

Youth (The Past's Trials)

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A story centering around Ryouko, Naruto, and the rest of the Hidden Leaf as children.

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Chapter 1 - The First Adventure	2
Chapter 2 - Adventure 2- A Big Meeting	12
Chapter 3 - Adventure 3- Relationships	19
Chapter 4 - Adventure 4: His First Mission	26
Chapter 5 - Adventure 5- The Odd Man Out	33
Chapter 6 - Adventure 6- Legendary Error	40
Chapter 7 - Adventure Seven- Update on the Rookie Nine	47
Chapter 8 - Adventure 8: Sensei Strength	54
Chapter 9 - Adventure 9- Time Slipping Away	61

1 - The First Adventure

"I think you need to see this, Lord Hokage...it's not something I've really dealt with before..." Iruka said, smiling a little. He had the Third's attention, at least.

"A student, Iruka? Playing pranks, or spying on bathing women?" Those were common problems.

"No sir...it's better if you see for yourself."

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"Hey, Ryouko, c'mon, we're going to play soccer!" shouted a group of kids. Ryouko looked up, his eyes and face flat. He tried offer a small smile.

"Thanks, but I'm still working. Have fun," came the seven year old's voice.

"Okay! But, boy, all you ever do is study!" a young girl pointed out. Ryouko looked up and gave her a small smile.

"If I study hard, someday I'll be strong enough to defend the Leaf Village. That's what I really want."

Ryouko went back to his studying, sitting in the classroom long after the others had run off for recess and lunch. His mind was in another time, reading about the First and Second Hokages. Ryouko's right hand was taking notes on a scroll of his own. He stopped to gaze out the window, and uttered a tiny sigh. It was a nice day. But that didn't mean much to Ryouko. He didn't look up again until, twenty minutes later, he heard two sets of footsteps coming toward him.

"Ryouko?" came the gentle voice of Iruka. Ryouko looked up at Iruka.

"Oh, hi sensei," Ryouko replied, a smile on his face.

"What are you studying?" Iruka bent down to look at Ryouko's work. The Third Hokage was watching silently from the window to see what the problem was with this boy. So far, the Third hadn't seen anything, aside from a model student.

"I'm reading history today, sensei. I want to do well on our test tomorrow." Ryouko held up the books and scrolls to Iruka as proof of his study habits.

Iruka looked at the history Ryouko was reading. It was beyond the quiz level, and more in-depth that some jonin had bothered to read. Even Iruka, a teacher, had trouble wading through some of this stuff without dozing off.

"This isn't on our test, Ryouko. Wouldn't you rather be outside, playing with the others?" Iruka asked calmly, hoping this didn't sound like yet another attempt to get Ryouko to be 'normal'.

“Not really, sensei. I just don’t fit in. Besides, I want to be strong. I want to be someone everyone can rely on. I want to be a great jonin, and maybe...maybe even on Lord Hokage’s council someday!”

Iruka noted the change- Ryouko had hopes and ambitions, something he never displayed in class. Not that he didn’t work hard, because he certainly did- there just wasn’t this definitive kind of ambition before.

“How about Hokage? Wouldn’t you want to be Hokage yourself someday?” Iruka asked, a little puzzled by Ryouko’s answer.

Ryouko shook his head, his dark hair hardly moving. It seemed to be like a brown hat at times. “No, that’s Naruto-kun’s dream, I don’t want to take it from him.”

The innocence in that answer made Iruka smile widely. He sat down on the bench next to Ryouko.

“That’s very nice of you. Are you friends with Naruto?” Iruka questioned, looking at another scroll, turning it over in his hands.

“Not really, sensei. But I don’t hate him. I heard...a lot of things about him...but I’m not s’posed to talk about it, right?” at Iruka’s nod, Ryouko continued. “But I don’t hate him, I feel bad for him. He’s not anything like what’s inside him.”

Iruka was taken aback that Ryouko knew so much about something that was supposed to be unspeakable. **Some people believe ghosts and spirits come to children, because that can think differently than adults, or they’re willing to believe. Children can always sense things, they just can’t describe them. Is that the case with Ryouko as well? What has he sensed?**

“What do you think is inside him?” Iruka asked, partially fearing the answer. The truth was as scary as any fiction.

“A monster. A nine-tailed fox. But it’s not Naruto’s fault, and he doesn’t bully me, so I feel bad for him. It’s like people not liking me because of my past.” Ryouko had his eyes closed, really thinking about his answer, then nodding to himself, as if he was telling himself he was right.

Iruka put a hand on Ryouko’s head. “You’re a smart boy, Ryouko. And a top student. Would you like to meet Lord Hokage?”

Ryouko looked at the ground. “I don’t want to bother him, Iruka-sensei...I’m not important enough for him to waste time on. I wouldn’t even know what to say...”

“How about “Hello”?” came the rich voice of the Third Hokage. Iruka stepped back and smiled, noting the awe on Ryouko’s young face.

“Ryouko, this is the Third Hokage. He’d like to talk to you. Do you have time for him?” That question always seemed to make children feel important.

Ryouko leapt out of his seat as though it were on fire. "It's an honor, Lord Hokage!" he said, bowing heavily, facing the ground.

"Ha ha ha, settle down, Ryouko. It's nice to meet you, too!" The Third Hokage sat down next to Ryouko, giving Iruka a nod.

The Third Hokage had the ability to get you to like and trust him the second you met him. Ryouko was in awe of this man, though he was past his prime as a Shinobi.

