

Moon Cycle Prophecy II: Striking Serpents Curse

By nextguardian

Submitted: June 17, 2008

Updated: July 12, 2008

Ryouko, now legendary, leaves Konoha with a heavy heart. His purpose and his girlfriend both taken from him, he's soon forced to confront a new fear from an old foe...

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/nextguardian/53040/Moon-Cycle-Prophecy-II-Striking-Serpents-Curse>

Chapter 1 - The Beginning-The First Winter	2
Chapter 2 - Months Seven to Thirteen: Shikotsu Myaku!	12
Chapter 3 - The Drunken Fist vs The Shikotsu Myaku	21
Chapter 4 - The Legend's Mettle	30
Chapter 5 - Months Fourteen to Twenty-Three	40
Chapter 6 - Return to the Hidden Leaf	49
Chapter 7 - Twelve-Hour Standoff	60
Chapter 8 - The Sacrifice	70
Chapter 9 - It Never Ends	80

1 - The Beginning-The First Winter

Gone...All I wanted was in my grasp, and now it's faded away. Faded so far that I could never hope to catch it...

Ryouko took a last fond look at the Leaf Village. Time had indeed passed him by; his ways of thinking was neither solicited nor welcome anymore. The cover of night and a thick rain giving him cover, Ryouko shuffled out of the gates, silently bidding farewell to his home. It held too many memories. As much as Ryouko loved the Leaf Village, he had to let go. After giving Sasuke back, Ryouko himself had been questioned. Sasuke's changed attitude, and the prestige his name carried, left Ryouko's name smudged. Legend or not, the villagers had the hope of the Uchiha clan back, and seemed to have little use for Ryouko.

It was time to go.

A chakra cigarette jutting from his mouth, Ryouko forced himself not to look back as he walked through the enormous gates of Konohagakure and out into the world once more. Time kept moving forward, and you had to move with it, even when going backwards seems like the better prospect.

--

In Otogakure, Kabuto held the two Striking Serpent Blades in front of him, almost reverently. They were legendary relics indeed. The blades that had fell one of the Legendary Sannin and his apprentice. Quite a find indeed. They had been resting at the bottom of the gorge that Orochimaru and Ryouko had fought at, hidden by the water. Time had rusted the blades, but they were still deadly sharp, and carried a deadly soul. The sword wasn't the soul's only guardian, however.

"Well, this is an annoying seal he put on these swords. It seems he's released one soul, that of Sasuke..." Kabuto held one blade up, turning it over and looking for any telltale markings. He only found Ryouko's seal on it, consisting of his handprint, with the characters for 'fire', 'wind' 'water' 'heaven' and 'void' burned over the pinky, ring finger, index finger, middle finger, and thumb, respectively.

"Interesting...the two blades were meant to be in harmony, and now the 'yin' and the 'yang', the respective souls the blades held, have been disrupted. Leaving the seal susceptible to weakness." Kabuto smiled as he held the two swords up. Their ornate designs caught his eye, and it was then Kabuto decided that they would make a fine gift for Lord Orochimaru, when he returned.

"It's going to take time, though, to decipher the seal. It would take less time and effort to let the seal weaken, and then release it. The power of a cursed seal could do it, with the right amount of effort. There's only a handful left to choose from, but the right person exists, and is in the palm of my hand..."

--

Lady Tsunade and Shizune were both smiling widely. Sasuke and Sakura had become fast friends, and

even a couple. Sakura's kind heart had melted Sasuke's icy demeanor like spring melts the frost left by winter. His short stay in the prison of that blade, and the story of how he was released (Sakura convincing Ryouko to release the seal) expanded the portion of his heart that contained love. Only love could rebuild the Uchiha clan. Sasuke's wasn't ready for that responsibility yet, but he had found the 'yin' to his 'yang' in Sakura.

"I see you two wasted no time in getting to know each other again," Tsunade commented with a hint of a smile. It was no secret that having Sasuke back was prestigious to her village. And, Tsunade had found, that with Sasuke back, Sakura worked even harder, and was more focused on her studies than ever. Tsunade had been worried that Sakura would slack off with Sasuke's return and subsequent interest in her; it had been the opposite. Instead, it seemed to motivate Sakura even further.

"The time I forfeited to Orochimaru was time wasted," Sasuke returned the smile with his trademark half-smirk. Since his release from both Orochimaru's grip and the holding cell that was one of the Striking Serpent blades, Sasuke had put on more muscle, and had become more wary of what others thought. It had been strange at first, but now everyone had gotten used to the new Sasuke. Some were reminded of the little Sasuke that used to run down the streets, always polite and friendly.

"I'm glad you feel that way, and that you're ready to get back in the game. The Uchiha clan have always been Konoha's police force. Are you up to the task?" Tsunade clasped her hands under her chin, while Shizune held Tonton around her ample waist.

"I am." Sasuke shifted his arm, which was around Sakura's waist. Sakura kissed him on the cheek, then laid her head on his shoulder. The picture of a happy couple.

"Very well. I'm going to assume that you've chosen Sakura as your associate. You're free to go and conduct the usual business. You're dismissed," Tsunade replied, with a flick of her hand, an indication that Sakura and Sasuke were free to go. As the couple left, Tsunade sighed dreamily, tilting her head to the side as she thought back to some other time.

"Ah, young love! We should all be so lucky, eh Shizune?" Tsunade was thinking out loud, still in another time.

"Yes M'lady..." Shizune responded, not quite fully enthusiastically. She was absently holding Tonton around the waist and looking out the window. Tsunade immediately knew what she was thinking.

"Shizune, if you're worried about the boy, don't be. He'll be fine. It was just puppy love." Tsunade knew that Shizune was a soft touch when it came to Ryouko Kaguya.

"I'm not so sure, Lady Tsunade. Don't you feel it? Like something's wrong? Like we've missed something? Or...I don't know, it's just a bad feeling!"

"Oink!" Tonton chimed in, expressing worry in her own way.

"You worry too much Shizune! What could possibly be wrong? The Village is safe, one of our most famous clans is being restored, and Orochimaru's threat has ended! Things couldn't be better...unless, of course, we got some pachinko machines in the Hokage mansion!" Tsunade was in high spirits, and

more cheerful than usual. There had been a festival the day before in honor of the victory over Orochimaru. But even then, Shizune had the same worried look on her face.

"I don't know, Lady Tsunade...you're probably right, I'm sure it's nothing!" Shizune tried to push the dark, foreboding thoughts aside. But they burst right back in when Rock Lee and Naruto barreled into the room.

"Lady Tsunade, Naruto and I-" Lee began, but Naruto shoved him aside.

"Grandma, Ryouko's gone! Lee and I went to see him this morning, but his apartment was completely empty! Like no one had been there!" Naruto was shouting, causing Shizune's worry to return like dark clouds during a rainstorm.

"Nonsense! You know very well that Ryouko's ego took a blow. I'm sure he's fine, and he's just out training somewhere. You know how he is about his training. I'm sure he'll be back." Tsunade knocked one pigtail aside as if oblivious to the situation.

The fact that Tsunade wasn't concerned irritated Shizune. **Doesn't she care? She acts like Sasuke defeated Orochimaru, while he was helping him the whole time! She won't give Ryouko any credit. Now he's left...it's too much of a coincidence to ignore...I've got to do something!**

"Pardon me, M'lady. It looks like it's Tonton's snack time, please excuse us!" Shizune bowed and left the room quickly, carrying Tonton, who oinked questioningly.

"I am worried about Ryouko-sama. It is not like him to miss our sparring matches..." Lee mused.

"Maybe he's let his legend status go to his head," Tsunade fired back, starting to get irritated. When Lee and Naruto both opened their mouths to talk, she held up a hand for silence.

"Not another word about it!" Tsunade demanded. Naruto and Lee exchanged glances, but shuffled out of the room, trying to mask their concern.

--

"Oink?!"

"I know it's not snack time, Tonton. But play along, okay?" Shizune patted the pot-bellied pig, who immediately sensed that Shizune was panicked. As Shizune was her caretaker, Tonton thought it best to go along with this.

"Now, where would he be this time of day? Hmm...Oh, of course! Come on, Tonton!" Shizune set the pig down, and they hustled down the streets of the Hidden Leaf, to the one spot they were sure to find their target.

--

“That’s it...that’s it...a little more to the left...hehehe, jackpot baby! Oh yeah! My research has paid off again! Jiraiya, you genius toad sage!”

Jiraiya, who was sitting on a building overlooking the hot spring, made fervent notes in his scroll, and even a few sketches of the young woman who was unwittingly posing for him. He was blushing the color of the sunrise, and smiling as widely as his face would allow.

Splendid figure...gorgeous eyes...drop-dead legs! This girl’s the whole package! HAHHAHA, the next book in the Make-Out Series will be out within the year! Jiraiya now watched for his own enjoyment, having gotten enough ‘research’ done for today. Not that he wasn’t taking notes in his head anyway.

Now if I could just figure out a way to hear their conversations! They seem like healthy, normal, curious young ladies!

--

Shizune landed on the building, immediately frowning in disgust at Jiraiya. **Lady Tsunade would be furious with him!** But that thought was quickly rescinded in favor of her concern.

“Master Jiraiya?” Shizune asked carefully. Jiraiya, upon hearing a female voice, nearly drooled.

“SOMEONE CALL MY NAME?!” Jiraiya spun around, looking for the attractive young woman who undoubtedly wanted to get to know him better. “COME ON OVER, GOOD LOOKIN’!”

Shizune and Jiraiya both grew sweatdrops at the same time, staring at each other. Tonton’s nose wrinkled with displeasure.

“Oh, Shizune, it’s you. Heh, sorry about that, you know how I really get into my work! Now, what can I do for you?”

Shizune looked down. “Well, Master Jiraiya, could we...have this conversation somewhere else? I don’t want Lady Tsunade to overhear...she’s just not understanding!” Shizune stamped her foot in frustration, then looked around, as if that motion would send Tsunade running to their location.

“Take it easy, Shizune. We’ll go to Akamadori, and you can tell me about it over a drink, alright? My treat. Looks like you could use the alcohol to settle you down, no offense.” Jiraiya began to pack up his things, though he took an extended look through his telescope as he compacted it to put it away.

A little drink couldn’t hurt...this IS nerve wracking! And Master Jiraiya is the only one I can turn to now...it has to be one of the Sannin. Or is it Yonin? Do I count them as four together, or three, plus a new one? Aiee, Lady Tsunade would kill me if she knew what I was doing! No, no! SOMEONE has to be in Ryouko’s corner!

--

The Akamadori bar was bustling. People were enjoying their meals, and the respite from the sun

outside. It was nice and cool inside the bar, and the beverages were an immense relief from the oppressive heat of the summer outside.

“Ah! Thank you!” Jiraiya said to the waitress as his food was served. He picked up his chopsticks and grabbed his first bite. After chewing and swallowing, he looked sideways to Shizune, who was sipping at her sake, and still looking incredibly antsy. She was moving her fingers all over the cup, like her hand was having some kind of a spasm.

“So, what’s this problem you wanted to talk to me about?”

Shizune turned to face Jiraiya, not looking him in the eyes. “Well...I don’t know if you noticed, Master Jiraiya, but at the festival yesterday, the guest of honor wasn’t there. Or...who SHOULD have been the guest of honor...This morning, Naruto and Rock Lee came into Lady Tsunade’s office, screaming that Ryouko Kaguya had left. She just brushed it aside...but I’m worried, Master Jiraiya! That festival turned into a celebration of Sasuke and Sakura loving each other, instead of Orochimaru’s defeat! And you saw how Ryouko was after he unsealed Sasuke’s soul! I think something’s wrong! I can’t leave to go find him, Lady Tsunade would skin me! I was hoping you could...I don’t know, talk to him, calm him down...even just finding him and letting him know that he still has people who care!” Shizune had gotten borderline desperate at the end, while Jiraiya remained calm.

“Ryouko left? I can’t say I’m surprised. Legendary status does that, it gives those of us with the title a need to expand our horizons. It’s healthy, really...”

Shizune shook her head fiercely from side to side. “No! It’s not like that! Master Jiraiya, he left the village without saying a word to anyone about it! You, and Lady Tsunade, and even Orochimaru let the village know you were leaving! Ryouko just up and left. The last time I saw him, he was sitting on the roof where Lord Third died...He didn’t look well. It was like...something inside him had just snapped. He hadn’t spoken to anyone since he unsealed Sasuke’s soul!”

Jiraiya took a drink of Sake, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Hmm...I think you’re right to be worried, that doesn’t sound like Ryouko at all...I’ll try to corral him. In the mean time, you keep acting like nothing’s wrong around Tsunade, so she doesn’t get suspicious.” Jiraiya tossed his napkin on the counter, snapped his chopsticks in half, and left the bar.

Shizune bought a flask of sake; things tended to go smoother when Lady Tsunade was happy. And the Akamadori brand of sake made Tsunade a happy Hokage indeed.

“Oink!”

Shizune nodded. “I know, I’m buttering her up Tonton. But she’s going to be so angry if she finds out...you know how scary she can be...”

--

Ryouko hadn’t gotten far; he hadn’t tried to. He had meandered along the dirt path under the trees, trying to let the scenery consume him so he could forget his inner turmoil. The scenery changed radically as Ryouko went; he was nearing Tanzaku town. Dully noting that he was low on sake, rice, and chakra cigarettes, Ryouko decided to make a quick stop. Even if anyone from the Hidden Leaf bothered to

come looking for him, the crowds Tanzaku town habitually had would make his escape easy; it was easy to slip into a crowd and disappear.

BWAMPF!

“What the hell?!” Ryouko leapt backward, skidding in a low stance and kicking up dust from the path as he drew his daggers. But Ryouko returned them to their sheaths almost instantly. The giant toad in front of him could only mean the arrival of Jiraiya.

“Master Jiraiya?” Ryouko asked, for it struck him that this could also be Naruto’s arrival.

“In the flesh, the one and only Toad Sage!” Jiraiya jumped down from atop the toad, who disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“It’s just ‘Jiraiya’ now, Ryouko. You’re legendary, too!” Jiraiya playfully ruffled Ryouko’s hair under his hood. “So, you wanna tell me why you up and left the Leaf Village?”

“It’s complicated, Jiraiya, and I don’t wish to waste your time with boring details.” Ryouko’s reply was somehow friendly and warning at the same time.

“Hey, it’s not my job to talk you out of it. One of the perks of being a legend is doing whatever you want. But, would it kill you to get a drink with me? On the up and up, no tricks. Whaddaya say? Then you can spill SOME of the details. I’m actually pretty curious...”

Ryouko sighed; Jiraiya was right. And after traveling, a drink would really hit the spot. And Ryouko couldn’t deny that it would help him to tell someone what was going on. Who better than someone who could really understand? Hadn’t Jiraiya loved Tsunade, and then left the village after his friend betrayed him? The two stories were eerily similar.

“I don’t see how it could hurt... You are more familiar with Tanzaku town than I, why don’t you lead the way?”

--

“Not quite what I meant, Jiraiya,” Ryouko mumbled, his head now resembling the color of a ripened tomato. He should have known better than to let Jiraiya pick the spot. Almost any place in Tanzaku town would have been fine; just not the ‘Oasis’.

Jiraiya whistled and cheered as the, ahem, performer made a few saucy, teasing moves. Ryouko, while still a man, wasn’t the pervert Jiraiya was. Exotic women dancing- great, fine, entertaining. But for as straight an arrow as Ryouko, it was embarrassing to be seen in such a place. ESPECIALLY when Jiraiya coaxed one girl off-stage and onto the seat next to him.

I thought I was supposed to tell my story... Ryouko thought with a sweat drop. After a few minutes, Ryouko tapped a blushing Jiraiya on the shoulder.

“I’m leaving Tanzaku town in one hour’s time, if you still care to hear the story,” Ryouko said

sarcastically. Jiraiya got the hint and gently removed the girl from his lap.

“Right, sorry, I can never resist coming here though!”

-

Jiraiya sat quietly and listened while Ryouko poured out his guts in what could only be described as a dismal display of shunned emotions.

“...Sakura picked Sasuke, even after what we went through in Otogakure. The Third is dead, so is my ‘older brother’, Hayate, and my cousin, Kimimaro. Tsunade’s got it in for me, and the town is so thrilled to have Sasuke back that they don’t realize just how close they came to death!” Ryouko shook his head. “I don’t do things for the accolades Jiraiya, but it would be nice to get credit, or some kind of recognition, even if it was only once in a while.” The bags under Ryouko’s eyes seemed more pronounced, and it was as if the baby-faced nineteen year old had suddenly aged a little. He brought the little earthenware cup to his mouth and took a sip of the rich rice brew.

“I see your frustration. Sarutobi-sensei wasn’t still teaching me when he died, and although I certainly had feelings for Tsunade, she never acknowledged them as anything close to serious, the way Sakura did. If it’s any consolation, I think she really loved you, but the chance to have her life-long dream...it was too great. Almost anyone would have done the same...” Jiraiya tried to explain all this gently. He didn’t have to dumb it down for Ryouko. Though there was roughly thirty years age difference, the two communicated very well. Possibly because Jiraiya sometimes had the mentality of someone thirty years younger.

“I understand why. I barely tolerate myself, I couldn’t hope for someone like Sakura to pick me over someone like Sasuke. But, those three deaths in a row like that...that shook me up more than I care to admit,” Ryouko murmured draining his cup and nodding ‘yes’ when a refill was offered.

Jiraiya took a long sip from his cup, exhaling happily. He hadn’t started to blush yet, so he hadn’t reached his limit. “It would shake anyone up, you’re not alone. What was it Sarutobi-sensei always said? ‘Shinobi are trained to be emotionless, but true strength comes from using those emotions’, or something along those lines. Besides that, everything hit you at once, and you know something?” Jiraiya put an arm on Ryouko’s shoulder.

“You did the right thing. You helped the village when it needed you the most. You and Tsunade don’t get along, but you’re more alike than you’d be able to comprehend. That’s probably why you don’t get along, now that I think of it.” Jiraiya paused one more time, knowing Ryouko was going to leave after these words.

“Just some advice for the road: Don’t stop your studying. Legends never retire.”

Ryouko nodded, thinking Jiraiya’s advice to be wise. “Thank you, Jiraiya. Please put anyone who asks about me at ease. I just need some time...”

--

Kabuto sat down and took a deep, fortifying breath. After fixing his silver hair and straightening his

ponytail, he took another look at the book he had been reading so fervently. But now, after such a long time, he had success.

“It took me two years to find this jutsu...and now, you’re the last one left with the cursed seal that return Lord Orochimaru. You’ll do it, of course, won’t you?” Kabuto knew he didn’t need to ask; he would simply use force if his chosen one declined. But this host was all too willing.

“Of course I will. I was one of the last he gave the seal to, so my body hasn’t deteriorated yet.”

Kabuto adjusted his glasses, pushing them up his nose farther. A bead of sweat was on his forehead. Despite being cocky sometimes, Kabuto was always wary around Orochimaru and his doings. Even this room bothered the medical ninja to some extent.

The dark lair, with only candles for light, was situated under-ground, hidden away from everyone. The ground was made of soil, an earthen workshop where hell had spawned. Jars of body parts lines the walls; grotesque corpses had piled in the corner. The centerpiece of the room was the throne from which Orochimaru had issued orders. It was made of black stone, and decorated with serpents, and of deformed figures bowing to an effigy of Orochimaru himself. The throne had sat vacant for two years, waiting for Orochimaru’s return. Tonight, finally, as the full moon rose, Orochimaru would come back, thanks to the sacrifice of a brainwashed follower.

“Seal Release!” Using the power of his cursed seal, the figure, clothed in all purple, reached onto the sword and grabbed the Five Elements Seal Ryouko had put on it. The seal began to burn away, but so did the user’s fingertips.

“Aghhh!” he screamed, superficially at first, but his screams soon became unearthly wails of terror and agony. Kabuto grabbed his hands and pressed them harder to the sword, increasing the man’s suffering, but hastening his Lord’s arrival. With one last scream, the man was forced to let go of the blade as energy burst from it. Kabuto shielded his eyes as the smoke and dirt cleared, then narrowed his eyes, peering into the dense fog to see if the experiment had been a success. The ‘sacrifice’ was lying across the room, blood dripping from his mouth, his hands both completely burned off. Kabuto noted that he was either dead or dying by sensing his chakra.

Damn! It’s too dark, I can’t see Lord Orochimaru! Did the experiment work?!

“Kabuto...” A hissing whisper sounded in the chamber.

Kabuto looked around, almost fearfully.

“Lord Orochimaru?” Kabuto asked, looking around. He spun around, hearing the sound of a fire crackling. The body of the sacrifice was burning; it was already half-swallowed by the orange tongues of flames.

Kabuto moved closer, his hands out in front of him for protection. What had once been a human body was now a smoldering pile of ash, still smoking from the intense heat it had been subjected to.

“Kabuto...”

Again, Kabuto heard his master's voice. But where was it coming from? It dawned on Kabuto to look down, and into the ash. When he did, he had to gulp, and even fight not to scream. Orochimaru's face was in the ash, and it was speaking!

"Kabuto...my soul is free...I need only a body...any body...find me one...willing or not...I will lend you my chakra to perform the soul transfer jutsu. Go, hurry, this form is useless to me!"

"Right away, Lord Orochimaru." Kabuto hastened to obey, not wanting to keep Orochimaru waiting too much longer. As it was, two years was a long time for someone as restless and power-hungry as Orochimaru. Kabuto knew that Orochimaru was going to admonish him for taking so long once he got a body.

--

For two years, Ryouko traveled, almost completely silent. Two years of a life consisting only of training. He had no home, and he didn't try to make one, save for a cave during the fierce winter storm he encountered after the leaves had fallen, the first year of his departure. It was bundled in this cave that Ryouko's life nearly came to an end, during one desperate night.

* WINTER* (Six months since his departure)

Loneliness had set in with Ryouko. Legend or not, he felt like he had failed the village he loved so much. As the snow howled outside, Ryouko stared into the small fire he had built. Was this truly existing? No, it was not. It was only a pitiful, meager half-existence. Ryouko closed his eyes, pulling his robes tighter to his body.

Lord Third...Cousin Kimimaro...Hayate...gone, all of them...So much I learned from them...it's said that memories may warm a man's bones, and keep spirits alive...(Ryouko shivered against the wind)Is this true? They're dead...and they're never coming back. I have no one to turn to. Is this being a legend? Is this really all there is? Have I lived out my usefulness at twenty years of age?

Ryouko thought back to Lord Third. The kindly, grandfatherly figure, full of knowledge and wisdom, and always ready to share it.

Ryouko, the path of evil is the path of death. But you needn't worry, nor do I worry for you. You're such a loyal boy. Always ready to take a mission, be it cleaning gutters or protecting someone.

Ryouko recalled seeing the Third dead. A dignified man, dead with a smile on his face, and a seal of shame on his stomach. A death at the hands of a vermin low as a snake's belly. Ryouko remembered, all too well, the anger he felt, and continued to feel. It was as if the emotion would never be quenched; as if nothing could ever satisfy it and make it end. It also made Ryouko think: All the friends he made died deaths unworthy of them. Kimimaro was cut down by a disease, and Hayate was unceremoniously killed by a Sand Villager.

Brave people...destroyed, when they deserved a hero's death! No...a peaceful life...a hero's life...

Ryouko looked outside; from his position, sitting on the stone, leaning against a wall, he could see the snow still falling heavily, now blowing nearly sideways. The falling flakes made him long for spring. But spring, too, was a cursed season. It made him recall the cherry blossoms.

Sakura...

Ryouko looked at his rucksack, then opened it carefully. He extracted his headband, his scroll, and finally, a picture. Everyone in the village. But on the back of it was a picture of Sakura by herself, standing among the cherry trees, a few blossoms falling. The edges of the picture had faded and torn after a year's worth of movement. But the picture itself, of Sakura, was still in fine condition. Sakura smiled at Ryouko, it seemed, while Ryouko only frowned back, as his subconscious placed Sasuke next to Sakura.

"You know, all the time we trained together these past few years, and I realize I really don't know much about you. But, I guess that's for another time..."

"...You aren't alone anymore, Ryouko. We kissed, remember? Didn't that tell you that you had me by your side?"

