

Naruto: Shinobi Chronicles

By nextguardian

Submitted: July 9, 2008
Updated: September 25, 2008

In this series, Ryouko and Sakura record their innermost thoughts. Sakura's diary and Ryouko's journal contain thoughts that could ruin either Ninja!

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/nextguardian/53345/Naruto-Shinobi-Chronicles>

Chapter 1 - Sakura's Diary	2
Chapter 2 - Ryouko's Journal	10
Chapter 3 - Meeting in Sunagakure	18
Chapter 4 - A Deadly Request	26
Chapter 5 - One More Night	32
Chapter 6 - Three Minute Challenge	39
Chapter 7 - Investigation	46
Chapter 8 - The Leaf's Recovery Begins	54
Chapter 9 - Treason	62
Chapter 10 - Enemies on All Sides	69
Chapter 11 - Mad Dash	77
Chapter 12 - Look to the Future	84

1 - Sakura's Diary

Sakura writhed against the snakes binding her to the ground. Even as she did, she didn't know WHY. Wasn't being with Sasuke her dream? Even as she thought that, she answered herself:

Not like this!

Where the hell was anyone else? Why was she alone in this room in Orochimaru's cavernous hideout, awaiting Sasuke return? Hadn't she come with the others? Kakashi, Yamato, Naruto, and Sai? Wait, they had been captured, the same as she had. That left one option, and that was the backup squad.

But they won't send Katsuyori! That means...Ryouko. No, this is suicide for him! It's better I should die...What am I saying?! Dying won't solve anything! I've got to get out of here! Before Sasuke comes back and...no, I can't think of that! I can't be afraid! I can't!

Sakura's eyes were starting to tear. The snakes wrapped tighter, one licking the salty tears from her eyes. That made her cry even harder. When the door opened, and light peeked in, her tears quelled momentarily. But what she had hoped was her salvation was now her undoing. Ryouko had been caught, too. And by Sasuke.

"You always had your eyes on her, didn't you?" Sasuke asked. Not evilly, just chillingly calm. Ryouko glared straight ahead.

"Ryouko, adopted name of Sarutobi, Hidden Leaf genin."

Sasuke sighed mockingly. "Name and rank, huh? Not surprising. The picture of loyalty, you won't sell out, even now. Don't worry...this won't take long. I'm just going to ruin your mind by taking Sakura...and making her MINE. My girl, and mine alone. I can see inside you..." Sasuke's Sharingan glowed more red momentarily, as if he COULD look inside Ryouko.

"It's killing you, to see her at my mercy. You know what I'm planning to do..."

Sasuke loosened his gi top, smirking at Sakura, who was blushing. Evil or not, he was still attractive, in her eyes. But knowing what he was planning to do to her...It was a horrible thought. Sakura silently begged fate to step in and stop this. Then she heard it:

"I do. You coward."

Ryouko had finally spoken up. Sasuke turned around slowly, looking at the boy propped up in the shadows. Snakes protruded from the walls, holding his arms and legs. It was his eyes that were scariest. Those eyes were what people saw just before their minds were pushed to near-insanity.

Sasuke strolled over, unconcerned with time. He leaned on the wall near Ryouko.

“Coward? You’re hardly in any position to fling mud. I’ll give you credit for even coming here. All for a girl that doesn’t want you, and never will. And you can’t have her. It’s pathetic, chasing someone like that. Sakura had the guts to tell me how she felt, no matter what I said, I can give her credit for her honesty. You...you couldn’t tell her, no matter what.”

Sasuke’s mind had grown warped over the years. Now he decided to play a dangerous game with the first genin to grace the ANBU torture/interrogation ranks.

“Tell her you love her, and I’ll let her go. Obviously, what I had planned for her won’t work with you...so I’ll just kill you...but she’ll go free. I’ll even let the others go. YOU stay in their place. I’ll resurrect you and kill you once for each of them. And it won’t end there...you’ll be my servant. You’ll KNOW that you’re serving me, but you won’t have a choice. So, choose wisely: You, or the others? Who lives, and who dies?”

Ryouko felt the snakes release him. He closed his eyes, and gulped.

“They live. I die. I’ll do whatever it takes...”

Sasuke nodded, almost feeling bad, but those feelings were quelled immediately. “Go, then. On your knees. I’d say ‘go naked’, but that’s not the kind of humiliation I have in mind for you. If I wasn’t going to kill you...It can’t be helped. Go.”

Sakura couldn’t hear what was said, but she knew it couldn’t be good. But when Ryouko got free, she cheered inwardly.

He’s fought Sasuke before! And he’s won! This is his chance!

But when Ryouko came to her, sunk to his knees, and looked defeated, Sakura’s happiness left her as quickly as it had come. She had never seen Ryouko bow to anyone before.

“Sakura-sempai...I’ve made a deal. You’re going free. I just have to tell you something, and you’re free to go...”

Ryouko nodded his head closer, near her ear. The snake binding Sakura’s mouth moved at Ryouko’s request- screaming wouldn’t do any good anyway.

“I love you,” Ryouko said. Under his breath, he muttered ‘Bite my lip’ to Sakura. He moved to kiss her, cradling her head, his eyes trying to convey the message he had just whispered to her. Sakura understood what he was doing, and let him kiss her. Or so it appeared. In reality, with Ryouko’s hand blocking Sasuke’s vision, Sakura used her teeth to bite into Ryouko’s lip. She felt his warm blood trickle into her mouth, but it was gone immediately.

“I’m sorry I had to do that...” Ryouko said, using part of his shirt to wipe the blood off her mouth. “I wanted to kiss you goodbye...Let me get rid of the filth I put in your mouth, so maybe you can forgive me for kissing you someday...” Ryouko said this almost regretfully, trying to fit the situation. He DID feel bad

about it, but with his hands newly bound behind his back, he had no choice.

The snakes hadn't released Sakura yet. She knew Ryouko was suspicious. For her part, she hadn't believed the ruse would work. But it was the best option in a bad situation.

"Why isn't she free, Sasuke?" Ryouko asked carefully.

Sasuke smirked at Ryouko. "Do you think I'm stupid, Ryo-bozu? I know you two have something planned. I was COUNTING on it. I want to see what you can do! Until then, Sakura stays. And when you fail, I'm going to make you watch..."

Ryouko couldn't take anymore. The blood on his lip was enough. He bit down harder, forcing more out, until it dripped down onto his chin.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

The Adamantine Yoi would have to be enough. Ryouko used it cut the snakes binding him and Sakura free. The hole in his plan was that Sakura had been here for so long she was weakened, and therefore an easy target. She was on her knees, but barely. This did not bode well.

Sakura saw what was going on, and knew just what Ryouko had planned. But she couldn't force strength from her body. It had taken all she had just to stay alive. Her ration pills had been taken. That's when something flew to Sakura's lap. Ryouko didn't break his glare at Sasuke as he said:

"Light one, hurry! It's a chakra cigarette!"

Sakura couldn't. Mostly because she suddenly sensed Sasuke behind her. Ryouko kicked off and aimed a punch at Sasuke. Sasuke smirked and disappeared, landing behind Ryouko. He kicked Ryouko with a sidekick just as Ryouko was turning, knocking him into the wall, cracking it so that it broke gradually, rolling Ryouko into the next room.

"You always wanted to be the one to help me rebuild the Uchiha clan...why do you fight me now, Sakura-chan?" He seemed to sincerely want to know. Sakura shook her head, and mustered up her courage. With the plethora of emotions running through her, it came easily.

"Not like this, Sasuke! You've lost your mind, and I'm not going along with this! You've lost touch! You never wanted anything to do with me!"

Sasuke couldn't answer, because Ryouko had returned and pushed him into the other wall, pinning him as long as he could.

"Run for it, Sakura! I'll hold him off! Kakashi-sensei and the others are a few rooms down the hall to the right!"

But Sakura still couldn't run. Her chakra was returning, but not fast enough. She cursed herself for

being weak yet again. Ryouko seemed to understand. With Sasuke momentarily stunned, he had just enough time to get to her level.

“Hold still,” he whispered in what he hoped was a calming voice. Sakura did, trusting him. Even when his lips meant her, she didn’t doubt him. He was too loyal. Somehow, through the kiss (WAS it a kiss?), she felt her chakra returning.

“H-how?” she managed, as Ryouko let go.

“Chakra Transfer Jutsu. Sorry for the near-kiss part, it’s the only way I know how to perform the jutsu, since it’s normally forbidden. Now, hurry!”

As Sakura left, she saw Ryouko still hadn’t moved. Sasuke was focused on him now, and appeared to be laughing. It was only then she that Ryouko had knives sticking out of his back.

When he was doing the jutsu...Sasuke must have tried to interrupt it...but he never even moved... I’ve got to get the others and get out of here! Kakashi-sensei can help Ryouko, but I need to get the rest freed. Ryouko isn’t the priority, he knew that when he took the job...

All the same, Sakura knew she wouldn’t be leaving without him.

--

“I’m sure Sakura is touched,” Sasuke told Ryouko as he bashed him aside. Ryouko spat out blood, though some of it dribbled out of his mouth. Ryouko’s eyes were alight as he snarled his answer at Sasuke.

“You wondering why I’m alive, aren’t you? Don’t doubt ANBU- the torture my friend and teacher, Ibikki, used to train me is worse than ANYTHING you could do to me. All the @\$\$-kickings I’ve taken have made me that much stronger. And now I have to return that strength. ‘Cause if I’m going down...”

Ryouko punched Sasuke in the jaw, surprising him. Sasuke suddenly saw the eyes that one Sound agent had described to him. The eyes that were almost insane themselves, and ready to make your mind crack. They weren’t as feared as the Sharingan, but they were unique to Ryouko. The last thing most people saw before going insane...

“...You’re coming with me!” Ryouko snarled, now even looking pretty damn insane to Sasuke.

Ryouko grabbed Sasuke by the collar, while Sasuke did the same thing. Both scrapped any defensive plans. It was going to be a pummeling, to decide who lived and died. An all-out brawl where punches were the carte de blanche.

--

Sakura found Kakashi and the others, alive and well, but in a locked room. There was a barrier of what was close to pure chakra in front of the door, which would explain why no one had escaped.

Naruto noticed her first. "Sakura-chan!" It was clear he had been feverishly trying to break out. Sakura could tell his chakra was low, mostly like from the swirl mark on the wall that gave evidence to the use of the Rasengan. The walls must have been fortified, too, or Kakashi could have easily broken out. As it was, he probably gave the order to conserve chakra. He wasn't considered the best of the best for nothing.

"Hold on, I'm getting you out!" Sakura called, pulling on her gloves. BLAM! The ground erupted, disrupting the chakra barrier, allowing Team 7 to slip out.

"Nice work, Sakura! How'd you get free?" Naruto asked, surprised that she could escape Sasuke like that. Or that she even would try to escape him, for that matter.

He's, like, her dream! MY dream, Hokage aside, was to see Sasuke home safely...I guess that isn't going to happen...Maybe not now, but I'll catch up with you someday, Sasuke!

"Lady Tsunade must have sent Ryouko after us, he showed up, and he's brawling with Sasuke! We've got to go help!"

Something in Sakura's eyes tipped Kakashi off that something was wrong.

"Yamato, Sai, Naruto- you go find Ryouko and get him out of there. Sakura, I want to make sure you're not injured in some way you didn't know about."

"Understood, Kakashi-sensei. Let's go!" Yamato ordered. Sai and Naruto trailed after him, sprinting down the dimly lit hallway that seemed to lead nowhere.

Kakashi and Sakura watched the others run off down the corridor, toward the sounds of a fight. Kakashi helped Sakura sit (more like forced her to sit), and tried to get out of her what was wrong.

"Kakashi-sensei, I'm confused. Being with Sasuke was all I ever wanted, but then he...he..." Sakura broke down crying. "He tried to..." she whispered something in Kakashi's ear. Even the stoic Kakashi showed anger.

"That's the most filthy thing anyone can do. Try to put it out of your mind, Sakura, at least until we can get a genjutsu specialist. Once we extract Ryouko, we'll get him to take a look."

"No! It can't be Ryouko! I, um, I just need to see...you know...another girl about this. I mean, it doesn't seem right, having a guy probe around my subconscious! Even one I trust like Ryouko!"

Kakashi seemed to understand. "Alright. Do you trust him enough to administer a calming genjutsu?"

"Of course!"

"Alright. But first, we need to pull him out of the fire. No matter how good he is, he doesn't know Sasuke like we do, and he's going to get burned..."

--

Brack!

Ryouko blocked Sasuke's kunai as Sasuke appeared next to him. He backhanded Sasuke, but Sasuke twirled through the air and evaded the critical shot that Ryouko had been aiming for.

Sasuke landed on the other side of the room.

"Too bad, loser. I'll give you credit for protecting Sakura..." Sasuke smiled eerily as the curse mark spread. "...But you can't protect her forever!"

Ryouko blocked an incoming kick, only to be struck with the other leg. He had rolled with the blow to lessen the force, and returned fire, but Sasuke was too quick in his Level 2 Cursed State. He brought his foot down on Ryouko's head with sickening force, while snakes snared Ryouko's ankle and sent him crashing even harder.

Damn, concussion, at least...I don't have any sense of balance, either. I'd better do something, or I'm dead in the water...

Ryouko's speech was slurred slightly as he said "Dragon's Fire Wall!" in the nick of time. Sasuke's foot hit the thick flames of fire, and burned him. Ryouko just had to keep the jutsu up. If Ryouko was Sasuke's target, that meant the others were safe.

Sasuke looked up, smirking.

"So the calvary to the calvary has arrived..." Sasuke said, not turning around. He could sense Naruto's enormous chakra. He couldn't sense the others as clearly, but he knew there was at least one more person in the room.

"He's gotten stronger...so have you, Naruto. But, now isn't the time or the place for us to fight. I can only fight you again once my brother is dead!"

On those sour words, Sasuke disappeared. Yamato picked up Ryouko and helped him down the hall to where Sakura and Kakashi were waiting. Sakura tried to dry her tears, but they only flowed harder, seeing her savior beat all to hell. It was clear that he was injured, though how heavily Sakura couldn't tell without performing a physical. In what might very well have been the caverns of hell, Sakura knew they didn't have the luxury of checking. Thankfully, the Hidden Leaf wasn't horribly far away, going at top speed.

"He's got a concussion, Kakashi-sempai, and various cuts and bruises. Nothing very serious. Sasuke was just playing, I think. Ryouko was the one who Sasuke could never figure out, if memory serves..." Yamato explained. His words would have been mysterious to everyone, except for himself and Kakashi.

Ryouko and Sasuke both trained largely by themselves. Ryouko's only frequent training partners were the Third Hokage and Rock Lee. After the Third's death, Ryouko's scroll collection had swollen, and he studied jutsu after jutsu, practicing fanatically, endlessly.

Sasuke trained by himself, with the Uchiha clan jutsus at his disposal, and the mighty Sharingan. As the story went, one day Ryouko and Sasuke agreed on a match. This was nearly three years ago now. Two loners duking it out was rare. They agreed on a proctor, plus Kakashi-sensei, to point out any mistakes they had made.

There had been no victor until nearly an hour in the match, when Sasuke had a final burst of chakra that outlasted Ryouko's. But this had made Sasuke question himself even more. He had won the fight, but a largely unknown name had held him at bay for nearly an hour. He didn't HATE Ryouko for that, but it did make him wonder if training by himself was enough. Sasuke started extra training with Kakashi shortly after. That was the only real fight Ryouko and Sasuke had ever had. Their personalities clashed, and Sasuke's harsh treatment of his teammates was never lost on Ryouko, who had neither team nor sensei.

Ryouko tried to stand up again, but fell back down to one knee, shaking his head.

"You've got to get out of here. I'm no good anymore, I'm useless as a warrior, just leave me. I'll take this complex out, and we'll call it even..." Ryouko was breathing pretty hard.

"What are you talking about?! He's delusional!" Naruto shouted. But Ryouko shook his head.

"You haven't seen my back...knife after knife...and the concussion...I'm as good as dead. Just leave me..."

Suddenly, Ryouko crumpled to the floor. Sakura's glowing hand was just above where his shoulder blades had been seconds earlier. No one move or spoke until Kakashi hefted Ryouko onto his shoulders.

"Good work, Sakura. We'll treat him back at the Leaf Village. We're in no shape to pursue Sasuke or Orochimaru ourselves, let alone without back up."

--

Sakura's Diary Entry 1

Diary,

It was horrifying. I really thought Sasuke was going to have his way with me. Tied up like that, I've never felt so helpless or scared...it was as if I couldn't control anything. All my Shinobi training couldn't protect me. It's terrifying, being vulnerable after you thought you were strong.

Ryouko-san came to my rescue. He says that he's never forgotten how kind I was to him when he first came to the Leaf Village. That I was the first to accept him without question. I guess he meant that, because he nearly died today, saving my life. Not that it hasn't happened before, but today was different.

He kissed me. Well, kind of...sort of...not really...It was really weird, and hard to explain.

It confused me when he showed up and faced off against Sasuke. Sasuke was all I ever wanted, and I should have been wanting his love, no matter how it came. But when Ryouko came and let himself be humbled for me...It's just something I'll never forget. On his knees, telling me he loved me (He's really scared of kunoichi. It's kinda cute, actually, how he blushes whenever one of us is nice to him ^^), it must have humiliated him to bow down like that. The tough as nails warrior is forced to say something he probably didn't mean, while tied up and on his knees. Poor guy. But we all got out, and Ryouko-san is going to be fine. My jutsu should be wearing off anytime now. Oh, good, he's waking up! I'll update you later!

--

Sakura closed the pink book and threaded a key into it's lock.

"Ryouko-san! How are you feeling?!" Sakura exclaimed.

Sakura had been sitting at Ryouko's bedside for hours over the past day or so. She felt like it was her fault he had gotten so beat up, and wanted to make sure he was okay, even if all she could do was sit next to him while he was in a drug-induced sleep that he, no doubt, would have resisted with all his energy, had he known about it.

"Sakura-sempai...I'm fine, is everyone else alright?!" Ryouko sat up, finding that his shirt and pants had been left on him, and even his mask was still in place.

Sakura breathed out a sigh of relief. "They all made it, Ryouko-san. They're fine...I, uh, wanted to thank you for saving me..."

Ryouko brushed the thanks aside, though Sakura noticed his ears had reddened.

"I'm just glad I could help," Ryouko replied, stretching, then stopping as he felt every little puncture wound in his back stretch. It hurt surprisingly little, considering how bad the injuries must have been. If a genius medic like Sakura hadn't been there, Ryouko guessed his life would have been forfeit.

Sakura reached into her waist pouch, digging around. "Oh, I almost forgot! I got you this, since you'll be in the hospital awhile, and I'd imagine even you get sick of scrolls...I know you aren't the journal type, but this might keep you busy for the next couple of days. Oh, I've gotta run, see you later, I'll check in after training today!"

Ryouko didn't have a chance to reply. Instead, he looked at what Sakura had given him. It caught his interest, although it was more because it was from Sakura than what it actually was.

2 - Ryouko's Journal

A journal?

Ryouko shrugged. He had nothing better to do. The black book was as good a confidant as any. And unlike human confidants, this one could be destroyed, if necessary. Ryouko wasn't the journal type, but it might prove healthy...

--

Ryouko's Journal

So, you're a gift from Sakura? That automatically makes you special. Sakura is one of the nicest kunoichi around. Even though I'm a little older, somehow I always feel younger with Sakura. Not like we're brother and sister, but like we're good friends. I don't know how SHE feels, of course, I could never ask her. I guess I'm stupid like that.

So, yesterday I apparently saved Sakura from Sasuke. Lately, I've been teaming with my student, Katsuyori, as the "B Squad", short for "Backup Squad". Our mission is to compliment the existing teams when they need backup, hence the name. I only barely got Lady Tsunade to keep Katsuyori out of today's mission. It would have been suicide. He's gotten really good, really fast, but no matter what, he would have been one more person I would have had to keep my eye on while trying to fight Sasuke. He's too inexperienced for this.

Although, had I not just had my @\$\$ handed to me, I might feel like that was a stronger argument. Who am I to judge strength?

Damn it...every time I think of that bastard trying to force Sakura-sempai into...THAT...it just burns me up. I wish I could have fought better. Time to up my studying and training.

It doesn't help that I've really been thinking about Sakura-sempai lately. She's just become such a beautiful girl...what would she want with an ugly thing like me, anyway? She's out of my league several times over.

That doesn't make it any easier to admit this, but I might as well write it here:

I think I've fallen in love. I just can't say anything...Never...I can't curse such a girl, bring her into my personal hell...Almost nothing will ever convince me that I'm in Sakura-sempai's league.

Ryouko closed the book, staring at it. For some reason, it seemed the perfect gift. Ryouko vowed to thank Sakura once he got out of the hospital.

--

Tsunade and Iruka were sorting through the missions for the day. Nothing out of the ordinary. D-ranked,

C-ranked, a couple B's and A's, and one S-ranked. The S-ranked required two people. The genjutsu specialist of the village was easily Kurenai Yuuhi, but Ibikki Morino and Ryouko Sarutobi had been the ones to crack prisoners. Information was crucial for this mission. Before Team Gai could be sent on this mission, information was needed. And it was up to Ryouko and Ibikki to supply it.

"Sakura, you have the clinic today. There's too much paperwork to be done. If there's an emergency, THEN call me. But there shouldn't be anything you can't handle." Tsunade glanced at Sakura, making sure she was paying attention.

Sakura nodded, a little too quickly. Her face was flushed, and she REALLY didn't want Tsunade to question that, so she bowed out of the room as quickly as she could, ready to go to work. Or so she appeared to the others, anyway. Her diary, however, told a different story.

Diary,

I'm feeling horribly guilty today. It's nothing I did...consciously, anyway.

I had a dream last night. I was tied up with snakes again, but Sasuke wasn't controlling them. He was fighting Ryouko. But Ryouko was...and Sasuke, too...they were both shirtless! I've never even SEEN Ryouko-san's chest! I feel almost dirty for having that dream, even though I didn't mean to. It was like that age-old fantasy of having two people fight over you. It just happened to be two cute, half-naked guys.

Maybe I'm just thankful that Ryouko saved me from a fate worse than death. Subconsciously, I want to thank him a little better for nearly dying on my behalf. But he insists on no 'thank you's'. He really worries me sometimes... Oh well, I have to go to work. I'll think more about this dream later, even if I don't mean to.

--

Ibikki and Ryouko, both clad in their trench coats, descended the stone slopes to the thick confines of the interrogation room.

"You or me today, sensei?" Ryouko asked. That was all he needed to say, Ibikki got the message.

"You're going to do it, and I'm going to make sure you don't screw up. You're softhearted, Ryouko. Remember, these are enemies who'd just as soon kill you as look at you. They're not going to be any more friendly to you after this than they are now, no matter how you act," said Ibikki with his trademark delicacy.

"Understood. This one is from...the Sand Village? Our allies?" Ryouko's confusion seeped into his voice as he gave his sensei a look out of the corner of his eye, not daring to say any more, and not needing to.

"FORMER Sand Villager. NOW he's scum, recruited by the Hidden Rain Village to attack us with

Sunagakure knowledge. Traitorous scum..." Ibikki muttered. The last time he was in the rain village, he had been getting zapped with a sword that conducted electricity. Any time the Rain Village came up, Ibikki immediately shifted into attack mode.

Ryouko started straight ahead, organizing his thoughts. He knew his plan of attack right away.

-

"Former Sand Ninja...joining ranks with the Rain? What motivation did you have?" Ryouko asked, calmly at first. Some enemies didn't have any great loyalty, and would just talk, all you had to do was ask.

"Get bent," came the reply. Okay, so much for 'calm'. Ryouko paced in front of the defiant prisoner.

"You know, it's funny. I'm not naturally a hard-@\$\$, but some of you bring out the worst in me. I don't ENJOY ruining minds. To me, it's mechanical- a living. But I don't regret it, either. The destruction of a mind can be satisfying, as in 'job well done'. I've done that more times than I can count. One more won't hurt...I know you have answers, and you're probably allergic to pain. So we'll trade: Answers for me, less abuse for you."

"Screw you, you little fresh-faced twerp!"

Ryouko grabbed the prisoner around the neck.

"I warned you about that temper. Do you want to test my genjutsu again? This time, when I wake you up, the kunai I use won't be in your arm. I'll just throw it and let nature take it's course...Perhaps my aim will stray lower...or higher...either way, your life will be ruined..."

Ryouko had been using a gradual genjutsu to plant the seeds of destruction in this prisoner's mind. This was one of his favorite genjutsus, a mix of the False Surroundings, and the Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing techniques. It gave the prisoner the illusion of being freed. Once that part of the jutsu had been engaged, the person was placed in hopeless situation after hopeless situation. What that was varied. For someone from the Sand, who probably didn't deal with a lot of water, that potential fear played a part.

Walls were closing in...the tide was coming in, and he couldn't move...he was falling thousands of feet into a canyon...he was running the gauntlet with hundreds of his former Sand comrades throwing kunai at him...the Kazekage crushed him in his sand...It never ended! Death would have been welcome!

-

"Looks like you've got your point across, Ryouko. Time to drive it home, and make the scumbag talk." Ibikki nodded to Ryouko.