"Iruka tells me you study an awful lot. Don't you want to play with the others sometimes? You're still young, you'll have plenty of time to study later, take it from me! I lived enough years to know!"

Ryouko shook his head. "No, sir. I just don't fit in with them. Besides, the more I study now, the better I'll be when I'm older! I want to be strong, and..." Ryouko's ears burned. He looked over to Iruka, who gave him an encouraging smile and nod.

"...And someday I'd like to be an advisor to you, Lord Hokage. I want to be someone the village can depend on! That's why I've got to study hard and train just as hard!"

The Third Hokage smiled at Ryouko. "Well, I can see you're serious. Keep working hard, and someday you'll be a strong Shinobi. Tell me, Ryouko- do you like it here, in the Leaf Village?"

"Yes, I really do! I know a lot of people didn't want me here, 'cause of all my samurai training..."

The Third Hokage now let the wisdom his age had given him show. "Ryouko, your past is just that- your past. Your life is a river, dotted by trees that drop leaves. The river is filled with rocks. Rocks that may be difficult to get around, but rocks that shape you, as a person, and make you stronger. Your river is at it's very beginning, and it will take many twists and turns. But know this- the trials you suffer now will only make you a stronger Shinobi, and a stronger person."

With that, the Third Hokage excused himself, saying he had to get back to work.

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"What did you think, Lord Hokage?" Iruka asked earnestly.

"I think he'll be a strong ninja, and a reliable person. As for his social skills, or lack thereof, with his peers...do nothing. Trying to force him to change will do more harm than good. His slate is, as of yet, blank. He'll have time to mark it later."

Iruka bowed. "Yes, Lord Hokage, I understand. It's sad, though...watching him sit by himself. Some of the others try to include him, but he never says yes. He said it was so the people that asked him wouldn't get bullied. It's not a pain he wants to share with others."

Lord Hokage gave a sigh. "That is a boy who thinks beyond his years. An admirable quality, but his childhood may be sacrificed. But, as I said, we can do nothing. At least not yet. Any move we make Ryouko may interpret as hostile, and there's no need to put someone so young on his guard against the people he needs to grow to trust. Many people hold him in contempt, it's true, but hard work like that

may give him the key to being accepted.”

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Today, the kunoichi-in-training were learning the age-old art of flower arranging. That meant a day in the sunshine, with lots of fun, and a chance to impress the boys who would be getting the flowers they picked. One pink-haired girl, her hair tied back with a red ribbon, was busy picking away when she heard the sounds of her blonde friend behind her.

“Oh, hi Ino!” the little girl said brightly, while her hands kept working.

“Hey Sakura! Wow, that’s a lot of flowers!” Ino declared. “Who are they for?”

Sakura blushed a little. “Well, these are for Sasuke. (a batch of red flowers) This batch is for Lord Hokage. (Pink flowers) And these...well, they’re for the new boy. (Yellow flowers)”

“Huh? The new boy? Who do you mean?” Ino asked, screwing up her face, trying to remember who Sakura meant. They didn’t have any new boys in class...

“The one in the classroom, over there. I think he’s a year ahead of us.” Sakura pointed. Ino followed Sakura’s finger to a small boy who seemed to be hard at work. The boy looked out the window, a wistful look on his face as he gave a visible sigh.

“Him? Why him? You gotta crush on him or something?” Ino teased, poking at Sakura. Sakura shrank away from Ino’s playful roughhousing.

“No...it’s ‘cause he’s always alone. He never plays, he only studies, and other people make fun of him. They did that to me once, so I know how he feels. And maybe flowers will cheer him up!” Sakura wanted to hear what Ino would say on this subject. Ino seemed so worldly and charming; it made Sakura feel that she could learn a lot from her.

“Sakura, boys don’t like flowers! They won’t help him! Besides, he’s kinda weird, isn’t he? Showing up in those weird clothes, with that sword...he’s a weirdo.”

Sakura gleefully tied the flowers neatly with a red ribbon. “I don’t care, I’m going to try! Maybe he’ll like them!”

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Ryouko folded himself into seiza, a position between sitting and kneeling in which you sat on your left leg, with your other tucked Indian-style in front of you. His tiny left hand reached out for a cup of tea, while his eyes never left the scroll. The steam from the fine cup tickled his nose, which caused Ryouko to drink quickly. Absently, Ryouko put the cup down and set about eating some rice. He wasn’t a big fan of rice, but he had to keep in shape, and rice was healthy in a number of ways. And it tasted better than a lot of healthy stuff he could be eating.

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“Go on, if you’re going to! What are you afraid of, you don’t have a crush on him anyway!” Ino prodded Sakura.

“I don’t know, Ino...I mean, look at him. He looks busy...”

Ino gave Sakura a playful hit on the arm. “Aw, you’re just nervous ‘cause he’s a boy and you’re a girl! Tell ya what- if you get him to smile, I’ll give you that pink dress of mine you always liked!”

Sakura couldn’t resist a bet like that. “You’re on!” Sakura marched into the classroom.

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Ryouko heard the footsteps, but figured it was Iruka-sensei again. So he kept reading until he heard a nervous cough.

“hmm?” Ryouko looked up, surprised to find a girl near his age standing near his desk. She looked familiar, but he couldn’t quite remember the name of the little kunoichi with the pink hair.

“H-hi, Ryouko-kun...” Sakura stammered nervously.

Ryouko remembered her voice now. She was the smartest girl in the class just a year behind his, that’s why she seemed familiar.