"You can always trust me, Ryouko. There are others, too, that haven't deserted you. Just remember you can always come to me..."

Ryouko felt tears start to well up as he remembered Sakura's kind words. One tear left his eye, followed by another, making a barely-audible sound on the stone floor of the cave. Ryouko started to put the picture in the fire, to rid himself of the memory. But he couldn't force himself to let go. Instead, he put the picture, the headband, and the scroll away. As he moved, Ryouko felt the dagger in his sleeve hit his arm. He pulled the dagger out and stared at it, seeing his reflection in the cold metal. Ryouko put a hand out to touch his face, but only managed to mar the dagger with his blood when he pricked his finger. He stared at the blood, watching it fall beside his tears on the ground. Holding the dagger with a shaking hand, Ryouko held out his left wrist. One cut in the right place, and the pain would be gone forever. But Ryouko's hand grew unsteady, as if another set of hands were pushing the dagger away. Ryouko gulped back his emotions, and returned the dagger to the inside of his sleeve.

Not yet... he thought to himself. **Some force stopped me just know...it's not yet my time...**

Ryouko bowed his head, and then began to remove the threadbare tatami mat that served as his bedding. Against the cold ground it would offer little comfort, but Ryouko's life offered just as little comfort.

2 - Months Seven to Thirteen: Shikotsu Myaku!

--Seven Months- Spring--

Ryouko chose a safe rooftop in the Land of Herbs to study on for the night. He didn't want to stay in this hellish place for long. But, strangely enough, the fact that it had so many bad memories within its borders was why Ryouko had journeyed there.

Maybe this mess will stop hurting if I can associate the Leaf Village with this hellhole...

Ryouko shivered, thinking about the battles he had fought here, the blood he and Lee had lost, when Sakura had kissed him on the cheek...damn. So much for that theory. The memory of that kiss was too fresh in Ryouko's mind to be suppressed. And the Land of Herbs was safer now, with the second Koubakage taking the reigns and taking control. Ryouko wondered if he had anything to do with it, fighting here twice, with no gain for the Leaf Village, or himself. If his actions saved lives, Ryouko was truly thrilled...but at the same time, it hadn't been his fight. With this thought came another, more poisonous thought.

Did I ever really belong in the Leaf Village? Everyone else had a team, or a sensei, or a career. I was just the favorite genin of Lord Third, and the worst nightmare of Lady Fifth. At least that's how it seems...was I loyal to the Leaf, or to the Third Hokage?

The Third's grandfatherly voice went through Ryouko's mind, reminding him of the Leaf virtues, and reminding him that, if you love something, you have to protect it with everything you've got. Ryouko knew that his love had been for the Leaf and the people in it, and most likely always would be. Even if the love was unrequited.

With a sigh, somehow feeling even more depressed for figuring out the truth, Ryouko went back to his scrolls. His repertoire of jutsu had grown, and his skills had expanded with it. But without someone noticing, even a little bit, the progress felt shallow. What good was knowledge, when it had no outlet?

~THE FIRST SUMMER~ (Eleven Months since his departure)

Ryouko had been gone for just shy of a year. The only contact he had with people came when he needed to buy necessities, or a night's lodging to bathe when he couldn't find a clean stream or river. Still wearing his black monk robe, Ryouko was growing pale. His diet had been reduced, as he couldn't eat out often. More than once Ryouko heard a version of his story. He hadn't known that Orochimaru's defeat would mean so much to so many.

Of course, not all the stories were positive. It seemed that Orochimaru's followers had since returned to their old villages, claiming to have been 'brainwashed'. Ryouko supposed that was true for some of those telling the story, but that most found it to be a convenient excuse to avoid execution.

Now resting in Sunagakure, while visiting his old friends, Temari and Kankuro, Ryouko learned that Gaara had become loved as the Kazekage, and had started to develop bonds with people. Ryouko mostly let Temari and Kankuro do the talking, while he listened, taking in the culture of Sunagakure. Somehow, it made him long for his home all the more. In a moment of weakness, Ryouko had joined Temari and Kankuro for an afternoon meal. The spicy food of Sunagakure was excellent, but it was while consuming the veritable feast that Ryouko had begun to backpedal, answering rather than asking or listening. This even more made Ryouko think wistfully about the life he could have had.

“So...” Kankuro began uncomfortably, prompting his big sister to take over while he played with his spicy chicken.

“We’ve heard you’ve left the Leaf...what happened?” Temari spoke quietly, wanting to be sure she wasn’t overheard. This was big news, and for more reasons than Ryouko was aware of.

“Yeah, weren’t you just declared ‘legendary’? Why would you leave all of a sudden?” Kankuro added, trying to augment Temari’s rather vague question.

“Push came to shove. The Village and I couldn’t exist together, for a number of reasons. Forgive me if I don’t discuss them; this trip has been about self-healing, and I’m afraid this will tear open some old wounds that have just begun to heal.” Ryouko had returned the vague question with an equally vague response. He drew his hood tighter despite the heat; being recognized might lead to Konoha Shinobi trying to track him down.

“So you’ve left for real, then,” Temari murmured, amazed. **The picture of loyalty leaving his home? Must have been a damn good fight with them...Or something else that he isn’t saying...**

“Then stay here...” A dry whisper came from behind.

Ryouko turned around slowly, carefully.

“It’s been a long time, Lord Kazekage,” Ryouko greeted, with an accompanying bow.

“Indeed...more than a year since we last met...” Gaara sat down at the head of the table that Ryouko, Temari, and Kankuro were occupying. Kankuro and Temari didn’t flinch around their little brother anymore, they were proud of him and his success. They were genuinely proud, not just proud because they gained prestige as his siblings. Gaara had also gained control over his impulses to kill without the Shukaku influencing him. He had become a steady leader.

“Are the stories true?” Gaara rasped, his slightly-less menacing eyes looking over the changed Ryouko.

“They are, Lord Kazekage. I’ve been named a legend, and I’ve left my village, under less than ideal circumstances...” Ryouko replied, trying not to shift nervously. Legendary or not, Gaara was still a scary kid with a nasty ability to kill people with very little effort.

“I know...Konohagakure sent us this...” Gaara reached inside of his robes and extracted a sheet of paper, stamped with the Konoha logo. Ryouko took it, careful to avoid giving Gaara even a paper cut. After glancing at the paper, Ryouko’s hands began to shake, and sweat ran down his face.

It was a mug shot of Ryouko, offering 25 million Ryo for his capture- alive only.

Ryouko looked up searchingly, trying to gauge the Kazekage and his siblings. Were they only being nice to collect the offer on his head? As if reading his thoughts, Gaara spoke once more.

“I have ordered my village not to hurt you. We will offer you sanctuary here, in exchange for your help...You see, our backs are to the wall. With the Shukaku gone from my body, other nations have become to perceive us as weak. My youth does not assist in destroying that perception...” Gaara looked Ryouko squarely in the eyes, the last thing many people had seen before everything went black.

“How would I be of service?” Ryouko inquired. Though he had been traveling and had heard lots of news, weakness in the Hidden Sand Village had never been a topic of discussion. And Ryouko knew that he wasn’t ready to commit to any village just yet. Would Konoha take him back, if he even chose to go back?

Gaara pointed to the East. “There, outside the village, lies a group of followers of Orochimaru. They believe their power is enough to overtake the village. Allowing them in would indeed weaken the Sand...” Gaara shifted his eyes toward Ryouko once more. “But your reputation alone may spare the blood of my people.”

This left Ryouko at an impasse. This would surely attract the attention of the Hidden Leaf. But at the same time, Temari, Kankuro, and even Gaara...if Ryouko could help them, so much the better. Even though he had left the Hidden Leaf, he had left when he was no longer needed. Here, at least for a time, he was needed, and it ill suited him to leave his allies in their time of need. As a paper lantern blew, tossed by the wind, Ryouko raised his eyes, while keeping his head bowed.

“I’ll help. You’ve offered me hospitality, and it wouldn’t be correct for me to leave without repaying it.”

--

“Mune, Raina, Kissaki- you three will confront the Kazekage. I myself will seize the capital building, and the city shall fall from within!”

Yakiba and her three brothers, all bearing cursed seals of earth, nodded to each other. Sunagakure had been weakened, or so they had heard. Despite the powerful Kazekage, the Village Hidden in the Sand had a small population, and would offer little resistance. They hadn’t been heard from at the chunin exams for a number of years, leading Yakiba to believe that there weren’t many Shinobi within the walls of the well-fortified Sand Village that were quality warriors..

“The loss of that demon that the Kazekage housed will surely work in our favor...” Mune said.

WHOOSH! TOK! The group of four turned to stare at what had just whizzed over their heads.

“Are you certain of that?”

Ryouko uncoiled from his crouching position, his head still facing the ground.

“Who the hell are you? Some monk dares oppose the greatest of Lord Orochimaru’s followers?!” The hot-headed Kissaki had already started to attack. Rushing forward and activating his cursed seal, he now commanded a staff that was nearly nine feet long. The staff had the ability attack free from Kissaki’s grasp, caused by Kissaki’s meager puppetry skills. His propensity with the staff, however, made this jutsu a dangerous one to face.

Ryouko’s first dagger blocked the staff, while the second swept it to the side. It came at him upward and diagonally next. Ryouko parried the strike, while silently casting a genjutsu.

“Death Forseeing Jutsu!”

Kissaki suddenly froze up. His death...so gruesome, and in so many ways! It was paralyzing, crippling fear that brought the proud Sound warrior to his knees, where he shook as a leaf in the breeze. Kunai riddling him...burning...hanging...decapitation...it all felt so real...

“You asked my name...though it’s common courtesy to offer your own before engaging in combat, I’ll humor you...My name is Ryouko Kaguya...” Ryouko snapped the staff that had been annoying him moments earlier, holding one half in each hand.

“Big deal! Some cousin of Kimimaro! I don’t see your bones, you don’t scare me! Hyaa!” Mune rushed, followed by Raina. Both activated their cursed seals. Their ability was interesting, to say the least. They could each transform into giant Shuriken and guide their flight with their chakra.

SCHWINNG!

Ryouko’s shoulder dripped blood, as either Mune or Raina managed to hit him. But as they swung around to attack again, they were met by a replacement jutsu. THOK! They were stuck in the thick wooden log! Before they could undo their transformation, they saw Ryouko, still holding the two sticks.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” Ryouko called. He threw both sticks at the base of the log, making handsigns as he barked out the jutsu. Just as the sticks landed, Ryouko punched. Jets of fire left his fists, and ignited the two sticks, which served as kindling to ignite the wood. Raina and Mune were still trapped, while the fire burned!

“Water Style: Tidal Crest!” Yakiba called out. The only female of the group, she was also the most talented, as well as the leader. She directed her jutsu at the burning log, while avoiding the still-suffering Kissaki. She rushed Ryouko next.

“HYAGH!” Throwing rights and lefts, Ryouko blocked with his forearms, until the fifth strike, where he stepped to the side and pushed Yakiba’s hand inward, throwing her off-balance. Using a side-kick, Ryouko propelled Yakiba into the Sand Village’s outer wall, effectively ending the fight. As Yakiba looked up, blood running down her mouth, she met Ryouko’s eyes.

“You...Now I know...the legend...the one who defeated my Lord...this was surely a fool’s battle. Next time, I won’t come with only my brothers! I’m tempted to collect the Ryo on your head myself...but to do so, I would have to forsake every instinct I have...” Yakiba forced herself to her feet, staring at Ryouko with a

mix of respect and hatred.

“Next time, I will end your reign as a legend! You have never witnessed the power of my cursed seal! In Otogakure, I was recognized as the most lethal kunoichi to survive the curse mark’s usually-deadly beginning process!”

Ryouko released the genjutsu on Kissaki; his mind had been hovering near collapse.

“Your bragging is boring...everyone proclaims their talent to be great, yet few possess true talent. Take your brothers and go. Do not make the mistake of returning to this Village.” Ryouko was trying to show mercy, although he was rapidly understanding that doing so was an empty gesture.

“Damn you!” Kissaki rushed Ryouko once more. Ryouko was about to defend himself, but Kissaki stopped. He was bound by sand!

“That’s enough...Ryouko, you’ve made the point I needed you to make...now let me deal with them...” Gaara was standing on top of the wall that Yakiba had been thrown in to. From the gourd on his back, sand was flowing.

“Enemies of the sand, you chose not to heed the warning of our ally. Your threats against this village cannot go unpunished...” Gaara’s sand had engulfed all four. Gaara raised his arm, which tightened the sand while raising the enemies up to his level.

“Lord Kazekage...are you sure this is necessary? They proven not to be a threat, and they’ve been humiliated. Isn’t this...extreme?” Ryouko knew he was risking Gaara’s wrath, but the thought of four people being killed so gruesomely had made his heart soften. This was not the case with Gaara’s heart.

“Letting them go would only allow them to breed an army...You left a message, now it’s time for me to leave mine...I take no pleasure in this execution, but it’s a necessary evil. Surely you can understand. Even if you can’t...our customs are different than yours. Our Village, with it’s smaller population and fewer resources, has to eliminate threats before they reach their full power. Your job is finished...”

Gaara raised his hand in front of his face. As he clenched his fist, and blood rained from the four bodies trapped in the sand, he said:

“Crushing Sand Coffin!”

--

“Will you be returning to the Hidden Leaf Village? You could always stay here, you know.” Temari cocked her head to the side, waiting for a reply, while Kankuro stood silently beside her.

Ryouko wondered about that himself. Would staying in Sunagakure be so bad? Ryouko had thought about it. Maybe even find a kunoichi here, and leave the past to die. But the past was that very thing that stopped him.

The past...I can't let it go...not yet...Getting close to people again? What would that accomplish? It would only hurt...

"Thank you for your generous offer, but I feel I need to move on. But should you need me, it would be my honor to help again. For now, I have to go. Thank you for your hospitality. And please give my regards to Gaara. I know he can't be troubled at the moment. Thank you again for the hospitality."

Ryouko bowed, accepting a return bow from Kankuro, and a good-bye hug from Temari. Briefly, Ryouko remembered Sakura's hug, and then even his own crush on Temari. It was time, once again, to leave. The Sand Village hadn't wronged him, but the past seemed to be scattered in his future. Makabishi spikes on the path of life.

--

--13 months since departure—

The Land of Rain.

So this is the land...I finally get to see it. I wish Kimimaro had come to the Leaf. Even if we couldn't have saved him, he could have told me the heritage of our clan...All I've heard is the bad: Blood-thirsty, partially-insane savages that wiped themselves out attacking the Mist Village. I know Kimimaro was different. He had such an intense loyalty to his 'master'...that bastard Orochimaru. Did he even TRY to heal Kimimaro, or did he just let him die?

"Excuse me, young man? Are you lost?" The voice of an older woman, her hair gray, and her stature small, reached Ryouko's ears as he was tapped on the shoulder. The woman hadn't spoken unkindly, so Ryouko opted for a nice approach.

Ryouko turned around, realizing that his robes hid the Kaguya family crest.

That may be for the best, I don't know how the village felt about my clan...

"I was looking for information. I hope I'm welcome to be searching..." Ryouko said/asked, in this way conveying respect. Being by himself had earned Ryouko street smarts over the past thirteen months.

"Of course, dear boy! Perhaps I can help you! What are you searching for?"

Before Ryouko could answer, the woman got a glimpse under his hood, and put her hand to her face to cover a gasp.

"You're that boy...of the Ka-"

"Please, don't speak it, if it holds ill omen here." Ryouko didn't mean to interrupt, but he didn't want to have a whole village chasing him down.

The women grew stern, her features darkening. "If it were any but the legend who defeated Orochimaru...You've come to search your bloodline, am I correct?"

“That’s correct,” Ryouko confirmed, bowing slightly. The aged woman closed her eyes, looking even older by doing so. Her wrinkled hands had tensed such that her knuckles had turned not red but white from the strain.

“The Kaguya clan’s grounds are considered sacred...and cursed. But if the cursed blood flows in your veins, you won’t be harmed by the insanity...or so I am told...”

Ryouko looked at the woman closely. “You are a mystic, or a fortune teller, if I’m right. Your speech...your dress...you are one of those who speaks of what is to come...or what has become the past...”

The woman gave a toothless smile. “Sharp, boy. Very sharp. Come with me, legend, to the grounds of your ancestry! You may lay claim to any of it, or none of it. But be forewarned- I will not speak of your death!”

Ryouko nodded his understanding and consent, and followed the woman.

--

“Lady Tsunade! Lady Tsunade! Oh, wake up! Come on!”

Shizune was trying to wake Tsunade up from a drunken stupor. Not a great idea, but this was urgent.

“What the hell? What is it, Shizune?!” Tsunade was more annoyed than concerned, despite the fact it was so rare for someone to dare wake her up. Poor Sakura had endured this for a long time, waking up Tsunade to train every morning. Not an enviable task.

“How could you, Lady Tsunade?!” Shizune demanded, waving a paper around wildly.

“How could I what? You could mean a lot of things...” Tsunade remarked off-the-cuff. She did a lot of things that worried, annoyed, or flat out pissed her assistant off.

“How could you put a bounty on Ryouko’s head?! And why?!” Shizune thrust the paper at Tsunade, who suddenly looked guilty, like she had her hand caught in the cookie jar.

“Oh...that. Well, I guess I can tell you, now that you’ve found out. I wasn’t going to tell you. You and your motherly instincts, you would have overreacted. Listen, that boy is legendary, and he belongs to Konoha. And he needs to be here. Simple as that.”

Shizune couldn’t resist. “Oh, like YOU stayed in Konoha? YOU left, HE was pushed out! There’s a difference, you know! What choice did he have but to leave?! And now he’s a criminal for living his life?! Don’t you realize that HE knows about this two, and he could turn this right back in your face? Spill our secrets to anyone he wants? You’re just lucky he’s honorable enough not to do so! You would have gambled them away on the right day!”

“SHUT UP SHIZUNE!” Tsunade boomed, causing Shizune to shrink away, losing her momentum as

fast as it had come.

“Where did this come from? This flyer, who sent it here?” Tsunade held up the flyer.

“It came from Sunagakure. Ryouko visited, but he’s long gone. The Kazekage offered him a position there, but Ryouko refused it, and disappeared...no one’s heard anything since...”

Tsunade leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. “I see. Well, the trail is a little cold, but I know a few Shinobi who need a work out. Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, Sai, Lee, and Shikamaru. Dispatch them to Sunagakure. Let’s see what information they can give me.”

--

The old woman led Ryouko to what looked like a cemetery. A gray, mausoleum-like building was the center of it all. It was built grandly, three stories high, with ivy climbing up the sides. It looked as though no one had cared for the building or the surrounding patch of land in some time.

“Here, boy, lies your ancestry. This land is yours...tell me, can you use the Shikotsumyaku?” (Corpse Bone Pathways) The older woman had donned a gray shawl. Ryouko sensed chakra around the shawl, but he guessed it was a heating jutsu, or a protective spell against the ‘cursed’ land.

“Only partially. I assume that it’s because my blood has been diluted by 50%.”

Ryouko kept his answer short, in fear that he would say too much. Instead, he looked around the building that he had been led in to. It was dark, and even the inside looked like a mausoleum. Gray walls with long-tattered scrolls and a blood red carpet was the décor, save for the staircase that led upstairs, and a suspicious-looking wooden door that must have led to a downstairs room. For some reason, as he saw the door, Ryouko felt something...evil, or maybe sad, possibly both. But the feeling urged him to stay away from the door. The door itself was harmless looking, made of old wood and black iron frames, like the barrels that ingredients for various poisons came in.

“I see...now, you’ve come with a heavy mind...full of worries, fears, and regrets...but also questions. It’s only the questions that I can help with...but you may ask only one question! Choose your query wisely!” The old woman clasped her hands behind her back and began to walk in circles, muttering strange words that Ryouko either didn’t understand, or wasn’t hearing correctly.

One question...I may as well get the answer I came here for...

“My question is this: WHERE, exactly, can I find the Kaguya clan’s notes, scrolls, and other valuable information?”

The old woman was now wearing glasses, big and circular, and peering up through the bifocals at Ryouko. She was smiling again, a truly disconcerting gesture that Ryouko wasn’t ready to embrace as friendliness.

“Very specific...I see living on the streets for more than a year have given you a good head on your shoulders, Dragon Boy. Very well...” The old woman beckoned Ryouko to follow her, while Ryouko wondered how she knew his old nickname, and how long he’d been gone from home. Was she really a

fortune teller, or a mystic? A demon instead? His thought process stopped as the woman led him to the door that he had studiously avoided earlier.

“Down their lie the secrets you desire. The Kaguya bloodline explained, it’s jutsus defined, and even what little remains of their artifacts. And it’s your property...” The woman opened the door; nothing greeted Ryouko except the smell of stale straw; the smell to tatami mats. As he looked over to the door to peer down, he saw it was a pit, with bones at the bottom.

“Bones?” Ryouko said aloud. That’s when he felt a push from behind. He was falling toward the bones in a showdown he wasn’t going to win.

“THE ANSWERS YOU DESIRE ARE YOURS!” the old woman shouted. Ryouko had to think fast to save himself, or he was going to be an addition to the collection of bones at the bottom of the pile.

3 - The Drunken Fist vs The Shikotsu Myaku

With Shikamaru in the lead, Naruto pestering him, Lee and Sai in the middle, and Sasuke and Sakura bringing up the rear, they traveled to Sunagakure. There, they met some resistance from the Kazekage and his siblings. After having Ryouko's help, and hearing his story, Temari, Kankuro, and Gaara refused to help anyone collect the Ryo on Ryouko's head. Temari looked like she might have told Shikamaru. As it was, she was the one who gave the solitary clue they had to track Ryouko with.

"Man, I can't believe that they wouldn't help us! I mean, what's the deal with that? What'd Ryouko do, brainwash them?!" Naruto was thinking out loud, and had been for the last three hours. And his 'thinking' was taking place right in Shikamaru's ear.

"Will you can it?" Shikamaru growled, having heard enough. "They told us this direction. Legend or not, he'll be leaving SOME kind of sign, and, knowing his training, you'll be able to sense the thick chakra in the air. Well, maybe an animal could, but since we don't have any, we'll have to make do. Lee, you and Sai look from up in the trees. Naruto, you and I will search along the path and the immediate area to the right. Sasuke and Sakura, you two look along the left. We'll all meet up after twenty Kilometers."

--

At the nineteen Kilometer mark, Lee spotted something.

"Sai, look at that tree! That looks like Ryouko's Immortal Dragon's Circle Jutsu! Look at the pattern!" Lee pointed to the tree he meant, which had scorch marks all over it, making it distinctive from the other trees.

"You're right, Lee-san. I'll alert the others." Sai and Lee stopped on a branch. Lee kept the tree in site while Sai rapidly drew a lion. Putting his right hand in a half-tiger sign under his eye, Sai said his jutsu aloud:

"Great Beast Painting Animation Jutsu!"

The lion sprung off the page and leapt to the ground. It galloped toward the others and, upon finding them, led them back. Lee and Sai jumped down from the tree to join the others staring at the tree. Shikamaru offered his analysis.

"Damn, he's clever. He hit the tree on every side, we can't tell which direction he attacked it from!"

Sasuke looked at the ground while Sakura studied the bark.

"The burn marks on this tree are at least two months old, maybe more...The sap is fused into a glass-like state...the pattern DOES match Ryouko's attack..." Sakura ran a hand down the tree, trying to gauge another clue by feel.

Sasuke spotted his clue fairly quickly. "He's not so clever. He left a nice trail for us to follow. Those are his tabi boot marks; he's the only one to own a pair in our village. Most Shinobi wear sandals, which leave a separate, less complete foot print." Everyone agreed, but Shikamaru took a closer look.

"No...they're his, alright, but he walked backwards in every direction. He laid sixteen false trails...and the trees might be the same way...damn, he really thought this out! Lee, check the trees. There's only one other way he could have escaped, and that's up there. Everyone else, search this area within viewing distance in every direction."

Sai picked up the only clue of the bunch. "Shikamaru-san, this is a discarded inkstone of the brand Ryouko-kun uses for his notes."

Shikamaru looked at the stone, already forming his plan.