"Right. Release!" Ryouko called, tapping the man on the shoulder. Ryouko used his own chakra to break the genjutsu. The Shinobi flailed about, tied up. Ryouko let him go. Maybe they were muscle spasms from assaulting the brain and nervous system, or maybe it was anxiety. Either way, it worked in his favor.

“Now that you’ve seen your future...do you feel like talking with me? I’ve certainly got better things to do than wait for your mind to burst like a balloon...so I’ll hurry the process up...”

The Shinobi took a deep breath, and began to talk.

--

Ryouko landed outside the window behind Tsunade’s desk. SMACK!

“Damnit!” Ryouko muttered as he bounced off the window. **Damn her stupid tricks...I should’ve seen that coming. I wonder what I did now...**

Shizune opened the window, checking Ryouko for cuts. The glass hadn’t broken, but the roof tiles were sharp. And, being realistic, Shizune wouldn’t put it past Tsunade to put poison on the roof.

“Thank you, Shizune-sensei,” Ryouko mumbled, putting his coat away, revealing the button-up dress shirt and pants that exam proctors and off-duty ANBU agents wore. It was simple attire, suitable for fighting and rapid-response action.

“You’re welcome, Ryouko-san. Oh, are those for Lady Tsunade?” Shizune asked, pointing at the envelope Ryouko was holding.

“That depends...is her desk booby-trapped, too?” Ryouko muttered, dusting himself off. Shizune laughed, but shook her head.

“No, I think she’ll be happy to see you!”

Ryouko raised an eyebrow. “Happy?”

Shizune had to laugh again. “Or as close as she comes without being drunk. Come on, then.”

It turned out that Tsunade was busy, so Ryouko had to put the envelope on her desk and leave. While he had a few minutes, Ryouko pulled out the black book and wrote down a little more.

I’m going to be working with Team Gai today. Ordinarily, I love working with Tenten and Lee...too bad Neji and Linda will be coming. Damn. Neji always seems to have a chip on his shoulder. And one more long, boring speech about fate...

Although, lately, I’ve wondered if we DO have the power to change our fate...am I fated to be a genin, without a sensei or a real team? Am I fated to serve Konoha in silence? Am I fated to be without a girl? It’s depressing, but it may be true. Oh well, until my fate reveals itself, I’ll enjoy my work.

Ryouko put the book away, sensing the arrival of Gai. Or, more accurately, seeing him and Lee race,

each of them carrying one person. Tenten was holding on to Lee for dear life, while Neji was trying to pry himself away from Gai. Ryouko, no matter how many times he saw this, couldn't help but laugh. Gai screeched to a halt, followed shortly by Lee.

"Looks like this round is mine, Lee! Alright, Ryouko, are you ready?!"

Gai struck a comical pose, with Lee right next to him. Neji, Linda, and Tenten looked on, embarrassed. Ryouko nodded, drawing himself up from standing against the post he had been leaning on. He lowered his mask and reached into his pocket for a chakra cigarette. Ever since that sparring match where Lee had hit him in the throat, Ryouko couldn't swallow pills. A chakra cigarette worked similar to a ration pill, though taken in advance, you could avoid the fatigue that typically came with it. Ryouko always wore his mask in combat, but outside, when anticipating combat, he would have the chakra cigarette in his mouth.

"Such a disgusting habit..." Neji commented. Ryouko had to fight not to roll his eyes.

"Don't knock it, these things have saved my life. And, since you can see chakra, you can, of course, see that this is helpful to me, rather than harmful?" Ryouko never called Neji by his name if it could be avoided. Adding the '-sensei' title showed respect, which Ryouko, frankly, didn't have much of for Neji.

If he'd quit being a jerk, and just do his job, I could respect him. I wish he'd skip his lectures, too. You've heard it once, that's as bad as hearing it one hundred times. I can respect his abilities though. But his lousy attitude just doesn't lend him much in my eyes. He's just about the only jonin I haven't asked a question of.

"I still outrank you, you'd do well to watch your tone," Neji mumbled.

"Guys, c'mon! No need to fight, right?!" Tenten said, almost pleadingly. She liked Ryouko; she loved Neji. But he COULD be irritating at times, she had to admit. She didn't want to see either guy get hurt.

"Tenten is right, we don't need to be fighting! Ryouko is here as a genjutsu specialist, which is the one thing our group lacks. You've got taijutsu with Lee, Neji, and me, of course! Tenten is our weapons expert, Ryouko fits like a glove here! So, let's getta move on!" Gai started off enthusiastically, marching in the direction of the Sand Village.

Ryouko fell into step behind him, with Lee on his right.

"Are you well enough to be on this mission, Ryouko-san?" Lee asked.

"You don't have to add the title, Lee-san, we're friend of good standing, we have been for three plus years," Ryouko admonished his friend, smirking as he did.

"YOU always add the honorifics," Lee pointed out.

"Only because you do," Ryouko shot back.

"Ah, youth!" Gai said enthusiastically. "Come on, let's pick up the pace! We've got to be to

Sunagakure by nightfall!”

“We can make it in three hours!” Lee yelled, to the chagrin of Tenten and Neji.

“Two if we really push it...” Ryouko said, smirking to himself. **Neji’s gonna be pissed...good. Sorry Tenten, collateral damage! I’ll make it up to you, somehow.**

Lee and Gai, of course, took that as a challenge. They took off running at full blast, while the other three stayed at normal speed. Neji and Tenten shot Ryouko dirty glances. Tenten was joking; Neji was not.

“I’m going to get you for this. You know damn well they’re like six year olds when you challenge them!” Neji admonished.

“Must’ve slipped my mind, Neji-tan,” Ryouko shot back, eliciting an outright laugh from Tenten. **NOTE: the –tan honorific is used by high school girls as a ‘cute’ moniker, similar to ‘-chan’. Can anyone pick out the manga that inspired this name for Neji? Or the character? –NG**

“Don’t call me that!” Neji shot back. Ryouko put on a burst of speed, careful to make sure the cigarette ashes hit Neji, but not Tenten. If Linda got hit...oh well.

--

Sakura sat down, exhausted from the rush. It had been a busy day, and the clinic was understaffed. Most of the problems could have been handled by anyone with the right medication, but staff was lacking, so ‘anyone’ wasn’t available. And, annoying though it was, it was still valuable experience for Sakura.

“Naruto, what were you thinking?!” Sakura asked in exasperation. Naruto had come in with burns all over his body. He was grinning sheepishly, unaware, apparently, that some beef was stuck to his cheek.

“Well, I wanted to see the old man make ramen. I just kinda...tripped and fell into my order. Best mistake I ever made, believe it!” Naruto scratched at his head, noodles falling off his head, landing on the floor. Sakura grimaced, knowing she would have to clean it up.

“Naruto, what’s our next mission, anyway?” Sakura questioned as she brushed another noodle off his shoulder.

“Uhh...let’s see. Oh, that’s right! Kakashi-sensei had a mission for us, starting tomorrow! He says it’s B-ranked, but not Akatsuki-related. Kind of nice to get a break,” Naruto commented, rolling one shoulder.

“Yeah...alright, you’re set, Naruto. Try not to hurt yourself until the mission, okay?” Sakura waved goodbye, then sighed happily as the clinic was closed. Finally!

“Very nice work today, Sakura!” Tsunade complimented the tired kunoichi. “I just got Ryouko’s report about the Sand Village. And his report on Orochimaru’s hideout. An entire section is blacked out, though...I thought you might know what that was about...”

Sakura froze. Was she ready to talk about this? There was no better person than Lady Tsunade, her mentor. All the same...

"Can I tell you later, Lady Tsunade? It's...kind of...embarrassing," Sakura admitted, blushing. Tsunade smiled kindly.

"Okay. Just talk when you're ready, as long as it's not withholding vital information."

Sakura bowed. "Thank you, my lady!"

--

Sakura curled up in bed, wearing her two-piece red pajamas. Short sleeves and shorts were nice during the warm Konoha nights. Sakura kept her room cold, because it felt nice curling up under the blankets. That, and she hated the heat at times. She hated waking up with her hair plastered to her forehead, all sweaty and grimy. Usually, in the cool air, Sakura could fall right to sleep. But not tonight...Sakura decided to make a diary entry.

Diary,

Today was hectic, but it kept my mind off what happened. Tomorrow, we set off on some unknown mission. It's funny to think I would have once shied away from danger and excitement. I can't believe I'm the same girl sometimes.

All that time spent, chasing Sasuke. I don't think anyone would date me now, after the way I spurned some of the boys. Lately, I just...well, I want someone I can trust. I'm tired of being alone. But who would want me? My forehead isn't so big anymore, but I really got shortchanged in the T and A department. Maybe I'm a late bloomer or something.

(Sigh) I wonder if anyone finds me attractive?

I'm going to tell Lady Tsunade what happened tomorrow. I've got to tell someone! I almost told Ryouko-san, since he was involved, but he was off on a mission. Thank God, it would have been embarrassing! Even to a boy as nice as him, the conversation would have been awkward. No, for this, I'll stick to Lady Tsunade. She's very wise, and she can make decisions. I envy her.

So, back to my dream. Sasuke-kun and Ryouko-san, both shirtless. I thought about the dream more. They WERE fighting over me. I've seen Ryouko-san take knives, but never without his shirt! Same with Sasuke-kun! And what Sasuke tried to do was disgusting, so why is this dream so...I don't know...pleasant? I mean, CHA, two cute guys, but still...

Oh no. I just realized something. Valentine's day will be coming up soon! That means a celebration. That's all fine and good...but it also means chocolate! More precisely, the GIVERS and RECEIVERS of chocolate! I don't know who to give to! I mean, Kakashi-sensei, Naruto-kun, and Sai-kun, oh, and Yamato-sensei, but who else? Ryouko-san? He DID really help me out. I guess I should give him some too...

The only good thing about Valentines Day is a month later, on White Day! I love it when the guys return the favor in chocolate!

Still, wish the romance was there...

Oh well. Time for me to get some sleep.

Sakura closed and locked the book, then blew out the candle she had been working by and went to sleep.

3 - Meeting in Sunagakure

Team Gai reached the Sand Village before nightfall, but had to wait until the next morning to see the Kazekage. Their business was only with him, so it was the unanimous agreement that they find an inn to check in to, and get some meaningful rest. The inn, as it turned out, was priced fairly enough so that each person could get their own room, thankfully. The thought of having to bunk in the same room as Neji or Linda made Ryouko feel slightly nauseous. After saying their 'good nights', each retired to their rooms to rest up.

Ryouko immediately pulled out his scrolls and began to study. Jutsu and jutsu, for hours. Sitting on the floor near his futon, Ryouko guessed that five hours was enough, and let himself go to sleep. His sleep was full of dreams, most likely due to his last thought before falling asleep:

Valentines Day. Oh crap.

--

Ryouko woke with a start, sitting up and launching his blanket away from the tatami mat he was laying on. He rubbed his face with his hands, disbelieving.

It's normal for a boy my age to dream about a cute girl...but I always deny to myself that I'm human enough to have those thoughts. I guess I was wrong...

Ryouko looked at his journal, deciding to write this thought down within the confines of it's pages. It was an interesting dream, despite Ryouko's trepidation.

A dream. A window to another realm. Whatever it was, it was both good and bad. Let me explain:

The dream was of my and Sakura. For some reason, I was beat up, and my shirt was torn. Sakura took care of me, then...well, she kissed me. But it wasn't a 'get well soon' kiss. She was running her hand down my chest, pulling my head tight into her, pulling herself as close to me as she could get. She had me pinned to the wall, and I couldn't fight her, she was using her chakra to restrain me. Then...and this is the part that bothers me...she kissed me again (her tongue was involved this time. I don't even know what that feels like, how could I dream about it?!), but she was wearing...well, something different. Nothing really dirty, I mean. But this black gown...she looked beautiful. Like she had just come from a party...that might also explain my shirt and tie attire in the next section of the dream, where she grabbed me by the tie and kissed me again.

Okay, I'll admit it, she looked sexy, and part of me wanted this dream to either continue, or be real. (Let's face it, I'm clueless. The girl is gonna have to make the move, I guess, unless I get a burst of courage) But that's just it. I shouldn't be dreaming about a friend like that, no matter my thoughts.

Even though I couldn't help it, that dream just feels like an attack of Sakura-sempai. Maybe it

was of what happened to her. That must be it. Still, to dream about someone that way...I know it's normal, but it's worrisome to me nonetheless.

The mission is going well enough. I've made Neji angry, Tenten laugh, and I've ignored Linda. Lee and Gai are cool, if not a little strange. But who isn't. Tenten is kind of cute, truth be told. I like her eyes, and her prowess with weapons. Odd that those are the two things I find most attractive. Why am I attracted to powerful girls? Is it because I hold weakness in contempt?

For now, I'm going to let this rest. Time to get to work.

--

Kakashi was waiting, to Sakura, Sai, and Naruto's surprise.

"Well, you three are on time for a change! Glad you're ready to go!" Kakashi declared happily, looking up from his pervy novel.

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S ALWAYS LATE!!!" Naruto and Sakura shouted at their instructor.

"Oh? Am I? Guess I just think about more important things...oh well. Now, your mission is-"

"FINALLY! I've been dying for a mission! Tell us, sensei! What are we doing? Tell us! C'mon! I'm ready to go!"

Sakura cracked Naruto across the head. "Shut up, Naruto, he's trying to tell us right now!"

Kakashi rolled his visible eye. "Alright, enough, save it for the mission. You three have been requested by the Sand Village to investigate a murder of one of their elders, apparently at the hands of a Rain Village jonin. The Kazekage will tell you more once you get there. This is an A-ranked mission, but it's nothing you three shouldn't be able to handle. If you need back-up, Sunagakure should supply it. Any questions? Alright, go for it." Kakashi disappeared in a swirl of leaves and smoke.

"Awesome, seeing Gaara and his sibs again! I can't wait! Man, the Sand Village has this rare, spicy ramen, maybe I can get the recipe for old man Teuchi!"

--

Gaara, his siblings, and Baki were seated on one end of the table, with Team Gai, plus Ryouko, occupying the other end.

"It's safe to assume that the Rain Village has a vendetta, and are acting out," Gaara said, looking for an objection. He found one in Ryouko.

"It's best not to assume that just yet, Kazekage-sama. It's entirely possible that one or main Rain Shinobi are working on their own, drunk on national pride. The Sand Village has embarrassed them at the chunin exams, and is a more profitable nation. As the information I extracted shows..." Ryouko handed the folder to the Sand delegation "...the Rain itself hasn't shown an interest in was since the

Kaguya clan's slaughter. Militants have risen and fallen within the land. Perhaps someone is trying to ruin the government, overthrow the Amekage, and take power themselves in the ruin left in the wake of a war."

This was why Team Gai had brought along Ryouko, a genjutsu specialist. He was a good choice for diplomat when the need arose. Despite his anxiety, he had a way of keeping a cool head under pressure, and using cool logic to prove his point. Team Gai, as a rule, were excellent warriors, but they weren't known for keeping cool heads. Gai and Lee were both hot-blooded, competitive individuals by nature. Neji was too arrogant, Linda too quick to judge, and Tenten...she might have been able to do it, but she had no desire to. A kunoichi's role always turned out to be different in cases like this, usually involving seduction to get a point across. Tenten hated that.

"I see..." Gaara said finally. "For now, we will assume these are isolated incidents. Perhaps perpetrated by the same person? The one your village captured...given the time frame, it's possible he's also our murderer."

No one argued that point. It was entirely possible, and more than likely.

"Ryouko..." Gai tapped him on the shoulder.

"Sensei?" Ryouko replied, already knowing what was next.

"Toss on your interrogation gear and see what he knows. Tenten will accompany you."

Ryouko nodded his head. "Understood." Ryouko left, holding the door for Tenten as she walked out behind him. The door closed, and everyone sat in silence, waiting for Ryouko to return. The silence was broken very shortly.

"GAARA!"

Naruto barreled into the room, followed by a haggard-looking Sakura and an indifferent Sai.

"Naruto...Uzumaki...You've come for my mission. It's..." Gaara struggled, still getting the hang of this whole "people skills" thing. "It's good to see you again," he rasped. Naruto was surprised by that.

"Hey, you're talking like you aren't psycho anymore! That's awesome!"

"Are you on your way to investigate the murder?" Neji wanted to know, his gaze softening since Ryouko had left the room. Although he didn't like the thought of Tenten being with him, that was for sure.

"Yes, that's why we're here. Has anything turned up?" Sakura wasn't asking anyone in particular, just a general question.

"YAAAGHHH! BASTARD, STOP IT!"

"Oh, Ryouko-kun must be here!" Sai pointed out. They had heard what Ryouko's genjutsu could do. This sounded like a repeat customer. Sure enough...BAM!

Ryouko kicked open the door. Or he opened it using the guy's face, one of the two. Whatever the case, Tenten looked pretty mad, definitely mad enough to pretend Ryouko WASN'T dragging a kicking and screaming man into a room for interrogation after his psyche was already at it's limits.

"I thought you all might like to hear this in person," Ryouko growled, stuffing the prisoner into a chair. "He's telling the truth, or else he's an incredibly good liar."

The prisoner was foaming at the mouth, and bleeding from injuries. Ryouko hadn't actually touched the man until he had started mouthing off in such an offensive way that even Tenten landed a punch. Ryouko had to pull her off and calm her down, then administer some basic medical jutsu to make sure this clown didn't die.

"Talk, now. You know what I can do just by looking at you. Start talking, or start dying, take your pick, dirtbag..." Ryouko knelt down near the captured Shinobi's face. The Shinobi spit on Ryouko's face, eliciting a reaction from his team. But Ryouko put up a hand to stop them. The spit dripped down his face. Ryouko wiped it away with a piece of cloth.

"You're not the first to get the guts up to do that. You won't be the last. But think about it- is spitting in my face REALLY the last move you EVER want to make? Because killing you would save me a lot of time and chakra. But you opening your mouth and talking would save me even MORE of both, in addition to saving your life. Now, just tell them what you told me..."

The prisoner gave in and talked.

"...The government is weak, we were going to overthrow that pitiful Amekage, and make the land ours! When the head is weak, the hands and feet suffer, and we've done enough suffering! That's why the twenty of us were ready to revolt. We just needed help. I never REALLY belonged to this village, I was feeding information the whole time. But I'm no murderer, THAT honor belongs to our leader, Shoichi. You'll all die eventually, at the hands of our mighty new empire!"

Ryouko hit a pressure point and knocked the prisoner out.

"Convincing. When we captured him, he only had his Sand Village headband and Ninja Registration on him, but that was enough for us to turn him over to you. He's given me a few locations, but not much else. His mind is on the brink now...if I pushed for more, he'd either die, or go insane, and he won't be of help to us either way. May I suggest a secure prison? I could always return to interrogate him at your convenience, Kazekage-sama."

Gaara and Ryouko exchanged glances. The two had long since buried the hatchet. Gaara respected Ryouko for not quitting during their impromptu fight before Ryouko became a Shinobi. With a destroyed eye, Ryouko refused to get out of the way and let Gaara kill his friends. Of course, those 'friends' all turned on Ryouko later, but at the time, it was pretty damn noble!

Ryouko respected Gaara for making his nation profitable, and for trying to better himself. There was no problems about ancient history. Ryouko's eye had healed, so he was fine.

“That might be best...yes, please return...how long before his mind recovers?” Gaara was still looking at the prisoner. Ryouko closed his eyes, calculations running through his head.

“At least two months. He’s taken quite the mental beating the past couple days, more than I would usually give out. But this one was special. Said some awfully nasty things I won’t repeat.”

“Alright. Dismissed. Thank you for coming, Leaf Ninja. Naruto, your team can stay, I need to talk with you...”

“Ryouko can stay, too. He’ll be of more help if our mission is over,” Neji quickly pointed out. Ryouko shrugged.

“No argument. Thank you for working with me Gai-sensei, Lee-san, Tenten-san, Linda, and even you, Neji-tan,” Ryouko again used the nickname that Neji hated to irk him. Tenten stifled a laugh; it was funny to see uptight Neji getting worked up over a stupid pet name, of all things. Although Ryouko wouldn’t have considered Neji friend enough to give him a pet name he meant.

--

Sakura and Ryouko both blushed.

I’ve been dreaming about him/her, and now he/she is here? Oh my God! Gotta stay calm!

“Hey, let’s hit the mixed bath!” Naruto declared. “Hey, who wants to skinny dip? You, Sakura-chan?”

“Hm...Naruto-kun, is it hard to keep your pants up without a dick? They’re baggy for someone your size...” Sai pointed out. Naruto turned red from embarrassment. Neither Sakura nor Ryouko could look him in the eyes after that comment.

“Let’s NOT go naked, mixed bath or not. We should have it to ourselves this time of night.” Ryouko craned his neck to look out the window. It had to be near 4:00 am.

--

All wearing bathing suits, or something similar, the four piled into the hot spring. Ryouko and Sakura took one look at each other, blushed, and turned away.

Oh my God, his chest! Just like in my dream! No no no, don’t think that, Sakura!

She’s so pretty! I never dreamt about the bathing suit, though...damn it, stop that Ryouko! Behave yourself, you’re both adults, and...wow she’s pretty...

Ryouko and Sakura promptly tried to stop staring at each other, and went to opposite ends of the bath. At the same time, they couldn’t avoid each other forever.

Valentines day is coming... Everyone shared the thoughts about this one. Naruto and Sai weren’t

shy. After not landing Sasuke, Sakura had gotten to be shy. Ryouko had always been shy, in contrast to all of them. February 14th (and one month later) were terrifying days for Sakura and Ryouko. Giving chocolate, getting chocolate, it sounded so simple...until you tried it. Did I give it to the right person/people? Will I get any chocolate back? Romance? Love? Or solitude? What's it gonna be? It might as well have been Russian Roulette for Sakura, Ryouko, and countless other shy people.

--

That night, Ryouko and Sakura each made an entry.

Ryouko: I saw Sakura-sempai today. In a bathing suit, of all things! I'm no perv, but...she looked so beautiful! I guarantee I'll be dreaming about her again...is it wrong to hope the dream I have tonight is like the last one I had about her? I mean, I either dream about Sakura-sempai making out with me in sexy outfits, or I dream about the guy I just tortured to within an inch of his sanity...it's a no-brainer, I guess. Even if it DOES make me a perv...I wish I knew how Sakura felt. I'm sure she hasn't given me a second thought...

Sakura: Oh my God! I saw Ryouko-san without his shirt! And, even better- in a bathing suit! Well, sort of. They were more of ANBU shorts, but still! Wow! He looked so cute...and innocent, too. For a tough warrior, he looked kind of lost. Maybe he was thinking about Valentines Day and White Day, too? I wonder if I'll dream about him again tonight? No objection^^. I'm sure he's forgotten me already, I'm nothing special in a swimsuit. (sigh)

--

Ryouko joined Team Kakashi in their mission to head to the Land of Rain. The four were in high spirits, despite the dreaded V-day on the horizon.

"Our mission has changed. Now we have to suppress an uprising and warn the government. Easy!" Naruto clearly thought this was a one-day mission. Sai shook his head.

"It's likely we'll be subjected to questioning ourselves, Naruto-kun. How we came about such information, whose side we are on, and the question that will do us in- do we have proof of our affiliation? If we mishandle this situation, we may put the Leaf Village in danger..."

"How's that?" Naruto didn't quite get that one.

"War..." Ryouko muttered. "If they think we're helping the rebels, they'll accuse ALL of the Hidden Leaf, and we'll get dragged into a war we can't afford."

"If that's the case, we should send them a scroll or something...or maybe get that prisoner as proof. Either way, walking into a country unannounced might do us harm before we even talk to the government," Sakura pointed out. She found that everyone agreed with her. Unfortunately, none of the Leaf Shinobi had a summon that was built for this trip, and non-threatening.

Sai made a suggestion that, while it made sense, was the last thing any of the team wanted to hear.

"Maybe only one of us should go, so they don't feel threatened."

Ryouko nodded. "I agree, that makes sense. We also need it to be the right person. I think that's me. It's not some glory-hog thing, either- it's my genjutsu. It will protect me against interrogation. And, well..." Ryouko looked a little shy as he said "I never mind getting a new 'badge of courage' for my Village. Ibikki was explaining that to me. Either way, one person should go. I'm the only one here who isn't on a team, so it makes sense that it should be me."

Sakura could tell that no one wanted to send Ryouko. They all knew he had gotten a raw deal with his training. He refused to admit he might be overmatched, and thought nothing of putting himself at risk.

"Hey, why don't we sleep on it? It IS late, and we've been traveling all day. It's better to rest up and be thinking clearly tomorrow."

No one had enough energy to argue, so they set up camp in a small, secluded clearing. It was peaceful. Team Kakashi sat back and relaxed. Naruto dove into a stream nearby to catch fish (although maybe shadow clones weren't the best way...), while Sai started to draw the landscape in his sketchbook. Sakura took off her headband and tried to smooth her hair.

Ryouko, of course, was different. He was standing at the edge of the clearing, his exam proctor-ish (-ish because he hasn't achieved the rank necessary to be one, but at the same time has to dress uniformly) uniform still on. Now that they were near the Land of Rain, it was safe to wear his trench coat without the heat being TOO horrible. It was like an old friend, Ryouko thought. How many times had this coat helped him survive on the battle field over the years? Too many to count.

Sakura sighed a little, wondering what was going through Ryouko's head. She decided to make a small entry in her diary, although it wasn't all about Ryouko.

