

# Deception

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*Evil inside the Leaf begins to leak out when one jonin catches an elder in an evil act. Sacrifices are made to defend the Leaf's integrity.*

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# 1 - Sacrifice 1: Discovery

Ryouko...no, he had to stop thinking of himself like that! He wasn't ANBU right now! But he wasn't a civilian either.

**Maybe it's fine to pick a 'normal' name?**

That didn't matter right now. What DID matter was that he was hearing the worst possible kind of thing. Concealed in the shadows in Konoha's vast underground passage-system, Ryouko was lending an ear to a conversation not meant for him.

Elder Danzou was speaking to his trusted team. Ryouko wasn't part of that group. Instead, he made it his business to keep an eye on them. Lady Tsunade hadn't objected to him doing that. If anything, her glances at him had been encouraging. So he kept listening.

Now that seemed like a bad idea. He had just heard Danzou's plots to get hire the Akatsuki to take out the Leaf's current leadership. That by itself wasn't bad- it was good that someone heard that.

The problem was that Danzou knew that he heard.

Ryouko began to run- he HAD to get this information to Lady Tsunade! He took off in the maze-like underground path system of the Hidden Leaf. He didn't know it quite as well as the twisting streets, so his progress was a little slow.

THOCK!

An ANBU sword hit Ryouko in the back as he ran through the dark, twisting hallways. It was a fatal strike. As soon as it hit, Ryouko coughed up blood. He hit the ground hard, getting his arm in front of his face to brace himself just barely in time.

**But I can't die right now!** he thought desperately, using the last of his strength to perform a body flicker jutsu. He also wondered why he didn't think of doing that before. It was most likely the shock of hearing an insider planning Konoha's undoing.

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His jutsu didn't get him far enough. Luckily, he had put himself a safe end of town. Right near Sakura's apartment!

**I've...gotta make it! Ugh!**

Ryouko dragged himself toward Sakura's home. Where the hell were the night patrols?! There were supposed to be Jonin and Chunin patrolling the streets, even at this hour! He hadn't dared pull the sword out of his back. Sometimes pulling something out a stab wound was a bad idea. In this case, Ryouko decided to leave it to a medical professional.

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KNOCK KNOCK!

Sakura sat up, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

**Huh? It's so early! It's not even four in the morning!**

She padded to the door in her bare feet and somewhat short and loose white nightgown. One strap fell down off her shoulder. Sakura knew she should fix it, but was too tired to care. Her hair was falling over one side of her face, adding to the 'I'm so sleepy' look she was projecting at the moment. She rubbed her eyes again, trying to make herself feel and appear more awake. Her bangs just fell back across one eye, so she gave up on that for the moment.

Had she known it was a boy knocking, she would have cared a little more. But the only person who called at this hour was Shizune, or Lady Tsunade herself.

**Besides, the 'off-the-shoulder' strap is sexy!** her half-asleep brain provided helpfully.

Sakura opened the door. She looked around, but didn't see anyone. Then, by chance, she looked down.

"Oh my God!"

Ryouko was laying on her doorstep, his breathing heavy and his eyes out of focus. Not to mention with a sword out of his back. Blood had leaked out of the wound and Ryouko's mouth. It was coagulating on Sakura's front step.

Ryouko was in no shape to bow, so he offered her a salute. "Sorry to disturb you so...(cough) late..."

Sakura immediately knelt down and picked Ryouko up by getting under his arm. She dragged him inside and gently laid him face-down on a tatami mat in the center of her apartment.

"Hold on, okay?! I've got to get something to slow the bleeding!"

Ryouko grabbed her wrist, shaking his head, though his entire world shook when he did that. "No...no time. Lady...Tsunade had to hear this! You've got to tell her! I'm...not gonna make it..."

Sakura was in tears, but she knelt down by his side anyway. He started to outline everything to her. While he did, she began to work on his back. She got her hands bloody, but that didn't matter to her. She'd never lost a patient before, and she wasn't going to start now! Especially not someone carrying confidential information for Lady Tsunade!

**My first death won't be a friend, either! Hang on, Ryouko!**

Ryouko kept talking. His back had long gone numb, and he couldn't feel his legs. Those were the

symptoms that made him decide that he wasn't going to reach Tsunade in time. At least he could tell her apprentice, so the message would get to her.

"...So...please tell her...I'm sorry...You can...put me outside...It would be...problematic to die here."

"Shut up! I'm not done yet!" Sakura demanded, giving Ryouko a smack on the back of the head. "You don't get to die! You understand me?! While you're a soldier in the Leaf army, under my care, dying is NOT ALLOWED! Now you stay with me!"

Sakura took a deep breath. She had stabilized him and slowed the bleeding. His shirt and vest had been cut off him. (She KNEW he was critical when he didn't blush at that point) Now she had to perform the pseudo-surgery- pulling the blade out while she kept him from bleeding out. Then, she had to immediately close the wound to keep it from getting infected. Not to mention she probably had to repair a cracked vertebrae or two. Ryouko was lucky that the sword hadn't been heavier and sunk in deeper.

**Okay, you can do this, girl! Just stay calm, pull slowly, and keep Ryouko distracted! You can do this- and he can survive! Here we go!**

Ryouko closed his eyes. Sakura felt his breath start to slow. She began to pull as fast as she could without damaging him any more.

**Just a little more...Got it!**

The sword came free. Sakura threw it aside and immediately closed the wound and healed most of the damage. Immediately, Ryouko's breath began to even out again. But now they had a new problem.

**His fever spiked from the pain and injury! He might have even been delirious! After what he told me, I don't dare take him to the hospital, in case he isn't dreaming this. And I can't move him... Leaving him to get medicine is out... And I don't have any here... Damn it, if I don't do something, he'll die from a stupid fever! Wait... I know!**

Ryouko's fever was so bad it made him delusional. Fortunately, he was also weak and couldn't fight her as she stripped him. She was kind enough not to look at his naked body as she half-walked, half-dragged him to her bathroom.

"C'mon, stay with me!" she told/ordered him. Not caring for the moment about how this looked, she stepped into the shower with Ryouko. She held him up as she turned the water on. Even though she was now going to freeze, she didn't have the means to give him an ice bath. So an 'arctic shower' would do in it's place.

**I WOULD wear a white, loose nightgown the night a dying boy who turns red around kunoichi shows up. Although it's not white anymore. Now it's red from blood, and see-through because of the water. If he wasn't completely out of it, I wonder if I would do this?**

**For him? Yes. He's as trustworthy as they come.**

After a few minutes of the freezing water raining down on them, Sakura shut it off. She laid Ryouko

down on the bathroom floor as she ran into her room to grab towels. She didn't even think of herself as she began to dry Ryouko off.

**Don't look, don't look, don't look...** Sakura reminded herself. She turned away when she wiped his private area out of respect for him. She still got a handful, but since a towel was in the way, it didn't count as 'fondling'. Besides, this was an emergency.

Once Ryouko was dry, Sakura dragged him to her bed. She tucked him in tightly under her thick red comforter. She put a hand to his forehead, sighing.

**That lowered the fever a little bit, but it could climb back up too easily. There's only one more option now...**

Sakura took a towel for herself. She pulled her nightgown off over her head, tossing the wet and ruined garment into the corner. Next, she dried herself off as fast as she could. Once satisfied, she paused to gather her wits.

**I've got to get into bed with him. I can absorb his fever through direct skin contact. (gulp) At this point, that's all I can do. He's got to live! Besides, this is Ryouko! He'll panic once he wakes up and I'm clutching him. If I can trust one boy in the village, it's this one. So suck it up, girl, and get in bed with him!**

Sakura, still naked, lifted her comforter. For this to work, she had to lay mostly on top of Ryouko. It couldn't be helped, so Sakura didn't hesitate very long. She winced at how hot his body was, even after the cold shower, and that strengthened her resolve.

Sakura put her hands around his neck (to keep them from wandering somewhere less safe), and laid her upper body against his. She laid her head on the pillow, fitting it next to his head.

**Should I just tell M'lady now? ...No, what if he was already delirious when he started talking? Besides, if it's ANBU hunting anyone who knows, I'll need someone watching my back. And leaving Ryouko alone, with this fever and those enemies...It's not an option.**

Somehow, they both succumbed to the pull of sleep. The rest of the world was an enemy until further notice, but somehow there was an unspoken comfort in lying next to someone you trusted like this.

Sakura had one more thought before drifting off to sleep, though. **How could things have happened like this? It must be that Ryouko was hallucinating, or was delirious. No way Elder Danzou would be in league with the Akatsuki!**

--

Ryouko's eyes fluttered, then opened. Some small rays of sun were poking their way into the room through the blinds over the windows. The room was still very dark, and for a few moments Ryouko thought he was home.

**Wait...that's not right. What happened? And what's this warmth on my chest?**

Imagine Ryouko's surprise when he found a girl he had a crush on for a long time laying on his body. And, surprise!- They were both naked!

**No way! If we did anything, I'd remember! Wouldn't I?! PLEASE, I wanna remember! Wait...wait... That's right! I was dying last night! What happened?! And why do I feel alive today? Aside from my back killing me...and I'm all sweaty! And naked! What the hell happened?! Not what I'd really like, obviously...**

Sakura stirred, then sat up. She found Ryouko's hazel eyes staring at her. Immediately, she launched herself up and off his body. Or, she tried to. She found Ryouko's arms around her.

"Oh! I'm sorry! I didn't know I was..." Ryouko sputtered, letting go and apologizing. Sakura was busy covering herself with one of the towels from last night.

"Never mind!" she snapped, pushing him back down so she could feel his head. "Let's see...your fever broke! YES! Now, turn over!"

Ryouko obediently turned over on his stomach. He was all too thankful, actually. This was pretty high on the turn-on scale. From one to ten, this was a fifteen, at least. And that was before you got to her ordering him around!

That number climbed to twenty when Sakura began rubbing his back, probing the area of the wound gently with her hands.

"Good, good! You healed nicely, thank God! You gave me a quite a scare!" Sakura admonished, ruffling Ryouko's hair. "Dragging yourself in half-dead, and telling me those things!"

Ryouko sat up quickly, forgetting he was naked. At this point, he didn't care, even if his crush was present. All that mattered was delivering his information to Lady Tsunade.

"Sakura, you've gotta believe me! That was real! I've gotta tell Lady Tsunade! Where'd my clothes go?"

Sakura made sure she was covered before telling him "You can't wear those! They were destroyed! The pants might be salvageable, actually..."

"That's fine!" Ryouko told her urgently, running for his clothes. Sakura blushed, doing her best not to stare. It was kind of hot having a naked guy run around her home. After clutching him all night, Sakura had felt Ryouko's muscles, and she'd be lying if she said he wasn't more attractive to her now.

"I'm going to get dressed, then! You're not going anywhere alone; not after I spent most of last night patching you up!" Sakura called back, running over to her closet. She rifled through her drawers for underwear, then tossed on her normal clothes.

"Okay, let's go! Wait, are you stopping at home first? To get more clothes?"

Ryouko shook his head. "I can't. They know I heard them- they've got the place booby- trapped by

now. These'll have to do until I get a new uniform from Lady Tsunade."

Ryouko paused, looking at Sakura out of the corner of his eye shyly. When she met his gaze, he blushed even harder.

"Thank you... for saving me, I mean! I really appreciate it!"

Sakura smiled and waved his thanks off.

**But that look in his eyes...that wasn't just a 'thank you' look... He was blushing awfully hard...could there be something else in his mind? No way, he's a career man! He doesn't have time for girls! And why me anyway? A handsome boy like him could have anyone. I'm just reading into a blush! From Ryouko at that! After last night, I'm surprised I'm not lit up like the sky on Chinese New Year!**

--

Ryouko barged past the guards and into Tsunade's office. Beat up, wearing nothing but a pair of blue, blood-stained pants, and with a scar that hadn't healed yet on his back, Ryouko outlined all he had heard and seen last night to the head of the village. The fearsome FireShadow, the Hokage. In this case, the Hokage was also a legend worthy of her own book- Lady Tsunade, legendary healer (or legendary sucker; it depends on who you ask).

**It's frightening to see this much intensity from him,** Sakura thought, nervously smoothing her skirt despite standing military-straight. **He's normally so hard to read. But now, he's pounding on her desk, giving 'orders', and outlining a scary situation. I saw his injury, so I know he isn't faking it. No way he got that from training.**

Tsunade didn't seem all that surprised. In fact, if anything, she seemed to have her thoughts together as soon as she heard what Ryouko had to say. As if she had been expecting some disaster like this.

"Ryouko, listen to me- this is an *order*. You will take Sakura and Sai, and flee the village immediately. There is no time for discussion. Everything you need to know will be communicated to you through Sai when you need to know it."

Ryouko didn't protest. In fact, he seemed more military-ish himself.

**As if this wasn't a complete surprise to him, either...** Sakura thought, deciding it was a little suspicious. And yet, not surprising all the same. Ryouko had earned the trust of those who were more powerful than he was through hard work, discipline, and extraordinary actions when the situation called for it.

"My Lady, I need some new clothes. No doubt my place is booby-trapped by now," Ryouko informed her crisply. Shizune went into a storeroom next door and brought a new jonin uniform for him.

"You're going to have to get dressed here. Shizune, Sakura- watch him. I'm sorry about this invasion of privacy, Ryouko. But we can't turn our backs, not even in here. If you heard that, they'll want you eliminated right away, no matter what."

Ryouko blushed. "M-My Lady, no disrespect intended, but-"

Tsunade stood up, a commanding presence even at fifty-plus years of age. "Are you stripping yourself, or do I have to do it for you? And don't even whine about sexual harassment! Not when we're protecting you! Now, STRIP!"

Ryouko finally did as he was told. He pulled his pants off as fast as he could, then replaced them equally as quick. The girls in the room blushed, but nothing like Ryouko.

**Aw man! Naked in front of girls for the first time, and it happens twice within a day? Well, at least it's girls I can trust. But, damn it, not in front of the girl I have a crush on! I hope I'm 'impressive' to her! No, better yet, don't look, Sakura!**

...

**No, don't get turned on *now*! Think of bad things! Ugly things!**

Ryouko finished dressing, deciding he would buy a trench coat. If he had to get naked again, he would keep the thing with one of his summons so he wouldn't have to stay naked for long. Although he hoped his nudity wouldn't be a pattern (special circumstances aside).

Tsunade nodded. "You look fine. Good boy. Now, come here."

Ryouko did, and Tsunade pulled him into a hug. She whispered into his ear "Take care of my girl, Ryouko. Protect her; protect her like I know you want to. Danzou will come for me next. He can use the council to overrule me. If that happens, I'm going to make someone else Hokage until I can take care of the problem. Naruto is safe with Kakashi and Yamato. That leaves Sakura...and you. Take care of each other."

Tsunade let go, and nodded to Shizune. She hugged Ryouko while Tsunade went to Sakura.

"Ryouko...give these to Sakura. If you have to leave her side for any length of time, these will protect her..." Shizune whispered. She always had a soft spot for Ryouko, so she gave him an extra squeeze. "And...you might have to kill to protect her and yourself. Can you do that?"

Ryouko whispered back even as he felt Shizune's eyes looking deep into him: "I can, and I will if it comes to that. If you told me to, Shizune, I would go kill Danzou right now, and end this problem. But I can see that won't happen. So just take care of M'Lady, okay?"

Shizune gave him a warm smile before depositing an armband with spring-loaded needles dipped in poison. Shizune found it to be effective in combat and was betting that someone of Sakura's considerable talent would find it useful.

After hugs and goodbyes were exchanged, Tsunade told them that Sai would meet them at the gate. After that, they should run to Tanzaku town, lose themselves in the crowd for a few days, then keep moving until they received word via summon of what had happened.

After that, it was out the door. Ryouko looked over at Sakura, and saw how nervous and upset she was. He was the jonin of this impromptu group, so he had to keep things together. Forcing himself to be



friendly, he reached over, patted Sakura's head, then set his face in a look of grim determination.

Sakura felt the pat on the head, and was surprised that Ryouko would do that.

**Even though I've seen him naked, it's still hard to believe he's human. Especially with that super-serious look on his face. He must be trying to intimidate anyone we pass. That's a good move. And if that doesn't work, I'll intimidate with my fists.**

## 2 - Sacrifice 2: ANBU

Sai was waiting for the two of them by the gate. When he saw them coming with those deadpan stoic looks on their faces, he sought out his book on friendship. He never seemed to notice that following the book's advice got him into trouble.

**Let's see... "When a friend is troubled, it is beneficial to call him or her by the nickname you gave them (see chapter three), and then to hug your friend and tell him or her that you're with them."**

As Ryouko approached with Sakura, Sai broke into a smile.

"Hello, plain (Sakura)! Hello, single (Ryouko)!" Sai exclaimed, moving to hug Sakura. Ryouko was surprised to see Sakura let Sai hug her. He stopped being surprised when she picked him up and squeezed him until his back cracked with protest.

**Man, if I ever DO get to sleep with her...when I'm aware of it...I'd better be very careful. If she hugs too hard, she'll snap me in half,** Ryouko thought, slightly mortified at the thought of that. Not to mention what people would say about finding his body...

"Okay then. Sai, Sakura, for now I'm the ranking member. I know we can work together, so I'll skip that end of the pep talk. Now, this is a grave situation. We have to stay together. If you leave the group, you'll have to identify yourself to be allowed back in. That goes for all of us."

After a pause, Ryouko continued.

"We'll head to Tanzaku town and lose ourselves for a few days. During that time, we can plan on what to do. For now, we can't discuss anything else here. Let's get moving."

Ryouko started to move, but his back locked up.

"Damn it!" he cursed. This was a bad omen, especially at the start of their journey.

Sakura reached down and tapped Ryouko's spine just so. His back unlocked. He nodded his thanks, promising to give her a smile of gratitude later. For now, he had to look tough. He had two people to protect, and then himself. Damned if he was going to let some crooked ANBU agents take him down without a fight!

--

That night, they had traveled halfway to Tanzaku town. They were going to camp in the woods for the night. That was incredibly nerve-wracking, knowing that they were being hunted. It was too much like a B-grade horror flick. But in this case, this was the sort of thing they had all trained for.

"What do you two usually do when Team Kakashi is camping out?" Ryouko asked. He always did everything himself, since he worked alone. Teamwork was a new thing to him, so he decided to follow

the lead of his two friends.

