structure.

“Tazuna-san, there are things you haven’t told us. WHY you were attacked, for starters. I’ve got no choice but to terminate this mission once we get you ashore.” Kakashi hated to do it, but their mission parameters had ended the second Tazuna hadn’t warned them about such a serious attack. Kakashi continued.

“Those were chunin level ninja, a serious threat to the genin crew I have. Next time, whoever is attacking you will send higher level ninja, meaning that this mission would be higher than “C” ranked.”

“We’re only genin, we’re not trained for this kind of threat,” Sakura added kindly, thankful to be getting out of trouble.

Tazuna wasn’t happy, but he had no choice but to tell his story to try to save his own butt.

“This bridge is our land’s last hope for independence from a short man who casts a long shadow. The shipping magnate, Gato. He controls our nation’s imports and exports, leaving us impoverished, and forced to pay him. He wants to kill me, because if the bridge is complete, we wouldn’t need his ships anymore, we could trade with whomever we wanted.” Tazuna paused, beginning to look a strange combination of ‘depressed’ and ‘desperate’. Then he continued. “We’re a poor nation, we couldn’t afford to pay for an A or B ranked mission. That’s why I lied; I had no choice. I understand if you have to end the mission...but all those people’s hopes will die with me...not to mention my Grandson, Inari, and my daughter, Tsunami...don’t worry about it, though...it’s not...your fault.” Tazuna cried at the end, but his tears were horribly fake, and his acting sucked.

Everyone had their own thoughts, but Ryouko's was the most accurate. **He might be a louse, and a rotten actor, but he's right. If the others go back, they go back without me, I'm not going to desert him- no matter how much of an @\$\$ he is...**

Ryouko didn't have to worry, he wasn't going to be alone. Everyone agreed to stay. Naruto never backed down from a mission.

Tazuna smirked; his little acting job had worked.

As they reached the shore, Tazuna seemed to regain his bravery, and his abusive nature.

"Alright, let's hurry it up, your mission is to get me home in one piece, let's move it!"

Naruto was furious over how Sasuke had stayed so calm and cool while they were being attacked, and he was determined not to let it happen again. That put Naruto on the lookout for anything that moved. He ran ahead, comically looking around, a hand over his eyes.

"Over there!" he shouted, throwing a kunai into the bushes. No one else had moved.

"It was just a mouse," he said sheepishly.

"You idiot, be careful, those aren't toys!" Sakura shouted, probably thinking that she would be the next thing to get hit with an errant kunai.

Soon, Naruto threw another kunai. This one had almost killed a rabbit. Naruto freaked out, and began apologizing to the rabbit.

"I'm sorry little rabbit, I'm sorry..." he cried, stroking its fur. The rabbit was petrified, but otherwise unharmed. Sakura looked horrified that Naruto had nearly ended the little rabbit's life, while Sasuke didn't get the fuss. Ryouko was still out on the trail, keeping an eye on Tazuna, while looking around for some sign of a person having been there, on the off chance Naruto was right.

But Kakashi noticed something strange about the rabbit. **That's a snow rabbit...The color of the fur...it's only white like this during winter...one look around plainly said 'it's not winter', with a clear sky and a warm day like this]This rabbit was raised indoors, away from the light, which means it would have only one use...a replacement jutsu...**

Up in the trees, a figure hid among the leaves, watching silently. Kakashi casually looked over his shoulder in the general direction of the figure, one thought in his head.

So...they're already here...

Crouched up in a tree, a strange villain brandishing an enormous sword peered down on his prey.

They sure don't LOOK like a threat to the demon brothers, not to mention the other two chunin I sent...Except for that one...Kakashi of the Sharingan...

"Everyone take cover!" Kakashi ordered suddenly. It didn't take long to figure out why he had made that order. The huge sword flying through the air, about to behead them, seemed a perfect reason to take cover. The genin hit the dirt and covered their heads. Ryouko combat-crawled toward Tazuna. He might not be the most tasteful man, but he was still their client.

Naruto and the others looked upward, seeing the sword had buried itself blade-first into a tree. Second later, a tall, muscular, but strange-looking man, with a bandaged face and an angled headband (Mist) was standing on the hilt of the sword, looking down at the group almost dismissively. Naruto immediately made for the man, eager to redeem himself for the 'scaredy cat' incident, but found Kakashi-sensei's hand blocking his way.

"Don't interfere, Naruto," Kakashi ordered, before briskly turning his attention back to the man on the sword. The name and face clicked in Kakashi's mind.

"So, Mamochi Zabuza, rouge ninja from the Hidden Mist Village." Kakashi had a gut feeling that Zabuza was going to attack. With that, Kakashi played his ace, revealing his Sharingan eye. Only Sasuke really knew what it was. Ryouko had studied it, but had never actually seen the eye in person. He didn't think he would, unless Sasuke showed him. For this sensei to have the eye, Ryouko's respect for him grew. Sakura knew OF the Sharingan eye, but not much else. Naruto didn't know what the heck the eye was, but he knew enough to figure out that it was cool, and most likely dangerous.

Zabuza, who had his back to the group, turned his head to face Kakashi.

"Are you gonna surrender the old man?" he growled. It was a pretty menacing site, this guy standing atop his sword like that. It was a beautiful, but deadly, weapon. If the stories were true, that weapon had taken more lives than people Naruto had even met. It was a gruesome thought.

Kakashi looked over at his group, who were standing in awe. "None of you get involved, this is the best kind of teamwork in this situation. Focus on protecting Tazuna." Kakashi's voice had turned steely, and the air suddenly felt heavier. A battle between ninjas of this caliber...you could only surpass it by having a battle between kages, and that wasn't likely to happen, since the Lands were at peace for the moment..

To Naruto and his team, failing this mission might have been as bad as death. Naruto would be further from being Hokage, Sasuke would be farther away from rebuilding his clan, and Sakura would look like a failure to Sasuke. Neither failure nor death was appealing. Judging by their opponent, one seemed as likely as the other...

5 - The Hidden Mist Rises

THE HIDDEN MIST RISES!

The air was ripe with intensity. The stare down between Kakashi and Zabuza was the first time any of the genin had seen a battle between two jonin. Add that to the fact that these were jonin of the highest caliber, and the intensity level rose ten fold.

Kakashi had lifted his headband, but kept his eye closed to Zabuza. Until now. This elicited a chuckle from Zabuza, which seemed grossly misplaced, considering the danger he was in.

“So, I get to face the famous Sharingan? This is quite the honor! Ha ha ha!” Zabuza seemed pleased to be facing Kakashi, while Kakashi remained his normal, impassive (albeit slightly more intense) self.

“Man, Sharingan, Sharingan, Sharingan! What the heck is it, anyway?!” Naruto’s voice pierced the silence like a kunai. To Naruto’s surprise, it was Sasuke who answered him, instead of Sakura.

“Sharingan is a type of doujutsu, or ocular jutsu. Shinobi possessing the Sharingan have the ability to instantly copy any jutsu performed in front of them. Not only that, they can also see through illusions, and genjutsu. But the Sharingan is not a learned technique. It’s a kekkeaigenkai.” Sasuke was deadly serious, and thoughts were rattling around in his head nonstop.

How could he have the Sharingan? It’s the Uchiha kekkeaigenkai!

“Wait, a kooky-WHAT? What’s that?!” Naruto’s face was screwed up in confusion.

“(Sigh)Didn’t you EVER pay attention at the academy, Naruto? A kekkeaigenkai is an ability that is inherited, not learned. It comes from your ancestry, and depends on who your parents were. There are lots of kekkeaigenkais, some we don’t even know about yet!” Sakura, of course, knew the answer. She was a brilliant girl by anyone’s standards.

“Oh, I kinda get it. It’s special, then. Okay. GET HIM, SENSEI!” Naruto declared loudly, cheering on Kakashi.

“Right, right. Even if you’re leading a pack of brats Kakashi, it’s still interesting...When I was still in Kirigakure, our BINGO books had quite the collection on you. Rumor has it that you’ve copied over a thousand jutsus...impressive. Let’s get to it, Kakashi, I’m on a schedule, and killing that old bridge builder is tops on my agenda! But I can see I’m going to have to wipe you out first!” With that, Zabuza leapt backward onto the water. To everyone’s surprise (save for Kakashi and Ryouko’s), Zabuza was standing on the water.

Kakashi’s Sharingan was taking in everything, and assisting Kakashi in supplying sardonic thoughts.

Clever bastard...he's built up a huge amount of chakra...where is he going with this?

"The Hidden Mist Village Jutsu..." touted Zabuza, before disappearing into a thick fog. That fog began to spread all over. The group of genin clustered around Tazuna tightened the grip on their kunai, partially in fear, partially in anticipation.

"Don't drop your guards! If you do, you've got a one-way ticket to the next life!" Kakashi warned the group. "Zabuza has mastered the art of silent killing...you're dead before you can even know he's been here."

"There are eight targets..." Zabuza's voice said, seeming to come from everywhere, though there was no visible source. "Throat, spine, lungs, liver, jugular vein, subclavian artery, kidney, heart...which delicate life source will I pick first?"

Sasuke, usually the most collected of his team, was starting to shake. The kunai in his hand began to rattle in rhythm with his trembling.

I-I can't even blink! If I do, he'll find me and kill me! I can feel it! I can't stay like this for long, I'm going to lose my mind! An assassin, determined to kill, has me in his hands, and he knows it...I...I almost WANT to die...Anything, ANYTHING, just to end the suspense!

"Sasuke!"

Kakashi's voice cracked Sasuke's borderline-insane thoughts. Sasuke turned his shaking head slowly to look at Kakashi, who continued to speak once he was sure he had Sasuke's attention.

"Calm down. Even if it kills me...I will never let my comrades die..."

FWOOMP!

Zabuza landed right in the middle of the genin, his sword at the ready. He elbowed Sakura out of the way, and gave Sasuke a backhand. Ryouko tried to get a grip on Zabuza's hands, but Zabuza quickly cracked him across the forehead with the pommel of his huge sword.

"Game over." Zabuza drew his sword back to cut. He stopped suddenly. Kakashi had plunged a kunai hilt-deep into Zabuza. But Zabuza didn't bleed, he just splashed into water.

"Sensei! Behind you!" Naruto shouted. Kakashi didn't even have time to turn around as Zabuza used his gigantic sword to cut him in two. But Kakashi just splashed to the ground, the way Zabuza had. This left Zabuza both surprised, and angry.

He was able to copy my jutsu, even through the fog?! Then Zabuza froze up, the cold metal of a kunai against his neck.

"Game over." This time, the words came from Kakashi. He was holding a kunai at Zabuza's neck, keeping the rouge Mist Shinobi tight. At such a close range, Zabuza sword would be ineffective.

“Do you really think this is over? It’s going to take plenty more than just mimicking me to defeat me! Although, you’re as good as they say, Kakashi. Copy my Water Clone Jutsu, then making your clone say something you yourself would say, all while you hid in the mist and watched my every move...But I’m not so easy to fool!”

Kakashi was now the one with the kunai at his neck. Zabuza had somehow gotten behind Kakashi. But he was in front of him at the same time. Kakashi stabbed the Zabuza in front of him, and it simply turned into a puddle of water. That’s when the REAL Zabuza swiped at Kakashi with his sword. Kakashi ducked the first strike, though it was close; his silver hair moved in the breeze created by the strike. Zabuza planted his sword in the ground, spun around it, and then kicked Kakashi. The kick was incredibly powerful, and knocked Kakashi into a small lake. But that lake hadn’t been there before.

In the lake, Kakashi pulled himself out of the water. But he immediately registered that something was wrong.

This water...it’s not natural...it’s too heavy...

“Hah! Fool! Water Style: Water Prison Jutsu!” Zabuza quickly put the exclamation point on his attack by trapping Kakashi in a sphere of water! “Heh he! That prison is inescapable! You’re not going anywhere! I’ll finish you off later- but first, my mission must be finished!”

Damn! He’s going after them! Kakashi thought, but couldn’t do anything else.

“You little punk...wearing your little hitai-ate, thinking you’re a ninja! You’re just a brat!” Zabuza created another water clone. He himself was holding the water prison that currently held Kakashi. The water clone, however, cracked Naruto across the face, knocking his headband off.

“Listen, all of you! Take Tazuna and run! His water clone can’t go out of his range, he has no choice but to keep me here!” Kakashi plan was desperate, and it left him at Zabuza’s mercy. But to Kakashi, both his comrades and his mission came before his own life.

Naruto, who was still on the ground, looked up, shaking. **He-he’s going to kill me! I’ve got to run for it! OW!** Naruto had started to push off with his hand, but he had used the hand he had cut with his kunai. It reminded him of his vow.

I swore that I would never back down, or run away again...I’ve got to...get up...and

With a yell of primal rage, Naruto rushed Zabuza, who was stepping on the Leaf Village headband that had flown off of Naruto’s head.

“NARUTO!” Sakura shouted. She looked at Sasuke, who was gritting his teeth, but not moving.

“I’ve got it, you protect Tazuna, Naruto needs the backup!” Ryouko took off after Naruto, focusing

chakra to his feet to catch up.

Zabuza grinned widely, thinking this would be the easiest kill he ever had. It wasn't every day someone rushed you with his head down like that. Zabuza cocked his sword back and started to swing, but found it blocked. **What?!**

Ryouko had used a kunai to stop Zabuza blade. It took his both hands to do it, but he stopped it's deadly arch by bracing the flat section of the kunai with his hand. Ryouko and Zabuza were both shaking from the effort, though it was clear Zabuza was the more powerful of the two as the sword moved closer to it's intended destination. Naruto dove forward, and just as his hand grabbed his hitai-ate, Zabuza's powerful leg kicked him back toward his group. Ryouko released his hold on Zabuza sword, letting Zabuza's own force drive the sword into the dirt. Ryouko was tempted to follow up and keep attacking while Zabuza was open, but his mission was to protect Tazuna, not fight this weirdo. Zabuza swung at Ryouko with his free hand, but Ryouko had already leapt backward to Naruto's aid.

"You okay?" Ryouko asked, wondering what the hell had prompted Naruto to rush in with his head down like that. Then he saw the hitai-ate in Naruto's hand.

"Naruto, have you lost it?! We're only genin, we can't just- huh?" Sakura stopped in mid-criticism, noticing the headband in Naruto's fist.

He just wanted his headband?

Naruto was bleeding from the mouth, but started tying his headband back in place.

"Hey...you...the freak with no eyebrows...I've got a new name for your bingo book. He's the future Hokage of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, and his name is Uzumaki Naruto!" Naruto's eyes flashed up. You could swear it was a different kid. He had a new air of confidence, and while this was undoubtedly Naruto, it was unlike him.

"Sasuke...I've got a plan!"

Kakashi was immediately worried. **Darn it...** He couldn't keep his worry silent for long.

"What's the matter with you? Run! You have a duty to protect Tazuna! This was over the second I got caught! Take Tazuna and go!" Kakashi yelled in frustration, his voice garbled from being inside the water prison. Next to him, Zabuza had begun to laugh.

"Heh...do you realize that by the time I was your age, I had already stained my hands with the blood others?!"

Kakashi suddenly felt Zabuza's name fall into place in his memory.

“The demon...” he said aloud, lost in thought.