“Hi, Sakura-chan,” Ryouko answered, putting his tea cup down and looking up from his scroll, trying to seem less distant than he usually did.

“I, um, wanted to give you these. We picked flowers today, and I thought you’d like some.” Sakura held the flowers out to Ryouko. She winced inwardly when Ryouko didn’t take them right away. **What if Ino was right?**

Ryouko blushed- he had never had a girl give him flowers before. He reached out and took them, turning redder when his hand touched Sakura’s. He stood up.

“Th-thank you!” Ryouko bowed to Sakura, who seemed to get more nervous after the gesture. But when Ryouko stood back up, he had a smile on his face for the first time since Sakura had seen him.

“You’re welcome! I’ve gotta go, bye!” Sakura ran out of the classroom, waving over her shoulder.

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“Wow, Sakura! You got him to smile! I guess I owe you that dress...” Ino was surprised that Sakura had won their bet. **She got that stone-faced kid to smile? Wow, that’s really impressive!**

“No, you can keep it, Ino. Making someone like him smile is enough for me,” Sakura told Ino, recalling the cute smile Ryouko had managed. “C’mon, let’s go finish eating!”

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Ryouko looked at the flowers in front of him all day, until it was dismissal time. He got up, and, for once, ran out with the others. He had to get home to tell his Mom about today!

"Bye Iruka-sensei!" Ryouko called to him. "I'll see you tomorrow, I'll be early!"

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Ryouko ran home, still smiling as he slid open the door.

"Mom?! I'm home! I've got to talk to you!" Ryouko yelled happily, finding his mother in the kitchen.

"Ryouko, you're home early today! Is anything wrong?" Shinobu, Ryouko's mother, asked, kneeling down to take her son's coat.

"Kind of...but it's a good thing! Sakura Haruno, she's a girl near my age, she gave me flowers! See?!" Ryouko pointed to the flowers he had laid on the table.

"They're beautiful! Did you remember to thank her?" Shinobu asked with a mother's concern as Ryouko put them in a vase.

"I did! But I didn't know what to do after that. I've never had a girl give me flowers before. Does this mean she likes me or something?"

Shinobu had to laugh at her son's cute confusion. **So a girl took notice of my little Ryouko? I'll have to see if I can get a picture or something.**

"Maybe, but you ARE by yourself a lot, maybe this girl just wants to be your friend." Shinobu had talked to Iruka several times about Ryouko's somewhat anti-social behavior. But when Lord Hokage had stopped by...

"I don't know, Mom. Maybe she WAS just being nice. It was really nice of her to think of me. Oh, and I met Lord Hokage today! He says he's impressed by how hard I study, and that he thinks I could be a great Ninja someday!"

Shinobu gave her son a smile. It wasn't so much what Lord Hokage had said, it was the fact he had gone out of his way to say something to her son. She hadn't seen him so excited since they had come to the Hidden Leaf. It was a relief to know he was still capable of being the happy child he once was.

"That's great, honey!"

Little Ryouko smiled, jumping up and flipping to express himself. "Thanks Mom! I'm gonna go train! I'm be late!"

With that, Ryouko ran outside, with a sword, shuriken, kunai, and an armful of scrolls. He had all the ambition in the world, and was on a natural high right now. **Lord Hokage, Iruka-sensei, Sakura-chan-**

maybe people DO like me here!

--

Ryouko walked carefully through the village, looking at the ground. People always looked at him funny. He knew it was because of his old training. Still, to a seven year old who loved his new home, it was devastating, almost to the point of tears. No one wanted anything to do with him. The other kids weren't so bad, but a few mean ones had ruined him.

"Hey, Ryouko!"

Ryouko looked up slowly, worried at what he did. But it was another kid's voice calling him. Naruto's voice, for that matter. The orange-clad Shinobi wanna-be came running up to Ryouko, knocking a few people off balance as he darted through and around their legs. He skidded short of Ryouko.

"Hi Naruto-kun," Ryouko replied, wondering what Naruto wanted. Aside from pulling a prank or two, Naruto wasn't the type to hang out with Ryouko. Not that anyone was, but the two seemed to be polar opposites.

"Come on, you gotta see this! I swear, I didn't do it this time! I was kinda busy, marking up the Academy blackboards ('I can't wait to see the look on Iruka-sensei's face tomorrow!')" Naruto yelled, towing Ryouko toward whatever mayhem he had caused. Somehow, Ryouko believed Naruto, but all the same had his doubts. **What could be so important? Naruto confesses to stuff all the time, but only after he's been caught.**

It was pretty big indeed. There was Sakura and Ino, surrounded by other kids, mostly boys, throwing water balloons and fruit at the two girls, neither of which were happy. Sakura was already crying, while Ino was shouting something.

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"Why are they doing this, Ino?!" Sakura wailed, crying as an apple bonked her on the head.

"I don't know! Ugh, STOP IT YOU IDIOTS! WE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" Ino shouted. An old tomato found it's way to her, ruining her new white blouse. That got her near tears, too.

Ryouko had seen enough. Prying himself loose from Naruto's grasp, he darted in front of the kunoichi in training, taking several tomatoes, apples, and even melons. He had his arms out in an attitude of protection.

"Stop it!" Ryouko yelled to the crowd. "Why are you doing this?!"

"They're little thieves! They took a ton of manga, and broke people's toys!"

"This is none of your business, Ryouko! Get out of the way!"

But Ryouko didn't move. He couldn't understand it- why weren't any adults helping? If no one else

was going to, then Ryouko was going to help. He had to think really hard at first, but it came back to him. His chakra, and how it could help. He couldn't do jutsus yet, but he could control his chakra. He did now, bringing a supply to his feet.