“We both gather wood, usually...” Sakura informed him. “Captain Yamato takes care of our lodgings. Naruto goes hunting, if we need that. And Kakashi-sensei...does nothing but read his stupid pervy books.”

Ryouko chuckled a little at that. “Well, we shouldn’t need any elaborate houses tonight. In fact, I’d like to get going before the night is over. We’ll just rest for a couple hours, then take off.”

Ryouko didn’t hear them protest, but he would have if he were them. Maybe that’s why he said “I’ll take care of the first night at a hot springs resort once we reach Tanzaku town.”

That made his two compadres very happy. They could all use a good night like that. Especially if the worst came to pass, as Ryouko suspected it would. They should have fun and make memories now.

**Lady Tsunade may have told me to take her and run, but the second I’ve got a good plan, I’m going back to liberate the village. I’m not going to let that crusty old warmonger own my home!**

“If we’re going to be on the lam, perhaps we should have a cover story, Ryouko?” Sai suggested, smiling his ‘is it real or is it fake’ smile.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Let’s see...Sai, you’re my younger brother. Sakura, you’re going to be a childhood friend of ours. If anyone asks, you and I are close to being boyfriend/girlfriend.”

Sakura blushed suddenly. She was thankful the flickering light from the fire was questionable at best so the others wouldn’t see her blush.**Boyfriend/girlfriend?! Me and Ryouko?! First that smile earlier, then this ‘relationship’ stuff? No, no, I’m reading into the wrong stuff! It’s just a cover story! It’s not like we’re actually like that! Stop acting like a giddy teenage girl!**

Ryouko, meanwhile, had to go for a walk. He wished he had a cigarette right now. He only smoked when he felt himself losing control of his anxiety, which wasn’t often. But something like this pushed him to his limits.

**Too bad all my stuff got destroyed after my injury. Damn it.**

He leaned against a thick, old oak tree. It’s rough bark dug into his palm. He hadn’t had time to replace his gloves. Or his sandals. He didn’t like the standard issue sandals much. They were impractical if you kicked in combat. That, and blue sandals didn’t mesh well for his stealth work.

In his head, Ryouko mapped out their route to Tanzaku town. There was actually a nice, straight, clean path that took a couple days to hike, if you went straight to Tanzaku town. Obviously, for three people traveling under the radar, such a path wasn’t an option. They had to take a roundabout route through the woods. While you were more likely to leave traces that you were there in the woods, the forest had an inordinate ability to swallow up paths and evidence both in a short amount of time.

**Nature’s adaptability is fascinating at times. Hopefully it’ll ‘fascinate’ any pursuers we have off our trail.**

Ryouko peeked over his shoulder at his two teammates. They were settling down to rest for a couple hours. That meant that Ryouko was going to stay on guard duty. Like he could have relaxed, being the one in the crosshairs.

**I can relax once we get to Tanzaku town and get lost in the crowd. A few nights in a hotel to relax, then we take our time to plan. What can we do from the outside to get our home back?**

...

**I'm gonna get court-martialed for going back. Best case scenario. Worst case, I'm killed on site. But that beats letting those bastards corrupt the Leaf Village. If I have to disgrace myself to save it, I will.**

**Now, to a matter that's been in my head for a while- I need to get the guts up to ask Sakura out. Man, if she says no, this is going to be one awkward trip...so I won't ask yet. But before this trip is over, I'll have asked out my first girl! It sure seemed like Tsunade was okay with it. All that about 'protecting her the way I want to' and all...**

Ryouko had his fist clenched in determination. At least, he did until a second thought struck him:

**Why did that seem like a horribly 'un-joninish' thing to think? (sigh)**

--

After their short rest, the three took off through the trees, aiming to reach Tanzaku town by daybreak. With a festival going on, no one would think anything of three travelers showing up that early in the morning. It would be easier to lose themselves in the early morning light anyway. The town would be lit up all night long, no doubt. So they had to pick the moment when the natural light was just strong enough to drown out the streetlights. It was people seeing them up close that was dangerous.

--

"No, that's not what I said! Don't misunderstand me!"

Ryouko was currently trying to outline to a particularly belligerent hotel clerk that he did not want the honeymoon suite.

"But sir, you have such a lovely young lady with you! You should give her the best. That way, she'll give YOU the best!" the clerk protested, wagging her finger at Ryouko like he was a naughty dog.

Ryouko shook his head- this lady wasn't getting it! "Look, we're traveling with my younger brother. We're not going to be doing anything above a PG-13 rating here!"

"We have a special deal on children's rooms. And for young couples, it gets even better!"

Ryouko gritted his teeth, putting a hand to his forehead. "Listen, just give me a regular room. Three futons. I'll be sure to take good care of my girl without the honeymoon suite. She really doesn't like that sort of thing- besides, she's always telling me to be more spontaneous. How can I be more spontaneous if the room is screaming 'have sex' everywhere we look?"

The clerk nodded, a dead serious look on her face. She bowed her head a little as she spoke. "I see. You, young man, are an excellent boy for such a classy girl! You make such an adorable couple! How old are you two? Sixteen? Fifteen?"

"She's twenty; I'm twenty-one. Why the hell would you try to sell two minors on a honeymoon suite?!" Ryouko couldn't help saying that last part- what was this lady trying to pull?

**I hate to lie, but I can't give our real ages. Even that tiny scrap of information could lead ANBU to us. In fact, when we switch hotels tomorrow, I'll have Sai check in before us to break up our group a little.**

"We don't judge here, sir. Love is love, at any age," the clerk laughed, holding up a hand as if to say 'age, shmage!'.

Ryouko really didn't want to stay here after hearing that. God only knew what went on at this place! And of course, Ryouko didn't understand 'morally casual'- if he saw something illegal or immoral, and he couldn't do anything about it, it would bother him to no end.

Sakura stepped forward and grabbed Ryouko's arm. "C'mon, you promised we could stay here! And you said you wouldn't fight with the clerks anymore! You remember what happened last time. My Dad won't bail us out again if you cause more property damage!"

It took Ryouko a second, but he remembered that Sakura was playing a part- the same as he was.

"Oh, yeah...I keep trying to forget that. Thanks for reminding me, beautiful."

Ryouko tickled Sakura under the chin, doing his best to smile one of those goofy

'I'm-in-love-and-I-don't-give-a-damn-about-anything-else' smiles that every couple seemed to wear when they were around each other.

Sakura stretched her neck out happily, keeping the show going for the irritating clerk. In her head, though, there was another story:

**Do I LOOK like the kind of girl that would want to be in a honeymoon suite?! Your perverted old bat!**

--

Up in their room, Ryouko, Sai, and Sakura made their plans. It was easy this first day- time in the hot springs, check out the festival, go to sleep early, stock up on supplies first thing in the morning, then head to the next hotel.

Having time to yourself was going to be practically non-existent for a while. But no one seemed too bothered- when you looked at the big picture, it was better this way. Besides, to Sai and Sakura, this was a chance to help one of their friends.

It was easy to tell Ryouko was lonely these days. Whereas he used to study for hours without stopping, these days he seemed to stop and sigh a couple times an hour. Sometimes, he would stand up on a roof at night, just staring at the moon. Sometimes he had a cigarette; sometimes not. He usually only smoked healthy chakra stuff. But Sakura had caught him with a couple real cigarettes lately. It was not a good

sign for someone like Ryouko.

Sai wanted to be friends with Ryouko, too. He had tried talking to Ryouko, and found that the older boy was quite knowledgeable about some things. He was also more readily accepting of Sai's personality than Naruto. In fact, Ryouko had offered to help Sai understand 'bonds' better. Though Sai thought that was kind of ironic- it was clear that Ryouko didn't quite understand bonds himself.

Sakura was worried about Ryouko's health. They had dodged a bullet the other day, but Ryouko's back might still be a problem for a while. And he couldn't be allowed to hurt it again for a while.

But beyond that, Sakura found herself thinking about Ryouko as a friend. It was pretty obvious the guy couldn't make friends with people near his age. The older jonin- no problem, he charmed them easily. But people his age weren't impressed by his studying, and they rarely got to see the results of his studies because he worked alone. And kids, of course, could be cruel. No one had ever said 'let's not include Ryouko!', but no one ever seemed to go out of their way to include him.

As for Ryouko...well, he certainly had his mind of Sakura some of the time. The words he needed to tell her had never been so close. But for once, he had a legitimate excuse for not asking her out: He was in charge. He shouldn't get Sakura worked up without good reason. Dating would certainly fall under the 'stressful' category- wouldn't it? Or was that just for Ryouko personally?

Looking past that, he had the stress of running this team when he was the odd-man out. Plus, he was given the special mission of being Sakura's guardian. That meant things like watching her all the time, sleeping near her, and so on.

"Can we hit the hot springs now?" Sakura asked, stretching her arms above her head. "I've been dreaming about them since you mentioned it in the woods! Besides, it'll be good for your back."

Ryouko wasn't a medical ninja, so he couldn't dispute the healing properties of the hot springs. Nor did he really want to. He was a fan of hot springs himself.

"Sure. We could all use a good soak to unwind."

--

Ryouko and Sai went through the men's entrance; Sakura went through the women's entrance. In a festival town, at this time of day, they would likely have the hot spring to themselves. Most people would be out on the streets browsing stalls; others would be sleeping off whatever they did last night.

Sai settled into a corner, his sketchbook with him. Ryouko waded toward an end. He liked to lay his arms over the edge while the rest of his body was in the spring. That way he could lay his head on his arms.

It was warm and silent. Perfect to think. So when a couple new people came splashing across the springs, Ryouko gave them a mild gaze before settling back down onto his arms. But before he did, he noticed something.

**They had tattoos on their upper arms...they looked like ANBU tattoos. Damn it!**

Ryouko tried to play it cool. Sai hadn't noticed anything yet, as he was scribbling away in his sketchbook.

Sai looked up once in a while. But he mostly kept himself busy with his drawings. He didn't understand friendship very well, because he was drawing a naked portrait of Ryouko. He had finished it, deciding to give it to Sakura later.

**“Friends always respond well to personal gifts...” That’s what chapter five said...So this should make Sakura happy.**

Ryouko steadily reached for his towel. When a kunai was quivering in the ground inches from his hand, he knew the jig was up. Time to get into combat mode.

“Sai! Cover me! ...Not with your hands, you idiot! I mean, draw!”

While Sai's lions came to life and attacked the ANBU agents, Ryouko dove for his towel. He had kept his clothes bundled up inside them for just such an emergency. But the agent's kunai knives kept him away. So he scrapped that plan. He would have to fight naked.

“Sai, get dressed! I'll keep them busy!”

Ryouko made the handsigns necessary, and from the water came two water clones. Each clone paired off with an ANBU agent and began to attack.

“Summoning Jutsu!” Ryouko barked, smashing his hand down onto the ground. Out popped his sarcastic dog summon, Holly. Immediately warding off the rant he knew she would go on for being summoned somewhere so hot, he pointed to the fence.

“Go! Give that coat to Sakura, and tell her to meet up with Sai outside! I'll join them in a minute!”

Holly really liked Sakura, so she readily obeyed for once.

Meanwhile, Ryouko's two water clones had bitten the dust. Now he had two ANBU agents charging him with swords. He was unarmed, so he had to deal with very carefully. Catching one sword on its back swing, Ryouko snaked his arm around the agent's arm. He gave a sharp jerk, snapping the arm. The other agent was aiming for him with a cut, so Ryouko spun around, dragging the ANBU agent with him as a shield. The agent with the sword stopped in mid-swing, working against his own momentum. Ryouko took advantage of that and shoved his partner into him. They both hit the ground with an 'oof!'

“Water Style: Tidal Wave Jutsu!” shouted the uninjured agent. Ryouko spun to see a giant wave of water coming at him. Kicking backward, he made the handsigns necessary, and countered:

“Water Style: Water Wall!”

The water wall protected him long enough for him to plan his escape. He couldn't leave the others alone, or they would move on without him. Summoning two more water clones, Ryouko hid them below the surface of the water as he ran across it. The agents gave chase until the water clones popped up, stunned them with kicks to the stomach, then dragged them underwater and held them there.

Ryouko knew his clones wouldn't kill the agents unless necessary, so he ran off without letting that concern him.



### 3 - Sacrifice 3: Enigma

On the other side of the hot springs, Sakura found herself tangling with a female ANBU agent. This agent had long brown hair, and a good, toned body, with swells of female muscle on her arms being particularly impressive. Both girls were naked for the moment, making this awkward no matter how you thought about it.

The agent threw a kunai at Sakura, then charged in after it. Sakura ducked the kunai and aimed a swift punch at her attacker's jaw. Her attacker deflected the punch and tried to wriggle around for an armbar. Sakura's body was slick with water, so she slipped out of the hold easily, giving the ANBU agent a hard shove. The agent spun and stabbed with a kunai. The knife bit into Sakura's flesh, drawing blood from her shoulder. She slapped a hand to the wound, wincing in pain. You never got used to this kind of injury.

"That's it, dog!" Sakura snarled. Her hand glowed blue with energy- a Chakra Scalpel. Now her hand and forearm were as deadly as any kunai. Training with Tsunade was about to prove it's worth.

Sakura took the initiative and charged. The ANBU agent produced a sword from it's hiding place in a towel. She swung the sword in a side to side motion at chest height. Sakura blocked it with her glowing forearm. Using her other hand, she punched the agent's arm, breaking the smaller bones and sending the sword clattering away.

Instantly following up, Sakura cut the ANBU agent's leg muscles with a quick swipe of her Chakra Scalpel. With the agent incapacitated for a few minutes, Sakura decided to leave. But...

"I don't have any clothes! Just my towel! Now what?!"

Luckily, Ryouko's dog Holly came bounding over the fence. She ran straight for Sakura, her bushy little tail wagging full-speed.

"Hey kiddo! Wow! I bet my boy would be drooling over you right now! But never mind! He apparently foresaw something like this. Dig into my pouch here, and hurry!"

Holly growled at the ANBU agent as Sakura reached into Holly's collar pouch. She pulled out Ryouko's long black trench coat.

"Excellent!" she cried out, putting the coat on. "I'll thank your boy later, Hol'! For now, you'd better split! Don't worry, I'll force him to summon you later and I'll give you a good, long petting session as a reward!"

"I'll hold you to that!" Holly called back happily. She disappeared in a puff of smoke as Sakura exited the hot springs.

--

The three met up outside. Ryouko had already stuffed a chakra cigarette in his mouth after doing the obvious- using a genjutsu to simulate normal clothes on his body. He hadn't time to get dressed yet (Something that Sakura found delightful. Ryouko hoped Sai didn't!) He looked at the other two, memorizing them the best he could. Producing three Shadow Clones, he had them transform into Sai and Sakura, while the third clone stayed as Ryouko.

"You three, run to the right!" the clone Ryouko announced. "We're going straight!"

All six nodded and took off through the crowded streets, weaving in and out of Yukata and Kimono-wearing festival-goers. Stopping only to pick their packs up, the real three ran straight out of town.

--

They finally stopped to rest after about an hour of running. No one had followed them so far, which was a good sign. That meant they had a minute to stop and rest. Sakura also wanted to get dressed in her own clothes. She had made sure that Sai was in front of her, so she could keep an eye on him at all times. She trusted Ryouko more, letting him bring up the rear to protect against any attacks from behind.

"Ryouko, I'm going to get changed. Kindly keep Sai with you over here in the clearing. I'm going behind those rocks to throw my clothes on."

Ryouko nodded obediently. Sakura threw his trench coat to him over the outcropping of rocks once she was safely hidden behind it. Ryouko caught it, then turned bright red.

**Sakura...was naked...under this coat. MY coat. I've got to be careful or I'm going to wind up being a complete pervert...**

**Is it just me, or is she more open with me recently? I mean, in the past, she would have kept that coat on until we got to some place more private. But now she's just hiding in some bushes to change her clothes. What does that mean? Well, one of two things:**

**a) She trusts me**

**b) She doesn't think of me as a threat**

Sakura came back into the clearing, in a fresh set of clothes. She was much happier-looking now, and easily more relaxed.

"Sakura, can I borrow you for a minute?"

Sakura cocked her head; it had been Sai calling her. That never ended well. But maybe this time he had made a breakthrough with bonds?

**Well, he didn't mention Ryouko's privates yet, so maybe he's on his best behavior? Either way, I shouldn't ignore him...**

So she got up and walked over to Sai. Ryouko was sitting on the ground, busy turning some kunai into traps by wrapping exploding tags around them. Some he tied together with wires to make razor wire traps. Sakura reminded herself to do the same as she finished the short jaunt over to Sai.

“What’s up?” she said casually.

“Well, I made you a picture. I’ve never given anyone one of my drawings before, but I thought you might like this picture.” Sai smiled and held out the picture. Sakura returned the smile.

**Well, look at that! He’s being a gentleman! So, what did he draw...!**

Sakura’s jaw dropped slightly and she turned very red. She was staring at a picture of Ryouko completely naked, baring nothing. He was anatomically correct, too. His body was straight toward her, but his head was posed so that she saw him from the side. His face was stunningly accurate, right down to the eyes. Granted, other accuracies caught Sakura’s eye, but all the same, Sai’s drawing skill was exceptional.

“It was hard to draw. Ryouko didn’t know I was drawing him, so he didn’t pose. But I copied everything exactly...” Sai happily informed her. Apparently, he thought he had finally earned the girl’s approval with this bit of smut. “I sketched him just as he was getting in the hot spring.”

Sakura gave Sai a hard punch to the face, sending him skidding across the clearing. Sai raised his head at the opposite end of the long crater, rubbing his cheek and sucking on his cut lip.

“What the hell is wrong with you?! You don’t do stuff like that; especially without permission!”

Sakura tucked the picture into her pack. Sai had gone to a lot of trouble, after all. And it’s not like Ryouko was too hard on the eyes for her. It was an innocent joke...kind of...sorta...right?

**Don’t want to let all that hard work go to waste...** she thought cheerfully.

Sai shook his head and rubbed his aching cheek. **The book says you should treat all your friends equally... But how will I draw a picture of Sakura naked for Ryouko?**

--

“So, where do we go from here?” Sakura finally asked. She and Sai both turned to Ryouko for an answer. He narrowed his eyes as he thought about it. Lady Tsunade hadn’t given any instructions about what to do in case of this kind of emergency. That meant it fell on him, as team leader, to make the best decision.