“It seems you’ve heard of me...and the Mist Village’s little “graduation ceremony”...Students were paired off and forced to fight to the death. Comrades killed each other, even though they had eaten from the same plate, and had been raised together. That is how you truly became a Shinobi!” Zabuza was seemingly smiling at the memory. Sakura shivered slightly, while Ryouko and Sasuke grew more serious. Naruto was still brimming with confidence. But now, a little anger had risen. To Naruto, life was precious, and to hear about it thrown away in such a senseless manner was foreign to him. Before he could voice that, Kakashi continued where Zabuza had left off...

“Ten years ago, the elders of Kirigakure had to put an end to that test...a young man, not even qualified as a ninja yet, slaughtered over one hundred members of the graduating class...”

“Ah, life was so much fun then!” Zabuza added brightly. Then, without warning, he struck. Sasuke was hit so fast and so hard he didn’t have time to react. After two strikes, Sasuke was down, blood gushing from his mouth, and Zabuza’s foot on his chest. Ryouko and Sakura hadn’t been targeted yet. Ryouko tried to force himself to come up with a plan, but since Sasuke was in the line of fire, and positioned in such a way he could be killed in an instant, Ryouko’s mind gave him nothing to work with. Naruto, however, acted out of desperation.

“Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

The clones swarmed Zabuza, pushing him off of Sasuke. It appeared that Naruto’s tactic had worked. Then, suddenly, all the Naruto’s went flying, the clones destroyed, and Naruto himself hit yet again. But as he was falling backward, he reached into his backpack and pulled out his last idea.

“Sasuke! Heads up!” he shouted, throwing something to Sasuke.

Sasuke saw some salvation as he caught what Naruto had thrown. **So THIS is what he had planned...**

SNAP!

Sasuke was now holding a black, four-sided throwing weapon. And it had a name:

“Demon Wind Shuriken! Windmill of Shadows!” As he leapt up to throw the weapon, Sasuke let loose a shout of fury, before flinging the giant shuriken at Zabuza.

“Hah! Too easy!” Zabuza reached out and caught the rapidly spinning shuriken by the center handle. **WHAT?! There’s a second one?!** Zabuza had to jump over the second shuriken.

He hid a second shuriken in the shadow of the first? Sakura was gaping in surprise. Knowing that she was busying oogling this, Ryouko created a Shadow Clone of himself, positioning it on one side of Tazuna, whose mouth had also dropped open with shock.

Behind Zabuza, the shuriken suddenly disappeared! In its place was Naruto! And Zabuza didn't see him until Naruto shouted "Take this!" and threw a kunai at Zabuza. With both arms occupied, Zabuza had to dodge the kunai aimed at his face. He did so by stepping to the side. As a result, his hand broke free of the water prison holding Kakashi. But now Naruto was flying through the air helplessly, and Zabuza had Sasuke Windmill Shuriken. Zabuza, angered by the sudden turn of events, began to spin the shuriken, and reared back to throw it.

THOCK!

Kakashi was standing up, and the back of his hand had stopped the Shuriken from moving.

"Naruto...your scheme was brilliant! Excellent work, all of you!" Kakashi declared, with Zabuza too stunned to move for the moment.

"He he he! The Clones weren't the attack! It was just a distraction while I transformed into the second shuriken! I used a Shadow Clone to make it LOOK like I saw still standing over here, when really, I was behind Zabuza!" Naruto was beaming with pride. And maybe even a little anticipation. With Kakashi-sensei free, for Zabuza, there was going to be hell to pay!

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"Heh. You made me so mad I undid my own jutsu..." Zabuza groused, mildly impressed.

"No...they broke the spell, not you. And you know, the same trick won't work twice on me..."

After a pregnant pause, Zabuza and Kakashi leapt away from each other. They were making identical handsigns, and so rapidly that the genin could barely make out what signs they were. It was also the longest series they had ever seen. Ryouko wished he could see this in slow motion to make some notes. Anything this complicated had to be a hell of a jutsu.

"Water Style! Water Dragon Missile!" Kakashi and Zabuza shouted at the same time. Two dragons rose from the water, and bit each other, in effect canceling out the jutsu. The water rained down on everyone, and left everyone, save for Kakashi, shocked. Zabuza attacked again, and Kakashi blocked his strike with an identical one. As they jockeyed for position, it dawned on Zabuza that something was wrong. He leapt backward, as did Kakashi, and raised his arm, ready to perform another jutsu. But Kakashi had imitated his position.

He sees... Zabuza thought, but his thoughts were cut off by Kakashi's words.

"Through them all?" Kakashi finished.

Is he-

"Reading my mind?" again, Kakashi finished Zabuza thought.

"Stop mimicking me, damn you!" Zabuza tried to make handsigns, but Kakashi had beaten him to the

punch.

“Water Style: Giant Waterfall!” Kakashi shouted before Zabuza had finished.

This can't be! How did he do this? I didn't even finish the handsigns! But he used my technique against me! I can't keep pace with him! Zabuza was swept away in the current, until he bounced off a tree with a loud THUNK!

“How are you...can you see into the future?!” Zabuza was out of breath.

“...Yes. I can see...your death.” Kakashi was ready to kill Zabuza, when two senbon suddenly did the job for him. Kakashi and the others were on their guard again. But a young kid, roughly the same age as Naruto, landed in front of them.

“I apologize, but I wanted to kill him. We've been after him for weeks...” the kid, wearing a porcelain mask with the Hidden Mist Village's symbol on it said, by way of explanation.

“WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!” Naruto shouted, an accusatory finger pointed at the kid.

“Naruto, stop it. This isn't an enemy. (To the masked kid:) You're one of the hunter-nin from Kirigakure, aren't you?” Kakashi stated/asked. He had checked Zabuza, and found him to be dead.

The masked person answered Kakashi's question. “Yes. My duty was to hunt down Zabuza, to stop him from revealing secrets of Kirigakure. Your mission is done, for now. I must take care of this corpse...” The masked hunter-nin made a handsign, and disappeared in a swirl.

Then, Kakashi fell over.

“Must've used the Sharingan too much...” Kakashi said weakly from the ground. Without speaking, Naruto and Sasuke picked up their sensei and helped him back to Tazuna's house, while Sakura bandaged his hand.

“Will you be all right?” Tsunami asked. A pretty young woman in her late twenties with chestnut-brown hair, Tsunami was the daughter of the bridge builder, Tazuna.

Kakashi was lying on a futon, his strength still sapped. “I'll be fine in about a week or so.”

“One thing I don't get...that masked kid...what IS a hunter-nin, anyway?” Sakura wanted to know.

“Hunter-nin hunt down rogues from their own village. Their main job is to kill that rogue, and then dispose of the corpse. They get rid of the body so thoroughly, it's as if the Shinobi never existed at all,” Kakashi answered.

“But why? I mean, they’re dead, right? What damage could they do?” Sakura had been sitting on this question for a long time.

“A shinobi’s body holds a lot of secrets. For example, if I were to die, and an enemy took my body, they might discover the secret of the Sharingan, and find a way to ‘manufacture’ it.”

That wasn’t a welcome thought to the genin, but no one said anything else. Kakashi-sensei needed his rest.

6 - The Hunter-nin's Secret Agenda!

THE HUNTER-NIN'S SECRET AGENDA!

For a couple days, Kakashi was too laid up to teach anything, which meant that the genin were free to do what they wanted. Naruto and Sasuke had been injured slightly, and Sakura convinced them both to take it easy and relax. Ryouko had also been injured, but he didn't deter his training. Every night, without fail, he had his white scroll in front of him, making notes, corrections, and additions. He extracted his scrolls and worksheet on chakra control and studied that, making rapid notes, muttering if he made a mistake. Ryouko had taken to sitting out on the roof, and became so absorbed he missed meals. One night, Ryouko had taken the time to construct a straw dummy of Zabuzza, and used a cut on this thumb to mark certain areas on the straw dummy. Going by the knowledge he had gotten from his own dojo, Ryouko knew pressure points, and what strike went with what point. Something about that hunter-nin bothered Ryouko, but he couldn't put his finger on what. He was hoping this reconstruction would help. After coming close, but getting nowhere, Ryouko decided to take the dummy to Kakashi-sensei. From there, Ryouko could outline what he knew about pressure points. Kakashi-sensei could probably put his mind at ease.

A second person joined him on the roof. It was Sakura, and she was carrying a plate of rice, dumplings, and some kind of delicious-looking roll.

"Kakashi-sensei says you need to eat, Ryouko. If he's hurt, we need all the help we can get..." Sakura looked worried, and rightfully so. The last couple days had been trying for her.

"Thank you, Sakura. Sorry if I worried Kakashi-sensei. I've just been thinking...something feels off to me...I just can't figure out what...well, no matter, I should keep training..." Ryouko looked tired; he hadn't slept in almost a day. Naruto, Sasuke, and Kakashi needed their rest, and Ryouko was up at night anyway, so he was perfect to keep watch.

"I meant to ask, Ryouko...that scroll of yours- what's in it? Can I see it?" Sakura questioned, kneeling down next to Ryouko.

"Oh, sure. I'm sure it's not anything fascinating. Just some notes I've taken. I was just adding to my section on the Sharingan..." Ryouko opened the white scroll. It was longer than Sakura had thought, and it didn't take her long to realize that this wasn't genin level work.

"Wow, this must have taken a TON of studying!" Sakura exclaimed. **Geez, I'm supposed to be the smart one, and I can barely wade through this!**

"Yeah. Well, I mean, I kind of threw myself into my training. I left my old dojo, and not under the best circumstances. But I couldn't do any more there...I feel like I fit in at Konohagakure..." Ryouko smiled serenely. Then he blushed furiously.

"Sorry...I always get nervous around girls...especially kunoichi..." Ryouko muttered shyly. Sakura smiled

understandingly.

“Can I ask...how come you're always alone?” Sakura had been wondering about this.

“Well...I guess it's because I'm older. And because I'm the new kid on the block. Not that people haven't been nice, they've really been great! But I'm different, I just don't really fit anywhere. My parents aren't Shinobi, NONE of my family is, and they don't get my fascination with this, or the other martial arts I do.”

That made sense to Sakura/ She offered him an empathetic smile.

“My parents don't get it either. They don't understand that I've got to be a ninja to be with Sasuke.”

Ryouko forced a smile; it was difficult being completely ignored at times. **Well, at least she doesn't hate me. She's pretty. If she had confidence, she'd easily have Sasuke...or any other guy she wanted. She's too self-conscious about her forehead. It adds to her charm...that's not the turn-off to Sasuke. The turnoff is that Sakura doesn't think she had strength. She does, you can't be that brilliant and not have some kind of strength. But she doesn't display it...Must be nice to have a fangirl, huh, Sasuke?** Ryouko thought, smiling for real. He was fifteen and only really starting to find an interest in girls. But his social awkwardness put the kibosh on a relationship in his mind.

Sakura could also see why Ryouko liked it up here. A view of the ocean, a nice cool breeze on a warm day, and the quiet sounds of life that the ears could *just* hear. She stood for a few minutes, letting the breeze toss her hair. She couldn't help but dream a little...what if Sasuke were up here with her?

“Sakura.”

For a moment, Sakura could swear she heard Sasuke's voice. She sighed audibly.

“Sakura, come on.”

Again, Sasuke's voice. Sakura looked at Ryouko, who wasn't saying anything, but had gotten up and rolled up his scroll and taken his straw dummy up.

“Sakura!”

This time, Sakura felt a hand on her shoulder. Her heart nearly stopped. It was Sasuke. Her dream was coming true! If only he would kiss her...

“Sakura, come on, sensei wants to see us.” Sasuke jumped back down off the roof, leaving Sakura alone, and slightly depressed.

So much for that daydream...(sigh)What's a girl gotta do to get some attention?!

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Elsewhere, the hunter-nin from the Hidden Mist Village laid down Zabuza's corpse. Getting out the tools to do the job, the hunter set to work.

"First I'll cut the wrappings to allow the blood to flow out the mouth, then...!" the hunter stopped. Zabuza sat up!

"I'll do it myself!" Zabuza reached up to his neck and pulled one senbon out roughly, practically throwing it to earthen floor in the clearing he was lying in.

"Be careful. If you pull those out carelessly, you're going to kill yourself for real," said the hunter-nin placidly.

"Just how long do you intend to wear that stupid mask? Take it off!" Zabuza demanded, yanking the other senbon out. "You've got all the finesse of a butcher!"

The hunter-nin removed the mask. At first glance, you couldn't determine the gender of the hunter. Even going by voice, you still couldn't tell if this...thing...was male or female.

"Sorry. I got attached to the mask. And it served it's purpose well. You would be dead now if I hadn't intervened."

"You didn't have to hit the neck! There are plenty of other spots that would have worked! You're a sadistic kid..." Zabuza groused angrily, feeling the strength return his body very slowly.

"You would have complained if I had cut your perfect body, and besides, the neck is a much easier target. Normally, such an attack will leave a person 'dead' for a week. But you're so strong, you recover quickly," the hunter-nin explained, still holding the porcelain mask.

"You're so innocent...no doubt that's why I keep you," Zabuza mused, smiling slightly. The hunter gave a genuine smile.

"Well, I AM just a child. Look, the mist has lifted...next time, will you be alright?"

Zabuza spoke determinedly. "Next time I'm going to break the Sharingan's spell!"

At Tazuna's house, Kakashi was awake, and moving a little bit, but was kept in bed by Tsunami, Tazuna's daughter. Which was really what he needed. But something kept nagging at him. Something about the way that hunter-nin had acted.

"Kakashi-sensei, you were in ANBU, right?" Ryouko had shown up at Kakashi's bedside with his 'Zabuza Scarecrow', and two senbon.

"That's right, I was," Kakashi confirmed, wondering what Ryouko was doing with that straw-filled villain.

"Isn't there...some kind of pressure points on the neck? I've just got this feeling..." Ryouko looked

uncomfortable, but, mercifully, Kakashi finished the thought for him.

"I know...Zabuza isn't dead...I've been thinking about it..."

"WHAT?!" Team 7 had rejoined the group, and Naruto had voiced what they were all thinking.

"The way that hunter-nin carried off the body...they don't normally do that. They obliterate the body where it lay. As I said, a ninja's body, even a dead one, can reveal many secrets. A corpse is disposed of thoroughly and silently, with no room for error. Which begs the question- why would that hunter-nin go to the trouble of lugging of Zabuza's body like that?"

"What are you saying, sensei?" Sasuke said/demanded. **No way...**

"I'm saying...it's likely that Zabuza is still alive, and that he and that hunter-nin were in cahoots this whole time."

Silence followed Kakashi's statement, but the air had become thick with worry. Naruto was even trembling a little bit. To his surprise, so was Sasuke. Sakura was biting her nails. Ryouko was inspecting his straw dummy.

"That kid must have had some incredible skill to hit the two points on the neck like that. There's almost no margin of error...A quarter-inch to the right or left, and Zabuza would have been dead for real..." Ryouko played with the senbon, spinning them between his fingers, before stabbing them back in place. "I think that hunter-nin is going to be attacking with Zabuza next time."

Later that night, everyone, save for Ryouko, was eating. He didn't eat as much as the others, so he was finished already, and back to studying. That was when a little boy came in the room. He had been around before, but Team 7 had been too exhausted to notice.