"Hold on to me, okay?!" Ryouko yelled over the crowd, reaching for Ino and Sakura's hands.

Focus...focus!

Ryouko jumped- and suddenly found himself on the roof, still holding the two girl's hands. The crowd of kids, seeing that they couldn't reach the girls anymore, dispersed, mostly running off to tell adults. Ryouko let go of their hands, and turned around.

"A-Are you okay?" Ryouko stammered, suddenly nervous.

"Y-yeah, I-I think so..." Sakura managed to say.

"W-why'd you help us?" Ino wanted to know. "It's not like it was your problem..."

Ryouko shrugged. "I don't like seeing people getting bullied. I know neither of you did that stuff..."

Little Ino and Sakura were kind of surprised at that. They hardly knew the new boy in class. Now, splattered with vegetables, and a small cut on his face from a rock, they couldn't understand why he would help them. They were thankful nonetheless.

"Oh no, I'm going to be late for dinner, my Mom is gonna kill me!" Sakura suddenly remembered. It was past six o'clock.

"You mean US! I'm supposed to be staying at your house tonight!" Ino suddenly remembered.

"How are we going to get home? We'll just get hit with more stuff!" Sakura already knew that there would be problems with her mother when she saw the state of the brand new clothes Sakura was wearing.

Ryouko spoke up again. "I could...walk you both home. Your parents might believe you if you have me with you. I'll tell them what really happened. I mean, if you want." There was that nervousness again. Ryouko was never good with people. And since even girls bullied him, he wasn't sure what to think.

"T-Thanks Ryouko!"

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"...and that's what happened, Mrs. Haruno. I know they didn't do it, and I didn't want them to get in trouble for something they didn't do. I'm really sorry to have bothered you..."

Mrs. Haruno looked at Ryouko, a small smile growing in her heart. **This is the horrible samurai boy? This little boy has that held against him? People can be so cruel, judging without actually knowing what someone is like.**

The smile in her heart reached her lips. She knelt down to Ryouko, who instinctively flinched a little bit. But Mrs. Haruno just patted him on the head.

“You’re a good boy, Ryouko. Thank you for bringing the girls home safely, and-”

There was a knock at the door. Mrs. Haruno excused herself and opened the door to find a hassled chunin on the other side, followed by a group of parents and their children, some clutching broken toys.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs. Haruno, but I’m afraid I need to take your daughter, as well as Mrs. Yamanaka’s daughter, to see Lord Hokage. Stealing and destroying is serious, even at their age. They need to be disciplined.”

Mrs. Haruno glared at the crowd, the thoughts she just had running through her head. “And just who are you to make accusations of my daughter and her friend? How do you know they did this?! What proof do you have?!”

“We caught them in the act, Ma’am. They took the manga from someone, then stepped on the toys. They were seen.”

Mrs. Haruno didn’t say anything. What COULD she say? Apparently, though, while she had run out of words, someone else had found some more. Ryouko had climbed up the steps to stand next to Mrs. Haruno.

“What if they were PUSHED onto the toys? You said they took the manga from someone, what if that person pushed them? Kids are always pushing each other!” Ryouko almost yelled, but managed to keep his voice quiet.

“Stay out of this!” the chunin snarled at Ryouko. “Don’t get yourself involved, or you’re just as bad as they are!”

“They’re innocent! And what about all the people that threw things at them? What kind of trouble are THEY in?!” Ryouko shot back angrily. Is this how things were? Didn’t anyone look at facts? Wasn’t anyone going to defend those girls?

“That doesn’t concern you!” the chunin shouted. “Saying they DIDN’T do it is the same as saying YOU did it! Did you give them the manga, then push them?!”

“No! But they didn’t do it!” Ryouko finally yelled. “They didn’t even know what was going on! And besides, they were with me after they got stuff thrown at them! Where did the manga go then? How could it have just ‘vanished’?! Toys get broken by accident all the time, but manga doesn’t just disappear!”

One angry parent in the crowd fired a new accusation. “Maybe HE took them! Ryouko’s always reading, maybe he needed something new!”

The crowd rallied behind that parent. Ryouko’s eyes got wider, and even teared a little.

No! I won't cry! I won't! Sakura and Ino didn't do it, and neither did I! I won't cry! But I don't understand why everyone is so cruel. Even if I AM different, why do they have to blame things like this on me? Well, I'm not backing down!

A firm hand grabbed Ryouko's wrist. "Come on, then. You've all but confessed to doing it. We'll just take YOU to Lord Hokage instead!"

With Ino, Sakura, and Mrs. Haruno watching, Ryouko was dragged away by the chunin.

"Mom, he didn't do it! Someone DID push us, but he came running up after! It's true, really!" Sakura yelped, tugging on her mother's sleeve desperately.

"I know, Sakura. But sometimes, doing the right thing isn't easy, you know. I'll do what I can to help Ryouko, okay? You and Ino go ahead and eat, I'll be back shortly." Mrs. Haruno hustled away, following the crowd. Ino and Sakura exchanged glances, then helped themselves to the food Mrs. Haruno had made.

"Hey, Sakura, what do you think of Ryouko?" Ino asked as she picked at her fish with her chopsticks.

"I think he's a nice boy, I guess. I don't really know. It was nice of him to help us, though. Do you think he knew he'd get in trouble like this?" Sakura answered/asked.

"I doubt it. Why would he have helped if he knew he would get blamed in the end?"