“We have a choice. We can head to a country that’s a friend of the Hidden Leaf; or we can try to fit in a country where they’re enemies with the Hidden Leaf.”

“Why would we go to an enemy country?”

Ryouko nodded to Sai to acknowledge he heard him before he outlined his thought process. “If we head to a land that’s friendly with the Leaf, then we risk being turned over to ANBU agents by the country’s government. If we go to a country that’s an enemy, then we don’t have to worry about ANBU agents coming. But we’ll have to deal with the country’s inhabitants.”

Sakura curled up against a tree, tucking her knees into her chest. "But isn't staying in one place risky? Maybe we should just...keep moving? From place to place..."

"You know, you've got a point. We'll just keep moving. Good idea, Sakura. We'll head toward the Sand Village first. Given my past history with the Kazekage, it's not likely we'll be searched for there first. We should have time to stock up on supplies, then hightail it out of town."

**Tail...tail...Oh! That's right! Holly!** Sakura exclaimed, remembering she promised Holly a good petting session once she was out of trouble.

"Ryouko, could you summon Holly? I promised her some 'girl time' with me, since she came to my rescue earlier."

Ryouko obediently summoned Holly. He made the handsigns, paid the blood tribute, and then tapped his palm on the ground. Smoke flared up instantly, making vision difficult. When the smoke dissipated, standing before the trio was Ryouko's wise-cracking Keeshonden.

"Kid, you summon me one more time today, I swear I'll neuter you! And I mean it, too! And if you even try to sweet-talk me, I'll bite your face off! Now, whaddaya want?!"

Ryouko just pointed at Sakura, his head down. Getting browbeaten by a summon that was supposed to be your loyal companion was kind of embarrassing.

"Sakura!!!" Holly exclaimed happily, hearts practically in her eyes as she bolted for the pink-haired kunoichi as fast as her little legs would carry her. "I knew you wouldn't forget me!"

"Because I neglect you so..." Ryouko muttered under his breath. Holly kicked a dirt clod at him, which bounced off his cheek with an audible 'thunk' sound.

Holly went over and plopped down in front of Sakura. Sakura thought that Holly treating Ryouko like that was kind of funny. Most people did. It was clear who was in charge in that relationship. Holly didn't really dislike Ryouko, but she definitely had little patience for boys. As a girl dog, she preferred the company of girls. But also as a girl, she had a desire to see her boy meet a nice girl. And if that girl was Sakura, all the better for Holly.

"Besides that, the kid is just depressing!" Holly murmured, her head on Sakura's lap. She was apparently very content as Sakura's delicate hands moved over her fur. "He's been doging-no pun intended- about being lonely lately."

Sakura's hand wavered for a moment, but resumed its course so that Holly didn't really notice.

"Really? I've always wondered if he felt lonely. He's so hard to read sometimes. It seems like he genuinely cares for most of the people he knows."

Sakura was sitting comfortably under a big maple tree. The shade felt good against the summer heat. It helped cool her sweaty body a little. Running for so long took its toll on you. And when you were running from members of your own village, it took its toll mentally as well. Petting a dog, it seemed, was

good therapy.

Holly snorted dismissively. "He does. But he's stupid like that- he wants a real life, but he keeps getting in his own way. He had a crush on some girl for years, but he's never gotten the guts up to ask her out."

**That's you, Sakura! C'mon, go talk to my stupid kid! It would make his year! And then, when you two are hitched, you can be my summoner! And...well, the kid would be happy too... (sigh) I guess I care more than I let on.**

"Did he ever tell you who he meant? I mean, her name?"

Holly put a paw over her eyes in exasperation. **Oh for crying out loud! My kid is practically drooling all over you! Wake up, Sakura! He lights up like a Christmas tree around you!** Aloud, Holly said "I shouldn't say. That's my kid's business. But y'know, he probably needs help. He just doesn't get girls."

That was funny; too bad it was true.

"Well, it's a crime he can't get a girl. He's too sweet to be single all his life. Even if he cops that hard-@\$@ attitude, everyone knows that's just work. I kind of wish he had gone after Tenten. She's too good for Neji."

Holly had to agree there. "Neji's a dog. Again, no pun intended. My boy could wipe the floor with him, no sweat. Even with those freaky eyes of Hyuuga's."

Sakura smiled at Holly. "You're kind of fond of your owner, aren't you?"

Holly put her head between her paws. "Don't say it like that! I worry for the kid because he's so pathetic! And / own him, not the other way around! Don't think I'm just the type of dog to roll over and..."

Sakura rubbed Holly's belly. Holly rolled over.

"Yeah, that's the spot!"

Sakura stayed that way for a while, rubbing Holly's stomach, while turning thoughts over in her head.

**The way he thanked me...I just can't get it out of my mind. It had to mean something. I mean, he never gets that close to anyone. I guess he trusts me to some degree. It's a badge of honor to get into Ryouko's inner circle.**

**But I wish he would just let the village adopt him. He wants to; I know he does. But something holds him back, each and every time. I wish I knew what... it just seems like he's suffering, and no one knows how to help. No one can see the suffering, unless you really look at his eyes. They're the tell that he's not yet comfortable in his own skin...**

Holly opened one large, brown eye, seeing Sakura deep in thought. She saw Ryouko on the other side of the clearing, giving the slightest of wistful glances to Sakura. That made Holly sigh a little, but in a good way. A relaxed way.

**They're thinking about each other...Come on, Sakura! Pick up on his feelings!**

--

The three congregated over the map, searching for a little town that was barely on the radar. Some town that none of them had ever heard of, even in passing. A place so obscure (and maybe useless) that they could just slip into the town, rest up, and leave. Hopefully, without engaging ANBU again.

As Ryouko looked at his two companions, he felt...not warm, but certainly...welcome. It wasn't a sensation he had felt often before, so the feeling caught him off-guard a little. But it was a pleasant feeling, that was for sure.

**I won't let anything happen. It sounds cheesy, but who cares? I'll see both of them safely back to the Leaf village. No matter what it means for me, I will do that much. No one has ever reached out to me like this; extended this much trust.**

"How about here?" Ryouko asked, his finger hovering over a spot on the map.

"Yobaitsu?" Sai asked? His mind started to drift off in odd directions. Well, not 'odd' considering the name of the town.

((Note: 'yobai' is 'to have sex' in Japanese. -NG))

"Well, we're not likely to run into anyone in that town, except for maybe Master Jiraiya..."

That's what Ryouko *said*. But mentally he was smacking himself for picking such a stupid town. 'Yobai' hadn't been what he was thinking about. He just saw a small town with a small population in the middle of nowhere.

**Damn, Sakura looks uncomfortable...Maybe I can change things...**

Ryouko chose his words carefully. "Maybe this place isn't ideal...I mean...it sounds trashy..."

But to his surprise, Sakura shrugged.

"It's really the best spot. If we don't like it, we can just leave. But we can check it out either way."

"Are you sure? I mean..."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "I'm a big girl. Besides, with you and Sai around, no one will try anything with me. And I'm not going to be offended by the content of this place. It's not like they'll pull perverted crap in the street."

Ryouko wasn't sure of that. He had been to other places on rather unsavory missions where there were less than sanitary (and sometimes 'sane' conditions). But if Sakura really didn't have any objection, it WAS a good place to hide and get lost in the crowd.

“Okay,” he said finally, rolling the map up. “But if things are at all disgusting, we get right out of there. I’d rather fight ANBU agents than the perverted visions I’d have to get out of my head.”

“Yes, it’s much more fun to create your own, isn’t it?” Sai commented. “I wish I had the imagination to do so. Ryouko, do you have any fantasies?”

Ryouko reddened, and Sakura had to stuff her fist in her mouth to stop from laughing.

“Right now, I think not outlining my fantasies to you is my biggest fantasy.”

--

They had only traveled a short distance when a group of brown-clad shinobi surrounded the three.

“Yes?” Ryouko said with exaggerated patience, as if just going through the motions of some boring exercise.

“We’ll be taking all your money now!” one thug, presumably the leader, exclaimed enthusiastically.

“I think not,” Ryouko replied flatly, physically picking up the thug and throwing him off the road. “You’re picking a fight with the wrong people here. But I can’t say I’d be happy letting you roam free...You’re lucky I’ve got no authorities to turn you in to.”

This group was so pitiful that Ryouko didn’t even feel threatened. Sakura and Sai, normally more sensitive to such things, didn’t even flinch. Sakura just reached down, picked up a rock, and crushed it with her fist.

“We’ll be on our way now. And if I hear you’ve been bothering someone else...”

Ryouko leaned down and helped the hapless robber he had thrown up.

“...I’ll be back. With ten times the man power, so next time I won’t have to dirty my hands with you.”

With that, Ryouko tossed some ryo at the thug.

“...No way anyone so pathetic would try to just rob people. Not without being desperate. Go get yourselves a good meal, then inquire at the Hidden Leaf. You guys aren’t real criminals.”

Sai raised an eyebrow. Sakura was just stunned. It didn’t seem like Ryouko to take pity on anyone, but in this case he seemed to almost...relate to the criminals. Not in an obvious way, but Sakura saw something. And Ryouko obviously sensed something.

**Who are you, Ryouko Amakatsu? You’re a mystery bundled inside an enigma to me...but all the same, I can’t think of many people I trust more.**

Sakura vowed she would find out more about Ryouko. She didn’t like loose ends, and Ryouko was a loose end himself if there ever was one.

## 4 - Sacrifice 4: Confessions

The next town on their map was a bustling outpost town. There were no festivals here. But the place was just as lively. But in a seedy sort of way. It was the kind of town where you don't want to take your shoes off in your hotel room.

There were strip clubs lining the streets and adult stores stuffed in between them. There was no lack of adult entertainment anywhere. The streets were littered with dirty magazines featuring the raunchiest, most disturbing sexual images Ryouko had ever seen. Like anyone else, he had an imagination, but this was beyond his imagination.

As the group walked through, every head seemed to turn toward them. Well, mostly Sakura. Sai got a few curious stares himself. Ryouko had his share of female attention. But he was going out of his way to project disinterest, while Sai was acting mildly curious.

Someone reached down and grabbed Sakura's butt. She yelped in surprise, then turned and swung a fist into the offender's face. But she had no sooner hit him than three more people with happy hands tried to grab her. Sakura had every intention of hitting every last one of these perverts, but she noticed Ryouko striding toward her from the front of the group.

It took Ryouko less than two seconds to reach Sakura. Pushing through the horde of perverted guys and girls grabbing her, Ryouko picked out the ringleader. He was the kind of guy where, if you shook hands with him, you counted your fingers afterward. His hair was slicked back, and he wore a jacket that read 'Now accepting applications for my next 'model'.' With sunglasses over his eyes, this guy was the opposite of a model citizen. Just about anyone could fit in the shinobi world. But this guy was pushing it.

"Now listen up! I'm just saying this once- the next one who lays a hand on the girl gets the crap beaten out of him. She's with me. So you keep your hands off her."

Despite his calm demeanor, Ryouko was burning mad. So when one pervert made a grab for Sakura's breasts, he found himself flying backward courtesy of a wicked right hand from Ryouko.

"I SAID- Hands off the girl!"

Someone tried to grab Ryouko from behind. Sakura stepped in and dropped him.

"That doesn't mean you get to molest him, you perverts! EEK!"

One guy had managed to lift Sakura's shirt. While she covered up, Ryouko picked the guy up and threw him across the street. A kunai whizzed after him, hitting a building's wall right next to the man's head.

"You got an eyeful...maybe I should make sure that eye doesn't see anything else? And to those of you who got handfuls- if you like your hands, you'll keep them to yourselves- or on anyone but my group. Because you'll find I get less civil the more you act up towards her!"



“Yeah? And you can back that up, tough guy?! I wanna see you tangle with Glen! C’mere, Glen!”

Some skanky looking prostitute was yelling for someone. She was wearing a ridiculously short red skirt, mesh top, and a black bra. She had long gold earrings dangling from her ears, and her nose and lips had been pierced. With knee-length, high-heeled boots on her feet, she looked like an odd mix of biker chick, hooker, and ninja. She wasn’t at all pretty from the neck up. Ryouko guessed that she only got attention because of how much skin she showed. In any place with moral standards, she would be completely untouched.

Then Glen lumbered over. He was at least eight feet tall, with hands the size of watermelons. He was shirtless, showing off layer after layer of muscle. The rest of him looked like a mutant ogre. His eyes were crossed, and his teeth had large gaps between them. His nose seemed to take up half his face. His lower body was covered by long, tattered black pants. He didn’t wear any kind of shoes on his mutant feet.

“Youse pickin’ on her? Huh, ya little punk?!”

Ryouko didn’t seem impressed. “No. She and this horde are molesting my girlfriend. You can understand why I’m upset, right big guy?”

A hand the size of Paul Bunyon’s axe slashed down near Ryouko’s head. Ryouko dodged aside just barely in time. Reacting instinctively, he smacked several nerves on the jolly green jackasses’ arm. But he narrowed his eyes as it had no effect whatsoever.

**His arm should be hanging loosely by now! But it didn’t even phase him!**

“No! Whatever they want, they get! That includes your girlfriend!”

Ryouko would normally have just pounded this guy, but something about his statement hit Ryouko hard. **He’s just protecting his friends. I can’t rip him apart for that. But there’s no way to end this peacefully...or is there?**

Ryouko backed up, bit his thumb, and prepared to summon one of his animal friends. He choose his biggest- Shuurai the snake. With a huge ‘BAM’, the massive creature appeared in the center of town.

The town’s reaction was suddenly respectful.

“We didn’t know you were shinobi!”

“Yeah, you shoulda said something!”

“Sorry, please don’t kill us!”

Ryouko ended the jutsu, letting Shuurai go back to wherever he came from when he was summoned. Everyone, including Glen, had backed down after that, just as Ryouko had bet.

“We’re just passing through,” Ryouko announced, making sure to keep tight to his group. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll be out of your hair.”

When Ryouko was done talking, he happened to glance in a window purely by accident. In it was some pretty trashy ladies underwear. But that made Ryouko remember he'd ruined Sakura's nightgown when she had patched him up.

**Would it send the wrong message if I were to buy her a replacement?**

**Y-eah. It would.**

"See something you like, Ryouko?"

"Ack!"

Sakura had been asking the question, watching Ryouko apparently eyeball the trashy lingerie. The un-shinobi-ish sound was Ryouko forgetting himself, plus embarrassment at being caught staring at something like that.

**Let's hope honesty is the best policy...** Ryouko hoped, gulping as he prepared to tell Sakura why he was staring into an adult toy store.

"I was thinking of how I ruined your nightgown, and debating whether or not I should replace it. Then I realized I shouldn't, because that would be sending the wrong message."

Sakura had her hands on her hips, her head cocked as if curious. "Really? What message would that be?"

Female cunning had defeated Ryouko. It figured that one of the few times he got the guts up to talk to the girl he liked, he sounded like a combination idiot/pervert.

"...I'm just gonna stop talking now..."

--

In the dark of night, five ANBU agents arrived at the tiny town. The 'Amsterdam' of the shinobi world, this was the last place any agents would innocuously show up without reason. There had to be a reason they'd come...

"Are you the five from Konoha?"

A man wearing a faded brown coat beckoned the ANBU agents to him. The five all strode over cautiously, distrusting of the man already. He wasn't the type of person five upstanding shinobi would talk with under normal circumstances.

"They checked in to the hotel across the street earlier today. They say they plan to leave in the morning. That's why I had you rush to come here."

The five agents exchanged glances. The leader, a tall blond man, finally nodded his head.

"Acceptable. Thank you. Please see that no one else becomes aware of this."

"What, that's it?!" the coat-wearing stranger grumbled. "No reward?"

"The reward is that you know this much and we let you live. Fair enough?" a female agent hissed into

the ear of the informant.

Apparently it was fair enough, because that was the end of the conversation.

--

Ryouko was too anxious to sleep. The three of them were laying on futons in the middle of the room. While not touching, the futons were close together. This way, if they were attacked at night, no one could be isolated and destroyed. If someone attacked, they were going to fight three of Konoha's best.

"mm? Can't sleep?"

Ryouko looked to Sakura. She had turned to face him, her head propped up on her arm. She grinned playfully.

"What's the matter? Can't sleep 'cause you've got a scary girl in the same room as you?"

Ryouko paused. This was either teasing or flirting- so, since he knew Sakura, it should be safe to return the verbal volley with one of his own.

"Maybe I can't sleep cause we aren't naked this time," he replied, smiling a little in the darkness. No doubt his face was incredibly red, and no doubt Sakura could tell. Chances are, the kunoichi in her (Not to mention the girl in her) couldn't resist teasing Ryouko a little bit.

Sakura slid her futon closer to Ryouko, then plopped down, laying with her arms propped behind her head. She stared at the ceiling quietly for a minute, then tried conversation again. But this time it was a little deeper.

"You know, I remember how you were always alone. Whenever the village did something, you were there...but by yourself. Didn't that ever...I don't know...make you sad? Or, at least, bother you?"

**I've got to know. I should have just asked him about this, rather than wondering all this time.**

Ryouko mimicked Sakura's relaxed position. His answer was almost instantaneous. "Absolutely. But I never thought I could fit in, so I never said anything. You all had your own squads. I'd be extra baggage, you know?"

"No one would think that!" Sakura protested, using her pillow to give Ryouko a smack. "Ugh! All the times the senseis went out of they're way to get you to join in! You never once did, am I right?"

"I tried, but it just...never felt comfortable, I guess..."

Sakura rolled over onto her stomach so she could face Ryouko. She wanted to see his expressions when she asked this next question. But she couldn't find the right words. She just stared at his inquisitive eyes. This close up, she could see both curiosity and sadness within those eyes. That, and something else. But she couldn't quite pick out what it was.

**It seems like...a desire, maybe? Or a need? Is there something he needs to say or do? I wonder if I can help...**

Ryouko, meanwhile, was looking back into Sakura's eyes. They were a pretty, shimmering, emerald-green color. They fit her pink hair and white skin beautifully, he thought. She just seemed like such a beautiful, wholesome girl. And practical, too. And she was pretty close to him right now...

"Sakura, I... you are...really beautiful. I mean, I admire you. You've really got your act together, too. I mean...I'm sure that sounded lame, but I really think...that."