"That means we've got fingerprints. That doesn't do us much good, except that fingerprints are harder to mimic...Ugh, we'll never do this without a dog or something. Lee, you're the fastest. Go back to the Leaf Village and get a dog," Shikamaru said, already starting to make camp for the night in his mind.

"Right!" Lee shouted. "If I am not there and back in two days, I will do two thousand pushups!" Lee took off at top speed, and was quickly out of view.

"Man, what does he eat? He's got more energy than I do, believe it!" Naruto commented.

"This is so troublesome...whatever the case, let's make camp here, we'll get moving again when Lee comes back," Shikamaru added.

Sakura had grown quiet; well, everyone had, but Sakura had been through the same hell as Ryouko, and she was genuinely worried about him.

I practically told him I had feelings for him, then I asked him to return Sasuke, like that night in the temple never happened. Did I cause this? No, at least not by myself. There were other things bothering Ryouko...namely Lady Tsunade.

--

Ryouko was falling fast. There was no time for a summoning jutsu. So Ryouko desperately pulled a bone from his arm and jammed it into the wall. The bone dug in and slowed Ryouko's descent enough for him to land between two of the large bones.

That bony dog, pushing me into this...wait...was this a trap? Or did she push me in the right direction...That smell...of straw...it can't be coming from this hole, there's only bones here...but it's gotten stronger since I fell...

Ryouko began to feel around the walls for a door, or a hidden compartment. Upon inspecting the wall, Ryouko found- nothing. But those bones...Ryouko scrambled to the dirt, digging with his hands, tossing dirt aside, finally feeling wood underneath his hand. Next, he found an old iron door handle. But when he pulled on it, the handle broke off. Nonplussed, Ryouko retrieved the bone he had pulled from his arm,

freeing it from the stone wall with a sharp tug. Aiming the bone down, Ryouko used the only jutsu to make sense for this occasion.

“Tsubaki no mai!” (Dance of the Camellia). Ryouko’s hand soon turned into a blur as the bone in his hand pummeled the door at a high speed. The door began to splinter, crack, and then finally cave in. Ryouko ended the jutsu and gave a hard stomp; the door fell down another ten feet. Ryouko smelled the straw even stronger now that the second door was gone. Sensing no danger, he stepped over the doorway and let himself fall to the ground below. Using his feet, Ryouko felt the pattern on the floor with his tabi boot. Straw tatami mats.

The room Ryouko had landed in was a huge, circular chamber, made of stone, but the floor was almost all tatami mats, save for a corner where there was a cage. The smell of straw was less strong, now that it had an opening to escape from. There were no windows or doors, save for the one Ryouko had just destroyed.

Ryouko looked around, finally seeing what he wanted: Scrolls, books, and even- clothes? Ryouko, admittedly curious, picked up one of the strange garments. It was a long shirt, with long sleeves, and was a light gray. On the back was the crest of the Kaguya, a camellia flower. The curiosity was that the shirt had holes at the shoulders, and a wide opening at the base of the neck. To anyone without the Shikotsuymyaku bloodline, this would have been strange, and useless. But Ryouko understood that the openings were for access to the bones that the select few Kaguya who inherited this trait could pull out. That was fascinating enough, but those scrolls...Ryouko only knew Tsubaki no mai (Dance of the Camellia) and Tessenka no mai: (Dance of the Clematis:) Tsuru (Vine). Ryouko knew there were others, but he had only seen Kimimaro use them; he had never learned them himself.

Ryouko had all the time in the world to learn these jutsus now. An ample supply of food and water in his summoning scroll, Ryouko set to work.

--

“Hey, Lee’s coming back!” Sakura called down from the lookout post, the highest place in the area, on top of a strong maple tree.

“I am back! And I have brought the dog!” Lee shouted, holding a flustered-looking Pakkun high above his head. Lee held him up a little too long, because Pakkun bit down on Lee’s bandaged hand.

“I don’t like to be held. Don’t you have ears, kid? I can run just fine, I didn’t need you to carry me. Just like your sensei...” Pakkun grumbled, while Lee took the comparison to Gai as a compliment.

Pakkun rolled his eyes, but sat next to Shikamaru. “You called me here for something, what do you need?”

Shikamaru took out the inkstone that Sai had found and held it to Pakkun’s nose.

“We’re tracking Ryouko. We’ve got this clue, but that’s it. Other than that, the trail is cold. Will this be enough for you to follow?” Shikamaru asked earnestly, already tired of this mission. **Just leave the guy alone already! He wants to get away, that’s his business. It’s not like he’s hurting the village or**

something. What a drag.

Pakkun sniffed at the ink stone. “Nope, that won’t do it. But that’s not the only clue the kid left. And I’d like to see him fake THIS one.” Pakkun pointed to a small cropping of rocks, stained with something.

“What is it?” Naruto asked, trying to sniff the air like Pakkun did. Pakkun almost didn’t stop him, but Naruto was too easy a pawn for such a trick.

“I wouldn’t do that, that’s not water, kid. Looks like nature called...” Pakkun informed Naruto, who reacted by leaping away from the spot, trying to force the smell out of his nostrils. He was thankful that it wasn’t one of those smells you could ‘taste’.

“This is a...disgusting...but natural trail I can follow. I’d like to see him do THAT while walking backwards.” Pakkun nodded for everyone to follow him. Taking off into the treetops, Pakkun led the way, followed by Shikamaru and Naruto. Lee and Sai were in the middle, while Sakura and Sasuke brought up the rear.

--

Ryouko had just started to get comfortable in the Land of Rain. How long he would stay, he wasn’t sure. It was a nice place. The people of the village nearby were pleasant enough, if wary of Ryouko. After reading the history of the Kaguya, Ryouko had learned of their nature, and their demise. Bloodthirsty warmongers, the Kaguya had attacked the Mist Village for no seemingly reason, other than an enjoyment of death. They were talented warriors to be sure, but against the discipline and numbers of the Mist Village, it was suicide. The scroll had ended there, which Ryouko knew was a mistake. Kimimaro had somehow escaped the battle, and had been found by Orochimaru. Ryouko corrected the scroll, adding himself and writing down Kimimaro’s true time of death.

Ryouko’s tale had reached the Land of Rain, and therefore the Village Hidden in the Clouds. One day, a jonin got the courage up to meet Ryouko. Ryouko wasn’t used to this, but invited the man in, where they drank and exchanged tales.

“You did a great thing, ridding the world of Orochimaru,” the jonin told Ryouko. “Pardon our village for being wary of you. Your clan...made things difficult in the past. The last one is named legendary...fitting, in a way. Our Village is sturdy enough, but without notoriety. Even a visit from a legend is a welcome boost. And, sorry about my grandmother coming to you like that, and pushing you down that hole. Hehe, gram’s a feisty old thing!”

The jonin had black hair, pulled back into a ponytail. That was really the only defining feature about him, otherwise he looked like every other jonin Ryouko had seen. Looks didn’t matter so much to Ryouko anymore, although he felt certain that would change, should he meet the right kunoichi.

Ryouko tried to smile. “Thank you. It wasn’t the most enviable task, and I hope I’ll be remembered for something better than defeating a man. And the Village has been very hospitable. Aside from some wary glances, it’s been peaceful...a welcome change...”

The jonin stood up from sitting on the ground. “Have you thought of staying, permanently. All this land is

yours as the last of your clan...and word has gotten out about the bounty on your head. Few here who know of your clan's heritage would dare even attempt to turn you over to the Leaf."

Ryouko had heard this many times, in various villages he had visited. The Sand village offer had been tempting, but Gaara, Kankuro, and Temari were too close to the people in the Hidden Leaf. In the Cloud Village, there was no such problem. Everyone knew Ryouko by clan and by legend, which was nice, if a little tiresome. But at the same time, there was no pressure, and no connection to the Leaf. Ryouko suddenly remembered he still hadn't answered the jonin yet.

"I have...I haven't decided either way yet. Although I do plan to lay my claim to this land. But a permanent stay, I'm not sure of yet. I also need to change my look. I'm too easily recognized, everyone wanting to make a name for himself will be after me..." Ryouko had already donned one of the Kaguya shirts he had found, and wore his mask around his neck. Usually he had a chakra cigarette in his mouth. But if he didn't, his mask was in place. Typically, his mask was in place in public and in combat. Ryouko had put his robe away, at least for a while. A picture of him in it had been circulated, along with the 25 million Ryo bounty, so changing his look had become necessary.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"What the hell?" Ryouko looked to the jonin, who followed him upstairs. Ryouko looked down from the top of his new land, seeing...

"Oh damn. They found me!" Ryouko ducked back down. The jonin followed him as Ryouko hustled to the door.

"You weren't kidding about challengers! It's no one from our village, that's for sure!" the jonin exclaimed, before looking at Ryouko. "Do you want help? I'll battle alongside you..."

Ryouko shook his head. "Thank you, but this is something I have to handle myself. Those are my friends, from the Leaf Village. They were, anyway...I don't know how they feel about me since I left. It's been a long time..." Ryouko climbed back up the stairs to look down.

"Shikamaru, Naruto, Sai, Lee, Sasuke, Sakura, and...Pakkun. Of course, THAT is how they found me. A tracking dog. I should see them, I suppose. They've gone to all this trouble to find me..." Ryouko was just starting to get comfortable with his new life, when his past came knocking. But there was no putting it off. Ryouko had to face them. He owed them the truth. THEY weren't the ones who had driven him away...well, some of them weren't. There was still Sasuke and Sakura.

The Cloud Jonin watched as Ryouko jumped off the roof and landed in front of his old friends.

"Whatever you do...don't awaken his Kaguya blood..." the Cloud Jonin whispered to himself. He had taken a liking to Ryouko, but he knew all too well what that Kaguya blood could do if unleashed...

--

Thwomp.

Ryouko landed in the grass, head bowed, before standing up to look at his shocked 'friends'.

"So you found me after all...Do I have you to thank for that, Pakkun?" Ryouko patted Pakkun gently on the head, surprising the pug-mix.

"If you've come here, you've probably heard about the Ryo on your head..." Shikamaru began carefully. **This isn't the same guy. He's twenty-one now, and hasn't been a member of a village for over a year...**

Ryouko looked from member to member of the Konohagakure squad. It was a sight for sore eyes...nostalgia bit Ryouko momentarily, but he quickly stiffened his thoughts and his demeanor.

"Shikamaru...Naruto, Sai, Lee, Sasuke, and Sakura...It's been a long time..."

The wind whooshed through the grass, breaking the awkward silence. Ryouko's eyes were half-lidded and non-threatening, but his mask was in place. It was hard to read Ryouko without his mask, let alone with the black material covering his face. Without a headband, his dark brown hair had grown bushy, but not long. Ryouko didn't LOOK like a legend, OR an enemy.

"Yeah...it's been a while since you released me from my prison..." Sasuke suddenly growled, stepping closer to Ryouko. In his hand, he had a kunai hidden, the flat of the blade against his wrist.
If I can kill a legend...I can kill my brother. Ryouko has NEVER been stronger than me...

Suddenly, Sasuke was thrown backward, a slash mark across his stomach. His kunai went clattering away. Naruto had been ready to attack Ryouko, but upon seeing that Sasuke had been the instigator, stopped. No one moved. They were too busy staring at Ryouko, and the bones that had jutted from his stomach so suddenly.

"Are all of you trying to kill me, or was that just Sasuke's idea?" Ryouko's bones sucked back into his skin, not even leaving a mark.

Shikamaru nodded to the others. "We're not here to fight you. None of us knew Sasuke would do that. We were dispatched to bring you home in one piece, not to cut you to ribbons. Not that we could, apparently."

Ryouko gazed at the others. "I see...well, this IS my home." Ryouko indicated the gray building behind him. "When the Village turned it's back on me, I had to leave. I couldn't take it anymore. And now, I've been evading any trackers for over a year..."

"Once we give our report to Lady Tsunade, this place won't be your home anymore, everyone will know about it! So why don't you just come to your real home?" Sakura asked gently. She had never received such a cold glare from Ryouko.

"Home? To be kicked around, and treated like dirt? To have my house burned down, my school destroyed, my students jailed, and my pride squashed? I don't think so." Sasuke had since gotten up, and wondered what the hell had happened.

Naruto decided to play his ace. "But what about the old man, the Third Hokage! Would HE want you running off from the village like that?"

That would have been a direct hit to the heart strings. But Ryouko had already thought about that, and was quick with his response. There was regret etched all over Ryouko's face as he spoke, and his words didn't have their normal crisp edge.

"Lord Third would be mortified if he knew what the village had become. Turning on it's own like this...I know I can't be the only one to think this way. Under the Third Hokage, our village grew and prospered, until he was taken from us. Under Tsunade (gasps as Ryouko didn't add an honorific or title. Ryouko decided that she isn't his leader, and they're both legends), the Village has become a shadow of it's former self. It's painful to watch something you love so much...just curl up and start to die...I would have died for that Village, and anyone in it! How can loyalty like that be wasted?!" Ryouko was rolling now, finally shouting. "I WOULD HAVE DONE ANYTHING TO BE ACCEPTED! INSTEAD, I GOT KICKED TO THE CURB! WHY? BECAUSE I'M NOT THE SAME AS YOU? DON'T INSULT MY INTELLIGENCE BY TELLING ME EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE, AND I'LL BE ACCEPTED BACK! YOUR HOKAGE, TSUNADE, IS A dog! SHE KNOWS NOTHING OF LOYALTY AND LOVE FOR THE LEAF!"

There was silence once more. But Lee strode forward, and took up his guard.

"Ryouko...let us spar, for old time's sake! We will talk, as we always did!"

"How do I know I can trust you? I want to, Lee...but living alone, on the streets, for so long, has told me not to listen to everything anyone says, even friends..." Ryouko countered.

"If I cannot face you as a friend, I will be your opponent, and I will bring you back to the Leaf Village! You decide!"

Lee deepened his stance, and readied himself to attack. Ryouko reached back and pulled a bone out of his shoulder. Lee's eyes widened; he remembered how tough Kimimaro was all too well. And Ryouko wasn't dying from some mysterious disease.

"The bone is blunted. I don't aim to kill, Lee. Only to give you the fight you deserve. I'm not going back to the Leaf..." **At least not yet...**

"Konoha Hurricane!" Lee aimed a face-level kick at Ryouko, who chose to dodge it by stepping backwards and taking a swipe with the bone. Lee spun around, and tried a heel kick. Ryouko moved away, but Lee tagged the tool pouch around Ryouko's waist. Not a big deal, until Ryouko saw what had happened.

Lee had landed on his feet behind Ryouko, and was ready for another attack. But from Ryouko's waist pouch came his hip flash, filled with sake. The rice brew's loss wouldn't have been devastating in combat, except for where it landed- in Lee's mouth.

This isn't good...I've never fought against the drunken fist. I only know that even Kimimaro had a

hard against it, and he was a better fighter with the Shikotsu Myaku...if even Kimimaro, someone as strong as Orochimaru, had difficulty with the Druken Fist taijutsu, I have my hands full. I've never defeated Lee, even when he was sober, in a taijutsu contest...

Lee began to hiccup and sway as more and more of the rice alcohol trickled down his throat. He stumbled and fell down, sitting down, looking defiantly at Ryouko.

“WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?! DAMN IT, DON'T STARE AT ME!” Lee took off like a shot, aiming a kick at Ryouko, who barely dodged it. Lee's punches grew faster and faster, until Ryouko couldn't block anymore, and he could only dodge. Eventually, dodging didn't work anymore, and Lee hit Ryouko full in the stomach with a hard sidekick.

Lee immediately landed a punch into Ryouko's midsection, knocking Ryouko for a loop, and sending blood spilling out of his mouth. Ryouko knew this fight was already written off, unless he could sober Lee up somehow, or outlast the alcohol.

Thank God I don't drink much...there was enough in there to buzz him, but how long can it last? How long can I last?

“HEY, WHASSA MATTER? CAN'T DODGE ME! HAHHAHA! WHOA, CLONES? I'LL JUSS DESTROY THEM! HYAAH!”

Lee plowed through three imaginary clones, while Ryouko stood still watching in amazement. **I wouldn't use clones against Lee...even now, I will only spar him in a taijutsu vs taijutsu match...I can only use ninjutsu or genjutsu if he starts to hurt himself, or someone else...damn, honor is a burden sometimes...**

Lee had finally targeted the real Ryouko, who had dropped the bone he had been using. Empty hands were all he had now, and that worried him. His worry was validated as Lee blazed right into him. Ryouko blocked and countered, but couldn't land a solid strike, only a glancing blow off Lee's forehead. Lee had become a human dynamo. Ryouko kept blocking and dodging, hoping Lee would wear himself out, all the while wondering why he was fighting so badly. It hit him, ironically, as Lee's right leg cracked him in the shoulder.

It's because I have no desire to fight him...he's no enemy, so I don't want to hurt him, which limits my movements to mostly defense. Once the sake wears off, I may be able to handle him. We haven't fought for a long time, he may have forgotten my style. And it's since changed anyway...

“Enough, Lee!” Sasuke was back on his feet, and rushed Ryouko again, Sharingan activated.

“No, Sasuke!” Sakura shouted, but Sasuke was right near Ryouko by now. Ryouko didn't offer 'taijutsu only' matches to Sasuke, so he had no trepidation when he used a new jutsu.

“Larch Dance!” Ryouko's body sprouted bones. One hit Sasuke, knocking him into the air. From there, Ryouko began to spin, keeping Sasuke in the air, bones hitting him each time, before Ryouko let him fall to the ground. As Sasuke gasped for air, he blurted out:

“What are you? My Sharingan can’t copy this! Damn it!”

Ryouko looked down at Sasuke, his eyes offering no mercy. “This is twice you’ve attacked me needlessly. If you want to know, I’ve discovered my Kaguya heritage. I’ve been lucky enough to inherit the Shikotsu Myaku, the ability to control bone density and growth within my body. I’ve been here, on my land, for only a short while, studying my heritage, it’s blood line limit, and the jutsus that come with it. They’re imperfect as of now, but I’ll make them stronger.”

“YOUR land? You don’t get it, do you? You’re still a genin from the Leaf Village, THAT is your land!” Sasuke shot back. He tried his Lions Barrage combo, but Ryouko’s bones stopped him cold.

“Ryouko, please, stop!”

Ryouko did just that, looking to see who had begged him to hold off his counterattack. When he saw that it was the Cloud jonin that had befriended him, he stepped away from Sasuke.

“Please, don’t attack him anymore! He’s holding back because you’re his friends, but even he has his limits!” the jonin nodded to the Leaf ninja. “He has a valid claim to this land, as the last Kaguya descendent! His blood IS diluted, but his family name gives him the leverage to own this land...please, stop attacking and give him a chance to explain...we may be from different villages, but I have no desire to see you hurt!”

Sasuke had reached his level of tolerance. “And what makes you so cocky? You think he can hurt me?!”

The jonin looked over the battered Sasuke. “He can. But he’s holding back, even against you...of the Uchiha clan...WHY he owed you a debt like that, I don’t know...but his clan is truly fearsome, and his bloodline just as much!”

“I’ve had enough of you!” Sasuke zipped toward the jonin, but Ryouko skidded in the way, retrieving his bone on the way over, then backhanded Sasuke with the flat of the bone.

“Your senseless attacks against me may be valid in your mind, but you can’t have a grudge against this jonin, you just met him. He’s proven himself a friend to me...and I’ll die...or kill...to protect my friends...”

Ryouko stabbed his bone into the dirt, so he had both hands free to make hand signs.

“Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique!” Ryouko stunned Lee with the genjutsu out of nowhere. Ryouko hadn’t even been looking at Lee when he used the genjutsu. But at the same time, the genjutsu wasn’t harmful.

“Sakura, your Poison Removal could speed up Lee’s recovery from my sake. Naruto’s Shadow Clones could hold Lee down while you work. In the mean time, let me make my home presentable...I owe you the truth, if you’ve come so far to get me.”

4 - The Legend's Mettle

Ryouko had finished making food and drink enough to serve his 'guests'. Not for the first time, Ryouko questioned his legendary status. Pushing that aside for the time being, Ryouko returned to his guests.

"It's been a while since I left, hasn't it? Has the Hidden Leaf changed very much?"

The Leaf Ninja exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"Well, uh, thing is, we can't say what's changed. Since you don't live in the Village..." Shikamaru was strangely nervous for him. He was usually calm and collected, but found his confidence wavering. Especially at Ryouko's acid, yet politely-toned response.

"Sounds no different from when I was living there...I didn't hear news as a villager, so not much could have changed. If you're all here, then no doubt that the Legendary Loser is still the Hokage..."

Again, the group gulped nervously. To use Tsunade's nickname like that- it was unthinkable!

"How dare you insult the Hokage?!" Naruto snarled, standing up. Ryouko remained sitting at the head of the table, unconcerned. He looked up at Naruto, meeting Naruto's glare with an even gaze.

"Relax, Naruto, I'm not insulting the position of Hokage; I hold that in the highest regard. My insult was directed at Tsunade herself. For obvious reasons. No offense meant, except to her..."

That settled Naruto down, which paved the way for Sakura to try her hand at asking a calmer question. Despite her admiration for Tsunade, Sakura was as smart as they came, and equally as understanding. Ryouko had a right to be angry, that much was evident.

"So what have you done with yourself for all this time?"

Ryouko looked at the Rain Jonin, who was sitting to his right. The Jonin nodded, and then Ryouko spoke up.

"Training. Being a legend has put a giant dartboard on my back, and any idiot with a kunai and something to prove has, and will continue, to attack me. Not to mention that one has to fight for one's beliefs..." Ryouko's face smoothed into a nostalgic look, though that was short lived.

"If I may ask all of you a question...It's Tsunade herself who has sent you, no doubt. Has she given a reason for wanting my capture?"

Everyone looked to Shikamaru for this one. He nodded.

"She's worried that you'll betray the Leaf Village. And she doesn't like to lose Shinobi, much less have them walk out on her. The high bounty on your head is to ensure that you're returned to us alive. You

have a lot of knowledge that no one wants to see die with you.”

Ryouko nodded gravely, pushing his food aside, and drinking from a second hip flask.

“I see...has she given any of you a reason why I left to begin with? I wouldn't put it past Tsunade to just sic you on me without presenting you with reasoning as to why.” Judging by the looks he received, Ryouko had answered his own question.

“It's said that if you're unhappy with yourself, you can make no-one else happy. I don't know if this is a truth, but I'm certainly unhappy with myself. Why talk the risk of making another's life so miserable? Companionship with me is a weight, rather than a burden lifted. Or it used to be. I won't lay claim to happiness, but I will say that I've grown. With it, the gap in my heart has grown. The Hidden Leaf will always be a soft spot for me, no matter what assassins are sent. But I can't return. I would be forced to respect Tsunade, and acknowledge her as Hokage...I can't do it. There isn't much in the Hidden Leaf for me at any rate. No missions, and even less respect. All of you have grown stronger, and become the pride of Konoha. Just because I have no set home anymore doesn't mean that I've grown deaf...”

Ryouko stood up from the table, and stepped over to a window.

“Answer me this: Are all of YOU happy?”

The Leaf Villagers couldn't say they weren't.

“Even if we are...that doesn't mean we don't want you to come home!” Sakura said quietly. Ryouko gave her a small smile.

“Time has passed me by. A ronin among Shinobi? Not very often do you see that...and it's not often you see someone like me, who has nobody and nothing, except his training, to keep him vital...”

Ryouko's tone suddenly turned more inviting.

“All of you are welcome to stay the night. I daresay I have plenty of room for all of you. You can resume attacking me in the morning, once you've rested.”

With Ryouko, you couldn't tell if that was joking, or if that was biting wit. None of the Leaf Villagers had any great desire to camp out again. For some reason, except for Sasuke, they all felt they could trust Ryouko. And a soft bed could also soften a warrior's outlook on the person offering it.

--

Pale moonlight bathing him, Ryouko stood alone. The window's pattern was made of criss-crossed wooden 'X' shapes, filtering the moonlight to hit him in squares. A glass of a rare, blood-red wine in his hand, Ryouko kept staring out blankly, at nothing in particular. It reminded Ryouko of night in the Leaf Village. So many people around, yet he was lonely. Everyone else had their friends. Ryouko never DID fit in perfectly. Some still looked at him as an outsider, or a transplant. With Lady Tsunade against him, Ryouko would never fit in. Even though people liked him, Tsunade was their Hokage, their leader, the backbone of the village. If push came to shove, the people would protect the backbone, rather than a

hand or foot.

