

An Unsteady Alliance

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Ryouko Kaguya is tossed in jail on a false charge. Upon needing his help, Tsunade lets him out. Ryouko has to work fast, and lead his first mission, to save a boy and his family from their execution at the hands of a new alliance.

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1 - The Looming Threat

“Please. I KNOW what I did was...mostly wrong...” Tsunade’s voice came through the bars to a prison cell. A dark figure laying on a cot casually looked up.

“I thought I wasn’t worth your time...why know? Is there something you can’t handle?” the voice spoke mockingly and dark, and the figure the voice belonged to didn’t move.

“Don’t make this hard. It’s bad enough I have to ask for help! Now, will you do it?” Tsunade asked earnestly, Shizune and Tonton at her side.

The figure sat up, stretched, and got off his cot. He walked over to the bars, until the dim light from the outside shown in. He leaned casually against the door, his arms out between the bars.

“Let me get this straight...first I lose my friends, and my cousin. Then I lose out on the girl I’m sure I love. And then I get tossed in jail. For what? You know why I’m here? You should. YOU put me here.”

Despite the severe words, Ryouko Kaguya smirked. Nothing like flipping the bird to the administration that had kicked him in the nuts.

“I know. Look, you didn’t give up, I didn’t give up. I’m the Hokage, THAT’S why you are in that cell. I lost my cool, and I didn’t understand you. But now I get it. WHY you did what you did. And I’m sorry. Please, you’re my only option left! I don’t want to ask...but I have no choice, and you’re the best, and only, man for the job.” Tsunade wanted to punch Ryouko; leaning on the bars so smugly. As if an iron door could stop her fury. But she had to stop thinking that, it WAS all her fault.

Ryouko had changed in the week he had been jailed. His scrolls had kept him sane. Reading them over and over again kept the walls from closing in. And his genjutsu made sure that no one touched him. Only one time did he have to bloody his hands, and it was on that oaf from his academy days, Hiromaru. Ryouko kind of enjoyed that. Now, he had this deal on the table. It freed him from all he had done right. Jailed for doing the right thing. Brilliant justice system.

“Fine. You’ve got a deal. BUT- I want the rank I deserve, and I want to be out of this cell, with my charges pardoned. And I want one favor...deal?”

“Anything. Deal. Just go fix the mistake I made...the guards will free you.” Tsunade looked back over her shoulder as her high-heels click-clacked down the hall.

“Don’t make me regret this, Ryouko,” she warned.

“No more than usual,” he said back with a lopsided smirk.

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Freedom. Ryouko exited his cell, and walked outside, taking his ninja tools back from the guard, who welcomed him back. Ryouko had always been well-liked, and most everyone understood that Tsunade was just flexing her muscles to prove a point.

Ryouko had changed. Instead of his bandanna, he had changed to a black headband. He had worn black since the death of Hayate, The Third Hokage, and his cousin, Kimimaro, all within days of each other. But that had been three years ago now. The deaths were fresh in his mind. But life was again at his fingertips. Ryouko felt older, and looked a little older. He had let five o'clock shadow grow on his face while he was jailed. Now, with his dark brown hair newly trimmed, but still unruly, Ryouko felt different, and in a good way for a change. Oh, and his mask was gone, too. Confiscated by the guards, so he couldn't hang himself with it. Ryouko had thought about it, before he remembered he had his scrolls. Someone like Ryouko just wasn't built for jail. The past was the past, now. Time to look to the future. Time to right the wrong he had started to fix before Tsunade got in the way.

"Ryouko!" Lee, Naruto, Sakura, Kakashi, Asuma, Tenten, Temari, and Shikamaru cheered. Ryouko gave a rare grin and raised a hand in a wave before jogging over to his welcoming party.

"So, they let you out, huh?" Asuma muttered. He tossed Ryouko what looked like a pack of cigarettes. Ryouko caught them, and shrugged, putting one in his mouth. Asuma offered him a light, and Ryouko nodded his thanks.

"Chakra cigarettes? When are you gonna ditch the healthy stuff?" Asuma joked. Unlike Asuma's cigarettes's, Ryouko's were actually ration pills. But after a fight, when Ryouko's throat had been hit, he couldn't swallow pills anymore. He hated the medicinal taste and the fatigue anyway. So instead, Tsunade had created these. They didn't do any harm to the body (Ryouko HATED smoking.), and having them in the field were necessary. You never knew when you'd have to pull an all-nighter. These were actually proven to be safer than ration pills, but they hadn't been widely adopted yet.

"When I get sick of my body working the way it's supposed to," Ryouko shot back, raising his eyebrows. "Thanks for coming, all of you! It's great to see you!"

Sakura couldn't help but stare. Mentally, she compared Ryouko to how he was before his jail sentence, and after.

He's gotten cuter! He's still got that baby face, but somehow, that five o'clock shadow really adds something! I forgot how he looked without his mask, too! I hate smoking, but I guess it doesn't count if it's not a real cigarette...What am I thinking?!

"So how'd you get out? Oh, oh, did the ramen with the file hidden in it work?!" Naruto wanted to know. Ryouko shook his head.

"No. Actually, Tsunade almost killed you, until I convinced her I asked you to do it," Ryouko said with a laugh. "Then she threatened to neuter me...not a pleasing prospect..."

"Oww!" the group said as one.

“So, you’re out. Tsunade seemed awfully interested in what you were saying down there...of course, she didn’t know I was the guard, using a disguise...so I’ve told everyone,” Kakashi said happily. “And I see you’ve stopped copying me. Not to mention you’re more...cheerful...”

Ryouko tugged his headband down over one eye, causing a laugh from the group.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure I’ll be miserable again soon enough. It’s just great to be out of there. And...hey, where ARE your headbands, anyway?” Ryouko asked, noticing that not one of those waiting for him was wearing one.

“On Lady Tsunade’s desk, with about ten others. You’ve got some aura, kid. Not sure why, but all of us saw what happened, and decided you were right. When Tsunade wouldn’t release you, we all tossed our headbands on her desk,” Temari informed Ryouko in her typical fashion.

Not bad. I’d better not stare too long, Shikamaru might get jealous...Not that there’s anything between us, of course! Temari thought to herself. She had come to the Leaf Village because of him. But she would NEVER tell him that. Not know, anyway.

“Man, I missed all of you! I hate to cut and run, but I’ve got a mission. Since Kakashi’s filled all of you in, I won’t bother to say. But I’d better hurry. I’ll pay for a party when I get back!” Ryouko knew time was of the essence. He hated to leave everyone behind. But with so much at stake, he had to. Only time to refill his hip flask before heading out.

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“Thank you, Aki,” Ryouko said with a bow to the bartender. He had worked here once, before Tsunade jailed him. It was Aki’s adopt son he was protecting, and the reason he got jailed.

“You’re welcome, Ryouko...” Aki tried to smile, but instead grabbed Ryouko in a hug. “Please...save my son!” she cried into his shoulder. Ryouko patted her on the back.

“Don’t worry. I’ll have your son here in no time,” Ryouko assured her, helping her to sit down on a bar stool.

“I know you will. I wanted to thank you for all you did for us. And...just be careful. There aren’t a lot of Mist Shinobi...but they’re all very good...and those rumors...” Aki shuddered.

“Rumors? What rumors?” Ryouko asked, sitting down.

“Oh, I’m sure they’re nothing, really!” Aki told Ryouko, waving her hand dismissively.

“No, really, what. Anything helps, Aki,” Ryouko said soothingly.

“Well (sniffle), The...the Akatsuki are supposed to be involved...” Aki said, shaking at the name of the horrible group.

Ryouko froze up. This WAS bad. But it wasn't the rumor that worried him...Without warning, he punched Aki, sending her over the bar.

"You're not fooling me! Release!" Ryouko shouted. 'Aki' faded, and began Deidara! Deidara leapt back over the bar, kicking Ryouko in the face as he went. Ryouko skidded across the floor as he fell off the stool.

"What gave me away, un?" Deidara demanded, giving the downed Ryouko another swift kick. But his foot only splintered a log. Ryouko sailed down from above and behind Deidara and knocked him backward onto the bar. Ryouko snagged the long cloak the Akatsuki wore, and Deidara's long hair, using both as a handle to run Deidara down the bar, through the glasses and plates, before sending him sailing off the end of the bar. Ryouko picked Deidara up and bashed him into the wall, breaking his one arm. The other had been destroyed by Gaara.

"You scum! Where are they?! If you hurt them, I'll see you dead! Where are Aki and the others?!" Ryouko snarled, holding the stunned Akatsuki member up by the cloak.

"Your stretch inside give you a nasty steak, un?" Deidara crowed. He stopped his crowing when Ryouko held a kunai to Deidara's neck.

"Maybe. Or maybe I just hate you. Incidentally, are you a boy or a girl? Normally, I don't hit ladies..." Ryouko gave Deidara a rough shove, pushing him into the wall again.

"Go to hell, un! I'm not saying anything else!"

Ryouko pulled the still-lit chakra cigarette out of his mouth and ground it into Deidara's 'normal' eye. Deidara screamed as hot ash burned his retinas. Ryouko put a stop to that by ripping off a piece of Deidara's cloak and stuffing it in his mouth, tying it like a gag.

"Then you just come with me. If you try to run, I'll kill you. And I'll hate myself for it, but you're more trouble than your worth."

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THWOWMP!

Ryouko dropped the bleeding, mutilated Deidara on Tsunade's desk.

"The Akatsuki are involved. I would install security checkpoints everywhere, and have everyone carry identity." Ryouko didn't say anymore. He didn't NEED to.

"Then take Team 7 with you...I can't have you face the Akatsuki alone. I don't hate you, and sending you there by yourself is suicide," Tsunade told Ryouko. Ryouko shook his head.

"Leave Kakashi and Yamato out of this. If the Akatsuki are a threat, they'll be here, and after Naruto. Sending him into the line of fire is a mistake. He got out once, but he might not be lucky again. Besides...this mission means a lot to me personally. I need to lead it. You, more than anyone, knows how

hard I fought for what the Mist demanded...or who, rather. Katsuyori..."

Tsunade sighed. "Deal...but Naruto's already heard the mission, and he's not saying no. It's out of my hands. BUT- you will lead the mission. As per your request...you're a jonin. I just promoted Sakura to Jonin, but she wouldn't take the promotion until you were given it. Seems she's taking a liking to you...But, more importantly, I know you can seal Naruto's demon if necessary...so I'll allow it. You, Sai, Naruto, and Sakura it is, then. But you check in every twelve hours, ON the hour." Tsunade sat back in her chair.

Wish I was thirty years younger...Ryouko Kaguya is becoming quite the man...and he reminds me of Dan...that's really WHY I regretted all this...I should have been jailed for insisting on medics, the way I did over thirty years ago...I was even younger than Ryouko...Well, either way, what's done is done. All I can do is apologize...

"Seems a lot of people had words with you..." Ryouko picked up a couple headbands from Tsunade's desk.

"Ryouko...listen. I'm very sorry. I really regret doing what I did. And, on this trip, please decide if you can forgive me or not. You're a talented boy...and what the Leaf Village needs. So, no dying on me, alright?" Tsunade stood up and walked around her desk.

"It's all in the past, Lady Tsunade. And thank you..." Ryouko nodded, and turned to leave.

"Hold on!" Tsunade grabbed Ryouko and turned him around, and kissed him on the cheek.

"For luck. Don't read into it, kid," Tsunade chuckled, watching Ryouko's face burn red at the innuendo.

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"So you're a jonin, now?" Naruto questioned as the four leapt through the trees.

"So I'm told," Ryouko replied. He had put a straw hat on his head. To make it distinguishable from the Akatsuki's, Ryouko dyed it black.

"Hmph. Impressive," Naruto said dismissively. Ryouko could FEEL the jealousy radiating off Naruto. And Sai, of course, chimed in with perfect timing.

"Much more impressive than your dick, Naruto-kun!"

Ryouko was thankful he was in between Naruto and Sai. The LAST thing he needed was a fight on his hands before they even got to the Mist Village.

"Ryouko, what's up with this Katsuyori kid, anyway? I mean...is he your son?"

Ryouko nearly missed the branch he was aiming for. He had to reach an arm out to steady himself.

"No, not at all. He's nearly my age. He's a good kid. But his health isn't great. That's why he tried to

come to the Leaf Village in the first place. The Mist Village was going to kill him and his family. They can't have anyone 'weak' dragging them down. Katsuyori is blind in one eye, and he's...well, different. He's sharp, and he's got a good heart. I guess I just see some of myself in him. He's why I got jailed."

Silence. Ryouko looked up at the sky. It would be dark in another two hours, plenty of time to travel. But the others were starting to tire. They all needed to be on top of their game, especially if the Akatsuki were involved. Ryouko spotted a clearing below.

"Let's head there for the night!" Ryouko called to the others. They all changed course and landed in the clearing.

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Ryouko lay in his sleeping bag, chakra cigarette clenched in his teeth, his hat next to him. He couldn't relax, not in this foreign land. Naruto had conked out immediately, and Sakura shortly after. Sai was still awake now, and was drawing with a serious expression.

"Sai?" Ryouko muttered over the crackling fire.

"Hmm? What is it, Ryouko-kun?" Sai answered pleasantly.

"When I was jailed...ANBU came to get me...I caught a look at their files as they were pulling me away. I knocked one of them out. Broke his nose and blackened his eye, apparently. But, something on the list caught my eye. A name...can you tell me something about the name 'Ekyt'?"

Sai took up his brush and a scrap piece of scroll. "The name is all we have...ANBU was once deployed to martial arts tournaments, and to other cities, and dojos. We came across a boy, about fourteen at the time. He was talented. So we looked further into his life. He was a vigilante in the city, and the criminals were more afraid of him than the police. They called him 'the boy with daggers in his eyes'."

Ryouko exhaled a puff of 'smoke'; the 'smoke' was actually impurities removed from Ryouko's body by the cigarette.

"What did this guy look like?" Ryouko wanted to know. Sai finished drawing and held up the finished product.

"This is all we saw. A long coat, a bo, and a red-haired girl...We never caught 'Ekyt'."

Ryouko smirked. "No. Ekyt came to you. That was me, five years ago." Ryouko smiled a little. "Someone had to fight crime. The cops were chickenshoot cowards; that left me. A fourteen year old against the world. Sounds stupid. That's how I met the girl. Her name is Linda. Now, it's Linda Mawashi, resident dog of the Hidden Leaf. Back then, she was so kind, and beautiful, and she could kick @\$\$, too. I wish I could have seen her for what she'd become..."

Sai thought back to his brother, for some reason.

"I adopted that name to protect my family. As for Linda...things were never the same between us once

we got to the Leaf Village. I studied so hard; still do. It fascinates me. And, to be honest, I outgrew Linda as a partner in the art of the Ninja. She started to date Lee, and she outgrew me...One time, I got the courage up to kiss her on the cheek. When she said 'just friends', I damn near lost it. All that time, I put on a brave face for her. Then she burned me, but good. Oh well, Lee's happy with her..." Ryouko had put his hat back on, and taken a long swig from his hip flask.

"And what about Sakura-chan?" Sai asked, smiling. Sincere or not, he was trying. Ryouko and Sai actually got along, because Ryouko could understand not fitting in. That, and Sai didn't talk about his penis anymore. Once Ryouko found out that Sai didn't actually 'swing that way', and was just trying to break the ice, both of them got past the first reaction. When Ryouko had been in ANBU, he had worked with Sai. They had been referred to as "Bunbu Itchi", which translates to "Pen and Sword in accord". With Ryouko's past sword work, and Sai's drawing skills, the name stuck for the brief time the two worked together. Then, of course, Ryouko got jailed...

"Sakura...I don't know, Sai. I really like her. But she's out of my league. (looks away, scratching his head) But I don't want to put either of us in a bad position. Maybe I'd better just keep my feelings to myself. And...if you wouldn't mind...let's keep this conversation quiet, too. Maybe there'll be a need for 'Ekyl' again some day. And no need for Sakura to know how I feel...I'll tell her when the time is right."

Ryouko chuckled at his old moniker. Even more so at Sai's drawing, which showed 'Ekyl' in a heroic pose, with his staff in one hand, and his arm around the pretty red haired girl. Crushed by a crush.

"Ryouko-kun, I'm going to lay down. Do you plan to sleep?"

Ryouko shook himself out of his trance; he had been thinking about Sakura. "Probably not. We're too close to enemy territory, and this chakra cigarette will keep me awake. I've got some thinking to do anyway."

"Okay, Ryouko-kun. But you should sleep, too. Since you and I have been awake, we should wake Naruto-kun and Sakura-chan."

"Good point. I'll grab more firewood, while you wake them up."

2 - Dysfunctional Family

“Hey, Naruto?” Sakura asked quietly.

“Hmm? What’s up, Sakura?” Naruto answered sleepily.

“I was just curious...have you told Hinata how you feel yet?” Sakura blushed; that wasn’t what she had meant to say.

“Not yet, but I will!” Naruto laughed.

Typical Naruto...he knows nothing about love, but he thinks he’s going to sweep her off her feet!

“So, what about you and Ryouko, huh?” Naruto teased, elbowing Sakura.

“Huh? Ryouko? Where did that come from?” Sakura breathed.

“Oh, please, you’ve been making puppy eyes at him this whole trip, dattebayo! Geez, you give a guy a little stubble, and trim his hair, and all of a sudden every girl wants him! I think even Grandma Tsunade would’ve jumped him!”

Sakura and Naruto both burst out laughing, then shushing each other, as Sai and Ryouko were trying to sleep.

“I admit, I DO see him differently. More...well...it’s like this. He’s cute, but now I feel safe around him. Kind of like...I don’t know, Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura admitted, blushing even redder.

“WHOA! YOU LOVE KAKASHI-SENSEI?!” Naruto practically screamed.

“No, you idiot! I mean, with Ryouko leading us, it feels like Kakashi-sensei. Like everything’s under control, we won’t be attacked, and even if we are, he’ll handle it.”