Sakura shrugged. "I don't know. I just have this feeling that Ryouko knew something like this might happen. He's different, but it's not a 'scary' different."

2 - Adventure 2- A Big Meeting

Lord Hokage looked at Ryouko, not looking angry, just concerned. Ryouko was sitting in a chair that was way too big for him, making him feel even smaller. The angry crowd behind him wasn't helping him.

I won't cry!

"All of you, please leave and go about your business. I will speak to Ryouko," the Third Hokage said firmly. The crowd left, a few glaring at Ryouko. Ryouko just kept his head down until they left, and even after.

"Ryouko..." Lord Hokage began, coaxing the boy to look at him, "...did you do this?"

"No, Lord Hokage..." Ryouko said quietly.

"Did you see Sakura and Ino do this?"

"No, sir..." Ryouko replied again, this time a snuffle in his voice.

"Do you think Sakura and Ino did this?"

"N-no..."

Lord Hokage was getting a feeling. One more question. "Do you know who did this?"

"No sir."

"Then please tell me what you DO know about all this."

Ryouko looked up, his eyes red, but no tears flowing. "They were getting stuff thrown at them. I didn't know what happened, but I saw Sakura-chan start to cry, so I stepped in front of them. That's how my cheek got cut, when a rock hit me. I held both their hands, then jumped onto the roof. Then I walked them home so that people wouldn't bother them. I told Mrs. Haruno that they didn't do it. I know they didn't, Lord Hokage. I can't prove it, but I'm SURE of it!"

Lord Hokage put his pipe down and walked around his desk to Ryouko, whose head was facing down again.

"How did you know that the girls were in trouble?"

Without thinking, Ryouko said "Naruto-kun came by and led me over...". Upon realizing what he had said, Ryouko shook his head. "Lord Hokage, I mean...Please don't blame Naruto-kun! He's already so sad! You can blame me, I'll take the punishment! Please don't tell I told, I didn't mean to! Don't punish Naruto-kun, or Sakura-chan, or Ino-chan!"

Ryouko finally started to cry, his little mind swollen with fear, and his body marked up from objects hitting him. Ryouko never cried, but so much had happened, he was overwhelmed with emotions.

Lord Hokage bent down and put a hand under Ryouko's chin, forcing Ryouko to look him in the eyes. Then he hugged Ryouko, which shocked the boy so much he stopped crying.

"Do you know that you can learn a lot about a person by looking at their eyes?" Lord Hokage asked, letting go of Ryouko.

Ryouko kind of nodded. "I guess...but I don't know WHAT you learn."

"In your case, I learned that you are telling the truth, and that you truly believe your words. I can tell you aren't lying- I can also tell that you're being brave, and trying to protect people. People you don't even know very well. Please, sit here a moment and think about what I've just told you," Lord Hokage said, walking back around his desk, digging in the drawers for something.

Ryouko thought about it, calmed now. **You can learn by looking at a person's eyes...That's what made Lord Hokage believe me?**

"Emotions are very powerful things, Ryouko. Feelings of love, and hate. Joy and sorrow. They all teach us something, and show us for who we are to others. Do you want to know what I see after speaking with you twice today?" Lord Hokage asked, something in his hands that Ryouko couldn't see. Despite that, Ryouko nodded, wiping his sore, swollen eyes.

"I see a boy who will someday grow tall and strong. I see a seedling that will grow into a sturdy tree. A tree of honor, and trust, and loyalty. A tree that can become a support of this village, and everyone in it. And I see your character, and your intentions, which are pure."

Ryouko looked into Lord Hokage's eyes. **I see...I see a man who loves this village. And I can see...no...that's not it...**

"I have a question, Lord Hokage. What does it mean when you can't see something, but you know it's there?" Ryouko asked, struggling to word his question in an understandable way.

"Can you give me an example, Ryouko?"

Ryouko shifted in his chair, which suddenly didn't seem so much larger than him. "Well, when I looked into your eyes, I couldn't see anything, really. But I felt something...I felt like I could trust you, and that you didn't mean me any harm. And I could feel that you believed me, even though I can't defend my own words. But it wasn't a feeling like pain or something...it was different..."

Lord Hokage clenched his pipe between his teeth. "THAT is called 'sensing', Ryouko. You can 'sense' that I believe you. We all have that ability, some more than others. Have you ever sensed anything else before?"

Ryouko thought hard, his eyes closed in concentration. "Well, I sensed that Naruto's lonely. He always

smiles and plays jokes, but I always got this feeling that he was hurting. And I sensed...well, that a lot of people don't trust me, or don't like me. I don't know which. Does- does that make sense?"

Lord Hokage nodded. "A lot of sense. For now, Ryouko, I think it's better for you to go home and rest. I know you'd like to train, and I won't stop you- maybe you'll be content with reading this scroll for tonight. It starts after the one I found you reading earlier, about the First Hokage. This one is about the Second Hokage, who was my instructor. I think you'll find it interesting."

Ryouko took the scroll, happy to get something from Lord Hokage at all, never mind something so important.

"Thank you, Lord Hokage!" Ryouko hugged the old man, forgetting his character for a moment. Then, the character flooded back, as Ryouko apologized, bowed, apologized again, then walked out the door.

Lord Hokage smiled, sitting back down. **That boy will be fine...**

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As Ryouko's eight birthday came and went, a tragedy shook the Hidden Leaf. Ryouko woke up, ready to go, to find his Mother outside. It seemed everyone was outside. Kids, too. Class had been canceled, and that NEVER happened. Something big had to have gone wrong.