Sakura hadn't seen that coming. Whatever desire or need she had seen in his eyes, THAT was not the one she saw coming. Not by a longshot!

**He never talks like that! Maybe I'm dense, but does this mean...? And that look earlier! Does he...like me? I mean, seriously like me?!**

Ryouko blushed a deep crimson hue. He had NEVER talked to a girl like that! It hadn't even crossed his mind until he met Sakura. And what he said- he had no idea where those words came from!

The hardwood floor creaked. The faucet leaked. The toilet dripped. There was silence from anything living, however. I was just too much of a shock. Ryouko saying what he did, and Sakura not being sure how to react. It just didn't seem like Ryouko, no matter how she sliced!

Finally, Ryouko broke the awkward silence. "...Sorry. I, uh...meant every word...I can't take it back, so I won't even try...and I wouldn't if I could."

Sakura climbed out of her futon, pushed Ryouko's blanket away, settled down next to him, snuggled up to his chest, and listened to his heartbeat. His chest rose and fell with breath- it was comforting. They were both fully clothed this time, too.

"...If this was on your mind, why didn't you just say so? It's really nice of you to say those things. And you know, you're pretty impressive yourself. Even if you ARE a stupid boy!"

Ryouko clearly didn't know what to do, say, or where to put his hands. Sakura finally rolled over and hugged him. She was actually crying with emotion. No boy had ever been so nice to her. While crying silently on his shoulder (after coaxing him to hug back), she finally reciprocated his compliment.

"You're someone I admire, too. You're strong, and even though you don't think you're part of our group, you do so much to help us. And you're strong and dependable. There's so much more I'd like to tell you..."

Ryouko put his arms around Sakura, pulling his blanket over them both. Sakura switched to the more innocent position of lying next to him, though her body was tight to his. Her head was laying on his chest, and that left her lips inches from his face. After a slight hesitation, she also put her arm on his chest. She gave him a quick nuzzle, then laid down, feeling comfortable enough with him to just fall asleep.

Ryouko, of course, wasn't going to be sleeping. Not now.

**That bumbling bit of honesty I spat out was what she needed to hear? And it seemed like she**

**was expecting it. Maybe she noticed my blushing? Oh well, you can't argue with results! I don't even really care that Sai is going to see this when he wakes up, and probably draw it! In fact...I'll need a copy. Maybe it could serve as proof that this actually happened!**

That's when Ryouko noticed the paper door leading into the room being opened. Little by little, inch by inch, someone was peeking inside. In the dim hallway light, Ryouko caught a glimpse of an ANBU mask. This was the worst possible timing for this.

Ryouko didn't move yet; his eyes were just barely open enough to see the attackers. One by one they snuck in until there were five of them. When they got close so they could congregate quietly, Ryouko threw his blanket at them. When it landed, in the same motion, he threw shuriken at them. He heard them clang off their armor, and a couple sunk into their shoulders.

The sound woke the others. Sai drew his own sword, then scrambled backward into the corner, rapidly unfurling a scroll. His ink and brushes were too far away, so he bit into his thumb and drew with his blood. If he could just get one lion out there as a distraction, he could get his real equipment.

Sakura sprang backward, a little shell-shocked from the sudden movement. Ryouko didn't have that problem, as he had been wide awake. He called 'cover me!' back to his two companions, then leapt forward into the thick of things. The ANBU agents were still wrestling with his blanket, so that gave him an opening to create three Shadow Clones. They fanned out around him, each one holding two kunai.

"Dance of the Sick Moon!" Ryouko yelled. His three clones began to hack and slash at the ANBU agents with kunai. That meant cutting up the blanket, but it also caused the agents to get some wounds. Even the smallest wound could make a good opening later on in the fight.

Sakura smashed one agent in the chest, breaking his armor and knocking him out through the doors and back into the hallway. He was covered by the doors and rice paper that had been behind him when he got too close to Sakura.

The agents finally freed themselves of the blanket, but found themselves being mauled by Sai's lions. Finally getting a chance to fight back, the agents cut the lions up with their swords. They started to charge again, but found themselves stuck in place.

"Ninja Art: Ink Fly Trap," Sai declared tonelessly. The ink from his lions on the floor had become a sticky syrup. The ANBU agents couldn't move their feet, leaving them helpless. All they could do was curse and throw needles and shuriken.

"Good work, Sai. Sakura, if you'll reach in my bag you'll find those explosives from earlier. Would you help me with them, please?" Ryouko nodded toward his bag. His brown rucksack-type bag hadn't been far from his pillow.

Sakura obediently handed him the explosives. Ryouko gave her a nod of thanks, then asked Sai: "How long will the ink hold for?"

"As long as I have the slightest bit of chakra focused on it, it will hold at least until we are out of town... What are you going to do?"

Ryouko was already working on his plan. His explosives were tied to kunai knives. He used them to form a web around the trapped ANBU agents.

“Try not to move. The explosives will do a lot of damage at this range,” Ryouko informed them pleasantly, taking away their swords, tools, and even their masks. “Now you stay still, and behave yourselves. Remember that you’ve been attacking my team, and that if you force me to, I will kill for them.”

“Exposing our faces is a threat to village security!” one complained. Ryouko cocked his head, smiling unpleasantly.

“No, it’s a threat to YOUR security. And if you’re attacking me, you yourself are a threat to village security. Just think about that, and please excuse me- this place is filthy, and with Danzou supporting scum like you, it just got filthier.”

Ryouko led the way out of the room, with Sai and Sakura on either side of him. The ANBU agent lying in the remains of the door grasped Sakura’s leg. It was likely only so that he could get up, but Sakura’s temper was still in place. She cracked him in the face, putting him back out like a light.

## 5 - Sacrifice 5: Roots

They kept walking down the hallway, their sandals making a 'tomp' sound on the floorboards. They were walking faster than usual, yet not so fast as to attract attention. They had to leave this place in a hurry if they were to avoid killing, being killed, or being captured.

"HEY!"

Ryouko muttered 'ignore it' to his companions and just kept walking.

"HEY! YOU OWE ME FOR THE NIGHT!"

Ryouko stopped. He turned, smiled (never a good sign) and said: "Don't worry. The group in our room generously offered to pay our tab at the end of their stay. They said you can go check on them in a half-hour or so, and they'll give the money. As for me..."

Ryouko walked over, taking money out of his vest. He counted out some bills, then placed them on the counter.

"If anyone asks, all of us headed for the Mist Village. We took the mountain pass, across Arashi river. You follow me?"

Ryouko put the money on the counter, then turned his back deliberately, making a show of looking at Sai and Sakura. When he turned around, the money was gone.

"I see. Enjoy the Mist Village, sir!" the clerk told them, bowing deeply. His sleeve had some bills sticking out of it, but Ryouko paid that no mind. He simply turned around and started to walk with Sakura and Sai.

"...Let's head for a temple some friends of mine run. It's about three hundred miles away from Arashi river. Oh well. It'll be a nice side trip for when we head to the Mist Village...maybe...eventually."

Sai cocked his head. "Ryouko, was that a...bribe? So he would keep quiet?"

Ryouko smiled, maybe a little mischievously. "Well, if you like that sort of word...yes. But I prefer to say that we 'changed our plans at the last minute'."

Sai suddenly perked up. He stopped, sat down, and rummaged through his bag. After a few moments, he took out a scroll. It was green and white, and had the Hokage's symbol stamped on it. It was unopened, and unmarked on the outside, except for the seal and the writing 'ten days'. Sai handed it to Ryouko.

"Thanks, Sai. But what is it?"

Sai shrugged. "I'm not really sure myself. I just have my orders to give it to you after we've been gone for ten days."

Ryouko recalled that Tsunade had told him that Sai would tell him things as he needed to know them. This must have been what she meant by that.

As he turned the scroll to find the opening, he found his name and Sakura's name written on the side near the seal.

"Looks like it's for both of us," he stated, reading the names again just to be sure. "Well, let's get out of here for now. We can always take our time and read this later. We should put some distance between ourselves and those agents as fast as possible."

--

Tsunade stacked up another box under her desk. Her tactic of formally petitioning the council was just a delay tactic. There was no way she and her supporters could go against Danzou, who was gaining support among the thousand-plus nameless ANBU agents.

**Next they'll come for my position. I just need him here before they can oust me. I can get a three day grace period- they won't want too quick of a transition, or things seem unstable. I'll just have to drag my feet as long as possible.**

Danzou walked in, followed by the council. Tsunade gulped, stiffened her face, and prepared to stand her ground. She had to make time for the new Hokage to get here. This new Hokage would be in line with her, and could put a law into effect protecting them from being overthrown unjustly by the council. But the new Hokage had to hurry!

**This might never be my job again. I'd like to take it back, but there's a good chance that the new one will do well. If they can do a better job, then I'll leave it up to them.**

--

Once on the road again, Ryouko talked with Sakura and Sai. It was just light conversation to pass the time. Nothing serious. Ryouko knew that being too serious was a fault of his, and he wanted to correct it. Sai and Sakura had become good friends and teammates, so it wouldn't do to be anything less than a good friend and a better leader to them.

Sakura's mind was on that scroll. Why would Lady Tsunade address something to both of them? And she even had some kind of timetable to it. Was this some kind of wacky training exercise or something? Real life wasn't planned like this...

"Ryouko, you should open the scroll. If it's urgent, we'll need to be in a position to act fast."

Ryouko nodded in agreement, pulling the scroll out of one of his makimono pouches. He dug his fingers into the edge to pull it open, waited for Sakura and Sai to gather around, then unrolled it.

The forest was chirping with wildlife at this time of day. It was about ten o'clock or so. Late enough in the morning for the dew to have disappeared. The animals seemed to disappear with the dew, save for



the occasional insects, deer, and rabbits. But the three humans in the forest, despite the peace the forest gave, had suddenly turned ashen. Ryouko couldn't pry the scroll out of his hands with a crowbar. The handwriting (Lady Tsunade's mostly illegible scribbles) read:

*Return at once. The village is under your leadership. This is the first time the village will be under a joint rule, but it's the only way the three of us can oppose the council.  
Congratulations, Lord and Lady Sixth.*

-Tsunade

-

Ryouko and Sakura exchanged glances. Their shock at being named the leaders notwithstanding, could Tsunade have had something else in mind?

**It looks like she thought Sakura and I would be...**

**Did My Lady think Ryouko and I would...**

Sai smiled. "Oh? So you two are my superiors now? This is...what's the correct word to convey surprise?"

"Shocking," Ryouko muttered, his mouth still open. "Well, this means nothing until we get home. Stealth be damned for now. Sai, draw yourself that owl thing that you use to fly. I'll get Taleo to help us. We're going to fly home. Sakura, I'll need your help, so you'll ride with me."

Ryouko's hawk, Taleo, was a formidable beast. A huge bird that Ryouko had somehow met and tamed when it tried to eat him, it now respected Ryouko. That respect would come in handy now when Ryouko needed a quick ride home.

"Hey, Ryouko...um...can we talk on the way?" Sakura asked, surprisingly timidly for her. She had her hands folded under her chin, as if pleading with someone- maybe herself? Either way, she was blushing, and looked, for once, like a vulnerable girl.

"Absolutely. We've got a lot to discuss. For now- here. Since we haven't been apart yet, I didn't need to give them to you. But you'll need them now..."

Ryouko handed over the package Shizune had given him earlier. The spring-loaded needle launcher that mounted on your forearm would give Sakura a quick and easy weapon to use. God knew that they would be in for a fight, even if they were now joint Hokages.

"Oh, thanks! This'll be perfect!" Sakura said happily. "Can you help me up here? I've never ridden a hawk before..."

Ryouko bent down and cupped his hands together. Then he looked up and shook his head. "That's not gonna happen. Okay, I'm going to have to grab you around the waist. When you can reach, grab on to the feathers on his back, just below his neck."

Ryouko bent down and picked the kunoichi up around the waist. She didn't weight much, so it wasn't a difficult task. When he felt her weight lessen, he let go and let her climb the rest of the way up. After that, he walked to the front of Taleo and asked the beast for help getting on him.

Taleo was a regal bird, and he liked to be treated like a person. He didn't ask for anything other than the respect you showed an equal. He had an enormous wingspan, and his golden feathers falling made for a majestic portrait as he flew gracefully.

Like most summons, Taleo spoke.

"You are a Hokage now? And is this your girl on my back?"

Ryouko smirked. "Yes, and...not yet. Her and I are sharing the Hokage title for now. But I DO fancy her a bit."

Taleo picked Ryouko up with his beak and tossed him gently on his back. "Good luck, then. I'm proud to serve a Hokage."

"And I'm proud to have such a summons," Ryouko replied, truth in his voice. "To Konoha, please, Taleo."

--

On top of the hawk, with Sai picking up the rear on his owl, Sakura and Ryouko had a little time to themselves for the first time in a while. Behind Taleo's head, the wind resistance was very slight, so they could stand up and talk. But neither felt like falling, so they both sat down, back to Taleo's neck. Ryouko kept glancing at Sakura, unsure of what to say or do.

Sakura finally slid closer to Ryouko. She caused him to blush as their hips touched. But Sakura didn't really care about that. Right now, she had bigger things on her mind. Such as...

"...You didn't object when we cuddled the other day..."

Ryouko chuckled. He couldn't help it. "Well, most would say 'who could refuse a beautiful girl wanting to get in bed with you'... But I'm not most. I really care for you. Beyond being thankful for you saving me."

"I had a feeling," Sakura admitted. She had her head down for a moment, but picked it up and faced Ryouko, beaming at him with a huge smile. Her eyes were closed, but you could still see the tears leaking out of them. They ran down her slightly pink cheeks and fell on Taleo's feathers. Taking the hint, Ryouko reached over and pulled her to him.

"You must think I'm so useless now! Crying because a boy likes me!" Sakura managed to say between silent sobs. "I shouldn't be crying right now! We're going to run a village! And...!"

Ryouko gave her a harder tug, pulling her into his chest. He maneuvered her head so it was on his shoulder, and put his hands on her back tight enough to let her know that she wasn't going to get away.

“It’s alright. This is emotionally overwhelming for me, too. If I wasn’t so shocked, I’d be crying. But there’ll be time for crying later. Right now, we’re walking into a hornet’s nest. But even before that...”

Ryouko gently reached for the back of Sakura’s head. When his hand brushed through her silky pink hair, Sakura looked up, making eye contact with Ryouko for the first time since she had climbed into his bed to calm both him and herself down a couple night ago. His eyes were confused and unsure, but determined. Their dark color made it seem all the more serious.

She threw her arms around his neck. He could feel her strong, feminine muscle on his shoulders and neck. Those hands seemed to give him permission to do what he really wanted. He looked in her eyes for confirmation, and found two green gems staring back at him. They were still moist from the tears, but lively and showed certainty.

That was all it took to convince Ryouko.

Summoning up his courage, he leaned forward first. Sakura followed soon after, meeting him halfway. Their lips met and locked in an embrace all their own. In that moment, their eyes closed and grips tightened. With the wind rushing through their hair, the scene seemed perfect. Passionate, full of love, and the start of a new beginning.

They broke apart, though Sakura leaned forward and kissed him once more quickly. Their lips were bruised from the kiss, and each found an odd, yet strangely good taste in their mouths. They didn’t release their embrace with their arms, nor the eye contact they had made.

**I never understood why people would stare into each other’s eyes. But now I think I get the attraction...**

Sakura nuzzled Ryouko, thinking to herself that she was lucky. **We’re going to lead the village. And now I’ve found a man of my own.**

--

Ryouko, Sakura, and Sai arrived in the Hidden Leaf village a short while later. Their summons dropped them off on the Hokage mansion’s roof. Walking around to the side door near the top of the building, the three strode to the Hokage’s office, determined looks decorating their faces.

-

Tsunade smiled at the council. She had won. By passing on the title to two successors, and adding herself to the council, they could combat the threats from within.

**From the look on Danzou’s face, he knows he’s lost. There’s a new regime, you old geezer! And good luck, because those kids are smart, tough, and can tackle anything you can throw at them. And if I’m right, Ryouko and Sakura should be a couple now. So if Danzou goes after Sakura, Ryouko will take care of that handily.**

Ryouko opened the door quietly, making eye contact with everyone in the circular room. When he determined it was safe, he raised his hand up, signaling to Sakura and Sai that it was time to come in. Ryouko waited for them to step inside, then he shut the door.

“...”

There was silence. No one seemed comfortable. It was too tense in the room. Everyone knew what was happening, but no one knew what to say about it. Until Ryouko couldn't take the silence that is.

“I know why I'm here, as does Sakura. We're ready to take our rightful places as co-sixth Hokages. We will hear objections once we've had time to get settled and form our own council. Respected elders and Danzou ((The lack of title showed that Ryouko knew what was going on)), please leave us for the time being. I will call on you soon enough. But it's been a long trip for Lady Hokage and myself, and we'd like the time to catch up with Head of the Council Tsunade.”

In one powerful block of speech, Ryouko dismantled the council, humiliated Danzou, gave Tsunade a leadership title, and stirred things up.

The war for Konoha, however, was far from over.

## 6 - Sacrifice 6: Love

Ryouko and Sakura stood in their new office, planning out their new ideas and choosing their leadership. There had been some redecorating already, and even some clothes changing.

Ryouko now wore an open Hokage robe, white with black trim. Underneath was his old Jonin uniform. This made him look distinguished; yet not too old. He wasn't a wizened old elder yet. He was a combat-ready young man with hopes, dreams, and ambition enough to fulfill them. Though he didn't always dress the part of a Hokage. Sometimes he donned his old hakama and gi, complete with two swords in his belt.

Sakura tended to wear a white lab coat over her usual clothes. She also pulled her medium-length hair into a ponytail while she compounded medicines in her corner of the Hokage's office. Her time was spent mixing medicines with Tsunade, plus the extra combat training. Now that Tsunade wasn't running a village, she could give Sakura her full attention. That meant the young kunoichi developed in leaps and bounds.

Ryouko himself had lessened his training so that he could tackle the village's paperwork. He made sure his skills stayed sharp by occasionally going out on a mission with a group of jonin. This irritated the conservative members of the counsel. To them, a leader should not be seen or heard- he should only issue orders and safeguard his own life. When they confronted Ryouko about this, he told them in a flat tone:

"I won't ask anything of this village that I'm not willing to do myself. Lead by example and all that. Besides, a leader should be known by the people. Sakura is a medic ninja who saves lives- I have to save lives my own way. Your advice is duly noted."