There he is again. Ryouko-san. I've written a lot about him lately, but there's so much to write about. Ryouko-san is a complex person with simple needs, the best I can tell. But it seems a lot of laws don't apply to him. By "laws" I mean 'general rules for humans'. It's like the world doesn't interest him. I can't understand what made him that way...it's just so sad to see. It reminds me of this time, three years ago, all of the "rookie 9" went to look at the stars. Ryouko-san didn't go, but Lee and I spotted him studying on a distant roof. It was strange, though...when I mentioned this to Ryouko-san, he nodded and agreed with me. But it was what he SAID that got to me:

"I couldn't hope to understand them...and they couldn't hope to understand me...I'm an outsider, looking on, maybe wishing I could be one of you.

When I said "You ARE one of us," he said, without sounding superior: *"I can't ever hope to be. All of you has a bond, thick as blood. For me to achieve such a bond...I would have to be normal..."*

I didn't understand what he meant. He seems as normal as the rest of us. But there's this...I don't know, aura of sadness around him sometimes. Like now. He walked over there, by himself,

but he's thinking about something that's really bothering him. I don't know HOW I can tell, but I can.

Oh well, I know he'll talk when he's ready. Ryouko-san is shy, and a very private person to begin with. I'll let him come to me, he might only retreat more if I prod him.

Today was a good day, though. It's always great going to new places, seeing new things, meeting new people. And, of course, seeing Gaara, Temari, and Kankuro again was great! I've never been to the Rain Village, so that'll be an adventure, too. Oops, I'd better stop, Sai and Naruto are about to fight...again -_- Well, Naruto is going to fight Sai for Sai making fun of Naruto's, um...well, you know! I can't tell Naruto I find it hilarious!

4 - A Deadly Request

Ryouko couldn't sleep, and for one good reason. He hadn't been the one to perform the mental exam on Sakura, but from what he had been told, Sasuke's capture had damaged her psyche. That kind of damage repaired itself, but it took time and understanding. Sometimes, things like this struck in dreams. Ryouko felt like a stalker, but he was waiting for Sakura to go to sleep. If she had a dream, like he thought she would, he could help her through it. That was all he could do. The rest would depend on her will. But Ryouko wasn't worried- Sakura's will was strong. Stronger, perhaps, than most anyone's.

Sakura, who had finally fallen asleep, had started to twist and gasp. As a long shot, Ryouko tried to sense chakra in the air. Nope, nada, so it wasn't a genjutsu. It was something worse. Ryouko took off, getting to her side quickly. He couldn't wake her up while the dream was this bad, or he risked more damage to her psyche. Ryouko nodded to Naruto and Sai, who both restrained him. Ryouko thanked them, even as he tried to help Sakura. He bit his lip in frustration.

I can't help her! Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! Sai and Naruto are doing the right thing by stopping me, like I asked. But this is really bad! I need to save her! How can she love someone who can't even help her in her hour of need? I'm too weak...this is the worst feeling in the world. You're helpless, watching someone you really care about writhe in pain. You want to stop the pain, even if it means taking it on yourself. Why does she have to suffer?! What did she do wrong?! Why can't I be the one to suffer?! I can take it! I can take it! Please, don't let her hurt! Let ME take her pain. I can't stand watching this! Please, Sakura, fight it! Don't let it damage you any more!

Ryouko knew his thinking would become irrational. Sai and Naruto had to really fight him. His thoughts were getting borderline insane, and he had to word really hard to control them. Finally, Sakura went limp, and Naruto and Sai let go of Ryouko. He immediately dropped beside her, checking her vitals. She was fine, but shaken up, and would be awakening any second...he hoped.

--

"Sasuke, no! Don't do this!" Sakura begged. But Sasuke was going to have his way with her. She couldn't fight it.

"Don't fight me, Sakura-chan..." Sasuke warned. He removed his gi top and tried to kiss her.

"No!" Ryouko grabbed Sasuke and threw him away from Sakura, standing between the two. Sasuke smirked and threw kunai and senbon, all aimed at Ryouko. But Ryouko couldn't move, or Sakura would get hit. He had freed her, somehow, and now pushed her out of the way as kunai rained on him. Sakura watched, horrified, as Ryouko coughed up blood, multiple stab wounds covering his slender torso.

"She's mine!" Sasuke declared, punching Ryouko. Ryouko's head hit the wall, cracking the plaster. From his sitting position, he kicked, smashing Sasuke in the face, driving him backward. Ryouko took his own kunai up and leapt back in front of Sakura. It was unnerving to see knives

sticking out of him, but Sakura felt calmer. She could only stare while the two boys dueled. There was no way this was going to end without a death. But who's?

Sakura realized that she was missing her skirt and her vest, and covered up, embarrassed. Suddenly, Ryouko's trench coat was covering her, while he fought on without it. It's warmth seemed to breathe new life into Sakura...

--

Sakura sat up with a start, cold sweat dripping off her head onto her shoulders. Her shoulders were bare, but now they were covered with a coat? Sakura recognized the warmth from her dream. This coat had to be Ryouko's. She turned slowly to find Naruto and Sai restraining him slightly, as he simultaneously fought them and himself. Once they saw she was awake, though, Naruto and Sai let go of Ryouko, and Ryouko zipped to Sakura's side. Sakura didn't know why, but she decided she had to-

GLOMP!

Sakura grabbed Ryouko and pulled him into a hug. He didn't ask for an explanation, he just tried to be as comforting as he could. Ryouko pulled the coat back on to Sakura's shoulders as it began to slip. This small gesture made Sakura even more affectionate. The coat had been her sole source of warmth in her most terrifying hour, and if Ryouko was giving it to her, then that warmth was an extension of him. Or so Sakura's terrified mind reasoned. She was now crying, balling up her fist while gripping Ryouko's shirt, apparently fighting for control of herself. Ryouko sat still and let her do what she needed/wanted; that was best for now. He couldn't watch her go through that again. It was mortifying, to sit back and let someone suffer.

"It's okay, sempai. It's alright, it was just a dream. I know it must have been terrifying, but it was really just a dream. You're okay, you're safe, you're with friends. Calm down now, it's okay..." Ryouko hoped he was speaking calmly. It was hard to tell- he himself was scared out of his mind. First he couldn't help Sakura, and now she was hugging him? His 'fear' of kunoichi withstanding, Ryouko knew he couldn't dwell on that. No one else could help Sakura. He, Sakura, and Sasuke were the only three in the room that day. Like it or not, what happened had happened, and there was no taking it back. Ryouko guessed that Sakura had somehow formed an attachment to him. To tell her now wouldn't work, she was too distressed. For now, it was better to let her go, and get this emotion out of her system. As scary as it was, it was better than sitting there, watching her suffer.

But I HAVE to tell her...even if this were to lead to the relationship I admittedly want, this is the wrong way to do it. Once we're home...I'll tell her, and she can decide what she wants. Right now, I'm a source of comfort, and that's one more source than most others get. So even though I feel like a grade-A @\$\$ for doing it, I will let her cling to me, if necessary, to get her back to normal. Whatever it takes...Even if that price is my life, or my heart...

Sakura sized up Ryouko, holding his shoulders.

"Thank you..." was all she said; all she NEEDED to say. Ryouko could only smile and nod, and pull the coat around her again.

“Wear that as long as you like, if it helps you,” Ryouko offered. Sakura still hadn’t let go of him; she was just staring at him, though her stare wasn’t cold. It wasn’t love either. But it was definitely appreciative. And who knew what that could lead to? It had to be nipped in the bud before it became too painful for everyone involved.

“Thanks, I will...I never DID thank you for saving me...” Sakura began. Ryouko smiled and shook his head.

“You did. Many times over. Now, try to get some more rest. The last thing your psyche needs is lack of sleep, on top of everything else. If you’d like, I can put you in a protective genjutsu that induces sleep. To be safe, if there’s a fight, and either you or I is hurt, then you’ll wake up and be able to defend yourself.”

Sakura thought about the offer. It went against the grain, but she nodded.

“Okay. I trust you. Go ahead...but please, can one of you stay with me? I’m not worried about the dream...I’m worried about what I’ll do to myself. I haven’t felt this helpless in a long time, and I’m worried I’ll...hurt myself, I guess. Or at least be paralyzed with fear...”

Naruto volunteered, but Sai objected. “No, it sure be Ryouko-kun. He knows the mind better than us, Naruto-kun. And he seems to have a calming effect on Sakura-chan. You and I are more than able to take on the duty of combat. That can change as necessary, such as Ryouko-kun being our ‘ambassador’.”

POOF!

Ryouko was up in an instant, though he lowered his guard upon seeing who it was.

“Captain Yamato?! What are you doing here?!” Naruto exclaimed, not sure whether he was happy to see Yamato or not. Yamato was back with a smile, though his eyes were serious.

“Ryouko-san, this mission is being terminated for you. There’s no longer need for torture/interrogation. Not yet. The Fifth Hokage sent me to cover for you. She was insistent that you come home immediately following my message, no questions asked.”

“That’s fine and good, but there’s just been a development here that Lady Tsunade is not aware of. It’s important that I see this through...”

Yamato was, at least, willing to listen first. Ryouko took him aside and outlined what happened, trying to emphasize that he should stay with her. Yamato nodded, and spoke into his field mic, but apparently received a response in the negative, because he still told Ryouko he had to go.

“Sakura’s in a sleep caused by genjutsu. Please don’t remove my coat from her. I explained that it’s kind of a security blanket right now. But more than that, it’s...well, protected by some jutsus that will prevent anyone from removing. It’s not an issue of trust, Captain Yamato...” Ryouko looked at the peacefully sleeping Sakura “...It’s just that I don’t want her to be hurt by all this. She couldn’t take it. I just watched her suffer through a dream that must have scared the holy hell out of her, and I couldn’t do

anything. Just...promise me you'll send her back if she has a dream like that. You'll be able to tell. Or, at least, send for me. I'll face court martial, demotion, whatever- The fact remains that I may be the only one who can help her, until Sasuke is no longer a problem."

Yamato patted Ryouko's shoulder. "I understand. I hope it won't come to that. If you don't mind advice...do what Lady Tsunade asks. It might not be to your liking one hundred percent, but it's very important you follow her wishes."

Ryouko gave a slow nod, trying to coax Yamato into saying more. He wasn't biting, so Ryouko said his goodbyes and disappeared back to the Leaf Village, already apologizing to Sakura in his mind.

--

Tsunade laid her cards on the table to the befuddled Ryouko. He shook his head a little at her suggestion.

"It's time for you to die," she had said. Meaning something else entirely, but still, hearing those words just caused Ryouko to immediately hate the idea. He had trained hard to stay alive, not to 'die', no matter what the sense of the word.

"You want me to 'die'- that is, get in a fight, and allow myself to get destroyed, then fake my own death? Before I even consider this, you'll have to explain to me what good this does the village...and what good it does me. Not to be selfish, but I've still got to think of myself a little bit. What you're asking is a lot..." Ryouko hadn't said any of this in an unfriendly way, but then again, he might have been too shocked to be angry.

Tsunade had her hands clasped in front of her, sitting calmly in her chair.

"I know, and I don't want to ask it of anyone...but I know I can trust you. The village needs a martyr, a hero. We pulled together as a nation when the Third Hokage died, or so I was told. To fix the Leaf- we need someone people know to die, and die in a way that makes loyalty to the village look glamorous. Ryouko, this is the Leaf's hour of need..." Tsunade nodded to Shizune, who was clearly apprehensive about handing over the documents in her hand. She did at Tsunade's impatient growl. Tsunade handed them to Ryouko, who was greeted with shocking news.

"THAT BAD?! What could...never mind, not my business. Okay, but I want a say in WHO I lose to, and WHO gets told about what happened."

"No one can know..." Tsunade replied. Ryouko gave his head a firm shake.

"You're misunderstand, Lady Fifth. Sakura, you're apprentice, is in a DIRE medical state. If she thinks that her 'security blanket' has been killed, it will do damage to her. Irreversible damage. You know as well as I do that I'm not making this up. I want Team Kakashi and several jonin whose names I'll write down informed about this."

Tsunade knew Ryouko wasn't going to budge. And this was her last chance, she had to make it count. Finally, she nodded to Ryouko's demands, which were actually little more than courteous requests.

“Alright, they’ll be informed. Now, who did you want to lose to? I know you’ll hate this, but we’ve got to portray you as a turncoat, at least at first. After you die, I’ll find some ‘evidence’ that you’re innocent. But, for now, we’ve got to make you seem like a real threat...”

Ryouko leaned forward, suddenly getting an idea. “Lady Fifth, people KNOW there’s friction between you and I...what if we played off that. To make me the biggest jerk possible, I could...What if I kidnapped you? Kakashi-sensei could find me, and him and I could fight. I’ll let him hit me with the Raikiri. Not that I could stop him anyway...You ‘wake up’, restore order, and have my body ‘destroyed’...”

Tsunade nodded, agreeing to the idea. It was exciting. Of course, Ryouko had to hit her with the question she had been dreading to answer. It was clear to Tsunade- she wasn’t going to tell anyone but Kakashi what was going to happen, no matter what Ryouko asked. It was in the best interests of the village; even if it meant betraying his trust.

“So what happens to me once I’m ‘dead’?” Ryouko asked. Tsunade froze, sucking in her breath.

“Well, you would continue your work in ANBU...”

Ryouko leaned forward. “You’re not telling me something, Lady Fifth. You’re NEVER this skittish, so it’s not something you’re comfortable telling me. There are only a few things that could make me mad. Then one sure-fire thing you could do is withhold information crucial to my mission, which is what you’re doing now. Despite what you’d like to believe, Lady Fifth, I hold the cards in this situation. What I’m asking is reasonable: A few people know what’s going on, and that you tell me the full extent of what you’re asking me...what aren’t you telling me, and why?”

Tsunade looked Ryouko in the eyes. He knew full well that he had just pushed her buttons. Tsunade knew it too, and was thankful. She needed to get the “Hokage Fire” going to tell him this.

“I want you to go to Otogakure and perform reconnaissance and sabotage. I want you to ruin the Sound Village from the inside. That’s why I wanted you to ‘die’...it was the only way to get you to the Sound Village without people REALLY thinking you’re a turncoat.”

Ryouko stroked his chin. He knew he had no choice, but he COULD dictate the terms a little more...

“I want to change the story. Tell people I was leaving for Otogakure because you refused me promotion to chunin. That’s close to the truth, and with our history, it should make people believe, without making you look bad, and without making me look bad- only frustrated. Then, Kakashi-sensei catches me at the gate, and we put on the show.”

Ryouko turned to leave. But he stopped at the door and looked back.

“Please don’t double-cross me, Lady Fifth. I want to trust you, despite our history.”

Tsunade suddenly felt like a grade-A heel.

--

Ryouko sighed heavily. He didn't want to do this. He really didn't. But there was no choice in the matter. So he took out his journal and wrote a little bit, just to stop worrying for now.

...So that's what she asked me to do. I don't want to. I love it here. But that's exactly WHY I have to do it. I have to betray the village to save it. This would be much less difficult if I didn't have to act like a traitor. I HATE traitors. And Sasuke...I have to work with him now, and probably serve that little bastard. If he even HINTS about aiming for Sakura again...Maybe I'll go temporarily insane and cripple him.

I couldn't do that, though. In the end, I would only kill or cripple if I was defending another person directly. If he puts his hands on Sakura again, THEN I'll give this some thought...

I am going to write the following twice...

Tsunade will betray me, and not tell people what happened. It's a fact. I have prepared for that, and will contact who I need to, one way or another.

Sakura...if you read this yourself, please understand, I don't want to hurt you. And this is hard for me to write...it's really hard...but you need to know the truth...any affection you felt for me the past few weeks came as a result of me rescuing you. I really care about you, and that's why you should know the truth. I couldn't keep it from you. If/When we meet again, I hope you'll have forgiven me by that point.

Ryouko pulled a page out of the journal and tossed it on his bed. He could direct Team Kakashi to his apartment before ANBU came, if need be. He had to make sure they got that note first. It was the only way to salvage his honor at this point.

--

Ryouko lay back, defeated, blood dripping from his mouth, and from the various dog bites. Kakashi's hand was glowing with the blue energy that would spell the end for him.

"Raikiri!"

Briefly, Ryouko wondered what would happen if he DID die. But he couldn't let himself go just yet. So, with Kakashi's help, he escaped down into the hole where the dogs had come from, using the Earth Style: Head Hunter Jutsu. Now, it was time to make a new life, serving one of his biggest enemies.

But as Ryouko sat underground, it occurred to him that this would be suicide. Orochimaru and Sasuke would kill him before they would trust him. Maybe it was time to get advice, THEN make his move. Whatever that move turned out to be...

5 - One More Night

Sakura looked at the note in her hand, re-reading it again and again. It just didn't seem real. How could it be? She clenched the note in one fist, trying to make sense of all this.

"How could Lady Tsunade ask this of him, and then betray his trust?" Sakura finally asked aloud. She kept the note to herself, since it was addressed to her, more or less, by content. She didn't mention what exactly was said in the part about her and Ryouko. She knew that she would be thinking about it later, and most likely for a long time after that.

"It doesn't matter...he followed orders...now he can help us even more..." Kakashi sat down on Ekyt's bed, reading his book of questionable content, seemingly calm about all this.

"What do you mean?!" Naruto demanded; he didn't get this at all.

"Sabotage...damage from the inside..." Sai muttered calmly. "He knows just where Orochimaru and Sasuke-kun are, and he can lead us to them, while slowing any progress they're making...it's a favorable position for us."

"But not for him!" Sakura protested. She was wearing Ekyt's coat, and resolved to until she found him and returned it personally. "He's in serious danger, more danger than he can handle! He got lucky against Sasuke, and he wasn't alone!"

Kakashi closed his book and stretched. "He'll be fine, Sakura. He can hold his own against Sasuke, better than you think. And against Orochimaru...THAT one is in Ryouko-kun's favor. Even he wouldn't hold back against someone that evil."

That point was agreed upon. Ryouko wasn't a killer, but someone like Orochimaru might be the exception. One day, Ryouko had run up against Itachi Uchiha. No one would DARE face Itachi, but Ryouko did. And he gave Itachi a match, even forcing Itachi to withdraw after he had no choice but to use Tsukuyomi on Ryouko. Ryouko had been badly injured, but he had been applauded for facing Itachi. But Sasuke AND Orochimaru...without back up...that was pushing it. Ryouko wasn't the most powerful, but his mentality was 'win or die', there was no middle ground. More accurately, it was 'die in defense', meaning that he would defend someone until he was physically unable to.

"Now, we can't talk about this. If any of you are contacted by Ryouko, tell me ONLY once you're sure it's me your talking to. Say something about our team that only we would know. That also counts if you talk to each other. We have to keep this quiet. Also...and I know this will be hard...but in public, act like Ryouko is a traitor, and you can't stand him." Kakashi didn't like giving that order, but he had to, if Ryouko's mission was to succeed. In the back of his mind, Kakashi wasn't really sure that Ryouko COULD handle this by himself, but there wasn't much choice.

On a whim, Kakashi decided to check out the site where he and Ryouko had 'fought'.

--

Kakashi knew there was someone underground. Kakashi also had a hunch on who it would be...

"I had a feeling, Ryouko..." Kakashi said, getting himself underground, too.

"There's just so much I haven't done, Kakashi-sensei. And I KNEW Lady Tsunade would betray my trust, that was never a question. But...well, what about Sakura? What about Katsuyori? What about ANBU? I felt pressured to take this assignment, and I said 'sure' at the time...but before I go...I want to wrap up my loose ends here..." Ryouko looked to the side, giving Kakashi a look at his black eye.

"So tie up the loose ends, then leave. If anyone can respect service to the village, I can. I'll even help you out. Tell me 'where' and 'when', and 'with who', and I'll set them up for you. I know Sakura, and the rest of my team, would love to talk to you before you do this..."

Ryouko didn't say anything, aside from a nearly-silent 'thank you'. But he looked Kakashi in the eye, and asked him a question, one that had been burning in his mind for a long time. There was no definitive answer, Ryouko knew that, but it was still a curiosity to him.

"Kakashi-sensei...do I have any chance at all of becoming a great Shinobi? I know this is suicide...but will it be worth anything? I'd die for the Leaf Village...but if it's a pointless death..."

Kakashi could sympathize. "Yes, you do have a chance. A GOOD chance. And no, it won't be pointless. Yes, it's true, death is likely- but then again, you've proven yourself adept at getting out of tight spots. If you're alive after facing Itachi Uchiha, you're at least at a jonin level..."

Ryouko's eyes narrowed, making his expression almost angry. "Sensei...I think Itachi LET me live...WHY, I don't know. But I think he let me off. I was beaten...he could have just put a kunai in me and been done with it. I didn't have the strength to fight back, or even stand up. And he had his partner, that giant blue thing, Kisame. He hadn't even fought yet...so why didn't they kill me?"

Kakashi shrugged. "Itachi's thinking is beyond a lot of us. He could have killed me, too. But he left us both alive, for one reason or another. But that isn't ALL that's bothering you, is it?"

Ryouko shook his head. "It's...juvenile, really. I shouldn't be concerned with this at all, but I..."

Kakashi tried to think of what could frustrate Ryouko like this. Slowly, it dawned on him.

Only Ryouko...it's got to be Valentine's day. I guess every warrior has his quirks. Mine is "Makeout Paradise", Ryouko's is shyness...

"Sakura, right? You don't want to leave her alone yet...you don't think your work with her is finished, right?"

Ryouko nodded. "Partially. And...well, even if I live, how long will I be gone? The people I care about should know. I knew I couldn't trust the Fifth to pass that on."

Kakashi stared at Ryouko for a little while, thinking about how to make this work. It meant going against

Tsunade, but Ryouko had proven himself to be loyal, so Kakashi couldn't see how this would be detrimental to the village.

"How about this: I'll make sure you can talk with the people you want to talk with. After that, you and I will go to Lady Tsunade and find out more about this mission of yours. Sound fair?"

Ryouko cracked a half-smile. "It does. Thank you, Kakashi-sensei. It really means a lot..."

--

Sakura sat down by the river, puzzled as to why Kakashi-sensei would have her meet him here in the middle of the night. It was about some super-secret mission. But where were her teammates? Was this mission only for her or something? It was too weird. What if Kakashi-sensei really liked her, and wanted to give her something for Valentine's Day.

No, that's just wrong! Besides, it isn't Kakashi-sensei's style!

The river was flowing peacefully, contained by hand-made stone walls. The stones had been eroded, their once-jagged edges now becoming smoother and rounder. A blossom fell off a tree across the river and landed in the water. It was white, with a yellow center, shaped vaguely like a cup. The 'cup' floated while Sakura watched, until it was out of her site.

At one point, Sakura would have dreamed about some scene like this with Sasuke in the starring role as her lover. Sakura was SURE she would never love him again. Or had she been too young to even know real love? Was she STILL too young? It was altogether pretty confusing.

Sakura sighed, wishing, not for the first time that SOMEONE loved her.

-

Ryouko looked side to side before leaping into the next tree. Why did Kakashi pick HERE to meet, of all places.

By the river, at night? What's he gonna do, hit on me or something? This is where you'd take a girl on a date, right? Then why would Kakashi- oh, duh! Sakura! Kakashi set this up? Wow, I never knew you could get so much out of reading perverted books all the time...

Ryouko wondered if he would ever find love; he had always wondered that. But it was so damn hard to know what girls looked for, and how to approach them. This clandestine meeting seemed...awkward, while seeming perfect at the same time. It wasn't a feeling that was easy to describe, or even deal with.

-

Sakura heard the sound of someone landing above her, but didn't move yet. He was late, so it was most likely Kakashi-sensei. But then a dog trotted up to Sakura. She noticed it was Ryouko's dog, Holly, a sweet (at least to Sakura) little Keeshonden. She had something tucked in her collar, and something bigger in her mouth.

“Here you are, Sakura. From my kid. He says he knows it isn’t White Day, but he obviously won’t be around for that. He was insistent that I come here first. He shouldn’t be far, but you know how shy he is...Anyway, these are for you.”

Holly jumped up onto the bench Sakura was sitting on, dropping flowers into her lap, and then, after scratching at her collar, a box of chocolate dropped onto Sakura’s lap as well. Sakura picked up both, amazed at Ryouko’s thoughtfulness.

“Thank you, Holly! Will your kid be around to see me in person?” Sakura had a feeling that Ryouko was actually in the tree just above her.

“Not a doubt in my mind...he told me he feels kind of responsible about everything that’s happened, and that he can’t leave the Leaf Village peacefully until he’s got everything in order.”

Sakura blushed a little, absently playing with a strand of her hair. “He’s that worried about me?” Sakura couldn’t believe that someone would be so concerned for her safety. It seemed out of character for Ryouko.

“Trust me- he IS worried. You read the note, right? Damned if the kid wasn’t in tears, trying to word that part about not hurting you. I haven’t seen him so emotional in a long time...” Holly scratched the ground nervously, as if SHE had written the note. “I’ve got to go now, Sakura. Take care. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again.”

Holly trotted off, claws making a ‘skitter’ sound on the stone street as she walked.

Tok.

Ryouko fell from the tree, landing on his feet, his mask in place. Clothed in the dark colors of ANBU, he blended in with the night.

“Hi...” he said quietly, almost embarrassed.

“Ryouko...” Sakura, despite Holly’s warnings, was surprised to see Ryouko.