Are we at war? Did Lord Hokage die? Ryouko went through his mental rolodex of problems. Finally, after he had dressed, he walked to the Academy, finding a distraught Iruka returning from somewhere.

"Iruka-sensei? What's going on? Is everything alright?" Ryouko wanted to know. Iruka-sensei looked ready to jump out of his skin.

"Y-you haven't heard, Ryouko?" Iruka asked, surprised. **They haven't told the kid's yet? Are they planning to?**

"No, I haven't heard anything sensei."

Iruka sat on the ground. "Well, Ryouko, last night, the entire Uchiha clan was murdered."

Ryouko's eyes were as big as dinner plates already, but Iruka's further explanation made things even more murky.

"Sasuke is the only one left. The murderer was his own brother, Itachi. Itachi was a prodigy, extremely talented. And, well, last night...he killed them all, except Sasuke."

Ryouko responded with the question on everyone's tongues. "Why did Sasuke live, Sensei?"

Iruka didn't have an answer. "I don't know, Ryouko...I'm not sure..." Iruka suddenly got an idea.

"Ryouko, you're one of the two tops students in class. Do you think you can help me with something, since you're here?"

Ryouko was always ready to help. Iruka-sensei had done a lot for him, so Ryouko never found it irksome to help him. "I'd be happy to, sensei. What can I do?"

Iruka handed Ryouko a key to the school. "We need someone to be in the academy. It's Lord Hokage's orders to make every building look occupied. As you know, the Uchiha clan was our police force. Lord Hokage is worried about robbers. I have to patrol the streets, and I need someone here. And I think you can handle it. But don't be a hero- if there's trouble, yell for help, okay?"

Iruka made sure Ryouko got inside, then had to run off. He wasn't worried about the boy- who would try to rob the school?

--

Ryouko had been sitting in school, studying, for maybe three hours when he sensed something. It was like the Third Hokage had said. Ever since he had mentioned it, Ryouko had sensed a lot of things. This sense wasn't a good one.

There's someone here...and they aren't friendly...but where are they?

Ryouko closed his eyes and tried to sense more. He heard the creaking of floorboards above him. Upstairs! Ryouko darted out of his seat. He thought about yelling for help, but what if no one was there? What if it was just a mouse or something? No, Ryouko was going to look first. A kunai drawn tight to his chest, Ryouko peeked up the stairs, seeing a shadow. Ducking back, Ryouko wished he had brought a mirror to look around the corner with. But he hadn't, so he had to make do with what he could. Now eight, Ryouko had learned two jutsus. One of which was going to come in handy right now.

"Transform!" Ryouko whispered. POOF! A cloud of smoke hid him as he turned into the first adult that popped into his head- Iruka.

-

Joubo walked carefully down the stairs, grumbling about such a weak assignment. **The school? Nothing here but outdated textbooks and scrolls! Damn, I always get these lousy missions!**

Joubo was twenty years old, and a thief. Not very skilled, his boss always gave him easy jobs. A deserted school wasn't an assignment that anyone could screw up. But this school wasn't deserted. As Joubo walked around the corner, something popped up behind him.

"You're not from this village!" the voice said in surprise. Joubo cursed- he had been caught. He turned around, finding a chunin holding a kunai. The kunai was inches away from Joubo's neck.

"Huh? A transformation?" Joubo said to himself. He put his hands together. "RELEASE!"

Joubo watched the chunin melt away, until there was a small boy in his place. The boy had a look of determination on his face. Dressed in black pants and a white shirt, with a thick crop of dark brown hair, the boy didn't look threatening.

“You little- YOU caught me? I’m losing my touch!” Joubo reached out to grab Ryouko, who instinctively swiped at the incoming hand with his kunai. As Joubo yelled out in pain, Ryouko ran to the window.

“HELP! ROBBER AT THE ACADEMY! HELP AT THE ACADEMY!” he shouted, before turning around, finding a knife whizzing toward him. Ryouko dodged to the side and covered his heart, as they taught in the academy. But the kunai had struck his arm, causing a decent-sized cut to start bleeding pretty heavily. The feeling of the pain made Ryouko sick, but he didn’t throw up. Help was on the way, he just had to hold out.

“So, that didn’t kill you? Then I WILL!” Joubo ran forward. Ryouko, his eyes wide, threw the kunai desperately, hitting Joubo in the lower stomach. That stopped the big robber in his tracks.

Tok tok tok tok tok.

Iruka, two senseis Ryouko didn’t know, and one person Ryouko knew to be in ANBU Black Ops all landed next to him. They saw Ryouko, then they saw the big bandit lying on the ground. Then they saw the wounds both had. Iruka ran to Ryouko, while the others took care of the robber.

“Get him to the hospital! I’ll take Ryouko!” Iruka called to the others, who acted on those wishes immediately. Iruka winced, waiting for Ryouko to cry. Instead, he found the telltale inquisitive brown eyes looking at him.

“Iruka-sensei, are you okay?” Ryouko wanted to know.

Iruka kind of laughed. “Shouldn’t I be asking you? Doesn’t that hurt, Ryouko?”

“Yes, sensei. But I’m not scared. He barely got me, I won’t die from this…” Despite that, Ryouko looked scared of something. It wasn’t long before he voiced it.

“Sensei, are you mad at me for fighting?”

Iruka had to smile with relief. “No. You DID call for help, like I asked. Then you did the brave thing and fought the robber. I’m proud of you.” But that didn’t ease Ryouko.