That got his point across. Things were going well, aside from the dreaded feeling of waiting for Danzou to make his move. Well, that and the whole romance thing.

--

"Hey, old man Hokage!"

Only one person would dare. Naruto, of course.

"I've only got a few years on you, don't call me 'old man'!" Ryouko shouted back. It was actually cool to have Naruto call him that, but Naruto would stop if Ryouko didn't object to it. There would likely always be a delinquent side of Naruto Uzumaki. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same, after all.

It was indeed Naruto who came busting in, followed more calmly by Master Jiraiya. Jiraiya, being himself, looking at Sakura, whose back was to him. He turned to Ryouko and raised his pinky. Ryouko nodded shyly, admitting that he and Sakura were together. Naruto broke out into a big grin.

“So, did Sakura make you a real man yet, Grandpa Hokage?”

Ryouko didn't need to say anything as a nasty corrosive acid came flying from Sakura's corner. Naruto was loud at the best of times, and when teasing someone, he might as well be wearing a mic.

“What brings you here? Missions? Training? Just to pester me?”

Naruto's face kind of dropped. Ryouko only had to think for a second as to why.

**I beat him to being Hokage...**

“Naruto, listen. This is only temporary. I'm not staying Hokage forever. There are just some things that need to be done. Things that only I can do. Believe me, I'm not the heir apparent to the Hokage title- I just happen to have a certain something that, at this moment, is appealing. You're still Hokage material; more so than me.”

That appeased Naruto. Now for Jiraiya. He couldn't speak about this; not out loud. Not with this half-treacherous council. He just passed Ryouko two envelopes.

“That one is about the Akatsuki. The other one,” Jiraiya pointed to a blackened envelope, “is a copy of my new book, 'Makeout Unlikely'. I think you and the little lady'll find it a fascinating read. Might even give you some ideas, if you get my drift...”

With that, Jiraiya and Naruto had to beat a hasty retreat, as Sakura had heard that part, too, and was ready to beat the hell out of both of them.

==

It had been a week now since Ryouko and Sakura had kissed on top of Taleo. While they both acknowledged it, and while they both smiled fondly at each other, that was it. They hadn't kissed again. Or cuddled. Nothing. Nothing at all.

“...”

Several times, Ryouko thought about going over to her, grabbing her, and kissing her. But it wouldn't do to just randomly kiss her! She wasn't that kind of girl, he could tell. She wanted a kiss to be special. And likely private. With the menagerie of people in and out of the Hokage's office everyday, there was no time for romance.

--

Unbeknownst to Ryouko, however, Tsunade was giving Sakura some help with her love life. Based on what she knew about Ryouko, she was helping Sakura plan the best way to approach him.

“A boy like that needs a girl that can be aggressive when necessary. He won't ask you to submit to him, no matter what tradition dictates. If anything, he would submit to you. What I'm saying is, go on and take the initiative. And if he, by some miracle, takes the initiative, just go with it.”

Sakura chewed her nails nervously, looking at Ryouko from across the room. He had grown into the Hokage role. Every movement portrayed grace and power. He was kind, understanding, firm, and fair.

He stood straighter these days, and seemed healthier. Suddenly it was more intimidating to approach him.

**It was easier when he looked sicker. He was cute then, too. But now, he just seems more intimidating... But he doesn't try to intimidate me. He just doesn't know what to do. So Tsunade's right. I need to take the lead in the relationship. Meanwhile, he can take the lead in the village. I've got a long way to go before I can fight alongside him.**

Sakura was feeling an admiration for Ryouko that he, unbeknownst to her, felt for her.

"Sakura, do you have a minute?"

Sakura looked toward the voice. She found Ryouko standing in front of the window behind the desk they shared. He had his hands clasped behind his back as he looked out at the beautiful day. It was hard to believe that the village was in dire danger. It completely belied this beautiful scene.

When she joined him at the window, she found Ryouko was smiling a little. In his own reserved way, at any rate. He turned to face her, reaching out a hand to smooth her bangs from her face. He gave a sigh, took a breath, and reached out to pat her shoulder.

"I love you. I just thought I should tell you, on the off-chance you haven't figured it out for yourself."

Sakura was still. She hadn't seen this coming at all. Her mouth opened in an 'O' of surprise, and her face reddened. She couldn't quite meet his eyes. (Ryouko, of course, panicked that he screw up)

"...You idiot!" she finally said, reaching around him to hug him. She buried her pretty pink head into his chest, eyes closed. "You're s'posta tell me you love me, hug me, then kiss me! Not pat my shoulder!"

Ryouko smiled a little. "Oh, is that it? Sorry. I'm no good with these things."

Sakura sighed into his chest to hide the sob of overwhelming emotion that had grown in her chest. She picked her head up, made eye contact, and told him:

"Don't apologize. Just make it right. I love you, too."

This time, Ryouko did exactly as Sakura had detailed. Though God added his personal touch. As they kissed, light streamed in the window behind them, warming them both as they pulled closer. Perhaps it was then that they both knew there was no point in reservations anymore.

For Ryouko, he had become the most powerful man in the village. He had nothing left to prove to anyone; least of all a girl that loved him back.

For Sakura, she was the most powerful woman in the village. The title had been passed to her from her mentor. To inherit a title like that from a legend helped Sakura shove her doubt aside.

They were alone for now. Both of them were young, and admittedly really into the moment. So Sakura took a chance.

"Y'know, the forbidden love between a samurai and a kunoichi... it's kind of hot, isn't it?" she whispered in his ear, running her hand down his chest. She could feel his face redden.

"I think you're right..." Ryouko replied, a smile in his voice.

Sakura took his hand and led him away. His place was more private...

--

Once there, both of them could understand why. But yet they both hesitated, staring at each other like a couple of clueless kids. Which was exactly what they were, come to think of it.

"..."

Sakura had been the one to suggest this, so she decided she would take the lead. Locking the door behind her and closing the curtains, she moved toward him, determination coming from every pore of her body. She was sweating, shaking, and blushing all at the same time. But she didn't let that stop her as she grabbed Ryouko in a fond embrace.

Ryouko was happy to let her lead. He was horribly out of place in this situation. But he didn't want to be. All the questions of a first time plagued him. Am I any good? Will she enjoy it? But he knew he loved her, and he was going to try it. Once he felt her arms snake around him, he reciprocated and pulled her in tightly.

Their lips met passionately. While controlled at first, soon they gave into the passion.

Sakura's hand tore at Ryouko's clothing. She yanked his gi top off, immediately pulling him in close again. Her nails dug into his shoulders, even drawing a little blood. The boy didn't complain at all. She took that as a sign to keep going.

--

The two laid next to each other in bed. Both were panting, exhausted, and ready for a nap. They had the time, so why not? Tsunade could handle things; she no doubt suspected what was going on.

"Mmm...Y'know, we've gotta do that again sometime," Sakura mumbled into Ryouko's chest. She found that she liked his heartbeat, so she laid her head on his chest and listened.

"No argument here," Ryouko answered, putting his arm around the kunoichi, fondly embracing her.

It was a good sign they could agree on that; that much was certain.

--

The council of elders couldn't be trifled with, except in special situations. In this case, Tsunade would do very nicely. It was an obvious move, sure. Danzou would see it coming. But he couldn't do anything about it. That was the beauty of it.

"And, of course, the Hokage title will be waiting for you as soon as we've taken care of this," Ryouko



assured Tsunade. Sakura, by his side, nodded eagerly. She felt like she was too young to be burdened with this sort of responsibility.

Tsunade had seen all this coming, and agreed without hesitation. She did have to update the two joint leaders before they began ruling, though.

“Danzou has been confirmed to have made contact with the Akatsuki. This is their chance to get at Naruto. Not to mention the damage they could cause, leaving us wide open for Orochimaru to slither in.”

Ryouko had laid a ‘Go’ board on the table, playing with the pieces. He placed a white stone in the center of the board. Around it he placed black stones. The stones represented various villages. “The Akatsuki have no known base of operations... Orochimaru operates out of Otogakure...the Mist won’t be an ally...nor the Stone...nor the Rain...Grass is unlikely...only the Sand would come to our aid. So we have to avoid war...”

Ryouko had been thinking for a long time about how to liberate Otogakure. His plan was risky to the few individuals who made the move, but for the rest of the village it posed no threat. It was both the safest and most efficient way to handle the situation.

“My theory is this: We can eliminate Orochimaru. We send a stealth force comprised of our most elite. They quietly assassinate Orochimaru. Then we install a new leader in Otogakure- one WE control. This way, there’s no chaos of war, and the casualties will be kept to a minimum.”

Sakura and Tsunade were both impressed with that. They had their own ideas about flaws, but Ryouko had already pinpointed them.

“Sasuke will be there. By now, with his genius and Sharingan, he’s probably stronger than Orochimaru. But that’s just one problem. The other- who do we have who could stand up to Orochimaru. Someone fit to lead, and someone who can...!”

Ryouko strode over to the door forcefully. Sakura and Tsunade had sensed it, too.

THWACK! TOK TOK TOK!

As soon as he opened the door, Ryouko was hit with a rain of kunai and swords!

“Ryouko!” Sakura shouted, her eyes tearing up. She balled up her fists and tore toward the assassins. “YOU BASTARDS!”

## 7 - Sacrifice 7: New Hokage's Rage

The assassins were ready to aim for her, but someone else had something to say about that!

KABAM!

Ryouko kicked the ceiling down, falling from above. The log he had replaced himself with was splintered. For once, he avoided injury and turned the tables.

It was the assassin's bad luck that Tsunade and Sakura were both there. And they were both incredibly angry about that little attack.

You could hear the screams for miles.

--

Ryouko and Danzou agreed to meet at the center of the Leaf Village. Against Sakura's wishes (at first; she hated this idea until she heard his reasoning), Ryouko was not accompanied by any ANBU guards. That was unheard of for a Hokage in hostile negotiations. But how could Ryouko allow those who were traitors to watch his back while he talked with the chief traitor? Besides, by not telling anyone that he wasn't assigning any ANBU agents, he could immediately tell who the rogue agents were.

To make Sakura feel better (and, really himself too, he admitted), Ryouko had the remains of Team Kakashi and Team Asuma hidden nearby. If anything happened, there were no shinobi that Ryouko trusted more.

The day was slightly windy, blowing Ryouko's Hokage robe around. He stood atop the Hokage mansion- the least accessible rooftop in the village- staring at the Third Hokage's stone face. He wondered, not for the first time, if he was cut out for this. If he was worthy for this. As a co-Hokage, he knew he had giant sandals to fill.

**I'll give it my best, and that's all I can do. I wonder, though- today, will I become a murderer? To protect all those people down there...to protect myself...to protect Sakura...can I plunge a kunai into another man's heart?**

...

**Can or cannot makes no difference to me. I WILL, if it comes to that. There is nothing more important- not even my peace of mind- than this village, and the people in it. Better I bloody my hands than let Sakura be tormented.**

Sakura would join him shortly. That was another layer to Ryouko's plan. Tsunade and Sakura had terrifying force. If necessary, they could take down the Hokage mansion with their bare hands. Hence the reason for this place. Only one door came onto the rooftop. If the floors below became saturated with enemies, they would drop the building- and Ryouko- on top of them.

Closing his eyes for only a split second, Ryouko's senses perked up. He turned slowly, meeting the gaze of Danzou and four ANBU agents. They were an imposing site, to be sure. All of them nameless

and faceless...no emotions or expressions. Nothing but orders to kill. And if they died, they were expendable, and five more would take the place of each one that fell.

There was silence for a time, sizing each other up. Ryouko broke the silence first, speaking quietly.

“What will it take to end this peacefully, elder?”

Danzou and his agents relaxed a little bit. Or, more likely, appeared to relax.

“It will take you stepping down as Hokage, and naming me your replacement. Effective immediately.”

Ryouko tried logic. “You know very well that doing that would cause instability among our citizens. It would give other nations a chance to attack. A shift in power always means changes or temporary weakness, at least.”

Danzou glowered at Ryouko. His old face was set as the stone Hokage faces behind Ryouko.

“Very well then. We’ll have to do this by force. Ima, Suntetsu- show him!”

Two agents dragged Sakura up to the roof, her arms bound and her face bloodied. She had been stripped naked, and it looked as though she had been whipped. But beyond that, she looked as though she was experiencing some horror internally as well. Ryouko’s face paled- they couldn’t have!

“What did you do to her?”

Danzou smiled nastily. “I let my agents have their way with her. She put up quite a fight, but I daresay all my agents were satisfied!”

Ryouko had never felt so...everything! Nothing was right! Nothing was fair! And for the first time, he felt no trepidation. He would end this- now!

“Oh, and if you try to- ?!” Danzou began, but stopped as Ryouko disappeared. He was going to tell Ryouko that, if he tried anything, they would kill the girl. But it became apparent that it wasn’t going to work like that.

SCHUNK!

Four agents lay mutilated in barely three seconds time. They had been gutted. They had their arms, legs, feet, groins, and eyes separated. Their masks had been shattered, showing their expressions of shock and horror as the new Hokage dismantled them with more raw anger and power than they believed possible.

“Danzou, for this you’ll die. But you’re going to feel it. I want you to feel death’s hand close around your neck...”

Ryouko was already behind Danzou. The clone that was doing the talking disappeared.

Danzou swung with his cane, but Ryouko blocked it with one hand. He threw it off the roof to the ground below.

“Shall we test the sharpness of this blade?” Ryouko growled. He dug the blade into Danzou’s shoulder, ripping it into his flesh. A cascade of blood fell, but Ryouko kept slicing until his blade exited by Danzou’s hand. His left arm fell to the ground.

“Do you see what you’ve done?!” Ryouko roared, sticking the sword into the wound and giving it a violent twist. “DO YOU?! DO YOU?!”  
Stab stab stab stab stab!

Five times the short sword entered and exited Danzou’s body. The first time destroyed his right arm. The second his upper right leg. The third his lower right leg. The fourth his upper left leg. The fifth his lower left leg.

The blade now laid aside, Ryouko used his bare hands to pummel Danzou over and over. His nose was broken, his teeth were gone, his jaw was destroyed. One ear was torn off. His fingers and toes were chopped up and stuffed down his throat until the pathetic old man gagged on his own bile.

Ryouko’s breathing was heavy and hard as he raised his sword one more time. But he felt a soft hand sliding over his.

It was Sakura. She was still naked, but alive and seemingly okay.

“Ryouko, you are going to feel guilty about this. But at least...at least allow me to share that guilt. For better or worse, we’ve done this for the village. Now, one more cut. Let’s take out that eye...”

Ryouko smiled lightly, then broke ‘Sakura’s’ arm.

“I knew it! A corpse doll! You never touched her!” Ryouko declared, throwing the Sakura doll off the roof and into the street below. The incident had served a great purpose for him, though-

**It’s not enough to love her. I have to trust in her and her abilities. I nearly lost my cool over some stupid scheme. She’s too strong to get caught like that!  
You aren’t alone anymore, Ryouko! If you love her, trust her!**

Ryouko sheathed his dagger once he flicked the blood off. He raised his hand, giving Sakura and Tsunade the signal to come on up and begin treatment on the defeated. From there, it would be off to a jail cell with chakra seals. Although not before some interrogation...if whatever was left of Danzou could talk. If he couldn’t talk, he could listen.

As Tsunade worked, Ryouko and Sakura wandered over and leaned down near Danzou.

“Just a warning- make the mistake of involving her image again, and I won’t stop at just ‘mutilation’. This must hurt badly- so image me taking it to the next step...”

It was hard to believe the kindly new Hokage could elicit such ferocity, both in speech and actions, but it was plain- if you messed with the his village or his girl, there would be hell to pay.

--

--

Ryouko and Sakura paid Ibikki Morino a visit the following day. No doubt Ibikki would find it both distasteful and fun to torture the truth out of an elder. Ibikki was a stickler for rules, and respecting elders was up there, for sure. But traitors were dealt with simply in ANBU Interrogation and Torture.

“Any progress, Ibikki?” Ryouko asked. He felt Sakura shake a little behind him. He had warned her that he had done a number on Danzou. She had been sure her medical expertise would protect her. No such luck- Danzou was more mutilated than anyone else Sakura had ever seen. Even after having a day to settle down, the sight of the old man really bothered her. (Although she was definitely flattered that Ryouko had done it for her sake. It was kind of hot, having your man fight for you like that.)

Ibikki gave a grim look at Danzou. “We were lucky, Lord Hokage. This traitor tells me that negotiations with the Akatsuki were almost finished. They were to assassinate Lady Tsunade in four days time.”

Ryouko crossed his arms, trying to think of the best way to deal with this. He didn’t like the idea too much, but for now, it would work.

“News of Sakura and I taking hasn’t become public yet... If we project the illusion that Tsunade is still in charge, that might give us a chance to capture- or eliminate- some of the Akatsuki. We simply lay a trap...”

Sakura wasn’t fond of the idea. “Ryouko, we can’t do that! We can’t put Tsunade at risk like that. Or Naruto, for that matter! We don’t have the manpower to deal with this kind of problem head-on.”

Ryouko knew she was right. He wasn’t sure about his plan to begin with- who here was strong enough to combat the Akatsuki, yet expendable enough if they were lost?

“Thank you, Ibikki. When you’ve finished, lock Danzou up. Chakra wards on the cell- the whole deal. Oh, and please station guards as well. I believe some of Danzou’s more hardcore followers will try to free him. We can’t have that. Unless...”

Ryouko brightened a little. Here was an idea! Make the traitor work for him!

**I’ll discuss it with Sakura later. I wonder if we’ll wind up at my place again...**

## 8 - Sacrifice 8: No Moon

Ryouko and Sakura talked about how to proceed. They didn't want to invite the Akatsuki to their village. They had to figure out a place to meet. If they were going to use Danzou as bait, things had to work perfectly. But that wasn't the chief topic tonight.

Sakura was sitting bashfully, dressed in an evening yukata with a pink striped pattern. She sat formally to talk to Ryouko- the first sign for him that something was up. The second sign was that she was keeping her distance from him. Or so it seemed. The third sign was that Sakura seemed very nervous- she was blushing, and seemed very close to perspiration.