“Oh! I get it! So you DO like him?”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Yes. But as a friend. Let’s face it, he could do better than me. I mean, the only thing big about me is my forehead! I really got shortchanged in the T and A department...”

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The next morning, Ryouko woke up quickly. He felt something was off...For good reason.

“Oh shoot!” Ryouko grabbed his still-lit cigarette and blew the ash upward. When the ash hit ‘nothing’ and stayed in one spot, like it was stuck to something, Ryouko new something was horribly wrong. His uttering of the vulgar word for fecal matter had awakened the others.

“Sai, draw! Get the lions to run in every direction. I want to see who or what we’re dealing with!”

Sai followed Ryouko’s orders and drew as fast as he could. Soon, the lions had splattered against a wall, now visible thanks to their ink. Naruto ran toward it, but Ryouko seized the back of his jacket.

“Hold it! Don’t touch the wall!” Ryouko reached down and picked up a rock. He tossed the rock at the wall. BRZAP! It exploded into fragments.

“We’re surrounded!” Sakura pointed out.

“And the walls are closing in...” Sai added.

“We’re gonna die if we don’t move!” Naruto shouted.

“Calm down! Earth Style: Mud Wall!” Ryouko sucked in his stomach and spat out a layer of mud. The mud grew taller and taller, until it hit the ‘ceiling’. The ceiling and walls slowed down, their progress hampered by the wall of mud.

“It’s a barrier jutsu...there has to be four people, at least...Naruto, have your Shadow Clones dig, just in case we can go UNDER the barrier. Sai, have your ink at the ready...Sakura, I need your help on this one. We need to send genjutsu in every direction, until we hit a person. You know that medical jutsu, the one you used to put me out for my eye surgery? (WAAAYYY back, at the beginning of my original fic, Ryouko’s left eye was destroyed by Gaara. It would take two years before Tsunade and Sakura discovered a way to fix it.) Try that one. Here, you’re gonna need this.” Ryouko handed her a chakra cigarette, already lit. Sakura took it and put it in her mouth, already making hand signs.

“1/8th of a turn each time we don’t hit someone, and aim the genjutsu as wide as you can! Damn it! Water Style: Water Wall!” Ryouko used some of the mud and some water that the ground had soaked up to create another wall to slow the progress of the wall down.

“It’s no good! My clones just disappear! They’ve extended the barrier down!” Naruto shouted back.

Ryouko and Sakura had started their genjutsu attacks. On the third try, Sakura hit someone.

“Ryouko, right there! I’ve stunned him, but he’s going to throw it of!”

Ryouko didn’t make handsigns for these two genjutsus anymore. First he used a “False Surroundings” jutsu, which he sensed got thrown off. But the second jutsu hit home and latched on. Torture and Interrogation were important to ANBU, and Ryouko had learned from the best. Now he set out to destroy his first mind. He would hate himself for it, but he would hate it even more if he and his squad perished.

Before long, Ryouko heard a scream of terror. An ink-covered wall vanished, giving the four Leaf Ninja time to scamper out. Ryouko looked to see who he’d hit. To his surprise, it wasn’t the Akatsuki. It was some Mist Ninja.

I wouldn’t have laid that genjutsu on that thick if I had known it wasn’t the Akatsuki behind it...

Ryouko hated the thought that he might have just destroyed someone from the inside. That diminished when he remembered that it was his group that had been attacked. That caused Ryouko to grab the now-drooling man. He was only unconscious; Ryouko had ended the genjutsu in time to save the man's mind.

"Alright, I want the rest of you out here, right now! Don't screw with me, you saw what I did to him!" Ryouko tugged on the man's short gray hair, in effect increasing the pressure he had on the man's neck. To Ryouko's surprise, the guy was clothed in traditional items, not Ninja gear.

"Okay, we give up! Please, don't hurt him!" a blond woman with dark eyes ended the genjutsu she had placed on her body. Soon, a teenage girl with red hair ended it. Naruto breathed out sharply.

She's totally hot! And that is skin-tight clothing! He heh, her curves are in all the right places!

"Naruto, put your eyes back in their sockets!" Sakura said, smacking him in the head.

"Ow! You violent kunoichi, what the hell?!" Naruto moaned, rubbing a growing, throbbing red welt on top of his head.

Ryouko tilted the kunai he was holding until it was under the unconscious man's chin.

"You want to explain to me just why the hell you attacked us?" Ryouko growled.

"Please, come with us! We mistook you for the ones in black! Come to our home, we'll explain everything!" the woman begged. Her son smiled at Sakura. He was about twelve years old, and Sakura was the nicest looking girl he'd ever seen. His sister, the redhead, smiled seductively at Naruto, Ryouko, and Sai, even winking and wagging her finger. Naruto was drooling, Sai was impassive, and Ryouko was too focused on the situation to care.

"Alright. But this better not be a trick...I'm going to hold on to this guy (Tugs on man's head) until I'm sure you're not screwing with us."

"How about holding me, instead?" the girl offered. "My Daddy won't mind..."

"I'LL HOLD YOU!" Naruto declared. For whatever reason, the girl walked over to him.

"Naruto- no. Not until we're sure that they aren't going to knife us. You, whatever your name is, don't come any closer..." Ryouko glared at her. But you would think he had blown a kiss for the reaction he got. The girl giggled and backed up, twirling her hair, then even blew a kiss.

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"So you're friends of the Akamadori family? Why would the Akatsuki be after you?" Sakura asked. Everyone was sitting down at a low table, food in front of them.

“They want Katsuyori...I don’t know why! But we decided that, if they came back, we were going to delay them...at least buy Katsuyori some time...the worst part is, this is all on orders from the Mist Village! No one can stand up to the Akatsuki, and our whole village is being forced to bow down! I hate it!” the older woman, who wouldn’t give her name, said in frustration.

“Everyone has gone soft, and just let the Akatsuki run wild...I was forced to quit my job as a ninja, because I refused to submit my children to the government’s testing.”

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Ryouko asked quietly.

“No, not at all.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry for treating you so roughly. I got attacked early by an Akatsuki member, in a bar. He’s under our government’s control now. The bar belongs to the Akamadori family. He jumped me, disguised as Aki. My mission, officially, is to find and return Katsuyori to the Leaf Village. My personal mission is to save the whole family. If you know anything, please tell me.” Ryouko leaned forward, ignoring the age-old rule of ‘no elbows on the table’.

“We can talk later. For now, we should all rest. Your chakra must be exhausted after all that work.”

“C’mon Naruto, let’s go to my room!” the girl grabbed Naruto and ran upstairs. Ryouko stood up, as if to stop them, but then sat back down and shook his head.

“Sai, do you have a minute? Please, excuse us for a moment...” Ryouko asked kindly, stepping outside with Sai.

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“Sai, use those mice. Can you get them into the girl’s room? I don’t know what she’s doing to Naruto, but we need to know. She’s playing the ‘flirty’ game...that worries me...”

“Why does it worry you?” Sai questioned as he drew.

“Because I was the only single guy at the academy, helping Iruka-sensei, one day I got picked to help the kunoichi. They had to seduce me, in various ways, and then ‘kill’ me before I touched them. This girl is following a pattern that they used on me, or a similar one...she might just be friendly...but I don’t trust her.” Ryouko exhaled, the smoke clearly visible against the cold night air. Sai’s mice came to life, and scampered to the window...

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“So, Naruto-kun, do you have a girlfriend?” the girl questioned. Ryouko hadn’t caught her name. No one had given their names out, except Naruto, of course.

“Nah, not yet!” Naruto replied, sitting on the window sill.

“Re-ally...a cutie like you? Single? It’s a crime...I should know, I’m single, too...” the girl had moved

closer to Naruto, and pulled him away from the window.

“You? But you’re drop-dead gorgeous!” Naruto answer, shocked that something that looked so good could be single.

“A crime...Naruto-kun...” suddenly, the girl pushed Naruto onto her bed, knocking aside stuffed animals of various shapes, sizes, and colors.

“I noticed the looks you gave me earlier, you bad boy...if you wanted to see...all you had to do...” the girl reached for her shirt, and pulled it up over her head, “...was ask...”

Naruto could only stare blindly. The girl moved in closer.

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“Hmm...” Sai’s mice had come back. They began to form words on the paper.

“What’re they saying?” Ryouko whispered.

“That she is beautiful, and seductive. She just removed her shirt, and is moving toward Naruto-kun...but she’s got a senbon in her hair. It’s hidden too well to be anything but a weapon...”

“Damn! It’s not like we can go barging in, either!”

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Ryouko ran back inside, whispering urgently to Sakura. Instantly, she took off upstairs. Ryouko turned in time to block a kunai with one of his own.

“I thought so...you had your daughter seduce him! Those ‘kisses’ she blew...genjutsu, aimed at the most susceptible mind, right?!” Ryouko blocked the man’s kunai. But the mother and son were frozen.

“How could you? How could you turn your back on us?!” the son demanded.

“I had no choice!” his father murmured. “It was either HELP the Akatsuki, or get killed by them!” The father turned to Ryouko. “It’s too late, my daughter has already given your friend a nice send-off. I knew that dip would fall for it! All she had to do was flash a little leg, and he was hooked on her!”

“She flashed more than that!” Ryouko shot back, pushing away and throwing his kunai. “Even if you put her up to seducing my friend, she went farther than ‘showing a little leg!’”

“DON’T YOU DARE INSULT MY LITTLE GIRL!” the man roared. But he stopped suddenly, and fell forward, blood pouring from his mouth. Behind him was his son.

“No time to explain, we’ve got to check on your friends! My sister is really strong!”

“Alright. Sai, you keep an eye on them, find out what you can. I’m going to help Sakura!”

--

Ryouko dashed upstairs, finding Naruto staring absently at the girl. Understandably so; she was topless and he was fourteen, a boy, and a pervert. Guys are born that way, apparently. (lmao, I had to get a shot in. This was a witty observation by one of my friends. It IS a joke...not ALL of us are pervs! XD)

“Game’s up, girl. I know what you’re doing...” Ryouko, a man of integrity, made sure to look her firmly in the eyes.

“How DARE you just barge in! I don’t care if he’s your team mate! He belongs to ME know! Get him, Naruto!” the girl blew a kiss to Naruto, who charged Ryouko. He didn’t even have time to get his hands up, as Naruto moved incredibly quick and socked him in the jaw, rocketing him backward, through the wall, and down the stairs.

Seconds later, the girl joined him. Ryouko moved aside just as she tumbled down, senbon piercing her neck and back, and her mother standing on top of the stairs.

“My own daughter...my God...” the lady broke down in tears. “I killed my daughter!” she wailed. Ryouko leapt upstairs, over her, and into the girl’s room. Naruto tried to attack him again, but this time Ryouko was ready.

“Release!” Ryouko ducked Naruto’s punch and tapped his shoulder, thereby forcing his (Ryouko’s) chakra into his (Naruto’s) body, breaking the genjutsu. Naruto stopped dead, and looked up.

“Whoa...she was cute...where’d she go...and why is there a fist mark on your face?”

“She’s dead, Naruto. She put a genjutsu on you, and tried to stab you with a senbon. Now, where’s Sakura?”

“I don’t know...I really don’t remember much...” Naruto scratched his head, still feeling wobbly from the genjutsu.

“Go wait with Sai. This family isn’t on the same page. The mother and son killed the father and daughter for betraying the family. Make sure everyone’s okay, and see what’s left of our stuff. We’ve got to move, the Akatsuki will be coming.”

“Right!” Naruto ran down the stairs. Ryouko pretended not to notice the tear in Naruto’s eye; he really thought the girl loved him. Ryouko sighed, knowing how hard death was. But at least Naruto hadn’t had time to get to know the girl; not the way Ryouko had gotten to know Hayate, Kimimaro, and the Third Hokage. When they all died within days of each other, Ryouko’s life went to hell. And it stayed there, until this mission started. Death and danger aside, Ryouko was...enjoying himself, in a strange way. He shook his head, deciding to ponder that thought later. Right now, he had to find Sakura.

It didn’t take long. The closet door flew off it’s hinges and nearly decapitated Ryouko. Sakura came tumbling out, tied up with about eight coils of rope. Two on her arms, one coil around her wrist, three on her legs, then the other two coils connected the other ropes, making for a nearly inescapable rope

prison. Finally, Sakura's headband was stuffed in her mouth and tied in a knot, making an effective gag. Ryouko verbally warned Sakura he was there, and was going to cut the ropes. That was for his own safety. Sakura could STILL destroy him from that position if she landed a full-power punch.

"That dog got the drop on me! She stabbed me with something, too...she was waiting behind the door when I came in..." Sakura's voice trailed off. "I can't...feel...my chakra..."

"Boy...you, Ryouko..." the mother was talking. "the green jar contains an antidote...my daughter uses a poison, called"

"Ariothimayne," Ryouko finished. "I've heard of it. Sakura taught me, actually. Green blotches on the stab wound, spreads throughout the chakra network, closes the tenketsu..."

"Hey...heal me already...spout the knowledge later..." Sakura mumbled.

"Right, sorry. Hang on." Ryouko picked Sakura up and carried in front of him. Ryouko didn't want to leave Sakura in the care of this woman. The family was WAY too dysfunctional. Two of them lay dead, and Ryouko didn't want him or his squad to be next.

"Sai, Naruto, are we packed up?" Ryouko asked, laying Sakura on the table while racking his brain on how to use the herb he needed to heal her. Powder, pill, liquid?

"Yes, Ryouko-kun. We should move quickly. What happened to Sakura-chan?" Sai commented/asked.

"Poisoned. Don't worry, it's an easy poison to get rid of, and I know the cure. I just want to make sure we're ready to leave at a moment's notice...Sai, take Naruto and scout around, would you? Find us a place, an empty house, or something. We definitely need a place to hide out off the grid. We can't fight the whole village, let alone the Akatsuki. And this might take a while..." Ryouko didn't want to hang around in this country long, but with the Akatsuki around, he didn't want to leave them, either. The Mist and Leaf may be enemies, but in Ryouko's eye, people were people, and this was a village that was being manipulated.

--

Ryouko finally remembered what to do with the herb. But healing jutsus weren't his forte. Forte or not, though, it was that or let Sakura slowly die.

"Poison Removal Jutsu...Damn, it's too strong..." Ryouko muttered, trying again, his hands glowing with green healing energy. "Maybe I can suck out enough just to get her moving again, and she can finish...That should do it!"

Sakura stirred, then sat up. She shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs. Immediately after that, she put her medical jutsu to work on herself.

"Sorry, I didn't master those medical jutsu yet...I'm only good enough to heal a few cuts, and stab wounds. Poison...I need more practice..."

“Not on me, you don’t! I don’t want to be poisoned again, I got enough of that with Lady Tsunade. ‘Save your own life in 30 seconds’! I hated that drill...guess I’ll have to keep working with you...”

Ryouko nodded. “Seems that way. I’ll get it eventually.”

3 - A Date and a Death

Sai and Naruto returned shortly. What they saw was Ryouko and Sakura working on a map, with Ryouko looking like hell had frozen over. Sakura seemed tired as well. To Naruto, this suddenly sparked an idea. Mischievous, but good hearted- two words that described Naruto, and his idea as well.

“Sai, I’ve got an idea…” Naruto whispered to the artist.

Sai listened, and gave a genuine smile at the end.

“That’s a good plan, Naruto-kun. Let’s do it.”

Naruto nodded, then called to Ryouko and Sakura. “Hey, c’mon, we found this place! Whoa, man, you look like crap! (Naruto snaps his fingers as Ryouko glares at him for the ‘compliment’) I’ve got it! You two should go collect information! You’re both genjutsu-type ninja, right? Use your genjutsu to disguise yourselves, and collect some info!”

Ryouko shrugged, but Sakura was all for it. Gung-ho might describe her reaction better.

“Getting out is JUST what the doctor ordered! C’mon, Ryouko!” Sakura grabbed the half-asleep Ryouko’s arm and dragged him out the door. Ryouko vaguely registered that it was female, and nice looking one, that had dragged him away, and he suddenly warmed to the idea.

--

“Mommy, look at those two! What are they doing?!” a little boy asked his mother as Ryouko and Sakura (with Mist Village headbands) walked by. Ryouko had tried to eavesdrop on every conversation. Normally, he wouldn’t think of something like that. But he was desperate for any scrap of information that could help his mission. With lives hanging in the balance, he would do whatever it took to make sure his mission was successful.

“Those two? They’re on a date, don’t bother them,” the mother told her son, smiling widely. “Ah, young love!”

“A date? Man, that guy is lucky!” the boy chimed in. His mother shushed him and dragged him away.

It hit Ryouko and Sakura simultaneously. **A date?! Is THAT what this is? I’ve never been on a date! What am I supposed to do?! Did she/he plan it that way?!**

Sakura and Ryouko exchanged nervous laughs, both blushing deeply, their faces lit up like Christmas trees. A bright crimson hue had spread, starting on their cheeks, but eventually engulfing their entire faces.

“Well, kids get some ideas, don’t they?” Sakura giggled nervously. **The guy is lucky...thanks for**

compliment kid!

“Yeah. Their parents just want to see a cute couple...” **Oh shoot! I just called us a couple! Um, damn, I'd better cover this!** “...Maybe we should let them believe that while we get information?” Ryouko suggested carefully, knowing of Sakura's propensity to punch the perpetrator of an offensive comment.

“Yeah, that works for me!” Sakura responded quickly. “Um, food would be a good idea, to perpetuate the theory of the date, I mean!” Sakura scratched the back of her head nervously.

“Oh, right. Uh, what do you like?” Ryouko asked, looking over at his pink-haired comrade.

“Oh, um, dumplings?” Sakura scrambled for an answer. She even forgot the name of the ice cream with the jelly in it she really liked. (Seriously, WHAT is the name of that stuff? Sakura's eating it in the first episode of Shippuuden. Can someone give me an answer here?)

“Sounds good. Um, here's a spot,” Ryouko pointed out a spot. His nervousness was about to cost him.