“I could have called sooner. But I wasn’t sure it was a robber yet. I didn’t want to bother anyone until I was sure.”

After more reassurance from Iruka, Ryouko willingly let Iruka lead him to the hospital. Ryouko was told he was brave by lots of people, and when he didn’t cry out when he got a shot, even the medics commented that someone so young was brave.

“What about the robber? Did I kill him? I didn’t mean to, if I did…am I going to jail?” Ryouko finally asked Iruka, who had sat with him the entire time, even when Ryouko’s mother came.

“No, he’ll be fine. And you won’t go to jail, you were only doing your job, and acting in self-defense. If anyone should go to jail, it’s me for giving you an assignment like that! I don’t know what I was thinking! Even if it WAS just the academy, I shouldn’t have left you alone!”

Ryouko had already assured Iruka it was okay. "I'm going to be a ninja someday, and I'll be doing stuff like this all the time. I'm just happy my Transformation Jutsu worked right, at least for a little while!"

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Iruka pulled Shinobu, Ryouko's mother, aside.

"I want you to know- your son is a joy to have in class. I AM worried about his social skills, but he works hard and tries his best. He's second in the class right now, and not far from the first in class, Neji Hyuuga. You're sure you have no ninja blood?"

Shinobu nodded. "That's right. Ryouko just likes it here so much. The village, the people. Every day, he comes home and writes his notes down onto a scroll, then he goes outside to train. He'll be gone for hours some times, but for the first time in his life, I think he's truly happy."

--

Within a few weeks, Sasuke Uchiha was back in class. His new attitude seemed to create a stir, especially among the female students. It seemed like Sasuke was the talk of the lunch room now. Every girl wanted to marry him and have kids, it seemed. The brooding raven-haired hope of the Uchiha clan was suddenly THE person to be seen with.

This didn't really bother Ryouko so much. Until, one day, he overheard Sakura and Ino saying that they would each marry Sasuke. Ryouko hadn't thought much until then, but he found he liked Sakura. She treated him nicely, and he thought she was kind of pretty. So it was kind of a first crush for Ryouko. But he didn't know how to act on it, or what to do. He didn't even know about 'dating', or even how to tell a girl that he liked her. Now, that didn't seem to matter, since Sakura liked Sasuke. It would be wrong to tell Sakura that he liked her, because then Sasuke might not have someone who really liked him. And Sasuke had enough trouble.

At least that's how Ryouko's eight year old mind processed all this. Instead of speaking up, Ryouko backed down and quietly kept training.

One day, Ryouko saw a girl that wasn't fascinated with Itachi Uchiha. She was pretty, and the same age as him, with big brown eyes, and two buns on hair on either side of her head. But soon, Ryouko saw she was fascinated with another student. Neji. He was the top in the class. Ryouko decided that he needed to be as good, or better, than Neji. He didn't really understand that he liked Tenten, and he didn't know her. He just remembered how good it felt to have a girl be nice to him. It made him feel like he fit in, like he belonged.

So it began. Ryouko studied even harder, and did everything he could to be better than Neji. But no matter what, Ryouko was always behind him. He was never good enough to be number one. Week after week, Neji remained the top student in class. Sasuke was a year behind Ryouko, but was just as good as Neji. Ryouko finally became frustrated one day and decided he simply wouldn't leave the academy for a day. After obtaining permission from his mother and Iruka (which took some work on Ryouko's part), Ryouko was allowed to stay overnight in the academy. Sleep wasn't in his plans, as he ate

through four scrolls in twenty-four hours. Ryouko only stopped when Iruka came in to get set up for the day and found Ryouko still working.

“Ryouko, you haven’t slept yet?!” Iruka fretted. An adult doing that was one thing- but an eight year old boy, staying up all night studying? It wasn’t healthy.

“No, sensei,” Ryouko answered, prying his eyes from the scroll.

Iruka knew something was going on with Ryouko. “Ryouko, what’s wrong? You’ve always worked hard, but this is unhealthy. I know something’s bothering you. Why don’t you tell me what it is, and I’ll help?”

Ryouko looked at the ground. “It’s...well, kind of embarrassing, sensei...” but Ryouko told Iruka everything. He couldn’t quite explain his fondness for Tenten and Sakura, but he had no trouble expressing his disappointment that his hard work wasn’t getting him to the top of the class.

“...and it’s getting frustrating, Iruka-sensei. No matter how hard I try, Neji and even Sasuke are always ahead of me.”

Iruka recognized what Ryouko was saying. **So it’s a case of first love? Oh boy...I’m not sure how to handle this one. I know Lord Hokage said to let things like this work themselves out, but...** That’s when Iruka got an idea.

“Ryouko, did you know there’s someone who works as hard as you, but is near the bottom of the class? He tries, but he just can’t do it. Can you think of who I mean?”

Ryouko couldn’t, and he said so.

“Rock Lee. He tries, but he just can’t do ninjutsu or genjutsu. If I graded on effort only, you two would be at the top of the class. Neji and Sasuke are rare people- they both come from strong families. You and Lee don’t, and sometimes that means that you’re a little behind. That doesn’t make you any less strong or valuable.” Iruka got up and walked away, hearing someone cry. But he hoped Ryouko would take the bait.

Rock Lee could use a supporter or two...

3 - Adventure 3- Relationships

"I cannot do it. No matter how hard I try, I am not able to succeed!" a young Rock Lee wailed as he failed yet again at the Transformation Jutsu.