Ryouko sat across from her, but shifted to a more comfortable position. He had been sitting in tateheiza to match her formal attitude, but now switched to something more comfortable in hopes that she would do the same. She did, eventually- likely once she realized what she was doing.

"Sorry. I just keep thinking of you as 'Lord Hokage'..." Sakura apologized, blushing again.

"You're 'Lady Hokage', so you don't need to worry about that."

"I know," she said, smoothing her yukata. "But I...I'm still young, Ryouko. And I want...I want to know what it's like to live like a normal girl, too. Without giving up my power. There's so much good I can do, especially with you by my side. But that's part of it- I want us to be...closer."

Ryouko didn't have any clue where she was going with this. Once you had sex, how much closer could you get to your partner? Thankfully, Sakura said what was on her mind and spared him the torment of thinking about it:

"Let's move. Together. I mean...as in...live together."

That was indeed a big step, and also pointed out why Sakura had been blushing. They had been together for a couple weeks as boyfriend/girlfriend, but that had known each other much longer. And they were in love. Was there any reason they shouldn't live together?

Ryouko gave Sakura a smile. "I'd like that."

--

It was decided that the village would be split up into a few sectors. Each sector would, in turn, be manned round the clock by various jonin, squads, and ANBU combinations. The chief combinations were:

The North Gate: Asuma, Shikamaru, Choji, Kurenai, Izumo Kotetsu

The South Gate: Kakashi, Yamato, Sai, Naruto, Hinata

The River: Gai, Lee, Tenten, Neji, Kiba

The Residential District: Chouza Akimichi, Inoichi Yamanaka, Shikaku Nara, Ino Yamanaka, Yukao

(Hayate's lover, for those who don't know)

Industrial Center: Shibi Aburame, Shino Aburame, Hiashi Hyuuga,

School: Iruka Umino, Anko Mitarashi, Genma Shirani, Raido, Shizune

The Center: Ibikki Morino, Tsunade, Ryouko, Sakura

Ibikki and Tsunade were Ryouko and Sakura's chief advisors, so they stayed close to them. Beyond that, there were leaders to each section.

North: Asuma. 2nd: Shikamaru 3rd: Kurenai

South: Kakashi 2nd Yamato

River: Gai 2nd Neji

Residential: The Ino-Shika-Cho trio shares the responsibility.

Industrial: Hiashi Hyuuga 2nd Yukao

School: Shizune 2nd Iruka

Center: Ryouko 2nd Sakura

This was a radical move. It meant the village had to take less missions, or give more missions to genin and even academy students. But with an attack from the Akatsuki (Or Danzou's followers) as such a certainty, it couldn't be helped.

"This is tantamount to declaring war. We'll need to send letters of non-aggression to each Village, and all the surrounding outpost towns. Lady Hokage, can I leave that to you?"

"Of course, Lord Hokage. I'll start on it right away."

"I'll make sure we get you an assistant, M'lady," Ryouko told her with a smile. "Meanwhile, if you, Medical Officer Tsunade and Medical Associate Shizune, will see that our hospital is as up to date as their budget will allow. I'll make allowances as needed. But make no mistake, this will be a war."

Ryouko hesitated for a split second, then met Tsunade's eye. He gave her a small smile.

"I think it's time to establish that medical teaching facility you talked about all that time ago, Tsunade. I'll leave that to you and Shizune, plus Lady Hokage. I know she'll insist on being involved."

Tsunade and Shizune nodded, leaving the room to do that. They shared a smile- Ryouko had settled into the role just fine, despite his obvious discomfort at ordering them all around. His plan was sound, so no one would oppose him- at least, no one who truly had the village's best interests at heart.

Next, Ryouko called in Iruka, Anko, and Ibikki.

"As my educational representatives, I would like to be personally informed of any academy students showing promise. There will be a genin qualification exam in two days. Tell your students not to fret if they aren't chosen this time, as this is a special occasion."

"But promoting them just to fight in this war, Lord Hokage? I can't, in good conscience...it's..." Iruka's voice trailed off. He couldn't believe that Ryouko could be this hard-assed!

"It's both a necessity and a helpful measure, Iruka. Consider this: There are lots of D and C ranked missions that take place in other villages. Should that many children be away at another village..."

"I get it! They won't be under attack from the Akatsuki outside the village! And the rest will be easier to hide!" Iruka smacked one palm against the other, finally understanding Ryouko's insistence.

"Anko, Ibikki- I'll be counting on you both to find jonin instructors. Perhaps you might prod some of our less active jonin to... 'volunteer'." 'Volunteer' meant, of course, intimidation.

"Yes, sir!" the three said at once, leaving in clouds of smoke.

That left two more people. Genma and Raido. These two had been very upset at the Third Hokage's funeral. They had blamed themselves for not being able to do enough. Raido especially as he was Lord Hokage's guard when Orochimaru attacked. Raido didn't remember the fight, as he had been unconscious the whole time. Now, he and Genma wanted to make amends. As part of Shizune's temporarily dissolved squad, they needed to be assigned.

"I want to ask you both something. We were all there when the Third Hokage died. And we all blamed ourselves. I must ask you now to either release that self-loathing, or channel it towards defense. Defense of the new Hokage's. Can I ask that of you?" Ryouko talked to them both as equals, rather than subordinates. They had a shared experience that had shaped them in a big way.

"For once, you may refuse a mission. There are other candidates, but I feel that you two would be the best for the job."

Genma and Raido looked at each other, nodded, and told Ryouko:

"Yes, Lord Hokage!"

Ryouko patted both their shoulders in a surprising display of familiarity.

"Good. Now, please watch Lady Hokage when she is outside home or work. The rest of that time, I'll count on you to be my eyes and ears in the village. If you don't already know Summoning Jutsus, I would suggest learning. The Inuzuka family has a new litter of puppies that are currently in ninja training."

--

The academy tests were more rigorous than usual. As this was wartime, everyone was on edge. Those with the most dedication to the village were easy to find. They were the ones who were working incredibly hard and always putting their best foot forward.

The tests were mostly sparring and jutsus performed individually. At least, until Lord and Lady Hokage showed up. Ryouko was adorned in true Hokage fashion, complete with the hat, while Sakura wore her normal clothes, coupled with a white lab coat.

"Thank you all for testing today. Everyone here has the potential for something great. At this time, my decision must concern a very select few. If you aren't chosen this time, do not panic. There is a very narrow criteria we're using to search this time around, due to wartime needs. The rest of you will continue to develop your skills.

Also, be aware that your shinobi training will NOT be the conventional three-man squad. You will fall under the direct tutelage of my aids for excelled learning before being deployed on missions."



Sakura stepped up to finish for Ryouko.

“This will mean a lifestyle change. You’ll need to get a physical from me before you’re okayed for duty. If you have any problem leaving home for extended periods, then this job isn’t for you. And, lastly...” This part seemed hard for Sakura. She looked to Ryouko. He glanced at her, then spoke up:

“If you are afraid of death, or you are squeamish to kill...then think twice before taking this on. You may be lucky, as I have, and never have to end another human’s life. But you are more likely to find yourself in some kind of situation where someone dying is inevitable. I ask you think that through carefully before considering accepting this job. Now then...the following will please report to Lady Hokage and her medical team for check-ups. Males- if you are uncomfortable with a female doctor giving you a physical, please say so, and a male doctor will be provided. Now then...”

-

Of the chosen ten, six passed the physical and psychological tests. They were ready and willing to help. And they are:

Aiko Kagurazaku (child of love)- female kunoichi. Dark brown hair/eyes. Tough, but sweet toward her squad. Will attack one provoked.

Daisuke Sakurazaki (Big help)- Not tough, but incredibly clever. Can use teammates to their fullest abilities. Inadvertently draws out his own talents the same way.

Hanaka Sonozaki (flower child)- kunoichi. She is a leader, and a tomboy.

Hideki Satoshi (Excellent) Arrogant against enemies, he is gentle with women, especially teammates.

Kenichi Yoshizuki- A rare male medical shinobi. Very gentle, and dislikes combat. Really only there to heal team. Wears glasses outside of combat.

Nanami Kasumi: Rare water user in the hidden leaf. She’s very much a prodigy, but frustrated easily.

-

“This one...Kenichi Yoshizuki...I think I’ll take him on personally, if that’s okay,” Sakura told Ryouko, thumbing through the file. “He’s a rare find. A male who wants to learn medical ninjutsu. He’s got a great aptitude for it.”

“Absolutely fine. The rest will...” Ryouko began, but his voice trailed off. They had a visitor.

A severe looking girl was waiting at the door. She had long black hair, but her eyes were light. Ice blue, in fact, adding to the intensity of her glare. She strode heavily over to Ryouko and Sakura, looking at them both with the same stern look.

“I’m Makoto Yamada! Lord and Lady Hokage, I’ve come to appeal your decision!”

Sakura was ready to belt this little smartass, but Ryouko looked on with an amused look. He smiled,

fixing his gaze on the girl before him. Getting a look in the eye from the Hokage seemed to melt her confidence a little. But as it was a mild look, it came flooding back.

“That’s right! You left me out of your decision! If you took Kenichi, then I should have been picked! That child is helpless without me! You can’t take him without taking me!”

“That isn’t how you get what you want,” Ryouko said sternly. “And you would have to demonstrate to me how my and Lady Hokage’s judgment was incorrect. Right now, you aren’t impressing me with this attitude.”

Makoto looked to Sakura, hoping that she could reason female-to-female. But Sakura looked more intimidating than Ryouko. Finally, Makoto crumbled.

“I’m sorry, Lord and Lady! I just...I can’t let Kenichi go without me! Please! Give me a week! I’ll meet your standards after that!”

Ryouko and Sakura exchanged glances. They gave each other a slight nod.

“Very well. You’ll have one week. Next time, however, don’t try the attitude routine on me.”

--

Ryouko and Sakura finally had a few moments to themselves. Their work was done for the day, and both were exhausted. Their eyes met, and their energy came back. They met in the center of the Hokage’s office, immediately entwined in a fond, desperate embrace.

“With all that’s gone on... I feel like I’ve been neglecting you,” Ryouko said, just a little on the seductive side.

“Well, it’s been the same way with me. But you wanna know something interesting?” Sakura purred, cooing up to Ryouko. “Kunoichi are very possessive creatures. Not to mention girls are, too. Once we’ve kissed you, we own you.”

“Oh, really now? Well, I can’t argue that logic, can I?” Ryouko cooed. Then he perked up. Sakura did, too. They kept talking to each other like that, even as they broke apart.

The moonlight in the window revealed a shadow. Ryouko spun toward it. But he was working blind, and his vicious strike met only air. Immediately, he moved backward until he felt his back meet Sakura’s.

“This is bad...” Sakura muttered in a low tone. “(sniff sniff) Ryouko...I smell blood...”

Ryouko saw it- shining in the moonlight. The two older elder’s that had often clashed with Tsunade. Their bodies lay in a heap on top of one another in the moonlight. Next to them was Ibikki Morino, slashed from shoulder to hip. Not dead yet, but close.

“Secret art: Mugetsu!”

The light from the moon died. Sakura and Ryouko tensed up. All they could rely on was their other

senses. But 'smell' was defeated by the blood in the air. Taste too was defiled by blood. It was one of those smells you could taste. 'Hear' was good, but shinobi didn't go crashing around. That left touch.

"We should retreat..." Sakura said, a question in her tone.

"We can't. If they take the Hokage building, that's it. Whoever this is, they're good..." Ryouko clenched a kunai tightly to his chest, swiveling his head all the while knowing it was hopeless.

The tell-tale whoosh of a sword slashed down. Both Ryouko and Sakura turned to block it. It was Ryouko who would meet the blade. It cut through his kunai and bit into his shoulder.

Suddenly, he could see again.

**It was...genjutsu? Then I've got to free Sakura...wait...him!**

A hand clasped over Ryouko's mouth. He struggled against it, but found he couldn't speak. But he could reach Sakura...

## 9 - Sacrifice 9: The Leaf's Split

Sakura felt her back being tapped. The world had light again. And she saw only one horrific thing:

A man she didn't know slit Ryouko's throat.

A roar of rage escaped Sakura's throat. She swung her fist as hard as she could. But the intruder disappeared, dropping Ryouko to the ground.

Sakura hit the floor next to Ryouko, putting her hands on his neck to stop the bleeding. All her training left her as the panic set in.

**The cut is shallow because Ryouko pushed against him at the last second. But that's not going to mean much if I don't do something!**

"You idiot! Did you forget everything I taught you?!"

Tsunade dragged herself across the floor. She had been crouching behind Ibikki, healing him blindly in the darkness. He would recover, but at the moment, it wasn't the major concern. Ibikki himself would have insisted that Ryouko be treated first.

"Hold his neck in place. I'm going to close the wound. Then we've got to get him out of here. That's not the last of the assassins."

As she fixed Ryouko, Tsunade turned and showed her hip to Sakura by mistake. Sakura noticed a cut. The cut began at the hip and continued up to her shoulder. Blood gathered in Tsunade's ample cleavage.

Sakura's training came back, and she healed Tsunade. This took ten minutes or so.

Ryouko was still in critical condition. Sakura was alone, and looked to Tsunade for advice. Tsunade's face was grim as she said:

"We have to retreat. ANBU isn't under our control. We don't know who to trust. All we can do is back away and try to counter."

"But that means giving up control of the village!" Sakura protested. "Ryouko would never-"

"Ryouko is in no state to argue. Do you honestly believe there's a better option?! While his life hangs in the balance?!"

Sakura bit her lip, but hefted her barely-living boyfriend onto her shoulders.

"Let's go. Destroy what you can on the way out,"

Sakura spoke her first order to her former master. Tsunade gave a small smirk out of pride, then set about the task of getting the Hokage's office ready to detonate.

--

The next morning, the people of Konoha all stood in the center of the village. The gates to the outside had been closed and locked. The citizens had been hustled out of their homes in the middle of the night. No one had been hurt so far, but with ANBU being the enemy, no one knew who to trust.

A shinobi, tan and with tight-cropped black hair, stood in front of the still-burning Hokage mansion. He was a counselor, and generally very popular. His ideas were in direct opposition to Danzou's 'war first' attitude'.

"I want you all to know that this fire was set by your previous leaders. Violence is not something I will tolerate. You will all be protected under our rule. The rule of the *Kaichou* party."

The crowd muttered, but didn't dare speak out. The fate of two Hokage's was unknown, and the entire council had been demolished.

"Now then, immediately- all shinobi, turn in your weapons! Anyone caught with a weapon will be arrested and sent for 'reform'. Jutsus are hereby prohibited. There will be no more instruction at ninjutsu. Instead, there will be peace. A utopian society in which everyone is equal."

In the crowd, one shinobi couldn't take it anymore.

"That's it? That's what you say? Just like that we're supposed to stop our lives? Give up our military power? Roll over and die, our heritage shattered? What if we don't want this?!"

Immediately, three ANBU agents were standing around the man.

"Believe me. This ruling party, Kaichou, knows better. Give it time- you'll understand why you need us to think for you."

That was it. With that, the Leaf Village had been taken over.

"I'd like to thank your previous leader. Lord Sixth Hokage made this easy for me by eliminating that troublesome warmonger, Elder Danzou. Really, what do we need war for?"

"To keep some kind of balance of power!" came a shout.

"Oh dear. You must be 'reformed'. ANBU, please deal with that."

The Village's darkest hour had come. One man sweet-talked his way to power, hiding his deception amongst kind words. In a military world, in a time of war, he tried to preach peace. That was suicide, and most of the Leaf Village knew it.

--

Kakashi, Gai, Asuma, and Kurenai stood near the burnt Hokage building. Kakashi's Sharingan eye

scanned for signs of life, finding none. But he did find something interesting.

On a small board, in very tiny letters written with blood, there was a message. The handwriting was Sakura's; the blood Ryouko's.

"Seek us out, allies of the true leaf"

"They're alive!" Gai said, shocked.

"At least Sakura is..." Kakashi added. "If I know Ryouko, he protected her with his life. Maybe literally..."

"Then we've got to find them! This guy will destroy us!" Asuma exclaimed. But Kurenai hesitated.

"I'm not sure... I mean, his idea makes sense. Peace breeds peace if war breeds war, right? Maybe we DO need someone to tell us how we should think. Who's to say we know best?"

"Who's to say this guy does?" Asuma shot back. "Are you serious, Kurenai? This guy's taken our freedom! He wants to make us a joke! We're supposed to be the most powerful village! If this guy gets his way, we'll be a laughingstock!"

"Everyone deserves to be equal! We all work hard! We should be taken care of!" Kurenai protested.

Kakashi finally stepped in, being the most level-headed.

"Kurenai, I'm seeking them out. Lord and Lady Hokage. If you won't come with us, can you at least promise to stay out of the way? If you get involved, you endanger yourself and Asuma."

Kurenai's deep red eyes met Kakashi's eyes. After a moment of trepidation, she gave a single, firm nod.

"I can give you that. But don't expect my help."

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Under the academy there was a meeting room. It was usually for teachers. But in a crisis, it became a vital meeting area. The council was generally too busy to congregate here. In fact, it was a good bet that none of them even knew about the spot.

In the center of the room was a great tree. Built around the tree were the various teacher's desks.

Right now, laying on the desk was Ryouko. He had a fever, though it would pass. Save for the trauma of such an injury, he would live.

Sakura laid a cold washcloth on his forehead, a checking his neck for blood for the thousandth time that hour. She had kept a constant vigil by his side.

"Do you think anyone will understand the message? I wrote it in English..."

Tsunade was doubtful about that. Not capitalizing the 'L' in leaf, if anyone could even read it... Even if they did, there were thousands of trees in the Leaf Village. The note could have referred to any tree in the Fire Nation.

"...No. But I think that someone will show up down here eventually. Through them, we can spread the word. And it has to happen sooner rather than later if we're to fight back."

"Mm..."

Tsunade put her arm on Sakura's shoulder.

"Be grateful you can do something for him, Sakura. It was more than I could do for Dan and Nowaki. You're there for him, and he'll live because of you. And if I know him...when he wakes up, it'll be you that'll be on his mind."

Sakura was silent for a moment. But she had to confide to someone.

"I love him. I really love him, Master Tsunade. I want him to be mine, and I want to be his."

Tsunade gave a small chuckle. "You know, he's been in love with you for more than four years. He never felt deserving. Maybe he was afraid of rejection, or maybe he's just girl shy, but he couldn't tell you. But it showed on his face."