“Uh, Ryouko, that's nice, but let's pick a different spot...” Sakura suddenly looked uncomfortable, pointing next to the dumpling shop. Ryouko followed her finger to...a strip club? (Black lines of doom on Ryouko's face right about now)

“I didn't even see that place! Sorry about that. Uh, you pick?!” **Great, now I'm a pervert AND a retard! I really hope SHE knows how a date works, I'm just following her lead!**

“Calm down, Ryouko! Easy! I'm not going to kill you over a mistake, okay? Relax! You're not Naruto, I don't have to pound sense into you. Besides, we're both jonin, we can certainly talk over a meal like adults, right? No need to get all giggly like school girls...right?” Sakura actually seemed to make that a question.

“Right...he heh, my bad...” Ryouko took a quick sip from his hip flask to calm down.

“Hey, aren't you under age?” Sakura questioned.

“Technically. But Lady T...I mean (Ryouko stopped himself just in time before blowing their cover) the leader told me to drink sake for my heart, so it doesn't come bursting out of my chest. Same with the cigarettes...hope you don't think less of me for it...”

“No, I help fill the prescriptions, remember...gimme!” Sakura grabbed the hip flask and took a drink herself.

“Ah! That's good stuff!” Sakura declared. She had had some of 'the sauce' before. Being Lady Tsunade's apprentice meant that you got to try certain things. Sometimes sake, sometimes poisons.

“Hey, you're a minor!” Ryouko protested. Sakura shrugged.

“What, you gonna tell on me? I didn't drink that much! I don't trust the stuff around here, anyway. I heard they eat weird stuff...in this section of the Village, I mean. I come from the other end,” Sakura

covered her mistake quickly when a few Villagers raised their eyebrows.

“Oh, that’s just a myth. All of us drink and eat normal stuff,” Ryouko laughed, trying to sound confident, like this wasn’t a first date, in a strange place, and like he didn’t just inadvertently give an indirect kiss. **Would I be a pervert to cherish that flask?**

“Hmm. Well, let’s eat, then!” Sakura dragged Ryouko into a bar, and sat him down at the counter. She sat next to him, trying to act less nervous. “Fake” or not, this felt like a real date. Not that Sakura minded so much. Anything for the mission.

The two ate, one or the other occasionally forcing conversation. Little by little, though, they both loosened up, and started to enjoy themselves. They even forgot the mission momentarily, and just became what they were trying so hard to act like- two kids on their first dates. All the awkwardness that went with it was even almost enjoyable.

“So, Ryouko, what was your old dojo like?” Sakura asked, her plate empty. She hadn’t known anything but the Leaf Village, and was curious as to what someone who had lived on the outside had to say about the world.

Ryouko chewed and swallowed, then shrugged. “Money hungry. They would make anyone a black belt who had the money. I did my best to bring some honor back to the rank. That’s about it, really. Not much else to tell.” At this point, Ryouko pushed his dish away from him.

“That sucks, I hate it when that happens. Or, the other end of the spectrum, where you won’t get promoted, even if you deserve it. You wrote the book on that, Ryouko!”

“Yeah. I did it in prison,” Ryouko mumbled back, laughing.

Man, she’s really gotten beautiful. She lost the fangirl stuff, and now she’s just...out of my league comes to mind. I wish I had a shot with her. Whoa, no more of these thoughts, I’m going to enjoy this date. Sakura needs to enjoy it, even if I’m faking my way through it. Truth be told...I want this to count as a real date...

-

Sakura laughed at the response, then let her chin rest on her hands, looking at Ryouko from the side as he signaled a waiter to refill his drink.

That boy is really something...I remember wondering if he’d live, after losing three people so quickly. And then the jail thing...Lady Tsunade was wrong. Anyone who couldn’t understand that Ryouko was only doing the right thing is missing some brain cells. I should have put my foot down with Lady Tsunade. If Ryouko is treated better when we get back to the Leaf Village, I’m going to. (sigh) I wish this was a real date...he’s gotten cuter. The air of mystery he had with the mask was cool, but without the mask...he just seems so...different...so much more charming...I wish I had a shot with him...

--

Even though they were the only four in the bar (save for the bartender), Ryouko and Sakura didn't notice the two in the straw hats and black cloaks sitting behind them. On the hats were lines of rice paper, and two bells that jingled in the wind. One figure was tall and powerfully built, like he could rip a phone book in half with two fingers. The other looked more or less normal.

"That one made our BINGO book..." the tall one growled, pointing at Sakura.

"BOTH of them did. The one of the right is the medic-nin under Tsunade. The other is Ryouko Kaguya..." a quieter voice said, thumbing through his BINGO book.

"Who the hell is that?!" the tall one muttered.

"Otherwise known...as 'Ekyt'," the other told him. At that, the tall man's eyes lit up. An old score to settle, perhaps?

"Let's go..."

--

Sakura was digging in to her desert happily. Ryouko had already paid, when he felt something. A HUGE chakra. Trying not to turn around, Ryouko tried to warn Sakura. But someone had already grabbed her around neck. Ryouko got up to protest her rough treatment, but the person with the huge chakra pushed him onto the bar. Ryouko landed a two-foot kick to the man's sternum, knocking off his hat.

"Kisame! Well, coming to your old stomping grounds?" Ryouko decked Kisame, then threw a kick over his shoulder, knocking Sakura's attacker off balance. Sakura took it from there, shifting her weight and throwing the heavier man over her shoulder, knocking his hat off as he tumbled to the ground.

"Who the hell is that?!" Sakura howled, giving whatever it was a kick in the chops.

"Not that damn puppet again! I hate those things!" Ryouko moaned. "That's Sasori of the Red Sand...but I think you already know him, Sakura. Same jackass, different body. Still playing with toys, Sasori?"

"Yeah. Get out of our village, freak!" Sakura added, pulling her combat gloves on.

Kisame and Ryouko squared off. Samehada nearly beheaded Ryouko. As the sword went by, Ryouko ducked under it, and got close to Kisame, to a range where his sword would be useless. He took the opportunity to- throw his drink on Kisame?

"You idiot!" Kisame laughed as he swatted Ryouko away. He didn't seem to notice Ryouko pulling Sakura down behind the bar, for some reason. Ryouko popped back up and used his signature fire jutsu:

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ryouko shot orange tongues of flames at Kisame, who suddenly realized what Ryouko had done. He had doused him with alcohol! FWOOM!

Kisame lit up like a Fourth of July firework show. Sasori ejected his 'heart' from his wooden body. He attached himself to Ryouko's neck, choking Ryouko out. Sakura knew all too well what Sasori could do. She couldn't just punch, that might cause damage to Ryouko's neck. Instead, Sakura took a kunai from her waist pouch and stabbed Sasori's 'heart'. With the kunai still in it, Sakura used a pair of ice tongs to pull it off of the now-gasping Ryouko. Sakura debated what to do with the heart. Finally, she decided to throw it on the smoldering pile that Kisame had become.

"Are you okay?! Let me see your neck!" Sakura grabbed Ryouko's head and tilted it. To her relief, there wasn't any damage.

"Time to go," Ryouko said quietly. He put some money on the counter and grabbed a bottle of sake. He smashed it on Kisame's head, causing the fire to leap higher into the air.

--

"Not an ideal date..." Ryouko commented, chakra cigarette in his mouth.

"No. But you DO know how to show a girl a good time. I haven't had THAT much fun in a fight in a long time!" Sakura added in such a way that Ryouko wasn't sure if she was kidding or not.

"Yeah. I was under the impression that the biggest thing I would have to worry about on a date was conversation, and whether or not I kiss you goodnight, or vice versa, or not at all." Ryouko blushed a little, kind of wishing that the date HAD been just that- a date.

And then that brawl happened. The worst part was that neither Ryouko nor Sakura were sure if they had killed Kisame and Sasori or not. It's not like they could hang around to find out. They had both left the bar after hiding the two 'bodies', and bribing the bartender to shut up. When the bribe didn't work entirely, that turned to a threat. When Sakura picked up a solid metal bar stool and twisted it into a pretzel, the bartender suddenly decided it would be for the best to just do what the nice people said.

Sakura chuckled at Ryouko's assessment of a first date. "I kinda thought so, too. But, still, I've got to admit...I enjoyed myself..."

"Me, too. Thanks for going along with all this..." Ryouko knew Sakura had hoped for a better first date. Ryouko was fine. The 'date' hadn't been entirely awkward. Nothing like combat to get the adrenaline flowing. But to hear Sakura say she enjoyed herself, that was like a dream come true.

Naruto and Sai's plan had worked. When they talked, it was about getting Sakura and Ryouko out together. Sakura needed a boy, and Ryouko needed a girl. Somehow, there was a mutual attraction there, without either of them being aware of it. And with Ryouko's new attitude, he was more likely to actually get Sakura's attention.

--

"Little bastard, he nearly got me with that damn alcohol/fire jutsu. I'll give him credit for having guts. And I look forward to tearing those guts out, and hanging him by them!" Kisame plucked at the last of

his burnt flesh. If his chakra hadn't been so enormous, he would have burnt to a crisp. Sasori hadn't been so lucky. One Akatsuki member was now dead, and one was missing (Deidara). How could such a small group wreak so much havoc?

"I warned you not to underestimate him, Kisame." Itachi's cold voice pierced the dim confines of the Akatsuki hideout. Kisame glared up at Itachi, despite his normal friendliness with the heartless killer.

"Yeah, yeah. I lived, didn't I? Sasori never had a chance. Oh well, not a great loss if you ask me. Playing with those toys all the time. Whackbag."

Itachi's eyes glowed dangerously. "ANY loss is a great loss...or have you forgotten our plans, Kisame? The leader won't like you straying from his plans for the sake of your own bloodlust."

"Heh. You know that this place gets me all nostalgic...puts me in a killing mood," Kisame patted his sword affectionately. He had been talking about what he'd like to do to Ryouko all day. Those damn burns hurt, and he actually complained about them. As for Kisame's comment, Itachi wasn't amused.

"Don't let your guard down just because you're 'home', Kisame. It's your turn to guard tonight. I have business to take care of."

"Itachi, we're partners, you shouldn't go alone. Didn't you just get done saying not to underestimate this little pest?" Kisame protested, feeling ready to go. He had a high tolerance for pain, a burn wasn't going to stop him- especially if it meant getting some revenge.

"It's not the boy I'm going after...I have no plans of violence. All I'll need are a few simple words...and a name." Itachi left Kisame to tend to his skin. The Akatsuki didn't normally crack jokes, but calling Kisame a 'giant fish stick' was too good to pass up.

"Whatever. But don't overuse those eyes of yours, the damn things are dangerous and you know it. If you keep using it so much, you'll barely be able to see at all, Sharingan or not." As always, Kisame's words fell on deaf ears. Even the leader thought twice before asking Itachi to do something. The guy was good- scary good.

--

"Damn it..." Ryouko muttered, combing a map of the Mist Village again, marking certain spots. It was tedious work, and REALLY not his thing. That, or it was Naruto bouncing off the walls, wanting to see some action.

"Ryouko?"

Ryouko looked up from his map, seeing Sakura.

"Sakura? What is it?" he asked gently, trying not to show the wear and tear the last few days had put on him.

"Listen...I need a little, um...well, private girl stuff time. I'm going to go for a short walk, by the river,

okay?"

"Sure, just be careful," Ryouko told her.

"Thanks! I'll be back in a little bit!" Sakura waved over her shoulder and headed outside.

Immediately, Ryouko worried. Even if they had killed one, or both, members of the Akatsuki (which weighed on Ryouko's conscience for two days), there were more to the Akatsuki than those two. Three, actually. Ryouko remembered Deidara was in the hands of the Hidden Leaf. It really showed the Akatsuki how much they cared for their comrades, leaving one in the hands of an enemy. But even that didn't bother Ryouko. What bothered him was who was left in the Akatsuki. The only one he had met personally was Itachi, and that had been hellish enough. He had heard of others, but only by name, not ability, and very rarely by village. No village wanted to own up to the fact that one of their own was in such a horrid organization.

Ryouko finally couldn't stand still anymore.

"Guys, I'm going to refill my hip flask. Do you need anything?" Ryouko called to Sai and Naruto. The two had gotten along amazingly well, for them anyway. Ryouko and Sakura only had to pry them apart twice. It was like both their minds were elsewhere, instead of on each other. Ryouko knew it was too much to hope for that they were both so focused on the mission that they would forget everything else.

"Ramen for me! Red miso!" Naruto shouted. He had been denied his favorite form of sustenance for a long time.

"I need more ink, Ryouko-kun."

Ryouko nodded, making a mental note. "Naruto, can you handle the check in? Send Gamakichi or Gamatatsu, Lady Tsunade needs her information, or she'll skin us all alive. I'll be right back. Stay here, don't come looking for me if I disappear."

4 - Itachi's Visit

Sakura walked along the river, stopping to feel the cherry blossoms. They were nice this time of year. The petals floated into the water of the river, moving with the slow current. Sakura watched the water splash against a rock, and even saw a small fish swim by. Such a tranquil place existed in such a hectic world.

Sakura sat down on a rock, removed her sandals, and dipped her feet into the pleasantly-cool water. That's when Sakura suddenly felt a second presence...and it wasn't a good one. In one smooth motion, Sakura turned around and stabbed with a kunai. She gasped when she found a strong arm blocking it.

"Sakura...Haruno. Medic-nin under Tsunade...Hidden Leaf Village..." Itachi rattled off what he knew about the pink-haired kunoichi. Sakura tried to draw back, but Itachi had a firm grip on her wrist. With a torque, he forced her to let go of the kunai. It landed tip-first in the ground with a 'thunk'.

"You...you're Sasuke's brother...Itachi!" Sakura gasped, and tried to get away even more. But Itachi's strong hand wasn't letting go.

"I'm not here to fight, Sakura. I'm only here to talk to you...to tell you something you'll like very much...and to make you an offer..."

"I don't care what it is! I don't want anything to do with you!" Sakura shouted.

"You'll change your mind...unless you don't want to know about Sasuke..."

Sakura stopped her desperate struggle. "Sasuke...what about him?!"

"Very soon, he and I will be meeting...if you were with me, you would get to see him again...I can see inside you, Sakura...you WANT to see him again...And you'll do anything...you still love him..."

Sakura was careful to avoid Itachi's eyes. "I thought I loved him...That was years ago, Itachi...I almost hope the two of you kill each other...just so Sasuke will stop hurting himself..."

"Sakura...the Akatsuki could use you. A talented medic, and a powerful taijutsu user, in one package...in return, you would see Sasuke again...I won't ask you to decide now, that would be hasty...think about my offer for two days time, and meet me back here. And come alone...I only know of one person you have with you. If he comes, his remains will never be found. Forty-eight hours, Sakura..."

Itachi disappeared, leaving Sakura to massage her hurt wrist, and turn over the offer in her mind. It was tempting, but it would mean turning her back on everything she held dear. And could she really trust Itachi? Despite those thoughts, she KNEW Sasuke would find Itachi eventually. It was a hard decision for Sakura...

--

Ryouko bounced off the tree limb, stopping on one way up as he heard Sakura's voice...and Itachi's! Pushing himself flat against the tree and trying to control his breathing, Ryouko listened in.

"...a talented medic-nin...forty-eight hours, Sakura..." Itachi put two fingers in front of his face in a half-tiger handsign, and disappeared.

Sakura stayed still for a few moments, massaging her hand where Itachi had grabbed it. She had a lot to think about, she realized, and couldn't do it here, where she could be targeted. After making sure Itachi hadn't planted a bug on her, Sakura took off for 'home'.

--

Ryouko cursed to himself, and leapt off as fast as he could. He couldn't tell anyone about this. Sakura had to decide for herself.

Sakura...don't do it. Don't become the enemy... he silently prayed. He knew that if she put on that black cloak, that they would fight someday. But could he do it? Fight Sakura? It seemed so impossible that, for a minute, Ryouko let his anxiety take over. He misjudged his landing on a branch and tumbled to the ground. He just lay there, trying to picture Sakura as the enemy. The black cloak, the scratched-out headband, the look of hatred...it was painful to the Kaguya boy. Such a close friend? Sasuke leaving was only important to him because Naruto and Sakura were affected. It wasn't like Ryouko and Sasuke were good friends...

Maybe a better question...what can I do about this? Can I stand up to Itachi? I've barely survived my fights with him. Not like I have a choice. Even if the Akatsuki DO get Sakura, they're going to lose him...

Ryouko just laid in the leaves in the forest, staring up at the green canopy of leaves above him. Slowly, he made himself move, shaking the leaves out of his hair. Once he was sure he could move without falling again, he took to the trees and leapt off to town to do what he had set out to do to begin with.

--

"Thank you," Ryouko nodded, tossing ryo on the counter of the bar. His hip flask full again, Ryouko took to walking the streets. All too quickly, he felt something. Ryouko chanced a glance over his shoulder, seeing two Mist ninja walking behind him. They didn't look threatening. But neither did they look peaceful.

My imagination? No...my intuition...those two are up to something, and I'm guessing it involves me...

Seconds later, Ryouko's theory was proven correct. From behind, two sets of hands grabbed him and forced him into an alley. A cord was wrapped around his neck and pulled tight. Ryouko choked and gasped, fighting the cord. If he didn't do something soon, he was going to be done for. Desperately, Ryouko grabbed his cigarette and stabbed it backwards over his shoulder. The masked Mist Shinobi stepped to the side to avoid the cigarette that nearly took out his eye. The shift in weight gave Ryouko

time enough to move with the cord, so that there was slack. Ryouko kept backing up, smashing his attacker into the building next to him. Crushed between the unforgiving building and Ryouko's powerful strides, the attacker let go to push off the wall. Ryouko kicked backward, hearing the sound of a shin breaking. It was actually a very distinct sound, especially when coupled with a low, guttural scream from the shin's owner.