The Rain Jonin decided to speak up after seeing Ryouko stare out the window for several minutes.

“Master Ryouko?” the Jonin asked quietly. He hadn’t known that the boy had become a REAL legend; he thought it was just a term people gave him. But it was official.

“I’m sorry. What is it?” Ryouko turned away from the window to face the Jonin. Right then, the Rain Jonin knew that something had bothered Ryouko. The boy looked even more dismal than before. His eyes were half-lidded, and he didn’t look like he had slept in two days. The Rain Jonin bowed his head.

“With all due respect, there’s something you haven’t told me...I know you came from the Leaf Village...why does the Hokage hate you? Our Raikage has heard of you, and even he respects you. The villagers have begun to lose their fear of you and your clan, you’ve been so gracious. What could Tsunade have against you?”

Ryouko looked around; everyone was asleep, and there was no one in the shadows. Absently flicking a match, Ryouko lit a candle, illuminating the large table that his jonin friend was sitting at. The flickering candle light made Ryouko’s skin seem even more pale somehow.

“There are two things...the first of which...I loved her apprentice. The kunoichi with the pink hair, Sakura. She was the first to be friendly to me, she healed my eye when it was torn to shreds...somewhere along the line, I became infatuated with her. Tsunade knew of this, and did what she could to keep us apart. I would never get the courage up to tell Sakura, and without Tsunade supporting us as a couple, to even tell her would be pointless, unless I wanted her to be miserable, too. But such is her heart that she risked that to train with me, when I taught forbidden arts. Tsunade only forbade them to get back at me. But NONE of this would have happened if she had never taken away my jonin rank and my position in Konoha’s Black Ops. After I lost my job, and my rank, I lost my respect for her, and, ultimately, myself...”

Ryouko looked thoughtful as his face began to harden.

“That’s when I was told that Sakura was kidnapped by Orochimaru. One thing my teacher, Lord 3rd, taught me was that everyone in the Leaf is family. And one thing a sensei, Kakashi, taught me, is that you don’t let your comrades die, no matter what. And that’s when I stumbled across a scroll called ‘The Moon Cycle Prophecy’, authored by the First Hokage...”

Ryouko reached into his tool pouch; this was one of three scrolls that he kept with him at all times. But it stood out against his white personal scroll, and his green-trimmed summoning scroll. It was blood red, tied with a black cord, and battered and faded, with yellow edges. The words inside were blood red, and seemed to bleed through the rice paper.

“A warrior that time has forgotten...” Ryouko recited the first sentence, then a little more, before explaining it.

“Basically, my ideals are long dead. I was fated to save Sakura, and I was fated to defeat Orochimaru. I sealed his soul, and that of his apprentice, inside two swords, which were lost in battle (Ryouko doesn’t know of their fate). The seal I used is a secret jutsu that only I can perform. But Sakura loved the

apprentice, and, at her request, I released him. I couldn't bear to see her unhappy...But this was what led to the last straw..."

Ryouko finished his wine, and immediately took a little more. After a long sip, and a slight bit of red under his cheeks, Ryouko had drained the glass, and continued to speak.

"There was a grand festival held, in honor of my defeating Orochimaru. I was declared a 'legend', the first of the next generation. But the party turned into a celebration of one of Konoha's most celebrated sons returning, and on that night, he admitted his passion for Sakura. The Hokage acknowledged it, and the rest of the festival became dedicated to them. That was the night I left Konoha. I still had friends there, but the abuse, and...well, the, the jealousy I felt when I saw another man with the girl I loved...it became too much. Every man has his limit, and I had reached mine..."

The Rain Jonin couldn't help but think "**That poor son of a dog!**", despite Ryouko's legendary status.

"I see...thank you for telling me, Master Ryouko. Will you be alright here tonight? I can stay..." The jonin mumbled; it was already so late. His wife would be angry, but it wasn't every day one got to talk with a legend.

"No, it's alright. Your family would enjoy seeing you. I'll be fine here. Have a good night." Ryouko nodded, then walked toward the giant marble stairs. Once he reached the first floor, he started to head toward his room, but decided that a little stargazing was in order tonight. The night had grown cold, so Ryouko absently grabbed his robe before finishing the walk up to the roof.

--

Sasuke, Sakura, Naruto, Shikamaru, and Lee stayed up late, talking in the largest room, which was at one end of the house. The room had become Shikamaru's. That didn't mean that it wasn't scary as hell. If the house looked like a cemetery from the outside, then some rooms inside were just as 'cheerful'. There was a strange crest emblazoned on Shikamaru's headboard- two dragons crossed, stabbed by bones. The room was dark, which did little to make it look inviting. By questionable candlelight, the five discussed Ryouko late into the night, silencing themselves when they heard him walk by.

"He's mentally stable..." Sakura reported.

"His body isn't harmed..." Lee added.

"He's gotten stronger..." Sasuke murmured.

"But there's still something wrong!" Naruto exclaimed in frustration. "What do we do, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru had been sitting quietly, his fingers cupped at his waist. That always meant he was forming a plan. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

"We have three choices: Attack him all together, Call for backup and try to swarm him, or...we leave tomorrow, and tell Lady Tsunade that we either couldn't find him, or that he fought us and we had to

retreat.”

None of those seemed welcome options. No one wanted to admit they had failed a mission, and no one really wanted to attack Ryouko like that, there was that chance that he- or they- might be killed. Surprisingly, it was the number-one hyperactive, maverick, knuckle-headed ninja that came up with the winning idea.

“I’ve got it! We just need the right backup! And someone to stall Ryouko...”

Shikamaru nodded. “Lee and Sasuke need the rest...I’m half asleep...Naruto, you’re the only one with a fast summon...that leaves you, Sakura.”

Sakura nodded firmly, accepting a kiss on the cheek from Sasuke. At age eighteen, Sakura had matured (physically and mentally) some, but still had a charming innocence about her. That, and she was as smart as ever.

“Right, I’ll stall him, but hurry up Naruto!”

--

It was a rare night for Ryouko. Usually, a night not spend perfecting his techniques was a night wasted to him, but tonight marked a grim event for him. He was forced to come to terms with a past that he thought he had left in the grave. But it wouldn’t die! The past wouldn’t die. Ryouko wondered if maybe he didn’t WANT the past to die, at least not entirely. Moving on was one thing, killing the past quite another. Ryouko felt so much regret, though...

Defeated by his own thoughts, Ryouko stared at the full moon, not seeing anything. The moon reminded him of his past, and, ironically, the one thought that warmed him was the one night he and Sakura had shared in the temple. Granted, it had been awkward, and in the middle of a war, but Ryouko would never forget how it felt when Sakura told him that he made her feel safe, and then snuggled up to him. There hadn’t been more than a kiss shared between them, but this memory was special to Ryouko nonetheless. Getting it on in a temple was probably a one-way ticket to hell. But protecting someone you loved, that was about as pure as love could get. A willingness to do anything for that one person, to die for that one person.

And I did die, emotionally. Things haven’t been the same for me since. And every time I try to escape what happened, there’s some reminder that comes along and kicks me in the nuts. I wonder if I should just give in and go back to the Leaf...or would the pain worsen. I’m alone now, but if I went back to the Leaf, I’d still be alone, but I’d be surrounded by people, making the pain that much worse. I’ll never forget that night I sat on a roof, alone, studying, while everyone else met and went to look at the stars on Lone Pine Hill. I remember feeling regret...Now, some of that regret has been replaced by wondering- what if Sakura and I had fallen in love? More accurately, what if she loved me back?

At twenty-one, Ryouko felt his chances at dating were over. Sakura had to be near eighteen now. Tsunade was in her mid-fifties by now. Not that any of that mattered. Sakura was a taken girl, and who had taken her was better than Ryouko. Now that Sasuke had gotten a heart, Ryouko lost his advantage

over Sasuke.

“Ryouko? Sakura called gently. She had to stop and smile at a familiar site. Ryouko in his robes, a wind tossing them, looking at the moon by himself. It was a common occurrence, or it used to be at any rate.

“It’s a beautiful night...” Sakura began, giving a slight nod to Naruto, who started to perform the summoning jutsu.

“It is. ...” Ryouko didn’t seem to have anything else to say. His mind was still in the past, on the temple, the battle that ensued, and even on his treatment by Lady Tsunade.

Naruto nodded to Sakura, saying he had finished. Sakura returned the nod, noting that she had saw his signal. She still had one bone to pick with Ryouko.

“So...we get why you left, at least part of why you left. What I don’t understand- what pushed you over the edge like this? I mean, to become a hermit? Why not go to Sunagakure?”

Ryouko had his eyes closed. “I needed to get away from my past, and Temari, Kankuro, and Gaara are a part of my past. I wanted a complete escape from everything. It worked, but not for long...”

Sakura wasn’t done yet. “What about what you wanted? To have a kunoichi? I mean, Tenten and Temari both liked you, and Tenten is available...”

Ryouko looked away, indicating that he didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “She and Neji have a thing. Most kunoichi in the Hidden Leaf do. Besides, I would hardly think bringing a girl into this mess I call a life would be fair to her. I’m going down, and she’d be going with me. Besides, there are other kunoichi, I’ll meet the right one someday, once I’ve sorted myself out.”

Sakura sighed. Since she had thought about Ryouko, it had become obvious to her that he wasn’t as much of a lost cause as he thought.

Some kunoichi in the Leaf Village messed with him...if I knew the dog that did it, I’d beat her face in! A shy, innocent, sweet boy like that is so rare! This girl never knew what she was throwing away. I’m surprised at Ryouko, though, it seemed like the only kunoichi he ever talked with was me...

“Well, okay Ryouko.”

“Good night, Sakura.”

--

Naruto’s summon had reached it’s target. Naruto had figured that it would take another legend to talk to Ryouko- Orochimaru was out, and Tsunade was DEFINITELY out. That left Jiraiya. And Jiraiya had an idea- present a challenge to Ryouko. Ryouko had never turned one down, and this one hit close to home with him. As they stood in the large field in front of Ryouko’s house, with woods on both sides, Jiraiya made his proposition:

“Okay then- a legend should be able to fend off three attackers at once without killing them, or even really attacking. Let’s see how you do against Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura! If you lose, you come back to the Leaf Village.”

Team Kakashi would be difficult. They had worked together, and they could read each other. But Ryouko also knew each one had a weakness. And Naruto’s was that he always attacked first, with Shadow Clones.

Sure enough: “Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!”

There had to be two hundred Naruto’s! He wasn’t playing around.

Ryouko decided the time was right to try a new jutsu. Combining his “Larch Dance” with the Body Flicker Jutsu gave Ryouko the:

“Rose’s Thorn Dance!”

Ryouko had taken off his trench coat, and even his shirt, knowing it would get torn to shreds. His slight, martial-arts muscular frame jutted bones from everywhere. In the next instant, Ryouko was gone, and so were ten shadow clones. Then twelve more, then fifty more!

Ryouko appeared back in his starting position and threw a kunai laced with an explosive note. BOOM!

The remaining dozen clones rushed Ryouko. He leapt over the leg sweep attempted by four of the clones. The one above him, set to complete the “Uzumaki Barrage” became a weapon. Ryouko grabbed him by the leg and threw him down to the others, taking out all five. In the air, another clone jumped Ryouko. As soon as they hit the ground, Sasuke tore in with a Chidori. Ryouko threw his head backward into the clone, freeing himself in the process. Another Naruto clone tried to take it’s place, but Ryouko a Shadow Clone Jutsu himself. His two clones blocked Sasuke’s way, while Ryouko grabbed Naruto’s clone and spiked it into the ground.

“Guys, jump!” Sakura called to Naruto and Sasuke. She smashed the ground with her fist, forcing Ryouko to leap up to the side of his home, and then spring off, landing back on the ground. Sasuke and Naruto suddenly tore toward Ryouko. Ryouko had been staring at their clones!

“Chidori!”

“Rasengan!”

Ryouko spun to find both attacks getting near him. The combined power was cracking the earth, and Ryouko knew that surviving such incredible combined attacks was low. It was time to break out one of the Third Hokage’s Jutsus.

“Earth Style:...” Ryouko waited for just the right moment. Now! “MUD WALL!”

Ryouko spat out a layer of mud, which telescoped upward. But Ryouko had time it just right- Sasuke and

Naruto's hands were stuck! They both pulled, but couldn't break free. That left one member unaccounted for.

"Painful Sky Leg!" Sakura came crashing down just inches from Ryouko as he rolled to the side. Sakura's attack had an enormous crater that she and Ryouko were on opposite sides of.

Sakura looked Ryouko in the eyes as she made her move. "Summoning Jutsu!" Sakura didn't summon Katsuyua for this occasion, but instead a medium-sized slug that still towered over Ryouko. Ryouko couldn't use Shuurai here, the monstrous snake would take out half Ryouko's property.

"Liquid Nirvana Jutsu!"

The slug spat out a thin stream of nearly clear liquid at Ryouko. Ryouko guessed from the name that Sakura had somehow tapped into the genjutsu called "Temple of Nirvana" and learned the theory, then bottled it.

Setting fire to this stuff might be a bad idea...I'd better go the safer route...

"Summoning Jutsu! Umisu, Water Wall!" Four geysers of water sprang up around Ryouko, giving him a wall of protection from the liquid genjutsu. As he tried to figure out his next move, Ryouko noticed a kunai hitting one of the walls. With alarm, he also noticed that this kunai came with an exploding tag attached.

Sasuke! Of course! He still has one hand free. Naruto's hands are trapped, since he was using one arm to use the Rasengan, and the other to steady that arm. But the Chidori only requires one hand. Damn, I've gotta get out of here! Replacement Jutsu!

BLAM-SPLOOSH!

The water-wall exploded.

"Holy hell! Sasuke, that was overkill! This isn't a killing exercise!" Naruto shouted.

"On your guards, there's no body!" Sasuke shouted back. He had been aiming to kill. That's why it was the ultimate insult to find a bone at his neck, it's tip and side deadly sharp. Ryouko was standing behind him, also trapping Sasuke's other arm.

"I win, stop attacking," Ryouko murmured dryly. He hated doing this, fighting his 'friends'.

"This isn't over! Chidori: One Thousand Birds Current!" Sasuke shouted, forcing Chakra from his body. The mud conducted the electricity, giving Sasuke a boost even though he was trapped. This jutsu sent a shock through Sasuke's body, and to anyone touching it. If Ryouko hadn't grabbed his arm, he wouldn't have been hurt by the jutsu. But it was too late for that. Ryouko was sent flying, through three trees, his bare back getting cut all to hell. When he stopped moving, Ryouko saw that Sakura was freeing Naruto and Sasuke. They were definitely in the opening stages of an attack. Unfortunately for Ryouko, one tree had fallen on top of him, not injuring him further, but pinning him to the ground, leaving only his right arm and half of his upper body free.

“It’s over...loser.”

Ryouko’s eyes narrowed at the insult from Sasuke. When they were comrades, Ryouko would have shrugged it off. When Sasuke said it to Naruto, it was ‘brotherly love’. But when it was an obvious insult, Ryouko took offense. Pretending to try to pry the tree off himself, Ryouko touched his bloodied back. He pretended to fall back, exhausted. In reality, Ryouko’s bloody palm had been his saving grace. As he ‘fell backward’, Ryouko was actually using a summoning jutsu.

“Adamantine Yoi: Prison!”

Ryouko had all three trapped in a cage made of something harder than diamond, using the Third Hokage’s summon, Enma, in his staff form. Enma also used an arm, formed from the staff, to pull the tree off Ryouko.

“Seedling Fern Dance!” Ryouko put his hands to the ground. All around the cage, for some meters in each direction, a forest of bones popped up, isolating the cage. Now escape was almost impossible. In the cramped cage, handsigns were out, unless you elbowed someone in the face. That, and Enma could extend an arm out and trap your arms. At Ryouko’s tired nod, Enma did just that.

“Alright, I’ve seen enough!” Jiraiya stopped the fight, even though there was most likely an escape for Team Kakashi. Jiraiya threw an arm around Ryouko.

“You’ve proved your mettle as a legend. Those three are no slouches, and maybe you had a little bit of luck on your side, with that kekkaigenkai of yours, but that was a great fight. Even though they DID free themselves from your prison...”

Ryouko spun to find all three members of Team Kakashi standing a few meters away, looking glum. The loss angered Sasuke so much that he attacked one more time, this time with his Kusanagi.

Ryouko didn’t have time to yank a bone out of his shoulder. Instead, he used the dregs of his chakra to harden the bones on the side of Sasuke’s strike, and tried to block with a kunai. Sasuke’s Kusanagi couldn’t be blocked blade to blade, and it went right through Ryouko’s blade, and into his body.

CRACK!

The Kusanagi hit Ryouko in the ribs. Sasuke’s swing had DEFINITELY been for real. Ryouko finally couldn’t take it:

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU HAVE AGAINST ME?!” he demanded, yelling. Sasuke glared back, but murmured his reply:

“I don’t like to lose, it’s humiliating. You nearly ruined my life. But I got you back, didn’t I?” Sasuke was right near Ryouko, so close no one else could hear them.

“I’ve got Sakura...” Sasuke said with a nasty smirk.

--

“Master Jiraiya? I’ve got one more idea...” Shikamaru nodded towards Ryouko, who was sagging with exhaustion.

“Shadow Possession Jutsu!” Shikamaru’s shadow snared Ryouko’s, and Ryouko was trapped! But that didn’t seem to register with him All heard, over and over, was Sasuke’s words.

I have Sakura...

He’s using her to get back at me?! That miserable bastard, how could he use such a sweet, innocent creature? And now I’m trapped by this damn shadow! This REALLY pisses me off! Sorry Shikamaru, but it’s time for you to let go!

Ryouko didn’t do anything, but Shikamaru suddenly let go of the jutsu, a hand over his heart in pain.

“Do you understand? That’s what I have to with. That pain. Every day, almost every waking moment.”

Slowly, everyone’s gaze turned back to Ryouko. He had pulled his shirt back on, and put his robe over it. He had fallen to one knee, exhausted and hurt from the fight, but not harmed severely.

“No one can hope to understand. The only thing my relationships with people have done is make things more painful! I left the Leaf to seek relief from that pain, even temporary relief! I’m sorry to make you fail your mission, but give your Hokage this scroll, from me. It should transfer her anger from you to me. It’s the least I can do. Same village, different village, we’re still comrades. Fighting for what we believe in...I can respect that.”

Ryouko gave a curt nod, then walked away. The thought of failing had set in on the Leaf group, but even worse, they felt like they had failed twice- once for Lady Tsunade, and once for Ryouko.

“Let’s go home, we made the required effort.”

Shikamaru’s statement was correct, but it was still with a heavy heart that everyone left.

--

The Rain Jonin stood by Ryouko as he began to pack up his stuff. After placing several vicious genjutsus around the house, Ryouko finally fitted an old brass key into the lock on the door, and gave it a turn, locking up the giant, forbidding house.

“Will you be back?” The Jonin asked earnestly.

Ryouko nodded. “I will. This home and land belong to me. And the people here have been so great. It means more than most could understand...Thank you for everything. I hate to leave, but I need to, at least for a few months, to give Tsunade the slip.”

5 - Months Fourteen to Twenty-Three

(Fourteen Months)

“Master Ryouko, have you time enough for this old woman’s ramblings?”

Ryouko, robes on and pack on his back, looked over his shoulder. The old woman who had first ‘welcomed’ him to the Rain Village was peering up at him. Ryouko had wanted to exit quickly to avoid anyone else Tsunade might send, but he couldn’t find it in his heart to deny the old woman.

“I always have time for your wisdom, Elder,” he replied with a smile. Ryouko normally wore his mask while traveling, but his body had taken quite a pounding, as had his psyche. A chakra cigarette clenched in his mouth, and a hip flask full of sake, Ryouko wanted to heal himself as quickly as he could, in case he met any resistance on his travels. Now that Tsunade could track him somewhat, it was more of a ‘when’ than an ‘if’.

The old woman didn’t say anything, but beckoned with her head that Ryouko should follow her. Out of morbid curiosity (emphasis on morbid), Ryouko followed her to a garden. It was obvious that it had been expensive, and designed by a professional, with fountains and plants from other villages all over. A thick wooden fence separated the garden from the rest of the world. In the center there was a thick stone table, carved with ornate designs around the edges. Upon closer inspection, Ryouko noticed that the carvings were lions. Two had their mouths closed, two had their mouths open. Ryouko knew the lions were symbols of good luck. The two that had their mouths closed were sucking in bad luck, and the two with their mouths open were exhaling good luck. Ryouko made a mental note to see if his luck changed here. If it did, he resolved to buy those lions and maybe start believing in the legend that surrounded them.

Surrounded by flowers Ryouko didn’t know, he sat down on one of the benches as the Elder indicated. She immediately stared into his eyes with an unblinking glare. It didn’t take her long to make her first observation.

“You have much mental baggage that is starting to take a physical toll...” the elder stated. It wasn’t a question. Ryouko nodded his agreement.

“That’s right. The stress of running from my past is becoming tiresome. The ‘past’ attacked me, in the form of my old Leaf friends...”

The woman shook her head and put up a hand to stop Ryouko.

“Superficial thinking is of nothing to one’s spirit, Master Ryouko...” she said airily. Then, suddenly, she grabbed one of Ryouko’s hands. Turning it over to see the palm, the woman nodded gravely.

“The past has become such a burden...are you familiar with this line on your hand?” The elder pointed to the one she meant. Ryouko looked closely; he was no student of palmistry or anything of the kind. It

was interesting, and could benefit the right people, Ryouko guessed. But it just wasn't him. He preferred to leave the future a mystery.

"I think that's the life line...and that one, it's the love line..." Ryouko indicated which lines he meant with his other hand.

The elder gave a gummy smile. "That's right! Now compare the two lines. What do you notice?"

Ryouko looked at his hand. He had never really studied them before, at least not seriously. So he was vaguely shocked that his love line was longer than his life line. And the life line looked irritated; it was red, and Ryouko hadn't injured his hand lately.

"How is that possible?" Ryouko asked, already knowing that the woman would know what he was referring to.

The Elder's smile had vanished. When she spoke, it was mysteriously, but also chilling. Looking into Ryouko's hazel eye, her weathered, creased mouth said words that shook Ryouko to the core:

"If you do not mend the breaks of the past shortly, your time on this earth grows short. How short, I cannot determine...but a word of advice-Do not use the ShikotsuMyaku."

Ryouko's mouth dropped open. His chakra cigarette fell on his hand, burning it, and sending him back to reality. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, then slowly forced himself to look the Elder in the eyes.

"I'm dying? And the...this is how Kimimaro perished. The ShikotsuMyaku was the cause?" Ryouko was trying not to panic, although that was his first instinct. Why **SHOULDN'T** he panic?

"It is a deadly blood line for both those who use it, thought equally those that are the target of it. Should the ability lie dormant, the disease may lay dormant as well..."

Ryouko had gone more pale than usual, but at least he knew what not to do. And he had a measure of closure for Kimimaro's death. After thanking the Elder, Ryouko rose and left the Rain Village, on his way to his next destination.

Wherever that was.

--

Tsunade had woken up this morning with a small headache. That grew now as she started to shout, absolutely livid at the group of normally capable warriors in front of her.

"**HOW THE HELL CAN FIVE OF YOU HAVE FAILED TO CAPTURE ONE MAN?!**" she roared, pounding her desk.

"Listen Grandma," Naruto began with a snarl, but Sakura quickly clamped a hand over his mouth, stopping him from committing a veritable suicide.

“Don’t piss her off, Naruto! You don’t want to get her mad!” Sakura dragged Naruto away, to force him to calm down.

“He gave us this scroll to give to you,” Shikamaru muttered, holding out the scroll to Tsunade, who snatched it from his hand and tore it open. It contained three words:

Don’t blame them/.

Tsunade bunched the scroll up and threw it into the trash can beside her desk, and then started to massage her temples to calm down. Though she hated Ryouko with a passion, his honesty was never a question mark.