“You must hate my guts, so I’ll make this quick...I had to set things straight. I know my note was probably in bad taste, but I didn’t know I’d get the chance to talk with you. I hope that you won’t hate me for what I said...what I HAD to say...I hoped it would save you pain later on. It wasn’t easy for me to say, and I’m sure it wasn’t easy for you to read. But, I had to say it.”

Ryouko had to look away and take a deep breath to fortify himself. Sure, these SEEMED like ordinary, easy-to-say words. But it was never that simple with Ryouko.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Sakura was silent. She really didn’t know what to say. Ryouko stuffed his hands in his pockets and started to walk away. Not angrily or sad, but like there was something bothering him.

“Ryouko!” Sakura took off after him, catching his arm. “Wait a second!”

Sakura held out his trench coat. “Here...I hope it’s helpful to you...it was really helpful to me...”

Ryouko looked at the coat, but didn’t take it. Instead, he pushed it back towards Sakura.

“Why don’t you keep it? At least until I get back...I’d like part of me to stay in the village, as corny as that sounds.”

“But it’s cold out, are you sure?” Sakura asked, noting that she sounded almost like a wife, or a mother. Or a concerned girlfriend.

Ryouko managed a hollow smile, tugging his mask off his face and letting it hang down around his neck.

“I’m sure...I should go, before the Fifth finds out I’ve been here...(Ryouko shakes his head)I don’t want to cause you anymore trouble. Just...take care of yourself, okay?”

Sakura pulled Ryouko into a hug, surprising him. She rested her head on his shoulder, while he stared straight ahead in shock. He didn’t get hugged often, and never quite like this. There was an...appreciation in the confines of the hug that Ryouko sensed, but didn’t understand.

There’s a lot beyond understanding...accepting is more important...right?

“Let me at least warm you up before you go...”

Ryouko took that as a sign to go ahead and give Sakura a gentle hug in return. Ryouko felt guilty for enjoying this, even though he knew that feeling guilty made no sense whatsoever. Then again, it didn’t seem like much DID make sense. Things just seemed to happen randomly.

Sakura let go, blushing herself, thinking about those dreams she had. She would sort out her thoughts later, though. Right now, she still had the real Ryouko in front of her, for the last time for who knew HOW long. She was tempted to lean forward and kiss him...

No...if he has to leave, I’d only be making it harder...for both of us.

“Please, be careful, okay?” Sakura asked Ryouko, putting a hand on his cheek against the cold night air. Ryouko managed another small smile, causing both himself and Sakura to blush even more.

“I will...I promise.” Ryouko felt Sakura move her hand off his cheek. He looked at her one last time, then ran silently down the street, wishing even more that he didn’t have to leave.

--

After talking to everyone he needed to, Ryouko met with Kakashi. It was daybreak now, and time to talk to the Fifth Hokage. But Ryouko wasn’t going to go.

"I figured out this, Kakashi-sensei: I can't disobey any orders I don't know about. Maybe it's better I *don't* know all the details of my mission. It might be safer that way. Besides, you can't even torture someone into telling something they don't know."

Kakashi hadn't thought of it that way. The thought that HAD crossed his mind was "he wasn't raised as a Shinobi, no matter how hard he's studied, it's going to be hard for him." Now, Kakashi's thinking had been altered to "He'll be okay. He's thinking just like we need a spy/assassin to." Ryouko had indeed matured as a Shinobi. How anyone could suggest he was a traitor...if Ryouko hadn't made the big show about it, no one would have even thought about it. It was too unlikely. But when the realization DID hit them, the wound ran deeper, and with that wound, loyalty to the Hidden Leaf grew deeper as well, that much was already very apparent.

Out loud, Kakashi replied with "That's smart thinking. So you're going to do this?"

Ryouko shrugged. "It's not like me to refuse a mission. Besides, maybe I'll get that promotion, provided I don't die." It was common knowledge that Ryouko had been died a well-deserved promotion for at least two years now, so it was a long-running joke that even Ryouko indulged in once in a while.

Neither one of them needed to say it wasn't likely Ryouko would be coming back.

--

So Diary, tonight was...well...how to describe it? It was...romantic, in a strange way. I mean, Ryouko got the guts up to talk to me like something other than a teammate. It was strange, seeing him so...different. He was really nervous, I could tell, but he didn't freak out, he just tried to make sure I was okay. He seemed very concerned about me. But still, he managed to make the night so meaningful! He even gave me gifts, well in advance of White Day. It was so cute, a secret rendezvous near the river! I could have kissed him! But I didn't.

Would he have stayed if I HAD kissed him? I answered myself: No. It would have been MORE PAINFUL for him to leave if I had kissed him, but he still would have. Ryouko's like that, always duty-bound and loyal, chasing a promotion that never seems to get any closer. I hope he'll be alright...

No matter what, I won't forget who made this Valentine's Day special. Ryouko left his coat, saying he wanted a piece of himself to stay in the village...I saw through that. He would NEVER say something so corny. He didn't want me to have to give up my 'security blanket'.

I'm more thankful for that he could imagine...

-Sakura

--

I made my move tonight. Out of the village, I mean. As for Sakura...she must know how I feel. I had the feeling she was going to kiss me, but she held off. Probably to save my feelings. Sakura WOULD do that. But would she have kissed me, if I wasn't leaving? Hard to say. I'm nobody special, but she makes me feel like I am. I hate to leave, especially her. Her mind isn't healed yet.

I know the Hokage is a big name in healing, but some wounds can't be healed conventionally. The wound Sasuke inflicted is the kind that's only going to go away with understanding, time, and patience. Patience is NOT Tsunade's strong point. And more than that, I think that Sakura needs someone who was there with her to tell her 'it's okay'. If Sakura gets sick, I will never forgive myself for agreeing to this mission, and I will never forgive Tsunade for asking it of me.

Tonight I say goodbye to the Hidden Leaf for a period of time unknown to me. I'm trying to make the most of this, but it isn't working. This just sucks, no matter how I slice it. Dying as a 'traitor' to your village...I hate myself for that. I hope I live to clear my name...

6 - Three Minute Challenge

“So you’ve turned traitor to the Hidden Leaf? I find that hard to believe,” Kabuto’s sardonic voice informed Ryouko.

Kabuto pushed up his glasses. He knew Ryouko well enough to know that the boy didn’t take his loyalty to the Hidden Leaf lightly. Kabuto respected him as an opponent, and Ryouko respected Kabuto in the same way. But Kabuto had to be cautious where Orochimaru was concerned.

“So do I, Kabuto,” Ryouko replied, genuine sadness in his voice. “But there just wasn’t a place for me anymore. And it’s not like any other Village would take me. Strange as it sounds, I trust you.”

That was partially a lie. Ryouko DIDN’T feel like there was a place for him in the Hidden Leaf. But he didn’t want to leave them. He would do what he had always done, and that was create a place for himself. But things weren’t going to work that way. Instead, Ryouko had to play the traitor, and side with one of his worst enemies. Yes, that meant he could sabotage the Sound Village, but at the same time, he would be forced to act against the Leaf at one point or another.

Kabuto stared at Ryouko, trying to decipher his thinking. But that wasn’t any easier now than it was the times they had met in combat.

He knows how to disguise his thoughts, feelings, and emotions very well. But at the same time, I know Ryouko is a genuine person...what does my ninja information card say about him?

Ignoring Ryouko for the time being, Kabuto pulled out a card that, when activated with his chakra, could tell him about any ninja he’d faced and taken notes on. Kabuto’s collection had swelled to nearly five hundred Shinobi from various villages.

“Let’s see...Ryouko...Adopted name of ‘Sarutobi’, potential in Genjutsu, Ninjutsu, and Taijutsu...ANBU Interrogation...genin...good stamina and speed. And, from our battles, I know about your instincts...” Kabuto looked back at Ryouko, his glasses reflecting off the sun.

“Full of potential, and a favorite of the Third Hokage. Well, you’re quite the interesting one, Ryouko. I don’t doubt that Lord Orochimaru would love to have you in his ranks...but it may not be in his best interests to trust you...”

Ryouko shrugged. “Whatever you want to believe, Kabuto. The ball is in your court, now. I’m on the market as a free-agent. I’m not going to take a side until that side takes me. No point in aligning myself with anyone but the best. And that’s either the Hidden Leaf, or the Sound.”

Ryouko spun sharply toward one shadowy part of the shady meeting place he had chosen upon hearing a stifled snicker. In this old quarry, there was lots of rocky overhangs. Ryouko decided that, if Orochimaru himself attacked, that Ryouko could bring this quarry down on every involved, and at least ruin Orochimaru somewhat.

Orochimaru slithered from the shadows. “Now, Kabuto, you could be a LITTLE more hospitable to such a guest! After all, he’s been quite the pain over the years. And he’s only grown since! But...”

Orochimaru melted up from the ground, forming next to Kabuto.

“...with a teacher such as the Third Hokage, how could he be a failure? Sarutobi-sensei has only trained a few students, but they’ve all become great.” Orochimaru and Kabuto were both half-glaring at Ryouko.

“So tell me, why are you hear? Such a zealous little Leaf, coming to me?”

Ryouko didn’t break his gaze. “I’m here because the Leaf doesn’t have a place for me. This is my way of life, asking me to do without acting as a warrior is like asking a bird not to fly. That’s why I’ve come. Does the Sound have room for me?”

Orochimaru’s grin spread. “For you? I think so- but there IS a little problem. Someone so loyal to the Leaf would have to prove to me that they have no affiliation with their village anymore. So prove it...by killing Tsunade!”

“Impossible.”

Ryouko’s flat, short answer earned Orochimaru’s attention.

“Why not? Do you have a soft spot for that old elixir hag?” Orochimaru touted. Kabuto was on his guard, not sure about this.

“I mean, it’s not possible. After I left, security was tightened, even though I faked my own death. I couldn’t leave a corpse, obviously, so that means that I’m still a wanted criminal in their eyes. If I left on bad terms with Tsunade, who would I aim for? Of all the people I know...only Itachi Uchiha would stand a chance against the forces the Leaf have mounted. Besides...wouldn’t the village guessing that I MIGHT be dead work to your advantage?”

This seemed to amuse Orochimaru. But he didn’t say anything about that, instead looking at Ryouko, as if trying to decide what to do with him.

“I think we’ll have a little fun, first. To test your potential. Sasuke-kun and I didn’t perform this little ritual, it wasn’t necessary. But for you...” Orochimaru nodded to Kabuto, who stepped away.

“...I want to see what you can do! We will fight for three minutes. If you do well, you’ll have a place in my village. If not...then I kill you. So, on your guard!”

Ryouko ducked and kicked backward. He hit Orochimaru, who was surprised at that move. Ryouko didn’t let him marvel for long, he went on the offensive. Orochimaru parried his punch and returned fire with a heel kick. Ryouko stepped under Orochimaru’s foot, suspending it high in the air. Orochimaru wound himself around Ryouko’s arm, as he was one of the rare Shinobi that had his bone structure altered to allow him to move like a snake, when necessary. Ryouko decided to play one of his ace’s

now. He had to prove himself competent without showing everything he could do. If he was incompetent, he was dead. If he showed everything he could do, when he had to fight Orochimaru for real, Orochimaru would know all his moves.

“Dragon’s Fire Extension!”

Fire ran down Ryouko’s arms and legs, to the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands. Orochimaru got singed and backed off. Ryouko stepped forward and tired a side kick, fire jetting out of the bottom of his foot, forcing Orochimaru back. As strange as it sounded, Ryouko wanted Orochimaru close. Up close, Ryouko didn’t have to use a ton of chakra. Orochimaru had far more chakra than Ryouko, and knew more jutsus. But in close, taijutsu would be the biggest concern. With that in mind, Ryouko darted forward, dodging Orochimaru’s incoming tongue, then blocking Orochimaru’s kick with his shin, using his leg to pull Orochimaru off balance. Ryouko pulled Orochimaru in and tried to punch him, but Orochimaru dodged aside. Ryouko’s fist glanced off the side of the quarry, sending a huge rock tumbling down over the mountain. Orochimaru hadn’t seen it, so Ryouko made handsigns.

“Dragon’s Flame Wall!”

Ryouko positioned the flame wall above Orochimaru, to slow the rock’s descent, while giving Orochimaru a kick to the side to move him outside of the rock’s path. Ryouko let it crash to the ground, the earth shaking as the giant boulder hit the dry ground. Ryouko leapt on top of the boulder, leaping up high, then sailing down with a Dynamic Entry. Orochimaru caught Ryouko’s foot and threw him. Ryouko righted himself in the air and landed on his feet. Orochimaru came to him this time. Ryouko ducked low and aimed a kick upward. Orochimaru blocked the kick, though the force moved him backward, giving him momentum enough to jump the sweep kick Ryouko threw. Orochimaru dodged backward again.

“Striking Shadow Snakes!”

Snakes burst out of Orochimaru’s sleeves, aiming for Ryouko. Ryouko leapt over the first half of the snakes, who hit the ground with enough force to crack it. The second half of the snakes followed Ryouko in the air. Ryouko used a Chakra Scalpel Jutsu to cut at the snakes as they came at him. None of them managed to grab him, but Orochimaru did land a hard punch to Ryouko’s stomach, propelling him into the air even higher. Orochimaru extended his head up after Ryouko. Ryouko knew what Orochimaru was plotting. He couldn’t let that happen! If he got bitten...

Ryouko grabbed Orochimaru’s hair and tugged as he fell. Close to twelve times Ryouko’s knee came up and hit Orochimaru in the face. Ryouko landed, and Orochimaru’s head snapped back to it’s normal position.

“Time’s up!” Kabuto informed them. Orochimaru opened his mouth and- spit out a new body?

“You did very well. But you didn’t want my curse mark, I see. Not everyone can handle it. You may be better without it, because you would only reject it. Very well...you’ve earned a place in the Sound Village.”

--

“Now it’s back to work for you three. Ryouko is working on Orochimaru from one end, you’re going to work from the other end. We have a lead on Orochimaru’s whereabouts...” Tsunade unraveled a scroll, reading through it herself, then pointing at something.

“...But this source is questionable. It’s your job to investigate it. Let me see...Naruto, Sai, Sakura, Yamato, you four go and investigate the lead. Kakashi will be backup for you if it turns out the lead is a trap, or if you can pursue Orochimaru further.”

Sakura was surprised she hadn’t been reprimanded, at least. She had given Tsunade a piece of her mind about how Ryouko was treated. Before she was stopped, she had let Tsunade know that she felt this was a horrible thing, and a million other things that should all have earned Tsunade’s ire. But Tsunade had let it slide without question. Maybe she was happy to know who Ryouko had told. It was more likely that she PLANNED for Ryouko to tell people. Whatever the case, she knew what was going on.

“Understood, Lady Fifth. We’ll set out now,” Yamato addressed Tsunade.

“Very good...oh, one additional mission parameter- if you find Ryouko, DO NOT engage him in combat until HE fights with YOU. Do not throw the first punch- do you hear that, Naruto?”

“WHAT IS IT ALWAYS ME, GRANDMA?!” Naruto shouted, earning himself a sharp whack on the head from Sakura to shut him up.

“Because it’s always you doing it, you idiot!” Sakura hissed in Naruto’s ear, holding him back. She knew Tsunade’s wrath all too well, and Naruto was practically begging for it. Not a healthy thing to do.

“You’re on your way, then. Dismissed.”

-

Naruto, Sai, Sakura, and Yamato were ready to go very quickly. They were itching for this mission. Their only hold-up was Kakashi, who wanted a few quick words with them before they went. Everyone settled down- Kakashi wouldn’t be here for three hours, knowing him. In “Kakashi time”, fifteen minutes equaled three hours. This had been demonstrated time and time again over the years.

“Oh, yeah...” Sakura muttered to herself, kneeling down and digging in her backpack, fishing around until she found what she was looking for. “Ah! There it is!”

Sai, Naruto, and Yamato watched while Sakura pulled on a long, black trench coat.

“What do you think?” Sakura asked playfully, sticking her tongue out jokingly while striking a pose with her arm behind her head.

“Whoa, you look hot, Sakura-chan!” Naruto exclaimed. “**Hehehe, if only that was ALL she was wearing...**”

BAM!

“Naruto-kun, you should stop thinking out loud. Sakura-chan will only hit you if you say things like that,” Sai pointed out, settling down to draw. It wasn’t every day he got to sit down and draw the beautiful foliage outside the Hidden Leaf Village, so he couldn’t pass up the opportunity when it came.

“Gah, I didn’t mean for that to come out loud!” Naruto massaged his aching head, his fingers running across a welt the size of a cantaloupe.

Yamato smiled tolerantly. Upon seeing Sakura don Ryouko’s coat, he had to stop and think.

First Sasuke kidnaps her, and tries to have his way with her...Ryouko shows up, saves her, but is hurt in the process...Then Ryouko is forced to leave her...it must be difficult. Sakura’s training has encompassed CARING for people...but there isn’t much in her training, or in her constitution, to give up on someone. That’s admirable, but it may mean painful times for her...For all of them. Naruto will never give up on someone, and Sai wants to form bonds, so he’ll follow Sakura and Naruto’s ideals.

“Remember to stay within wireless range, everyone. If we have to split up, Sai will go with me, Sakura will go with Naruto. Also, remember that OROCHIMARU is the target, no one else.”

POOF!

Kakashi appeared, vaguely waving over the top of his book. Without looking up, he handed out three small scrolls.

“Hey, these are empty?! WE WAITED ALL THAT TIME FOR THREE EMPTY SCROLLS?!” Naruto wailed.

“Not exactly. They’re only empty until you put something in them. For example, I use mine to carry extra tools, provisions, and even other scrolls.” Kakashi, seeing the bewildered looks he was receiving, sighed and bit his thumb. He ran the bleeding digit down a length of the scroll. Then he reaching inside the scroll and extracted a second copy of ‘Makeout Violence’.

“Oh! It’s a summoning scroll!” Sakura understood now. She had read about these, and had always wanted one.

“Huh?!” Naruto clearly didn’t get it. This was a new concept to him. Unlike Sakura, he wasn’t so much into reading.

“A summoning scroll allows you to carry a certain number of objects inside it, without the objects weighing down the scroll. But to open it, you have to pay a blood tribute. How thick and long the blood tribute is determines how long or wide the opening to the ‘inside’ of the scroll is,” Yamato explained.

“These are for your mission. It’s very possible you’ll run across some item that Orochimaru has discarded. That could be valuable to us. When you find something, put it in that scroll for safe keeping. Alright? (Everyone nods) Okay...good luck.”

POOF! Kakashi disappeared again.

“Now we can go. Otogakure is a two-day trip at top speed. The first night, I’ll pay for a hot spring resort, to, once again, foster team work, since we haven’t worked together in a while.”

“YES! Captain Yamato is the best!!!” Naruto declared.

--

“What a drag, Choji. The chunin exams are coming up, and I’ve gotta show this lady around. Ugh, it’s such a pain!” Shikamaru drawled.

Shikamaru, Choji, and Temari were walking lazily through the Leaf Village, enjoying the day. Soon, the village would get busier with missions and training, since the chunin exams were coming up, to be held in Sunagakure this year.

“WHAT was that, Shikamaru? Did you say something? Or do I need to beat you up again? Hah, those chunin exams were fun!” Temari said with a laugh, nudging the stiff Shikamaru, who shrugged off the verbal jab.

“Yeah, whatever. You won because I gave up, don’t forget that,” Shikamaru reminded Temari, hating the thought of losing to a girl, no matter how strong she was. **Man, seeing Dad strung up by Mom’s apron strings...You’d think a guy would have more control over his destiny that that.**

“Sure, sure, it’s not like I couldn’t have won!” Temari said with a dismissive snort.

“Man, are you two married or something? You fight like a couple!” Choji said around a mouthful of chips.

“Me and THIS slob?! Hah, don’t make me laugh! Like he’d EVER have a shot at me!” Temari looked over at Shikamaru, to see his reaction.

“Like I’d ever bother with this one, Choji. Girls are troublesome in general, but this one is special- extra troublesome. Oh well, I guess I can’t complain. This is my job now, dealing with her.”

Choji continued to eat his chips, but in the back of his mind he thought: **Man, Shikamaru, it’s so obvious you like her! She reminds me of your mother, come to think of it! Man, you’re gonna wind up whipped, the same as her!** Choji started to chuckle, showering Temari with bits of potato chip, to her disgust.

“Ugh, hurry up and take me to the Hokage, Shikamaru, this is disgusting!”

Shikamaru, of course, high-fived Choji, while Temari glared at both of them. **Maybe I should sic Gaara on them...**

--

The hot spring resort was great, no question. An enormous feast ready to be eaten, rooms with plush beds, and, of course, hot springs. It's said that a hot spring can cure many ailments. With that in mind, everyone took their robes and towels for a quick bath before dinner.

The hot springs were largely empty, since this was during the day. This also wasn't a big tourist time of year. That was just fine with Team Kakashi. After the last of the lunchtime bathers filed out, they had the run of the hot springs. Naruto and Sai were splashing on the other side. Or, rather, Sai had made a comment about Naruto's dick, and Naruto splashed him angrily, while Yamato tried to relax. Sakura giggled at that for a moment. It WAS funny, after all, while the team was alone. In public, it was embarrassing.

While I've got a minute...

Sakura pulled out her diary and tried to sum up her thoughts.

Diary,

In a word, I'm confused. I haven't given up on Sasuke yet...but at the same time, I never want to see him again. I just don't have it in me to let go of someone I was so close to for so long. I guess that's normal, even though it makes things harder. Should I hate him for what he tried to do? Yes, I should. But at the same time, I know that isn't the same Sasuke I used to know. He's changed, but I can see the old Sasuke underneath the 'new' Sasuke. When we catch up to him, we'll get him back, this time for sure! I'll never let that sick Orochimaru get him! No matter what Sasuke thinks of me, I'm going to force him to admit I've gotten stronger! I'm going to prove I don't need his protection, and I'm going to show him just how much of a fighter I am!

Ryouko's coat is pretty comfortable. I still need it to get through the night some times, when I dream about Sasuke. It's not an easy thing to face, and I feel bad that I need a 'security blanket', but I know I can't handle this alone. I WILL get stronger, and I WILL beat this. I'm not the scared little fangirl I used to be. I'm a full-fledged kunoichi now, and I'm going to do more than ACT the part!

Valentine's day is still in my head. I only later learned what Ryouko risked by meeting me. With the whole village believing he was a traitor, he would have been killed on site by them. By risking that, Ryouko proved to me that he is a special person. Not too many would risk that to say something to a girl they had no relationship with. That made it all the more meaningful to me.

Hope he's alright...

With that last, worried thought, Sakura went back to enjoying the hot springs.

7 - Investigation

NOTE: Keep in mind that time periods and people may differ from the canon storyline

--

The food had been excellent; the hot springs great, and the beds comfortable. Team Kakashi hated to leave, but at the same time, there was an unspoken determination among them to make their mission a success. Well, mostly unspoken.

“HURRY IT UP!” Naruto shouted, scrambling around the room, tossing clothes, weapons, and a couple scrolls into his backpack. Sai, Sakura, and Yamato were already packed, and waiting on Naruto.

“Hey, Captain Yamato, what does this guy look like, anyway? This informant, I mean. What’s his history?” Sakura asked, suddenly realizing that nothing had been said about this mysterious helper.

Yamato looked in the file he kept in his pack. “Let’s see...he’s from the Hidden Grass Village...he’s a chunin...nothing really notable about him, except his sister was a host for Orochimaru. That, we can assume, is his motive for assisting us.”

“That would also mean he may be assisting Orochimaru,” Sai pointed out. “There’s no sure way to say that he isn’t loyal to Orochimaru, he and his sister may have the same loyalties.”

“So what do we do?” the finally-packed Naruto wanted to know.

“We should operate under the assumption that this is a trap. Any information he gives us should be checked thoroughly before we follow the any leads. And even if the information turns out to be true, we need to be careful. The truth can contain traps as well.” Yamato wasn’t quite ready to trust this lead yet, but there was no better lead to go on for now.

--

Shikamaru walked down the hall to Tsunade’s office, Temari and Choji still in tow. Shikamaru knocked on the door, and opened it at Tsunade’s invitation.

“Here, Lady Tsunade, the ambassador from Sunagakure, regarding the chunin exams.” **I hate formal introductions. What a drag...**

“Good to see you again, Temari. Is all well with the Sand, I hope?” Tsunade offered her hand to Temari, who shook it carefully, not fully trusting Tsunade, who could have ground her hand into powder.

“Things are not all good, Lady Hokage...” Temari suddenly looked preoccupied, thinking heavily about something. Or, rather, letting herself show she was thinking heavily. This problem had never left her head.

Tsunade cocked her head. "What's the problem?"

Temari looked around the room, as if she wasn't quite sure how to answer.

"Well, it's...it's Gaara. Since the Akatsuki extracted his demon, he's been loved by our village...but his decision making has suffered. He's lost his edge, and now we've gotten a threat from the 'Akatsuki'. I'm sure it's fake, but Gaara..." Temari looked at the floor sadly.

"Gaara just isn't himself."

Tsunade clasped her hands together. "Well, the Leaf and the Sand are allies. I want to offer the Leaf's assistance. I'll send a team to investigate, while you get Gaara back in order."

Temari bowed. "Thank you very much, Lady Hokage."