Ryouko snapped his hand backward, over the guy's mouth, to shut him up. The second attacker managed to stab Ryouko. He hit him high up in the shoulder, but nowhere vital. Ryouko winced, but held on. With both hands occupied, Ryouko needed a weapon. He chose the man with the broken shin. Two bodies collided, taking out a trash can. The luckless ninja with the broken shin was unconscious now, and the other was begging for his life. Ryouko was going to let go, until a knife was arching toward him. Ryouko dodged backward and let a kunai of his own fly. It buried itself hilt-deep into the screaming attacker. Ryouko casually took another kunai out and marched forward.

"You'd better explain just what the hell you were thinking, or I'm going to kill you." Ryouko's words were chilling in their simplicity. Ryouko vaguely registered that these must have been chunin. They were wearing the special vests, but they didn't fight like jonin.

"Screw you! Too bad, kid, you're not getting a word out of us!" The ninja held up a kunai. Ryouko was on his guard, but instead turned away as the Mist ninja slit his friend's neck, and then his own. Ryouko shook his head sadly. After making sure his fingerprints weren't around, Ryouko used a genjutsu to disguise himself and walked back 'home'.

--

Ryouko took his nightly drink of sake, immediately feeling the rice brew's calming effect.

The night itself was a calm. A sickle moon was overhead in the dark, starless sky, casting a pale light on all that lay beneath it. It was nights like these that Ryouko thought back to his first time meeting Kimimaro, his last lesson with the Third Hokage, and the sickle moon reminded him of Hayate and his jutsu. Ryouko exhaled, letting his head fall forward. Since there was no one around, Ryouko had donned his special, sleeveless trench coat. On the back was a large, circular crest. In the center was a camellia blossom, the sign Ryouko had adopted as the last surviving Kaguya (Ryouko's mother was the Kaguya, who married into another name, but answered to her maiden name). It was nights like this that made being alone even more difficult. All his friends were dead, it seemed. Not counting the three sleeping peacefully below him. That gave Ryouko even more food for thought. But he stopped his thought process; the last thing he needed was to worry more. So far, three Akatsuki members had attacked, and one had 'visited'.

Itachi is going to be a problem...even more so if Sakura takes his deal. I should tell the others...but I can't. Naruto would spill the beans and wind up giving us away. And Sai...he wouldn't understand. His reasoning would be to cut Sakura down. He doesn't understand friendship. Damn...And I'm not much closer to reaching Katsuyori...if I ask around, the Akatsuki will figure out that he's who I'm after, and they'll use him as leverage. They'll call my bluff if I lie...there's no other option. I've got to fight them.

Ryouko tucked his chin into his chest and wished that this wasn't happening. It was a lot of pressure,

saving someone like this. It would be easier if Ryouko didn't have morals, and could just kill anyone he needed to. But that wasn't his style. He HAD changed since those deaths, and his fights with Tsunade, but not all of him had changed. He would never lose his ideals, or his integrity. That was what those three deaths had taught him, if nothing else. That, and one very important lesson: You protect what you believe, and what's important to you, no matter what the cost. Ryouko had done that...but the cost might be decidedly different this time.

Sakura...

--

Sakura lay in bed, looking over at the picture she had brought with her to make it feel like home in this foreign land. It was of Team 7. Sakura saw herself smiling, while Naruto and Sasuke were glaring at each other. Kakashi was happy, smiling away. Sakura tried to picture all of them now. Sakura hardly ever smiled anymore. Sasuke was gone, Naruto was older, and now Sai and Yamato, two mysteries, would be in the frame.

I would see Sasuke again...but I would have to give up everything else...and there's no guarantee that Sasuke would love me know...but what if he did...would I find love somewhere else, with someone else? All the power and training in the world doesn't mean anything unless you have people to use them with, to protect.

That was when Ryouko flashed across Sakura's subconscious.

Why did I think of him? I must be tired. (yawn) He IS cute, though, and it seemed like he really tried to make sure I enjoyed myself, even if that date WAS fake. Boy...I would miss the Leaf Village...but I would get Sasuke...But is it worth it? And can I even trust the Akatsuki?

Despite the obvious answer to that question, Sakura still had to think about it. It wasn't a decision to be made lightly.

They found me once, they could do it again...

Sakura found that to be a terrifying thought. It would haunt her deep into the night.

--

Ryouko had returned with the ramen and ink. He had been up on the roof longer than he meant to be, and by the time it hit him that he should go inside, it was too late. Everyone had been asleep. They needed their rest, so Ryouko didn't disturb them. Now that morning was here, he handed out what he had picked up. Both Naruto and Sai immediately picked up on something. Ryouko had been...well, fun this trip. Before he was stoic and studious to a fault. But after his release from jail, and promotion to jonin, he had changed, for the better. Last night, he had been quiet, and had kept to himself. Naruto, being a curious creature, couldn't resist asking Ryouko what was going on. So he climbed up to the room Ryouko had chosen as his office.

"Hey, Ryouko?" Naruto called, knocking on the door.

“Come in, Naruto,” came the reply, partially muffled by the door. Naruto slid it open to find Ryouko, his headband askew from Ryouko’s hand, which was propping it up. Ryouko looked slightly older, and definitely tired. No sleep for two days will do that to someone. But a look of stress had also crossed his face.

“Hey, you okay? You look like hell froze over or something, ‘tabeyo.” Naruto sat down on the window ledge. The room was dreary, to say the least. Ryouko hadn’t bothered with it too much, only a place to study and plan privately when he needed to. His straw hat had been tossed onto the bed, while two scrolls and a map lay unfurled in front of him.

“Oh, that’s from a fight. Two Mist guys jumped me. I didn’t bother saying anything, no point in worrying you guys over a little scrape like that,” Ryouko replied dismissively, putting down his brush and capping his ink bottle.

“They’re both dead. One guy killed himself and his partner before I could get info out of them...” Ryouko suddenly questioned his decision not to tell the others about Sakura. But Naruto questioned it for him.

“Listen, Ryouko, Sai kinda...had his ink mice follow Sakura...she’s got an offer from the Akatsuki, and-hey!” Naruto protested as Ryouko leapt to his feet.

“Naruto, DO NOT tell her that you know. I wasn’t even going to tell you and Sai. I was there, watching, I passed them on my way to town. Here, look at this, you might be able to help...” Ryouko opened up a scroll. “Shield your eyes for a second, I put a genjutsu on this...okay, it’s safe.”

Naruto looked over the scroll. It was small, but it’s contents were potent.

“Itachi...Uchiha? Why him?”

Ryouko closed his eyes for a second, then answer briskly. “Because he’s going to be our biggest problem. He’s killed more Ninja than any of us have even SEEN. And it’s going to take a lot to stop him...even kill him. I couldn’t even get a hold on him long enough to use the Reaper Death Seal...and those damn eyes of his...” Ryouko rubbed his hair in frustration, messing up the side.

“What if we took the eyes out?” Naruto suggested. “Getting close enough would be hard, but if we ruin his eyes, then we don’t have to worry about his genjutsu as much, and we can fight him hand to hand.”

“That’s a good point,” Ryouko nodded, “But there’s still the HOW. And, it’s not like we can ALL pay attention to him. Only one Akatsuki member is gone for sure, and that’s the artist with the explosives. He’s in the hands of the Leaf Village. I’ve heard rumors that the puppet master, Sasori, was killed in his fight with Sakura and I. Kisame was injured, but he’ll have recovered by now.”

Ryouko sighed deeply and looked out the window.

“It seems so damn impossible, no matter how I slice it. It’s not like an all-out war where we can call for backup, this is a covert operation. I’ve likely already failed my mission here...I can’t admit that to Tsunade...or even myself...”

“Huh? You mean the kid? At least you tried to save him, and his family! How many wouldn’t have even bothered to do that? And what about he Akatsuki? They STOLE a village! We can’t let them get away with that! They’re just going to keep hurting people, and bossing them around until someone puts the hurt on them. And that’s us, believe it!”

--

One day left.

Ryouko had worked out a plan with Naruto and Sai, to get near Itachi. Should it come to that. That just left their original mission. But Ryouko was sure Katsuyori and his family were dead. The Akatsuki had no reason to hold them prisoner, or torture them. That meant they were dead; it was too much to hope that they were free.

Damn it...Hokage or not, Tsunade is going to hear about this. It’s her fault they died. Maybe it was an impossible mission to save them...well, I’ll be clashing with the Akatsuki soon enough. How I use the time until that fight may mean everything...if I go in with the state of mind I have now, it’ll be impossible to win...

“Ryouko-kun...Naruto-kun and I have been talking...” Sai began, sounding suspicious. Naruto soon chimed in.

“Right. It’s time for you to make a sacrifice...” Naruto added. Even though he was speaking seriously, he was giggling like a school girl.

“What are you two plotting?” Ryouko wanted to know, despite his reservations about ANYTHING that came from Naruto’s mind.

“You should go out with Sakura-chan again,” Sai told him, adding a real smile for emphasis.

“See, if you talk with her, and go out with her, she might remember she has friends besides Sasuke, friends who WON’T desert her, and she’ll think twice about leaving!” Naruto finished.

Ryouko raised an eyebrow. “Guys...you know, that just might work. It’s as good an idea as I’ve had the past day. Alright, I’ll do it. Wait, why is it a sacrifice?” Ryouko suddenly remembered ‘sacrifice’ being the first part of this idea.

“W-ell...it may mean that she’ll want to rip your head off for spying on her, if you say the wrong thing...hehehe (man, it would be great to see her wrath on someone else!).” Naruto tried saying this as innocently as he could. He didn’t have to try.

“I’ll do it. But- you two make sure you’re ready. Sai, see if your mice can scrounge up anything on the Akamadori family. And Naruto...be careful. Don’t leave the house, there are two genjutsus on it, and traps hidden outside.”

“Okay, Ryouko! Go get ‘er!” Naruto swatted Ryouko on the back, causing Ryouko to nearly swallow his

cigarette.

This really WAS mission impossible to Ryouko.

--

Sakura hummed some mindless tune as she dressed for the day. She fixed her hair just so, and winked happily at her mirror.

Looking good today, girl!

Sakura's thought soon turned against her. In the mirror, her face was suddenly frowning.

One more day...I still don't know what to do. Itachi made it sound so easy...I wish I could talk to one of the boys about this...but they'd overreact...(sigh)

Sakura smoothed her skirt and started to walk downstairs. It was there that she met Ryouko walking up.

"Oh, uh, hi!" Ryouko said nervously. Sakura cocked her head.

"Good Morning, Ryouko. Is something wrong? You're kinda red...fever?" Sakura asked, trying to figure out why her normally stoic friend was suddenly beet red.

"Well, actually, I...wanted to ask you something..." Ryouko muttered shyly. **How does anyone do this regularly? I've never asked someone out before! How the hell does this work?!**

"Hmm? Well, you can ask, don't be shy!" Sakura encouraged the stammering boy with a smile. That, inadvertently, made the situation harder for Ryouko. Sakura's smile made her more charming.

Ryouko took a deep breath. "Would you...like...to, uh, get some food?" Ryouko's voice came out all at once, and fairly quickly, to the point where Ryouko wondered if his statement had been coherent.

Sakura was taken aback. **He-he's asking me out?!**

Before she could fully process the question, Sakura had already replied.

"Sure, that sounds great! I'll be ready in a minute!" Sakura darted back upstairs. Ryouko grabbed onto the railing of the old house; he was SURE he was going to wake up any second, or pass out. He HAD to be either drunk or sleepwalking.

For the mission...and for myself...right.

Ryouko nodded once, firmly, then walked downstairs once more.

--

Sakura's delicate hands flew across the low dresser as she cut up some of this and some of that. She

mixed it all up, and crushed it into a fine powder.

I hate to do this...but there might not be a choice...

A colorless, odorless powder. The same powder Tsunade had used on Jiraiya. This didn't bode well for someone...but who?

5 - Sakura's Choice

Right off the bat, Ryouko let Sakura pick the place. No screwing up this time. Sakura had picked a run of the mill tavern that was advertising a special fish, served with rice and stir-fried vegetables. It was familiar food, so it sounded good to both of them. Or, it WOULD have, if Ryouko could have eaten. He picked at his food, trying to figure out how to make Sakura see another side of things. He DID keep drinking, though. The sake was watered down, but it still calmed him. And, brother, did he ever need that!

Feels like my heart's going to bounce out of my chest...are dates ALWAYS so nerve-wracking? Or is it just because I really like this girl, and she may be deserting the village to join a criminal organization? I can't let on that anything's wrong. Am I always this nervous around her? Probably. So, just let it go. BE nervous. That way she won't get suspicions. Being cool, calm, and collected would give me away, it's not my style...

"Ryouko?"

Poke!

Sakura had to stop herself from laughing outright. Somehow, Ryouko had been in another dimension while she eating, and her talking had startled him. That didn't explain how his chopstick got in his nose.

"Oh, hold still!" Sakura pulled the chopstick out and handed Ryouko a napkin to act as a compress on the wound. Ryouko pulled the napkin up. It was large, and had blinded him for an instant. Sakura saw her chance and dumped the powder into Ryouko's drink.

"Sorry about that, real smooth thing for me to do," mumbled Ryouko, once he was cleaned up. **Oh yeah, THAT is my style. How the hell did I do that?**

"That's okay, I understand. You don't have to be so nervous around me, you know. I'm just a kunoichi," explained Sakura. Ryouko shot her a comical glance.

"Part girl, part warrior...a deadly combination..." Ryouko mused. Sakura giggled. Her chopsticks clattered to the floor when she hit them with her elbow.

"Oops! Ah, clumsy me!" Sakura bent down to retrieve the lost eating tools. Ryouko saw his chance. He quickly dumped a small amount of a suspicious-looking clear liquid into Sakura's drink, quickly stowing the bottle in one of his pockets before Sakura noticed.

"You didn't stare at my butt, did you?" Sakura interrogated upon getting back on her stool, adding a mock glare for emphasis.

"No! Wait, is that an insult, if I didn't?" Ryouko joked. He and Sakura simultaneously reached for their drinks. Both of them smiled, then brought the cups to their lips. They kept watching each other,

unknowingly playing a dangerous, calculated game of 'chicken'.

Suddenly, both of them thrust their left arms out.

"Don't drink it!" they said at the same time.

Looking down, they both blushed. Their hands had each grabbed each other's right hands, to prevent the cups from rising to their mouths. In leaning forward, both had leaned forward, their faces inches apart. Ryouko's eyes met Sakura's. His dark hazel eyes searched her pale green eyes. They moved closer. Sakura was in the opening stages of a kiss, and Ryouko followed suit. Their mouths were inches apart, eyes in the process of closing, when the tender moment was broken up violently by a big blue hand hitting Ryouko's head. His head bounced off the bar as he toppled off his stool. Sakura was quicker, and moved before the strike hit her. Focusing her chakra in a short burst, Sakura leapt high and punched Kisame in the face.

"Take that, you blue bastard!" Sakura added, as Kisame reeled backward. Ryouko had since recovered and grabbed a chair. As Kisame's momentum came toward him, Ryouko swung for the fences and cracked the big goon in the back of the head. The chair shattered, sending splinters everywhere. Incidentally, that sent bar patrons flying.

"That's for ruining my date TWICE!" Ryouko snarled angrily.

Kisame swung for Ryouko's legs with his sword. Ryouko jumped over the strike, adding a kick to Kisame's gills. As Kisame spun from the impact, he was met by a punch from Sakura. He felt the bones in his jaw shatter. For the occasion, Ryouko broke out a special genjutsu that he had seen Orochimaru himself use.

"Death Foreseeing Technique!"

The technique was brutal. It forced the receiver to watch his death over and over, until they lost their minds, or broke the genjutsu. From the look of horror on Kisame's face, he HAD seen his death.

"We've gotta get out of here, come on!" Ryouko urged. He and Sakura hustled out of the tavern, using genjutsu disguises to reach home.

--

"Release."

Itachi's impassive voice ended the genjutsu. Kisame got off his knees, looking around. How did he get back at the hideout?

"I brought you, Kisame. We need to talk about something...your disobedience, and your failure."

"Hold it, Itachi! I've done nothing wrong! I wanted revenge on that little prick. And you know as well as I do that our mission would go much smoother without him and his team getting in the way. So I took a little initiative, big deal,' Kisame snorted dismissively.

"It is a big deal, Kisame. You nearly ruined our plans with your haste. It's not a risk any of us are willing to take again."

Kisame's face dropped. "What are you saying, Itachi?"

Wordlessly, Itachi opened his eyes all the way. The tomoe of his Sharingan began to spin. Kisame fell back to his knees; this couldn't be happening!

"Itachi, I promise, I won't lose again! Give me one more chance!" he begged, completely out of character for the hulking man.

"Amateratsu..." Itachi chanted tonelessly. Black flames, hot as the sun itself, began to scorch Kisame. Amateratsu was the name of the sun goddess, and one jutsu Itachi rarely used. The black flames were said to be able to burn for seven days and seven nights, and if you felt them, they were the last thing you ever felt. As Kisame's flesh began to crisp and peel off, and his screams began to die, the legend rang true.

It WAS the last thing you ever felt. But that wasn't the worst part. Kisame was seeing exactly what Ryouko had planted in his head with his "Death Foreseeing Jutsu".

--

Back in her room, Sakura broke down and told Ryouko everything. She was surprised when Ryouko wasn't. His explanation surprised her even more.

"I heard...all of us did...I told them not to say anything, because you had to decide for yourself," Ryouko told Sakura quietly. "And none of us are going to pressure you. That was originally why I took you out...but after we stopped each other from drinking those spiked drinks...I couldn't do it. It's not fair of me to try to make you sentimental about the Leaf Village like that, not when you trusted me. I'm going to back off...and hope that you and I won't be enemies..."

Ryouko paused, looking away, running a hand through his thick brown hair. He said one more thing to Sakura.

"If you DO decide to stay with Konoha...I'll help you and your team find Sasuke. I see what he means to you...what matters is your happiness...if it's not with Konoha, then it's not, and no one can force you to be happy there."