“Well, all of you did your best, I’m sure. Even FINDING that little bastard must have been hard...alright, I’ll consider this a mission passed. But he’ll be getting a visit...you may go.”

-

(Three days pass)

“No one there, my lady,” Genma said sullenly.

“Not even a trace, or a trail!” Raito added. Both were kneeling before Tsunade, hoping their submissiveness would help them escape her wrath. To their immense relief (and surprise), Tsunade dismissed them silently.

--

||FALL|| (16 months since his departure)

It was four monthes into the new year now, making it sixteen months since Ryouko had left the Hidden Leaf Village. Save for his friends, and the stories that followed every legend, Ryouko was forgotten. It was practically Tsunade’s mandate that Ryouko’s name not be uttered in the Hidden Leaf Village. No one dared say anything else, although most secretly harbored a liking for the boy that had grown into the legend.

“The Leaf Village is quiet today...kind of a nice change...” Tsunade turned her head to look at Shizune, who hadn’t answered. Instead, Shizune seemed preoccupied, looking out the window, ignoring the work in front of her. Tsunade was worried by this behavior, and decided to put it to the test.

“I can’t remember the last time I went out drinking...or gambling. Maybe I’ll go indulge myself...Come on, Shizune.” Tsunade got up to leave the room, but Shizune hadn’t followed, or even made any indication that she had heard Tsunade.

“Shizune, let’s go!” Tsunade stamped her heel, this time succeeding in earning Shizune’s attention. But her answer wasn’t what Tsunade expected.

“I’m really not feeling up to it, Lady Tsunade. Maybe Sakura could escort you today? I need some time

to myself.” Shizune still had turned around to face Tsunade; she just kept looking at the ground below from the window behind Tsunade’s desk.

Tsunade was perplexed, but persisted. “Come on, getting out will do you good. Worrying yourself over the village like this, not even thinking of yourself, it’s just not healthy, you’re going to make yourself sick. Now, let’s go!” Tsunade moved her hand, as though to put it on Shizune’s shoulder, but Shizune moved away from the gesture. This surprised Tsunade; Shizune had never acted like this before.

“I’m sorry, M’Lady, but I can’t go,” Shizune said firmly. “I’m taking my day off right now. Have a safe trip.” POOF!, and Shizune had disappeared.

Tsunade stared at where Shizune had been standing, but no longer looked confused.

So she’s still worried for Ryouko, is she? And that crack about Sakura going with me...I guess I had that coming. But Shizune must feel strongly about this, she never stands up to me like this. Did she see something about Ryouko’s actions that I didn’t? Or is it just concern?

Tsunade had been kidding about going gambling, but now she felt as though she needed the break. Taking up her suitcase full of money and donning her green jacket, Tsunade left her office to try to relax and forget about the situation at hand.

--

Ryouko, staying in a small village outside the Beach Village, Hamagakure, pored over his scrolls again. Most jutsus that the Third Hokage had used were now second nature to the rapidly-developing Ryouko. When your entire life was study, you progressed quickly. Ryouko wouldn’t have had this luxury in the Leaf Village, at least not undisturbed like this. But Ryouko would be lying if he said that, after nearly 17 months, he didn’t miss the Leaf Village. Granted, things would be different if he returned; everyone would be older, and maybe the Village itself would be changed somehow.

“HELP! PLEASE! OH GOD, SOMEONE HELP!!!”

Ryouko immediately snapped to attention. A young woman, maybe in her earlier twenties, was yelling for help. Around her were ten rough-looking men. Every one of them had lust in their eyes. Wearing only a purple bikini, the woman had garnered some unwanted attention.

Ryouko made hand signs after he had created a small cut on his thumb, and smashed his hand into the ground.

“Summoning Jutsu!” he shouted. There was a poof, but nothing!

Damn! The Striking Serpent Blades...they were the reason I could summon Shuurai...without them, I can’t summon him! This worried Ryouko, but he had to focus on the problem at hand. Being near a beach, Ryouko quickly ascertained his advantages. Water and sand were at his disposal, but little else.

“Water Clone Jutsu!” Ryouko took off across the beach. He had removed his robe to allow it to be cleaned, so he was clothed in a black jumpsuit. His mask was being cleaned as well, so his mouth was

clearly visible. It couldn't be helped now.

"What the hell? Water Clones?! When the hell did a Shinobi show up?!" the men began to question each other. Unknowingly, that was perfect- it gave Ryouko the opportunity to reach the young lady himself.

"Go on and run somewhere safe, I'll take care of this!" Ryouko told the woman.

"Thank you so much!" the girl exclaimed, running off as fast as she could.

With their target gone, the ten men aimed for Ryouko.

"You ruined our little party! I think we'll kill you for that! Right boys?!" the biggest and fattest, whom Ryouko assumed was the leader, shouted boisterously. His nine cronies shouted their agreement.

"Your guest of honor didn't want to attend," Ryouko murmured. He pulled his chakra cigarette from his mouth, getting ready to make his move.

"It was none of your business! NOW you're going to pay!"

Ryouko suddenly kicked sand upward into the goon in front's face. With his left hand, Ryouko punched him, knocking him down into the sand. From behind, Ryouko was grabbed in a full nelson. Not even bothering with a replacement jutsu, Ryouko let his upper body go limp as he ducked, breaking the grip that the attacker had. Throwing a hard elbow into the larger man's sternum, Ryouko finished him off by sweeping his legs and punching him in the stomach, making the man's meeting with the sand a painful one. He was lucky if his ribs weren't broken.

Ryouko jammed his cigarette backward over his shoulder, into the eye of an oncoming attacker. Dropping the tainted chakra enhancer, Ryouko collared the man around the neck and threw him into two other enemies.

"Dragon's Ember Jutsu!" Ryouko added, to take care of the last four attackers. He aimed his jutsu at the sand, which heated up to a high temperature very quickly, sending all four men leaping into the water for relief. That effectively ended both the fight and Ryouko's stay with the small village. Before he left, though, Ryouko looked to the end of the beach.

It's so peaceful...the sound of the water, and the glistening sand...it's the opposite of the turmoil inside me...This beach is said to perform miracles...some force making lovers come together...it must not work for me, I don't feel any love...only pain...or nothing at all...

Most hated to leave Hamagakure and the surrounding towns. Between the hot springs and the beach, it was paradise. Ryouko, however, left without a second thought.

--

^SPRING^ (20 months since his departure)

So many birthdays had come and gone. Sakura and Sasuke had each celebrated their eighteenth. Naruto was now seventeen, and showing signs of maturing. His hair had grown longer, and Naruto tended to leave his sideburns longer. Today, Naruto, now a chunin, met with all his teachers to celebrate his birthday.

“Seventeen, huh? It’s hard to believe I’ve known you for so long Naruto! I guess I can’t call you a trouble-making little brat anymore!” Iruka knew that it was a teacher’s greatest sadness, while at the same time being their greatest joy, to see their students meet and surpass their instructors.

Naruto, around a mouthful of ramen, was eerily reminiscent of his old self. He had gotten stronger, and had changed a little bit, but he was still a boisterous youth with energy to spare, and then some.

“That’s right, Iruka-sempai! Heh, man, I was such a monster! I don’t know how you and old man Third put up with me! Or even you, Kakashi-sensei!”

Kakashi was reading the latest in the Makeout series. He hadn’t changed a bit.

“Well, it wasn’t easy Naruto, but a true teacher can look past the weaknesses of a student in order to harness his true strength. You really have grown...” Kakashi gave up talking, as Naruto was demanding another bowl, and not paying any attention anyway.

I don’t give compliments often, and of course this knucklehead chooses not to listen the one time I DO compliment him. He hasn’t changed THAT much.

“Hey, hey, Pervy Sage!”

Jiraiya shushed Naruto. “Don’t call me that in public, you’ll scare off my research subjects!”

“Yeah, whatever, you dirty old perv. Listen, now that I’ve got the Rasengan down pat, how about teaching me some tricks with Gamabunta?! I mean, if I’m going to be Hokage when Grandma Tsunade finally hangs it up, I’ve got to be really strong, right?”

Naruto’s three teachers exchanged glances. All three gazes said the same thing: SON

Same Old Naruto.

-- (21 monthes)--

A scant month later, Rock Lee, fresh off his promotion to jonin, became one of the first to be able to open seven of the eight gates of chakra. His taijutsu had rivaled that of his sensei, Gai, to the point where they could train together nearly endlessly.

Tenten, while still a chunin, became a weapons instructor at the academy. Shikamaru, while in a teaching position, had discovered that students who received weapons experience before reaching genin level matured faster as Shinobi. The Leaf Village still hadn’t recovered all it’s strength after the Third Hokage’s death, but they were still on the road to recovery nonetheless. More Shinobi would

certainly be welcome. And Ino, to everyone's surprised, agreed with Shikamaru enough to run a pre-academy program for budding Shinobi and kunoichi. She was surprisingly good with children, and now that she had put on a little weight and didn't look like the next gust of wind was going to take her away, she was surprisingly attractive.

Kiba had also been promoted to Jonin. His squad mates, Hinata and Shino, seemed content as Chunin. When asked his opinion, Shino simply said "better a strong chunin than a weak jonin." This was no reflection on Kiba. His actions were rash, but his tracking abilities and natural instincts were impressive by anyone's standards. Coupled with Hinata's Byakugan, and Shino's surprising prowess in combat and quiet wisdom, they were also complimented by Kurenai's genjutsu.

Everyone in the Hidden Leaf had begun to find their place. The fire that the Third Hokage spoke of before he died was indeed alive and burning brightly. It was a veritable paradise for all who dwelled there. In a time of prosperity and peace, little thought was given to the problems of the past, or even the heroism of the Shinobi that had come before.

--(23 months)--

Orochimaru still hadn't grown completely used to his new body. He had returned to his old appearance, and tried to make this body as comfortable as he could. It always took some getting used to when he used his forbidden jutsu to take over another body. But Orochimaru had rapidly grown restless. An egotist, Orochimaru wasn't satisfied with only being alive- he wanted people to know about his glorious return. And, of course, he wanted revenge.

"Lord Orochimaru? It's time for your medication." Kabuto walked into the room, holding out a pill for Orochimaru. Orochimaru's tongue snared it out of his hand. Kabuto used to throw a look of disgust at this, but was so used to it he simply didn't register it anymore.

"Such a foul taste..." Orochimaru commented, though he was smirking. Kabuto knew that something was going on in Orochimaru's head. Had Kabuto not been the one to bring Orochimaru back, he would have been more concerned.

"Without it, your chakra won't completely return. You'll only need these pills for another month, then you'll be at full strength again," Kabuto reminded his master. Orochimaru's face hadn't changed. That smirk always meant something was about to happen.

Of course, I'm the one who has to break the news to him...

"Lord Orochimaru, you inquired about the Kaguya boy..." Kabuto held up a Shinobi card, reading it aloud.

"His potential has maxed out in Genjutsu, while his Ninjutsu is very powerful. Taijutsu is his weakest point, but not by much. Taking into account his second chakra, and his bloodline, the Shikotsu Myaku (Corpse Bone Pathways)...this makes him more dangerous than the Third Hokage. In his prime, the Third would have been stronger, but Ryouko isn't done growing yet..."

Orochimaru finished the bitter pill, his displeasure registering on his pasty-white face.

“Then we shall see to it that the boy never reaches his full potential! The time to kill him is now, before he can fully mature. In the same swoop, I can destroy the Hidden Leaf!” Orochimaru finally revealed what his smirk had been about. Immediately, Kabuto had to speak up; this was too big to just ignore as one of Orochimaru’s ‘schemes’. This went beyond a scheme.

“Lord Orochimaru, that’s suicide! Two of the Sannin live in the Leaf Village, and they have more Shinobi, and those Shinobi are of a high quality. Besides, I’ve further information that the one you aim to destroy no longer resides in the Hidden Leaf...” Kabuto finished and pushed his glasses back into place, higher up on his nose. Apparently, Orochimaru wasn’t impressed with the news.

“Enough, Kabuto! Even if Ryouko isn’t in the village, he will be...ha ha ha, it’s just a matter of leverage. The village he loves so much, that he swore he would protect with every drop of blood, every ounce of sweat...when it begins to buckle under our attack, he’ll come. And then I’ll finally take my revenge on him!”

Kabuto was skeptical. “He DID defeat you, Lord Orochimaru. He was cunning two years ago. If he’s evaded arrest for two years, he must be even smarter and stronger. And what little we know about Ryouko is centered about his study habits. He’s never without a scroll, and his training is endless.”

“Kabuto, do you trust me?” Orochimaru demanded. Kabuto stammered, momentarily tripping over his words, but bowed his head.

“Of course, Lord Orochimaru.”

Orochimaru’s smile widened further yet. “Then you’ll have no problem trusting me. I know the legend of his two swords...or, rather, my two swords. THIS time, he’ll have no annoying snake at his disposal, and the Haruno girl’s ‘Pure Soul Resurrection’ Jutsu will be canceled out by my revision of the Impure Soul Resurrection. While my chakra was returning, I studied, and I’ve learned how to counter it. The advantages that defeated me last time won’t be available to Ryouko.”

Orochimaru got to ‘his’ feet, and walked around, trying to get used to this new body, which was very tall and slender, though it was nearly in his image now. Only the feet still resisted Orochimaru’s jutsu. But it would give in. If the head suffers, so must the hands and feet.

“Two years trapped in that blade, Kabuto...my mind was free...and I put the time to good use. When my chakra returns, the time will be right to make our move on the Hidden Leaf, and therefore, on Ryouko...”

Orochimaru drew the Striking Serpent Blades, smiling at the marvelous metal work. Orochimaru ran his hand down blade, when his fingers suddenly burned. He dropped the sword, but snakes came from the handle and grabbed Orochimaru’s wrist.

“Magnificent...his damn seal still burns my flesh, but even it is fading. Interesting that a cursed seal could break this unknown seal...”

Kabuto looked at the flickering candle in the corner. “Actually, Lord Orochimaru, it took several cursed seals to finally break it. The twelfth seal sacrificed was the one that released you.”

Orochimaru put the swords away. "They're only lives, Kabuto. Lives of inconsequential existence. The only existence that matters is my own. That is why I must destroy my enemies. Don't worry, though, Kabuto- for being by my side, you will be handsomely rewarded. Maybe I'll let you run what remains of the Hidden Leaf. But I warn you now- I will be the one to kill the Kaguya boy. You are not to touch him. Do you understand, Kabuto?"

Kabuto bowed his head in submission and thanks. "I understand, Lord Orochimaru."

Orochimaru smiled again, licking his newest swords with his long tongue. "Very good. Just a month more, Kabuto, and the Hidden Leaf shall fall!"

--

(Friday, the thirteenth day of the 23rd month)

Ryouko arrived in Tanzaku town, ready to try his hand at some gambling, and even some good sake. He had lived so carefully, the thought that he may be slowly dying from some damn disease really bugged him. As Ryouko stripped to enter the hot spring, he looked at his hand while pulling off a glove.

Still irritated...damn it. Maybe the hot spring will help, they're supposed to have healing abilities...

Ryouko slid into the warm water, thankful that he was alone. Turning twenty-two in twelve days time hadn't given him less modesty. Although travel had made his body perfectly fit without being showoffy, Ryouko still never even took off his shirt without the utmost caution.

My birthday has done little to soothe my nerves...twenty-two...one year closer to my body quitting on me...if I even have that long left. I haven't used the Shikotsuymaku, but having that disease inside me is unnerving. Is this something I would have passed on to my children, or my wife? That matters not...I don't have either, and I'm certain I never will.

Ryouko looked at his hand again. The red had stopped spreading, and was receding a little. Not bad for Friday the Thirteenth. For some reason, that reminded Ryouko that it had been almost two years since he had left the Hidden Leaf.

Eighteen days and I'll have been gone for two years. I'm really starting to miss that place...

Ryouko had to shove those thoughts aside. Two people had just come in and, while not recognizing Ryouko, had an interesting story to tell...

6 - Return to the Hidden Leaf

“Have you heard the news, Hiromaru?”

“No, Boku, not this news, at any rate. The last I heard, he had fled...”

Ryouko sat silently in the steam-filled water while two men talked. One was short and balding, while the other was tall but thin and had thick black hair on his head. Something urged him to be wary of this conversation and what was said. For once, having everyone reason to follow his intuition, Ryouko closed his eyes as though asleep to augment his hearing.

“I’ve heard that...he has risen again...” the one called ‘Boku’ said in a hushed tone.

“He? He, who?” Hiromaru asked, not sure what his friend meant.

“Orochimaru. The Third of the Sannin. The one fell by the Kaguya boy, from the Hidden Leaf.”

Ryouko’s eyes opened, despite his plans to just listen.

No...it can’t be! How could he have escaped! He was sealed, all but dead! Ryouko forced himself to calm down and listen to the rest of the story.

“No shoot? That kid had better watch his back. I mean, getting lucky against Orochimaru once...” Hiromaru muttered.

“I heard that he was...destined...” Boku continued. “Something about a scroll from the leader of the Hidden Leaf...No one knows exactly how Orochimaru ‘died’ either...I don’t think he was human enough to die...”

Hiromaru whistled. “Wow. This is bad news. Even if our Village isn’t targeted...Orochimaru’s gonna be out for blood!”

Boku bowed his head. “There was one last thing I heard...about the moon. My cousin lived in Otogakure. He said the moon turned blood red. The Kaguya boy is the one who rescued his family. My cousin watched some of the fight as he ran, and he said it seemed as though the boy moved as though not of this world...so fluid, he was untouchable by Orochimaru’s demons. (Boku shakes his head) I can’t say I’d care to see any of this, no matter how capable the boy is...”

“Man. He’s nearly twenty-two, isn’t he? If he survived. All I heard was that he disappeared from his home village two years ago...” Hiromaru hadn’t paid as much attention. Maybe if he ignored Orochimaru, Orochimaru wouldn’t bother him?

“That’s true. No one’s heard about him, save for some scattered people who claim to have been helped by him. More likely his ghost than him, if he tangled with Orochimaru. Surely if Orochimaru died,

the Kaguya boy had to have given his life as well..."

Ryouko couldn't take anymore. Using a silent transformation, he appeared to be an older man, decidedly unthreatening.

"I beg your pardon...I overheard the slightest bit of your conversation. I had hoped you might include me..." Ryouko bowed.

"And what interest have you in this topic, Elder?" Boku asked in a rather accusatory way. Ryouko made sure to smile.

"I was not always old, young man. I once valued bravery on the battlefield as much as I valued my life. In my waning years, to hear such a story...One can't deny that Orochimaru is fascinating..."

"Boku, let the Elder join, he will harm no-one!" Hiromaru nodded and smiled. "Boku was just explaining what he had heard. It sounds almost like a hellish fairy tale, does it not?"

"Oh, indeed. No doubt that was part of my fascination. My son was claimed by the dark arts..." Ryouko said, hoping that this would earn him enough merit, or at least sympathy, to hear more. Boku, thrilled by the attention, continued immediately.

"I've heard that Orochimaru has returned, and is wielding two swords of untold power. Not the Kusanagi, but two swords forged long ago. It's said..." Boku looked around, to make sure that there was no-one else around to overheard. "...It's said that the swords bring forth a giant snake summon, among other powers. There is said to be only one sword in existence that can brave the two..."

Without thinking, Ryouko said "Suitoru..."

The two men looked over at him, shocked.

"How did you know, Elder?" Boku wanted to know. Ryouko forced himself to look rueful.

"My golden years were spent in pursuit of that blade. I fear it may never be found. I dedicated my life to it, only coming to this town for my final years, be they one or one hundred!" Ryouko added the last part with a chuckle.

"If you'll excuse me, my old bones are beginning to cook in here!" Ryouko bowed to the two men, then exited the bath.

-

Ryouko dressed quickly, and, after a moment's thought, put on his monk's robe. But the robe had been hurt in combat throughout the years. To augment it's protection, Ryouko added his sleeveless trench coat, a black one with the Kaguya symbol on the back, tucked under his robe. If the crest were seen, it would give away who he was. That left one more thing, though Ryouko couldn't access it yet.

Suitoru...the absorption blade...had the samurai's son not passed it on to me as a gift, I would hold no cards against Orochimaru. Without my kekkaigenkai, this will be an uphill battle. I'm

positive that Orochimaru will return to the Leaf to destroy me. So I must do it...I must swallow my pride and return after some last preparation.

--

In the baths, Boku suddenly bent over, as if ill.

“Boku? What’s wrong, what happened?!” Hiromaru waded over to his friend, shocked to see his skin peeling off.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised!”

Hiromaru nearly swallowed his tongue in shock. That voice..

“Orochimaru?!”

Orochimaru, who had exited Boku’s body, smiled. “That’s right. How else would I know so much about...me. Or my ‘death’. Hiromaru, was it? Of the Amakatsu clan?”

Hiromaru nodded and bowed. But it wouldn’t save him this day.

“I’m afraid I said more than I should have. Don’t worry...you’ll get a second chance at life!”

Hiromaru’s head rolled away, as Orochimaru held two familiar swords.

“The end is near, Ryouko Kaguya! That pitiful disguise didn’t fool me! We WILL clash once more, but this time, it is YOU history will remember as the failure!”

--

(Two Years)

Ryouko opened his eyes. He had done all he could to heal himself, but his life line remained shorter than his love line, and inflamed. The red had dulled, but not disappeared. As the old woman said, when Ryouko used the Shikotsumyaku, the red enlarged. No cures were to be found, though at the same time, Ryouko wasn’t going to die from the disease unless he used his kekkaigenkai.

It’s been two years today...it’s time to return to the Hidden Leaf, and warn them. I already know they won’t believe me...damn it...Why am I tired...There’s too much left to do...I cannot rest until this is over!

Ryouko took off at top speed, reaching the nearby Leaf gates in just shy of an hour. Ryouko had camped just far enough away so as not to draw himself, but not so far that he couldn’t be in the Hidden Leaf before it fell.

It’s presumptuous of me to think they’ll just fall if I’m not among their ranks...but this prophecy has concerned me from the start, I need to assume the worst...And deal with the worst.

Tsunade...Perhaps I need the aid of a friend...there remains only one who can influence the Lady...

Ryouko zipped past the gate guards, who barely noticed him.

“Always in a rush, they’ve got so many missions these days!”

“Yeah, I almost wish we got some missions ourselves, aside from sitting here...”

--

“My Lady!” Sakura ran into the room, looking scared as hell.

“Sakura? What is it?!” Tsunade asked. Shizune perked up as well.

“It’s Ryouko! He’s back! Sasuke is fighting him right now!”

“He’s...returned? Damn it! I’m going!” Tsunade started to get up, but Shizune pushed her back down.

“No, my Lady. You and him don’t respond well to each other. If he’s come here, you know very well what it must mean! Put your hatred aside and work with him! I’ll talk to him. Sakura, you see that she stays here!”

Shizune ran off, while Sakura and Shizune stood in stunned silence.

--

“HYAGH!”

Sasuke leapt high in the air and aimed a Chidori down. Ryouko dodged out of the way, cursing the fact his cover had been blown so quickly.

“I’m not here to fight you!” Ryouko shouted as he bounced off a building, twisting in the air. Sasuke jumped up after him, but Ryouko spun once more and punched Sasuke, sending him into the hard street below. Ryouko landed kneeling.

“Master Ryouko!” Shizune skidded in between the two, ending the brief fight. By now, several people had gathered.

“It’s...it’s really you, Master Ryouko!”

“Shizune...it’s been a long time. But I can’t wait any longer, I must see Tsunade! It’s a matter of life or death for this village! What we now face, I can’t bear alone, at least not while protecting innocents!”

“(koff)No, you don’t!” Sasuke ran past Shizune again. Ryouko was forced to kick in self-defense, and he finally lost his temper.

“Damn it, listen to me! I’m here to help!” Ryouko shouted. “Without knowing what I know, this village

will fall! Damn it!" Ryouko had to jump again, as Sasuke tried to sweep his legs. Ryouko bit his thumb and ran a length of blood across his hand.

"Summoning Jutsu! Taleo, come forth!"

Taleo was a hawk the size of a human. His majestic wings spread, and the giant bird became airborne. Ryouko stood on top of him until he was at a safe height. But a chain wrapped around Ryouko's arm.

"What?! Only one person I know could have gotten me at such a height...Tenten..."