"What are these guys doing here, Grandpa?" the little boy asked, after hugging his grandfather, Tazuna.

"They're ninja, here to protect me while I finish the bridge," Tazuna explained.

"Don't they know they're going to die?" Inari muttered. Unfortunately, Naruto had heard the mutter.

"WHAT was that, you little brat?! Hero's never die!" he shouted animatedly, food flying from his mouth. As he pounded the table, a drink spilled, and a chopstick went flying. It plunked Ryouko in the back of the head. After uttering a somewhat-stifled curse and resisting the temptation to throw the chopstick back, Ryouko went back to his studying.

"What are you, stupid?" Inari snarled. "There's no such thing as a hero. If you don't want to die, you should leave."

Tsunami apologized for Inari's rudeness. "Where are you going, Inari?"

“To look at the sea from my room!” The little boy called back, exiting the room without a backward glance.

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Naruto slammed down his plate and ran out of the room, intended to give the kid a piece of his mind. When he walked upstairs, murmuring about how rotten the kid was, he heard a small sound. Crying. Silently opening Inari’s door, Naruto saw the small boy crying. He was looking at the sea, and holding a picture of some tough-looking man with a headband made of rope, and a courageous smile. Silently, Naruto backed away from the door, and went back downstairs.

Kakashi nodded, privately agreeing, and forced himself out of bed.

“What are we going to do, Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura wanted to know.

“We’re going to climb trees,” Kakashi answered mysteriously, limping outside with the aid of a crutch, and motioning for the others to follow him outside. The four hiked to a clearing in the nearby woods.

“Climbing trees, huh? What kind of bogus exercise is that?!” Naruto was ranting. Privately, Sakura and Sasuke agreed.

“By itself, it’s pretty useless. But, in this case, you can’t use your hands,” Kakashi informed the group dryly.

“How do we do that, it’s impossible!” Sakura whined, thinking Kakashi had lost more than chakra in that fight. **Like brain cells...** she thought, eye twitching.

“Really? Huh!” Kakashi began to walk. He walked up to a tree- then UP the tree itself, no hands! He kept walking until he was hanging upside down, staring at the shocked group of genin.

“The key to this is chakra control. It’s a skill difficult to the most skilled Shinobi, but it’s invaluable to those who master it. If you can master control of your chakra, in theory, no jutsu is impossible for you to learn.”

Naruto’s smile widened, and he got his telltale look of excitement.

“Alright, I’ll have this done by breakfast, no sweat!” he declared. Naruto was too busy celebrating to notice Kakashi rolling his eyes. After thoughts of exasperation had danced through his head, Kakashi threw four kunai to the ground, at the feet of the genin.

“Use this to mark your progress. Each time you do the exercise, you should make a mark on the tree with the knife. The more practice you have, the higher you’ll get up on the tree. So, go to it! A running start should help you at first. But keep in mind- tree climbing is one thing, maintaining chakra control in battle is another.”

Naruto and Sasuke were working side by side, and they started at the same time. Like a yin and a yang, these two were complete opposites. When Naruto attempted the exercise, he simply fell off the tree without making a mark, then rolled around comically, clutching his aching head. A welt was already visible.

Sasuke, on the other hand, ran up the tree, but his foot dug in. He back-flipped off the tree and made a mark, but soon came to an understanding.

There's more to this exercise than meets the eye. If you don't focus enough chakra, you won't hold on to the tree, like Naruto. If you focus too much, you dig into the tree and eventually fall...

"Hey, this isn't so hard!" Sakura shouted down from the tree top, playfully sticking her tongue out.

"Well, well, it seems like Sakura is the closest to becoming Hokage, despite all Naruto's grandstanding. And she even bested the Uchiha clan's finest...Ryouko, I can't insult you, since you haven't tried yet..."

"Sensei, how could you?! Don't say things like that!" **Sasuke will hate me!** Sakura fretted from her perch.

"I'm not sure how you'd make fun of me sensei, hopefully I won't give you a reason to." Ryouko took his running start, and ran up the tree. He reached the branch, but his chakra concentration at his feet slipped. Ryouko stabbed the kunai into the tree and hung on with one hand. It was a long way down. Ryouko looked over, seeing Sakura a few feet above him on the adjacent tree.

"Not bad for a first try at all, Ryouko! Almost made it, try again," Kakashi instructed. **Sakura's got the best chakra control, but the smallest pool of chakra to work with. Sasuke and Ryouko have an even amount of chakra, but Naruto...he has more chakra than me. All four have enough resources of chakra to be sturdy Shinobi. If this exercise goes according to plan, they'll be able to tap into those resources.**

Alright! I'm gonna do this! For starters, I'm going to catch up to Sasuke! Here we go! Naruto started again, getting a little farther, but still failing dismally in his goal to catch Sasuke.

Unbeknownst to any of the genin, Inari was watching from a distance. For some reason, he seemed to be on the verge of tears. In his mind, he saw the man with the rope tied around his head. That hastened the tears, and Inari took off, undetected.

In the forest, in a strange, almost cocoon-shaped house, lay Zabuza. He was still too weak to move much, so the 'hunter-nin' sat at his bedside, getting food and water as Zabuza instructed. Soon, the two had company.

“Well, you DID show your face after your humiliating loss!” A short man with a big mane of hair and a little cane touted. This was Gato, the shipping magnate that had hired Zabuza to kill the bridge builder. Flanking him were two samurai flunkies. One was shirtless, and had a muscular, tattooed body, and an eye patch. He was called Waraji. On the other side of Gato was a smaller samurai, wearing what seemed to be a huge, pocketed coat. Atop his head was a knit hat with a long, pointy tip. His name was Zouri. He had the curiosity of being left-handed. Tradition dictated that samurai, when wielding a sword, were right-handed.

Gato continued to tear into Zabuza, who stayed silent. This angered the tiny man even more, and he approached Zabuza’s bedside.

“No last words?!” Gato intended to say more, but his wrist was suddenly being crushed by Zabuza’s ‘hunter-nin’, who apparently also served as his bodyguard.

“Do not contaminate him with your touch!” Zabuza’s companion ordered. That’s when the sound of swords being drawn by clumsy samurai echoed slightly in the cavernous room. The bodyguard turned quickly and somehow grabbed the hands of both samurai.

I didn’t even see the kid move! Zouri thought, struggling against the kid’s powerful grip.

“Doing that while I’m angry is a mistake...” came the threat.

Knowing when to back off, Gato tried to retain a shred of his dignity.

“Don’t fail me again! If you do, don’t even think of coming back here! Consider that your warning!” Gato and his flunkies left after the show of bravado, leaving Zabuza and his companion alone once more.

“Haku...there was no need for you to do that...” Zabuza said groggily. Under his blanket, he was holding a sharp kunai knife.

“I know, but it’s too soon to kill Gato. If you kill him, we’ll be forced to run again,” the bodyguard, now known as “Haku”, gently explained.

“Heh. You’re right,” Zabuza admitted, laying down to get some more rest. He wanted his strength to come back quickly, so he could finish with Kakashi and his pack of scheming rug rats.

Later in the afternoon, three hours after beginning, Sakura sat back to watch the others try to figure out the exercise. Ryouko seemed the closest. At one point, when he was out of breath, he had reached into one of his makimono (scroll) pouches, and extracted a diagram about chakra control. Sakura noticed it was one Iruka-sensei had shown to her once. After reading it, Ryouko seemed ready to try again. He nodded to himself, muttering some instruction from the sheet, and took off. This time, he reached the branch he was supposed to hit- but he kept going, straight to the top of the tree. He stood up and gazed out across the landscape. This was mostly to catch his breath. He leapt back down, landing in a

crouching position, breathing heavily, but not panting.

Sakura kind of smiled. **The boys have so much energy...man, I'm tired!**

"Good work!" Kakashi offered. Ryouko nodded his thanks. He sat down against his tree and opened up two scrolls, one he had borrowed, and his own white scroll, which he was making fervent notes in about chakra control.

Sakura watched Naruto fail once more, and her smile broadened. **He's so predictable. Now he's going to throw a tantrum and quit, just like a little baby!**

Naruto appeared to be doing just that. "Darn it!" he said, stifling a curse. But, to Sakura's surprise, he didn't throw a tantrum. Instead, he walked over to her and crouched beside her.

"Hey, Sakura, can you give me some tips?" he asked in a whisper.

Kakashi didn't smile, but he WAS proud of Naruto. **Naruto's growing up, in terms of skill and height. I wonder how strong he'll be? If he only knew that his potential surpasses Sasuke's, and even mine...**

7 - The Threat of Companionship

THE THREAT OF COMPANIONSHIP!

Ryouko shifted up to his feet and stretched. He looked at Kakashi, then at the straw dummy he had crafted of Zabuzā. It seemed like Ryouko was going to ask Kakashi a question, but held back. Instead, Ryouko dragged the dummy to the edge of a small river running through the forest, and made hand signs. Several times he made them correctly, but didn't stop until he did them fast enough and smooth enough to satisfy him. Finally, he used the jutsu:

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu! 5...10...15...20...25 (koff)...30...35...(puff puff)40...45...50...55...60!" Ryouko had blown the dummy to a crisp, and then used the last burst of fire to knock it into the river, so as not to start a forest fire. The straw smoldered and smoked, but didn't set anything else on fire. Ryouko made a quick note in his scroll, then turned to find Kakashi watching him.

"The counting...what was that for?" Kakashi asked kindly, though he figured he knew.

"I wanted to see how long I could hold the jutsu for. Just curiosity. I wanted to see if my time had improved after the chakra control exercise," Ryouko explained. "That, and I wanted to see how it felt to use chakra combatively. You said that maintaining chakra in battle is different. I know that wasn't a real battle, but it gave me some idea." Ryouko looked over at the ruins of the dummy he had constructed.

"That, and that thing was creepy as hell," Ryouko added with a small laugh.

"Interesting...Now, you're fifteen, right?" Kakashi asked/stated.

"Yes, sensei," Ryouko responded, wondering why that was important.

"Tomorrow, Sakura is going to watch Tazuna and his team work. Naruto and Sasuke will still be training. I'd like you to work with me for a little while. It's just an exercise that might help you out. You're older, and I think you're ready for this. Okay?" Kakashi gave an encouraging smile and patted Ryouko on the head.

"Thank you, Kakashi-sensei. Is it alright if I go to town? I'm running low on writing ink, and my brush is about to fall apart." **I've learned a lot in the past couple of days. It's a shame I suck at drawing; my scroll would be a lot better if I could draw out what was going on, instead of writing it out.**

"Sure, go ahead," Kakashi responded with a nod.

"Thank you, I'll be right back," Ryouko said over his shoulder as he started the walk to town.

Kakashi was sprawled out on the roof, reading Makeout Paradise for the umpteenth time. No matter how many times he read it, the book always made Kakashi nearly giddy with joy.

The love between a man and a woman! Love, hate, anger, lust, envy! The emotional cornucopia overflowing! This is a stroke of genius! I can't wait for the next book in the series!

Whoosh! Tok!

Ryouko landed next to Kakashi, looking up, trying to conceal the shock that someone else was lounging in his spot on the roof.

"Sorry, sensei, I didn't know you were up here," Ryouko apologized.

"That's all right. I wanted to have that training session with you, remember? But, for it, we have to go somewhere else, it's dangerous up here for this drill," Kakashi said, closing his book and stretching. "Let's head to the grassy area near the woods."

Once there, Kakashi questioned Ryouko.

"What's one thing you're afraid of Ryouko. No, don't say it out loud, right in on the small scroll I asked for. All finished? Good, let me read it...Okay. Now, do you remember when we first met, the genjutsu I used on you?"

Ryouko nodded. "Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique," he quoted, nodding to himself, as if confirming the answer.

"That's right. And you threw the genjutsu off handily for someone so new. That's why I figured out that you might be a genjutsu-type ninja; or, at the very least, you'd be able to understand its benefits in battle, and perform it well enough. Now, I'm going to warn you- this training is going to be painful. I need you to put your complete trust in me, alright?"

"I trust you, sensei. Tell me, what do I have to do?" Ryouko wanted to know. He always had a high tolerance for pain, so that didn't concern him. It was the trust part that concerned him. Ryouko had very rarely ever trusted anyone. But he guessed that if he could trust anyone, it was Kakashi-sensei.

"Just stand there. I'm going to use the fear you wrote down on this scroll in a genjutsu. I don't want you to break it, no matter what. Just remember, it won't hurt you while I'm doing it. This is the first step. Now, are you ready?" Kakashi questioned calmly. A breeze suddenly sang through the trees, and rippled the ocean. The sounds of Naruto and Sasuke running were carried on the wind. The wind?

(Memory)

Ryouko watched the others work together at martial arts. Strictly speaking, they were messing around and having fun, targeting each other with water balloons. Not at all what sensei had said. Not that Ryouko liked this sensei much, but still.

They look like they're having fun...Sometimes I wish I could just go and be like them. But I'm not.

Am I...supposed to be alone? Why do I have to be different?

The wind kicked up; the class was being held outside today. On the wind, a single leaf blew by Ryouko, and he thought about that group he had met at the tournament, with the strange headbands, that had a Leaf shape on them...

(End Memory)

Ryouko shook his head, regaining his focus. "I'm ready sensei."

"Alright. Here it comes. Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!" Kakashi stared Ryouko right in the eye. Immediately, Ryouko saw a swirl of leaves. His first instinct was to throw off the attack, but Kakashi's words ran through his head, and he just stood still. Then, panic began to grip him.

Genjutsu

Ryouko was standing at the gates of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, his rucksack in hand. As he walked in, he saw several friendly people wave. One he knew as Gekkou Hayate gave a rare half-smile.

"Come on, let's not be late!" Iruka-sensei was pushing the kids into a line. "Okay, follow me. Stay in line! Naruto, stop that! This is a solemn occasion!"

Naruto crossed his arms defiantly. "Big deal, some stupid kid died. It's not like he MEANT anything to the village."

"Naruto's got a point, why are we going to this? I like funerals as much as the next guy, but this is getting troublesome," Shikamaru commented.

That was when Ryouko noticed something- he was lying down. All around him was velvet. His arms were crossed in front of his chest, and he couldn't move them. He couldn't move at all.

I-I can't breathe! What the hell is this?! Why isn't anyone helping me?! Ryouko tried to call for help, but couldn't speak. That was when Lord Hokage shuffled into his view, peering down into the casket.

"I was wrong to be proud of him...he only made himself a burden. He was useless to the village..."

Useless...

Ryouko shot upwards, breathing heavily. He was lying on the lawn of the bridge builder's house.

"You alright?" came Kakashi's voice. Soon his arm was in view. Ryouko let Kakashi haul him to his feet.

"Yeah...I'm okay...I see why you wanted us to get off the roof to practice this." Ryouko was panting, a

cold sweat soaking his body.

“Alright. I tested the limits of your mind with this drill. To be able to use genjutsu, you have to endure it first.”

“ ‘Those who are versed in the advantages of arms must also understand the disadvantages of arms’,” Ryouko commented, quoting ‘The Art of War’.