Ryouko got up from the windowsill and left Sakura to her thoughts. She watched, wide-eyed, as he left.

How important is Sasuke to me? Do I abandon everything and go after him? Or do I take Ryouko's word? I don't know what to do! Itachi is more powerful, and Sasuke WILL come to him, while he avoids the Leaf Village...

Sakura suddenly shook against the cold night air. She had left her window open to let the breeze come in the house; it was so damn musty in there. She strode across the room and shut it. She put one hand

against the glass panels, looking down. Soon, it began to rain. The water came down in sheets, plastering the window. The drops crissed and crossed across the window, weaving an intricate pattern against the glass.

I've only got two hours left...and I face Itachi again. I've got to go alone. I still don't know what I'm going to do...maybe the Akatsuki wouldn't be so bad...but they seem so wrong...trying to take Naruto's demon, and nearly killing Gaara...I'm not a murderer, I couldn't do that to someone! But...I need to decide, now! What am I going to do? Okay, I choose...huh?

Ryouko had walked outside, without his vest. He glared up at the rain, as if daring it to keep raining. It did. To Sakura's surprise, Ryouko slid off his shirt and tied it around his head, like a bandanna.

What the hell is doing outside? It's pouring! He's practicing taijutsu?! In this weather?

As she watched Ryouko, Sakura figured out he wasn't practicing taijutsu. This ancient house had a stove, and it needed wood. Sakura never noticed a supply, and now she knew how the house stayed heated. Ryouko had gathered wood every day. Even in this horrendous weather, the house needed heat.

Despite herself, Sakura watched Ryouko. He wasn't a body-builder, but he was martial-arts athletic, and stronger than he looked. A swift kick knocked a tree over. Before it crashed to the ground, Ryouko had ran up it, then smashed his heel into the top of the tree, cracking it down the center. Then he jumped back off, falling gracefully to the ground. His right hand was glowing with a Chakra Scalpel, which he used to cut the tree into logs on the way down. As he landed, the tree fell into sections. Gathering them up, ignoring the cuts on his arms and chest, Ryouko went back inside. Sakura stared at where he'd been a little longer. For some reason, she thought of their date earlier.

Was I...going to kiss him? Was HE going to kiss ME? And we nearly poisoned each other. But he never said a thing about it...

Sakura felt a surge of loyalty for her team and her village in her chest.

It's time I made a sacrifice, too. I love Konoha. I've just got to love it enough to do the right thing.

--

Itachi was waiting, a crow perched on his shoulder, at the stream where he had met Sakura before.

"What is your decision?" Itachi didn't turn around when he spoke.

"I'm with you. I want to join the Akatsuki. Anything to see Sasuke again..." Sakura sounded ashamed of herself. Kunoichi weren't only part warrior, part girl- they were also part actor.

Okay...time to sabotage these cloak-wearing bastards! CHA! Let's just see if the Akamadori family is alive...

Itachi reached into his long cloak and pulled out another cloak, one that was Sakura's size. She slipped it on over her regular clothes before accepting the straw hat Itachi offered her.

"I won't need this anymore..." Sakura took off her headband and threw it in the mud.

"Let's go. You're going to be my partner, Sakura. My old partner met his end...he was too weak."

Sakura smirked. "Kisame? Push-over. I'm not one to let down my partner, Itachi. Lead the way, I've gotta put some distance between myself and my old team."

--

"She accepted our offer. Her team won't be far behind," Itachi told the leader.

"Fine. I will give you a detachment of two additional members. Eliminate these pests. Hidan and Deidara will accompany you. Deidara has been forgiven by ingeniously escaping from Konoha's clutches, and evading their ANBU forces. Should he fail again...execute him."

Itachi closed his eyes. "Understood. I will deliver their corpses to you."

"Itachi...attack them. Don't wait for them to come to you..."

--

"She's gone..." Naruto muttered, looking at the creek. No signs of a struggle.

"shoot! It's my fault...There was another fight, and I couldn't lie to her...damn it!" Ryouko sat down near the river, already planning how to rescue her. **Itachi, I'm going to make you pay for this! I swear!**

Sai was drawing the picturesque scene, as though unaware or uncaring of the problem. He sat down on a rock and began to sketch. He finished his drawing, and colored it with pastels. It wouldn't have a title; none of his pictures did. He had no feelings, as a result of being in ROOT, a special (now disbanded) attachment of ANBU agents that were cultivated at a young age. They were taught not to feel, or care, and only to obey their orders. It was drilled harshly into them nearly since their birth.

Sai kept coloring, until he noticed something about his drawing. There was a Leaf headband in the foliage, partially sticking out of the mud. Sai looked up, and saw the real Leaf headband.

"Ryouko-kun, this may be a clue..." Sai knelt down and pulled the headband out of the mud, turning it over in his hands. Once Ryouko had walked over, Sai let him have the headband. Ryouko suddenly smirked.

"Man, she's clever! She hid a note under the metal!" Ryouko exclaimed, reminding himself to kiss her, then realizing he would never get the courage up again, most likely. Still, that didn't deter his happiness.

"This note tells where the hideout is! She's going to find the Akamadori family, then escape!"

“We’ve gotta help her!” Naruto declared.

“Damn right we do! Let’s go get her! Wait!” Ryouko held out an arm. He breathed once, to fortify himself, then spoke one more time.

“Thanks for everything. Listen carefully, and swear that you’ll listen. I’m going for Itachi. No matter WHAT, if he kills me, get out of there. Take Sakura with you. If I’m going to die, I’m taking him with me. No matter what- run. Report to Lady Tsunade. Blame it all on me. But don’t let yourselves get caught. Alright?”

Sai and Naruto exchanged glances. Ryouko didn’t wait for an answer; he took off for the tree tops, heading in the direction Sakura had outlined in the note she had left.

--

Sakura met Deidara and Hidan. Two very creepy individuals with criminal records a mile long. Deidara was an artist, of sorts. His exploding clay had once defeated the Kazekage, Gaara. That was no easy feat, as anyone who had seen Gaara fight could attest to.

Hidan was more of a mystery. With a foul mouth, and an obsession for the most bloodthirsty religion Sakura had ever heard on, he was almost immortal.

Sakura had been paired with Itachi, while Deidara and Hidan were to fight together. Against Ryouko, Sai, and Naruto, it would hardly be a fight. The Leaf Ninja were going to be horribly outclassed, unless Sakura could do something to tip the advantage toward them.

“Feel free to explore. We have a meeting in one hour. In that time, get acquainted with the hideout.” Itachi rarely spoke, but when he did, he commanded attention, even from Hidan and Deidara.

Wordlessly, Sakura walked away, down a corridor to the side. She snuck glances in every door, every window, seeing horrifying things, strange things, weapons. But not one sign of people. Specifically, the Akamadori family. Sakura combed the hideout, looking everywhere, but not finding what she was looking for. The hour was nearly up, but then Sakura heard it?

“Sakura?” A weak voice came from the second to last room on the corridor.

“Katsuyori?!” Sakura pressed her ear to the door.

“Sakura, what are you doing here?! Don’t tell me...you’re one of them?!” Katsuyori was now glaring accusingly at Sakura. Katsuyori had been Ryouko’s student, but in the way of the sword, not the way of the Shinobi. A former Mist genin, the fourteen year old had come to think of Sakura as an older sister, and Ryouko as an older brother. The boy was cursed with horrible luck. Blind in one eye (Name that manga! Katsuyori’s character is derived from a popular CLAMP character. Can anyone name him? HINT- the name of the manga starts with “T”)., and cursed with an anxiety so horrible that he could barely feel safe around his mother, Katsuyori’s was also orphaned. The Amakadori family had adopted him. His father, a samurai, had been cut down by a ninja in a senseless fight that never needed to take place. His mother had committed suicide, stricken by grief.

Just when Katsuyori's life took an upward turn, it was snatched away from him. A decision made by the Mist Village, and approved, unknowingly, by Lady Tsunade, due to illegal citizenship in the Hidden Leaf, Katsuyori had been turned over to the Mist authorities. Ryouko had protested so long and so loud he was arrested. Upon realizing what she had done, Tsunade had freed Ryouko to rescue Katsuyori. Ryouko had added Katsuyori's family to his priority list. He had been a bouncer at the Akamadori bar, and their sake was prescription for his own anxiety. It was also Lady Tsunade's favorite brand of the strong rice wine.

"Katsuyori, how is your family?!" Sakura ignored Katsuyori's glare. Her voice and question gave him reason to trust her.

"They're alive, but not for long. They aren't Shinobi, or even fighters. They're only bait, for Ryouko! Sakura, you can't let him come here! They'll kill him! Please, don't let Ryouko come here! I don't want him to die, too!" Katsuyori's voice turned desperate at the end. Through the narrow barred window in the cell, Sakura held his hand.

"Don't worry about Ryouko. To be honest, Katsuyori, he was sent here to save you. And there aren't many things that could keep him away at this point. Just trust him to make the right move, okay?"

Katsuyori looked back at Sakura, his face gaunt and white from being trapped in a dark cell for so long. But he nodded.

"Okay, Sakura-san. I'll trust you. If Ryouko-sensei does..." Katsuyori was one of the few Ryouko had told about his feelings for Sakura. And Katsuyori was, like Lee, Naruto, and Sai, sworn to secrecy.

"Listen Katsuyori, I've got to go. For now, just stay alive. I'll be back to heal you and your parents later. I'll bring food if I can. I've got to go." Sakura thought she heard footsteps coming down the hall, so she backed away from the bars and started to walk towards the sound.

6 - Checkmate?

"Time for the meeting, un," Deidara informed Sakura. He gave her an accompanying glare, and then a little smile.

"Aren't you one of those Hidden Leaf brats, un?" Deidara questioned, smirking as if he knew something special. Sakura took the wind out of his sails with as blunt an answer as possible.

"I used to be. But now I've seen the greater good. Come on, take me to this meeting. Itachi said I'd get my ring...You know how girls love to accessorize..."

Deidara indicated with his head that Sakura should follow him. Sakura took up step behind Deidara, hoping that the others had found her note. Part of her hoped they hadn't; she was leading them to their deaths, if what Itachi said was true. Sakura was then struck with a somewhat amusing thought:

If I had left a note, or even if I didn't, Naruto would have found this place eventually. Same with Ryouko. Those two are special, to be sure. Be safe guys, all of you...

--

Ryouko followed the directions on the note, occasionally indicating one direction of the other to Sai and Naruto. Now, Ryouko indicated that they should land, and stop their tree top excursion for the moment. Naruto and Sai followed him to the ground, landing silently.

"Sai, send your mice ahead, 10 meters northeast. They should see something, or be hit by a genjutsu, at least," Ryouko was on one knee, waiting for the mice to get going. He needed every bit of chakra he could save, that much was certain. You didn't take Tsunade's sake, you didn't take Kakashi's book, and you didn't go to a fight against ANY of the Akatsuki, let alone Itachi, with anything but your best stuff ready to go.

Sai drew the mice, his hand dancing over the rice paper as fast as he could make it move. Each mouse popped off the paper and too life. They scampered off, leaving no trail, ink or otherwise. Ryouko lit a chakra cigarette; he was sure they were in for a fight any time now. Naruto was looking away quietly, something clearly bothering the normally hyperactive ninja. Ryouko, having taken notes on what the best jonin did, he asked Naruto if something was wrong.

Naruto looked up at the sky. "I was just thinking about Sasuke. ..how he left. What if...what if Sakura is leading us into a trap? She would do anything to see Sasuke again...I want to trust her, but I'm still worried...Sakura-chan's like a sister to me, you know? And Sasuke was like a brother, and Kakashi an awesome uncle! But now Sasuke has turned his back on us...what's to say Sakura won't do the same? She was ALWAYS after Sasuke!"

Ryouko nodded his head, even chuckling a little. "Yeah, I noticed that, too. That's partially why I never made a move for Sakura. It's pretty obvious she harbors some kind of feelings for Sasuke. But it's also

obvious that those feelings are not entirely good for her. And she knows it. I think...I think that's why she went out with me. To try to break the 'Sasuke' habit.. Or she felt sorry for me. Either way, she wants to either get him back in the village, or forget him. Sakura won't betray us. I'm sure of it."

Naruto didn't look entirely calmed by the explanation. So Ryouko tried a sure-fire tactic to fire Naruto up for battle, and to make him forget his worries about Sakura for the moment.

"It's a shame we couldn't help Gaara..."

Immediately, Naruto's face snapped into a posture of determination. He was his old self again, and ready to go.

"Those cloaked bastards! This time they don't have Gaara hostage, I'm going to destroy them!"

"Ryouko-kun! My mice have returned...There are four people, one of them is Sakura-chan. The hideout isn't far."

"Can your mice describe the other people?" Ryouko asked earnestly, hoping against hope.

"One is Itachi Uchiha...another is blonde...with one arm...and the other is not anyone I know by their description..." Sai rolled up his scroll. Ryouko looked toward the direction the mice had returned from.

"Guess it's now or never, then. Remember, get the family out and go. We've got to avoid the fight if we can. If not...remember what I said..."

Sai and Naruto nodded. The three jumped gracefully back into the trees and took off at top speed. The hands on the clock of fate had just struck twelve. Time for a rendezvous with destiny.

"This must be the place...anyone else feel that chill?" Ryouko intoned. The Akatsuki hideout was an old, abandoned temple. It was abutted by a cave, which the warrior monks had used to train in, before time outgrew them. Somehow, it suited the Akatsuki perfectly, even though they had long since forsaken any religious beliefs. (With the exception of Hidan)

"I felt it, believe it! We're sure this is where Sakura said?" Naruto wanted to know. Ryouko nodded.

"This is it. I don't expect the entrance to be protected by a turnstile...brace yourselves for genjutsu. Any landmarks you see, don't go past them without throwing a rock, or using a clone. There may be a barrier jutsu, and those are sometimes traps in and of themselves."

Naruto and Sai nodded their understanding. Strangely, among them, Naruto had the most experience with the Akatsuki. Ryouko had small skirmishes, and a couple of battles with Itachi, and Sai was more or less inexperienced when it came to the Shinobi who clothed themselves in the colors of the sunrise.

"So...what's the plan?" Naruto asked Ryouko. Ryouko shrugged.

"Get Sakura, get the Akamadori family, and get the hell out."

Sai was the next to question that. "Have you taken into account, Ryouko-kun? It's not likely that the Akatsuki will let us walk in and take what we want. Do you have a strategy?"

Ryouko bowed his head. "I do...but you're going to have to trust me when I say that it is up to you to get Sakura and the others out. I'll handle combat."

"WHAT KIND OF ATTITUDE IS THAT?! WE'RE A TEAM, YOU CAN'T JUST WRITE US OFF!"

Naruto snarled. Ryouko spun on his heel. He hadn't enforced his rank yet, but he was going to. There was no choice.

"I gave my orders. Friends though we may be, A jonin I still am. Now, do you trust me? I have on other policy, in addition to making sure my team gets out alive- making sure they aren't disappointed in me."

Naruto gulped at the suddenly display of fervor on Ryouko's part, but decided he had to trust him.

I can always step in, anyway. He's right, Sakura-chan and the Akamadori family are the mission.

"Okay, I get you. You'll handle the combat..."

--

"No traps..." Sai commented.

"Maybe they thought we wouldn't follow them?" Naruto's tone of voice revealed that he didn't believe that any more than Ryouko or Sai did.

"Something isn't right...keep your guards up...duck!"

Ryouko, Sai, and Naruto ducked as a series of kunai whizzed over their heads.

"You!" Ryouko snarled. "I should have guessed. Damn it...You put on quite an act for us..."

Four Mist Shinobi revealed themselves. The family from before! The mother and son had killed the father and daughter, or so it seemed at the time. All four were alive right now, and were clearly on the same page- against Ryouko.

The father laughed. "Yes, you fell for that. How pitiful!"

But the most cruel words came from the girl, and she was speaking to Naruto.

"You foolish little idiot! How could you think I could ever love you?! I could have anyone I wanted, why would I pick some little runt with a fox demon inside him?! You're a joke, kid! A sad joke! The only way I'd ever sleep with you is if I felt sorry for you! And I do, but not enough to give you what you want! Foolish fox demon!"

BAM!

Ryouko, who had never hit a girl before, reared back and blasted this one across her face.

“Don’t you dare talk to him that way, you little skank! I never hit a woman, which should say exactly what I think of you! Naruto is a fierce warrior, and one of the most brave Shinobi I have ever fought alongside. I will NOT sit still and let you harass him like that! And, yes, anyone could have you- for the right price!”

All at once, the four family members rushed Ryouko. Naruto’s shadow clones began to pry them off. Sai was less subtle, using his ANBU sword to hack away, until the family was bloodied and ready to back off.

Ryouko himself wasn’t hurt. But for a split second, his psyche was down, and the girl struck. She blew a kiss, and hit Ryouko with a genjutsu that was a low blow.

GENJUTSU:

Sakura strutted over to Ryouko, looking him up and down.

“How is such a cute, powerful Shinobi like you single? Well, you belong to me now. It’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? You don’t have the courage to tell me how you feel, I have to figure it out. I guess that means that I have to tell you what to do. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

Sakura smiled sweetly and held Ryouko’s hand, then moved to kiss him...

Sai tapped Ryouko on the shoulder, forcing his chakra into Ryouko to break the genjutsu. When he got to his feet, Ryouko glared at the girl, but only asked how she knew.

“Easy, I know men. You pigs, with your perverted desires! Ha! It’s child’s play to get you boys to do what I want. You don’t think with your brains, you think with-”

Whatever she was going to say was drowned out by Shadow Clones beating her and her family into oblivion. For all their talk, they weren’t talented. At that point, however, a strange thing happened: The mother and son stopped attacking and fell to the ground. After studying with Ibikki Morino, Ryouko knew a genjutsu when he saw it.

“You put a genjutsu on your family? That’s as low as it gets! Guys, there’s only one way to resolve this short of killing them...”

Ryouko made the hand signs for a forbidden genjutsu that he himself had created.