Indeed, Ryouko looked down to see the feisty young female pulling on the chain. The years hadn't changed her very much, save for her growing into a lovely young woman. Ryouko weighed his options- he risked injury if he pulled against the chain, either to himself or Tenten. Against that option, Ryouko ended the summoning jutsu and fell to the ground, landing crouched so as not to damage his knees. With a few moves, Tenten had wrapped the chain around Ryouko. He didn't fight against it for the same reasons as before.

"If I am bound by chain, will you listen?" Ryouko asked quietly. Everyone knew full well he could escape if he needed to.

"So you've really come back to help us?" Tenten asked quietly. Ryouko didn't know if this was good or not. He and Tenten had always been friends, but Tenten's idol had been Tsunade the last Ryouko knew. Tenten aspired to be the strongest kunoichi ever, and Tsunade was the bar she held herself to, at least until two years ago.

"I have."

Tenten walked closer, pulling the chain tight as she moved. Her hand suddenly seized Ryouko's chin firmly, but not hard.

"It really is you...Come with me, then I'll escort you Lady Tsunade. Shizune-sensei, please come."

--

Tenten opened the door to what Ryouko guessed was her family's house.

"Inside, quickly!" she urged, pushing him inside. Shizune hurried in.

Tenten looked at Ryouko, her cheeks turning red. Out of nowhere, she kissed Ryouko. Not just kissed, but more or less made out with him, to his surprise. Amazingly, Shizune didn't seem shocked, as if two people who hadn't seen each other in two years, and had no previous relationship, suddenly locking lips was an everyday thing. Not that Ryouko didn't find Tenten attractive, and vice versa.

Tenten relinquished her lip lock, and smiled at Ryouko.

"I'm really glad you came back..."

“So I see...” Ryouko said, still shocked.

“Tenten, you can have him later, this is life or death!” Shizune reminded Tenten. Ryouko looked at Tenten, noticing that she had changed her dress again, to where she wore her Chinese-styled vest, though it was black with pink ties now.

“Master Ryouko, what’s happened?” Shizune urged.

“Orochimaru, in a word. He’s come back. I don’t know how, but he escaped my seal, one way or the other. He’s coming to the Hidden Leaf. I need everyone hidden, only I can fight him!”

Shizune and Tenten exchanged glances. Ryouko struggled against the chain, but Tenten pulled it tight.

“Stay still. We’re going to Lady Tsunade, and the only way we’ll get you to her is if you’re in chains.” That explained why Tenten had pulled the chains tighter. She and Shizune had obviously been planning.

“How did you know I would ever return here?” Ryouko asked, craning his neck to look at the two kunoichi.

Shizune looked away awkwardly, but produced a scroll.

“You dropped this when you left, Master Ryouko. In your apartment, two years ago. I didn’t know what it was, only that it meant you. This prophecy...I don’t know who made it, but it must mean you!”

Shizune recited it:

*The evil lord slain, the legend, apart from his village,
wanders, seeking a purpose, yet claiming none.
As the years pass, the slain lord, repugnant, froth of evil,
Shall return, to once again engage in mortal combat
With his foe, the legend who has forsaken his world.
The battlefield will be torn with an unholy power, and
Only the selfless blood sacrifice of the legend may quell
The Blood Moon.
The legend alone may end this threat. Any who battle alongside him
Will be lost, should the legend’s last hope fall.
Should the legend fall, all hope will be lost...forever.*

Ryouko felt himself weaken. He was suddenly reminded of his illness. What if it WASN'T the Shikotsumyaku that was causing it? Was he dying regardless?

“Shizune...Every precaution must be taken against this threat. Prophecy aside...my time may be short...” Ryouko pulled off his glove. He had put a flexible, black metal glove on his left hand, to hide the mark. Now, he showed it to Shizune, instructing her to look at the lines. The dawning realization hit Shizune.

“You have to talk to Lady Tsunade, Ryouko! Put your differences aside, and let her heal you! She

doesn't know of this prophecy. But there's no choice- she has to know to prepare the village, and to heal you."

"You're right. But release me long enough to perform a summoning, please. I have an urgent message that I must send. Two of them, actually. Dual summoning Jutsu!"

Holly and Taleo appeared next to Ryouko. Taleo had compressed himself to the size of a normal hawk for travel.

"This one, for the Rain. This one, for the other legend. Please, hurry!" Ryouko urged both summons. Holly ran off, not even making a wisecrack about Ryouko in a dark room with two cute girls and a chain. Taleo flew off as fast as he could, soaring majestically into the blue sky above.

"Alright...I'm ready." Ryouko strapped his arms to his sides, and let Tenten wind the chain around him again. This time, when she got close to fasten the chain, Ryouko caught her by surprise with a soft, brushing kiss, full on the lips.

Shizune smiled at the gesture.

You've grown, Ryouko. I know you always loved Sakura, but it takes a big man to accept defeat and move on. As far as losing goes, I think this is one time you've come out on top. Even if you won't say it, you've wanted a kunoichi of your own. You forsake your dreams two years ago, Ryouko. Don't forsake them this time. Legend or not, you deserve something better...

--

Tsunade immediately stood up. She had gathered her top jonin. The rumors had been true. Ryouko was led in by Tenten.

"So you've come crawling back, I see..." Tsunade began.

"No, I came of my own free will to warn you...We need to work together if the Hidden Leaf is to survive!"

Tsunade reared back and hit Ryouko. Maybe it was the travel, or maybe it was just anger, but Ryouko escaped the chains and charged. The jonin mobbed him. All he could do was loosen his glove and flick it at Tsunade. The metal cracked off her forehead.

"You little bastard! Kill him!" Tsunade ordered.

"Do it, and I die with him!" Shizune shouted, holding a kunai to her neck. Tenten had done the same thing.

"That's right! Master Ryouko isn't the criminal here!" Tenten added. She took out the scroll that prophesized what was going to happen. Tsunade looked deflated. She made a movement with her hand, and the jonin let go.

"So he's come back...Evil that strong never goes away so easily..."

“You should know! You’re damned evil yourself!” Ryouko snarled. “I haven’t forgotten, two years ago! You flaunted my failure in my face, and you mocked my achievements! You wouldn’t acknowledge me as worthy of your trust! Better Lord Third should be resurrected than you lead your village! THAT’S why I left! You’re killing my home!”

Sakura put a hand on Ryouko’s shoulder, but he stepped away from it, his voice darker.

“And you...you knew very well what you meant to me. You chose the apprentice of my enemy...I lied to you when I said you had nothing to do with my departure. You and your teacher EMBODIED my reasoning!” Ryouko thundered. “You both spat in my face! After the loyalty I gave, and after asking nothing in return, you two were fair-weather friends. In my hour of need, my DARKEST HOUR, WHERE WERE YOU?! YOU WERE THE CAUSE!”

Tenten and Shizune rushed to Ryouko’s side. His face was beet red from all but admitting he had loved Sakura. But, to Tenten’s relief (and shame), she was happy to hear Ryouko renounce any relationship with Sakura.

Tsunade was quiet, and Sakura was near tears. Finally, Tsunade spoke.

“What do you need us to do? If Orochimaru is attacking, and only you can fight him...We’ll do whatever we need to! Just tell us!”

Ryouko nodded, somehow relieved after the outburst.

“Anyone who can’t fight at a chunin level needs to hide, quickly. Anyone with a weak stomach, or a weak heart, they need to hide as well. Only Sakura has seen a battle such as this, and this time, it’ll be worse. Sakura also knows a counter jutsu, but the jutsu will take time. I researched it, and she was lucky to perform it the first time. The “Pure Soul Resurrection” worked because she was in a purified temple that also contained bodies. The bodies need to be protected from evil, and the jutsu must take place in such a purified place. That’s the only way it will work, and there’s no time for that. I will be the front line by myself. Should I become swarmed, or fall, all of you will have to fight back and drive Orochimaru away. That, or give up the village, and award him my corpse.”

Tsunade held out her hand. “Fine. We’ll shake on this. You’re a man of your word, Ryouko. No matter how much I hate you, that is fact.”

Ryouko held out his hand. Tsunade shook it, then snatched his other hand.

“So Shizune was correct...Ryouko, do NOT do anything to make your condition worsen. There’s a chance that I can still save you, but you CANNOT play with such a disease. Luckily, it’s confined to you, so if you die, it will die with you. Even if you were to have children, it’s not likely they would inherit the kekkaigenkai causing this disease. You and Kimimaro were of the same generation, and this disease seems to skip generations.”

Ryouko withdrew his hand, looking as though someone had poured acid on it. Shizune and Tenten were the only two on his side of the room. Ryouko nodded, and walked out the door, with Shizune and Tenten

behind him.

Sakura was being comforted by Tsunade. She felt like the worst person in the world for what she had done to Ryouko. But there was no turning back the clock. She could only hope time would heal all wounds.

--

If this is my last night alive...I've made my existence worth it to others, but not to myself...I've been twenty-two for six days. Tomorrow will be the first day after two years since I've left...Orochimaru must have known, and picked the date to satisfy his own ego...

Ryouko was going to stay in a hidden shed on Tenten's parent's property. He laid out all his weapons, and even set to work with a hammer to improve on his metal glove. A few minutes before midnight, Tenten checked in with him. Ryouko was laying on his tatami mat, looking...defeated?

"Fate has already decided the life I lead..." Ryouko looked up suddenly, finally registering Tenten's presence. He stood up and bowed.

"Forgive me, I was...lost in thought."

Tenten didn't say anything. She looked like she was going to pop if she blushed any harder. Ryouko, being clueless, wasn't sure why she was blushing.

"Ryouko...I'm sorry, Master, Master Ryouko..."

Ryouko held her hand. " 'Ryouko' is fine, Tenten, you've known me for a long time. What's on your mind?"

Tenten took his other hand and looked him in the eyes. Before he could stop himself, Ryouko kissed Tenten again, with more passion. This kiss lasted a longer time than the first one. Since they were both adults, the kiss was a little less innocent, but it wasn't lusty by any means.

Tenten and Ryouko moved apart simultaneously. Embarrassed suddenly, Tenten picked up Ryouko's weapons and turned them over in her hands, growing excited.

"I could help you with these, make them better! Weapons are my thing!" Tenten stored the tools she needed in this very shed, so it worked out nicely. "Oh, that's right! Something came for you from Sunagakure!"

It turned out to be a new set of clothes. A black shirt with an old-fashioned drawstring near the chest was first, followed by a new robe with the Kaguya crest. This robe was sleeveless, or more like a trench coat. It fit perfectly. Attached to the sleeve was a note:

Best of luck to you. My brother and sister are confident in you, so I'll follow their lead and trust you to keep out world safe.

Gaara

“Must have been Temari’s suggestion, no way Kankuro or Gaara would have thought of this...” Ryouko mused with a grave smile. Tenten nodded her approval at the shirt.

“It makes you look handsome. But, handsome won’t do you much good unless you have a plan...do you?” Tenten asked earnestly.

“I do.”

“And do you think you’re going to die?” Tenten asked with more trepidation in her voice.

“It’s likely,” Ryouko admitted, “But don’t worry, my life won’t come easy, IF he gets it. Okay?”

Tenten shrugged. “Yeah. You’re doing what you have to...”

Ryouko started to say something else, but he felt it. Right there. Boom. Without explaining, he ran to the door of the shed and opened it.

“The moon...it’s red. Orochimaru is here. Go, hurry, let everyone know the plans, I will deal Orochimaru myself!” Ryouko pulled on his metal glove, his normal glove, his arm guards, and grabbed all his scrolls.

“This time we play for keeps, Orochimaru...”

“Hold on! For luck, Ryouko!” Tenten said, kissing Ryouko. Her eyes grew tearful as she watched Ryouko sprint away, in for the fight of his life.

Don’t die...

--

Orochimaru stood on top of his giant snake. Several Leaf Villagers had already died, and their bodies had paid the blood tribute he needed for the most forbidden jutsu of all.

“Infinite Damned Soul Resurrection!”

The Leaf ground twisted and heaved, bring forth hell’s minions. Orochimaru laughed as most of the brave, but not stupid, Leaf villagers ran for it. Orochimaru laughed even harder as Ryouko ran right up the center of the chaos.

“Go! Destroy the prophesized one!” Orochimaru commanded. The souls all turned on Ryouko.

“IT’S BEEN TWO YEARS, OROCHIMARU! ONLY ONE OF US WILL LEAVE ALIVE THIS DAY! THE HIDDEN LEAF SHALL NOT FALL!”

Ryouko whipped out a scroll. But it wasn’t just ANY scroll. It was a purified scroll of protection. In his

own blood, Ryouko had written his name, thereby activating the scroll. Using it like a whip, Ryouko cleared the immediate area around him of the damned souls all reaching for him. But there was still swarms, and even Ryouko was getting swamped. An ancient sword hit him high up on the side. Grunting in pain, Ryouko held the sword in place while he ducked a spear. As the spear crashed down again, it cut the sword's wielder's arm off. On the third strike, Ryouko had retrieved the sword and blocked the spear. He kicked the demon, knocking it away, while sliding his sword down and cutting off the demon's hand. Ryouko stabbed with the spear. But even WITH weapons, it seemed a hopeless battle...

7 - Twelve-Hour Standoff

Ryouko looked up at Orochimaru, perched on top of some monstrous snake. The sight sickened him, although that might have been the rotting flesh that was grabbing at him.

“Vile bastard demon! If your problem is with me, let it die with me, and leave the Hidden Leaf alone!” Ryouko managed to call out as he fought wave after wave of demons and zombies. The worst part was that most were wearing Leaf Headbands.

It had all been part of Orochimaru’s plot. He had taken his resurrection in such a way that the Hidden Leaf was psychologically absent. The jonin and most experienced Shinobi were seeing their comrades come back to life in a cruel and merciless way, and then cut down again, eventually, by Ryouko. It paralyzed the living to see their comrades live and die a second time. And the children...the young genin and chunin were scared. It was their worst nightmares come to life. They could do nothing but shake, and wait until hell came to them.

Ryouko was doing all he could to make sure it wouldn’t happen. He heard two young chunin screaming. Without thinking about it, Ryouko reached back and pulled out a section of his spine. He threw it, cracking it like a whip, and wrapping it around the three demons that had attacked the chunin. Ryouko pulled them in, but felt his heart suddenly slow down, albeit very slightly. After battling away a demon, Ryouko looked at his hand. Though it was covered by a glove, Ryouko knew what had happened.

My life line shortened...I used the Shikotsumyaku and furthered the disease...I’m not at an advanced stage yet, but I’ve got to avoid using the bloodline again!

--

Tsunade was being tended to by Sakura, while Sasuke was patrolling in front of them. But Tsunade and Sasuke were suddenly trumped. The ground twisted and heaved, and their greatest nightmares grew before them. Their biggest desires, their unreachable dreams.

The Uchiha Clan. Dan. Nowaki. All resurrected, as part of Orochimaru’s jutsu.

“Nowaki...Dan...” Tsunade saw their rotting corpses starting to heal, until they were almost living again. All except their eyes. They were cold and lifeless. But Tsunade couldn’t help herself. She reached out a hand to touch them.

“No, My Lady!” Shizune flew in from out of nowhere, spitting her needles, trying to at least divert the monster’s attention. No success. Their corpses were a strategic part of Orochimaru’s plan.

Sasuke was having an equally difficult time. “Mother...Father...Auntie and Uncle...” Everyone was back! And there was Mom, Sasuke thought, going to give her son a hug. Sasuke, in a rare moment of weakness opened his arms up to the embrace.

Mother...

CRACK!

Sasuke and Tsunade opened their eyes to see Ryouko sailing in, his flying heel kick destroying the walking corpses. Already splattered with blood from a number of injuries, and cut numerous times, Ryouko landed hard, panting for a second. He started to take off again, but Sasuke grabbed him and wrestled him to the ground, pinning him down and raising his fist to strike.

“What the hell? Sasuke, get a grip on yourself! That wasn’t really your mother! Not the way you remember her! She was going to kill you!” Ryouko didn’t have time for this. He couldn’t fight Sasuke now. If he did, he’d have no choice but to kill him to save the lives of hundreds of others. He was the only one in any position to defeat Orochimaru.

Lightning cracked the sky. Rain began to downpour. Sasuke thought back to the day his brother had killed everyone. It all seemed to be in black and white for Sasuke. And it happened again and again, a continuous loop of torture. It was only when something struck him across the face that the loop ended. Sasuke got up, and opened his eyes. Ryouko’s dark eyes were staring at him.

“There’s no time for this, Sasuke. Get a hold of yourself, and protect your girl.”

Ryouko successfully took off this time. While in the air, four of the corpses jumped on all sides of Ryouko. His boot lashed out and his one. That had the unfortunate side-effect of opening him up to attack from behind. Ryouko covered his head and heart, hoping to avoid a critical strike.

WHIZZ! CRACK!

A chain, weighted at one end, flew up from the ground and destroyed Ryouko’s attacker. That gave Ryouko enough time to roundhouse-kick the demon to his right, then throw it’s severed top half into the demon on the left. The fall destroyed them further, while Ryouko landed on a roof. He glanced down with a smile at his savior.

“Hang in there, Ryouko!” Tenten shouted up to him. Her weapons scroll was the salvation of a group of families that had taken shelter in the most stable building they could find, and one with only one entrance: The Academy.

Ryouko’s face turned grim. Some demon that had managed to get up next to him went crashing to the muddy ground below.

“Tenten, use this seal!” Ryouko bit his thumb, forcing more blood out, and quickly wrote his name on his second Scroll of Purification. He only had one left, but even if there was only one safe-haven in town, that many lives would be safe.

Tenten caught the scroll that fell down to her from the rain. Understanding what it was, she urged everyone back as she shut the door, then placed the scroll across it, two kunai holding it in place.

Satisfied, Ryouko jumped down from the building, thinking of another defense. They could get light in the

Academy using Fire Jutsu, and since Ryouko could open the door, he could find more survivors and put them in their safely. Chiefly, the top two medic-nin would be ideal.

“Earth Style: Mud Wall!” Ryouko yelled over the Thunder. The Academy was naturally suited for defense, being surrounded by Mountain on two sides, along with a thick stone wall all around it, and the sturdy Hokage Mansion on it’s other side. Ryouko’s mud wall added to the defense. As an afterthought, Ryouko also summoned his Water Dragon to create a moat of sorts, while Shadow Clones dug trenches to be filled. Ryouko left that to them and took off again, aiming to put the stake in the heart of ‘Dracula’, in the form of Orochimaru.

--

Orochimaru couldn’t believe that two years could change someone so much.

“It seems as if the Kaguya boy is truly legendary, not just in name, but in form. Kabuto, oversee further destruction of the Hidden Leaf. It’s going to take a legend to kill a legend, after all!”

Kabuto had to object. “Lord Orochimaru, the prophecy states that only Ryouko can defeat you! It’s too soon to put yourself at risk! Let his tire himself out by coming to you. You’ll have the satisfaction of slaying him either way, won’t you?”

Kabuto’s tone of voice led on that he knew something Orochimaru hadn’t outright told him. This always amused Orochimaru, and he prompted Kabuto to continue with his assessment.

“Go on, Kabuto. Tell me what you’ve figured out...”

Kabuto adjusted his spectacles as he looked down. That was a habit of his; when he started to think hard, he looked down, adjusted his glasses, and assessed the situation rationally.

“Those zombies aren’t after Ryouko himself. At least, not to kill. If I had to guess...I’d say you instructed them to destroy the Leaf Village. And Ryouko is getting in the way. They aren’t aiming for him per say, he’s just a problem, and they’re trying to solve that problem.”

Orochimaru’s signature smirk appeared as he licked his lips with his freakishly long tongue.

“You never cease to amaze me, Kabuto. You catch on so quickly, and you read between the lines. I also give you credit- though it irritates me, you speak up when it’s in my best interests for you to do so.”

--

Ryouko knew he couldn’t do this forever. He changed his priority from ‘destruction’ to ‘saving’. Any person he could find, and group. Anyone, anything, he led them to the academy.

Eventually, that included Sasuke, Sakura, Tsunade, Shizune, and Naruto. Both Ino-Shika-Cho trios were outside the academy, acting as guards. They rotated in with groups of jonin. Kakashi and Gai, Asuma and Kurenai, Genma and Raina, Ibikki and Anko. At least two of the duos were on duty all the time. But the defenses Ryouko had built seemed to be close to airtight. Only a handful of the undead souls got

through. But gradually, Ryouko's friends became aware that Ryouko's mission was nothing short of suicide.

"He's taken away anyone who could have helped him, Kakashi. Shouldn't we..." Gai nodded towards the outside of the barricade. To his surprise, Kakashi shook his head.

"No, Gai. It's my first instinct, too. But we don't know what we're dealing with. Ryouko DOES know, and he's defeated the demons once before. We have to trust him, and protect the Hidden Leaf in the way he thinks best. It's the best strategic move. If the Academy is lost, the Hidden Leaf is lost."

Gai and Kakashi both fell into a silence that spoke volumes. That silence lasted until their partners, Genma and Raina, two Tokubetsu Jonin, made their way over. Genma and Raina were both below Gai and Kakashi on the proverbial food chain in the Hidden Leaf, but had grown much, much stronger with each battle they had fought. Both had taken the Leaf's near-destruction during the chunin exam years ago, with Orochimaru's first attack, personally. They had felt helpless; weak and unable to defend their village. They had trained incredibly hard in between their regular missions, and were eager to prove their mettle. With the battle going into its twelfth hour, and the full moon turning completely red, despite Ryouko's best efforts, they had to question even their superiors.

"Kakashi-sensei? How long are we going to let Ryouko go this alone? It's suicide for him, you have to know that! So why are all of us standing by and letting him do this?"

Raini, normally quiet and reserved, had to ask. He had been next to the Third Hokage just before Orochimaru's attack. He had been taken out of the picture by two kunai thrown by some of Orochimaru's goons, and had only just survived. It made his itch for a match, even if his opponents were demons from hell who clawed their way back to life and didn't want to go back.

Kakashi looked over to Raina. Gai was starting to get emotional, and wouldn't be any help. So Kakashi tried to phrase it in the easiest way he could.

"Well...it's a matter of fate. Ryouko's fate is tied to the Hidden Leaf's fate. There's a good chance that if one dies, the other will...but Ryouko's fate is also tied to Orochimaru's. The First Hokage foresaw the first disaster Orochimaru would create with this new jutsu, and foretold of a hero that would protect us. That was Ryouko. After he left, two years ago, there was a scroll found in his apartment. No one is quite sure WHO wrote it, only that it says that, basically, Ryouko has to pull off another victory and slay Orochimaru."

Asuma and Kurenai joined the group, followed by Ibikki and Anko. It was time to switch, although everyone seemed to want to linger and talk. Finally, Ibikki said something horrifying.

"In the Chunin exams, my test is designed to see if students can take information without getting caught. At the end, I always explain to them that you can't always trust information, sometimes it's better to work blind..."

Anko cut in. "What are you getting at, Ibikki?"

Ibikki looked absolutely horrifying in the red moonlight and lightning. "I'm getting at this: We don't know

WHO wrote that document. I suggest we get it from Ryouko when he comes back, and take a careful look. We're all trained to read the meaning with the meaning. Maybe there's another meaning in that scroll, and a clue as to who left it."

Asuma nervously exhaled; he had gone through two packs of cigarettes in twelve hours. Intense situations like this either made him smoke like a chimney, or stop smoking altogether. When the Third had died, Asuma had stopped. This time, he was chain-smoking.

"Ibikki has a point. We might be dealing with a dual problem here. Ryouko might be working just as blind as the rest of us."

Kurenai closed her eyes, looking tired. "He's still legendary, isn't he? You all saw Lady Tsunade, she's in no shape to lead us. Ryouko is really the only one who's faced Orochimaru like this."

Gai shook his head. "No, he's not. In his report, Sakura had a large hand in what happened."

"I read that, too. But she didn't face Orochimaru herself, aside from being captured. And besides that, she might not be up to the task," Kakashi added. His words were a little cryptic. Only Ibikki picked up on what he meant.

"I see...Ryouko has been by himself for two years. Every day has been life or death for him, and his heart has hardened enough to kill. Sakura has been the Hokage's aid, and while not lacking skill...her heart isn't cold enough..."