“...Right. It’s pretty obvious we read different things then (scratching the back of his head). Now, tomorrow, I’m going to teach you the technique so that you can cast it on yourself.”

“Thank you for your time, sensei.”

Kakashi patted Ryouko’s head. “My pleasure. Now, you should rest up. I didn’t hold back very much, and if you don’t rest, you might wind up paying for it later.”

As Ryouko walked off, Kakashi wondered why Lord Hokage would order such a test for Ryouko. It was rare that Lord Third took such an interest in a case that average, at best. **It must be about survival...if he’s going to be by himself, then he needs to know as much as he can...I don’t think this will be too difficult for him. His mind withstood far more probing than I thought it would. Even Sakura, a genjutsu-type ninja for sure, didn’t last very long. Very interesting, this whole group...**

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The next day, Sakura was sitting on the edge of the bridge, watching mostly older men carry big metal beams back and forth, and then using hammers to pound them in place. It was boring to Sakura.

Geez, there aren’t even any cute guys to watch, just these sweaty old men! (sigh) I wish Sasuke could have come. Or Ryouko. Even Naruto, just SOMEONE to talk to!

As Sakura was sighing, Tazuna walked by, carrying a four by four wooden beam.

“Where’s blondie, pretty boy, and that wiseass kid with the scroll?” Tazuna asked sarcastically.

“They’re all training,” Sakura shot back, not really wanting to talk to Tazuna, despite her longing for conversation just moments ago. She found the old man revolting, and a jerk.

“Oh yeah? Why aren’t you with them?” Tazuna queried, shifting the weight of the wood he was carrying.

“Oh, I mastered the exercise. So Kakashi-sensei sent me to guard you,” Sakura responded with a cocky shrug.

“Really...hm.” Tazuna was about to get back to work, when he heard his name being called. Inwardly, Tazuna cringed; someone yelling his name was NEVER a good sign anymore.

“Tazuna, we need to talk,” said an older man, wearing a headband stained with sweat.

“What is it, Giichi?”

“I’ve been thinking about this...the bridge...I want off the job!” Giichi finished abruptly.

“What? Why?! Out of nowhere, you take off? Giichi, you of all people!” Tazuna had to try really hard not to yell; this song and dance was getting old very quickly.

“I know we go way back, and I want to help. But I just can’t take the risk. Gato will have us murdered if we don’t stop work on the bridge! Please...just give up...the bridge isn’t worth our deaths...” Giichi’s eyes and voice were suddenly pleading; making a desperate bid to an old friend.

“...I can’t do it. This bridge is owned by all of us. It’s everything we’ve worked hard for, together, as a city. When it’s finished, it will give us a new chance at life, and ruin Gato’s hold on us. It will put our tiny, poor country on the map, and get it back on it’s feet.”

Giichi threw an arm out, pointing at Tazuna. “But these are LIVES, Tazuna, and your life, too!”

“It’s time to call it a day,” Tazuna said gruffly, before lending a little bit of sentiment to his old friend, “Giichi...you don’t have to come back.” Tazuna shuffled off the bridge. After a moment, Sakura followed him.

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Ryouko worked on the jutsu, and soon found himself facing his worst fears. But now, he had to REALLY test it. Kakashi came along at that point to make sure Ryouko hadn’t overdone it.

“I’ve got it sensei. At least, on myself. I don’t know about someone else...” Ryouko muttered.

“Well, try it on me. Go on. You’ll instinctively know what to use on my subconscious.” Kakashi sat down, just in case Ryouko packed a punch.

“How will I know that, sensei?” Ryouko wondered, wiping blood off of his cheek. Ryouko had himself locked in his own genjutsu good, and had to cause himself physical pain to release it. So he had taken a running start into a tree.

“Think about what I’ve talked about...The one thing I’ve said over and over. Then, think of how to use it against me.”

Ryouko thought hard, but all he came up with was ‘teamwork’, and not letting people die. It took him a moment, but Ryouko put two and two together. As quickly as he could, Ryouko made the handsigns.

“Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!” Ryouko called, staring Kakashi in the eye. That eye was the only way Ryouko could tell if his attack had worked. After a moment, Kakashi’s eyes widened.

Ryouko hadn't clamped the genjutsu on tightly, instead he increased the pressure little by little, to improve his control over the jutsu. Finally, Kakashi used the 'release' technique. Ryouko waited for the verdict, while Kakashi cleared his head.

"Good job. Now, there is ONE thing you need to understand- genjutsu effects can be feigned. You have to know where to look, and what to look for. What did you see when you saw me get hit with the shock?" Kakashi questioned, running a hand through his hair and taking out his book.

"I could tell your pulse sped up...mild sweat on the temples...and neck...and your pupil dilated momentarily," Ryouko rattled off, eyes closed in concentration.

"Good observations. But everything you just pointed out; they are unreliable. If you're fighting in the Sand Village, and it's hot, sweat may already be there. If you're fighting someone in battle, their heart rate will already be abnormal, from adrenaline. And the eyes..."

"Can be faked..." Ryouko murmured, understanding what Kakashi-sensei was getting at.

"What you need to look for is a change in chakra. You can sense chakra, maybe you did during the tree climbing exercise. Anyway, if there's a disturbance in a person's chakra, you'll know that you've locked the jutsu in. And you'll be able to tell when it's broken as well. Now, rest your mind. Practice the handsigns, but don't use any chakra, I can tell you're low on chakra, and, should an attack come, I'm still low myself, but you'll recover quicker. I'm counting on you to take charge if something goes wrong."

"Okay, I understand, Kakashi-sensei." Ryouko didn't like the thought that there might be an attack while Kakashi-sensei was down and out, but it was a real possibility. It led Ryouko to vaguely wonder if he could match sword work with Zabuza.

"Good boy." Kakashi airily added; he had his head back in the lustful world of Makeout Paradise.

--

Sakura and Tazuna walked through the streets in the Land of Waves. While the streets were full, they were far from bustling. Everywhere you looked, there were people begging for money, or food, or work.

"My daughter wanted me to pick up some vegetables for dinner tonight," Tazuna explained as he and Sakura veered off into a store. The store was nearly devoid of any products, and what WAS available was pretty sad looking. The carrots and celery were wilted and old, and you could forget about milk that wasn't cottage cheese by now. The site of this food made Sakura appreciate just how good a cook Tsunami really was.

What's wrong with this town? And this store? There's almost nothing here...it's sad... Sakura, who hadn't been outside the Leaf Village, couldn't believe people lived like this. While deep in thought, Sakura had dropped her guard. Over her shoulder was a canvas bag, carrying her possessions. It had attracted the eye of a shiftless character. He made a grab for Sakura's bag. Unfortunately for him, he grabbed Sakura's butt instead.

“DAMN PERVERT!!!” Sakura shouted as she punted the luckless fool in the face. Tazuna felt a sweatdrop grow.

Note to self: Don't piss the girl off.

“So, what's with this place, Mr. Tazuna?” Sakura couldn't resist asking anymore.

“It wasn't always like this...we were once a proud land. But when Gato took over, we became a bunch of cowards, spineless as jellyfish! That's why the bridge is so important to me...it's our way to get out of Gato's clutches. Once we connect ourselves to the mainland with this bridge, his shipping business will dry up, and his grip on us will weaken, and we, as a people, will get our self-respect back! That's why the bridge is so important...”

Sakura felt another hand on her butt. She had every intention of punching whoever it was into orbit, but stopped short when she saw it was just a small child. The child smiled and held out his hands. Sakura's heart damn near melted. She didn't have a lot of food on her (damn diet), but she handed the boy all the candy she had brought with her. Happily, the boy ran off, and shared with his friends. Sakura couldn't help but feel that, if everyone did that, the Land of Waves wouldn't be in such rough shape. But Tazuna was grumpy enough, there was nothing to be gained by voicing such a thought.

--

Naruto ran up the tree once more, and slashed a mark into the bark. When he landed, he glanced over at Sasuke.

Crap! That jerk is still going! Wait, what did Sakura say? Focus...I can't lose my concentration! Okay, here I GO!

Sasuke saw that Naruto was catching up.

Naruto's doing better...I wonder what Sakura told him...

“Hey, Naruto!”

Naruto fell flat on his face, welt growing on his head immediately.

“What the hell, I'm trying to work here! What do you want, Sasuke?!” Naruto shouted, massaging his throbbing head.

“What...what did Sakura tell you earlier?” Sasuke muttered, looking away. He REALLY hated having to ask for help, ESPECIALLY from Naruto. Naruto, of course, relished this delicious little opportunity.

“I'm not gonna tell ya!” Naruto declared, sticking his tongue out for good measure. Sasuke was furious; his eyes turned all white, and his mouth quivered. But if Naruto wasn't saying, then there wasn't anything Sasuke could do. Sitting around was just letting Naruto catch up. And Naruto, the class clown, catching Sasuke, the pride of the Uchiha clan, well, that wasn't something Sasuke was going to take

lying down. Instead, Sasuke focused his chakra, and tried again.

At the same time, Naruto and Sasuke shared a thought:

I won't lose to you!

8 - The Hero: Gato's Shadow Extended!

THE HERO: GATO'S SHADOW EXTENDED!

At dinner that night, everyone sat down, including Ryouko, and ate the delicious meal Tsunami had prepared. Naruto and Sasuke ate with relish- too much relish. Sakura was eating carefully, and had one of the boys on either side of her. They inhaled their food, double-fisting their food as fast as they could handle it. Sakura was just digging into her rice, eating carefully, when both Naruto and Sasuke stood up:

"More, please!" they shouted. Then they looked at each other. Then at the floor, as they both threw up. Sakura wrinkled her nose in disgust, while Ryouko gulped his water down, hoping to keep his dinner down.

"Don't eat if you're just going to puke it back up!" Sakura admonished the two.

"No, I want to eat!" Sasuke replied stubbornly, glancing at Naruto.

"Right! Gotta eat to make your body strong for training!" Naruto added, grinning happily. Sakura and Ryouko were done after that spectacle. Ryouko excused himself to train, while Sakura walked around the table and to the wall. She noticed a picture with part torn away. It looked like it had been done on purpose.

"Excuse me, but why is this picture torn?" Sakura asked, studying it.

Tsunami, who had been doing the dishes, froze for a moment, then responded, solemnly.

"...he was Inari's father..."

"The town called him a hero," Tazuna added, equally as solemn. At this, Inari left the table and walked out of the room, ignoring Tsunami's questions.

"Father! I asked you to talk about this in front of Inari!" Tsunami ran after the boy, trying to comfort him.

"So...that's why Inari acts so strangely...the man missing from that picture?" Sakura questioned, still wondering why the picture was torn.

"Inari wasn't always like this...he used to be a happy boy, always smiling and laughing. What happened that day robbed this Land of its courage..." Tazuna had to stop and wipe his tears. The tale was always hard to tell. But the tale's result was something Tazuna had to live with daily.

At this point, Ryouko stumbled in, his lip bloodied. He didn't say anything, getting the gist of the conversation. He sat down at his spot and held a napkin to his bleeding lip.

"What was it that could have changed Inari so much?" Kakashi asked somberly, keeping with the mood.

“Let me start from the beginning...”

(FLASHBACK!)

“Hey, nice dog! I think I’ll call him “Shooting Star!” one of the bullies declared. His two cronies were holding Inari back.

“No! He’s not a ‘Shooting Star!’ He’s MY Poochie! Give him back!” Inari shouted/begged, trying to pull away from his captors. These three were something beyond bullies.

“Alright, fine! If you love him so much, go save him!” the ‘Leader’ taunted. He held Poochie out over the edge of a dock, and dropped the puppy into the water. Poochie began to thrash wildly; he didn’t know how to swim.

“POOOOCHIIIEEEE!” Inari shouted, free of his captors.

“I SAID go get him!” the ‘Leader’ pushed Inari off the dock, and into the water. There wasn’t a strong current, but that didn’t matter; Inari couldn’t swim. He began to thrash wildly as well. His last site was of his dog, learning to swim, before Inari himself sank towards the depths of Davy Jones’ locker.

I...I couldn’t save Poochie...I can’t even save myself! I-I don’t want to die! I’m scared! Inari’s thoughts scared him even more. Then he blacked out.

--

A short while later, Inari woke up with a start, on the beach. The ocean was in sight, glimmering beautifully, even though it was night time. Inari made a small sound of surprise, wondering how he managed to get here.

“Oh, are you awake, son?” a man with a strong, but gentle, voice called out. He was hunched over a fire. Inari walked over to him. The man had black, spiky hair, and a strong, dimpled chin.

“I really let those punks who were picking on you have it. But, enough of that. Here, eat!” the man said with a wide grin, handing Inari a fish flame-broiled on a skewer. Inari knew never to take food from strangers. But he couldn’t help but trust this man, so he took the food and ate rapidly. It was so good! Inevitably, Inari asked the man if it was he who had saved him.

“You had a pretty tough time, huh? Even your dog let you down. Where I’m from, dogs are loyal and trustworthy. Well, I guess you let him down first, to be fair.”

Inari started to cry again, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I tried to save him! But I couldn’t do it!”

“It must be very hard for someone your age. It’s scary, I know. But remember this: When you become a man, walk the path of life with no regrets. If something is precious to you, no matter

how painful, or how hard, you've got to protect it, with both arms. If you do that, even if you die trying to protect what you love, you leave the world a good man."

"Inari was star-struck by this new man, an ordinary fisherman. As he came to learn, the man (his name is Kaiza) showed him what life was about. Inari adored him, dressing like him, eating like him, and trying to act like him. His affection for Kaiza kept growing, and in no time at all, Kaiza was one of the family. Most likely, it had something to do with Inari never knowing his real father. But Kaiza filled the roll. He was exactly what our town needed then, and needs now!"

Kaiza! Come quick! The rain, it's so heavy! It's forced open all the locks and dams!" a man shouted. Immediately, Kaiza stood up and put on his rain hat.

"Inari, get some rope," he called.

All three ran to the site of a barrier, the last hope of saving the town.

"We need to tie the rope around it!"

"Impossible! The current's too strong!"

People were doing a lot of shouting, but taking very little action. Kaiza pushed his way to the front of the crowd, rope in hand. Taking a deep breathe, he leapt into the water. After a moment, he surfaced, and used his powerful arms to swim to the makeshift barrier. Gasping as he made it, he tied the rope around the strung-together logs.

"He's done it! Kaiza's done it! Everyone, pull on the rope! Hurry, pull the rope!"

"The town called Kaiza a hero, and a champion. Inari was so proud of him. But then Gato realized just how dangerous Kaiza was to him. With courage, this Land wouldn't bend to his every will anymore. So he did what he felt he had to do: he had Kaiza executed publicly!"

Kaiza was tied to a rough, wooden cross. His arms were both gone, only bloody stumps remained. There were countless cut marks all over his body; one eye was missing, the other was closed from being swollen. But Kaiza opened that eye and found his 'son' in the crowd. He gave Inari an encouraging smile.

"Everybody listen! This man has committed acts of terrorism and violence against my company! He's openly renounced our agencies and attempted sabotage! This is nothing short of treason, and is punished with death! His execution is now!" Gato nodded to his two samurai flunkies. They drew their swords back, and began the downward cut.