“Demonic Illusion: Mind Barring Technique!” Immediately after calling the jutsu, blood came out of Ryouko’s mouth. This jutsu didn’t take much chakra, but it was potent as hell. Really a ninjutsu wrapped in a genjutsu, this technique severed the connections between the brain and the nervous system, stopping the body from moving, effectively creating a temporary paralysis. The chakra by the user (Ryouko) exits the body so quickly it damages the insides mildly, causing bleeding. But the technique did it’s job, dropping the father and daughter.

“We’ve got to go, can you take care of them?!” Ryouko asked the mother and son. They both nodded.
“Thanks!”

Ryouko, Naruto, and Sai took off, heading for the Akatsuki hideout.

--

Sakura was on her way to the Akamadori’s cell when Itachi strode by her.

“The intruders are here. They broke through our defenses, as I planned. It’s time to fight them.”

Sakura made sure to keep her face smooth. “Right. Itachi, leave the blonde boy to me. I know him better than anyone, and he won’t hit me. I’ll leave him alive for the extraction.”

Itachi searched Sakura with his eyes, but nodded. “As you wish. The others Deidara and Hidan can hold off, until I’m ready.”

Itachi walked off, seemingly unconcerned. Sakura waited until he was safely gone before opening the cell, finding the Akamadori’s alive, albeit dirty, tired, and hungry.

“Come on, hurry!” Sakura urged them. “There’s going to be a huge fight, and you should be able to escape while it’s happening. But hurry, I don’t know how our side will do…” Sakura suddenly felt a horrible pang of worry for her team. She had to hide her tears quickly, as tension was already high enough.

“Is Ryouko-sensei alive?” Katsuyori asked.

Sakura nodded, and smiled, trying to calm the boy. **But who’s going to calm me? I’ve never done anything like this before, what was I thinking! Well, no matter, it’s too late now, I’ve come this far, I’m not letting any of my team down!**

--

Ryouko, Naruto, and Sai had discussed formation, plans, and everything in between. But, like a bull to a red cape, Naruto saw the Akatsuki cloak and charged.

“Naruto, no! Damnit! Sai, you stay back!” Ryouko took off after Naruto. But a sick feeling grew in his stomach when he saw a mark on the ground. It looked like a jutsu, but not one Ryouko recognized. And the one creating the jutsu wasn’t someone Ryouko recognized either. Blond hair, and open cloak, and the same symbol that was on the ground was around his neck.

What really freaked Ryouko out was when this new guy stabbed himself in the arm, and the same mark appeared on Naruto’s arm, blood and all. This was not good.

“Hey! Focus on me, Naruto is innocent!” Ryouko shouted. He was already biting his thumb, thought not for a summoning jutsu.

Hidan swept forward and backhanded Naruto off a cliff Ryouko hadn't seen. But this attack gave Ryouko opportunity to end the jutsu. Taking a chance, Ryouko used his blood to mark up the symbol on the ground. Amazingly, that idea worked. Now he had to move fast.

--

Naruto woke up, finding a pair of arms grabbing him as he was free-falling down the hole.

"Ryouko!"

"Naruto! Man, glad you're awake! Hold on, we're about to land!"

With a soft 'tok' sound, Ryouko and Naruto had landed on Shuurai, Ryouko's giant snake summon.

"Rest your chakra, Naruto, you're about the only one who has a shot of killing Itachi after I die." Ryouko said, without a break in his voice.

"Makes sense...WHAT?! DIE?!" Ryouko's complete sentence finally reached Naruto's brain. It was processed, and turned into a loud, shocked yell. Ryouko grabbed Naruto's mouth to silence him.

"I only get one shot, Naruto. Death is the price you pay when you summon Shinigami, the death god. I'm the jonin squad leader, and it's just like Kakashi says- you don't let your comrades die. And you remember what I said before we got here...Sakura and Katsuyori are the mission priorities. Take them and go."

Naruto couldn't believe that Ryouko was saying all this without batting an eye. To be so calm about certain death, to have no time to fulfill your wishes, to give up everything in this life, and move onto the next life, alone...it was so scary. Naruto, somehow, wasn't surprised, even though this was a huge announcement. And, somehow, there was a glimmer of hope in the back of Naruto's mind that Ryouko would be okay, somehow.

--

"Damn it, hold still, you little dog!" Hidan demanded, swiping at Sakura again. She was really giving him a run for his money. If he COULD be killed, he would have been dead several times over by now. But he just kept coming back.

In the artist vs artist battle, there was no clear winner. But Sai seemed to be enjoying himself, as did Deidara. Had they not been locked in mortal combat, they could have been comparing works of art. It was one of the strangest battles that even the Shinobi world had ever seen.

"What in the world, un?" Deidara uttered. Shuurai had finished his trip to the top, but where was his summoner?!

"Dragon's Immortal Fire Circle!" Ryouko shouted. Shuurai spat him out, right at Deidara, at an alarming speed. What was more alarming was the site of the fire burning in Ryouko's hand. Deidara didn't have to move or dodge as Ryouko cut through him like a hot knife through butter. Deidara was incinerated immediately. Ryouko bounced off the wall feet-first, and landed in front of Sakura and Katsuyori.

"It's a shame, but we've both overstayed our welcomes in this life, Hidan! Our souls can battle on in the next world!" Ryouko declared, making the series of forbidden handsigns.

"What are you going on about? You talk a lot of shoot for a little guy! The only one who's dying is you! You know damn well I can't be killed!" Hidan shot back. That was when Ryouko's shadow clone had grabbed him.

"REAPER DEATH SEAL!" Ryouko bellowed. Shinigami was slowly becoming visible behind him. Ryouko noted his presence; it was scary as hell to think of, but somehow, when you were just about to die, nothing bothered you anymore. Instead, Ryouko's soul focus was on pulling out Hidan's soul. It didn't come easily, and Ryouko had to practically inhale his chakra cigarette to pull the stunt off. But, with a final tug, Hidan's soul came free. That's when Ryouko played his last, desperate ace.

"Emotional Soul Release!" Ryouko's skin paled, and his hair grayed. Next to him, a glowing blue clone formed. Shinigami at the blue clone. Ryouko's emotions now belonged to the death god, thanks to a plan that Ryouko and Lord Third had spent hours working on.

Whether Ryouko would live, and if he would have his emotions ever again...that was something no one knew.

--

"Look out!" Sakura gasped, pushing everyone out the way as a giant sword slashed down into the dirt.

"Dodged me, huh?" Kisame was attached to the sword, but that wasn't Kisame's voice! That was Sasori's voice!

"No...you're dead!" Sakura couldn't believe it. How had Sasori survived? Itachi had even told her that Sasori likely been dead for some time.

"My body is more difficult to destroy. Kisame's cloak shielded me when you threw my 'heart' into the fire your meddling friend created. Once Kisame was killed by Itachi, I made him into my 300th puppet. Once your friend succeeded in killing Hidan and sealing his soul, I had the opening I needed."

Sasori moved his Kisame puppet forward. Sakura knew all too well what happened when Sasori made a puppet. It didn't come 'as is', he added something to all of them- and it always included poison. Sakura didn't have an antidote this time. But Sasori's best body had been destroyed in that bar. Indeed, that seemed to have crossed Sasori's mind as well.

"Sakura, we've fought once before. This time, I don't have my best body- but you don't have my meddling hag of a grandmother, Chiyo, and it's unlikely you've prepared an antidote to my unique poison, seeing as you thought I was dead. The playing field is tipped in my favor."

Sakura looked over at Ryouko. He hadn't moved, and Sakura had started to fear the worst. Naruto and Sai were crouched over him, while Katsuyori looked on helplessly.

“No, Sasori- I have the advantage. You’ve killed more Shinobi than I’ve ever seen, and by all rights, I should have been dead the last time I faced you. But I’ve grown stronger, and I’ve changed. You’re not going to kick me, or my team around!”

Sakura threw the Akatsuki cloak in the air, then reached for her hat.

“And I’m not alone. You think those damn puppets make all the difference? Let’s see how they hold up against REAL art, and chakra larger than you’ve ever seen!”

--

Ryouko moved. He had aged until he looked about sixty years old. His voice had deepened with the ‘aging process’, though his reflexes worked very nicely.

CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG!

Ryouko knocked down five shuriken that were hurled at his team. It didn’t take him long to figure out who did it. Two of the Akatsuki lay dead, leaving a very dangerous third unaccounted for.

“Itachi...show yourself!” Ryouko growled. Five Itachi’s walked out from the shadows on all sides.

“You’ve done well for yourself. Few could say they’ve faced the Akatsuki and lived. But, all of them are imperfect. My track record is flawless...each time I’ve meant to kill, I have. You’ve interfered too often now. You’re my next target. And Naruto...It’s time for you to come with me.”

Itachi’s menacing voice cut through the silence. Ryouko’s aged body moved with a grace that defied it’s apparent age. He had made his move, grabbing Naruto from the real Itachi’s clutches and jumping, throwing shuriken that took out the shadow clones. The real Itachi caught the shuriken and threw it back. Ryouko, carrying Naruto, couldn’t dodge entirely, and the shuriken tore through the fabric of his shirt and cut him high up on the arm. It was passed the protective chain mail gauntlets that Ryouko had worn since the Third’s death. Ryouko grunted and landed, Naruto behind him.

“You WOULD zero in on the place with no padding with those eyes of yours...I suppose you aren’t blind enough yet...”

Itachi stabbed backward with a kunai, killing a lurking Ryouko shadow clone.

“No...My eyes will stay true until I heal them. My body and I are in complete harmony. Your body seems to be betraying you...” Itachi didn’t need the Mangekyo Sharingan to see Ryouko’s aged body.

“Death is the price you pay with Shinigami. Normally...I paid a tribute that no one else could duplicate- I gave the death god my emotions. I hadn’t counted on myself aging, but it was well worth it to destroy this operation. If the effects are permanent, or they worsen, I’ll still feel I’ve accomplished something.”

Ryouko carefully avoided Itachi’s eyes. He had tangled with Itachi twice before, both times snared in Tsukuyomi, the Nightmare Realm that Itachi trapped his foes in, playing on the fears of their minds, or even just inflicting pain. But now, Ryouko didn’t have his most valuable weapon: His emotional chakra.

THAT had been what had kept him alive in his battles with Itachi before.

“You’re talking a lot, which is unlike you. You’re nervous...” Itachi taunted. Psychological warfare was his strongest suit.

“Who wouldn’t be? My body has aged, and I even thought my self dead. And now I face you, the pride of the Akatsuki, and the prestigious Uchiha clan. Nervous- hell, I’m terrified. But I’m this squad’s jonin leader. As you’ve heard before, Itachi, us REAL Leaf Shinobi don’t like to let our comrades die. And any good jonin will tell you that the lives of his team come before his own. But an honorless bastard child such as you can’t hope to comprehend that. If you’re done stalling, we’ll fight. If I’m the one you want, then let the others go!” Ryouko demanded, nodding for Naruto to join the others again.

Itachi closed his eyes. “I think having them here will prove that much more amusing. And, you can’t focus your entire consciousness on me if you’re worried about your team, can you? I’m not above taking an advantage in combat...”

“Hell, I knew that. But, Itachi, I want to ask you a question before we fight, something that has bothered me since our first fight: Why do you let me live after our fights, when you could easily kill me?” This had been bugging Ryouko for a while. Why DID such a powerful ninja, one who had killed his entire clan in one night’s time, without getting so much as a scratch on him, let an inexperienced Shinobi such as Ryouko, get off time and again? Wouldn’t it have been easy to just kill him?

Itachi opened his eyes, though Ryouko avoided looking into them.

“Because you have something special...when you see me, you don’t crumble and beg, you fight me upright. You call me dishonorable, yet I can respect that. I admit, at times, after you’d survived the Tsukuyomi, I had to pull out, either because we were in the Leaf Village, where you had enough allies to trouble me, or because you had, in fact, exhausted my chakra. Somehow, you’ve saved yourself, and even managed to strike back...”

7 - Turning the Tables

Ryouko tried not to be flattered by the praise, but still, considered the infamy of the sources, Ryouko couldn't help but be a little proud. As his aged arm creaked in the elbow area, Ryouko nodded.

"I understand. Well, it's nice to know I'm held in such high esteem. But, as you've targeted my friends, and my squad mates, we still have business. Running from you won't do any good. I'd rather not turn my back to you anyway." Ryouko had moved away from his squad gradually, so as not to leave them without cover. Now, Ryouko didn't want them to get caught in the crossfire.

Itachi made the first move. "Fire Style: Great Fireball Jutsu!" Itachi created a huge fireball, which he aimed at Ryouko. Ryouko had to dodge backwards, toward a stone pillar.

"Phoenix Flower Jutsu!" Itachi called quickly, jumping into the air above Ryouko, and blowing out smaller fireballs. There were a lot of them to dodge, and Ryouko's back was already against stone. He leaped and rolled, gracefully dodging the flying fire, but something felt wrong. He tried to move forward, but found himself trapped.

"Kunai...with strings...of course," Ryouko muttered, angry he had been caught by such a trick. Itachi pulled tight and trapped Ryouko against the stone pillar.

"Fireball Jutsu!" Itachi once again shot roaring tongues of fire, but this time, Ryouko had nowhere to go. He was trapped against the pillar. From his summoning jutsu earlier, Ryouko had blood on his left palm. Finding that he could move his palm, Ryouko weakly tapped the pillar behind him.

"Summoning Jutsu! Water Style: Water Wall!" Ryouko called. FWOOM! The fire was inches from him, just as the Water Wall flared up, putting out the flames. Umisu, Ryouko's small, but potent, Chinese Water Dragon, bit through the wire holding Ryouko, freeing him. Ryouko had to leap almost straight up and back, landing on the safety of the stone pillar before Itachi's next fire jutsu could catch him.

Ryouko's body hadn't aged any more, but Ryouko hadn't noticed himself get younger, either. He could feel a strain on his body as he debated his next move.

The Gates of Chakra might be suicide in my condition. Itachi is good enough to dodge me. Damn, my body's locking up! I've got to delay him, at least! Shadow Clones are pointless...maybe not. Of course! The jutsu is A-ranked, but how much chakra it uses is diminutive...

"Dance of the Sickle Moon!" Ryouko and two sword-swinging Shadow Clones started to move around Itachi in a pattern that strained even the Sharingan. The clones and Ryouko sliced, backed away, and sliced again, but they couldn't hit Itachi. Ryouko cursed- he had hoped that the movement would be too fast for the Sharingan. But Itachi had zeroed in on him.

"This is over..." Itachi said carefully as he stabbed with a kunai. POOF, POOF- SPLASH?!

“A water clone hidden with the shadow clones...very interesting move. Is your body beginning to test you?”

Ryouko, hidden behind the stone pillar, knew that Itachi could see him. His body WAS testing him, and he was failing that test. With Itachi, you couldn't use taijutsu, he was too fast himself, even though taijutsu was usually difficult for a Sharingan user. In Ryouko's state, jutsus had to be used moderately, or he would exhaust his chakra, and the fight would be over.

Damn it...my body WOULD have to start giving out on me! Is-is this permanent? Am I...sixty? Without living sixty years? Is my life over as I know it? Wait...despair...an emotion- they're coming back! I need that chakra...I've got to hold him off until that second chakra comes back! I can only access the jutsu I need with that chakra. I need to make smart use of my chakra...

Ryouko jumped out from behind the rock. But, very quickly, he had to jump up on top again. Itachi had been waiting with a fire jutsu, and he had sprung it immediately. He had also used a Shadow Clone jutsu and leapt behind Ryouko. BRACK!

A backhand knocked Ryouko off the twenty-foot pillar. He hit the ground with an alarming force, feeling his ribs protest. But he also felt something strange- his chakra coming back. His cigarette was long gone...his body!

Ryouko looked at his hand- it lost a few wrinkles and all its liver spots! Ryouko guesses he was about 45 now. Still a long way from where he WANTED to be, but still, he was better off now. It gave him a second emotion- hope. And just in time- here came Itachi! In contrast to his normal style, he was attacking with taijutsu in tandem with his normal jutsus. He didn't want any mistakes this time, apparently. Ryouko HAD to die, in Itachi's eyes.

--

Sakura, Naruto, and Sai faced off against Sasori. But this time, Sakura was confident.

“Sai, draw! Let's ruin that puppet's joints! Naruto, use your Shadow Clones! We can't let this guy get going!” Sakura was calling the shots now. With Ryouko tied up in combat, she was the ranking member. That, and her previous fight with Sasori gave her an edge. Having fought Sasori's puppet, Kisame, also helped. Kisame, when he was alive, was a tough battle. Controlled by Sasori, with the addition of poisons and traps, would be harder.

Or, it WOULD have been, had Sakura not half expected this. She had put together a plan for just such an occasion.

“Naruto, you first! Sai, as soon as the Shadow Clones reach the puppet, have your lions go. Then I'm up!”

Naruto nodded. “Right! Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!” The one hundred Naruto's shouted their warning.

“Ready or not, here we come, puppet freak!”

As Sakura expected, most of the clones were destroyed quickly. But the ones that got through used explosive-laced kunai to aim for the Chakra Strings that Sasori used to control the puppets. They sliced through them. Even if Sasori had managed to let the strings go, and could re-connect them in an instant, Sai's ink had time to do it's job.

"Great Beast Painting!" Sai's lions sprang to life off his scroll and ran towards the puppet of Kisame. The lions seemed to dissolve as they hit the puppet. In reality, the ink was going into the joints of the puppet, and then hardening, freezing the puppet up, making it useless.

"No matter, I still have myself." Sasori started to take off his cloak, but from behind, Naruto himself and a three clones swooped in.

"RASENGAN!" they all cried, hitting Sasori in the torso, and sending him skidding across the floor. It was Sasori's bad luck that, before he could counter any move, he landed at Sakura's feet.

"Goodbye asshole!" BLAM!