Tsunade waved the thanks aside. "Let me see...might be best to send...yes, yes, they'll do. Kiba, Shino, and Hinata are three of my best tracking ninja. They'll find the imposter Akatsuki."

--

"So where are we meeting this guy, anyway?" Naruto had his arms stretched out behind his head while walking.

"The outskirts of the Sound Village, by the farmhouse near the dirt path," Yamato recited from memory.

Sakura looked sideways to face Yamato. "Isn't that risky for us? Meeting so close to Otogakure? Especially if we're not sure we can trust this guy."

"Risk is part of the game. Although, this IS more risk than I want. It's too perfect a setup for a trap. Or, it would be, except for our ace in the hole," Yamato added, keying up his field mic, and tapping the communication button twice.

"Huh? Ace in the hole? Oh, Ryouko!" Naruto figured it out.

"That's right! Will we get to see him?" Sakura asked, surprised at this development.

"No...not this time. He has to remain low-key until he's got Orochimaru's trust. Contacting him this early is risky, but we don't have much other choice...Now, remember, this does NOT get put in your report to Lady Tsunade. She can't find out we've contacted Ryouko..."

"But how are we going to contact him?" Naruto queried.

"Yes, it would be difficult, he'll surely have been checked for a headset," Sai said, not seeing how this could work.

"You don't give Ryouko much credit..." Yamato stated. He was looking off into the distance, watching for something. "Ah! Message received!"

Holly, Ryouko's dog, came running up. She stopped, sat down, and saluted with her paw.

"Holly, at your service! And..." Holly dropped the act, and trotted over to Sakura, sitting at her feet expectantly. Sakura smiled and knelt down next to Holly, stroking her fur and talking to her.

"Hi, Holly! How are you doing?!"

Holly sighed appreciatively, tapping her leg in rhythm with Sakura's petting. "I'm great! Man, I gotta say, you've got a nice soft touch! I wish my kid would marry you so you could pet me! I gotta say, Ol' Ryouko's heart is in the right place, but he can't pet worth a damn! Not like YOU, Sakura!"

Sakura, eye twitching, turned around to gaze at Naruto, Sai, and Yamato, all of whom were snickering.

"So, you must've seen Ryouko a lot, huh Sakura-chan? How come I never saw you visit..." Naruto slid closer to Sakura, whispering "Only at night, huh? Secret visits? Maybe at a hotel, huh, Sakura-chan? Getting' a little lovin' Samurai-style?!"

Sakura gritted her teeth, trying not to hit Naruto. She had been hitting him a lot lately. But Yamato snickering, and Sai smiling like he knew something was irritating her.

"Oh, I know! They studied together every night, I bet! Anatomy, Sex ed..." KABLAM!

Sakura's fist collided with Naruto's head. Holly put her ears down and whimpered, while Sai and Yamato stood still, afraid to move.

"That'll teach you! How DARE YOU accuse me of that?!"

Holly felt a sweat drop grow on her head. **Wow...I like this girl! I totally have to get her to hook up with my kid! He needs sense beaten into him...nah, he'd treat her right, and I'd have someone to pet me! Everyone wins! Well...maybe not Sakura, but two outta three ain't bad ^^**

Yamato stroked Holly, who relaxed at the touch.

"You're not bad, Yamato! Now, I guess you summoned me for a reason other than stroking my gorgeous fur..."

Yamato smiled and patted Holly on the head. "That's right. Holly, we need Ryouko to create some sort of diversion while we question somebody. It doesn't need to be long, we just need five minutes to extract this man and leave."

Holly nodded her head. "He anticipated this, I guess. He wanted me to pass this scroll on, it contains the handsigns for a 'ranged' version of the "False Surroundings" genjutsu. According to him, Sakura is a genjutsu type who should be able to perform it. Just follow the handsigns, it uses minimal chakra. The range is roughly 25 meters, enough to camouflage your immediate area."

"I see...so, Ryouko-kun anticipated our need for his help, and thought of a way to do it without putting his

mission at a major risk..." Sai turned the idea over in his head. It was sound, in theory, but put into play, who could tell? It was certainly their best option.

Sakura knelt down again, petting Holly's ears, thinking back to Valentine's Day. It hadn't been that long ago, less than a week, and she wasn't sure how to feel, she had so many mixed emotions...but that didn't mean she wasn't worried about Ryouko. And, if nothing else, he was the closest to Sasuke at this point.

"Holly...is Ryouko okay? I mean..." Sakura's voice trailed off. Holly snorted.

"If it's Sasuke you're worried about, those two might hate each other, but they've got common ground now. Just looking at Sasuke...he's waiting for Orochimaru to crumble. He's looking for a soft spot to stab him...just my opinion, don't take it as fact."

That sent a shock through team Kakashi.

"Huh? How do you figure that?" Naruto asked, petting Holly TOO hard. Clearly irritated, she bit down on his hand to stop him.

"My kid said it, actually...Sasuke never adds any honorific to Orochimaru's name. Not "Lord", not even "San". Orochimaru doesn't seem to care, but my kid said that it's significant."

Yamato bowed his head while speaking. "It's VERY significant. It means Sasuke is playing for another side. Not the Leaf's, and not Orochimaru's. But who knows what that third side is? We can be sure it's not the Akatsuki...and we can be sure that this side offers Sasuke power..."

Naruto was shaking with anger/sadness by now. Sasuke was always a sensitive subject. Every time he was discussed, Naruto's memories of his first friend, rival, and 'brother' came flooding back, almost driving him to tears, sometimes succeeding in doing so.

"Don't you get it?" Naruto began, quietly at first, though his voice gained volume as he talked. "The other side is HIMSELF! Sasuke only cares about himself! If he topples Orochimaru, that means he's one step closer to beating his brother! That's all that matters to him...that's all that EVER mattered to him!"

Naruto looked away, trying to hide the tears that were now flowing freely down his cheeks. Shinobi NEVER showed their emotions, as Sakura would say, it's the twenty-fifth rule of Shinobi conduct. Naruto, however, as he had always been, was different. Emotions made him stronger, not weaker.

--

Kiba, Shino, and Hinata hadn't been to the Sand Village before, so it was new to them. The food, the people.

"Weird how these people act like us, but we see them as foreigners. Right Akamaru?" Kiba said upon completing a tour of Sunagakure with Kankuro at the helm. Kiba hadn't been much help; he was fretting over the fact that it might be too hot for Akamaru in the Sand Village.

Shino had his mind on the case (although a rare insect from Sunagakure that excreted a fire repellent had his attention for quite some time. He had eventually cajoled it into 'joining' him.

Hinata was quiet, and, honestly, a little scared of Temari. She had only seen a little of the chunin exams, but the buzz about this strong kunoichi from the Hidden Sand was enough to make her weak in the knees. But Hinata didn't run and hide, she faced that fear. Now she just wanted to learn to lose that fear altogether.

Kankuro looked at the Leaf Shinobi, almost studying them. "We can trust you guys, I'm sure. The message we got from the 'Akatsuki' came from the direction of the Rain Village. We've been having problems with the Rain lately, so that might be what's going on. But, since the Akatsuki have also given us trouble, we figured it's better to just double-check. I'll be going with you and letting you guys handle the tracking. But I've got a score to settle with the Akatsuki, if we meet the real deal...Crow needs a workout...'

'Crow' was one of Kankuro's puppets, the one he tended to favor above the others. There was also the 'Salamander' and the 'Ant'. They were modified versions of Kankuro's old puppets. The originals had been destroyed by their creator, Sasori of the Red Sand, in a skirmish with Kankuro. It had taken months to put them back together, but Kankuro wanted to see justice served against the Akatsuki. More than that, Kankuro wanted to be the one to serve it. Sasori was dead, but there were plenty of other of those cloak-wearing freaks that could use a good @\$-kicking, in his mind.

"It might be best to intercept one of their letters...then Kiba and Akamaru can trace them, even if they run," Shino pointed out. "They won't lose the scent."

"Got that right!" Kiba said proudly. He was never shy to accept praise when it was offered to him.

"You think they'll write again?" Kankuro questioned. Shino nodded.

"The contents of their last letter indicate that they'll send future letters. That, and if they were only going to send one letter, it would be pointless, the Sand wouldn't take them seriously. They'll be sending another."

"How did the first message arrive?" Kiba questioned.

"Uh, by a summon, a bird. Tropical thing, a parrot, maybe?" Kankuro didn't know exactly what the animal was, but it was close to a parrot.

"Okay Hinata, go for it," Kiba nudged her to shake her out of her stupor.

"Right! (Handsigns) Byakugan!" Hinata's kekkai genkai kicked in, in a big way. One hundred fifty meters in every direction, everything became shades of black and white. Hinata turned her focus to the sky. After about three minutes, she spoke up.

"One hundred meters North-west!" she exclaimed, secretly proud of herself for finding the bird at all.
I've gotten stronger!

“Awesome, Hinata! C’mon, let’s go! Show us where you receive messages, Kankuro, and then this mission REALLY starts!” Kiba jumped on Akamaru’s back and was riding in style to the Kazekage’s office.

--

Naruto’s crying forced Sakura’s mothering instincts to kick in. She knelt down next to Naruto and put a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll find him and save him from himself, Naruto. Don’t worry. We’re all stronger now, and we know what Sasuke can do. We won’t get caught by surprise again. Now, come on, crying won’t bring Sasuke home.”

I know it for sure...I spent too long crying...time I could have spent training, or enjoying myself...I wonder about you, Naruto? Have you cried a lot?

-

“Okay, once more Sakura. This time, we move. Maintain a chakra flow to keep the genjutsu up. If the genjutsu is released, my Wood Prison will deal with the attackers.”

“Right!” Sakura started to make the handsigns. The plan was in place, they just needed to execute it.

“Hey, wait, how is this guy gonna find us if we camouflage our surroundings? It’s not like we can end the jutsu so he can see us...I mean, if it was me, I’d think we were an enemy, and attack! We should wait until we’ve seen the guy, THEN use the genjutsu, and camouflage him with us!”

This surprising bit of wisdom came from Naruto. It was surprising to know that, now and again, he showed a real ability to have a handle on any given situation. In this case, he was absolutely right.

“Good thinking, Naruto! But it comes too late...he’s already here...” Yamato pointed, a kunai in hand, to a figure hiding in the shadow of the mountain range above them. There was a canyon behind them, with a twenty-foot drop. It would hurt, but you would live if you fell.

The figure stepped away from the rocks. “Forgive me for not speaking up...I had to make sure you weren’t Sound agents in disguise...”

The stranger’s speech was muffled, as if he was talking through a mask. He sounded young and nervous, which might explain why he was wearing the mask. To hide both his face and his quivering speech.

“I had to make sure as well, I hope you’ll forgive me...” Yamato nodded to what was either a clone or his real self, holding a kunai to the back of the stranger. This caused the stranger to gulp and panic.

“I’m with you, honestly! Here, this is all I’ve got, everything I managed to take!” the stranger tossed an envelope and Naruto’s feet. Naruto bent down and started to pick it up. He didn’t notice Sai drawing,

and only noticed that he was using his Great Beast Animation Jutsu when two ink-lions pushed him out of the way and dove on the envelope.

BOOOM!

The envelope exploded, and the lions disappeared. Ink splashed all over, as the lions had covered the envelope.

“Now, Sakura!” the two Yamato’s said.

“Right! Ninja Art: False Surroundings Technique!” Sakura cried out, her hands in the ‘tiger’ sign.

The stranger couldn’t release the genjutsu. He was outnumbered now, and his plot had failed. He tried to pull a kunai out, but the Yamato that was behind him cut his hands, making that impossible.

“There’s more than one way of getting information. It doesn’t have to be a friendly exchange,” Yamato explained to their new prisoner. Naruto shivered at the look in Yamato’s eyes.

Man, his eyes are really freaky when he gets like this!

--

After reading the note, Kiba, Shino, and Hinata came to a conclusion:

“This isn’t the Akatsuki...but it’s someone very good. They’ve tried to mask their scent with perfume...strong stuff, too! (sniff sniff) It’s just a generic perfume, too, not any special brand...” Kiba sniffed again, still shaking his head. Everyone in the group seemed down, except Shino.

“Send a message back with this bird,” Shino said quietly. “Anything will do, just a message that seems real, and important.”

“I don’t see the point...” Gaara said in his raspy whisper.

Shino pointed to the bird’s neck. “I put one of my tracking beetles in it’s feathers. It’s a female that leaves a distinctive scent to the males of the breed. The males will be able to track the female.”

There were sounds of approval from everyone for that idea. Kankuro thought back to the chunin exams at the Hidden Leaf three years ago.

This is how he found me after the Sound sprung their trap. That trick with the beetles...I hate to say it, but this guy’s good. Our poisons canceled each other out. If Temari hadn’t bailed me out, I would have been done for. Not sure how HE survived, but he’s definitely good to have on your side...

“Alright, the message is sent...Kankuro, go with them. Best of luck,” Gaara told the team before sending them on their way.

--

Team Kakashi was waiting for Tsunade to have a free moment so they could debrief. There wasn't a rush anymore, since the prisoner was in the hands of Ibikki Morino. Sakura took the opportunity to write down her thoughts:

I never want to go there again! The Sound Village has so many bad memories for me! How am I going to face Sasuke when the time comes? I...I know it's selfish, but I never want to go back! Ryouko would be okay without my help, wouldn't he?

No. Not just that. It's not just Ryouko. I promised to help bring Sasuke back home, and I want to see Ryouko's name cleared! But how can I face this? This is one of my worst nightmares come to life! I know you're supposed to face your fears, and that's the only way to beat them...

But that doesn't make it easier. I have no choice- I HAVE to get stronger!

8 - The Leaf's Recovery Begins

“So the informant was an assassination attempt...damn, I sent you too soon!” Tsunade reprimanded herself, thinking aloud. “If I had given Ryouko a little more time to prove his loyalty to Orochimaru, this might not have happened...”

Tsunade took a gulp of tea (flavored with a tablespoon of sake that Shizune didn't know about) before continuing.

“However, it wasn't a total loss...instead of documents, we have a prisoner with a perfectly good tongue who, I'm sure, will be happy to tell us everything he knows. Ibikki will see to that. Mission passed, you four, excellent work.”

That was good enough for now. Naruto was ready to move on to the next mission, after a quick bowl of some piping-hot ramen. Now to find someone to mooch off...With Naruto's growing reputation as a moocher, that was getting to be a mission by itself.

Sakura had training with Tsunade, after some rest. In the mean time, she had a question.

“Lady Tsunade, what's Kakashi-sensei doing anyway? Wouldn't he normally have come on a mission that important?”

Tsunade hedged the question with “I really can't say...” Sakura knew that was all she was going to get out of Tsunade. To ask more would make Tsunade mad, and Tsunade was NOT fun when she was angry. Besides, Sakura didn't need to worry about Kakashi-sensei, he could take care of himself, if anyone could.

--

Kakashi stared at the drawer he was going to open.

So it's really going to happen that way...

Kakashi looked around, seeing that there was no-one around. Moving quickly, Kakashi locked the doors and shut the curtains. From there, he moved to a copy of Makeout Paradise on the wall. Kakashi took the book down, looking at the cover for a moment. Unlike his others, this one seemed unread. And that was true. The one Makeout book Kakashi had owned but never read. A book such as that, untouched by Kakashi, it was unheard of. But, this book was special.

Kakashi opened the pages, thumbing to page twenty-nine. After that page came what made the book so special. Kakashi turned the page once more. All the pages had been cut, a hole in the center of them. In the center were two brass kunai knives. The knives were small; so small that Kakashi could have put them in the palm of one hand with room to spare.

Kakashi turned the book over, flipping backward until he reached page two hundred. At page one-ninety-nine, there was another hole in the book, this one containing a scroll the size of Kakashi's pinky. Kakashi removed that, then replaced the book with the utmost care on the wall.

All those years ago...when the Third Hokage told me... Kakashi's mind flashed back in time, to his last day in ANBU.

--

"Kakashi, I've given this matter a great deal of thought..." the Third Hokage began. The Third was considerably younger than most in the village remembered. He still had black hair, although it had begun to recede. Age hadn't yet shrunk the Third, so he was standing taller than his normal 5'4.

Kakashi finished polishing his sword, looking up at Lord Hokage.

"What is it, Lord Hokage?" Kakashi asked, concerned that the man had taken such a thoughtful tone of voice, as if he was still turning a problem over in his head.

"It's you, Kakashi. ANBU has helped you become the warrior I always knew you could be. But...it's costing you something much more precious than skills..."

Kakashi wracked his brain, but couldn't fathom what the Third Hokage could be talking about.

"...It's costing you your understanding of life. You've become TOO efficient, Kakashi. The emotion and understanding you received after your team's tragedy...it's begun to fade. You're no longer the man who doesn't understand the bond a team has...but neither are you the understanding individual you were after Obito's gift."

Kakashi's visible eye had begun to waver. Anytime anyone talked about Obito, Kakashi immediately felt a rush of emotion.

"What do you mean, Lord Hokage?!" Kakashi nearly yelped, but managed to control his voice.

"Kakashi, you are a skilled jonin. However, I think you would do well to remember what it's like to work with a team, instead of being a solo agent, as you have been for the past few years. That's why I'm asking- not ordering- you to leave ANBU behind, and become a teacher: a field instructor. I daresay there are many leaves who could grow in your tree of wisdom, Kakashi."

"Lord Hokage..." Kakashi began to protest, but stopped himself. "If it's what you think is right...I'll resign from ANBU Black Ops..." Kakashi was a little choked up, but managed to say-

"...effective immediately."

--

All those years ago...that was when Kakashi had locked this drawer. Now, it was time to open it once more. What was inside was going to cause Kakashi a rush of unwelcome emotions. But it had to be done. The Leaf came first.

--

"C'mon, this way!" Kiba called to the others, before patting Akamaru. "Don't let it out of your site, boy!"

"You really think this'll work?" Kankuro called over to Shino, who was on the other side of Hinata.

"...I think there's a chance..." Shino, who rarely spoke, answered as shortly as possible.

"Damn it, I'm losing it! Hinata, little help?" Kiba asked. That was one reason Kurenai had recommended Kiba lead this mission, if she couldn't be there herself. Kiba included Hinata, and always helped her when he could. While Kurenai had largely been a mother to Hinata, Kiba had been a kind of brother to her. Shino was encouraging, but a little creepy.

Hinata gave her shy nod and activated her Byakugan.

"Kiba, twenty meters northwest!" Hinata 'yelled'.

"Thanks Hinata! Let's go Akamaru!" Kiba steered Akamaru in the right direction.

Geez, he talks to that dog more than the rest of us. Is he waiting for the dog to start talking like a person or something? Kankuro thought sarcastically. He had almost said that aloud, but decided it wouldn't be the smart thing to do right now. It was still new to him, but Gaara was really counting on Kankuro. That trust had taken so long to form, Kankuro didn't want to betray it with an idiotic remark.

"...This way leads to the Rain Village..."

Shino's words perked everyone up.

"So it IS them pulling this! I KNEW that guy wasn't acting alone!" Kankuro declared. But Shino spoke up again.

"...No. The prisoner mentioned a rebellion...it's more likely that the rebellion is behind this."

"Hey, that's right, that guy DID say that! Something about a 'Shoichi', and killing the Amekage!" Kiba remembered suddenly. "But why get the Sand Village involved, we already got the traitor..."

"Unless there's OTHERS planning to rebel...In the Sand...if they could obtain huge power in the Rain by leaving and overthrowing a weak government...but who would do that? Everyone has complete loyalty to Gaara!" Kankuro protested.

"Is-isn't it..." Hinata began, red in the face. She stopped, apparently thinking she was going to say something dumb.

"Go on, Hinata, what is it?" Kiba encouraged. **C'mon Hinata, just say it! You see a lot of things that we don't, you've gotta tell us!**

“Isn’t it I-likely that this bird will lead us to someone w-who can tell us who’s planning to rebel? I mean, a list or something! ...”

“That’s brilliant, Hinata!” Kiba yelled over, giving her an encouraging smile. HOW encouraging was hard to say, since Kiba’s fangs showed when he smiled. “Alright, let’s catch this guy and put this rebellion to rest!”

--

Naruto had finally found someone to mooch off. Iruka-sensei was always good for a kind word and a bowl of ramen- two things Naruto was ALWAYS hungry for.

“It’s a shame about that mission...then again, our village has had a lot of shame lately...” Iruka said over his bowl. Naruto, always ready to fight if his village was slighted, gave Iruka a mild glare over the steaming bowl that had been set in front of him.

“What do you mean, Iruka-sensei?”

Iruka peered down into his ramen, as though he expected the answers to materialize from the rich broth. He played with his chopsticks, picking up and dropping the noodles distractedly.

“I mean...well, about Ryouko. Turning traitor...it just doesn’t seem possible. Naruto, don’t take offense, but Sasuke has always had a seed of rebellion in him, and some of us had a feeling the day would come when he would follow his brother’s path, or at least something similar...with Ryouko, it was a complete shock...”

Naruto opened his mouth and almost told Iruka what had REALLY happened. But Kakashi’s voice ran through Naruto’s head.

Remember, in public, act as if Ryouko is a traitor, and you hate him.

Naruto took a more sullen gulp of ramen. “Yeah...you think you know someone, huh Iruka-sensei?”

Iruka seemed to regret brining this up. “Yeah...I thought I knew you, Naruto. But, boy, you’ve changed- in a good way. You’ve gotten stronger, maybe even stronger than any of us thought. Someday you’ll be the pride of the Hidden Leaf, there’s no doubt in my mind.”

Naruto smiled, rubbing the back of his head as he took the huge compliment in. Naruto couldn’t resist pushing it just a little...

“Does that mean I get another bowl, Iruka-sensei?”

“WHAT?! NO!”

“I’M GONNA REMEMBER THIS WHEN I’M HOKAGE, IRUKA-SENSEI!”

--

Sai placed his latest painting on the wall at home. Another one with no title, this one was of the area just outside the Hidden Leaf. Sai had finally found time to finish the painting. As he was hanging the painting, Sai sensed someone in the room with him. Having his brush in hand, Sai spun around and blocked an incoming kunai with it.

“Still sharp...” a masked ANBU agent said in a toneless voice. Sai didn’t respond, he just stared at the agent. Sai didn’t have to wonder why this agent was here, he knew. It was also disappointing to Sai that the agent had come. Things weren’t the same in Sai’s mind.

“Your orders have changed. They’re in this envelope, memorize the contents, then destroy them.”

Sai took the envelope, still not saying anything. The agent nodded, apparently satisfied with no response.

“You’ve haven’t completely forgotten what you are...someone with-”

“Someone with no past, and with no future. Nothing exists for me except the mission.” Sai spoke for the first time, giving the response that would send the ANBU agent on his way.

“Right.” With that, the ANBU agent disappeared, leaving Sai alone, holding the envelope with his new orders. Sai didn’t open the envelope yet. This time, he was going to have company when he opened it. Being on Team Kakashi had showed Sai there was more to being a Shinobi, and more to life, than just blindly following orders. There was so much more...Sai was only scratching the surface. But he didn’t want to stop. The time had to come to remove his branch from ROOT. It was a risky move, but Sai had enough of Danzou controlling his life.

--

Kakashi took the two small kunai knives and placed them between his thumb and pinky on his left hand. The small scroll was tucked between his thumb and index finger of his right hand. Kakashi stopped for a minute, making sure of his aim, before pushing left hand forward. The two small kunai stuck into two small, all-but-invisible lines in the wood of the drawer. Kakashi then let go of the two knives long enough to fit the small scroll in to what looked like an opening for a key. Satisfied, Kakashi moved both hands back to the two small knives. Taking one in each hand, Kakashi turned the left key in a half-turn to the right, and the right key a half-turn to the left. There was a click from the drawer which told Kakashi he had done everything right so far.

“Release!” Kakashi remembered in the nick of time that he had put a protective genjutsu on this drawer. If that genjutsu had hit him, Kakashi might have been out of it for days. That wouldn’t have been good. That in mind, Kakashi slid the drawer open.

Inside was a scroll. INSIDE the scroll was a picture that meant a lot to Kakashi. It was the only time that Kakashi had posed for a picture with his father. Kakashi, even now, could see the resemblance he had to his father. Kakashi had since surpassed his father in terms of skill, but Kakashi didn’t have a son, as his father had at this age. Forcing those thoughts aside, Kakashi found the small scroll he had pushed through the lock. The reason for using the scroll like a key was that the scroll pushed through an

exploding tag that would have been activated, if Kakashi had tried to open the drawer normally. The two kunai knives had done the same thing to two other tags.

Breathing deeply, Kakashi opened the tiny scroll after paying the blood tribute. Inside was a small nail. Kakashi took the nail and poked it into the far right corner of the bottom of the drawer. The nail deactivated yet another exploding tag, and also acted as a key to allow Kakashi access to the next part of the drawer. The false bottom was so well done that even Kakashi's Sharingan couldn't pick out the weak spot. It was all from memory. And memories were what came flooding back to Kakashi as his hand searched for the right spot to pull up the bottom of the drawer.

Kakashi flicked the blood off his sword with one hand, while the other tugged the headband back over his eye. It had been a perfect mission. Five assassinations. Scum of the earth who deserved to die-right? They murdered, embezzled, assaulted...wasn't it better without them?

Kakashi had held a small seed of anger, ever since Obito's death. That seed just grew in size after missions like this. But at the same time, killing people who were just rotten felt right. As if, in some way, Obito hadn't died in vain. Kakashi shook his head.