"I can't believe I didn't notice. It's so obvious now..." Sakura gave a reserved smile, moving Ryouko's bangs aside and flipping his washcloth over.

"You need some privacy. Maybe to lower his fever. I'll erect a barrier jutsu. You just...do your thing."

--

Once the barrier was set up, Sakura laid on top of Ryouko. She took off his shirt, then hers. Just like before, her skin contact would ease his fever. And when he woke up, the first thing he saw and felt would be her.

--

One by one, some true Leaf's came. It started with Iruka coming to collect his textbooks. Soon, the teachers followed. Then the exam proctors. Then more jonin. But not everyone came, and that was a point of worry.

"Some people actually believe this nutcase is the right thing for us? I can't believe anyone would be that dense."

"His plan is ludicrous! To just shove this down our throats..."

"I know, it's ridiculous!"

Those were the general comments. There were plenty of masses willing to fight, but there was no leader. Not until someone stepped up.

“Are we gonna let him do this?! Our Hokages fell to this bastard’s assassin’s! We all bought into his crap! We’ve got to organize and fight back!”

This voice belonged to Naruto. If there was ever a pure essence of a true Leaf shinobi, this was it. Backed by Jiraiya and Tsunade, he took charge in Ryouko’s absence.

--

Sakura willed Ryouko to wake up. It wasn’t just that he was needed to spearhead this revolution- she had her own selfish reasons as well. Not least of all was that she missed his love.

**Please...wake up, Ryouko! I need you! You’re mine! Do you understand? Wake up!**

Sakura felt the familiar arms of her lover around her. He tugged her in close, feeling her warmth. He drank it in, clutching desperately- as if he would never let go.

Neither said a word. They didn’t need to. Their lips met, and that moment spoke volumes.

“Right...we’ve got a war to win,” Ryouko said, panting a little. “Time to take back our home. The thought of that idiot defiling it...”

“I know. But he has followers,” Sakura told him, biting her lip. “We’ve got to be careful if we’re going to liberate everyone without a huge war.”

“But now we know who the enemies are. We’re not working blind. And we WILL win.”

Sakura pulled him in close to her again. He just tried to relax and enjoy the moment. God only knew when they would get time like this again.

“Wait...you knew about the takeover?” Sakura questioned. She was sure he had been unconscious.

“Well, I saw him, but I couldn’t warn you. It was all I could do to break the genjutsu on you. That, and apparently I can hear when I’m unconscious. What you said...about wanting to be mine, and vice versa...it was a lot easier to wake up after hearing that.”

--

“He has to have made some kind of deal. Naruto, you’re likely involved, since the deal was with the Akatsuki. That means you’ll be with Masters Tsunade and Jiraiya. Sakura and I are likely targets as well. Asuma, you’ll be with us. That leaves Gai and Kakashi to head up another strike force.”

“What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to attack one spot, break through their defenses, and shatter their leadership. We can’t afford to spread out and hit multiple targets. But that’s the main attack. First, we’re going to deal damage to ANBU and this ‘Kaichou’ party with espionage.”

“How’s that again?”



“This party has mostly women and soft-spoken supporters. So we’ll need someone who fits that bill…”

Hinata Hyuuga’s shy hand raised up.

“I-I can do it, L-Lord Hokage!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Ryouko noticed Naruto’s expression twinge.

**Glad it’s not unrequited love.**

“That’s fine. But we need to establish our own leadership here and now. (Groan)” Ryouko got up. While his body was still recovering, his mind was already working on a solution to the problem at hand.

“Well, we can help, can’t we?” Kenichi asked. He had learned loads from Sakura, and would be a big help if things got violent.

“We need strategy. There’s seven of us, and all your advisors…almost all your advisors are dead,” added Daisuke.

“So let us help…please,” Makoto chimed in, remembering her manners this time.

One by one, the rest of the ‘Hokage Seven’ added their support. Ryouko and Sakura nodded, already beginning to plan.

## 10 - Sacrifice 10: Attacking Our Own

Hinata Hyuuga had begun her infiltration of the Kaichou party. As an added mission, Asuma asked her to keep an eye on Kurenai. Kurenai posed the greatest threat to their revolution at the moment. She needed to be kept in check if she talked about Kakashi and the others seeking out Ryouko and company.

Meanwhile, Ryouko re-established his base of power.

“This means that we’re at war. Master Tsunade, I’ll leave all medical questions to you. Ibikki, I’m going to capture one of these brainwashed fools. I need to find out if there’s a jutsu on them that’s making them do this, or if this clown really did manage to win everyone over. The rest of you- focus on combat. Eat and sleep when you can. We’re going to retake the Leaf bit by bit. And you’ll need to be at the top of your game. ANBU agents only...kill them if need be. DO NOT GET CAPTURED. We’ll be operating under complete secrecy as a resistance effort.”

With that, Ryouko turned to Sakura, taking her hand to lead her away.

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Around the corner, they embraced.

“I’m so glad I got to see you again. My life means nothing without you, Sakura. Please...I’ve asked horrible things of the others, but for you...I ask you to stay by my side, and protect yourself most of all. Our council will be led by you. I have to return to combat as soon as I’m able.”

Sakura held him at arm’s length, giving her head shake. “No! I don’t want you to! If you go out there again...I can’t put you back together a second time! That first hit to the spine nearly paralyzed you! One more, and that’s it...”

“You know I can’t hold back. What kind of leader would I be if I-”

“Asked people to do things that I wouldn’t do myself,” Sakura finished for him, having heard this many times. “I know, I know, but you’ve got to think of yourself! You’re allowed to! It’s not selfish, and no one will say a word! Lady Tsunade doesn’t go into combat all the time!”

“Lady Tsunade is a fifty year old woman. I’m a twenty-one year old man. There’s a difference. And no, it’s not gender. Besides, we’re on the losing end of things right now. We HAVE to make our move, with all we’ve got.”

Sakura understood, of course. She had known all along that arguing would be futile. But she had to try. Now her conscience could rest easy, even if her heart and mind could not. She just tucked her head into his chest and listened to the steady sounds of his heartbeat and breath. They had relaxed her ever since that night she absorbed his fever. The sounds were one of the precious few comforts she had left. It was the one comfort she would share with no one.

“You’re mine. So don’t do something stupid out there. You’ve got to come back to me. I order you to!”

Ryouko gave her a tired smile, playfully raising his hands in surrender. “Well, you DID capture me, ms kunoichi. No swordsman could stand a chance against your charms.”

Sakura put a hand on the back of his neck, as if to kiss him. But she stopped and met his eyes instead.

“Just don’t forget that out there, okay?”

“I won’t. I promise.”

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It began a week after the takeover. Having amassed a good-sized army, Ryouko and Sakura mobilized them for combat. However, a lack of weapons was a problem. And an even bigger problem was that most of those who came were either elderly or very young and untrained. That made squads next to impossible.

“Shintai,” Ryouko said, looking at his group. “Literal meaning: Ultimate Truth. The fact is, we’re fighting an uphill battle. But this group, all of you here- this IS the Ultimate Truth of the Hidden Leaf. The ‘Kaichou’ preach unity- a forced unity. We’ll deliver reality with our own hands. It’s all we can do to preserve our heritage.”

Immediately, a couple youngsters (ages six and seven) took some paper from the teacher’s area and constructed banners. They adorned the construction paper with green cutouts of leaves. One child, a very gifted artist, drew pictures of the Kaichou party’s leader and tacked them to boards, making handy targets for practice.

“It’s good to see so much team spirit,” Sakura commented, smiling at the children working in tandem with the adults. “It makes me so sure we’ll win.”

Ryouko looked proud, but even more disturbed. “We will, no doubt. But Sakura...I have to send *children* into an adult’s war! Children who shouldn’t have to even consider taking a life! Children being rushed into war! To make decisions they aren’t ready to make!”

“I’ve thought that, too. And you know what? You couldn’t STOP them, Ryouko. They WANT to go to war and win this village back. Don’t you think it’s better to organize their efforts, rather than have them disobey you, or work without a guide and wind up giving us all away?”

Ryouko had expected Sakura to be more sensitive to the issue. But the fact was, she was thinking like a leader, while he was thinking like a mother. He was not a mother or father to these children. He was their leader, and this was a time of war. Shinobi as young as eight had always been promoted based on their skills. The only difference was that they would be given D-ranked missions, not S-ranked espionage.

“I suppose we can control their missions this way. Have them attack from places adult’s can’t reach to

cause distractions. Then use actual strike forces..." Ryouko hadn't thought about this until Sakura said what she did. Now his mind was working big time.

"Do you think they'll have weapons out there?"

"Absolutely," she answered instantly. Sakura knew one thing for sure, and it was that the Kaichou party didn't play by its own rules.

Ryouko looked around- not much to work with around here. Wood, paper, fire style jutsu, lightning style jutsu, wind style jutsu, earth style jutsu...

That was it!

"Yamato, Nanami, and you three (points) children! Let's get to work on some weapons! Yamato, I need Wood Style Jutsu to create Bokkens (wooden swords). Fire users, I need you to fire hardened the swords, spears and staffs Yamato creates! Nanami, you're with me. You kids, too!"

Yamato exchanged glances with Kakashi- both of them smirked a little at their Hokage's cleverness.

"We need weapons- he figures out how to get them," Yamato commented, using his wood to create trees from which those with knives and swords could carve weapons.

"He's a better Hokage than he'll give himself credit for," Kakashi agreed. He watched as Ryouko created a mud wall, while Nanami created small pools of water.

"Now I wonder what he's going to do with that?"

The kids began to work, breaking off chunks of mud, dipping it in the water, then created shuriken and kunai.

"Clay weapons? Clever!" Asuma said to Sakura. He had stopped smoking- a sure sign that something major was wrong at the moment. It didn't take a genius to guess that 'Kurenai is among the enemy' was what was wrong.

"It goes deeper than that, Asuma. Kids and women blend in well with that crowd, so we can get them in there. It's good if they're armed. But if they were caught with weapons, that would be bad. But these clay shuriken are easy to get rid of. It's as simple as using water or saliva to distort the shape and wash away the material."

Both watched as the kids proudly displayed their work to Ryouko. He beamed at them, taking some candles and showing them how to 'bake' their creations with candles. He couldn't resist showing off a bit and using a fire style jutsu to achieve the same affect.

"Iruka, would you oversee this, please? I've got to get to other matters..."

Ryouko swept over to the other side of the room. As he passed Sakura, he gave her a meaningful gaze.

--

"Even if we win this war, the blood of our own will have been shed..."

In a secluded corner, Ryouko outlined to Sakura his ideas and trepidations. He had never been able to talk to someone comfortably like this, and sometimes he stuttered over his words.

“If we fight, we’ll have hurt or killed our own village members. I know it can’t be helped...well, maybe it can...”

Ryouko looked through his ranks: Inoichi Yamanaka and Ibiki Morino were among his trusted people. Ino, however, had chosen the Kaichou party.

“If we can see who is actually against us using genjutsu, we can avoid fighting people who are just caught up, or are just hostages. That means Inoichi, Ibiki, and I will all be involved in the espionage. We’ll all also need a partner...”

Sakura was going to go with Ryouko, but he actually said ‘no’. She was furious and asked him ‘why’? “Why? Why won’t you trust me?! Huh?! Is it that I’m weak? After what we’ve been through, I’m of no use to you, so I’m supposed to play the weak little girl part? I can fight, too! Damn it!”

Ryouko let her go, waiting until she was finished before he explained: “You’re Lady Hokage. If I’m killed, you have to take charge. If we’re BOTH killed, the resistance effort will die. It will have lost its heart. That’s why one of us needs to stay alive. And genjutsu is my specialty...”

Sakura immediately calmed down. She understood now.

**It’s my strength he needs now. He has to do this. He’s right about this situation. A medic’s job is to stay alive anyway. Lady Tsunade and I will do more good here.**

Ryouko gave Sakura a hug, holding her tight to his chest. Every fiber in his body was against leaving her side. But it couldn’t be helped, and they both knew it. It was the age-old story of a ‘warrior’s duty’ coming before his own life. Shinobi and samurai were destined and doomed to live this way. They counted themselves lucky that they had each other to rely on.

“You know, if I didn’t have you, I bet I’d be dead by now,” Ryouko admitted, completely off-the-cuff. “You’ve certainly made sure that I’ve got a reason to stay alive.”

“I’m glad I’m useful, then,” Sakura replied, with a little sarcasm. “But, y’know, even with this war...it really makes it obvious that I spent too much time chasing the dreams of my twelve year old self.”

“Hm. We must keep moving forward, even when it is not the most attractive prospect.”

With that, Ryouko kissed Sakura, then went to gather his troops.

--

“Inoichi, Shikamaru, Choji... Ibiki, Kakashi, Naruto... I will be with Asuma and Hideki.”

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The next morning, at five am, the Leaf ‘Shintai’ group tore out of hiding and began their systematic

attacking. Most shinobi, caught without weapons and out of practice, surrendered quickly. Some immediately turned around and joined the 'Shintai' group, taking the clay and wooden weapons.

By the time the Kaichou party managed to group its forces together, they had shrunk to a quarter of their strength. The leader had no idea what to do- he had planned for peace, not war. He was caught flat-footed by the violence.

"What do I do?!" he shouted at his unarmed shinobi.

"Be grateful their leader is merciful," one of them said.

"WHO? WHO IS LEADING THEM?!"

The other aide piped up, having just heard the rumor himself. "Lord Hokage, sir. He didn't perish, as we believed. He's personally led this force, and he's done it with an incredibly small amount of bloodshed."

"How is that possible?"

"Genjutsu, in a word. He retained three of the five masters on his side. They are: Kurenai Yuuhi; Inoichi Yamanaka; Ibiki Morino (who was also believed dead); Ino Yamanaka; and Lord Hokage himself."

## 11 - Sacrifice 11: Seeing the Light

Asuma and Kurenai met now. On opposite sides of the battlefield. Neither one was ready to do battle with the other. Yet Kurenai wouldn't move aside, despite Asuma's pleading.

"I have to fight for what I believe in, Asuma."

Ryouko strode to the front, facing her with a troubled look on his face.

"Before we begin battle, Kurenai...explain to me why the Kaichou party appeals to you."

Kurenai lowered her gaze, not able to meet Lord Hokage's eyes. When she did, she was still reluctant, but her will was growing stronger.

"Because...a world without violence is an ideal world. And this ideal world should last longer than a few weeks! And...I can't let you destroy it!"

Kurenai began to make handsigns. Asuma and Hideki steeled themselves, but Ryouko himself was the target.

Kurenai and Ryouko stood across from each other, neither moving or blinking, fighting a silent genjutsu battle.

--

### *Genjutsu*

"A world without war? It would be nice, wouldn't it? But war is a fact, Kurenai. And shinobi are tools of war."

Tree roots snared Ryouko, holding his arms to his sides as Kurenai appeared from the branches.

"Be that as it may, there are other options for shinobi. -!"

Ryouko had disappeared from the tree's clutches. Instead, he stood at the base, using a fire style ninjutsu to light it ablaze. Kurenai was trapped by his gaze.

"There are options. But, realistically, we fight to protect what's important. We've HAD peace. Letting the Kaichou party run things is letting that peace become tainted by a false peace. And worse yet, leaving us unprepared for war."

Kurenai vanished into pink blossoms, swirling all around Ryouko, covering his face and mouth in seconds.

"A shinobi is never unprepared. If I was unprepared, Lord Hokage, could I have trapped you in this genjutsu?"

Ryouko put a hand on Kurenai's shoulder, with his other hand around her neck in a headlock. Her body

hadn't yet reformed- his grab prevented that.

"I'm taking back my village, Kurenai. And I'd like to avoid shedding the blood of my own. This will be the last merciful genjutsu I'll offer you."

A root grew up from the ground, with a hand holding a kunai aiming for Ryouko's groin. He kicked the kunai away, sending it skittering into the darkness.

"...If you can't be swayed, I'll leave you in the darkness to debate things. Demonic Illusion: Bringer of Darkness!"

End Genjutsu

Ryouko blinked, seeing Asuma gently laying Kurenai down on a bench. Hideki was at Ryouko's side, anxiously looking for some sign of consciousness.

"I didn't hurt her, Asuma," Ryouko said gently. "I put her in the darkness so that she can think. You can stay with her, if you'd like..."

Asuma nodded, taking a seat next to her. "If she wakes up, I know her genjutsu well enough to break it. Go on ahead."

--

The Kaichou party had dissolved to all but it's most hardcore followers. These were the fanatics that carried weapons despite their party's beliefs that weapons were 'unnecessary'.

"All groups: Surround their capital building! I myself and going in to do battle. No one is to follow me. Lady Hokage is your leader for the time being. Protect her at all costs!"

Ryouko and the ninety percent of the Leaf Village that was on his side split up, surrounding the building. Ryouko himself walked straight to the door. In front of it were four loyal Kaichou members.

"Attack!" their cell leader commanded. They all reared back and threw kunai at Ryouko.

-

Ryouko just kept walking forward, only glaring at the four attacking him. To them, it looked as if the kunai hit him, but he wasn't bothered. He didn't stop, no matter what.

What was really going in: Ryouko's genjutsu caused all of them to believe their throws to be on target, while in reality no kunai came close to him or anyone else.

"Be gone from our village. You are no shinobi fit serving the Leaf if you would usurp your leaders so quickly and with so little logic."

That voice echoed in each of their heads. Ryouko's people moved in and took care of the shinobi- no



blood was shed. They picked them up and dropped them outside the Leaf's newly re-opened gates.

-

Ryouko walked up the stairs, waiting for the ambush he knew was coming. At the top of the stairs, it did. Two kunoichi slashed out with kunai, trying to stab him. Ryouko had blocked the kunai with the back of his arms, taking the small cuts they caused. He shoved both females aside, keying his field mic two times. That was the signal to send in two people. They would find the kunoichi and deal with them. One looked to be under some kind of genjutsu influence to Ryouko. The other looked to be the type to cast such a genjutsu.

--

The Kaichou party leader just sat at his desk, his two aides at his sides. Ryouko opened the door, then quickly shut it behind him. Reaching back, he pressed his hand onto the door's opening point- sealed.

"Now let's talk, Kaichou leader..."