Kakashi nodded to Ibikki's statement. "And Naruto...he still doesn't have the demon fox under control, he can't be trusted alone. Right now, for all intents and purposes- Ryouko is the Hokage."

Asuma voiced his agreement next. "He's right. Kinda funny that he's come back after how he was treated. I mean, we ALL knew about him and Sakura. It took guts to give her up to make her happy, and even more guts to come here and face Tsunade."

In the air, a hawk screamed overhead, gently depositing another survivor. This one wasn't injured. Seconds later, another came crashing down from the sky. It was the second one that attracted the attention.

"That boy...the sole protégé of the Kaguya legend..."

--

"Kantai! Are you alright?!"

Kantai was a pretty girl, roughly sixteen years old. Blond hair flowing freely behind her, she nodded shyly up at the boy who had been her protector. She hadn't met him before now, when he fought off demon after demon rescuing her with only a sword. But he used it as a master, making every move efficient and lethal to the enemies. She had hurt her leg, and this boy had bought her time to heal her leg. She was a trained medic-nin, and had been helping her family when the demons attacked.

“Thank you so much,” Kantai said with a bow. “May I ask your name?”

The boy was strange, but handsome, in a way. Long black hair fell over his shoulders into a ponytail. One eye was black, the other was grey. Thought sixteen, the boy looked younger, but acted older. Wearing a brown $\frac{3}{4}$ length coat, he introduced himself.

“Katsuyori Akamadori,” he said, offering her a hand up. She took it gently, noticing that the tough-as-nails warrior blushed.

“Katsuyori, I have you to thank for my life. But, please, if I may ask one more request of you...why does your name have a familiar ring? I can't help but feel as though I know your name from somewhere...” Kantai's blue eyes searched Katsuyori's dark right eye.

His left eye...he was born blind in that eye...the retina won't function. But with surgery...

“My name is known only because of the identity of my sensei...” Katsuyori looked out to the battlefield. “Two years ago, I was the only one who knew of Ryouko's desire to leave. I was his student. He took me when no one else would, and taught me the way of the ninja AND the way of the samurai.”

Kantai was intrigued. “You were taught by Ryouko Kaguya? Wait...I remember you now! Four years ago! We were in adjacent hospital beds! You were there for a check, to complete your...adoption?”

Katsuyori looked so rueful that Kantai regretted bringing this up. But soon, Katsuyori's face lit up.

“Yeah. Forgive me, I didn't mean to make you regret your words. I was just thinking about my foster parents. My Mother is alive, thankfully, I brought her here earlier. My father...it's too bad he made it. That horrible drunk, beating my mother. Until Ryouko stepped in as my guardian. He was the first friend I made after coming here, and he even rescued me from the Mist Village. He lent me his strength, and asked nothing in return. He's helped me become who I need to be...”

Katsuyori closed one brown-leather covered fist, his other hand straying to the sword in his belt.

“The Mist...you mean, the one in the history books at the academy, with the name blacked out?” Kantai wanted to know. Katsuyori's good eye met her gaze.

“The very same. The establishment has tried to discredit sensei any way they can. Or, rather, Tsunade. I've only stayed in this village because it's what Ryouko-sensei would have wanted...”

Katsuyori looked out at the giant mud wall, as if that would show him something.

“I have to go. It was nice meeting you, Kantai. If you're up to it, I know we're short on medic-nin's...”

Kantai was surprised; she had been lost in thought about her handsome savior. “Oh, right! Certainly! What about you, Katsuyori?”

Katsuyori had drawn his sword and was leaping over the mud wall. “I've got to help sensei!”

Kantai watched him go, feeling a small surge of something in her chest. Hope? No, that wasn't it. Kantai had never felt it before, but it was actually a growing feeling of love. It wasn't every day you were saved by a handsome boy who was the student of a legend.

Kind...charming...and he's a hard worker. I'll have to make it a point to get to know Katsuyori better...

Not surprisingly, Katsuyori's thoughts were similar about the cute, strong, talented young woman he had just met. Somehow, meeting her made him that much more determined. Katsuyori heard his name and looked down. Upon seeing it was one of his sensei's instructors, he leapt down.

"Ibikki? How can I help?" Katsuyori wanted to know. Being a jonin himself, Katsuyori didn't need to add the -sensei suffix.

"Get the second prophecy scroll off your teacher when you see him. It might contain something we need to know. Knowing Ryouko, he's memorized that scroll already. Tell him it's me asking, and that Lady Tsunade won't see it."

"Understood." Katsuyori ran off at top speed to find Ryouko. That shouldn't be too hard, and it would be even easier from the rooftops.

--

Ryouko ducked again, then leapt as an ancient bo swung at him. The two demons were double-teaming him; or trying to. Ryouko kept dodging. With those bo's, he just couldn't get in a good shot, and he was conserving all the chakra and weapons he could. But dodging was getting old. Just as he was going to make his move:

SCHWINGG!

Katsuyori shook the gore off his blade and sheathed it.

"Katsuyori? How are they holding up?" Ryouko asked, giving an approaching demon a hard punch to the face.

"They're fine, sensei. But they need the second prophecy scroll. Ibikki Morino needs to see it, and he says that Lady Tsunade won't see it."

Ryouko blocked an incoming kunai with his metal glove, catching it nimbly and returning it to its owner, where it was lodged firmly in its Adam's Apple.

"You're right, she won't. I'm going to deliver it. I need to add a few more defenses to the Academy anyway, in case I can't keep this up forever. Lead the way, I'll follow. Hyah!"

Ryouko stepped to the side as an odd-looking spear was thrust at him. Stepping forward, Ryouko grabbed the demon's hands and sliced fingers away with a chakra scalpel. Without knowing why, he

wanted this spear. After he had taken it, he used back to sweep the undead corpse's legs, before thrusting the spear home in it's chest. Ryouko twisted the spear as he pulled it out, causing entrails to follow in the spear's wake. Ryouko's stomach lurched, but it's contents stayed in place. He had done this so much in the last twelve hours it was a mechanical response. A gruesome ritual that Ryouko hoped he would never have to repeat again.

--

"Ibikki, I've brought him."

The jonin all turned enough to face Ryouko. After twelve hours, the boy was tired, but the chakra cigarette in his mouth had kept him going long after he should have collapsed from exhaustion. Wordlessly, Ryouko dug into a pouch inside his clothes and handed the scroll to Ibikki.

"Help yourselves. I'm going to add a couple more defenses. Katsuyori, can you make sure this stays between this group?"

Katsuyori knelt at Ryouko's side, knowing full well Ryouko didn't ask, want, or expect that kind of treatment.

"Of course."

Ryouko patted Katsuyori's shoulder. "Good man. I'll leave this to you."

"Hey, Ryouko! C'mere for just a minute!"

Ryouko heard Tenten's voice. He followed it over to a corner of the academy. Ino and Temari were waiting, with Lee and Shikamaru respectively. Ino and Lee had been sort of a surprise couple. No one had seen that one coming. But somehow, Ino and Lee complimented each other. As for Temari and Shikamaru- THAT one was common knowledge, except to the two of them, it seemed.

"Is everyone alright?" Ryouko asked in a low whisper.

"All of us except you, kid," Temari said in her trademark style. At one point, Ryouko had found her attractive. Still did, but it was clear she and Shikamaru had a thing.

"Yeah. What's up with you? Did you get dressed in the dark, or lose a bet or something?!" Ino added with a joking disgust. Though there was never any romantic interest, Ryouko got along with Ino well enough.

"I called him over here for that...technique you guys told me about," Tenten explained, suddenly looking a little embarrassed. Ino and Temari suddenly grew wide smiles.

"Oh, THAT! Just make sure you do it right, okay?" Ino said cryptically.

"I'll try, I've never had to do that before. Can you four give me a hand with it?" Tenten requested. Immediately, the four grabbed Ryouko.

“What are you plotting?” Ryouko asked, becoming a little worried. Tenten strode forward carefully. In one graceful move, she locked lips with Ryouko. It quickly became a little more than a single kiss. Tenten was blushing, and Ryouko wasn’t even sure his face turning red could be classified as a ‘blush’ anymore.

This must be what normal boyfriends and girlfriends do. I’ve only experienced this sort of kiss once, with Sakura. It’s...pleasant. Even in the midst of a disaster such as this...But how do I respond? Do we take turns? Okay Ryouko, take the plunge, here we go. One...two...three!

But the kiss was over. Tenten was blushing furiously, and Ryouko guessed that he was, too. The four holding his arms and legs to his sides let go.

Tenten blushed even harder; she was never one for public displays of affection, but this had been necessary.

If he knew that kiss also a chakra transfer jutsu, he might not have let me do either one! But I have to take care of him. SOMEONE has to be in Ryouko’s corner. I hope my chakra helps him...I’ve never done the jutsu like that before... But if he dies, I want to know just what it felt like...And if he had died and I hadn’t tried, I would never forgive myself.

Tenten suddenly felt a hand cupping her chin. Ryouko?!

“Tenten...thank you. I appreciate the jutsu...” Ryouko leaned closer to her and gave her a brief squeeze. “...But the gesture was even better.”

Basing what to do by what little he knew of relationships, Ryouko planted a soft, brushing kiss on Tenten’s shocked lips. He gave her an affectionate gaze, looking as relaxed as he could, for her sake.

“I have to go now. It’s time to end this, before more blood is shed...”

--

Ibikki cursed.

“Damn it! It’s just as I thought! Genma, catch Ryouko before he leaves again, and take him to the swing near the entrance. I have to talk with him. If he refused, take him by force. He HAS to know this.”

-

Ryouko strode over quickly.

“Ibikki? What is it?”

Ibikki took Ryouko aside. “Listen...this prophecy...it’s crap. It’s a plot.”

Ryouko tried to hide his shock. Making sure no one else was around, he looked at the scroll.

“How do you know?”

Ibikki pointed to the scroll. “Think of the First Hokage’s scroll. Do you remember the wax seal that was on it?”

Ryouko thought back, and nodded upon recalling the seal.

“Well, there’s no seal on this one at all. If it was a true document, it would be wax-coated and sealed by someone important. The fact that Shizune found this scroll, with no traps on it...”

“...Means that it’s a decoy...” Ryouko lowered his head. “Damn it, I should have known! It’s so obvious!”

Ibikki, usually the last person in the world to be comforting, clapped Ryouko on the shoulder. “You can’t think of everything yourself. Don’t beat yourself up.”

Ryouko shook his head. “Ibikki, whatever you do, make sure people believe that scroll is the truth.”

Ibikki didn’t understand why that was what Ryouko wanted, and he said so. Ryouko’s response even warmed Ibikki’s stone heart.

“Because it’s a source of hope. If people believe I’m their savior, let them. They need hope...maybe even a martyr. And I’m the only one in the position to do both. This has to stay between us. After this is over, or I die, THEN tell everyone I’m not the hero they thought. Let them be mad at me for deceiving them AFTER I’ve done the dirty work.”

Ryouko gave a nod, then took off again. Ibikki stared after him as he pocketed the scroll.

Maybe that scroll isn’t false information after all...if there’s one crazy bastard who can make it real, it’s that one. Good luck, Ryouko.

8 - The Sacrifice

(The Fifteenth hour of the Konohagakure siege)

Ryouko blazed through the seemingly endless demons, the prophecy rattling around in his brain.

Has destiny played another trick on me? If I'm not destined...at this point, it's meaningless to speculate. As far the Leaf is concerned, I'm in charge until this attempted coup has either succeeded...or been eradicated. There will be no mistake this time. I'll kill Orochimaru if it comes to that. I'm going to make a prophecy of my own: The two of us can no longer co-exist. One must die.

That was going to be true. Like last time, these demons had chakra and jutsus their disposal. However, the longer the fight went, the more the demons adapted to their surroundings, and the more dangerous they became. Ryouko saw too many familiar sites: The Sharingan eyes of the Uchiha, the Aburame clan insect techniques, and even what must have been the forerunner to the Ino-Shika-Cho combo. It was horrifying, but Orochimaru's weakness was revealed: The zombies didn't have full mastery of their bodies yet.

"Wroof! Wroof!"

Ryouko now saw the unmistakable Inazuka clan's loyal ninja hounds. But under Orochimaru's spell, the hounds were trained to attack Ryouko, rather than defend the Leaf. Ryouko had never struck an animal before, but was left with little choice as one of the animals tried to sink its teeth into Ryouko.

"Bad dog!" Ryouko swatted the mutt away with left hand. It skidded backward, then leapt, aiming to grab Ryouko's throat. All Ryouko could do jump up to meet the dog and hope to be quicker on the strike.

"Fang over Fang!"

Ryouko heard the familiar jutsu. He knew right there that he'd been duped. Where there were Inazuka dogs, there were Inazuka's. And he had just fallen into one of their signature techniques. In a split second, Ryouko would be torn to bits, unless he did something. He did, and hoped it would be enough: A replacement jutsu with an exploding tag on the log, placed during the split-second transfer.

KABOOM!

AIEE!

Ryouko looked back briefly, to see both the hound and the master returning to dust. That brief glance was shortened further by another familiar jutsu.

"Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!"

Ryouko twisted in the air to dodge the incoming fire, and had a warning to Sasuke already in his throat when he saw his assailant. The warning died in his throat, instead become a gaping stare.

Goggles, but no eyes underneath them. No right half of the body. There was only one person this could be; or had been.

“Obito Uchiha?”

Ryouko suddenly knew that Orochimaru had all but neutralized the Hidden Leaf forces. Like when Ryouko had been forced to fight the Third Hokage and become emotional, so would someone faced with a deceased friend or relative close to them. Even Kakashi, as powerful as he was, would have submitted to seeing his old comrade in this state. But the one thing that baffled Ryouko was simple: Not having any family in the Hidden Leaf, and few friends, he couldn't be affected emotionally in the way the others could.

Why would he do that? Ryouko thought, his kunai clashing against the half-Obito demon, dicing it into shreds. **To ensure that I wouldn't have any help? He knew I'd go this alone...So why go to the trouble regardless?** Ryouko soon answered that thought himself.

Because the Leaf would have risen to the occasion to fight him again. I'm one man against an army; last time, Orochimaru barely lost against a better Leaf force, even combined with the power of Sunagakure. If things had nearly worked in his favor last time AGAINST an army, how could one person stop him? Then again...one person was all it took last time. The Third Hokage stopped Orochimaru, albeit at the cost of his life. The Village took a pounding, but was saved. So my task has become clear. I can't drag this out any longer...It's time to make my move...

Ryouko retreated to the top of the Hokage Mountain. On top of the Third's head, Ryouko's nimble fingers went to work, rigging a way to get him to Orochimaru by clearing most of Konoha all at once. It was sad to see the village in such a horrible state. Only the back third of the of the Village was intact, and that was where people were holding out. Some were fighting the demons. The only good things was that Konoha's losses were very small in terms of manpower. The Village itself could be rebuilt; the lives lost could not. That was why Ryouko was getting ready to take such a chance with a new jutsu based off one of the Third's best.

--

“Two more, Sakura.”

Katsuyori gently laid two more injured people in the biggest room in the Academy, which was serving as the hospital. In one corner, the emotionally-wounded Tsunade was being tended to by Shizune, while Sakura and Kantai were making rounds, healing who they could.

Katsuyori's cold tone was not lost on Sakura. She knew that she had made an enemy of Katsuyori by choosing Sasuke over his sensei. That in and of itself was tolerable. But, looking back, Sakura had LET Tsunade rub her relationship with Sasuke in Ryouko's face, on a night when it should have been all about Ryouko and her. Not as a couple, but as heroes. Katsuyori had studiously avoided Sakura for two

years, and hadn't troubled to hide his displeasure at being forced to work with her. When he could help it, he gave the new patients to Kantai. Spending time with her was no chore, he had learned very quickly.

The doors opened suddenly, and Ryouko strode in.

"Everyone, listen up!" he barked. Everyone quieted down, waiting to hear what Ryouko was going to say. At their silence, he continued:

"I need everyone to stay indoors, and close your eyes, cover your ears, and open your mouths. It's going to get loud and bright very quickly. After that, stay hidden as long as you can...Until this siege is over, there needs to be a leader. Will all due respect to you, Tsunade, you're in no condition. Before this mess began, I sent one of my summons to the other Sannin, Master Jiraiya. He and I are going to launch a dual offensive. But regrettably, he can't lead you. And neither am I the best choice. There remains one person with the will to do so..."

Ryouko's outstretched hand pointed to Naruto.

"Keep everyone here, Naruto. It's the only way this crisis is going to be resolved. It's this easy: If you go outside, you're going to die. Only myself and my student have any hope. We're not natives here, Orochimaru can't attack our psyche with his resurrection jutsus. The rest of you are, no doubt, the most capable Shinobi fighters around...but anyone can crumble when seeing their greatest fear come to life. For now, put your faith in me...Trust me, for one last time."

There was silence. Katsuyori strode over to Ryouko. Though younger, Katsuyori was a sturdy young man, and more muscular than Ryouko. His eyes wander to Kantai, while Ryouko had to force himself not to look at Tenten. He couldn't afford any memories at this point.

--

"Katsuyori, are you ready? I know you've never done this before, but I know you can handle it. Hang on tight."

That was easy enough. Katsuyori didn't like heights, and he was riding on top of a hawk. Nothing nightmare-inducing there. He WAS hanging on tight. Any tighter and he would be strangling the poor creature.

"Alright, here we go. Just throw the kunai I made. I'm going to show you a modified version of one of Lord Third's best jutsus."

Katsuyori threw the kunai, exploding tags fluttering behind them. Ryouko held two kunai, and threw them. He made hand signs, faster than Katsuyori had ever seen anyone make them before. And he was no slouch. A sword might have been his preference, but he could weave handsigns with the best of them.

"Multi Kunai Shadow Clones!" Ryouko barked. The two Ryouko had thrown became two thousand! Far below, Ryouko could see the corpses trying to finish their attack on the Hidden Leaf, seemingly

unopposed. In reality, that was what Ryouko had wanted. They had walked right into his trap.

“Remote Detonation Jutsu!”

The sky light up like the fourth of July. The odor of searing flesh hit Katsuyori, and he vomited over the side of the hawk. As he looked down, he saw the incredible destruction. If there had been five thousand zombies, no more than one hundred remained. And that number was about to be cut down.

“Now, sensei?” Katsuyori wanted to know, his handsigns done.

“Now,” Ryouko confirmed.

“Fire Style: Dragon’s Ember Jutsu!” –Ryouko

“Fire Style: Fire Sword Rain!” –Katsuyori

Ryouko’s fire came arching down from above, while swords, lit with tongues of fire, fell to the ground. There was a second explosion, easily as violent as the first, which wiped out at least seventy-five percent of what remained of Orochimaru’s army. Katsuyori and Ryouko nodded to each other. They leapt down on opposite sides of the hawk, and started to run across buildings.

“Katsuyori, find anyone who’s left and get them to safety! There’s going to be one more explosion, and this one might do EVERYONE in if they aren’t protected! Have anyone who can add elemental jutsus: Fire, water, earth, anything! And make sure they brace themselves!”

Ryouko sped up, aiming for the giant snake that signaled Orochimaru’s presence. As Ryouko hit a certain spot, something glinted off of the village wall. It was, roughly, the shape of a woman. Ryouko couldn’t help but smile; that was Jiraiya, subtle as ever. This was also good news; it mean that Jiraiya was ready to attack.

--

BWAMPF!

“What the hell?!” Orochimaru turned on top of his snake to see Jiraiya standing on top of Gamabunta.

“Orochimaru, it’s been a while! Too bad I don’t have time to shoot the breeze with you. Only have time for some toad oil!”

Orochimaru growled with anger. “Kabuto, kill Jiraiya! That little pest, Sarutobi’s pet, is going to be here any time, and I need to kill him myself! GO!”

The toad oil came spewing from Gamabunta’s mouth. But Jiraiya didn’t use a fire jutsu. Ryouko, leaping through the air, used TWO fire jutsus.

“Dragon’s Ember Jutsu: Clone Instigation! Dragon Seeking the Way Jutsu!” The first jutsu was self-explanatory; a clone using a fire jutsu. The second was the fire the clone created turning into a lethal

highway that only Ryouko could stand on without being scorched into ash. Ryouko used this bridge to reach Orochimaru, while Jiraiya snared Kabuto into a fight.

--

“Okay, you’ve reached me! What do you plan to do now?! You’ve got nothing!” Orochimaru taunted.

“One thing you can count on, Orochimaru, is never counting me out until you’ve felt my pulse disappear!” Ryouko shot back. Time to whittle away at Orochimaru’s ego.

“How did two years inside my swords feel? You’ll come to treasure that feeling, Orochimaru. At least you were alive! After this fight, you won’t be able to boast that!”

Orochimaru seemed unphased. Slowly, he opened his mouth and withdrew the Striking Serpent Blades.

“These swords? Oh, no, they’re MINE. Finders, keepers, Ryouko. And what comes with them is mine, too!”

“Shuurai!” Ryouko suddenly remembered. Slowly, it sunk in: Ryouko was in deep shoot and sinking fast. He wasn’t about to open his mouth for help, though. He was going to do what any cornered warrior would: come out swinging. And he had a new aim:

I have to get those swords away from Orochimaru! Shuurai is like family, I can’t slay him!

Orochimaru grinned even wider and opened his mouth again, the Kusanagi protruding. Orochimaru didn’t remove the sword from his mouth. Now it was three legendary swords against two empty hands.

“Shall we begin?” Orochimaru darted forward and started slashing. Ryouko dodged, leapt, and twisted, sustaining superficial cuts, but nothing major. He DID have a sword, but he couldn’t play his ace too soon...

Damn it, I’ve never faced THREE weapons on one person before...if it was only two swords, no problem, even against Orochimaru...but no matter which way I move, that third sword has me trapped! Shadow clones? No...too much chakra this early in the game. Genjutsu? Maybe the time inside that sword weakened his mind to genjutsu. Once I’ve done that, I can stop him with taijutsu...

Without making handsigns, Ryouko cast three genjutsus at the same time, each growing in difficulty. First, there was the “Demonic Illusion: False Surroundings Technique. Hidden inside that was the “Bringer of Darkness Technique”. THAT technique concealed Ryouko’s specialty, the “Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique”.

“Release, release...” Orochimaru had seen Ryouko do this before, but it had been two genjutsus before. The third caught him by surprise. He staggered backward, nearly falling off the giant snake he and Ryouko were battling on. That was Ryouko’s cue. He rushed in. Orochimaru miraculously recovered, and swung three swords at once. All three bit into Ryouko’s flesh. POOF!

“A Shadow Clone? I’ll give you this, Kaguya, you’re no fool!” Orochimaru said calmly.

“Striking Shadow Snakes!” Ryouko barked. Orochimaru turned just in time to see Ryouko’s snakes burst from his wrist and strip the Striking Serpent Blades away from Orochimaru. Orochimaru cursed and tried, in vain, to grab the blades again. Ryouko’s snakes threw them to the side. The swords sank into the muddy ground far below until their ornate hilts were all that stuck up.

“Neither one of us can have them now! On your guard!” Ryouko decided now was the time to play his ace.

--

The red moon slowly turned pale again. Sakura noticed it over her shoulder as she was tending to more patients.

“Ryouko must have done it!” she exclaimed. She distinctly felt her heart strings being plucked at when Katsuyori wordlessly nodded, then walked away, congratulating the other medic-nin on weathering the storm. It had been rough, even though they hadn’t been in combat. Of the thousands in the Hidden Leaf, less than fifty lives were lost, despite Orochimaru’s best efforts and the bloodiest coup possible.

Katsuyori ran into Sasuke on his way downstairs. They exchanged cold nods, before Sasuke called back down to Katsuyori:

“You have a problem with Sakura?”

Katsuyori looked back up the stairs at Sasuke. He thought for a moment, but decided Ryouko-sensei wouldn’t have wanted him to spout what had just come to his mind.

“Apparently so,” Katsuyori countered. “I’m sure she’ll discuss it with you. If you’ll pardon me, I have a task to perform.”

Sasuke stared back after Katsuyori, deciding if he cared enough to talk to Sakura about it. Whatever it was seemed to be bothering Sakura, so Sasuke decided it was worthy of his attention. It was probably nothing major anyway.