“NOOO! DAD!” Inari screamed. *Dad...how could you. You...you promised to protect me! I hate you!*

Tazuna looked incredibly sad, his glasses stained with tears. He spoke in a low whisper, finishing his tale.

“That day, Inari changed...so did Tsunami, and the whole town...”

Naruto remembered what Inari had said. There were no heroes anymore...Naruto knew what he was going to do. He pushed away from the table and got up.

“Naruto, where are you going? You shouldn’t even think about training anymore today, you’re going to wind up killing yourself.” Kakashi tried vainly to get Naruto to listen to reason.

“I don’t care, I’ve got work to do! I’m going to show Inari that there ARE heroes in the world!”

Ryouko stood up, too, but he was shaking with anger. The glass in his hand burst suddenly, making little cuts all over Ryouko’s palm. The glass fell out, and Ryouko swept it up, along with leaving enough ryo on the table for a new glass. He even bandaged his hand as though he wanted to kill something, violently ripping the gauze apart.

“Ryouko? What’s wrong?” Sakura asked. She hadn’t seen the Kaguya boy exhibit so much emotion before.

“Forgive me...I’m just upset by what samurai have become. I trained as one. We used to be respectable, and respected! Not flunkies for some little midget, killing on orders! I became a ninja to save lives, even if it meant my own. Never did I think that the samurai would sink so low...I should have guessed. The money-hungry dojo I left probably bred those two!” Ryouko’s chest was moving in and out rapidly as he tried to contain his fury.

“I’m sorry for my outburst,” Ryouko said, apologizing quickly, and walking out of the room.

--

Haku was walking through the forest, his hair down, and wearing a pink robe. It seemed nature smiled at him. A bird landed on his shoulder. Haku smiled at it, and kept walking. That’s when he saw a familiar boy lying face-down on the ground.

That’s the boy from the Leaf Village...

Haku bent down to wake Naruto. “You’ll catch your death, lying on the cold ground like that.” It looked as though Naruto had been lying there a while. Birds, and bird droppings, were all over him, and he was all scratched up. Naruto woke up groggily. Say what you want about Naruto, but he has a heart of gold.

And a head of bone, apparently, as he never realized he was talking to an enemy. He even helped Haku pick out certain herbs that would aid Zabuza's healing.

"So these weeds are really medical herbs?!" Naruto was fascinated. He was always willing to learn, you could say that much for him. "That's some job you took on, girl, picking weeds at dawn!" Naruto wrinkled his nose in displeasure.

Haku smirked jokingly. "You should be talking, what were you doing out here?"

"Training!" Naruto replied heartily.

"Oh...your headband. Are you some sort of ninja?" Haku questioned kindly. Of course, he knew the answer, but Naruto STILL hadn't picked out who Haku was. **To be fair, I WAS wearing a mask, and I was dressed completely different. But you would think he would sense something...**

"Why? Do you think I look like one?! I'm a full-fledged ninja, believe it!" Naruto couldn't help but shout, happy to have someone notice him. "I'm training because I've got to be stronger! I'm going to be Hokage some day, of the Village hidden in the Leaves!"

"But you look so strong and masculine already!" Haku replied. Behind him, a few birds chirped and rustled in the bushes, looking for their breakfast.

"I've got to be WAY stronger than this! I've got to prove a point to...someone..." Naruto's intensity tapered off a little bit.

Haku giggled to himself. "So...tell me...is there anyone special in your life?"

Naruto cringed. **What's this girl getting at?**

Haku was lost in thought, and didn't notice Naruto's face change. He was remembering being a street urchin in his home town. That's when he noticed a long shadow suddenly obscuring what little sun he felt in such a cold place. He felt an even colder presence. But to Haku, that was comforting...

Haku shook himself out of his trance. "If there's someone truly precious to you, you will FIND the strength to protect that person. That's when you truly become strong.

Naruto thought back to Iruka, Kakashi, Old Man Hokage, all the people that had protected him.

"I know all about that, believe it!" Naruto replied happily.

"You WILL get stronger...oh, you should know...I'm a boy," Haku said over his shoulder as he walked, medical herbs in a basket, clutched tightly in one nail-painted fist.

This blew Naruto's mind. **No way! He-he's girlier than Sakura!** Naruto exclaimed to himself, hands squeezing either side of his head.

--

The next morning, a week after they had begun training, Naruto and Sasuke were once again practicing. But THIS time, they had it down. And when Kakashi and Sakura came looking, Naruto couldn't help but show off.

"Hehehe! I did it, sensei! Sakura, check it out, I- AHHH!" Naruto slipped off the branch he was on. At such a height, the fall would kill him. Kakashi gimped toward Naruto as fast as he could, hoping to at least soften the blow. But he didn't have to worry. Naruto was hanging upside down, like a bat, just as he had seen Kakashi do!

"Ha ha ha! Gotcha!" Naruto laughed.

"YOU ALMOST GAVE ME A HEART-ATTACK, YOU JERK!!!" Sakura snarled. **I'm going to kill you for this later, Naruto!** Inner-Sakura added.

Naruto, still laughing, lost his balance- for real this time. He was heading for a showdown with the ground he wasn't going to win. Lucky for him, Sasuke leapt over from his tree and snared Naruto's ankle.

"You bonehead..." Sasuke muttered.

--

Kakashi was doing one-finger pushups, checking to see if he had healed. While he was doing this impossible-looking training regimen, Tazuna voiced something that had been on his mind since their arrival in the Land of Waves.

"Why did you keep the mission, even though I duped you?" Tazuna asked, sitting down on a futon after a long day's work.

"Like master, like man," Kakashi replied, thinking that he was healed. "True Shinobi don't simply dance to the tune of the person paying the pauper."

--

"It looks like your strength has returned," Haku told Zabuza, while the latter crushed an apple.

"Yes! Let's go, Haku!"

At supper time that night, Naruto and Sasuke walked in, leaning on each other for support. It had been another all-out day of training. Ryouko limped in seconds later, this time sporting a cut knee.

"Sensei, I think I should practice on another target before I kill myself," Ryouko muttered with a laugh. His subconscious had taken quite the beating, and it was hard to tell if he was getting any better or not.

With his natural nervous nature, Ryouko was either having anxiety attacks, or he was doing the genjutsu right. He didn't know which at this point; all he knew was that he had fallen down to the point where it was a painful affair to write in his scroll at night.

Kakashi smiled, and used an adage Ryouko had heard at his old dojo. "If it hurts, you're during it right."

Ryouko expected as much. That was when Inari stood up, and pointed at Naruto, who had collapsed into a chair and lazily picked up a roll.

"WHY DO YOU KEEP TRAINING LIKE THIS?! NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU TRY, YOU'LL NEVER BE A MATCH FOR GATO'S THUGS! YOU TALK TOUGH, AND ACT ALL COOL, BUT STRONG PEOPLE LIKE GATO'S HENCHMEN WILL KILL YOU!" Inari shouted.

"Shut up! I'm not you, and I'm not going to lose, okay?!" Naruto shot back, too tired for this crap.

"JUST WATCHING YOU ANNOYS ME! RUNNING YOUR MOUTH WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING! THIS ISN'T YOUR TOWN! AND YOU DON'T KNOW ME! YOU'RE ALWAYS CLOWNING AROUND AND HAVING FUN! YOU DON'T KNOW SUFFERING OR PAIN!" Inari finished his rant. Team 7, Kakashi, and Ryouko winced. It looked like Inari had touched a nerve.

"So, what? You think it's okay to be all whiney, and try to be the star of your own soap opera, and get everyone to be guests at your pity party?" Naruto began quietly, his head buried in his arms. The room had gone silent. The bag of ice Sasuke had been passing to Ryouko hit the floor with a small crack. You could have heard a pin drop.

"It takes a REALLY big man to sit around and cry, you brat...you baby!"

Naruto and Inari both left the table, going in opposite directions.

"Naruto, you went too far!" Sakura admonished him. But Naruto didn't answer. He had heard enough. He had training to do.

Meanwhile, Inari went outside, to sit on the docks, just like he used to do with Kaiza. After a few moments, he heard someone walking down the dock.

"Can I join you?" Kakashi asked. When he didn't receive a reply, he sat down next to Inari, staring out across the smooth ocean. For a minute, Kakashi didn't talk. When he finally did, he looked over at Inari.

"You know, Naruto IS kind of a brat, but he wasn't trying to be rude, or mean...Tazuna told us what happened to your father. You should know, Naruto grew up without knowing HIS father. Or even his mother. He's been alone in the world. And in all the time I've known him, I've never once seen him cry, or use his troubles as an excuse. He gives everything he does his all, and he trains hard, with little encouragement from anyone. Everything you said...Naruto's probably told himself those things hundreds of times. But, I guess, he just got fed up with crying one day. He understands what it means to be strong...what it costs...the same as your father did. In fact, Naruto probably knows how you feel better than any of us."

Inari's look of disbelief made Kakashi laugh inside. But, the boy might have misconstrued that, so Kakashi patted him on the head and went inside.

--

The next day, Naruto was out of it from training so much. Kakashi asked Tsunami to take care of him. Naruto was blissfully unaware of this. But when he woke up, he was dressed in a flash and tearing out the door.

"I can't believe they left without me!" Naruto grumbled, jumping from branch to branch on the trees at warp speed.

Even though he was moving so quickly, Naruto noticed some strange marks in the trees. **Huh? Those look like sword cuts...** Naruto kept moving, but for some reason, those cuts in the tree bark disturbed him. Farther along, Naruto saw a pig, butchered in the same manner as the trees.

--

As Kakashi and the others reached the bridge, they saw a fearsome sight. Dead. Every worked, dead or dying. The grim realization hit Kakashi hard.

"They're coming!" he told his group urgently. Everyone took up their positions around Tazuna, and waited for the Demon of the Mist to strike...

9 - The Demon and the Innocent Soul

THE DEMON AND THE INNOCENT SOUL

A familiar mist drifted across the bridge. Immediately, sweat broke out on Tazuna's face. Even Kakashi seemed nervous. Just sensing that caused the genin to grip their kunai harder.

"It's been a while, Kakashi. I see you're still dragging along those pack of brats...And look, the little raven-haired one is trembling!" Zabuza's voice seemed to come from every direction. That did little to ease the nervous tension in the air.

"I'm not trembling...I'm shaking with excitement!" Sasuke shot back, swagger in his voice.

Even as Sasuke spoke, water clones landed all around the group. Kakashi told Sasuke to 'Go ahead.' In seconds, the water clones all splashed to the ground. That left Ryouko, Sakura, and Tazuna wide-eyed.

What the hell did he do? I couldn't even follow it! Ryouko was really glad he was working WITH Sasuke, and not against him.

"He's good...Haku, you might have a rival!"

"So it would seem..." Haku replied, sounding intense and curious at the same time.

"Looks like I'm right. Our masked friend is working for Zabuza," Kakashi said matter-of-factly. No one seemed surprised. "Stop hiding behind that mask, like a circus performer!"

"This one's mine!" Sasuke declared. "You, the freak with the mask! Are you some sort of clown?! You're a joke, now that the playing field is even!"

"You're so cool Sasuke!" Sakura cheered happily.

Didn't I just say that? Ugh...she takes everything Sasuke says at face value.

"We're still on the offensive, Haku, go!" Zabuza demanded.

"Right!" Haku replied to Zabuza's command. He began to spin towards Sasuke. Sasuke tagged him with a solid right hand, ending the spin cycle.

--

Swish!

“What the hell?!” Tsunami turned to see two samurai she knew as Gato’s thugs break into her house.

“So, you’re old man Tazuna’s daughter, huh? You’re coming with us!” Zouri demanded.

-

Inari was in the bathroom, getting cleaned up, when he heard his mother scream. Inari raced down the hall and burst into the kitchen.

“Inari, no! Run!” Tsunami shouted.

“Should we take him, too?” Waraji asked Zouri.

“We only need one hostage.” Zouri responded.

“I guess I can kill him, then! I’ve been wanting to cut something all morning!” Waraji drew his sword. Inari was paralyzed by fear. Even as the words of Kaiza drifted through his head, about protecting what’s important, all Inari knew was that he was scared, about to die, and couldn’t save his mother.

“Wait!” Tsunami barked out the single word sharply. “Don’t you DARE touch my son! If you do, I’ll bite my own tongue off and drown in my blood! THEN what will you do for a live hostage?!”

Zouri and Waraji exchanged glances, debating as to whether she was serious or not. They couldn’t take the chance. Both sheathed their swords.

“You got lucky, kid, your mom saved you,” Zouri commented as he and Waraji tied Tsunami up. They forced her to walk, leaving Inari alone. He began to sob, thinking of all that had happened. He thought of Kaiza’s words, and then Kakashi’s, and finally Naruto’s. ‘You baby!’ caused Inari to stop crying. For the first time, he put his own life on the backburner. With his fists clenched, he ran outside.

“MOMMY!” he shouted, before running blindly toward the two Samurai! The two samurai grinned at each other, and drew their swords. It wasn’t every day they got someone so willing to die. Their blades flashed down, and cut Inari in two. But Inari was gone- a log?! Turning quickly, the two samurai saw that their hostage was also gone, replaced by a log.

“The hero always shows up at the last minute!” Naruto put down Inari and Tsunami, his wide grinning spreading as he said, “Good job, Inari! When you charged them, that gave me the opening I needed to save you and your Mom!”

The two samurai charged, amused that their mission had been interrupted by something that look so unthreatening. They were forced to draw quickly, as Naruto threw two shuriken at them. The telltale sound of steel hitting steel cut through the.

“Ha! You’ll have to do better than that!” Zouri taunted, still charging. Neither he nor Waraji noticed the

two shadow clones running up behind them.

“How’s this?!” the two Naruto’s shouted in unison. They jumped the samurai from behind, and soon left them beaten to within an inch of their lives. Soon, the samurai were tied tightly up with rope, and Naruto was smiling about a job well done.

“But Naruto, how did you know?!” Inari was really curious about this part.

Naruto rubbed his nose and sneezed. “I guess someone’s talking about me! Anyway, I saw a bunch of cuts in the forest. And when I saw a diced-up boar, and where the cuts led, I came straight back here!” Naruto stopped talking for a moment, then opened his mouth again and said “Listen, I’m sorry I called you a baby. You’re not a baby; you’re a big, strong boy, okay?”

Inari turned away from Naruto. He was trying really hard to hide the fact that he was crying.

“Hey, c’mon, what’s wrong?” Naruto didn’t know, at first, why the boy was crying.

“You’re going to laugh at me, and call me a baby ‘cause I’m crying!” Inari told Naruto, rubbing his eyes.

“Hey, it’s okay, you’re crying ‘cause you’re happy! There’s nothing wrong with that! Now, I’m going to go help my team, the rest here is up to you, okay?” With that, Naruto zipped away to catch up with his team. He still had a mission to do, and Naruto’s nindo didn’t allow him to sit back and let someone else handle the fighting.

Haku and Sasuke tangled, Sasuke’s kunai and Haku’s senbon clanging together and creating sparks. Finally, the two were locked in a stalemate.

“You’re not going to quit, are you?” Haku asked as though discussing the weather.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Sasuke shot back. Both combatants were now shaking with the effort of maintaining their strength.