"ANBU doesn't have feelings. We're efficient and silent. That's all there is to it. Five more names get crossed out of my BINGO book."

Somehow, Kakashi knew it wasn't that simple. But he could ignore that fact for now, and would as long as he could.

--

"Excuse me, Lady Tsunade?"

Tsunade was kind of surprised to see Sai. It wasn't like him to come for a social call, and Tsunade hadn't sent for him.

"Sai?" Tsunade said/asked.

"Yes. I've come with this...my latest orders..." Sai held the envelope out to Tsunade, who raised an eyebrow.

"I haven't issued you any orders..." Tsunade said, a question in her tone.

"I know, my Lady. That's why I brought this. Please, look inside."

Tsunade opened the envelope, wary of genjutsus or poisons. The contents shocked her, but at the same time, they made sense. Tsunade let jonin and elders set mission sometimes, but this was close to the 'treason' end of the scale, as these orders undermined her own.

"Huh? That seal is Elder Danzou's!" Shizune exclaimed upon seeing the broken wax seal on the envelope.

"I'm not surprised..." Tsunade mumbled. "Thank you, Sai. Now, what is the best course of action...arrest him? Using Sai won't be any good...unless we play this up a little...no, we can't afford to destroy the credibility we just got back...hmm?"

Tsunade was spared figured out a plan. Elder Danzou had come to her.

--

Sitting in bed, Sakura took up a pen and brought out her diary. As she thumbed through her previous entries, she ran across a sketch she had done. On one full page Sakura had drawn the Uchiha crest. On another, she had drawn the Hidden Leaf symbol. They were opposite each other. Two drawings representing real-life friction. Looking at both made Sakura sigh, so she turned the pages in her diary until she found a blank page.

Things have slowed down a little here. The buzz from all the antics has died down, thankfully. It's hard to say you hate someone you...well, I haven't sorted my feelings out. What Ryouko said keeps running through my head. About how any feelings I have for him right now aren't real, they're just gratitude for him saving my life. That's the problem- I don't know HOW to feel. And, now that I've had time to think, Sasuke might have been acting under Orochimaru's orders. It makes perfect sense- populate the Uchiha clan, and give the clan to Orochimaru, and therefore, give him the Sharingan.

But at the same time...Sasuke could have ignored the order. He didn't pursue us very hard, though. GAH! I keep going back and forth! I can't sort my emotions out, there are too many of them!

On top of all this, Lady Tsunade keeps mentioning the Third Hokage. I think she's having an identity crisis or something. She keeps reading these old scrolls, like she's looking for something. It's unnerving to see her...studying. The last time she did that, Lee needed a risky operation. What is Lady Tsunade planning? And why hasn't she asked me, or Shizune, to help her? She NEVER does anything on her own!

Akatsuki...Orochimaru...Rain...this world is becoming so dangerous. It's so hard to believe that we were at peace with everyone three years ago. ANBU is all over the streets now, patrolling around the clock. The jonin, too. The number of missions have nearly doubled, and we're ALREADY short Shinobi! I'm stressing out too much, I know! But I can't help but feel this...intense loyalty, I guess...to the Leaf Village. I guess Lady Tsunade was right- Ryouko leaving DID give us a surge of loyalty. I guess he was the right choice for this mission...

Not that that fact makes it any easier. He was the last of the Third Hokage's students, and Orochimaru's enemy because of it! NOW he's alone with Orochimaru, Kabuto, Sasuke, and all those Sound Ninja?

And Naruto...he hasn't said it, but it's making both of us sick to pretend that Ryouko was a traitor. Sai once called Sasuke "a gutless little homo". That wasn't true, Sasuke isn't any of those things. When he called Ryouko a 'friend'...THAT was true.

I wish both of them would come back safely...and quickly. The Leaf just isn't the same without them.

9 - Treason

Tsunade's eyes turned dangerously mean as she looked at the envelope in her hand.

"How long has he been giving you these orders, Sai?" Tsunade asked the emotionless artist. The day outside, bright and sunny, belied what was going on in the Leaf Village. There was a storm within the village, and it was growing with time. The dark clouds of deceit were blocking the sun.

"Do not answer, Sai. Remember your training." Elder Danzou tried ordering Sai around, not believing Sai would listen anymore. Still, the blinded warmonger wouldn't concede defeat until every resource had been exhausted. That was why the Third Hokage hadn't chosen Danzou as a successor. His talent as a Shinobi was great, but his war-only mindset ruined what good qualities he had.

Sai didn't break his gaze on the envelope that was now in Tsunade's possession.

"From the very beginning. My first orders were to kill Sasuke Uchiha, in the interest of the Hidden Leaf. To do so, I was ordered to gain the trust of Team Kakashi, and then earn the trust of Orochimaru, to get close to Sasuke. I was ordered here by the Elder Council, influenced by Elder Danzou."

Tsunade's eyes sparkled with delight. She hated Elder Danzou, make no mistake. This treason gave Tsunade all the reason in the world to get rid of him. Until Danzou played his trump card.

"Do not forget, Tsunade, that there are quite a few people that agree with me. To remove me from the council, or whatever it is you plan, would mean forsaking all the loyalty you have worked to earn. Your decisions, like mine, are radical. So it would be very strange for you to question my thinking before putting your own thoughts up to question. I may be older, and blind, but I still command respect. And even a seed of hatred can grow into a tree...or it can become a disease that kills the leaves."

Danzou turned and left, leaving Sai and Tsunade to think.

"Damn, he's right..." Tsunade bit her lip in anger, drawing blood. "Sai, you did the right thing by telling me. Our village needs unity, not secrecy. Thank you."

--

Kakashi's hand found the bottom of the drawer. He lifted it slowly, titled at a certain angle. From there, Kakashi took a small screw from the back of the metal plates on his gloves and inserted it gently into the side of the drawer. Then, finally, Kakashi lifted up a blue blanket. Under the blanket...a set of orange goggles.

Obito...I haven't forgiven myself. My carelessness caused your death. Your bravery should never have come under my question...I hope you're resting in peace. Forgive me for using your goggles as a security measure, my friend. It reminds me of how you did, and continue, to protect me.

This thought brought Kakashi back to another time.

“Kakashi, you have not passed one student in a year’s time as an instructor,” the Third Hokage read through Kakashi’s file, offering the jonin a questioning glance.

“They don’t deserve to be Shinobi, they have no understanding of what it means,” Kakashi replied. He had partially failed these students out of anger. He HATED this job. It seemed like a betrayal of the Shinobi way, and it seemed like a poor way to repay Obito’s sacrifice.

“Did you understand when you were a genin, Kakashi?” the Third asked, a smile on his face. He exhaled some rich pipe smoke, waiting for Kakashi to answer. Kakashi, however, just looked up.

“No, you didn’t, Kakashi. You ALWAYS had the talent, just as your father did. But you didn’t understand the Shinobi way until after Obito’s death, and I believe, by that that time, you had been on quite a few missions.”

Kakashi looked down, ashamed in a way. He had taken his anger and frustration out on innocent kids. It seemed like such a bad choice in retrospect. Those kids had done nothing to him. Kakashi felt as though HE deserved to be failed. That’s when he felt the Third Hokage’s hand on his shoulder. Kakashi looked up almost reverently.

“Your mistake, Kakashi, is not unique to you. Many have made similar mistakes, for different reasons. Your mistake is not beyond correction.”

Kakashi knew that all these defining moments were coming back to him for a reason. His life belonged to the Hidden Leaf, and he wouldn’t have it any other way. Loyalty makes people do strange things; things that are completely out of character for themselves. Or, in some cases, loyalty revives a past, a stone best left unturned.

--

“Is this the place, Akamaru?” Kiba asked. He, Shino, Hinata, and Kankuro were hiding in the brush outside what looked to be an old temple. Long abandoned, the brass statues had long lost their luster. The rest of the temple was made of wood, also an indication of the temple’s age. The wood was splintered and cracked, even rotted in some places.

“Perfect hideout for creeps like this...” Kankuro muttered, already feeling for the summoning scrolls that held his puppets.

“Hinata, go for it,” Kiba said quietly.

“Right! Byakugan!” Hinata chanted. Her powerful eyes could sense chakra, and she sensed plenty of it.

“There are a lot of them, Kiba! Almost all of them are in the back room. I can only see one entrance...”

Hinata stopped her Byakugan, wanted to conserve her chakra for the time being.

“That’s not much help...we’re too outnumbered to try a frontal assault,” Kiba murmured.

“...A frontal assault won’t be necessary...” Shino said mysteriously.

“Whaddaya mean? There’s only one entrance!” Kankuro shot back.

“...Poison. If they’re all clustered together, that makes them an easy target for a group attack. Poison, explosions. If they don’t have an escape, then they’re easy targets for a long-range attack...Kankuro’s specialty with his puppets, and my own with my insects.”

Kankuro looked at the temple. “Hey, I got it! Crow pumps poison in the place, while the bugs eat at the structure, and we bring this whole place down on the heads of the Akatsuki wanna-be’s.”

“B-but, s-shouldn’t we try to get...the list?” Hinata chimed in, playing with her fingers nervously. It was a habit she hadn’t outgrown.

Kiba nodded. “She’s right, we need to get a list, or a hostage, at least. This might not be the only section of this rebellion. The question is- how do we get one of us in there to steal the list?”

“Perhaps a better question...how do we lure one of them out?” Shino remarked, thinking this through in his head already.

“Good point. Out here, we can plan an ambush, and if only one person comes out, we’ve got the advantage in numbers. But getting them out won’t be easy...There’s nothing we can do that WON’T be conspicuous.” Kankuro wasn’t sure how to make this work.

We should just wipe them all out, and take the chance that there are more. They’ll reveal themselves once a bunch of them are wiped out.

“...A dog...that would be inconspicuous.”

Akamaru whined at Shino’s suggestion. Kiba wasn’t thrilled with the idea either. But there wasn’t a better plan, even Kiba had to admit that. So, with a heavy heart, Kiba let Akamaru run into the hideout.

--

Tsunade was furious, but she didn’t let it cloud her thinking.

“Team Kakashi will be grounded in the Hidden Leaf until I’ve investigated Elder Danzou. Judging from the update from Kiba’s team, they’re going to need help...I’ll have to send Shikamaru’s team. With Kurenai and Asuma away, it might be a mistake. Then again, six talented chunin should be able to handle this...” Tsunade was talking to herself as though Sai wasn’t in front of her. She had forgotten all about him, until she saw his pale, smiling face waiting for instructions.

“Right...Sai, why don’t you tell Yamato, Sakura, and Naruto that missions are on hold until Elder Danzou

is cleared of suspicion of treason? In fact, please have them come here at their earliest convenience.” Tsunade was getting a brainstorm that might just give Team Kakashi something to do.

Danzou has been plotting this for a while, or at least had it in his mind that he might get caught. He’s got me over a barrel...at least, until I trump him. He’s not aware of what I’ve been doing. By going over the old Village records, I can tell when our Village united with a Hokage, and untied against a Hokage. If I follow those steps, I can erase his followers and bring them to my side. I hate to do it, but the twisted old warmonger needs to be isolated before he does some irreversible damage. He has no idea what’s good for the village now. It’s my job as Hokage to make sure my village is healthy and safe. And I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure those two things.

--

“The Rain is weakening every day. It shouldn’t be long before that hopeless Amekage is easy to target.”

“I’ve bribed one of his guards to ‘fall asleep’ in two days, at 11:12 pm. The Amekage is usually reading at that hour, and isn’t very vigilant.”

“Good. It’s time to make our move, and- What the?!”

The men crowded around the table looked up, their maps and scrolls falling to the ground upon hearing a possible threat.

“What was that?”

“Might be an assassin or something. Stay on your guards!”

Akamaru made his presence known by using ‘Dynamic Marking’. He spun through the air, and apparently claimed everyone in the room as his territory. To some of the hot-headed villagers, kicking a puppy sounded like fun. Five gave chase as Akamaru ran outside. Giving a loud bark as he rounded a corner, Akamaru seemed to taunt his pursuers. They ran around the side of the building.

BANG! BOOM! CRASH!

-

“Nice job, Akamaru!” Kiba patted his dog enthusiastically. “Five hostages is plenty to prove this plot!”

“We’ve got to hurry to make our move, we’re not gonna have time for poison AND bugs! Which one do we use?”

“...my insects can destroy the structure of this building. Poison may be cleansed, but the damage my insects do cannot. Even if they don’t succeed in killing, at the very least, this ‘Akatsuki’ group will lose their hideout.”

“Alright, when you put it that way. Go for it,” Kankuro stuffed two prisoners inside Ant, his puppet that he used to trap prisoners. Usually, Crow or Salamander diced Ant with knives and killed whoever was inside, but in this case, it was better to keep them alive.

“Do you thing, Hinata,” Kiba told the quiet Hinata.

“O-okay Kiba.” Hinata’s palms flew into certain parts of the ‘Akatsuki Rain’, as they were referred to now. The three members not inside Ant were unconscious quickly and effectively.

“Okay Shino, you’re up!”

Shino’s bug went to work, eating away at the rotting wood of the building. Once the first ‘cracks’ and ‘groans’ were heard, the group made their escape. Talented or not, they couldn’t handle all the Shinobi in the Rain Village.

“What’s this? A bunch of kids ambushed us?”

Kiba spun around, right into a menacing Shinobi.

“Looks like WE got the drop on THEM, now. Time to pay the piper, you little brats!”

Kankuro counted ten ninja watching them. And those were the ones he could see. Most likely, there were more, hiding, lying in wait.

Aw man, this isn’t good!

--

Naruto was predictably unhappy with Sai’s news.

“Huh? Grandma’s banning us from missions?!” he wailed. “How am I gonna get stronger if I can’t leave the village and train?! Agh, this is so stupid!” Naruto began to pound on a tree in frustration.

“Well, not quite. Lady Tsunade asked me to bring you and Sakura to her. It’s a special type of mission.”

“What are we waiting for, let’s get going!” Naruto blazed toward Tsunade’s office, excited upon hearing he might have a mission. Naruto was so excited, in fact, that he didn’t bother to watch where he was going.

CONK!

Naruto got up, shaking his head. “Hey, stay outta the way!” he shouted, raising his fist. Big mistake when it was Sakura you just ran over. Naruto’s fist fell to the side as he watched an incredibly scary Sakura get up, covered in the food she was bringing to Lady Tsunade for lunch. With rice on her skirt, ramen decorating her legs, and her head doused with tea, Sakura stood up, fist cocked, shaking with anger.

“WATCH IT, YOU LITTLE TROLL!” Sakura shouted, belting Naruto across the face. She had put considerable strength behind the punch, as evidenced by the fact that Naruto had gone through a fence before burrowing into the ground. Sakura strode over and yanked Naruto to his feet again.

“Now what was the big hurry?” That punch seemed to calm Sakura down enough to ask what was going on.

“Grandma’s got a mission for us! Some special thing! C’mon Sakura, let’s go!” Naruto grabbed Sakura’s arm and towed her away to Tsunade’s office.

--

Kakashi finally held what the fortified drawer had contained in his hands. The hilt of a sword was visible. The hilt was stained with a faint red color, blood that could never quite be entirely removed from a sword that had seen a lot of action.

The sword arched through the air, slicing one enemy through the head. Kakashi turned his head to see another enemy coming. Switching his hands, Kakashi tugged the sword free from it’s resting place and sliced again, this time at the waist, cutting down yet another enemy. A third got close to Kakashi, but his progress was halted by a stab. Kakashi watched, emotionlessly, as the Shinobi impaled himself on the tip, all the way to the guard that protected Kakashi’s hand. Kakashi rotated the sword inside his opponent, no longer fearing the guttural, inhuman screams that this move induced. Very quickly, the man fell, his weapon dropped. Thus Kakashi’s mission was completed. Three more names that could be etched off his BINGO book’s pages.

Kakashi laid the sword aside, next removing a book and a porcelain mask. The mask had been covering the book, which was faded and torn with age and use, it’s pages yellowed from being in storage for so long. Two more remnants of his ANBU past.

How many times had Kakashi donned this mask, and shortly afterward, opened this book and crossed out a name? If Kakashi had copied over a thousand Jutsus, that meant he had killed a lot of opposing Shinobi. But as long as names remained in that book, the village remained under attack.

“That’s why I do it. The Will of Fire. What the Third Hokage spoke of when he became Hokage. It’s hard to believe it wasn’t all that long ago, he’s done so much in such a short time,” a younger Kakashi told himself. It may seem strange that he was talking to himself, but Kakashi’s friends were all dead or missing. Life got lonely when you lived only for a purpose. Kakashi guessed he was lucky to have the village as family, and he was grateful for the love they returned to him. But loving a group of people was different from loving a few individuals. Kakashi had known that with his father, at least. But Kakashi’s sense of duty had overpowered that feeling of love. That sense of duty had also been what had killed his father.

Kakashi looked at the sword, mask, and book. From another drawer, Kakashi removed his ANBU armor.

If this is where the village needs me, then that’s where I’ll be. It means a dual existence that no one but the jonin know about. Even my team has to be kept in the dark about my return to the ANBU Black Ops. I hate to do it, but if this is what will save the Hidden Leaf, I’ll do it.

--

Sakura took a seat, waiting for her team to be ready to go. This mission mean they stayed in the village, but preparation was still important. Sakura had learned this as an academy student, and always kept a backpack full of everything she needed to be out on the field for weeks at a time. This had become easier after Kakashi-sensei had given her that summoning scroll. Two scrolls now occupied her backpack. The other item in the backpack was wrapped in a set of her old clothes. Sakura couldn't believe she had ever worn a long, cumbersome dress like that. But it served it's purpose then, and it did now. Sakura unraveled it, and let her diary fall into her lap.

Diary,

Our newest mission is to investigate Elder Danzou, and arrest him for treason. But he was pretty popular once, and arresting him is going to make a lot of people angry. That means that the loyalty and unity that Lady Tsunade has gone out of her way to promote may be destroyed. But she's determined that this is a necessary risk, and I agree. There's no room for treason in the Hidden Leaf Village.

As for me, I've had a lot of energy lately. After all that's gone on, I've been training harder and harder, and I'm getting in shape because of it. At least, I think so. If the amount of attention I've been getting from boys is a good indicator, then I guess I'm in the best shape of my life. I've grown, too. I guess that's to be expected, since I'll be seventeen in March. The twenty-eight, to be exact. Sure, that's over eight months away, but we all need something to look forward to. And-

Sakura's entry was interrupted by a scratching at her door. Sakura didn't own any pets, so this struck her as odd. Closing her diary, she walked over to the door and opened it cautiously. Sakura narrowed her eyes in confusion- there was nobody there!

"Down here!" a female voice called. Sakura looked down- and gasped!

"H-holly?!" she stammered, crouching down to see the dog. **If Holly's here, does that mean that...**

10 - Enemies on All Sides

Sakura knelt down, shooing Holly inside. She didn't need any encouraging- she had slept at Sakura's house one night, and she had one comfortable bed! Today, Holly trotted over, leapt up, and sat attentively.

"Sorry to disappoint you. My kid can't be here. But he did send his regards, and a little something else, aside from me. You don't have to accept it, but he's, well...damn that kid, I hate him!" Holly exclaimed, turning away, using her back leg to shift her collar so that a scroll fell out.

Sakura could tell by the way Holly spoke that she was worried for her owner, and she didn't actually hate him. Apparently, it was more fun to abuse him than show affection. That was Sakura's guess, anyway, as she picked the scroll up off her bedspread. To her surprise, it was a summoning scroll. As she unfurled it, she only saw one name: Ryouko's.

"So he took the name after all..." Sakura muttered, seeing that the scroll was signed Sarutobi Ryouko. "He talked about taking the name after the Third Hokage died, but I never knew he actually did. So, what's this scroll for?" Sakura knew it was a summoning scroll, but for what animal? She knew Ryouko had a large hawk-ish bird named 'Taleo', a Chinese Water Dragon named Umisu, Enma, the Monkey King, Shuurai- a large snake, and Holly, a keeshonden dog.

"This one is for me," Holly explained. "See, my kid, he's...worried. About me getting hurt. All the other animals are faster, stronger, or can transform. I'm just a messenger. He doesn't have any use for me while he's in that demon's clutches, and doesn't want me hurt. So he sent me here, and, well, told me to ask you to adopt me, at least until he comes home." Holly seemed uncomfortable suddenly, and pawed the bed spread nervously. "Actually, I suggested you. He didn't want to burden you, even though you were the first one he thought of. He was going to send me to Lady Tsunade, but (Holly shivered) she scares me. So I persuaded him to send me to you instead."

Sakura had never had a pet, or a summon. This was a first for her, but she didn't need much convincing. This was another tie to her protector, and a way to help Ryouko. And Sakura genuinely liked Holly.

"Okay, tell me what I have to do..." Sakura spoke after a few moments, indicating the scroll.

--

"Damn it, there's a lot of them! And that's only the ones we can see...Akamaru, how many can you smell, boy?" Kiba whispered. Akamaru whined in response.

"That many, huh? Alright, I guess we've got no choice but a frontal assault. Ready, Akamaru?!"

"Hold on, Kiba..." Shino intoned quietly, looking around. "This is going to need a more delicate approach. These are mostly jonin, and they have the terrain advantage..."

“He’s right. The only advantage we might have had was that they didn’t know our fighting styles. But since we don’t know their styles either, that doesn’t matter,” Kankuro added. But again, Shino showed that he was more than a creepy guy who collected bugs.

“Not quite. They’re from the Rain Village, a place abundant with water. Therefore, it’s safe to assume that they use water jutsus. Water won’t bother my insects, and it won’t interfere with Hinata’s attacks. Your puppets and Akamaru will be more sensitive to the water.”

“Are you saying that Kiba and I can’t do anything?!” Kankuro snarled, grabbing Shino’s coat violently.

“No. I’m saying that a frontal attack won’t work for you two. Hinata and I can hold out against their water, while you and Kiba strategize.”

“ENOUGH OF THIS! GET EM!” shouted one of the thugs. He was apparently the leader, because he didn’t attack himself. His flunkies attacked instead. Their jutsus proved Shino’s assessment to be correct.

“Water Style: Raging Water Sontetsu!” shouted the first two attackers. Water came from nowhere and took the shape of small, but deadly sharp knives. Kiba and Kankuro covered up with their arms in front of them.

“Protection of the Eight Trigrams!” came Hinata’s voice! Her bold attack defended Kiba and Kankuro, knocking the water out of the air and ending its threat. To Hinata, it seemed as if the water was moving at a snail’s pace. To everyone else, her hands were a blur as she blocked attack after attack!

“Of course! Hinata developed this jutsu! And she used water to develop it! I forgot she could do that!” Kiba was clearly stunned, having seen Hinata practice this countless times, but she seemed to fail every time. But now, performing it so flawlessly that he and Kankuro weren’t even getting wet- it was remarkable!

The other three attackers aimed for Shino. Their water attacks struck him, but he was long gone- bug clones took care of that.

“What?! Damn it, bugs?! Where’s the real guy?!” the Rain uprisers asked each other. Whack whack whack! They all fell down, poison entering their systems courtesy of some bugs they hadn’t noticed Shino planting.

“Nice! Now let’s-” Kiba began, but held up. More and more enemies had appeared, numbering twenty in all. Some were water clones, but it was impossible to tell.

“We’re in trouble...”

--

“Can you hear me?”

Sai's voice came through the wireless headsets. Naruto, Sakura, and Yamato all responded in the affirmative.

"Go ahead, Sai. Proceed," Yamato instructed, speaking into his headset. Turning it off and facing his team, he continued his instructions.

"Sakura, you will take the rooftops. Naruto, cover the ground level. My wood clone will take up a position at the main entrance, while I will watch from a distance. Keep in mind, this is a powerful man. He may appear blinded, and may even be blind in the traditional sense of the word, but do not think for a moment that he isn't capable of being powerful despite this handicap. He is, in fact, very dangerous, and he may very suspect us. So, um, don't drop your guards."

Yamato gave his 'scary eyes' look to Naruto, who quivered in fear even as he ran off to obey orders.

-

Sai knelt before Elder Danzou.

"It all went according to your plan," Sai explained. "I have them listening via headset, or so they think. I've programmed my set to a different wavelength. That wavelength contains you and I speaking, but not saying anything important."

Danzou nodded. "Good. I see that you haven't forgotten your training. Now then, your mission of killing Sasuke Uchiha?"

"Prematurely terminated by Sasuke's escape. We grossly underestimated what he can do. He bested all four of us (Team Kakashi), then fled with Orochimaru and Kabuto," Sai answered. Danzou didn't move, or even express displeasure.

"You did well in gauging his abilities. And you handed those documents to Tsunade...perfect. In this envelope..." Danzou's withered old hand produced a new envelope. "...are your new orders. Take them to your home and study them. I will leave it up to you to follow them. I would like to hear your plan now."

Now was the cue. Sai had waited for this opportunity with Danzou. "To kill Sarutobi Ryouko would amount to treason. I learned from Lady Tsunade herself that Ryouko is still under our employment."

Danzou seemed surprised. "That boy is a loose cannon...but that fool Tsunade believes she can trust him. Of course, she's suspicious of me...No matter. Your orders stand, Sai. Kill Ryouko upon seeing him."