The two agents next to the leader looked to their master for guidance. But he said and did nothing. He waited a few beats, then nodded to Ryouko.

"Talk, then."

Ryouko took one step at a time, slowly making his way across the room.

"While your ideas are to be applauded, your methods are extreme, harsh, and ludicrous. You aren't a bad person; just misguided. Hopelessly misguided, I'm afraid. All the people you bullied, threatened, tricked, or used genjutsu on are all waking up and seeing the truth. The Leaf Village will be reclaimed by it's rightful Hokages."

The Kaichou leader nodded to his guards. Ryouko prepped for a fight, but the guards only stabbed the Kaichou leader, their swords exiting out the opposite sides of his body.

"...Why do that? Did you think I would hurt you?"

Ryouko kept his steady pace up.

"...No. I was curious...about why you would do this...why you fight your fight...since you know why I fight mine. I'm satisfied that I can't win. So you might say...I'm just choosing...the peaceful way out..."

Ryouko waited for the man to die, not wanting to tangle with the two aides just yet. The second the leader's eyes closed, Ryouko said:

"That's not the peaceful way out. That's the *coward's* way out. But in your case...that may have been best. Rest in peace. I only hope that your intentions don't die with you."

The aides picked up the leader's body and left. Ryouko keyed up his mic. He spoke softly; calmly:

"The village has been retaken."

He could hear the cheer from all the way inside this bunker of a building.

--

“Yes! Yes!”

Sakura forgot her ‘Lady Hokage’ demeanor and just flat-out shouted in victory.

“Lady Hokage...the casualty report...”

Tsunade’s report, in Sakura’s hands now, momentarily dampened her spirits- until she actually read it.

“TWO dead? That’s ALL?! And all the other injuries are minor...this is...amazing! How could we go through a civil war with such little bloodshed?!”

KA-BLAM!

The war wasn’t over yet, apparently.

“Ryouko!” Sakura took her breath in a sharp gasp, dropping the report and darting up the stairs and outside.

--

Ryouko came crashing through a second story window, his hands held in front of his face and chest in a defensive posture. He tucked and rolled, avoiding serious injury as he smashed into the pavement.

“Damn it! Everyone, back away!”

Ryouko stood up from his crouch slowly, looking to the top of the building. There was one tall, familiar figure. With a sword as long as his body, there could be no doubt.

“Kisame Hoshigaki...” Ryouko murmured. “Contracted to murder Lady Tsunade.”

Kisame grinned his shark’s grin. “That’s right, brat. But I don’t suppose you’ll bother letting me by without a fight?”

Ryouko straightened his back, nodding to Hideki. Hideki used a summoning scroll to summon- the hat of the Sixth Hokage.

“You’ve no reason to fight her, Kisame. I am the Hokage. Well, one of them. There are two. Regardless of numbers, you and your partner will have to deal with me now. I do hope I won’t disappoint!”

Kisame’s partner leapt down from the building, a giant rumbling following him, despite him being a smaller person. The Leaf Village shook as the man landed. Buildings began to topple as their foundations cracked.

That was all it took for Ryouko to be running up the building full-blast, his hand throwing shuriken up, multiply as he used the Multi Shuriken Shadow Clone Jutsu. He followed his throwing stars in, pulling off his Hokage hat. Kisame batted the shuriken aside. Ryouko’s hat was directed at Kisame’s partner back down below. It was sharpened to a razor’s edge underneath it’s fabric. When it hit Kisame’s

as-of-yet-unnamed partner, it did major damage, as the man had been so busy menacing the retreating Leaf patrons that he hadn't seen the attack coming.

--

Sakura had come running out from her hiding place, aiming her chakra scalpel at the intruder. She pierced him through the neck, apparently killing him. Except he didn't die.

A hand that glinted for a moment like a sword slashed toward her. She kicked away, but her vest had been cut, exposing her midsection. A trail of blood followed her movement.

"Ugh!" she grunted, landing crouched. But she had to kick off again quickly as a huge axe-like hand buried itself into the ground where she had been. Seeing an opportunity, Sakura focused her chakra and kicked- hard. Her foot slammed into the intruder's midsection, putting him into a thick tree in the middle of the village.

**That did a lot of damage...based on his attacks, he focuses ONLY on attacks. He doesn't play defense...but why? He can't rely on Kisame for defense...so that must mean he's got a huge tolerance for pain, and an even bigger amount of chakra.**

Sakura steadied herself, coiling up tightly, then leaping into the air.

"Tsutenkyaku!" she declared, bringing her foot down on top of the intruder's head with all her massive power. The head split like a melon, and for a moment the fight looked as though it were over. But then needles flew out of the hole. Sakura crossed her arms in front of her in defense as she leapt backward, feeling the pricks of the tiny needles.

**No poison...just senbon...my chakra scalpel can deflect them, mostly. Still hurts a little, though. But how can that guy still attack? And he booby trapped his own head? ...No. There must be more to it.**

Out of the split skull came a small shinobi, clothed in an Akatsuki robe. He was a good five inches shorter than Sakura. But that size would be put to good use. In one instant, he had appeared next to Sakura, his sword poised at her neck. She barely had time to block his strike with her chakra scalpel when the next one came. She moved her body, but she was cut high up on the right thigh. Fabric of her skirt and blood fell to the dirt.

**I can't catch him! I've got think of something! All my power's no good if I can't grab him! But how?! Wait...duh!**

## 12 - Sacrifice 12: Final Combat

Ryouko squared off against Kisame, both standing on the building, fighting on a ninety degree angle.

Ryouko paid the blood tribute on a summoning scroll, then tossed it 'up' to himself. A sheathed and sealed sword fell down to him.

"I never thought I'd have to break the seal...oh well. What must be done, must be done."

Kisame had to laugh. The sword was so much shorter than his, and it looked like it could snap like a twig!

"Oh, and what's this? A special weapon? It can't hold up to my Samehada!"

Ryouko took up a guard stance. "Shall we test that? If you're aiming to assassinate the Hokage, you'll have no choice."

"Aren't you worried about your girl? Fighting that other Akatsuki member all by herself? She's not like you, Ryouko. She's not as strong as you, and you know it. You're sweating...you're nervous. Or you're tired. Either way, this will be an easy victory."

Ryouko did indeed look haggard. He wasn't at one hundred percent by any means. But that would have to do for this fight. He met Kisame's eyes.

"You're right. She's not as strong as me- she's STRONGER than me. She's had unwavering faith in me; I have the same faith in her."

Danzou flashed into Ryouko's head- the one time he had lost control, and over something so stupid. A stupid trick. It couldn't work that way again. Danzou had suffered unjustly- even for him. Killing him would have been more merciful. Ryouko wouldn't make the same mistake with Kisame.

"Regardless of strength- the Hokages are your targets. So you're going to have to test your skills against mine."

**The villagers have been evacuated...that leaves only Sakura and I, and Kisame and his partner. No collateral damage, save for buildings. It's the best we can do under this circumstance. Time to get to work...**

Ryouko broke the seal on his sword. Chains that had been wrapped around it melted into hot puddles at his feet. When he pulled out the weapon, there was a blast of hot chakra that cracked the earth around him.

**A sword sealed away...my own seal...for it bears so much malice that none short of a Hokage**

**could control it; and none the likes of Orochimaru can be allowed to have it. I have to wield it now. But if the legends are true, this may kill my enemy, and possibly me. It's a new thought for me...**

**I'm not ready for death...**

Ryouko took up a strange guard with his sword. He pulled it in tight to his right shoulder, as though looking down the barrel of a gun. His left hand extended out, bracing the back of the blade.

**...I'm not ready to die. I have someone waiting for me. Another human acknowledged me-accepted my existence. Embraced my existence. And in turn, many other depend on me. If I'm to end this fight without terribly bloodshed, I have to go for a weapon break...**

Ryouko let the sheath clatter to the ground below. It would only be in the way in his belt.

"Neither one of our jutsus are effective at this angle. So I guess we'll be meeting sword to sword this time..."

--

Sakura took another useless swipe, and felt yet another shallow cut, this time just barely cutting across her breasts.

**Damn it! He's toying with me! I've got to do something!**

Sakura tried a 'False Surroundings Technique' genjutsu, coupled with a clone jutsu. There were three Sakura's, and the distance between them would appear as a football field length.

Sakura felt her chakra ripple as her clones were cut. They wouldn't disappear, as they were just illusions, but they had served their purpose.

**Now!**

Sakura spun and threw her first hard. It met the jaw of her attacker, cracking small bones and sending him skittering across the village until he struck a building with such force that the stone foundation cracked. The building collapsed with its structural integrity compromised, presumably crushing the Akatsuki member with it.

Two slash marks appeared on Sakura's back. As she turned to face behind her, she was struck hard in the mouth, then in the stomach, causing blood to come from her mouth. It trickled down her pale cheek, splattering onto the ground.

**Now what do I do? I was trained as a medic! Ryouko is the combat expert! But...I can't count on him! Not when he's fighting an even worse opponent. I've just got to think...but how can medical ninjutsu help me...! I've got it!**

==

Ryouko pushed off, taking two strides to reach his top speed. He stabbed his sword at Kisame. Kisame dodged to the side and smashed his hand into Ryouko's face, planting him into the building. Ryouko stabbed with one hand, blinded by Kisame's giant hand. He felt the sword hit Kisame's face, but it

bounced off!

“My flesh is like a shark’s, you child. That weak strike can’t pierce it! HYAH!”

Ryouko felt himself being thrown, He righted himself in mid air only to see Kisame coming for him. His giant hand flashed at Ryouko at incredible speed. Ryouko used his left forearm to deflect the blow, then followed up with the sword in his right hand, slashing at Kisame’s gut. Again, the sword just bounced off. The force of the bounce caused the sword to fall to the side, leaving Ryouko open for attack. Thinking quickly, he wheeled the sword around behind him, turning with the blade, and stabbed two-handed. Kisame’s huge hand was coming in with a punch, and met the tip of the sword. Blood came from his knuckles, dripping just a little. Ryouko fared much worse once Kisame’s leg smacked him hard, knocking him into a building at a high speed. Samehada followed him in, slashing him across the stomach. Only a dodge reflex built into Ryouko’s instincts saved him.

Kisame charged in, aiming to put Ryouko through the building. Ryouko stabbed his sword into the building, hanging from it. As Kisame came, Ryouko hopped up onto his sword, pulled it out of the building, and, while falling, grabbed Kisame’s head with his legs and threw him to the ground.

Kisame landed with the grace of a cat, and Samehada soon joined him.

**Not good...** Ryouko thought to himself, panting from all that effort. **His chakra is bottomless, and I’m already worn out. My sword can’t even pierce him! Wait...that’s it right there! I’m aiming at the wrong spot.**

Ryouko’s sword was a blade of a legendary sword smith. There were many, of course. But this particular sword smith was the exact opposite of Ryouko. He lived to create weapons to take lives. How Ryouko came to possess the most vile and bloodthirsty of this man’s blades is an awkward story. It was an accident that he came to possess such a blade. Malice attracted malice. So this sword didn’t suit it’s wielder. They weren’t in harmony.

Ryouko put a chakra cigarette in his mouth, feeling something odd in the center of his chest.

**Kisame isn’t a horrible opponent. He’s tough, but he doesn’t actually do ‘evil’ things- at least in battle. I’ve never hated him before. If this sword’s legend is true, my hate is attracted to the blade’s hate. If I let the two hates ‘connect’, then I’ll have strength enough to destroy him.**

**But the hate might swallow me. If so...**

**If so, then I’ll need to be killed. My sanity will be swallowed up as well. That’s why this blade is cursed.**

**No matter. I’ll do it. I’ll use my ‘hate’.**

--

Sakura finally had an idea of how to take care of this little pest, once and for all. It was ironic- her plan entailed healing the enemy. As she looked around, Sakura began to make the handsigns for a healing jutsu.

“Healing Art: Healing Barrier!”

A blue barrier formed from Sakura's hand and radiated outward. It kept expanding in a circle shape, until it reached ten feet in every direction.

Sakura's cuts began to heal and fade, and she felt her body's tension lessen. Her adrenaline was still pumping, but it was being regulated. That would make her that much more effective when the enemy made his move.

There it was! That chakra sensation! The enemy breached her barrier. The little man was momentarily stunned by the healing effects. That was Sakura's opportunity. She didn't punch this time- she grabbed him and threw him into the ground. She ended her jutsu and put her chakra into one last strike.

"TSUTENKYAKU!" (Painful Sky Leg)

Sakura's leg slammed into the tiny Akatsuki member. The sheer power of the attack created a crater one hundred feet in diameter, and extended down twenty feet. But the Akatsuki member was done- Sakura had smashed him so hard in the stomach that she had destroyed several organs. Nothing fatal, amazingly. But this man wasn't going to move until no one less than Tsunade healed him.

Sakura had to take a knee to catch her breath. She put all she had into that strike. It was a gamble, but it had paid off. Now her thoughts turned toward Ryouko. She could see his fight in the distance.

**Part of me wants to interfere...but I can't. If I do, Kisame will get a hold of me, and Ryouko will do things he'll regret. I've done what I can. My faith is with Ryouko now.**

--

Both on the ground now, Kisame and Ryouko squared off once more. Ryouko had formed his plan- he just had to make it work. To do so, he needed two set-up moves. First:

"Multi Shuriken Shadow Clones!"

Two shuriken became two hundred, and they all whistled towards Kisame at top speed. Predictably, Kisame used Samehada to shield himself. That put him in the perfect position. Ryouko boosted himself with chakra and stabbed once more.

SCHUNK!

Ryouko's sword pierced Samehada!

**What?! How did he do that?! My skin and that blade are the same! They shouldn't be cut by that sword! How?!**

Ryouko exhaled with a loud kiai: "HI-AAAAH!"

Chakra surged through Ryouko's sword and into Kisame's. In one violent burst, both legendary swords shattered like panes of glass.

**Impossible!** Kisame had time to think, before Ryouko's hand grabbed his face. He kept squeezing as

Kisame's gills protested. Even Ryouko didn't know where this power was coming from. But some part of him realized that he had opened the Third Gate of chakra.

**The sword's malice drew it out. I'd better use this energy now.**

Throwing him by his face, Kisame was thrown high in the air. Ryouko followed him, stepping off Kisame to gain more height. He turned in mid-air, shifted his weight, and aimed his elbow down. He drove the point of it into Kisame's stomach. From this high in the air, coupled with the extra force Ryouko had given himself, it was going to be a painful affair.

KA-BLAM!

Kisame hit the ground hard. Ryouko landed seconds later, exhausted.

But it was over.

--

Sakura and Ryouko moved to a temporary office- the old Uchiha police force building. It was from here they licked their wounds and directed the rebuilding of the village.

"It's for the best, right?"

Sakura seemed a nervous, asking Ryouko something. He smiled at her fondly and drew her into a tight hug, her head on his chest. She sighed a little, feeling the crumpled bandage beneath his clothes.

"It's for the best. Besides, it's what we agreed on, right?"

Tsunade watched from the door, not wanting to interrupt the two lovers.

"You did really well. From one battle to the next. I'm looking forward to seeing how you progress."

Ryouko raised an eyebrow. "No need. We won't progress. Well, not as Hokages. I promised you, M'lady, that the Hokage title would be yours again. Disaster has been averted; Danzou is no longer a threat. The Akatsuki have been neutralized for the time being. So I can make good and return this hat to you, and the power that goes with it."

"Are you sure? You two did so well!"

Sakura smiled again, a little sadly maybe. "This time we did. But we let our guards down and nearly paid for it with our lives, and with this village. We have a lot more learning to do before we're ready for Hokage power again. Besides that...you've already named your true successor. It's not fair to him for Ryouko and I to cut in line."

Tsunade took the Hokage hat back, and with it the power of the FireShadow. Ryouko and Sakura gave her a 'good luck' pep talk before heading out the door. They had a lot of learning to do. Not just ninjutsu- they had to learn more about each other. Not to mention healing. But healing didn't seem so bad. Not when they had each other. It was no fun licking your own wounds; someone else you loved



licking them worked much better.

All the same, as the two left, Tsunade felt sure she would be handing them power again someday.

**Those two have nothing but potential, and the sky is the limit.**

--

As they walked, Ryouko's first thought as this mess began occurred to him.

"Sakura, I never did tell you my name, did I?"

Sakura perked up a little- she had been curious about it. "No..."

**I gotta know!**

"Oh, I see...well then, it's nothing important," Ryouko told her with a sly grin.

"Tell me your name...or suffer the wrath of a kunoichi..."

Ryouko laughed lightly. "Sorry, sorry, just teasing. Actually...you already know I'm not from around here. So when I got here, I picked a name. I took Sarutobi-sensei's last name; and then I chose my first name. I picked 'Kimihiro'\*."

"It suits you," Sakura said. "It really does."

(Note: Kimihiro, spelled the way I've chosen, means 'Look for Virtue', roughly speaking)

"Well then, I suppose we'd better find ourselves something to do. It'll be boring pretty quickly, not having any Hokage duties anymore."

Sakura thought boring would be okay with her. "I've got a lot to learn about you, Kimi-kun. And you about me."

"Here's one more fact: The fact that I revealed my name to you means that I trust you utterly and completely. Close family aside, I swore that the only one who would learn my name from me would be the girl who would stay by my side."

That made Sakura feel special, that much was certain.

"HEY! Don't leave us!"

Hanaka, followed by Nanami, Makoto, Kenichi, Hideki, Aiko, and Daisuke all ran to caught up to Sakura and Ryouko.

"You've still got a lot to teach us! We're not the 'Hokage Seven' anymore, but you're still our teachers!" Hanaka declared, as much a tomboy as ever.

"That's right. I'm only partly done with my medical training, aren't I, Sakura-sensei?" Kenichi asked in

his kind voice.

“And you can’t ditch me so quickly, Ryouko-sensei! You’ve got things to teach me!” Hideki chimed in.

The rest all added their wishes to further their training.

“Seems we won’t be as bored as I thought,” Ryouko/Kimihiko told Sakura.

“Apparently not. I guess we’d better get them ready for the chunin exams. We’ve got to make up for lost training time, after all.”

Things were as they were meant to be. A quiet chaos engulfed the shinobi nations. No one relaxed their guards; no one let up. Everyone who understood how things were kept their training up.

Peace was something earned, not bestowed, no matter how hard one wished. Bloody hands and prayer only lead to peace.