“I thought not. But you won’t be able to match me for long. First of all, we’re surrounded by water, which lays the groundwork for an attack. Second, one of your hands is tied up blocking by senbon, which only leaves you one hand to defend yourself with...” Haku started to make handsigns with one hand, something that wasn’t lost on Sasuke, or even Kakashi, who had never seen such a thing.

“Water Style: The Thousand Stinging Needles of Death!” Haku chanted. He stamped his feet; as he did so, the water surrounding him and Sasuke flew into the air. The water hardened and elongated, forming sharp needles. They all turned in the air to face Sasuke.

Damn! Okay, focus the chakra to my feet, and...jump!

The needles crashed into the bridge, denting the hard concrete. But Sasuke was gone! He had leapt straight up, over the senbon attack. From the air, he threw three shuriken. Haku backflipped away from

each one, while wondering where this was coming from.

“You’re not so fast,” Sasuke whispered from behind Haku, “Now YOU have to worry about MY attack!”

A fierce kunai vs senbon battle ensued, but Sasuke was the aggressor this time. He kept Haku moving, and narrowly missed him several times as his kunai cut the air near Haku’s head.

He’s fast! Haku thought to himself. Seconds later, a vicious kick to the face from Sasuke struck home on Haku’s chin, propelling the fake hunter-nin back to Zabuza’s side, quite a few meters away.

“You’re fast,” Sasuke admitted, “But I’m faster.”

“You had that coming for underestimating these kids...and name-calling. He might not look like much, but Uchiha Sasuke is the top genin from Konohagakure. And Sakura here is our sharpest mind. (Sakura blushed and giggled, while Inner-Sakura added an enthusiastic “Hell Yeah!”) And the older boy, Kaguya Ryouko, tied for second in our graduating class. And lastly, the number one knucklehead, maverick, comedy-ninja showstopper, Uzumaki Naruto!” Kakashi rattled off the praises of his team and Ryouko. They had all proven their mettle in battle, and not one of them didn’t deserve the hitai-ate they were wearing. Kakashi didn’t expect Zabuza to be chuckling, but that’s exactly what the ‘demon’ was doing.

“Haku, you realize that if you keep holding back, you’re going to be killed by the very person you were trying to spare, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do...” Haku said solemnly. It was becoming increasingly evident that Haku wasn’t a nasty person; it was who he was hanging out with that shaped him. But that thought exited everyone’s minds quickly.

Why is the air so cold all of a sudden? Sasuke thought to himself, not dropping his guard. He was so focused on Haku that he didn’t notice the water all around him flowing into the air and hardening.

“Hidden Water Jutsu: Crystal Ice Mirrors!”

All around Sasuke, mirrors made of ice cropped up. He was boxed in by the dome shape the mirrors collectively formed. What happened next was even more amazing. Haku walked up to one of the mirrors. He just kept walking- right INTO the mirror! But even more amazing was the fact that Haku’s image suddenly spread to all the mirrors. Even Kakashi hadn’t seen an attack like this before. And he was right to be worried. As soon as he heard commotion in the dome, he took off toward it. But Zabuza leapt in the way.

“Let’s let our kids play, Kakashi! You- catch!” Zabuza threw three kunai quicker than Kakashi could stop him. They were headed straight for Sakura and Tazuna!

Ryouko leapt into action. He wasn’t skilled enough to knock the weapons down one by one, and he didn’t want to throw the kunai in his hand, in case Zabuza made a run at him. That left one option:

Getting in the way. Ryouko thrust his forearm out. One kunai hit the metal plate on the back of his glove; the next bounced off his pouch of throwing needles. But the third sank into his forearm, slicing through the top of it before sticking in, wedging itself against the bone.

Sakura had her hands up, and she saw the kunai, but now it was still. Just inches away from her face, the kunai fell to the ground, save for one that floated in front of her. Until she realized that Ryouko was attached to it. With a grunt, he pulled it out and dropped it to the ground.

“You have more guts than common-sense, kid!” Zabuza managed around a laugh. Ryouko wasn’t laughing.

“You show up to a fight bandaged up like a mummy and you’re criticizing me for not having common-sense? You’re not the only one to swing a sword, you loud-mouthed mist reject,” Ryouko pointed out blandly. **Come on, Kakashi-sensei, he’s distracted!** Ryouko’s plan had been to draw Zabuza’s ire, giving Kakashi an opening. But no dice, apparently, as Zabuza didn’t break his concentration on Kakashi, save for tossing a dry “Looks like YOU could use these bandages, you little punk! Release!”

Damn, he caught my genjutsu too quick! If it had set in, Kakashi-sensei could have just cut him up...

--

What’s he planning to do with those mirrors? Sasuke wondered. He knew this was a jutsu, but it was baffling.

“Let me show you REAL speed,” Haku’s voice intoned. Seconds later, Senbon flew from every direction. Sasuke’s kunai was lost as he dropped it in surprise, then covered up as the dangerous needles began threading the air.

--

Sakura turned to face Tazuna. “Pardon me, Mr. Tazuna, I’ve got to leave you for a minute!” Sakura leapt as high as she could, and threw a kunai. “Sasuke!”

Sasuke reached up to catch the kunai, but Haku stepped out from one of the mirrors and caught it, much to the surprise of Sakura and Sasuke. But a split-second later, Haku went flying as a throwing star hit his mask.

“Uzumaki Naruto, at your service! Here am I, ready to save the day! You know how it is- heroes always shot up at the last minute!” Naruto shouted.

That exasperating little idiot! What we needed was an ambush! He’s just put a huge target on himself!

As if reading Kakashi’s thoughts, Zabuza threw shuriken at Naruto, who wasn’t paying any attention.

By the time he noticed, he couldn't do anything about the shuriken. The metal stars of death would have struck him, no doubt, had it not been for the senbon striking them down.

"What the hell are you doing, Haku?!" Zabuza snarled.

"Please, Zabuza, leave the boy to me. I want to handle him myself," Haku replied respectfully.

"You're so naïve, Haku..." Zabuza replied, but faced Kakashi again.

--

Inside the prison of mirrors, Sasuke was trying to figure out the mechanics of this jutsu.

That guy is naïve? Yeah, right. I'm cut all to hell by those needles. But they're all superficial cuts...more like he's playing with me than trying to kill me. What's more, I can't read his technique. Is he using clones in the mirrors? I can't even see the attacks! Looks like all I can do is focus on this guy's attacks, and count on Naruto to free me from the outside.

"YO, SASUKE! I'M HERE TO RESCUE YOU!" Naruto shouted in Sasuke's face from a meter away, tops.

"You idiot! We could have attacked him from both sides! You don't use any stealth or caution, and you think you're a ninja?!" Sasuke shouted. **Our best chance was to have me attack from the inside, while he attacked from the outside. And what does this idiot do? He surprises ME instead of the enemy!**

"Excuse me! You're welcome for the save! I went through hell to help you!" Naruto shot back.

At that point, Haku stepped back into the mirror and resumed his attack, this time hitting both Naruto AND Sasuke. This led Sasuke to form a desperate plan- escape by destroying the mirrors.

"Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!" Sasuke yelled, inhaling air, and then blowing out a huge amount of fire through his slightly-open fist. But to Sasuke's exasperation, the ice didn't melt.

"Your fire attacks can't hurt me. You can't catch me," Haku informed Sasuke from all angles.

"Oh, yeah?! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto answered, creating the flesh and blood doubles of himself. He was going to bash all the mirrors until he hit the REAL Haku. All the Naruto's jumped, but in a split second, they were all destroyed, leaving the real Naruto in pain, and wondering just what the heck had happened.

"Don't bother. I'm using the art of teleportation. All I need to perform the jutsu are these mirrors."

Upon hearing this, it hit Kakashi. "Of course...but to master such an attack at such a young age..."

" 'Such an attack?'" Sakura questioned.

“A kekkai-genkai, one that can be passed down from one generation to the next. My Sharingan can’t copy or break it.”

--

“No, it can’t end like this! I’ve still got my dreams to fulfill!” Naruto said while cringing with pain.

Dreams? Haku’s mind went back to another time. When he was a street rat in his home town. When Zabuza found him.

“Look at you, you’re pathetic. You’ll be dead by the side of the road, like a rat!” Zabuza told the young Haku. But Haku smiled.

“We have the same eyes. I can see my expression in them,” Haku responded.

“I find it difficult to abide by the complete Shinobi way,” Haku piped up out of the blue. “I would prefer NOT to have to kill both of you. But this bridge is where our dreams intersect. A nexus from which only one set of dreams can emerge. If this is the case, then I will kill you to preserve my own dreams. To protect the one I care about most, and see his dreams fulfilled...THAT is my dream. To achieve that, I will kill you both, and become a true Shinobi!”

“Sasuke! Naruto! Don’t lose to that guy!” Sakura shouted.

“Sakura, stop encouraging them! Even if we knew how to break the boy’s kekkai-genkai, Naruto and Sasuke have no chance of defeating him.” Kakashi’s face went grim. “They haven’t learned to turn their hearts to ice, and to take another’s life. That other boy, however, has lived with the mental anguish that would sculpt him into an ideal Shinobi.”

Zabuza voiced his agreement. “You grow up in a time of peace, in a village of weakness! You could never understand what it means to truly fight for your own life as Haku does.”

“What do we do, sensei?!” Sakura wanted to know.

“You take a look at Ryouko’s wounds...Zabuza, you’ll pardon me if I finish this quickly...” Kakashi reached for his headband.

“The Sharingan, huh? It lacks finesse.” Zabuza hand slashed up with a kunai. Kakashi had to let go of his headband and catch the blade with his hand.

“You can talk about my lack of finesse, but it doesn’t change the fact that you’re afraid of the Sharingan, and of me,” Kakashi replied. His hand had been turned into a mess of blood. “You should be honored, you’re the first to see the Sharingan twice. But you won’t live to see it a third time!”

“Ha! Even if you DO manage to beat me, you’ll never kill Haku. Since he was a toddler, I’ve honed his skills. Unlike your pack of brats, I forged a quality weapon in Haku. A weapon of matchless quality and

skill. And-”

“Is there anything more dull than listening to someone else brag?” Kakahsi asked, his headband raised, and his Sharingan eye ready to go to work.

“If you’ll wait one more second, I’d like to return a phrase you used on me in our last fight; I’ve been dying to get a chance to use it: The same spell won’t work on me twice! Having a chance to see the Sharingan work, I could analyze it and understand it. More accurately, as we fought, Haku was nearby. Someone as intelligent as him could understand the Sharingan after seeing it only once...”

Meanwhile, inside the dome of mirrors, Sasuke took notice of Haku’s attacks.

“Even he has a limit to his chakra! Naruto, get up, I can’t watch him and you at the same time! This guy’s attacks have been getting weaker. We’ve just got to suck up our injuries and keep going! Here he comes!”

10 - Naruto's Surprise: The Knucklehead's True Strength!

NARUTO'S SURPRISE: THE KNUCKLEHEAD'S TRUE STRENGTH!

Where the hell is this mist coming from? You can't see your hand in front of your face! Tazuna was rapidly getting worried.

"The air is full of his chakra, Mr. Tazuna, stay right near me!" Sakura warned him. She had bandaged up Ryouko's arm. He shyly thanked her, then took up his guard position. As a long shot, he focused his chakra to his eyes, but it did nothing besides make the fog clearer.

If I used my genjutsu, I might snare him...but I'm just as likely to hit Kakashi-sensei... Ryouko had toyed with the idea of attacking, trying to blow the mist away with his fire jutsu, but decided against it. If Kakashi hadn't been in there, he would have done it. And besides, if Kakashi couldn't get rid of it, Ryouko figured that he couldn't either.

--

Kakashi kept up his guard. But that was all he could do. Until he heard shuriken whizzing toward him. Almost too late, he reacted, knocking each shuriken down with his kunai, the sound of metal meeting metal screeching across the otherwise silent bridge.

"I'd expect nothing less from Kakashi of the Sharingan eye," Zabuza's voice informed Kakashi. Zabuza was right behind him!

"The next time you see me, this will end. You've over-estimated the power of your Sharingan!" Zabuza disappeared into the dense fog again. He had his eyes closed, a result of figuring out how the Sharingan worked. Before, in his fight with Kakashi, not only had Kakashi copied his moves, he then hypnotized Zabuza into saying something that Kakashi would finish. Once Haku had deciphered this, Zabuza concocted his attack against the Sharingan. Being an ocular jutsu, Kakashi needed to look in Zabuza's eyes. When Zabuza closed his eyes, the Sharingan lost most of its effectiveness.

"If I can't use my eyes, neither can you!" Kakashi called back. Then he had to move quick, to avoid getting hit with a kunai. He blocked it in the nick of time with the metal plate on the back of his gloves.

"You forget, Kakashi...I am trained in the silent killing art..."

"Oh no!" Kakashi darted back to Sakura, Ryouko, and Tazuna. They didn't see Zabuza slice at them with his sword. Kakashi made a desperate move, and put himself in the way of the blade. With a 'SCHINGG!' sound, Kakashi's midsection became a mass of blood. But no vitals had been hit, and the client was alive.

--

With a large slash across his stomach and chest, Kakashi glared at Zabuza. Even though you couldn't SEE the animosity, you could feel it nonetheless.

"Zabuza, do you really believe I've lived this long with the Sharingan as my ONLY weapon? I was once a member of a group dedicated to silent and efficient killing. Let me show you a jutsu that I learned without my Sharingan..."

--

Back inside the mirrors from hell, Haku was forced to keep his growing frustration in check.

I've begun to aim at that boy's vitals, but he's evaded every strike. As the battle goes on, he's getting faster...and he's seeing something. All this while watching out for his comrade. His moves are brilliant.

"You move well," Haku complimented Sasuke, despite the fact that Sasuke resembled a hedgehog at this point. "But my next attack will take you down."

Here he comes...keep your focus, and concentrate...and see through his illusion... Sasuke kept reminding himself. His mantra worked, as Sasuke dodged the next wave of needles unharmed. This is what finally frustrated Haku. But that's when Haku looked in Sasuke's eyes, and made a startling revelation.

"So you possess the Sharingan, a kekkaigenkai as well." **An amazing boy, a prodigy in his blossoming stage! To force such an ability of himself, in the middle of a battle. The longer this goes, the more dangerous it gets for me. But the other boy may be my answer...**

Haku released more needles, but ignored Sasuke. Instead, he targeted the barely-conscious Naruto. Sasuke uttered a curse, and made his move.

--

"Damn it, Naruto...no matter what, you always...get in the way..." Sasuke coughed out. Naruto looked up, seeing Sasuke peppered with needles. Needles that would have hit him...

"I used to hate you, you know," Sasuke continued, now bleeding from the mouth.

"Then why did you..." Naruto was gaping open-mouthed, and couldn't put a sentence together.

"I don't know...my body just moved...I swore I wouldn't die, until I killed my older brother. I thought that oath would give me the strength..." Sasuke's head rolled to the side, and his eyes closed.

"He was a Shinobi of the purest strength. To sacrifice yourself like that, to throw himself into what he knew full-well was a trap...it's worthy of a Shinobi's respect..." Haku stood up from his kneeling position. "Is this the first time you've seen a comrade die? That is part of a ninja's life."