Sai didn't move- he had to wait for Yamato's order. It came into his headset:

"Now, Sai. Take the conversation to Lady Hokage, leave Danzou to us!"

--

Gai waited patiently, still feeling guilty about postponing Lee's training. The boy looked so forward to it

that Gai felt bad whenever he had a mission and couldn't train with his star pupil.

Lady Tsuande mentioned something about an ANBU agent going with me to Sunagakure. If the Kazekage is in that much trouble, then this must mean that someone incredibly powerful is involved. The Akatsuki? Orochimaru? Just who could it be?

tok. The sound of someone landing almost silently next to him caused Gai to look up. He narrowed his eyes, realizing just how important things were.

“So, it's you. You've had to join ANBU again?”

Kakashi, fully masked and wearing ANBU armor, nodded gravely. “Yes, it's that serious. Preserving our alliance with Sunagakure is crucial.”

“We're being hit hard...Orochimaru...the Akatsuki...can we really afford to be worrying about another nation?” Gai wondered aloud.

“We can't afford NOT to. Orochimaru is being handled by one of our agents. The Akatsuki is being handled by a group of chunin. We're getting hit alright, but we can't focus on just one threat...and even one is bad enough.”

Gai nodded his agreement. “Alright,” he said, unusually serious for him, “let's go then.”

The two took to the treetops. Kakashi noticed Gai kept looking over at him, a dead serious look on his face. It wasn't like Gai, and even the stoic Kakashi was starting to get worried.

“Anything wrong?” Kakashi finally asked, giving Gai a calm look. Gai smiled a little wistfully.

“Nothing. This is just a reminder that...well, Kakashi, we're not as young as we used to be. My Lee is near jonin level, and you've managed to turn out two great students yourself. It's great, just what we need, but at the same time...It reminds me that things are different now.”

Kakashi didn't say anything right away, instead thinking about what Gai said. He was right- things WERE different. Despite living through the Great Ninja War and the Nine-Tailed fox, Kakashi's generation was going to wind up having the easier time. Orochimaru, the Akatsuki, and failing alliances made for a heady up-hill climb for Naruto's generation. At the same time, Kakashi knew they could handle it.

“So who got the Orochimaru assignment?” Gai questioned. He hadn't been one of those who had been told about Tsunade's plan. Kakashi weighed the options, and decided he could tell Gai. Despite being hot-blooded and even loud at times, Gai would take this seriously.

“The last person you would think...in fact, most are sure he's dead...”

“Working with Orochimaru, that's a safe bet...” Gai pointed out. Kakashi felt a small pang of worry. Ryouko might not have been on his team, but he had proven himself to be a good friend, and certainly a team player.

“Ryouko.”

Gai did a double-take. “Him? The traitor? Kakashi, you killed him yourself! DO you mean to tell me that this was all a plan?!”

Kakashi nodded silently, sighing. “Lady Tsunade’s plan was to make him into a hateable martyr, so the village would come together. Most aren’t aware just how bad things were. We were losing Shinobi left and right, and no new ones were signing up in the academy. Making Ryouko into a heel, then having me kill him...the village came together, kind of like we did after Lord Third died. That was the plan...”

“So, in the mean time, he’s working under Orochimaru, sabotaging him?” Gai nodded, understanding now. “But how is he going to be brought back? And when?”

Kakashi didn’t have an answer there. No one knew the answer to that one.

--

Surrounded. Perfect.

“Alright, this is it! Now or never guys! Here we go! Ready Akamaru?! Have a food pill! Here we go! Man/Beast Transformation! Tunneling Fang!”

Kiba and Akamaru became two whirling blurs that couldn’t see, but operated by scent. Water usually took care of scent, but Shino’s bugs had created one that the sensitive appendages of Akamaru and Kiba could detect. They plowed into water clone after water clone for what seemed like minutes. In reality, thirty seconds had passed when Kiba and Akamaru landed back next to their group, panting from the effort.

“Alright! That had to- what?! Come on! Damn it!” Kiba moaned. Akamaru expressed himself by whining.

Every water clone was back. They just reappeared, even doubling in size. Now there was trouble. Hinata had performed that jutsu of hers continuously, and needed a rest. Shino was nowhere to be found, and Kankuro’s puppets could be affected by water. With Kiba tired out, at least for the moment, things didn’t look good.

“Alright, there’s no choice, I’ve gotta risk it! Crow can handle this!” Kankuro declared, laying out the necessary scroll and summoning the fierce-looking puppet. This puppet had been created by Sasori, and improved on by Kankuro. It wasn’t some kid’s toy; this was a deadly Shinobi tool.

“Stop! The more we destroy, the more they multiply! We’ve got to think this out more, or we’re just dooming ourselves!” Kiba shouted. Kankuro almost shot back with some nasty response, but realized Kiba was right.

“Can that puppet do anything defensive for us?” Kiba wanted to know.

“No, he’s designed for offense...Any could, but he could only protect one of us...Hey, I’ve got it! You and

your dog dug up a ton of earth. Those clones aren't attacking, we just need to take cover, then try to find the real ones. Give the girl (Hinata) a food pill, and you recover your chakra. Because..." Kankuro stood up, getting to work. "I hate to say it, I really do, but that kid with the bugs is good. The fact that we haven't seen him means he's got some plan. So let's give him time to put it into action!"

--

Shino's plan wasn't grand, but it would get the job done. His insects would spread a poison over the enemies, and end the threat. But there was a problem there-

They use rain...rain will wash away the poison before it can seep in. That won't work. We need something else...

"You need some help?"

Shino turned around. He had sensed someone coming even as his beetle's scent gave off a particular aroma.

"Don't you worry, we'll take care of this. I've got a bone to pick with these guys for messing with my little brother."

--

Sai took the envelope, then left for Tsunade's office. Danzou smiled- right into his trap.

"Sai, when you attempted to develop bonds, you severed your ties to root. Now you're going to pay for it...And you, come out of the shadows!"

Naruto ducked lower, cursing. He keyed his headset. "Captain! Sai's in trouble! One of us has to do something!"

Sakura fell from the ceiling, aiming a poisoned needle at Danzou. Danzou dodged it, but managed to catch it with his teeth at the point where the poison ended.

"An assassination attempt? Foolish. Does Tsunade really want to make such a rash move and lose all that support, when I only have the interests of the Hidden Leaf in mind?" Danzou croaked in his withered old voice. Unlike the Third Hokage, Danzou's voice was full of malice and hatred.

"For someone who works to avoid war, Tsunade certainly tries to create problems in her own village. It's unnecessary- we're the strongest, we should assert that strength against the other villages. The weak are preyed on by the strong. It has always been this way, and it always will be- it is the way of our world."

"That'll change when I become Hokage, you can bet on that, you old prune-faced freak! You're under arrest!" Naruto snarled, but his headset chirped again.

"-Naruto, terminate the mission, and assist Sai. Sakura, you pull out as well. Make your report to

Tsunade, and leave the elder to me.-” Yamato’s voice ordered. Sakura and Naruto exchanged glances, but had no choice.

“Right!” they said together, disappearing in different directions. Seconds later, Yamato walked in, face to face with Danzou.

“The kids were correct- you are under arrest.”

--

“I knew it!” Tsunade pounded her desk. “I’ve finally cornered that bastard! Nice work, Sakura. You’re free to go for tonight.”

Sakura bowed herself out of the room and headed for home. Her parents were already asleep, so she walked past them, upstairs to her own room. She jumped when she saw two big, brown eyes sitting inside the door.

“Oh! Sorry Holly, you startled me! It’s been a weird night,” Sakura explained, stripping out of her clothes and going into the bathroom. She turned the water on in the shower, letting in for a minute to get warm. After that, she stepped inside, washing carefully but quickly. After she was clean, Sakura stayed in the shower for a minute and thought about what had happened today. She kept thinking as she brushed her teeth, washed her face, and wrapped a towel around herself.

“Hard day kiddo?” Holly queried, lying on one side of Sakura’s bed, making sure there was room for both of them. Sakura let the towel fall to the floor as she reached for the Yukata (Light cotton robe) she was going to sleep in tonight.

“Yeah, kind of. It tired me out, anyway. I’m just going to make a quick diary entry, then call it a night.”

Holly yawned and stretched herself, curling up into a little ball. “Sounds good to me. Good night, Sakura.”

Sakura gave Holly a quick stroke, then opened her diary.

Dear Diary,

Today certainly was a full day. Elder Danzou is one sick, twisted old man; I learned that much. But that wasn’t what tired me out. My emotions did.

This morning, Ryouko’s dog, Holly, showed up at my doorstep. When I saw her, my heart leapt into my throat when. I thought of her owner, and my heart just leapt into my throat. This emotion is...disturbing.

Ryouko told me that any feelings I had for him were because he saved me, and they were psychologically natural, but not real. But it’s been a while now since he rescued me...are these feelings still psychological, or are they real? When I think of him, I can’t help myself- I just have this feeling about him. But that feeling also comes with doubt, and I just can’t place WHY that

doubt is there. I know he cares about me, so that should be it, right?

I don't know what to think. It's been a couple months now since he left. Three months already? Maybe I'm confusing 'grateful' with 'I love you'? I don't know, I need to talk to someone about this. Mom would freak out if I told her I loved a guy- The thing with Sasuke was puppy love, and she knew I'd get over it (even though it took attempted rape for that to happen. I still have trouble sleeping). But Ryouko...he did things to increase my affection. I still believe there is a shred of good in Sasuke, and a hope to bring that shred out. For Ryouko...I believe that he is a good person who is traveling down a hard path in life. He's all by himself, like Sasuke. But unlike Sasuke, the few relationships Ryouko made, he treasures.

Does that mean he treasures me as well?

11 - Mad Dash

Tok tok tok tok tok tok!

Don't think, don't think, just cut and run, no choice now! Go, move it!

"There he is, grab him!"

Damn it! I don't want to have to kill them! Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique!

"Gah! Damnit! Throw it off and go! Hurry up!"

If I hadn't been found...they'd all have been alive...Can't be helped now. They live to kill others, it's my job to see that others live. If that means my honor goes on the chopping block, then I'll wield the axe and chop it off myself!

tok tok tok tok tok- whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh- tomp!

Which way? Which way? Damn it, my mission is compromised- there's no choice now! I've got to make this a hit and run, and get out of here!

Does this damn hallway ever end?! Where is it, where is it? C'mon...I've got to get out! And I've got to do it now!

The light at the end of the tunnel, finally in sight. Time to make a break for it. Hit the ground running, don't stop. Anyone gets in the way...don't think about that, just do it. To them, you're the prey. It's kill or be killed. Time for the hunters to become the hunted. It's time for the game of death to end.

--

Sai was being followed. He recognized the agent that usually gave him his orders as one of them. The other two were fellow ROOT members. But they didn't know anything but loyalty to Danzou. Sai had seen the outside world now, and had become a part of it. He would, most likely, never become one hundred percent integrated with society, but he also couldn't go back. It was more than that, actually- he *wouldn't* go back.

-

Naruto heard Yamato's order via headset:

-'Make sure that Sai reaches the Hokage Mansion, no matter what. He holds our only evidence.'

To Naruto, that meant that he fought, and Sai ran. Against three ANBU agents, Naruto didn't know if he stood a chance. Even his trademark confidence wavered a little bit. But in this case, he HAD to, and it was more than orders. Naruto would never, ever admit it, but he had started to befriend Sai, and

genuinely wanted to help him.

-

Sai braced himself for a fight, ink and brush at the ready. But he heard the tell-tale sound of Naruto's arrival:

"Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Sai didn't quite understand friendship yet. Sacrificing yourself for another was still very foreign to him. In the back of his mind, he registered that Naruto's mission was to get him to the Hokage Mansion, and that was it. Nowhere in those orders was 'stay alive, Naruto' included. Sai felt a small seed of something, but couldn't quite place it.

Perhaps it's an emotion that I can't understand. I know I have formed a bond with Naruto-kun, perhaps this signifies that this bond has strengthened?

"Sai, move your @\$@ already! I've got you covered!" It was amusing to hear all those Naruto's shout that insult in unison, but Sai got the message. He had heard the order, too, and that was the one thing that had stuck with Sai from his time with ANBU- orders came first.

With that in mind, Sai took off at top speed, the Hokage mansion in site.

-

Naruto squared off against three ANBU members, not liking his chances.

"You jerks wanna tangle with Sai? You're going through me, first!" he declared, hoping that his show of bravado would be enough to stop this fight before it started.

"You'll find that we have no qualms about fighting you. You are collateral damage to us," came the terse reply. Naruto gulped inwardly- that hadn't gone well.

"Why the heck are you after Sai, anyway? You're serving a traitor! Don't you know what would happen if this elder guy killed Grandma Tsunade? You're going to kill the village! We can't afford to deal with this right now!" Naruto decided, for once, to try reasoning.

"Alright, time to break this up. You ANBU pondscum get moving," a strong voice said from behind Naruto. Seated atop a toad, Jiraiya, flanked by Asuma and Kurenai, had arrived at the perfect time to save Naruto from dying.

"You go on ahead, Naruto- this has become our battle now," Kurenai stated forcefully, giving Naruto a nod in the direction he should head in.

"Kurenai's right, get moving. There might be more trouble ahead. That kid is running the gauntlet. Go on, now. We'll handle this."

--

Sakura woke up and stretched herself. She congratulated herself on getting through the night without needing any help. Then, with a small sigh, Sakura noticed she was holding his coat again.

“It’s not a crime to need someone...” Holly said, sitting on the end of the bed. “At least that’s what my boy always said. It’s funny, because he never followed his own advice. And I’m the last to admit it, but-”

Holly jumped off the bed, her nails scraping against Sakura’s floor as she walked toward the window. Climbing onto her hind legs, she used her mouth to rank on the blinds, opening them and letting rays of sun into the room.

“-but my kid isn’t stupid. He knows things because he watches everything. Every exercise, every movement, every last, insipid detail. And he’s learned things. Needing someone is a human thing, and trust me, Sakura- it’s necessary.”

Sakura clutched the coat tight to her chest, drinking in the feel and scent of the fabric. It had been a long while since Ryouko left. With each passing day, it seemed unlikely that he’d come back alive. That thought dawned on Sakura as she pulled off her robe to get ready for work. As she was getting ready, it occurred to Sakura that she hadn’t been sent on the mission to capture Danzou.

I’m glad Lady Tsunade didn’t send me...it’s just too emotional, too tiring...I couldn’t have stood up to him, not the way I am now. I’m too laden with worries...I know it’s unhealthy, but I’m only human! That bastard Sasuke, trying to rape me...Ryouko, playing the hero, nearly dying on my account. THEN he’s sent off to the Sound Village, to work for that scum because our village finally had a use for him! Why do we throw away things with so much good in them? Why can’t we see what we have before it’s gone?

Sakura finished dressing, tying the hitai-ate in her hair. As she looked in the mirror, she could see herself- a mostly-grown, healthy female. But her worries weren’t the typical teenage kind. Sakura didn’t have time to be a seventeen year old girl- she was a warrior, and age was irrelevant until you got a title or became an Elder. But, for once, Sakura wondered what it would have been like if she hadn’t been obsessed with Sasuke.

I might have had a boyfriend...I might have dated...I might have studied harder from the start...I need to forget all this nonsense...even if I feel something towards Ryouko, it’s not real, just like he said. Besides...he has to be dead by now.

Holly closed her eyes. “Another one from my kid- The past is just that- the past. Let the past worry about itself, while you look toward the future...”

Sakura gave Holly a few strokes and a smile.

“Your boy knew his stuff, Hol’.”

Holly shook her head. “No. He KNOWS his stuff. He’s not dead, and you know that. But if it’s easier for

you to believe he's dead...well, he'd want you to do that." Holly was smart, and could read Sakura's feelings a little bit.

She's confused...she wants to love SOMEONE, but she's not sure who to love. I've got to get her to talk to me more and loosen up- that's the only way she'll heal herself. I didn't tell her Ryouko sent me here to watch over her healing. That's a secret that she's not supposed to learn. But I can't help but feel that there was another reason Ryouko sent me away...something he had to do...but what?

--

Kakashi and Gai made their way through the trees as quickly as possible, their conversation turning away from Ryouko. The topic was still very sore to a lot of people. Gai felt bad about being left in the dark, and even worse for lecturing people on what an evil person Ryouko was.

"If I had just known...poor Lee was devastated when I told him what his favorite sparring partner had done...I wish I had known..."

Kakashi had less remorse for the situation. "If you had known, the ruse would have been less perfect. We needed it to work- and it did. A lot of people found loyalty to the Hidden Leaf after this act. The casualty here was Ryouko..."

"Why do you say that?" Gai asked, looking over at Kakashi with a questioning look on his face.

"Because all he wanted was to belong...when he agreed to this, he was devastated. He, for the first time, considered disobeying an order. I found him after our 'battle' and talked to him. He was so worried for Sakura he was near tears..."

Gai closed his eyes. "So the rumors were true...he really DID have feelings for her?"

Kakashi nodded gravely. "Or so I believe. He might have truly only cared for her well-being...but I don't think that was it, at least not by itself."

"Her well-being...Kakashi...just what is it that happened at Orochimaru's hideout that day? You've been more quiet than usual when it comes to this subject...that tells me that you're holding something back. We've got time, you might as well tell me."

Kakashi debated whether or not to tell Gai everything. He decided to go ahead and tell him- it seemed like the right thing to do.

"Well, my team went to capture Sasuke. Orochimaru and Kabuto got the drop on us and kept us distracted. After a while, we realized Sakura was missing. At that point, though, we had been defeated and captured, so we couldn't do anything about it. Before they confiscated my headset, I sent a distress signal..."

"...And Ryouko came by himself..." Gai had figured that out for himself based on Ryouko's personality.

“He wouldn’t let his student risk himself, so he came alone. As far as I know, I’m the only one he told, but before he barged in and stopped things, he heard Sasuke’s plan...if I had been there, Gai, I would have murdered Sasuke for this...” Kakashi paused and took a breath, looking away for a moment.

“He planned to rape Sakura.”

Gai closed his eyes. “It’s so hard to believe...all the times he shot Sakura down, now he’s interested?”

Kakashi exhaled deeply again, bracing himself. “He’s always said he wanted to rebuild the Uchiha clan...that’s what he told Sakura. That was his plan, don’t fight, you’re finally getting what you want. Ryouko was torn- was this what Sakura wanted, he wondered later- but he broke into the room and stopped Sasuke. Sasuke captured him as well. But Ryouko had one last move up his sleeve...Sasuke’s very own order...he used it against him...”

Gai was a little confused now. “What order was that, Kakashi?”

“He told Ryouko to go to Sakura on his knees and admit that he loved her. Sasuke was going to humiliate Ryouko, then make him watch as he went for Sakura. Ryouko threw a wrench into his plans- he kissed Sakura...or so it seemed. In reality, he asked Sakura to bite his lip.”

“Blood for a summoning...” Gai murmured, seeing Kakashi nod out of the corner of his eye.

“Ryouko summoned Enma, the monkey king, and used the Third Hokage’s ‘Adamantine Nyoï’ Jutsu to cut himself and Sakura free...After this, there’s a lot of details, Ryouko doing his usual stuff...but what stands out is when he noticed Sakura had suffered psychological damage...in her mind, Ryouko had become her savior, and she formed an attachment to him. It’s what Ryouko wanted...but it was a lie. Sakura’s psyche had confused ‘gratitude’ with ‘love’, and Ryouko knew it. So, before he left...on Valentine’s Day, he told her.”

“That must have shattered her...” Gai said breathily, shocked that Ryouko would just come out and say that.

“No, it didn’t. It strengthened her resolve to care about him...she’s worn his trench coat on every mission, and has slept with it every night...her psyche is still so damaged she can’t wean herself away from him...it’s something that’s haunting them both... I just hope, for both their sakes, Ryouko get the guts up to tell her that he likes her.”

--

Temari made no bones about it- she wanted revenge to the people that were targeting her little brother. Shikamaru, Ino, and Choji were, in essence, backup for her. The four functioned surprisingly well.

“Wind Scythe Jutsu!” Temari didn’t wait long to attack, either- she took out as many enemies as she could right away.

“Human Boulder!” Choji added, barreling his way through the ranks of the enemy. His mass hid Ino’s attack and Shikamaru’s trap- perfect teamwork. Ino’s jutsu blasted someone in the stomach, and she

set to work taking out who she could, capitalizing on the surprise factor. While that was happening, Shikamaru's Shadow Possession Jutsu and his Shadow Strangulation Jutsu were wreaking havoc. The fake Akatsuki had no idea where to turn next- they were getting hit from all sides. A counter-attack had been rendered impossible. The members that weren't attacked physical began to drop, courtesy of poison from Shino's insects. The battle had turned into a rout.

"We surrender!" shouted the handful of enemies left. Shikamaru had them all snared with his Shadow Possession Jutsu, and they were surrounded instantly by the Leaf and Sand Shinobi.

"It's a shame my favorite interrogator is away, but I'm sure we can find someone to crack these little pea-brains of yours," Temari snarled, a nasty smirk curling across her lips. Temari wasn't naturally violent- until you crossed her brothers. As the eldest of the sand siblings, Temari took it upon herself to take care of Gaara and Kankuro, despite the fact they didn't seem to need it. In truth, Temari's motherly instincts could keep the group in check when necessary. Right now, Temari's raw anger was keeping the prisoners in check as they were restrained and brought to Sunagakure.

--

Sai reached the Hokage mansion, followed shortly after by Naruto. Immediately, he handed over his orders from Danzou. But when Tsunade opened the envelope, she quickly used her chakra to form a barrier.

The envelope exploded. Sai, Tsunade, and Naruto had survived, but injured. Elder Danzou had taken a vindictive swipe at his sworn nemesis.

--

Yamato heard ANBU exclaiming what had happened through his headset. He narrowed his eyes, hearing Danzou try to make a move. Without hesitation, Yamato's next wood attack crushed Danzou's body, ending his threat. There was evidence enough now- the testimony of enough trusted Shinobi was worth more than any papers. Danzou's threat had passed.

--

Gotta keep going! Detonate!

In a hallway parallel to him, exploding tags went off, collapsing that part of the structure as he ran. The sent of sulfur and blood was a combination with the potential to induce vomiting, but there was no time for that. Movement was all that separating the living from the dead now. To die now would mean failure...failure was unacceptable. Intolerable. Unforgiveable.

He wouldn't let that happen. **Detonate!**

More explosions, more screams, more violence. Life went on.

No turning back now. There was the light at the end of the tunnel. Home free.

--

"You're just going to let that happen?" came the questioning voice.

"Such disrespect!" came another voice, this one disgusted.

"If this surprises you two, you're fools. That one...he will die. He's signed his own death warrant now- he has no one to turn to. Betraying us was his biggest error..."

--

Sakura's mind was hurting today, that much was evident. Too much to think about, too many possible outcomes, too much uncertainty. Tsunade had sent her home early, and Sakura went to bed, hoping to heal quickly and rejoin the fight. For now, she had Holly and her diary to keep her company.

Diary,

My mind has become overtaxed, apparently. With worry about myself, about Ryouko, about Sasuke...it just hurts so much. Sasuke never got to touch me, but at night I can still feel snakes wrapping around me, slithering all over...it's such a scary thought...I don't ever want to face it! But...I know I have to. Running away won't solve my problems. I can't back down forever.

Is clutching Ryouko's coat a weakness? I'm starting to wonder- I don't know what to think of the boy anymore. He told me...that anything I felt for him wasn't real. But for how long? Do these lingering feelings I can't quite decipher mean anything? Or is it still misplaced affection? (sigh) It would have been so much easier if he had never told me. But at the same time, I'm glad he did. Honesty is such a rare thing, and for Ryouko to tell me that...well, let's say I would want him to be the one to tell me anything of meaning. He told me so gently, so carefully...I almost thanked him for giving me bad news!

With all the time I've had to think, I've realized just what it took for Ryouko that day. To be ordered around by Sasuke, forced to his knees to beg for my life...it must have been so humiliating for Ryouko. I know he's never backed down like that before...but he did for my life. He let himself be humbled and beaten so I could escape. The grotesque picture of him, falling slowly to the side, knives in his back...I'll never forget it. All so he could give me enough chakra to escape. His chakra felt strange to me...warm, pleasing...comforting.

But that's just it- are these thoughts real? How do I tell? Is my mind playing tricks, or do I really think so highly of him? It's so hard to tell, it's unfair! But I suppose...that's how life is, too...

Holly sat up with a start, sniffing the air wildly. Her ears perked up and her eyes came alive.

"Sakura, Sakura! It's him! He's back! Ryouko's back! My boy is near the village!"

Sakura's diary fell to the ground, forgotten. Ryouko had come home...

--

12 - Look to the Future

Sakura ran for the gates, Holly following behind her as fast as her little legs could carry her. The trees whizzed by, left in the dust by Sakura's blazing fast feet. She was excited that Ryouko was back, but there was more to it than that.

"If the others get to him first, they'll kill him! They think he's a traitor!" Sakura called over to Holly, who wondered what the big rush was. When she heard that, her ears went flat and her teeth started to show. She didn't mean to show she cared for Ryouko, but it came through now, in what could have been his darkest hour.

"I don't think anyone else could have sensed him yet, my nose could pinpoint him anywhere!" Holly said around a growl. "Times a-wastin' kiddo, time to get movin'!"