As Sakura's fist hit Sasori's body, completely shattering it in the process, he ejected his heart from his body. But there was to be no mistake this time. Sai's ANBU sword arched through the air and pierced the heart, pinning it to a giant rock wall.

So much for Sasori. Now Sakura could focus all her worry on Ryouko. And there was plenty to worry about...

--

WHOOMPF! BRACK! STUFF!

In rapid-fire succession, Itachi had punched Ryouko in the stomach, backhanded him across the mouth, and kicked him in the gut, all while holding on to his collar. From there, Itachi's fist met Ryouko's chin, knocking Ryouko for quite a loop.

"No matter how strong you've gotten..." CRACK!

"...How many scrolls you read..." THONK!

"...Or how much you study..." BASH!

"This fight was over before it began." Itachi had pummeled Ryouko's body, until Ryouko coughed up blood, a sure sign of internal problems. Then, with all the care of avalanche, Itachi threw Ryouko to the ground.

"Fire Style: Great Fireball Jutsu," Itachi called. Ryouko, so hopelessly on the verge of defeat only seconds earlier, felt himself get younger again, now in his late twenties. More of his chakra returned.

"Kouryuu: Rain Dragon's Wrath!" Ryouko barked. Using the water from his water clone, and doubling

it, Ryouko caused what was best described as a hail storm of ice daggers. They effectively put out Itachi's fire jutsu.

"Ryuuzo: Dragon Chakra Constellation!" Ryouko wasn't done yet. He'd use two of his trio of special dragon attacks. The second, the "Ryuuzo", used a variant of Ryouko's 'Dragon's Ember Jutsu' and made a huge constellation in the sky in the shape of a dragon. The dragon was actually composed of many small fireballs. Using his chakra, Ryouko could guide it. And he guided it right into Itachi!

"Cover your eyes!" Ryouko shouted to the others. The super-nova effect didn't hurt him, since it was his chakra, but Ryouko couldn't guarantee it wouldn't hurt his friends.

CRACK!

"shoot!" Ryouko muttered loudly. The genjutsu he had used on the dysfunctional family's father had worn off, and now he had bad intentions with a bo staff. Ryouko couldn't afford to ignore Itachi, but at the same time, he had to deal with this guy. On the next staff strike, Ryouko raised a kunai to block it, and followed up with a kick to the groin. The kick lifted the luckless man off the ground, where Ryouko's other foot met his chin. Hearing the slightest sound behind him, Ryouko used his next jutsu, the last in his dragon trio, and a pure defensive maneuver.

"Tatsunokuchi: Dragon's Head Gargoyle!"

Just as Itachi and five shadow clones threw a barrage of shuriken, the ground leapt up around Ryouko and turned to stone, protecting him inside what looked like the head of a dragon. Ryouko took the opportunity to use a summoning jutsu, one that worked in tandem with his Tatsunokuchi Jutsu.

"Summoning Jutsu! Umisu, Dragon Water Fountain Jutsu!"

Ryouko exit the statue with a replacement jutsu, while his Chinese Water Dragon spewed a stream of water that came from the dragon's mouth. The powerful current took out the Itachi clones. Ryouko had the upper hand. Or so he thought. That was when he saw it:

Sharingan in the water.

"Tsukuyomi!" Itachi used his most powerful genjutsu. Ryouko had taken such care to avoid it. In the split second before he was snared, Ryouko wondered how Itachi had done it.

~(Inside the Nightmare Realm)~

Ryouko didn't find himself tied down, as was the norm for this jutsu.

Itachi's chakra must be low...is this a gamble for him? Maybe I need to take one, too. Those planning sessions with Naruto weren't for nothing. I knew this was going to happen, no matter how careful I was. But I had planned on being able to tell Naruto when to spring the trap! Well, my hands are free...let's just see what happens when you try genjutsu in the Nightmare Realm!

"Bringer of Darkness Technique! Your eyes are dangerous, Itachi. I have respect for you, warrior to

warrior. If you mean to kill me, you're going to have to give it all you've got!"

The Bringer of Darkness Technique was a genjutsu that couldn't be broken conventionally. It was a Hokage-level Jutsu. Knowing this, the Third Hokage had taught it to Ryouko, when the boy had burned through other genjutsu by studying day and night, and needed to improve. The technique put the target into complete darkness. In Itachi's world, that meant that he couldn't find Ryouko to attack him, and couldn't expend anymore chakra without losing his Sharingan to fatigue.

--

Naruto, Sai, Sakura, and the Akamadori family watched intently as Ryouko and Itachi seemed to just be standing still. Naruto didn't say anything, but instead rushed forward, to where Itachi was standing.

I see how he did it! Itachi used the water's reflection! That way, Ryouko could see his eyes! He didn't need to touch him to use that jutsu! Now I've got to break it by hitting Itachi. I can't kill Itachi; if I do, Ryouko will die with him, trapped in his subconscious. So I've got to hit hard enough to snap Itachi out of this, but not hard enough to kill him.

"YAAAHH!" CRACK!

Naruto's fist hit Itachi square in the jaw, knocking the powerful Akatsuki member backward. Ryouko suddenly came back to life.

"Good work, Naruto! Hey, heads up back there! That psycho family is back! Get rid of them, I'll hold off Itachi! I've got one last trick up my sleeve!"

Ryouko, now looking around twenty-five, took off toward Itachi at full speed.

"Blue Flame Chakra: Release!"

But Itachi disappeared. On top of the same outcropping as Ryouko had been, he was panting heavily.

"Enough. It's pointless to continue. The Akatsuki have been destroyed here. You left me no choice but to cut my losses this time. You're an admirable warrior, Ryouko. I can admire that. I COULD kill you, I have enough chakra left to do so...but..."

Itachi deactivated his Sharingan.

"...But you're interesting. So you've won the day." Crows flocked to Itachi, and when they disappeared, he was gone.

Ryouko ended his jutsu, stunned by Itachi's sudden departure, and perhaps even more by his words. Ryouko let himself sink to one knee, where Katsuyori ran over and hugged him.

"Ryouko-sensei! You're alive! Thank you so much!" Katsuyori spouted. The others smiled, and even Ryouko managed a small smile for the occasion.

“Don’t thank me, Katsuyori. I didn’t do it; at least not alone. But, that can wait. Let’s get out of here.”

Naruto’s shadow clones had taken care of the delusional family. Now, they seemed perfectly receptive to help, since the father and daughter had just lost their meal ticket, the Akatsuki. The Mist Village had been restored to its original government. Ryouko looked at the two, then at his team, sighing with a heavy heart.

“Alright. We’ll escort you home. But that’s all we’re doing. If you try ANYTHING, we’ll take you to the Hidden Leaf as prisoners. Understood?” Ryouko snapped.

“Yes, sir!” the father bowed humbly.

“Good, glad to hear it. Really great work everyo...” Ryouko fell back to one knee. Even then, he didn’t want to admit that he was exhausted. All those jutsus, and the Reaper Death Seal, Ryouko was surprised he had stayed up as long as he did. Without saying anything else, Ryouko struggled to his feet.

--

At Sakura’s insistence, the four stopped at a hot spring town to heal. They chose a mixed bath; or rather, Naruto and Sakura did. Sai didn’t care, and Ryouko was emotionally absent. The four had waded into the water, all sporting swimsuits. Sakura had turned her fair share of heads, but didn’t bask in the attention.

Young or not, he’s a jonin, or he’s never killed before. After the Third, Hayate, and Kimimaro died, he gained a deeper respect for life. But he put that aside for us, his team, just like Kakashi-sensei.

Sakura gazed at Ryouko, who had his badly-scratched and bruised back to the center of the hot spring, instead facing out on a corner, his head resting on his hands. Naruto and Sai quietly nodded to her, not cracking any jokes. Even they could understand the gravity of the situation.

“She will get Ryouko-kun’s attention, if for no other reason than her clothing,” Sai commented, mentioning Sakura’s dark pink bikini.

“Nah, he’s not like that. Clothes don’t matter all that much to him. It’s how Sakura’s treated him. She never treated him like an outsider. That’s why he got that crush on her to begin with.”

--

Ryouko sighed deeply, although that hurt a lot.

I took two lives today...even though they meant to kill...it was still the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Deidara and Hidan...an artist, and an immortal sadist. Even though I had no choice...

Ryouko’s thoughts stopped there. Or, rather, he FORCED them to stop there. He DIDN’T have a choice when he killed them. Had there been a way around it, Ryouko would have taken it. But had he

lost his team, that would have been inexcusable. But wasn't killing bad, no matter what? Or was this a war, where people died? Whatever the case, Ryouko couldn't give those lives back.

"Ryouko, hold still a second, okay?" Sakura asked quietly. Ryouko, of course, did anything BUT stand still. He spun around to face her, trying to put on a brave face. But he didn't fool Sakura. She had seen the dismal look in his eyes.

"Just hold still, don't freak out. I want to heal your cuts so they don't get infected." That wasn't why Sakura had come over, but it seemed a way to make conversation. Ryouko still didn't comply, so Sakura threatened to restrain him with her chakra. THAT made Ryouko behave, for whatever reason.

"Good. This won't take long, and you'll feel better after I'm done."

This healing met contact, and Ryouko soon turned a fierce red as Sakura was moving her hand slowly down his bare back. Though he knew better than to read into it, having Sakura doing something that even made them seem remotely like a couple was both Ryouko's greatest desire, and even his greatest fear. Kunoichi were the great unknown, and wise people fear the unknown.

They also try to explore the unknown.

"Ryouko, it was really sweet of you to come after me. It meant a lot that all of you risked everything to get to me like that..." Sakura began, her hand on Ryouko's shoulder, focused on a deep cut.

"It's what I do," Ryouko said, attempting to keep things light, but that didn't work out. Sakura cut right to the chase.

"Listen, Ryouko, I-"

Ryouko grabbed Sakura's hand, braced himself, and said it:

"Sakura, will you do me the honor of going out with me again? I know it didn't work the first two times, but..." Apparently, Ryouko's shock-numbered brain hadn't thought that far ahead. Now, all he had to do was wait for Sakura to say 'no, you freak', and everything would be okay. But that wasn't in the cards. Instead, Sakura smiled shyly, blushing as well, and kind of turned away.

"I-I'd like that, Ryouko!"

Either forgetting they were both somewhat less than fully clothed, or not caring, Sakura snatched Ryouko in an embrace, burying her head into his shoulder and letting herself relax. Ryouko gently hugged her in return.

"I've been waiting for a boy like you..." Sakura looked up at Ryouko, keeping her tears in check. "...Someone who can make me feel safe. Someone I can trust. And someone who I can relate to. You're all three, Ryouko. You're a rare type of guy."

Ryouko put a hand on the back of Sakura's head. "You're just what I've always wanted in a girl. You're strong, smart, independent...but you also make me feel special, like I'm not some loser who got

lucky and found a village that more or less accepts him. The first time we met, you went out of your way to accept me. That meant more to me than you could ever understand..."

To Sakura's shock, Ryouko kissed her on the forehead.

--

"Tell me something, Sai..." Naruto began.

"What is it, Naruto-kun?"

"How does he wind up with Sakura?! I mean, when I set them up, I didn't think it would work!"

Sai looked surprised at the revelation. "You didn't think it would work? Then why...?"

Naruto rolled his eyes. "To stop them from becoming miserable to work with! Ryouko's a study freak, and Sakura can REALLY be...you know...a dog at times..."

Sai turned his head. "Naruto-kun, you really should be more careful...I believe Sakura-chan heard you..."

Sure enough, an angry Sakura was looming over Naruto. But, she didn't hit him. Instead, she ruffled his hair.

"Your backwards way of thinking landed me a date with Ryouko, so I guess I can't kill you for that. But if I hear it again..." Sakura cracked her knuckles. Naruto got the picture.

NEXT ISSUE: A DATE?! RYOUKO? RYOUKO AND SAKURA HAVE THEIR FIRST REAL DATE!

8 - The Date

BACK IN THE HIDDEN LEAF

Ryouko fixed his hair for the hundredth time. Not that he was going anywhere dressy, but if you landed the cutest kunoichi in the Hidden Leaf Village, you'd better look worthy of being her date.

Date.

What a horrifying word to Ryouko Kaguya. This would be his first official date. 'Official' meaning that he wasn't trying to gather information, and it wasn't a cover-up date to spy on someone else. No, this was his first, honest-to-goodness date. And with the girl he had a crush on for years to boot! To some, that was a victory. To others, it was a case of the inevitable happening. For Ryouko, it was a dream come true.

People focus on her looks so much, and with good reason. But I like her for other reasons. She's not 'flashy' beautiful, and she's absolutely brilliant. Not to mention an absolute sweetheart.

How did I get so lucky?

Ryouko fixed his hair again, straightened his vest, took a gulp of sake, cursed as it dripped on his vest, and changed into his spare vest. All in a matter of a minute, tops. The night was off to a graceful start.

I hope this isn't going to be a pattern tonight...

--

As Sakura smoothed her skirt and primped her hair, it hit her that she had never been on a real date before. Sure, she had seen Ino's dating sims, and she had heard about dates, but actually going on one?

What do you do on a date? I mean, when it was a mission, it was easy enough. And that second one, Ryouko called the shots. Is that how it is? Or do I take charge? Do I follow his lead? Do I kiss him? On the cheek or the lips? What if he wants to go to a hotel?! I've never done *that* before! Am I any good. Is he?!

Sakura gave herself a smack on the face.

"Stop it, Sakura! Focus! Okay, you're going out with a sweet, gentle boy who would give his life for you. He doesn't know what to do either. So we're both clueless. Okay, that works! We'll make it up as we go along!"

Even though Sakura was dressed like her normal self (Sai had revealed that Ryouko found it attractive),

she was suddenly concerned about her dress.

Ugh, is this top too short? Too long? Wait, is it too flashy? Is my skirt too short?! Do my boots make me look 'easy'?!

--

"You'll do fine, believe it!" Naruto clapped Ryouko on the shoulder. Ryouko was so tense that Naruto had actually hit Ryouko's hardened shoulder muscles with enough force to hurt his hand.

"Ryouko-kun, now that you are...is 'courting' the correct word?...a woman...is this kind of bond rare?" Sai wanted to know. If anyone else had asked this, Ryouko would have bitten their heads off.

"No, Sai. 'Courting' means 'tendering marriage'. This is just a date, a social meeting restricted to two individuals, though there are exceptions. As for the bond being rare...good question. I think it depends on who you ask. Some people are more adept at gaining the attention of the opposite sex than others. Does that help at all?" Ryouko said kindly. Sai had opened up a book; Ryouko's eyes popped out of his head.

"Are all woman adept to rough treatment, Ryouko-kun? This one says that it's 'turn-on'. What does that mean?"

Ryouko snatched the book away. "No no no, THIS is a bad reference, Sai. This sort of this is for perverts who drool over women like a brainless otaku."

"Getting in the mood for our date, Ryouko?" Sakura said from behind. Ryouko suddenly realized she had the book.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!" Sakura demanded.

"It's not mine, Sakura, I swear it! Sai was asking about relationships, and this is the book he was getting his knowledge from. I was just explaining that only drooling otaku look at this stuff," Ryouko's eyes had gone completely white, while his face, by contrast, had turned red.

Sakura shrugged. "I didn't think it was yours to begin with, Ryouko. To be honest, I figured Naruto had planted it on you."

Ryouko had to chuckle. "Nah, Naruto's innocent, at least in this case. It's my fault, really. It's not mine, and I shouldn't have grabbed it. My mistake."

Sakura gave him a questioning look. "It IS normal for boys your age..."

"No, no, I'd much rather look at you! You're more beautiful than some girl made of plastic." Ryouko suddenly realized that Sakura might take that as an insult.

"Er, hold on. Let me rephrase that!"

Sakura put her hand on Ryouko's shoulder. "It's alright, Ryouko, I know how nervous you are. I get what you mean, and I'm flattered. Oh, darn it, I forgot something, I'll be right back, okay?"

--

Sakura ran back to her apartment. Or, more accurately, into her apartment to grab something, THEN to Lady Tsunade. But Tsunade wasn't who she was looking for.

"Shizune-sensei! Shizune-sensei!" Sakura ran down the hall, finding Shizune trying to wake Tsunade up from a drunken stupor.

"Sakura? What's wrong?" Shizune let go of Tsunade and let her go back to sleep for the time being, while she ran toward the door, where Sakura was cautiously peeking in. Sakura stepped back out into the hallway and told Shizune what was going on.

(One explanation later...)

Shizune smiled at Sakura. "Is that all? Congratulations! Ryouko's a nice boy, you two will get along great!"

Sakura ducked her head lower, blushing. "Neither of us know what we're doing. And more than that...will Lady Tsunade be angry with me for dating Ryouko?"

Shizune put a hand on Sakura's head, then spoke comfortingly: "Don't worry about Lady Tsunade. She trusts you expressly, Sakura. If Ryouko is okay with you, Lady Tsunade will come around. If not, leave her to me and elope!" Shizune joked.

Sakura thought the possibility was all too real.

--

"Oh, damn. That did not sound good..." Ryouko muttered, looking worried.

"C'mon, you're just paranoid. So she forgot something, no big deal!" Naruto was sitting in Ryouko's home; a dojo just off of the Nara property. His feet up on the antique coffee table that Ryouko had inherited from the Third Hokage, and the rest of him sprawled out on a black leather couch that Ryouko had ordered from who-knew-where, Naruto was relaxed. Sai was drawing a picture of the woods behind Ryouko's house, deciding that charcoal would be a good medium.

The living room was packed with scrolls the Third had left Ryouko. Bookcases lined the walls, and there was a stone hearth in the center of the room, with a pile of wood next to it. It was classily furnished, although interior design wasn't Ryouko's thing. The main attraction to this place was the big basement and the large amount of land- both ideal for training.

"Do you guys mind if I ask you something..." Without waiting for an answer, Ryouko asked:

"Do you think that Sakura and I can work? I mean, I'm two and half years older, and, well...she could do

better than me, I know it. I'm just holding her back with my own selfish desires, aren't I?"