Haku suddenly realized he wasn't talking to the same boy. Naruto had an orange-red chakra swirling around him. His eyes and face had gone feral. Whipping around on all fours, Naruto snarled to Haku:

"I'm never going to forgive you for this! I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"

--

"Ryouko, how's your arm?" Sakura asked, not dropping her guard.

"It's better, Sakura, thank you. Thanks for bandaging it." Ryouko turned a little bit, towards Sakura.

"Well, you DID save my life with that arm, I should take care of it in case I need it again, right?" Sakura replied with a giggle.

"Be careful what you wish you...stay with Tazuna, I heard something, and it wasn't friendly..."

Ryouko edged his way into the fog. There, he saw two more people laying down, bleeding. Ryouko knelt down.

The wounds are fresh...these aren't the kills we passed earlier...but they weren't done by Zabuza, either...these are different, not in line with his weapons, or Haku's. But there's at least two people...or one and a clone of some kind...

From behind, two men jumped down from the trees. It was the same two chunin that Ryouko had fought before. They had escaped the ropes somehow. Ryouko took no notice, it seemed, as he knelt near the bodies.

These kills were made by a long, spiked weapon...like a sickle and chain, maybe. It's in line with what those four ninja that jumped us earlier were using. Suddenly, Ryouko was constricted by the chains. Not tight enough to kill him, but enough to torture him.

"We got the little runt!" one declared.

"No, we didn't! A log! He used a substitution jutsu! Idiot, I TOLD you to be more quiet!" the other shot back.

Their argument ended, as they started to see hell come to life.

"Idiots! I have no use for fools like you! Haku, kill them!"

"With pleasure, Mr. Zabuza," Haku replied. He had ten long senbon in each hand. As the two ninja begged for their lives, the needles began to hit them. Blood flowed everywhere, and they could SEE themselves dying, but the two ninja were still alive...

Ryouko smirked to himself; it looked like Kakashi's genjutsu training had worked. Now that he knew what to look for, Ryouko could tell his genjutsu had caught the two off guard. As they sat still, screaming, Ryouko took their weapons off and threw them into the water far below. Then he ended the genjutsu.

“Just remember, this is the last time I’m letting you two live,” Ryouko growled. Unceremoniously, he threw the two Mist Shinobi off the bridge. They could swim, and they weren’t a threat without their weapons.

I’m lucky I caught them off-guard...I should have been the one in the water, if they were any kind of smart Shinobi. I’m not overly good, they’re just under-talented. No matter, I’ll report to Kakashi-sensei later. For now, I’d better keep an eye on Tazuna and Sakura.

--

Kakashi and Zabuza both sensed Naruto’s unearthly chakra. First their thoughts drifted toward each other, but Kakashi came to realize what was really going on.

The seal by the Fourth Hokage...has it broken?...No, there’s not enough chakra. But the seal has weakened. The power of the nine-tailed demon fox is bleeding through...I’ve got to act quickly!

Kakashi threw a scroll in the air, made a series of handsigns, and ran bleeding thumb down the scroll.

“Listen Zabuza. We’re both busy men. It’s not normally like me, but let’s end this in one move, winner take all!”

“Interesting, Kakashi. But what do you have left? Show me what you’ve got!” Zabuza growled, still hidden in the powerful mist he had created.

--

Haku couldn’t believe this was the same boy. Had this really been the one in orange, who had been nearly unconscious, and had bungled the fight the entire time?

He’s so bloodthirsty...and now he’s attacking! Haku let his senbon go, their trajectory true. But Naruto opened his mouth and roared; the needles clanked to the ground!

He never even touched the needles! Pure chakra sent them away! What is this boy?! Haku leapt out of his mirror, from above Naruto. Naruto spun to the side, skidding on all fours on the sturdy concrete of the bridge.

I’ve got to make it to the next mirror! But that wasn’t going to happen. Naruto had grabbed Haku’s arm with such force he nearly broke it! His chakra melted the mirrors, leading Haku to realize that he couldn’t hold out against the chakra any longer. That was when Naruto struck Haku in the face as hard as he could; a punch with bad intentions. A strike that was meant to kill.

As Haku fell, all he could think was that he had failed Zabuza. Even as Naruto came running in, fist cocked to kill, Haku didn’t move. With blood running from his mouth, he knew he would die...as a failure.

But Naruto stopped. His whiskers faded slightly, back to their normal state. “You’re that kid I met! This

morning, in the woods!”

“Why do you spare me? I killed your beloved comrade...your friend...and still you spare me?” Haku asked dreamily, not believing it. Naruto finished his punch, but the intensity was gone.

“Where did the power go? People mistakenly believe that it is doing their enemy a kindness to let them live after they have been defeated. It’s an empty existence to go on living, once your dreams have been shattered. You see, Master Zabuza has no use for a weak Shinobi. So, please...kill me.” Haku even smiled as he said it.

“Say what?! WHY do you waste all that devotion on that rotten jerk?! That mercenary scumbag! He doesn’t care WHO he works for, or WHAT he does, as long as he gets his money! Is that browless idiot really you’re ‘beloved friend’?!” Naruto shouted. This was beyond his scope of understanding. Why would anyone want to die for that monster? Why would anyone want to die *at all*?

Haku smiled serenely, his mind once more in another time.

“I was born in a small, snowy town, in the Village Hidden in the Mist. Once, I was precious- to my parents. But just as the world around me really started to take shape...something happened. Blood. My blood. You see, my Father killed my Mother, and then tried to kill me.” Haku stopped, letting his explanation sink in with Naruto. It was clear he was having a hard time believing this.

“I was born in a time of war. And the Mist Village become wary of anyone possessing a kekkai genkai. Bloodline traits that were used to wreak havoc on other villages soon became a harbinger of doom for our own village. After the Great Shinobi War, those with kekkaigenkai’s were hunted down and killed.”

Sasuke’s body was still lying on the ground, on it’s side, riddled with the needles Haku had used to kill him.

“I’m sure that the boy I killed grew up with the same pain as I did. We are special, we are powerful, and we are feared.” Haku’s voice never wavered as he weaved the sad tale. “My Father learned that my Mother possessed a kekkaigenkai that she never told him about. He murdered her, and then came for me. My father died by my hand. And that’s when I began to understand, that I had no place in the world. I simply existed. It was the most painful thing in the world, knowing I had no meaning. That I was unwanted, and unloved...”

He sounds just the way I feel! Naruto suddenly realized. In his heart, he could feel the awful pain that Haku felt, at least in some way. But Naruto remembered that he had Iruka-sensei, Kakashi-sensei, and Sakura left, and they cared about him.

“Didn’t you once tell me that you wanted to be the greatest ninja in your village? To be recognized and loved by everyone?” Haku asked, trying to make Naruto understand. “If you had one person at your side who made you believe that you were special...wouldn’t that person become precious to you?”

Naruto didn’t respond verbally, instead his thoughts drifted to Iruka-sensei, his team, and even the Old Man, The Third Hokage.

"I was so happy!" Haku continued, a distant smile on his face as he reminisced about Zabuza. "Master Zabuza adopted me, knowing what I was, and even cherishing it."

"Haku, I'm leaving this village tonight! I plan to return as a warrior, and a conquerer! I'll crush this Village and all it's people beneath my feet! What I need from you is not love, or affection, or support. I require-"

"I know. You need me as a weapon, a tool. Keep me with you, and I will do what you ask, and strike down who you tell me to."

"Heh. Good boy, Haku."

Master Zabuza...your tool has failed you...

"Naruto, please...take my life."

Naruto could only gape open-mouthed. The story Haku had just told had been wild, but this was incredible. Naruto had never taken someone's life, let alone the life of an enemy who had asked him to. He knew it was what Haku wanted, but was it the right thing?

--

Meanwhile, Kakashi finished his handsigns. In what seemed like an odd move, he smashed his hand into the ground.

"Earth Style: Fanged Vengeance Jutsu!"

"You don't fool me, Kakashi! You don't know where I am! I, on the other hand, can find you and kill you easily. So stop playing this ridiculous game that you can't possibly win!"

Zabuza's words seemed to ring true. That is, until dogs came from every direction, and bit into Zabuza.

"What the hell is this?!" Zabuza yelled. Dogs, everywhere, dogs had bitten into him, holding him in place. **Kakashi!**

"When your eyes and ears have failed you, you can always rely on your nose. In our fight earlier, I went out of my way to bleed on you. Your clothes, your weapons. To my ninja hounds, you were easy to find, because you stank of my blood. So, Zabuza, the fog is lifting..." Kakashi pointed to his Sharingan eye. "I see your future- death!"

Kakashi stared the still-defiant Zabuza in the eyes. "You made your plots. The second you left Kirigakure, all of us in Konoha were alerted to you're actions. We know all about your attempted coup, and your effort to kill the Mizukage. Since you failed, you've been trying to raise funds for another attempt. That's why you decided to work for a scumbag like Gato." Kakashi made a set of handsigns. In his palm, chakra began to grow, and it became visible, something Zabuza noted with a growing fear.

“Lightning Blade!” Kakashi shouted. Bolts of lightning seemed to fly from his hand. Pure chakra, such raw energy, it would tear a man in half.

“Then man you want to kill, the bridge builder, is the backbone of this land. But you’ll kill him, and everyone else, to achieve your selfish ends.”

Zabuza snarled suddenly: “Spare me your lessons in civics! I fight for my own ideals, and I’m not about to stop!”

--

“Naruto, please kill me now,” Haku requested. “That day in the forest, I remember thinking that we were two of a kind. You’ll have to bloody your hands on my account. Please forgive me for that.”

“That’s it then? No other way to do this?!” Naruto was flabbergasted. He didn’t want to kill Haku, even after what happened to Sasuke. Two wrongs didn’t make a right. Right? But Naruto understood he couldn’t change Haku’s mind. He grabbed a kunai from his holster and began to run at Haku.

“Thank you.” Haku’s voice was quiet and sincere. Accepting even. “That other boy...Sasuke had a dream to. I hope you realize yours Naruto...” **You’ll be strong...**

But Haku perked up. “Master Zabuza!” Haku parried Naruto’s strike, and knocked the kunai away.

“I’m sorry, Naruto. I can’t die yet!” Haku spun away, leaving Naruto to wonder just what the hell had happened.

--

Kakashi gathered speed, the chakra in his hand a fearsome sight. Ryouko was taking mental notes; he’d never seen or even read about anything like this. Sakura was nearly shivering with fright, while Tazuna was too dumbfounded to move. Kakashi thrust his hand forward, but something was wrong. The summoning scroll for his ninten (Ninja Hounds) was pierced with Senbon, ending the jutsu. Kakashi was splattered with blood, as he expected, but it was Zabuza’s blood.

Haku had thrown himself in the way, and clamped down on Kakashi’s arms. There was a serene expression on the boy’s face, even though Kakashi’s arm was straight through him. He had spared his master.

“That was brilliant, Haku! Even in death, giving me such an opportunity!” Zabuza hefted his sword and started to swing.

He’s going to go through the boy to get me! Kakashi realized. Zabuza’s sword cut only air, as Kakashi had jumped away, and was kneeling at Haku’s corpse, laying it down respectfully.

Sakura, Tazuna, and Ryouko stood still above Haku's body. It was gruesome, being able to see through a once-living person. Haku, once so pure and innocent, was now drenched in his own blood. Even with all that, Haku had died with a peaceful smile on his face.

11 - Courage in the Land of Waves!

COURAGE IN THE LAND OF WAVES!

Little Inari had run all over the land of Waves, banged on every door. And time and again, he heard the same thing:

“We don’t want to sacrifice anymore.”

As Inari sat at home, tying his shoes, putting on a helmet, and taking up a crude crossbow, he thought of all his father had told him. **Protect it...with both arms...walk a path of life with no regrets...even if you die trying to protect what you care about, you’ll die with a pure soul...**

Inari couldn’t comprehend half of that. But now, he was ready to prove he really WAS his father’s son. With his father’s memory fresh in his mind, Inari readied himself to protect his home.

“Inari, wait, you can’t go to the bridge yourself!” Tsunami tried to reason with her son. But Inari would have none of it.

“Can’t. No one will go with me. Besides, I know how to fight...I’m my Daddy’s son!” Inari marched out the hastily-repaired door, crossbow in hand. Tsunami stayed behind, but noticed that, if even for a moment, she saw Kaiza. Inari was indeed his Father’s son, in spirit, if not blood.

--

“Naruto! Where’s Sasuke!” Sakura shouted. Naruto had emerged from the fading mist. “What about Sasuke?!” Sakura shouted, happy to see Naruto alive. If Naruto had made it, then surely Sasuke had...right?

Naruto looked away, frozen to the spot as the thought of his...best friend, as it turned out, lay cold and dead on the concrete behind him.

“I’ll stay with you, so you won’t be disobeying your sensei,” Tazuna said. He let Sakura tow him along, to Sasuke’s body. Sakura’s arms dropped, as did her hope, when she felt Sasuke. The site of him covered in needles in was bad enough, but to touch him...

“He’s...so cold...” Sakura’s voice had begun to tremble. Soon, her body followed. She couldn’t believe it had happened...not to Sasuke.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to hold back because of me. It’s healthy to shed tears sometimes,” Tazuna urged quietly. He suddenly seemed like a kindly old grandfather, rather than the drunken construction worker he had been acting like the entire trip. The sudden change of demeanor was lost on Sakura, who was still fighting the losing battle to hold those tears in.

"I...I always got "A's" in my tests in school...I memorized every last one of the Shinobi codes of conduct. I used to write them down, so proud of myself. We had a test one day...the big question was 'what is the twenty-fifth rule of Shinobi conduct?'...just like always, I knew the answer, and I wrote it down..." Sakura finally broke down, tears streaming out of her eyes.

"No matter what happens, true Shinobi must never let their true emotions show through! The only thing that matters is the mission. Carry that in your heart, and never shed a tear!" Sakura leaned on Sasuke's body and cried her eyes out.

"Mr. Tazuna...please, come with me," Ryouko suggested lightly, indicating the other end of the bridge with his head. Tazuna nodded and followed him away, leaving Sakura to cry.

--

"Is that how it is for ninja? Just accepting death? It's seems...unbearable," Tazuna admitted, still reeling with shock. Death was part of life to these people?

"It is. It's not supposed to matter whether we live or die. While we live, we don't exist. When we die, it's like we never existed...It was a shock to me, too..." Ryouko replied, looking older, and somehow, wiser. "...It doesn't make things less painful, pretending you don't feel anything. I should know. And you should know, I have two missions here today..." Ryouko adjusted his headband, his eyes still solemn.

"I swore to protect you...but I also promised to never let my comrades die...Shinobi aren't heartless...we just pretend to be. But I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a group that cares more than those four."

Both of them looked back to Sakura crying.

"I wish I could help her...all I can do is give her room, and if she needs it, a shoulder to cry on. Mr. Tazuna...after this is over, if you still need help with the bridge, I'll stay until it's done. I'll do whatever you need." Ryouko couldn't stand to watch Sakura cry anymore; she had been one of the first to welcome him to the village, and he couldn't help but feel a kinship with her in some way.

Tazuna couldn't believe his ears. "Why would you do that?! After I treated you like crap? And you wouldn't be paid for it! What motivation do you possibly have?!"