--

Atop the massive snake, Ryouko didn’t notice he had garnered attention. With Orochimaru’s demons defeated, the Leaf Shinobi were walking free, the storm over. They had gathered to watch the fight. Two former Leaf Shinobi, two legends, hashing it out over a village neither one belonged to. But the intentions of each were clear.

Ryouko was a defender of the Leaf. The Village wasn’t his problem, it was it’s leadership. In a time like this, where leaders were defined on the battlefield, Ryouko could look past the technical details and come to the aid of the village he loved.

Orochimaru was the attacker with an unforgotten grudge against the Hidden Leaf, despite the years that

had passed. His immortality (more or less) made him fearful, and he never minded using that fear to command attention, and even ill-gotten respect.

Something had to give between the two.

“Orochimaru, it’s time our two swords clashed in lethal combat! Very rarely do I take lives, but yours is one that the world needs to be rid of!” Ryouko withdrew his summoning scroll, and extracted a black cloth. Inside was a sword, but not just any sword. The legendary Suitoru, the absorption blade.

“Death Foreseeing Jutsu!” Orochimaru chanted suddenly. Ryouko unsheathed his sword, letting the case fall to the ground. Using the gold hilt of Suitori, Ryouko blocked the jutsu. The blade expanded in size.

“So you’ve learned to control the one sword that may defeat mine! However, you’ve failed to take into account just how deep my influence is among those swords! Come forth!”

Both Striking Serpent Blades shot at Ryouko, their dangerous tips coming from either end of the giant snake, and Orochimaru coming down with his Kusanagi at the ready. Ryouko had nowhere to dodge. In desperation, Ryouko may have sealed his own fate. With no other option, Ryouko had been forced to use his bloodline, the Kaguya Shikotsu. And the jutsu he chose was more than a little taxing.

“Dance of the Seedling Fern!” Ryouko hit the ground with both palms. Or, rather, the snake. From nowhere, bones shot up, killing Orochimaru’s giant snake, and forcing Orochimaru himself to play defense, at least at first. Once the bones stopped growing, Orochimaru noticed something interesting. Ryouko was on all fours, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth

“So you inherited more than the abilities of the Kaguya, you also inherited the disease that killed the last one! Or, almost the last one! Our fight is as good as over!” Orochimaru crowed. The Leaf began to talk, prompting Orochimaru to continue.

“You’re such a fool. Legend or not, you’re still a child! And you didn’t see through my plot, did you? The First Hokage made the original, true prophecy. But I created this bogus prophecy to lure you into mortal combat. And now, Nature has made my task easier!”

“Not just yet, Orochimaru!” Ryouko got to one knee, and wiped the blood away with his hand, fierce determination in his eyes. “I will not lay down and die! Even if I’m shortening my time, knowing that you’ll be joining me in the afterlife makes it worth it!”

Orochimaru swept in, striking with the Kusanagi. Ryouko blocked his strike, one hand on the back of the blade, against Orochimaru’s more powerful strike. Both blades inched toward Ryouko’s throat. Forming a plan of desperation, Ryouko slid to his knees to lower his center of gravity, and swung a leg at Orochimaru’s leg. Orochimaru leapt, giving Ryouko time enough to but his blood to good use.

“Summoning Jutsu! Adamantine Yoi Transformation! Adamantine Prison Jutsu!”

Orochimaru suddenly found himself trapped inside a box made of adamantite, a substance harder than diamond. He saw Ryouko, mouth bleeding once more, holding a hand up.

“This time, it ends,” Ryouko said solemnly. He closed his fist, giving Enma (The Monkey King in control of the Yoi) the signal to close the box up, until Orochimaru was cramped inside and couldn’t defend himself.

“It’s against the grain for me to slay someone incapable of defending themselves, but I’ll do what I have to. DIE!”

Ryouko stabbed forward with Suitoru, hitting Orochimaru in the chest. POOF!

“Damnit! Substitution!” The only upside was that this jutsu forced Orochimaru to drop his Kusanagi. BRACK!

Orochimaru hit Ryouko from behind, sending Ryouko into one of the bones he created himself. Immediately, Ryouko knew he needed that sword back. It could kill AND act as a seal. Orochimaru had more than one soul; Ryouko needed to seal them all AND kill Orochimaru’s host body. Without Suitoru, that would be nearly impossible.

CRACK! THOCK!

Orochimaru was just toying with Ryouko now, hitting him hard, but not hard enough to kill. Ryouko was barely blocking, and even then, it didn’t always help much. He saw Suitoru, and could see no other way of reaching it, except for using the Shikotsumyaku once more.

THWACK!

Orochimaru landed one more shot to Ryouko’s stomach, knocking him backwards into the center of his bone attack from earlier. Orochimaru had all the confidence in the world right now. But, unknowingly, he put Ryouko just where Ryouko wanted to be. Leaning against the bone, Ryouko sunk into it.

“WHAT?! Kimimaro’s jutsu! How can you still be performing it?!”

(Ryouko’s hand grabs the Suitoru Blade)

“It’s easy, Orochimaru. YOU yourself made the prophecy. And you yourself made it come true by underestimating me! This time, I make no mistakes. We’ll likely die together, and Sarutobi will finally get his rematch with you!”

Ryouko and four clones appeared on all sides of Orochimaru, coming out of the bones. All of them held Suitoru. Orochimaru’s shock rooted him to the spot, even as the swords arched down from all directions. Each one pierced Orochimaru, until four blades were sticking out of him. That left the fifth unaccounted for.

“This blade has the unique ability to suck in jutsus, remove the chakra, and then return the jutsus. In other words, this blade is full of chakra, stored for nearly one hundred years. And that’s just about how much I’ll need to pull off this jutsu!”

The blade between his teeth, Ryouko made handsigns, using a jutsu he himself had both created and forbidden:

“Emotional Chakra Release: Blade Sacrificial Seal!”

The sword glowed with the chakra taken from thousands of jutsus, plus Ryouko’s own Emotional Chakra. Ryouko made his move, and cut at Orochimaru. The blade didn’t even need to touch Orochimaru for this jutsu to work. Only the visible wave of chakra. Orochimaru screamed in agony; then pain was too much. It was insanity in a sane mind; ANYTHING to end the pain! It was as if every emotion had come rising to the surface. Each one took turns being the dominant emotion, but ‘defeat’, ‘despair’, and ‘agony’ kept coming back. All in a second’s time.

Ryouko threw the sword in the air, making handsigns as fast as he could. The blade landed in his hands once he had finished.

“Ten Elements Seal!” Ryouko cut straight down at Orochimaru’s head. The blade cracked Orochimaru’s skull, then- sucked his body in? If that’s what was happening, it was clearly straining Ryouko. But it happened. The sword fell to the ground, next to the barely-conscious Ryouko.

“Sensei!”

“Ryouko-san!”

Katsuyori and Tenten rushed over as quick as they could.

“It’s fine. My work isn’t done yet. I need to get to a fire...(koff)”

More blood came with Ryouko’s words. Katsuyori and Tenten looked at each other, then nodded wordlessly.

“Alright, a fire. We’ll make it here, while you get a checkup.”

Ryouko shook his head at Tenten’s proposal. “No...I have to do this, first. I’ll only agree (koff) to medical treatment once my work is completed.”

--

Ryouko used a kunai to cut open each hand. He held the daggers by their edges and squeezed to achieve this. After he was satisfied, Ryouko picked up Suitoru. First the blade. Ryouko took the blood from his right hand and squeezed the blade, up near the tip. After putting the sword away in it’s case, Ryouko used the blood from his left hand to mark where the case and habaki (sword collar) met.

“No mistakes this time...two blood seals...two chakra seals...he’s not getting out.”

Ryouko coughed again, more blood coming with the cough. Using the light from the fire, Ryouko looked at his life line. It had shorted a lot. But what could Ryouko do about it now? He would die without the regrets of hundreds of deaths on his conscience. That was all he could do. Ryouko looked again, trying

to defy his own thinking. Strangely enough, he noted, his love line had grown longer.

“What the devil can that mean? How can I love if I’m dead?” Ryouko muttered. He was so engrossed with his hand that he didn’t notice the disturbance behind him.

Behind Ryouko, Tenten snuck up, with Katsuyori, Lee, Temari, Ino, and Kantai. This jutsu Tenten was going to perform needed absolutely no resistance from Ryouko. Wordlessly agreeing, everyone jumped Ryouko at once, forcing him to the ground, restraining him until Tenten could pin him down by kneeling on his chest.

“I’m sorry, Ryouko. But I can’t let you throw your life away...”

Just like before, Tenten kissed Ryouko. But this time, she made a different move, and Ryouko felt his chakra being drained from him, When he couldn’t fight any longer, Ryouko eased into unconsciousness, the victim of a Chakra Return jutsu. Tenten immediately felt awful about doing that to Ryouko, especially using the few people he trusted as accomplices.

Any relationship I might have had with him...I just killed my chances. I really hope he forgives me...but I won’t blame him if he doesn’t...and it doesn’t matter, as long as Lady Tsunade can save him!

9 - It Never Ends

In surgery...

Tsunade had shaken herself out of her stupor, and forced herself to focus on the man in front of her, lying on the operating table, unconscious. After a fifteen-hour battle, won single-handedly, fatigue should have fell him. Instead, against all advice, he had used the jutsu that was to be his undoing.

The damage is nearly irreparable...If I could just isolate this damn disease...I know it's in his bones. If I can get enough chakra to filter the veins near the bones, I can remove the disease...but that's going to take more chakra than I've got...Wait, Ryouko still had chakra, maybe I can manipulate his to help filter out the bad. The chakra is different from the bloodline, it's used to activate it, but not create it. It's his blood that's gone bad. His chakra should be pure...He's got maybe 10% left...if I add mine...damn it, I'm still short!

--

Katsuyori helped put out the last of the fires, while Kantai dug into the rubble. No one was in the house, or any of them, thankfully. The Academy had been the saving grace of the Hidden Leaf.

"How's your sensei, Katsuyori-san?" Kantai asked, standing up and clapping rubbing her hands to get rid of some of the soot and grime that had accumulated while she was searching.

"I don't know, he's still in surgery. I'm not worried yet...not about that..." Katsuyori's voice drifted off as he tried to organize his thoughts. He wasn't having much luck.

Kantai frowned and wrinkled her nose. "What IS worrying you, then?"

Katsuyori swept his ponytail back. "It's about what Ryouko-sensei is going to do after the surgery. Part of me wants him to stay in the Hidden Leaf. But the other part...wants to leave with him. If he leaves, it's not a set thing, not yet."

Kantai found herself saddened by the prospect of Katsuyori leaving. She hadn't known him for long, but she had known him long enough to understand that he was a rare type of guy; one she wanted to get to know better. But Kantai bit her lip and kept working, as if that would solve the problem.

--

"You did nice work. Damn, I hate feeling useless..." Sasuke murmured, looking out the window of the academy classroom that was serving as a break room.

"Don't worry about it, Sasuke-kun. Demons from hell are an acceptable excuse to miss work," Sakura joked. Her mirth didn't last long- very quickly her smooth features turned to worry and concern.

“Anything wrong?” Sasuke asked, going against the grain. This was his girlfriend, he HAD to care about her problems.

“I was just thinking...about what Ryouko said...he was right. But Katsuyori’s silence hurt even worse. I KNOW I hurt Ryouko, and I feel bad, but you were my dream, I couldn’t just give you up. I give Ryouko credit for bringing us together, even though I get it- he liked me. It’s Katsuyori’s attitude that really hurts. He used to be the kind of kid that looked up to me, because his sensei admired me. Now, even though Ryouko’s been nice enough, Katsuyori’s older, and it’s like he’s taken this whole thing personally...”

Sasuke stood up and walked out of the room. Right there, Sakura knew she had said the wrong thing. Sasuke wasn’t mad at her; THAT would have been safer. No, Sasuke had his sights set on Katsuyori.

--

Katsuyori narrowed his eyes. Someone was following him. No, two someones. There went his chance to get to know Kantai.

“Show yourself!” Katsuyori snarled into the shadows. Sasuke stalked out, followed by Sakura. Katsuyori didn’t bother to hide his displeasure.

“What the hell are you doing, stalking me?” Katsuyori glared at Sasuke, completely ignoring Sakura.

“You’ve hurt my girl’s feelings. I suggest apologizing, or else.” Sasuke said all this calmly, but his Sharingan told a different story.

“I haven’t done anything she didn’t deserve. I’ve kept my mouth shut around her. If she wants to hear what I have to say...no, she doesn’t. And I’d hate myself for saying it...no matter how true. Now don’t bother me...”

Katsuyori knew that Sasuke was looking for a fight.

“That’s it, you bastard! If you’re so dedicated to that fluke of a master of yours, why don’t we just see what he’s taught you!”

Katsuyori always took offence if his sensei was slighted. And now was no exception.

“I’m not going to let you badmouth my sensei! He SAVED your worthless @\$\$\$. He’s not around to save it again, and I don’t think he would. He always says I make sure a fight makes sense before I jump into it...Well, this one makes sense to me!”

Both glared at each other, gritting their teeth.

“SUMMONING JUTSU!”

BLAM! BLAM!

TWO giant snakes appeared from nowhere. Eerily, it was Shuurai (Katsuyori/Ryouko) vs. Manda (Orochimaru/Sasuke). Shuurai and Manda were brothers, and hated each other from way back. Each one previous owner had been the teacher of the one know using them. There was an incredible amount of bad blood, and that blood was about to spill.

--

“What on earth? Oh no! Damn it, the one who could have called of Katsuyori is out like a light, and I don’t even know if the surgery took! I’ve got to get out there, whether Katsuyori likes me or not!”

“Lady Tsunade, you can’t leave Ryouko!” Shizune protested. Tenten was already at Ryouko’s side.

“Either he’ll live or he won’t, Shizune, I can’t do anything else. If he wakes up, give him a ration pill, or one of his cigarettes, and send him out to stop this! For now, I’ve got to step in and try to end this before any more damage is done to the Leaf. We got out with very few casualties, but our Village itself, the buildings...not so much...”

Tsunade ran off as fast as she could, leaving Shizune and Tenten to turn back to Ryouko.

“It’s scary, Shizune-sensei...” Tenten began quietly, looking at Ryouko’s unnervingly still form.

“...Someone like Ryouko could be in this state. I mean...if a legend had this much trouble, no matter what the odds, and could wind up being unconscious in a hospital bed...what about the rest of us who AREN’T legends? ...”

Shizune didn’t answer; she didn’t have an answer. Instead, she put a hand to Ryouko’s fore head. No temperature; that much was a good sign.

Tenten had settled down in a chair next to his bed, and absently grabbed his left hand. She gently pulled the glove off to hold his hand, and gasped.

“Shizune-sensei! Ryouko-kun’s hand! Look at the life line!”

--

Sasuke and Katsuyori sized each other up. Their summons were long gone, and their chakras were both running low.

“Tell me, Katsuyori-kun...do you aim to kill me?” Sasuke asked casually. Katsuyori was seemingly caught offguard by the question.

“It crossed my mind...but no. Defeating you is enough for me. Besides, no matter what contempt I hold for you and Sakura, a needless death is a needless death. I wouldn’t do that to her...you might be a demon from hell, but I’ve faced more than my fair share this past day. One more won’t hurt!”

Sasuke shrugged. “Well, if you hoped to defeat me, you’d have to come at me as though you were going to kill me. If you aren’t going to, then I’ve already defeated you.”

“Get off your high-horse, Uchiha! You might be Konoha’s favorite son again, but that doesn’t mean that anyone with half a brain doesn’t see you for the little bratty, bastard child you are! My sensei called the shots on you, and he released you as a favor to the girl he loved! He might have been foolish to think she would ever RETURN that affection, but there was human enough in his heart to bring you back from hell, and all you can do is flaunt Sakura. You wouldn’t BE here if it weren’t for Ryouko-sensei!”

That struck home with Sasuke in a big way. In a rage, he ran at Katsuyori. Katsuyori had waited for this opening, and took off at top speed himself. Sakura and Tsunade could only watch as they were about to clash.

Thock, whoosh, crack!

Three sounds. The first was Ryouko landing, the second was him throwing both combatants to opposite ends of their battle field, and the third was him stuffing Sasuke with a sidekick that nearly cracked a rib.

“This is a senseless fight...Katsuyori, let the people talk. My honor doesn’t need defending. I put my honor on the chopping block when I let this menace go. It’s my grudge, don’t make enemies on my account.”

Ryouko looked pale, but other than that, he was his old self. His mask was in place during combat once more, though a lit chakra cigarette was in his hand. He let the cigarette fall, and stamped on it with his boot. His eyes darted around, looking for a threat, seeing none.

“Sasuke, Sakura, Tsunade...you’ve made it abundantly clear that you don’t want me here. I’d walk through fire to defend the Leaf. Always have, always will. But I DO have my limits. So, until the next great war, or the need arises...”

Ryouko gave a courteous bow. Next to him, Tenten landed.

“Oh no you don’t! You’re not taking off again without me! I’m going with you!” Tenten clamped down on Ryouko’s arm.

“Likewise, sensei. And...well, a friend is coming with me...” Katsuyori blushed as Kantai emerged from the shadows. He gave her a brief grin.

Ryouko was hit with a rush of emotion. As he felt it, he dug into his robe.

“Tenten...I know it’s only been a short while...but will you...”

Ryouko offered her a ring, down on one knee.

“...Be my wife?”

Tenten’s mouth fell open. **He-he’s proposing?! Oh my God! Yes! Yes! Of course I will! Just gotta say it out loud!**

“Yes!”

Katsuyori and Kantai were caught up in the moment themselves.

“Are you crying?” Kantai said, nudging her boyfriend playfully. Katsuyori shook his head.

“No. Damn, must have gotten some blood in my eye...”

“NOW HOLD ON!” Tsunade demanded. “Ryouko, I can’t stop YOU, but Tenten, Katsuyori, and Kantai are all part of the Hidden Leaf. If they leave, I’ll have them hunted down!”

Ryouko seemed to grow in size. “If you EVER threaten my wife again...If you come near my student...there will be hell to pay! It’s THEIR life, you have no control over what they want. Besides, the second I leave, you’ll start mistreating them, just like you did me! Besides, there’s only room enough for ONE nearly-extinct clan in the Hidden Leaf, and that’s the Uchiha clan. The Kaguya clan will live on it the Rain Village.”

Tsunade softened, placing a hand on Ryouko’s shoulder. “You’ve proved to me you’re worthy of Tenten. Go...with my blessing.”

--

Ryouko and Tenten returned to the Village Hidden in the Rain. To their surprise, they were greeted with the news that the Amekage had died. Ryouko’s jonin friend delivered the news.

“I’m sorry. Who’s next in line to take the title?” Ryouko questioned, concerned that his new home was in danger without a leader.

“Actually, Master Ryouko...we’d like you to take the title. You don’t have to renounce your connection with the Hidden Leaf. You’re the only one we can turn to. Your clan is the most powerful to come from our land.”

Ryouko, to put it mildly, was surprised. He looked to Tenten; maybe they weren’t officially husband and wife yet, but this was still a big thing. Promise ring glinting on her finger, Tenten gave Ryouko the nod.

“I accept.”

--

THREE YEARS PASS

Ryouko, the Third Amekage, had helped the village prosper. He was one of the few kages to join his land on the battlefield in person.

“You should never ask someone to do anything you aren’t prepared to do yourself,” he was fond of saying. He had found that the Rain Village agreed with him. Their relations with the Hidden Leaf had resulted in benefits for both. The Rain Village was small, but powerful, and the Hidden Leaf agreed to

lend them manpower when it was needed. In return, the Rain Village sent crops, and even their Amekage, to the Hidden Leaf. Every year, a festival was held honoring this commemorative pact between Villages. Eventually, the Sand Village threw it's hand in, and a new triumvirate took power, with Gaara (Kazekage), Tsunade (Hokage), and Ryouko (Amekage) keeping the peace.

It was at this festival that Ryouko and Katsuyori both received news from their wives.

"Ryo-kun...um...well..." Tenten began.

"Katsuyori-kun...I have something to tell you..." a blushing Kantai said slowly.

Ryouko and Katsuyori both stood up, SURE that it was bad news.

"I'm pregnant," said both girls. Katsuyori and Ryouko exchanged glances, before Ryouko uttered a phrase that made Tenten wonder just how much her husband understood about humans."

"Pregnant...how did that happen?"

Katsuyori looked to his wife, as if she had an answer.

The girls sighed.

"We married powerful idiots, Ten-chan," Kantai joked.

"Yeah...I've got the grand llama of idiots, and you've got his chief advisor!" Tenten shot back.

Ryouko took the chance to take a shot of his own. "See, Katsuyori, they're MEAN when they're pregnant."

--

Pein looked at the sword Itachi had brought him.

"Orochimaru is sealed within this sword...very well. Itachi, let's begin the extraction. I want that ring back...and perhaps one more in our ranks. We'll agree to only return Orochimaru's full chakra when he agrees to listen to us."

Pein made the handsigns and grabbed the sword.

"Begin!"

--

EXTRAS! TWO PARTS OF THE ORIGINAL, UNUSED ENDING! WARNING- IT'S MILDLY PROVOCATIVE, PG-13 WITH REFERENCES TO SEX.

"Give me...just one night..."

Ryouko was confused. “What do you mean?”

Tenten picked at Ryouko’s collar. “One night...with you.” Tenten looked Ryouko firmly in the eyes. Both had hazel eyes, though Tenten’s were of a lighter color.

“What do you mean, ‘one night’?”

Tenten slid a little closer to Ryouko, hugging him. “I wanted to tell you...that I really, really like you. Maybe more than that. Ever since you fought Orochimaru, I’ve thought that you were...perfect. But I knew you’d never have me, you loved Sakura, everyone knew it. And I’m so ashamed, but I’m glad you two didn’t get together. I know it’s selfish, and horrible of me, but...well, I guess love makes you do crazy things...”

Ryouko damn near hit the floor. **She just said...and she’s referring to...** Before he could stop himself, Ryouko kissed Tenten again, with more passion. This kiss lasted a longer time than the first one. Since they were both adults, the kiss was a little less innocent, but it wasn’t lusty by any means.

UNUSED!!!

“Tenten, it’s ironic you would say that. I had a crush on you, more than five years ago. But I thought you had your eyes elsewhere, so I never made a move.”

Tenten stared into Ryouko’s chest. “If tonight is your last night...I’m sorry, it’s selfish of me!”

Ryouko took Tenten’s hand gently, and kissed it, kneeling. “Anything you want, Tenten. I owe you that. And...if I survive...maybe there’s a future...for us?” Ryouko reached into his cloak and took out a golden ring. Tenten’s eyes widened, while Ryouko’s eyes silently asked the big question:

“Will you marry me?”

The question had come out verbally. Tenten nodded, too shocked to say anything. They didn’t need a ceremony to marry. In a shed, by themselves, that was fine. As far as Tenten was concerned, she was now Ryouko’s wife.

Tenten jumped to Ryouko’s arms. For both of them, it would be an unforgettable night. A crush among kids had turned to love among adults. And, also a first for both of them, that love was manifested physically.

--

I can’t believe I...with a legend, nonetheless! He’s only back for a day, and THAT happens! I-I should feel awful! But...I don’t. I can’t. It’s just what I wanted, with WHO I wanted, denying that would be a betrayal of myself! –Tenten

Never even a girlfriend for twenty-two years...and now I’ve...if children come as a result...I take

nothing back! If that truly was my last night on this earth, then it was worth it. Love will always conquer lust. –Ryouko.

Ryouko and Tenten smiled at each other. Tenten snuggled up against Ryouko's bare chest, while rubbing his back with one hand. The other was on his far shoulder. The night had gotten chilly, so neither of the two had wanted to get out from under the blanket to retrieve their clothing.

"I'm sorry if I...did something I shouldn't have. I've just missed you for so long, Ryouko. I couldn't help myself..."

"It was a joint effort, Tenten."

Ryouko kissed Tenten on the cheek. "Thank you...for being my wife."

Tenten didn't say anything, she only snuggled into his neck happily. She didn't speak until Ryouko moved a little bit.

"I love you. And...I can't believe we just did that! But, I wouldn't take it back for anything!"