--

By the time Sakura got there, Ryouko had been found. He looked like hell, simply put. More pale, more thin, and looking as though he hadn't slept in days, Ryouko was nonetheless trying to force his way in the village.

"Let me talk to Lady Tsunade, she'll explain everything," Ryouko was saying in such a way that Sakura was sure he was repeating himself.

"You tried to kill her, and then escape! Don't deny it! We ALL saw it! You're a traitor, and a disgrace! And now you come back and want forgiveness?!" shouted a chunin in front. The small crowd yelled their agreement. Ryouko let his posture drop slightly, clearly weary from either traveling or arguing, maybe both.

"Then you should have no problem letting me see her. I'm outnumbered, what chance do I have against all of you?" Ryouko pointed out. He was just stating the obvious, but it made so much sense that, for a moment, everyone considered it. Then Ryouko drove his point home with one sardonic quip:

"Unless you don't think Lady Tsunade could handle herself against me, IF I was truly hostile."

Sakura had now reached the group. It was sad to her, seeing Ryouko standing all alone, with no one believing him. She thought back to some of the things he had said to her.

"I wish I could be one of you...that's what he had said...I never understood. He had the headband, and he lived here, how wasn't he 'one of us'? But now I understand. Ryouko will always be an outsider, at least until someone truly accepts him. I could never understand. But now...now I can see it. When he was a child, standing by himself, training. As he got older, the same thing. It must be so sad, and you wonder what you did wrong...when really, he wasn't wrong. We all live the only way we know how, and Ryouko was a casualty of that...no one ever could open their

hearts to him...is that why he is the way he is? Did he see something we didn't? Does he still? Maybe all it would take is some understanding...

An image flashed across Sakura's mind: Ryouko by himself, on one side of a pane of glass. On the other side was the rest of the world. He had his hand to the glass, looking in longingly. But as the world on the other side of the glass grew larger, Ryouko's world only grew in darkness.

Sakura closer her eyes, trying to lose that depressing mental image. Right now, the real Ryouko was here, and he wasn't getting into the village without help. So Sakura, just as Ryouko had done for her those months ago, took the risk to help him. She pushed her way to the front, stepped in front of him, and began to speak.

"Let him in. It's worth hearing what he has to say. If you don't believe our Hokage can handle it, then you don't belong in this village! Now, move!"

No one dared argue with Tsunade's apprentice. Without noticing, Sakura had put on Ryouko's trench coat. It swished behind her as she walked right up the middle of the people, Ryouko following behind her, looking mildly surprised. He couldn't say anything to Sakura yet, the crowd was obviously going to mistake anything he said. So for now, he trailed silently, thanking her in his mind.

--

Tsunade sat in her office, flanked by jonin. The team that had been in the Rain Village had returned, their mission completed. Gai and Kakashi were still with the Kazekage, though they would be returning shortly. That meant that Tsunade was focused on the here and now- that was Ryouko.

"Are you alright?" Tsunade asked simply, seeing Ryouko's bloodied state.

"I am," Ryouko replied. "I'm sorry my mission was terminated so early..."

Tsunade invited Ryouko to sit. He did, although he wouldn't have normally. He would have stayed standing rigidly. But fatigue was catching him, so he left himself fall into the chair that a jonin had provided.

"Please, tell me what happened. After that, I can give you an escort home. Someone who will stay with you until the announcement is made that you were never a betrayer. So, for now, please speak. I ask everyone to let him talk without interrupting. The questions you undoubtedly have will be answered at the end."

Ryouko closed his eyes, but he didn't relax. "I was found out as I was sabotaging Orochimaru's records. He's written down jutsu after jutsu, and how to perform them. I altered the records, one by one, so maybe he would lose those jutsus that he hadn't memorized yet. This went well, until Kabuto, Orochimaru's right-hand man, found me. He didn't particularly care about Orochimaru, but he wanted to know those jutsus himself. As we fought, that naturally attracted the attention of others- too many others. If it was just Kabuto...no, even just Kabuto was too much. I had to pull out, or ALL my work would have been for nothing. I always carried explosive tags on me, enough to take out a building. As I ran, I planted the tags all over. Some I planted in obvious places as I was running, so the Sound ninja would

see them. But the entire time I was in the Sound Village, I had been planting tags everywhere. To put it simply, I took out Orochimaru's current headquarters before I left. While I was there, Orochimaru didn't completely trust me, but he DID ask me how to perform the Fourth Hokage's Jutsu. I steered him wrong there, and a few other times. But that's all I could do. Orochimaru lost thousands of notes, and a few men. Sadly, I think most of the prisoners died as well, though I did my best to plant explosive tags in a way that would allow them to stay alive, then escape after I had done my damage. I'm sorry...that's all I could do."

Silence. Tsunade stood up and walked around her desk to Ryouko. He was clearly emotional, silent tears on his face and his head down. Anyone who knew Ryouko knew exactly what was going through his head: mission failed. Tsunade had expected that and put a hand on Ryouko's head.

"You did well. The village pulled together after you left, and you struck a serious blow to Orochimaru. That's more than I had any right to expect. I'm proud of you." Tsunade gave Ryouko a rare smile. She looked to who she had gathered...of them, only Sakura would bother to talk to Ryouko right now. No doubt everyone had their own thoughts about what had happened. ALL of them would want a better explanation. So Tsunade gave Sakura a meaningful look. Sakura understood, nodded slightly, and helped Ryouko up. His head bobbed up, to nod to her in thanks, but fell back down after a moment as he shuffled out of the room.

Tsunade let her head fall, too. "That's what Orochimaru does to people...I hope that kid'll be okay..."

--

Sakura and Ryouko walked along, not speaking for a short time. Holly had left, leaving the two alone. Ryouko had eventually picked his head, but he still hadn't said anything. Sakura could tell he was thinking something over in his head. So she let him think, despite the fact that she was ready to ask tons of questions.

"Sakura..." Ryouko spoke in an almost silent whisper, his head finally up and facing her. He didn't look any healthier for it, and Sakura was worried about him. But she just looked back. Ryouko gave a deep sigh, but continued.

"I've been worried about you," he began, rolling his arm at the shoulder. Sakura could see a cut under his shirt and vest. But she was thinking more along the lines of 'that's sweet, but I was really worried about you!'

"...I didn't want to leave the village...leave you. Your psyche was delicate, and it still is. If I had stayed, I could have helped you heal it. That's why I left my coat, and why I sent Holly- even though I told you that whatever you felt for me wasn't real, I wanted to make sure I could somehow take care of you..." Ryouko turned even more serious. He stopped walking and turned to face her.

"...it killed me to tell you what I did. About how anything you feel for me isn't real. Because I knew it would have a negative effect on you. But in the long-term, I had hoped that telling you that truth would help. But it made me worry even more. I wondered about dying- would you have been okay? Maybe I'm underestimating you, but I was worried about you. Now that it's been a few months, I wanted to tell you a couple more truths...Actually, just one truth..."

Ryouko made sure he was looking Sakura in the eyes when he said this.

“Sakura...I think I love you. It’s been three years since I first had a crush on you. I could never tell you-I never felt I was good enough for any girl. But now that I’ve lived through hell, I shouldn’t fear anything anymore...what’s left to fear? So...and please, be honest...can you accept my feelings for you?”

Sakura was shocked, to put it mildly. **Does he mean that? Of course he does! But think first...what’s there to think about, just say it!**

“No...I’m sorry, I can’t!” Sakura exclaimed. She looked Ryouko in the eyes, expecting him to be surprised, or even angry. He SHOULD be angry. But instead, Sakura found an understand (but very tired) smile.

“I had a feeling...if I had told you how I felt when I had saved you, things might have been different. But that’s why I didn’t...taking advantage of you isn’t something that will ever cross my mind. To be honest...I knew this would be the outcome from the moment I told you that your feelings for me ‘weren’t real’,’ Ryouko explained, somehow looking relieved and trouble at the same time.

“You...knew? And you still told me? But your crush...I mean...” Sakura sputtered in complete disbelief. It wasn’t like Ryouko to smile, especially not after something like this.

“Of course...I owed you the truth. And, well, I’ve been wrong before, maybe I would have been wrong about your feelings for me. There was a ray of hope, and I acted on it, for once. The results were just what I thought, and I learned to live with that before I even knew for sure.”

Sakura didn’t know what to say. Ryouko seemed aware of this, so he shrugged and offered one more smile.

“Oh well, what can you do? You can’t any more of a person than honesty sometimes. And to be honest in return, I’m thankful you were truthful with me.” Ryouko drew himself up, rolling his hurt shoulder again. He had a smile on his face, though even he didn’t know why.

“At least let me heal your cuts,” Sakura offered quickly. But Ryouko pulled out of her reach.

“It’s better if you don’t. It’s all psychological- you want to fix my cuts because you feel bad, and you think you need to apologize. You don’t have anything to apologize for. Let your conscience rest.”

With that, Ryouko walked off on his own, leaving Sakura just as confused as before. Why did he react that way? Rejection? Or did he really mean what he said?

Probably both.

--

Ryouko sat in his darkened room at home. He had stripped himself naked and begun to work on healing himself. His chakra scalpel was enough for the cuts and burns he had suffered while making his escape

and completing his espionage. Ryouko was physically and mentally exhausted- he had been going non-stop for three days. Now was the time to rest, while he had the chance. But a nagging little feeling tugged at Ryouko.

“Maybe my journal...”

Ryouko pulled the yellowed, blood-stained book out, flipping to an open page. The book was surprisingly full- he had time to write in Otogakure. He had time right now, so why not go ahead and try to get his thoughts down?

Journal,

I escaped Otogakure, destroyed it's buildings, killed a few of it's men...It's no small accomplishment, but I still feel as though I've failed on some level. I guess that's not unreasonable. I'm prone to excess emotional baggage. But still...I just feel something nagging...forbidding...unsettling. No matter what word I use, it's a worry for me.

I'm back home...well, I guess it's 'home'. It doesn't feel that way yet. I imagine that it's going to take some time to get used to being here again. Everyone is so hostile towards me that it's depressing me even further. But at the same time, I can't blame them. For the good of the village or not, I DID deceive them. It'll take time to get their forgiveness, and that's fine. I can live with that.

Sakura...this one is a sore subject. I told her. I reasoned with myself for a change, and came upon this: I've faced Orochimaru, I've fought Sasuke, I've gone toe to toe with Kabuto, and I've stared down Itachi Uchiha. What is there left to fear? Rejection? Well, that's what happened- rejection. Sakura couldn't accept my feelings. I wanted to ask 'why' in the worst way, but I don't want to make her feel worse than she already does. That is the very reason I haven't told her how I felt for so long- I'll never be good enough, and now that she's rejected me, she's going to feel guilty. I hope I can avert her guilt somehow.

Truthfully, I wish I could avoid her. I know it's wrong, but I just don't want to face her. Will things ever be the same between us? I can't tell. But I can't complain- I told her that what she felt for me wasn't real. I couldn't let her do that to herself. But by telling her, I've alienated her. It's something I'll have to live with. I can't ask for forgiveness, as I've done nothing wrong. All I can do is work toward the future.

The future. What a scary thought. I've been told that we can only move forward, even when it's the least pleasing prospect. I can understand it, but I can't appreciate it. I've wasted so much time, so much life. The outcome I received today is a direct result of that. I have no one to blame but myself. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

So, do I still love Sakura? Yes, very much so. But I have to move on, and find another girl, or live alone. I don't want to sulk, but I don't know if a female that will accept me exists. Sakura isn't my only crush, but she was the one I had put the most stock in. For better or worse, that's what I did.

Life goes on. I'll live. Keep on moving. I guess my next mission is to fall back into the good graces of the Leaf Village. It will be long and difficult, but it's my only option. I love it here, and I promised to work for the village. In my mind, I'm still paying a debt- a debt of gratitude for the first place to try to accept me. Just once, I'd like to achieve that acceptance, be it in trust, rank...or love.

I have to stop writing now- Orochimaru will be coming for me, and I need time to prepare. For now, you're my sole companion, journal. What I've written here won't be shared. It's strange talking to an inanimate object, but it has a calming effect. So, thank you for that, and please excuse me, I have further duties to perform.

--

Ryouko picked out a spot on top of the village's dam. The view up here was incredible. But sights didn't interest Ryouko. What interested him was the fact he could see almost any movement from up here. It was the perfect vantage point to lie in wait for Orochimaru.

I'm sure he's taken my bait...I made sure he saw me when I made a break for it...time to lure him here and settle this. All the Shinobi are already on alert because of me, so Orochimaru won't take them by surprise. For once, I set the trap. I even knew of my own failures ahead of time. Still, it's odd being so clear-headed right after what should have been a shattering rejection. I thought that maybe I didn't love her, if I got over her saying 'no' so quickly.

But that's not it.

I can feel something else. Where in my mind, before all this happened, the Reaper Death Seal was something I would use without hesitation. Now, even though she can't accept my love, Sakura may still retain a connection to me in her psyche. Which brings me to the question...should I use the Seal? If I die, will it affect her? And how badly will it affect her? I don't get girls, hell, I haven't even figured myself out yet. But I do know that, as a rule, humans tend to feel sorry, angry, hurt, confused, when a link to their old life snaps. In Sakura's state, it might be fatal if I were to kill myself. Because her last words to me would have been saying no, then trying to ease her conscience by healing my cuts. If it were me, I would feel awful- like I killed that person myself.

On the other hand, if I DON'T use the seal, the whole village might be in danger. Two Shinobi as collateral damage for the eradication of a threat...seems to make sense. Because if I DIDN'T use the seal, then it would be MY personal feelings getting in the way.

What if she had said yes? Would I still be thinking this? No doubt I wouldn't have used the Seal- I'd have too much to live for. My life is worth more than I think...and that should be all. The deciding factor is just that- respect for myself. There are other kunoichi out there, or there's always the road of the ronin. So the Seal...will be my last resort. And that's final.

Ryouko stopped his thought process there, before his mind could conjure up a third side to this story. No matter what, he wasn't getting a storybook ending out of this, and he could live with that. What Ryouko couldn't live with was failure. He had set his trap, and now he had to spring it. There could be no more

doubts, and he could only be given one chance. And he would take that chance.

As he thought that, Ryouko saw the signs of a Summoning Jutsu below. He leapt just in time as a snake came crashing toward him. Ryouko drew a kunai from the holster near his hip and leapt off the dam. He landed with a dull thud on the snake's head, the kunai planted on top of it. BLAM!

The explosive note blew, sending the snake into a frenzy. Ryouko was already running down in, planting tags as he went, detonating them one at a time, until the snake disappeared, it's chakra gone, leaving it susceptible to further injury. Ryouko kept moving, seeing his targets. Orochimaru, Sasuke, and Kabuto. Ryouko stopped short of them and took up a guard.

"My my, how rude the Leaf Village is!" Orochimaru commented with a laugh. "They only send ONE person to great a legend, and he's a nasty little thing at that! Kabuto, kill him."

Kabuto activated his chakra scalpel, but Sasuke put a hand out.

"It's my fight. He stopped me from rebuilding my clan. I'll be the one to kill him. DO NOT get involved in this, Orochimaru," Sasuke muttered, striding forward confidently.

Ryouko had to suppress a snarl. "If I'm your target, you won't mind if the Leaf doesn't get involved..." Ryouko started to tell a huge lie, and hoped it wouldn't show. "They had nothing to do with that building being attacked, or even with me. I turned traitor to them, but found that I hated you more. So I came back here to get forgiveness. They won't give me any, so I'm not a part of this village. So we can settle this, three on one."

Ryouko thought about using Shadow Clones and then the Reaper Death Seal. He had replayed the Third Hokage's death in his head so many times that he had it memorized down to the finest detail. The biggest mistake the third had made was to wait until his chakra was so low before he attempted the Seal.

That, and he was emotionally blinded by his old student reappearing...I don't have that weakness...no, no seal yet

"Let's just see how far you've come, Ryo-kohai. Chidori!" Sasuke tore forward, using the speed he had copied from Lee, his outstretched hand holding a killing blow of pure chakra. The sound of birds chirping filled the air. Ryouko knew what Sasuke would do- it was obvious of someone who had so much speed.

"Dragon's Fire Wall!" Ryouko barked, causing flames to spring in front of him. **Replacement Jutsu!** he added, disappearing. Sure enough, Sasuke's hand tore through the log Ryouko had used. He had come in from behind the fire wall.

"Detonate!" Ryouko yelled, causing a tag hidden on the destroyed log to light up and activate. Sasuke saw this coming and dodged away. Ryouko had anticipated where he would land, and was waiting when Sasuke landed. Throwing his right fist forward, he tagged Sasuke hard in the jaw, sending him skidding to the ground, back at the feet of Orochimaru.

"It seems he's well-prepared for you, Sasuke," Kabuto chimed in, not entirely hiding his cheer that Sasuke wasn't going to have as easy a time as he thought. But when the Sasuke at his feet disappeared, Kabuto had to retract that. **So Sasuke IS thinking that far ahead...well then, this will be an interesting fight...**

Ryouko twisted suddenly, evading a kick from Sasuke. As he twisted, Ryouko threw his foot around in a roundhouse, which was caught by Sasuke. Sasuke didn't catch Ryouko's other foot (his supporting foot), which caught him under the chin. Sasuke rolled with the blow, sending Ryouko into the air by throwing him feet-first. Sasuke leapt up after him.

"Lion's Barrage!" Sasuke declared, starting his debilitating series of kicks. Ryouko replaced himself with a log and landed above Sasuke, stomping down on him. As his arms came up in a reflex, Ryouko grabbed them.

"Inverted Impact Flight!" he called, aiming to push Sasuke into the ground face first. Sasuke proved he could use replacement jutsus as well as Ryouko. Neither boy managed to land a hit as they touched down. Both kicked off the ground at the same time, jutsus in the works. Ryouko was avoiding Sasuke's eyes- he wasn't sure if Sasuke could do what his brother could, but it was a safe bet. Instead, Ryouko decided on a test. He couldn't match Sasuke in taijutsu forever, that much was for certain. But at the same time, using too much chakra would be a bad idea. So Ryouko settled on an easy-to-use jutsu; one that set up nicely for genjutsu later.

"Transform!" Ryouko said calmly. When the smoke cleared, Sasuke found himself staring down his brother.

"You bastard! How dare you?!" Sasuke screamed, tearing furiously toward Ryouko/Itachi. Ryouko chose not to move just yet.

"Your hate is still too weak, little brother. And you know something? It will NEVER be strong enough."

This was suicide. Making Sasuke mad, and using the image of his brother to do so. That was a gutsy move, but it wasn't easy to see why it was a relevant move. That would become apparent later. For now, Sasuke used his speed to land behind Ryouko/Itachi. Ryouko used a backfist to hit Sasuke- or try to. Sasuke landed in front of Ryouko, aiming for a kick to the stomach. Ryouko raised his shin in a block, catching Sasuke's foot. He yanked forward, tugging Sasuke toward his incoming fist. Sasuke leaned backward, away from the fist, now on one foot. Ryouko pushed forward, knocking Sasuke even more off-balance. Using this, Ryouko tried to use an elbow, but that was thwarted when Sasuke blocked with his forearm. This stalemated the two boys, until Sasuke used his chakra as a springboard and leapt straight up, forcing Ryouko to let go, or he'd be dragged in the air by his leg in a horrible position.

"Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!" Sasuke's signature fire attack flew towards Ryouko. Ryouko bit his thumb, just in case- he had been down this road before. He dodged the fireballs, but found his intuition to be correct- there were wires hidden within the wire. The kunai on one end acted as a weight, which then used a tree as a pulley. In effect, Ryouko was tied to a tree. The blood on his thumb would come in handy now. Just before the ropes grabbed him, Ryouko made the handsigns for a Summoning Jutsu. Now, he weakly tapped his hand against the tree, summoning his Chinese water dragon, Umisu.

“Water style: Water Wall!” Ryouko called to Umisu. Umisu leapt on the wire in front of Ryouko, then spat out an amount of water that seemed to violate the laws of nature. Sasuke had used a fire jutsu, and the rope was the catalyst. The water wall put out the fire, and also gave Umisu time to use one of his scales to cut the wire holding Ryouko in place.

Fire attacks aren't any good... Ryouko thought. **Genjutsu and taijutsu are strong for him, too...so I've got to be really clever here.**

--

Sakura went home, locked herself in her room, drew the blinds, and got into bed. She felt awful- sick, confused, hurt...hurt?

Diary,

Ryouko returned today, told me he loved me, and I turned him down. I feel like a jerk, but there's something that's bothering me. Ryouko said that he knew this would happen. My rejection didn't even phase him! And that...that bothers me! I mean, maybe I'm not the prettiest, and nearly an absolute zero in the T and A department...but, I mean, shouldn't he have been more upset? He's had this crush for, like, three years! He finally tells me, I shoot him down, and he shrugs it off?!

I mean...not to sound selfish, but that hurt my feelings a little. Knowing Ryouko, he was just trying to soften the blow for me...act like it was nothing, so I would act like it was nothing...but I wish he had been more upset, I guess. I feel rotten for wishing that, but I just wonder what went through his head...

Do I love him? I was so shocked he said anything that I didn't react in the way I wanted. Of course I love him...I just don't know what KIND of love I feel for him. Friend, acquaintance, something more, something less? I need to think about it. But the fact he approached me means a lot, I won't lie. Every girl in the world would enjoy being told she was liked, even if it didn't come from who she thought it would. Maybe Ryouko wasn't the fodder of my dreams, but does that mean that I DON'T love him? I'm so confused. Damn it! Everything happened so fast...I can't still have feelings for Sasuke, can I? The bastard tried to rape me! But...I guess it's hard to let go of something you've loved for so long...

Sakura slammed her diary shut. That was when something dawned on her.

Maybe Ryouko was distracted, too...he can't be thinking of fighting again! Can he?! Sakura knew the answer to that. Pulling her gloves on, she zipped out the door, hoping she wasn't too late.

They can't be hard to find...

--

BLAM!

Ryouko dodged aside once more, feeling his stamina getting lower and lower- he would have to use jutsus soon. For now, he wanted to push Sasuke's stamina, too- take away the speed advantage.

The two had exchanged punches, kicks, and knives, but no one scored any critical hits. Ryouko decided he had to test Sasuke's speed. This test wasn't one Sasuke could fake his way out of- either Ryouko hit, or he didn't. That in mind, two shadow clones flanked him, each drawing one long sword, and one short sword. They all began to move at top speed. To Sasuke's trained Sharingan eye, they might as well have been standing still. But that wasn't the question- the question was how fast Sasuke could react.

"Sickle Moon Dance!" Ryouko yelled, coughing at the end. This jutsu was A-ranked, and it drained your chakra something fierce. But when his first attack landed, Ryouko knew he had this won.

Six swords. Sasuke's arms (2), legs (2), and the tops of his shoulders (2) all had swords in them. The clones had taken care of the arms and legs. They disappeared now, leaving nasty wounds. Ryouko's swords had bitten into Sasuke's shoulders. He had come over the top of his clones, driving his swords into Sasuke's shoulders. Now, he looked Sasuke in the eyes. The normally impassive eyes were pain-filled, but defiant.

"Chidori: One Thousand Birds Current!" Sasuke suddenly called. This jutsu caught Ryouko by surprise, he was ashamed to admit. A Chidori-like pulse reverberated through Sasuke's body, through Ryouko's swords, and into Ryouko. The jolt sent him flying backward, thrown into town.

That was how the fight would end for Ryouko. The battle had been an hour long, and Ryouko wasn't going to win. He knew that, too. But now he had proven to himself that he was right- he WASN'T good enough.

"SASUKE!"

Sakura came barreling forward, leaping in front of the fallen Ryouko. She looked Sasuke in the eyes, then hugged him. Ryouko saw this from the ground- he also saw a kunai in each of their hands. Summoning his strength, Ryouko pushed Sakura behind him just as Sasuke stabbed.
SKCHH!

Sasuke's kunai was in Ryouko's stomach. Ryouko leaned into the kunai, and braced Sasuke's hand. Sakura stabbed over Ryouko's shoulder, and into Sasuke's chest.

Shortly thereafter, the calvary arrived, and Orochimaru and Kabuto had to flee. They couldn't face Jiraiya and Tsunade, that had been proven once before.

Sakura let the kunai fall from her hand. She hadn't meant to do that. But somehow, it felt right...maybe something was telling her which way to look. The kunai landed on the ground, pointing toward Ryouko, who had since fallen. Sakura nodded, as if finally admitting something to herself.

She did love Ryouko back. When he recovered, she would tell him so.

--

Time passed. Ryouko was cleared of all wrong-doing, and made a full recovery.

Sasuke's unconscious form was dragged into the village by Naruto, allowing Naruto to make good on his 'promise of a lifetime'.

Sasuke recovered, and was being held prisoner. After spending time with Naruto and Sakura once more, he rejected Orochimaru.

Sakura struggled with her feelings. She hated Sasuke, but at the same time, she loved him. Ryouko she knew she loved, but she wasn't sure how.

It was a complex set of emotions in the Hidden Leaf thereafter. No one could believe the whole thing with Ryouko had been a ruse. When they finally accepted it, he was welcomed back. He was not promoted- instead, he became a counselor to the Hokage, until his injuries healed eight months later. He was then given the title of 'jonin'.

Now, we look toward the future. These trials of two Shinobi are merely a precursor for what is yet to come. The present became the past, and the past looked toward the future.

--

SEQUEL ANYONE?