"I don't want to see your land suffer, simple as that. And yes, you did treat me like crap. But just now, you know, I saw another side of you. A side that actually gave a damn about human life. Even of someone you hardly knew. "

Tazuna scratched his head. "Well, you're a strong boy, and with those ninja abilities, you might be of some help...thanks."

I don't know whether this kid is dumb, a glutton for punishment, or he has a genuinely good heart...

--

Zabuza ran at Kakashi. Kakashi, almost lackadaisically, used the back of his fist to send Zabuza skittering away.

“Damn it! Why can’t I keep up?!” Zabuza shouted. Kakashi had suddenly managed to grab onto him.

“This is goodbye, demon!” Kakashi used his kunai to pierce both Zabuza’s arms. “No more jutsus for you.”

--

“Well, what a mess he’s made of you!”

Kakashi looked up, seeing a small man tapping his cane.

“Gato? What are you doing here? And why...Why did you bring all of them?!” Zabuza demanded harshly, indicating the nearly hundred samurai behind Gato.

“Change of plans, demon. YOUR plans. I never planned to pay you, as you’ve likely figured out by now. It’s such a pain, hiring a skilled warrior like you, at such a hefty price. Now that you’ve worn yourself AND these ninja down, my thugs can kill you easily! Calling yourself the ‘demon of Kirigakure’! What a load of crap! Baby demon, maybe! I call it ‘false advertising’. The shape you’re in, you’ll be dead in no time!”

Zabuza looked almost sad. “Forgive me, Kakashi. Our fight is over. I no longer have any need to kill Tazuna, so that settles our differences.”

“That reminds me, I have a score to settle!” Gato walked over to where Haku’s body was laid. He began to lay in, kicking it, all the while remembering how Haku had nearly broken his arm.

“What the hell are you doing, you scumbag?!” Naruto shouted. He started to run towards Gato, but Kakashi corralled him.

“Think. We’re heavily outnumbered,” Kakashi reminded Naruto.

“HEY! HE WAS PRACTICALLY YOUR SLAVE!” Naruto had given up on Kakashi, and was now pleading with Zabuza. “DO SOMETHING!”

Zabuza seemed to have lost his will to fight, or even to live.

“Like what?” he replied dismally, “Haku’s dead. Gato used me, and I used Haku. Don’t you get it? It’s how Shinobi are. We’re either users, tools, or both. I didn’t value Haku for himself...only for the power he held. And I’m not sorry for any of it.”

“You...you really mean that? He really cared about you! He was devoted to you! He would have done ANYTHING for you! Are you so heartless that you can’t see what you meant to him? Or all he did for you?! He gave his life for you! To just let him die, get kicked like that...it’s too much...too much...”

Zabuza turned around. Tears were staining the bandages around his face, and stinging the multiple wounds he had all over his body.

“Kid...just shut up. Haku didn’t fight just for me. While he fought you and your friend, he broke his heart over you. I’m glad my last battle was against your team. Because you’re right. Shinobi don’t have to be just tools. When all is said and done, we have feelings, just like normal people. And now...I’ve lost everything...” Zabuza looked down once more. But something inside him had awakened.

“Kid...lend me your kunai, will you?”

Naruto tossed a kunai to Zabuza, who caught it in his teeth. Without another word, he took off toward Gato.

“What the hell are you waiting for?! Kill him!” Gato shouted. His group of thugs rushed in the way, while Gato stood back, satisfied that this was over. But he kept hearing screams. Screams of men dying. But most of all, Gato heard footsteps. And those footsteps were getting closer. And that’s when Gato saw it. He backed up. But his eyes couldn’t be lying to him, this was too real, too scary.

It was Zabuza, and beneath his feet, the shadow of a demon was growing. With numerous swords, knives, and spears sticking out of him, Zabuza was still advancing.

“Why won’t you die?!” Gato cried out, scared for his life.

“Gato! I’m not going to the same place as Haku...I’m going to hell...and I’m taking you with me!” Zabuza snarled in a nearly unearthly howl. Gato stumbled backward, but it was too late. Zabuza swung his head (And subsequently, the kunai) forward, and off went Gato’s head. Satisfied after his last kill, Zabuza let himself fall to the ground.

--

Sakura was still sobbing, and so loudly that she barely heard it.

“Sakura...your arm is heavy...”

When Sakura DID hear it, she didn’t dare believe it. She looked down disbelieving.

“S-Sasuke? SASUKE!” Sakura flung herself at Sasuke, holding him in a fond embrace.

“Sakura, you’re hurting me,” Sasuke grumbled. He was a mess of blood and needles, and no doubt Sakura had aggravated those injuries inadvertently.

“What happened to Naruto? And that damn kid in the mask?” Sasuke wanted to know as he was being hauled to his feet by Sakura.

“Naruto’s fine, and the other guy is dead!” Sakura explained.

“What? Dead? How?”

“I...I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure. All I know is that he died trying to protect Zabuza. Oh, Sasuke! NARUTO! SASUKE IS ALIVE!” Sakura couldn't help but shout with glee at the fact that the object of her affection was alive, after being in a temporary state of death. It was only then that the realization hit Sasuke.

He never aimed to kill me...

--

“Well, I've been worrying since the fight began, but you made it!” Kakashi chimed in happily.

“Hey, don't forget about us, you soft-touches!” The angry horde of Gato's thugs were still brandishing weapons, despite the fact that their leader's head was somewhere at the bottom of the ocean.

“You just killed our meal ticket, you ninja scum!” screamed another of the thugs. At that, they all charged, yelling various battle cries.

“Kakashi-sensei, isn't there something we can do? Some technique to get rid of all of them?!” Naruto questioned.

“Funny thing...between the Lightning Blade, the Summoning, and the Illusions, I've exhausted my chakra...” Kakashi was still crouching, trying to get his breath back.

Suddenly, an arrow flew across the air and buried itself into the concrete.

“THIS IS OUR LAND! ONE STEP FURTHER, AND YOU'LL DIE WHERE YOU STAND!” It was Inari, and he had an entire army behind him! He looked over at Naruto with a genuine smile. “The hero always arrives in the nick of time, right?”

Naruto couldn't help but smile widely himself. “You got it! Mind if I jump in? Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!” A hundred Narutos came from nowhere. The angry horde of thugs slowed down, but didn't stop running.

**I don't have enough chakra left for something solid...but an illusion should fool these idiots.
Clone Jutsu: Kakashi Style!**

Hundreds of Kakashi's joined the Narutos, and the people from the Land of Waves. Suddenly realizing that they had stepped out of the frying pan and into the fire, the group of goons turned tail and ran. The citizens of the Land of Waves cheered; their homeland theirs once more.

--

The fight was over. All that remained was dealing with Haku and Zabuza's corpses. The only hitch was that Zabuza wasn't a corpse yet.

“Kakashi...do me a favor? I...want to see his face,” Zabuza requested. Kakashi tugged his headband back over his Sharingan eye. He and Ryouko hefted Zabuza over to Haku’s side. Strangely, it began to snow.

“He said...Haku, I mean...said he was from a village where it snowed a lot,” Naruto remembered suddenly.

Zabuza looked to his companion. Haku was long dead now. “Haku...if I could...I wish I could go to the same place as you...”

“You CAN Zabuza...” Kakashi muttered. But Zabuza’s eyes and ears had heard and seen their last. Wherever he would wind up in the next life, he was headed there now.

--

Looking at the cross constructed for Haku, and the blade that served as Zabuza’s grave marker, Team 7 and Ryouko had begun to ponder their own existence as Shinobi. All except Naruto.

“What are you doing?! Don’t steal offerings, you’ll tick the gods off!” Sakura growled at Naruto, slapping his hand which was aiming for a rice ball that was near the grave.

“Sensei...is it true...that Shinobi are only tools?” Naruto asked quietly, thinking of Haku’s depressing definition of the lifestyle Naruto had chosen.

“It’s crucial that a ninja not exist only for themselves. We’re tools, used to best serve our homeland. That’s as true in Konoha as anywhere else,” Kakashi replied.

“Well, I don’t like it! When I become Hokage, that’s going to change!” Naruto stated firmly.

“Do you really believe that, Kakashi-sensei?” Sasuke queried, casting a dark look at the graves in front of him.

“Welllllll...No. That’s why all Shinobi are unique, and have their own ideals. But that one, the thought that we’re just tools, is constantly bothering us, just under our skin...” Kakashi had to admit that the prospect of being nothing short of a puppet irked him a little.

“In my old arts...we were always told what to do, how to do it...and it all seemed so selfish. Run away from trouble instead of confronting it...” Ryouko had spoken up for the first time in a long while. “...What does running solve? I would rather die in defense of another than preserve my own existence with a heavy conscience, always wondering if I could have stopped that death. I doubt that makes sense, but I’ve always felt that way.” For whatever reason, Ryouko seemed to regret chiming in at all.

--

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Well, it’ll be dull once you’re gone. But come by and visit, alright?” Tazuna answered Kakashi’s

thanks.

“You’d better!” a tearful Inari added.

“Hey, Inari, it’s okay, if you gotta cry,” Naruto told him.

“Me? N-no way! YOU can cry if you need to, Naruto.” Inari shot back, tears in his eyes, regardless of his words.

“I don’t cry!” Naruto declared, turning on his heel and walking away. Of course, Naruto started to blubber the second he turned away.

Bonehead... Sakura thought to herself.

Shortly after Team 7 and Ryouko had left, the name of the new bridge was decided:

The Great Naruto Bridge.

--

Back in Konoha...

“Thanks you letting me tag along. And thank you for your help, Kakashi-sensei,” Ryouko muttered.

“You did a fine job, Ryouko. But you still seem like something’s bothering you...Anything wrong?” Kakashi asked kindly.

“Yeah, you can tell us!” Naruto added. Ryouko’s eyes were half-lidded, and the bags under them more pronounced.

“It’s nothing, really. I’ve grappled with it for a long time, I’ll be fine. Right now, I’d better go find out what I’m doing next. Thanks again. And Sasuke...get well soon. Sakura, thanks for bandaging me up. And you, Naruto...we need more Shinobi like you,” Ryouko shuffled away, looking like a lost soul. Probably not far from the truth.

“What’s up with him, Kakashi-sensei?” Naruto tugged on his sensei’s sleeve. Kakashi knew the look all too well.

“That, Naruto, is the look of someone who hasn’t found his place yet. Well, that’s something only he can figure out. In the meantime, you three have a lot of growing to do. But I’m proud of all of you.”

--

A few days later, and several missions later, Team 7 had been given mostly D-ranked missions; a lot less fun than their latest B-ranked in the Land of Waves. Naruto, especially, seemed to have taken something away from that, and acted as if he had something to prove. He had been tearing through missions, though still having some trouble keeping up with Sasuke, something that irked him to no end.

This morning, Naruto was determined to be different. He had woken up, eaten his ramen and milk for breakfast, then had taken off out the door with a boisterous shout:

“WOO-HOO! NO MATTER WHAT TODAY’S MISSION IS, I’LL HAVE THE ENERGY TO KICK BUTT NOW! BELIEVE IT!”

Naruto zipped from his apartment, across town, and to the place Team 7 was meeting for today. It was in an alleyway in town, so Naruto’s words echoed a little as he shouted his greeting to Sakura.

“GOOD MORNING SAKURA!”

After the shout, Naruto’s enthusiasm tapered off. He had met eyes with Sasuke. Both glared for a minute, then turned away from each other. Sakura looked on, dreading today’s mission now. A forced smile straining her face, Sakura thoughts about the situation at hand.

They’ve been like this since we got back from the Land of Waves. Man, it’s soooo embarrassing! Hurry up, Kakashi-sensei!

-Three Hours Pass...-

Kakashi strolled up, late as usual. “Good morning everyone. Sorry I’m late, I got lost on the way here today...”

“YOU’RE SUCH A LIAR, SENSEI!” Sakura shouted, accusing finger directed at Kakashi. Under her breath, Sakura murmured that “as far as ninja deceptions go, that one just plain sucks!”

Naruto pushed his way to Kakashi, and, bubbling over with his trademark enthusiasm, started to talk very fast, and very loud.

“Sensei, sensei, what kind of missions do we have today? We’ve only had boring, easy missions! Give us something that’s a challenge! Something where I can put my skills to use! C’mon, please?!”

It’s good to see Naruto’s learned some restraint... Kakashi thought sarcastically.

Naruto’s thoughts were anything BUT sarcastic, they were downright angry. Even shaking a fist for emphasis, Naruto was going off on a tirade in his head. Glaring at Sasuke, and softening his look slightly towards Sakura, Naruto’s fist began to shake even harder.

Every time we go on a mission, those two wind up saving me, and I wind up looking weak! But not this time! That time is over! Naruto had begun to chuckle out loud, thinking of scenarios where he had saved Sasuke, and where a grateful Sakura rewarded his bravery with a hug or a kiss.

--After The Mission—

Sakura was half-dragging Naruto, who looked exhausted and pretty worn out. While Sasuke, Sakura, and Kakashi didn’t even have a scratch on them, Naruto looked like he had been through the wringer, then clawed by a cat.

"If you hadn't overdone it, you wouldn't be like this," Sakura admonished Naruto.

"You're such a nuisance," Sasuke chimed in. Naruto had miraculously regained some energy.

"That does it, Sasuke!" he snarled, taking steps toward Sasuke to do just that.

"If you start anything, I'm gonna bury you, Naruto!" Sakura declared, and grabbed Naruto, restraining him from getting to her precious Sasuke.

Kakashi sighed, and stepped between them, hoping to defuse the situation and give his assessment of them all in one shot.

"Lately, your teamwork has been non-existent."

"You tell him, Kakashi-sensei! You're always messing us up, Sasuke!" Naruto yelled. Sasuke really couldn't have cared less about what Kakashi said, but Naruto's yelling had irritated him, and he actually spoke more than usual.

"He was talking to you, pinhead. Instead of yelling and blaming me, why don't you actually improve, and get BETTER than me...you loser."

A stare down ensued, with Sakura keeping quiet, although she was thinking **This is bad! I don't know HOW they did it, but they're no worse terms than before!**

Sasuke's thoughts were going in an entirely different direction. **There are people that are challenges to me out there, but I'm stuck doing easy work with that knucklehead...** Briefly, Sasuke thought back to his fight with Haku, which, at this point, was the toughest he'd ever had.

"Well, that's enough for today. I've got to hand in my reports on today's mission," Kakashi informed his team, then walked away, his face buried in his adult novel.

"I'm going home, then." Sasuke said dryly, starting to walk away.

"Sasuke, wait up! How about you and I getting together and working on our teamwork?!" Sakura had asked Sasuke out on a date in just about every way possible, and Sasuke hadn't bitten. Today wouldn't change that.

"You're as bad as Naruto," Sasuke told Sakura. Inner-Sakura was shouldering a huge weight, while Sakura herself tried to remain impassive.

"Why waste your time flirting when you could be practicing?" Sasuke's words increased the size of the boulder on Inner-Sakura's shoulders, while Sakura was trying her best not to look TOO hurt.

"Even Naruto's skills are better than yours." Sasuke's assessment made the weight Inner-Sakura was holding even heavier, and nearly unbearable. Sakura bowed her head in defeat, while Sasuke walked away, not caring one way or the other.