Naruto tackled Ryouko and pinned him down. Both struggled violently, although it was more of a wrestling match between kids. Unfortunately, as Ryouko tried to roll, he bounced off his coffee table, and Sai's book fell to the ground, landing open on a page.

This was the scene Sakura walked in on. A dirty book, and two boys wrestling around. She drew her own conclusion, and was tempted to kill them both, but the 'oh crap' look on Ryouko's face pacified her.

"Naruto...get off, now!" he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Sakura, I SWEAR this isn't what it looks like!"

Now, Sakura knew full well what was REALLY going on, but she had to mess with Ryouko a little bit. Not to be mean, just because it was too much to resist.

"Oh, I see what's going on. Why didn't you tell me you and Naruto were lovers? I would have cheered you both on! It's so progressive! Please, don't let me get in the way, I've never seen two guys do it before!"

Black lines of doom hit Ryouko's face. Naruto started to sputter with something between anger and embarrassment. Sakura finally softened her look.

"Ryouko, relax! I'm just kidding. I know how you guys are, just messing around and wrestling, it's not a big deal. Just calm down, okay? I'm not gonna hurt you. Now, how about we give this dating thing a shot, hmm?" Sakura held out a hand to Ryouko.

"Thanks Sakura!" Naruto grabbed on. Sakura smashed him in the head.

"NOT YOU, MORON! I'M TRYING TO HELP RYOUKO UP, NOT YOU!"

Ryouko had already gotten up under his own power and dusted himself off.

"Right, we should go before anything else happens." Ryouko gave a surprisingly charming smile. "I'll be on my best behavior for you."

Sakura froze for a second. **Whoa...he changed. Right there. Is that what he used to be like? Before all the crap started? An awkward, but charming, kid? I've never seen him smile like that!**

"Is something wrong?" Ryouko asked, his smile turning to a small frown of concern. Sakura blushed with embarrassment at being caught staring. She blushed even harder when Ryouko put a hand on her forehead.

"No fever...Are you alright?" Ryouko asked kindly. **Nerves, maybe? Or anger? Did I do something wrong...besides everything tonight?**

"I'm fine, Ryouko, really. Shall we go?"

Ryouko, to Sakura's surprise, knew enough to offer his arm to her. Sakura linked her arm in, not voicing her question aloud, but not needing to, apparently.

"Yes, lets...oh, you're wondering how I know ANYthing about this. It's alright. My mother raised me as a gentleman. Until now, I haven't really needed to go ahead and use any of that stuff. But, fair warning: I have no idea what I'm doing. So, um, please forgive me if I mess up..." Ryouko's ears were burning by the end of that confession, despite it being completely normal.

"No problem. I kind of guessed you didn't know what you were doing. If it's any consolation, I don't either. So, let's just go have fun. If ANYONE has earned the right to goof off, it's us, right?" Sakura linked her arm a little tighter, indicating she was content for the moment, and ready to move on.

"Oh, right. Uh...food?" **Damn. Smooth! Mono-sylballic vocabulary, THAT'S a turn on to such a brilliant girl!** Ryouko chided himself. Thankfully, Sakura had known him long enough to know that he wasn't bumbling or stupid, just anxious.

"Food sounds fine. Do you want to pick, or should I?" Sakura offered. **No, don't give him choices, that's only going to make him MORE nervous!**

"Well, why don't you pick? I'm afraid I'll pick a bad place...so far you've seen me in two bad positions, I don't want to make the third time the charm!"

Sakura admitted he had a point. "Alright, I know just the place! Casual dress, and we're not likely to run into anyone who'll be a problem there. So, get me at 7:00?"

Okay, I'm guiding him through what I know about dating...let's see if Ryouko can run on instinct, the same as me...

"Seven sounds fine. Where would you like me to pick you up? Sorry, but I'm not familiar with your schedule, I don't want to show up at your house when you're at work. (heh, your parents might kill me!)"

Sakura wasn't surprised at how considerate Ryouko was being. She WAS surprised at how level-headed he was about all this.

"Um, I know! Why don't we meet at the gates? I have to give my traffic report, and we can just go from there. Will that work for you?"

Ryouko nodded. "That works for me. I'll see you at seven, then."

"Right. Bye for now!" Sakura realized she was going to be late seeing Lady Tsunade about her work for today.

The second Sakura was out the door, Ryouko flopped into one of his armchairs.

"You got through it, you're fine. Now, you just gotta date her, and take her to a hotel, right?!" Naruto said/asked. It was clear all he had learned about girls he had learned from Jiraiya and his peeping

habits.

“To a hotel?” Ryouko hadn’t thought of that. Is THAT where this is all going to wind up? Wait wait wait, hold on, time out! I don’t even...well, that doesn’t matter, it’s instinct, isn’t it? But...it’s a responsibility. (nods head) I need to take this seriously, and consider it as a possibility as a mature, responsible adult jonin...WHAT AM I SAYING?! I’m a clueless nineteen year old kid, on a date with his dream girl, and I have no freakin’ idea what’s going on! Gah, who can I talk to? Who’s been on a date? Sai and Naruto are out...Asuma-sensei!

Shouting a vague warning not to break anything, Ryouko made a mad dash for Asuma’s place. Surely he, and all the time he spent with Kurenai, would know how a date worked.

--

“Sakura, don’t put the red-”

BOOM!

Tsunade, Sakura, and Shizune blinked, ash covering their faces.

“Okay Sakura, that was a rookie mistake. What’s on your mind?” Tsunade asked. Sakura looked to Shizune, who nodded her support. Telling Tsunade had been something Sakura had studiously avoided until now.

“I have a date tonight...my first one...” Sakura mumbled, looking at the floor. Tsunade couldn’t resist pushing a little.

“Oh? With who? Must be someone pretty special to distract you that much. So, who’s the lucky guy?” Tsunade leaned forward at her desk.

“Uh, well, he’s special...” Sakura tried to hedge the question, but Tsunade put paid to that thought with a well-placed glare.

“It’s Ryouko!” Sakura finally blurted out. She turned several shades of red and winced, waiting for Tsunade to lose her temper; to yell, scream, or throw things, or tell Sakura she couldn’t date Ryouko, or any number of horrible things. But it didn’t happen. Tsunade only snickered.

“You seem to like the bad boys, Sakura. Dark, brooding charity cases. But...as far as guys like that go...(Tsunade smiled)I guess you picked wisely. I guess that boy deserves some good luck. And at least he can stop WISHING he had you, and see if he can handle you. You’re a good girl, Sakura. And, it goes against the grain, because I’m not Ryouko’s biggest fan, but...guide him. I know just how clueless he is, and I know he’ll try anything to make you happy. So, don’t get too mad at him. He’s not Naruto, being perverted on purpose, remember.”

Sakura nodded, practically ready to take notes. Don’t hit Ryouko was at the top of the list. If he made a mistake, it was likely out of ignorance, not malice.

"Y-you're okay with this, Lady Tsunade?" Sakura couldn't help but ask.

"Sure, it's your life. And I think you could have done a lot worse. Ryouko is no dummy- he's saved his money, trained hard, and studied like he had nothing else to do, all the while juggling mission after mission. He's got a good head on his shoulders, the same as you. You two will be fine."

Tsunade cleared the charred mess Sakura had made off her desk.

"Now, try this one again, without that kid worrying you. Alright?"

--

Asuma gave a grin to Ryouko.

Geez, he DID want this to be secret... Asuma looked around. On top of Third Hokage's head? Wow.

"So you're dating Sakura. You two will be a good match. Just remember one thing, Ryouko..." Asuma shook his pack of cigarettes, a fresh one rolling out into his palm. He deliberately made a show of looking for his lighter, then nearly dropping the cigarette. It was fun watching someone like Ryouko squirm with anticipation.

"What am I remembering, Asuma-sempai?" Ryouko questioned quietly.

"Hmm? Oh, right. Listen, once she's done with the hand holding, laughing at bad jokes, and eating, she's going to make her move. A hug, a kiss, or all the way, you know. Let me warn you: After she kisses you..."

Asuma exhaled; he couldn't WAIT to tell Kurenai this one!

"...After she kisses me?" Ryouko prompted, ready to punch Asuma for playing his damn game.

"...After she kisses you...she owns you. So make damn sure you WANT that kiss," Asuma finished, chuckling.

"Asuma-sempai?" Ryouko asked timidly.

"You're full of crap, you know that, right?" Ryouko had to laugh, admitting that Asuma's practical joke had actually helped relieve some of the tension he felt, at least temporarily.

"In all seriousness, Ryouko, think of it this way: She's already attracted to you, and you've known her for three years. How can you use that? You know some of her likes, her dislikes...and, well, you're a Shinobi, why not ask her friends for info? Use your resources. Oh, and while you're at it- don't mention the hotel part, even if you intend to go there, you follow me?" Asuma knew Ryouko had followed. It hadn't registered with Ryouko yet, but he DID understand. He wasn't some dumb kid.

--

It was time. The moment of truth. Ryouko had decided to keep with his normal clothes, since his 'sources' (Naruto and Sai) had told him Sakura was going to keep her normal clothes. That seemed to be a good match. And, if it turns out he sucked at the dating game, they could always pretend that it was business instead of a social thing, and go their separate ways.

But once Sakura walked up, Ryouko desperately hoped that wasn't going to be the case. He REALLY wanted this to go well. It was once in a blue moon that Ryouko showed genuine emotion, and it was usually when Sakura was around. Knowing that, he hoped he had picked the right flowers. He had thought 'candy', but he had heard Sakura was on a diet. She didn't NEED to be, but flaunting chocolate still seemed like a bad idea.

Okay, Ryouko. Calm down. She's just as nervous as you are. And she's going to lead...isn't she? PLEASE let her know what she's doing! Here she comes, play it calm and cool!

-

Sakura, you can do this. Okay. He's JUST a boy. No reason to be so nervous, right? He's a good guy who put his life on the line to save you. If nothing else, you say you're thanking him for that, then go your separate ways...

But Sakura wanted this to work. She really liked Ryouko, and she felt....well, safe with him. And his awkwardness WAS kind of cute.

Ah, crap! I can't stop thinking of that night! When he was shirtless, cutting wood! No, no, don't smile! If you start smiling, you won't be able to stop! Calm down. No, no, don't picture him in his underwear (boxers or briefs? He seems like a briefs guy. Am I wrong? Boxers? Boxer-briefs?!)! That'll just make it worse!

--

"Hi Ryouko-san!" Sakura managed a smile and a wave.

"Good Evening, Sakura-san...I, er, (koff) these are for you!" Ryouko blurted out the last four words, thrusting the flowers toward her almost violently. But that was better than he expected himself to do.

Sakura took the flowers, seeing that they were red carnations. **No way Ryouko thought this up on his own! He might be sweet, but matching the flowers to my clothes? Who did he talk to?**

"They're beautiful, Ryouko-san!" Sakura exclaimed.

"Sakura-san, if it's not forward of me...if you're more comfortable, we can drop the honorifics. We've known each other long enough. And, well, it makes things easier..." Ryouko added mysteriously. Kakashi's advice HAD help, and so had Asuma's. Even Lady Tsunade and Ryouko tolerated each other long enough for Ryouko to get (and, he suspected, give) information.

"Oh, not at all, Ryouko. Out of curiosity- easier? In what way?" Sakura hoped this was good conversation. Who the hell knew?

“It makes it easier to tell you look beautiful. ‘You look beautiful, Sakura-san’, or ‘Sakura, you look beautiful’. The second one rolls off the tongue a little better,” Ryouko replied, hoping he was giving a winning smile. He really couldn’t tell. Hell, all he knew was ‘breathe’, everything else was frozen. He hoped he had some kind of instinct that would help him out.

“Hah ha! That’s sweet, Ryouko!”

Ryouko perked up. Joking or not, what Asuma had said had stuck with him. **She laughed at the bad joke...then there’s the hug, then the kiss...and then...**

“So, um, Ryouko, I just realized I really don’t know much about you. What do you like to eat?” Sakura took another brave stab at conversation.

“Well, I’m not horribly fussy. What would you like?” Ryouko countered. **So, it’s some kind of game...who’s going to say what they like first? Neither of us wants to inconvenience the other...Unless, of course, we’re both just being considerate. Moron, stop over-analyzing everything!**

“How about Amiguriama? Their dumplings are pretty good...” Sakura said thoughtfully, a hand on her chin.

Ryouko nodded. “That sounds fine, I know the place.” Ryouko gulped, and offered his hand. Smiling at the gesture, Sakura took it, giving it a gentle squeeze, watching Ryouko’s face. Stony or not, it changed color. (NEW- Color-changing Ryouko! Available in stores now! Girls, hold his hand and watch him change color, from deathly white to bright red!) Sakura hoped the squeeze said ‘this is fine, you can relax’.

Ryouko gave a heavy breath; first test passed. **Okay, good. Now, just remember- you know this girl, and she knows you. It’s not a stranger...okay...**

“Ryouko? We’re here? Hey, you in there?”

Ryouko snapped to attention. They had arrived. Ryouko nearly fell over, realizing they had been less than a mile away. He had set himself in for a long journey that would entail conversation. This was actually better.

Sakura had another thought: **If he gets any more worried, he’s gonna pop. ^^’**

--

Their plates cast aside, Ryouko and Sakura sat on the benches outside the dumpling shop. To anyone else, it must have looked as if two normal teenagers were doing normal teenage things. To them, it was clearly a case of ‘now what?!’

“I know so little about you, Ryouko. It just occurred to me that I never knew you even ate! I’ve never seen you take any food...”

Ryouko shrugged. "Well, I'm not a big eater. And I get pretty nervous, especially around kunoichi."

Sakura played with one of the skewers the dango had come on. "Huh. I noticed that, but I never knew why. Can I ask?"

Ryouko gave a laugh that was almost hollow. "You can ask...I'm not sure if I know myself. I guess it's because I know how to treat women, and I know how to treat warriors, but I'm afraid of both, let alone a mix of the two." Ryouko had a hand under his chin, giving him a thoughtful look, and giving Sakura a glance at his profile.

Slim...but cute. Healthy looking. Except for the pale skin, and the bags under his eyes. Strangely enough, that combination is...kinda cute.

"Sakura?" Ryouko said/asked.

"Hmm?" Sakura turned to face him.

"I'd like to flirt with you right about here, but I suck at flirting. Not enough practice, I guess," Ryouko said somberly. Sakura couldn't help but break out with a case of the giggles. Somehow, it suited Ryouko to say that at just the opportune moment. The wind flared up for a second, tossing Sakura's hair, and giving Ryouko a look at her from the side.

She looks so cute and feminine...how can something so adorable crush boulders? When she held my hand earlier, neither of us were wearing our gloves. Her hand was soft and warm...shouldn't something that can break rocks be hard and cold? ...

...

She's pretty, no matter how I slice it. Duh, genius, say it out loud!

"You're very pretty, Sakura."

Sakura gave Ryouko a sudden look. It was a curious look, and Ryouko knew he HAD to have made a mistake.

"I don't mean to go on and on about your looks, I know you're more than just looks!" Ryouko added sheepishly.

"Oh, no, Ryouko, you were fine! I'm sorry, the look was...well, you've never called me, or anyone else, pretty. It just caught me off-guard. It was a nice surprise..." Sakura tilted her head and smiled. "I'm learning more about you every second. I knew that you were a gentleman, but you've also made me feel special."

"You ARE special." Ryouko was sitting on his heels while propped up by his toes, reaching over so he could reach her hand. Sakura thought this was so touching that she succumbed to the moment and wrapped Ryouko in a fond embrace.

"That's so sweet of you, Ryo-kun!" Sakura exclaimed happily. "Oh! I never asked if a pet name like

that was okay! Please, forgive me!”

Ryouko hugged Sakura back. “I don’t mind. May I call you Sakura-chan, then?”

“I don’t mind!”

Sakura didn’t seem to want to let go. Neither did Ryouko. In reality, both were waiting for the other to break the embrace.

--

“I don’t kiss on the first date, Ryouko-kun...” Sakura said with a coy smile as she headed to her apartment. Ryouko’s mouth dropped open slightly at Sakura’s smile. Sakura spun around and kissed him full on the mouth. No probing tongue, and only a little pressure. But still, it seemed better that way for a first kiss.

I thought she said she didn’t kiss on the first date! Ryouko thought as Sakura relinquished the lip-lock on the stunned Ryouko.

“...but this isn’t our first date!” Sakura stuck her tongue out playfully.

“Oh, that’s right! Wait, those counted?” Ryouko questioned.

“W-ell, yeah. When I decided to kiss you, anyway. We’ll call this our first official date. The others were practice! After this, though, no more practice. The next one is our second official date.”

Ryouko had to give his head a slight rap with his fist. “Pardon me?” he managed.

“You, uh, DID want to date me again, right?” Sakura asked, suddenly worried that she had come on too strong and completely turned him off. **He’s affection-starved, but did I over-do it? Too demanding? Damn it!**

“I would...I would be honored, Sakura-chan!” Ryouko nearly yelled, but managed to keep his voice quiet.

“May I ask a question, Sakura-chan?”

“Of course!”

Ryouko’s dark hazel eyes met Sakura’s light green eyes.

“Does this mean that we’re...you know...boyfriend/girlfriend now?”

Sakura patted Ryouko’s head.

“Yes.”

Ryouko steadied himself. He grabbed Sakura’s hand, and then, before he could change his mind, put

his arm around her waist.

“Then it’s my duty to kiss you good night,” Ryouko declared. Sakura was surprised he would pick up on things so quick.

But can he kiss?

“You’re absolutely right, it IS your duty!”

Ryouko made his move. It wasn’t the greatest kiss in history, but the kiss itself MADE history, at least to Ryouko and Sakura. The newest couple in the Hidden Leaf, and they were sure to make an impact. Provided they ever got over their shyness of each other, that is.

It could happen, Ryouko and Sakura thought, gazing fondly at each other, before saying good night.

For both, it WAS a good night.