"Just give it up, Lee. Your fate is to be a loser, you have to accept it," came the cynical reply of Neji Hyuuga.

Tenten watched quietly, not sure what to say. She felt bad for Lee, but Neji wasn't tops in the class for nothing.

"I will not listen to you!" Lee shouted, trying again, but not getting any closer to succeeding. Neji chuckled at Lee's failure.

"You're only serving to prove my point, Lee. Some of us are born to fail, and some to succeed. I have the genius blood of the Hyuuga clan, and you have the stench of failure!"

"You've also got a giant ego, Neji-kun," said the newly-arrived Ryouko. Leaping down from his perch on a nearby tree, Ryouko had heard enough. "It's not your place to tell Lee what he can and can't do."

"Oh, it's you. Number two, as always. Go study or something, no one asked you for your opinion," Neji said dismissively.

"I don't care. Leave Lee-kun alone, Neji-kun. You don't need to be picking on him just because you've got some age-old genius blood. Why don't you leave him alone, what's he done to you? And no one asked for YOUR opinion either..." Ryouko's frown grew longer.

"Are you suggesting I pick on someone else? Such as you?" Neji took a step toward Ryouko. Both boys were starting each other down, daring the other to back off. "And if you're talking about blood, what about yours? It's just as empty and worthless as Lee's! Neither of you should be called Shinobi!"

"Shut up, Neji!" Ryouko growled, shifting his weight in case Neji attacked.

"Come on guys, stop! Neji-kun, let's just go, okay?" Tenten urged, trying to end this. Even as she said it, she knew it was hopeless. Quietly, Tenten left to get Iruka-sensei; he could put a stop to this.

"Make me, then, you filthy little samurai peasant! You're not even good enough to clean my sandals. You and Lee are both worthless failures. You'll die the second you're in combat against someone with any talent, and you know it!"

Crack!

Ryouko's fist flashed out and hit a shocked Neji in the nose.

"I'm still alive, and it's past one second," Ryouko commented dryly. "I don't care if you pick on me, that just makes you the same as a lot of people, despite your 'superior blood'. But you have no reason to bother Lee-kun."

Neji got up and tackled Ryouko, turning this into a brawl. Both boys punched, then had each other in headlocks as Iruka came running over, followed by a worried Tenten. Being young, Ryouko and Neji couldn't put much behind their punches, so this was barely a fight. But all the same, it couldn't go on.

"Okay, break it up! BREAK IT UP!" Iruka collared both boys and held them apart. They didn't break their gazes on each other.

"Iruka-sensei, I hit Neji-kun first. It's my fault. You don't need to punish him, I started the fight," Ryouko said, not sounding disappointed in himself for a change.

Iruka didn't believe that for a second, but decided to play dumb. Tenten had already told him what had REALLY happened.

"Okay Ryouko, that's how we'll do it. You'll stay late with me today. And no more fighting, do you understand?"

"Yes, Iruka-sensei. No more fighting," Ryouko repeated, feeling Neji's gaze washing over him. He also felt Lee and Tenten's eyes searching him.

--

Ryouko waited outside the classroom, still angry at Neji, but even more at himself. **I shouldn't have gotten so angry. I hit him first, it's my fault. It's wrong to start fights. I deserve what I get.**

"Ryouko, come in, please," Iruka called. Ryouko got up and walked in, his eye blackened and his arm cut from the fight. When he walked in, Ryouko saw Lee and Tenten sitting down next to Iruka-sensei, both of looking a mix of worried and relieved.

"Ryouko, they told me what happened. You threw the first punch, but Neji provoked you and Lee. I can't condone fighting, but I understand WHY you hit Neji. All three of us agree that it was nice of you to take the blame after defending your friend. Do you understand that hitting Neji was wrong?"

Ryouko nodded calmly. "Yes. I shouldn't have lost my temper and hit him, no matter what he said. It's my fault for losing control."

Iruka shook his head. "Well, okay then. I can't punish you for doing the right thing. But I don't want you to hit Neji again. If he bothers you or Lee, you are to tell me, not fight him. Understand?"

"I follow you, sensei."

-

Ryouko was walking home when he saw Lee sitting on a rock, despair written all over his face.

Something tugged at Ryouko, and he walked over. He didn't notice Tenten watching the whole thing from a distance.

"Are you okay, Lee-kun?"

Lee didn't look up. He simply asked "why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? Why, what?" Ryouko wanted to know. He was playing dumb, but he didn't want to make Lee feel worse by sounding superior.

"Why would you defend me? I do not even know you..." Lee murmured, tears running down his face. Ryouko kind of shrugged.

"Because it's the right thing to do. It's not fair that you get treated like that. I know how it feels, and I don't want anyone else to go through it. You haven't done anything to deserve the abuse Neji-kun gives you. You're also too nice to hit him for it. So, I just heard enough of him mouthing off...and I decided to knock his genius face into the dirt," Ryouko said the last part happily, laughing at himself. "It wasn't smart of me, I should have just talked to you instead. But Neji-kun irritates me."

Lee seemed to calm down now, and could meet Ryouko's gaze. "Thank you for standing up for me. But please do not do it again, I do not want you to get in trouble on my account."

"Fair enough. I already told Iruka-sensei I wouldn't hit Neji-kun again anyway." Ryouko looked up at the sky. "I've gotta go train now. See you in class, Lee-kun!" With that, Ryouko took off running to a training spot in the woods. He didn't notice Tenten following him at a distance.

-

Ryouko looked at his weapons, trying to choose which to use first. His hand, by chance, picked his bo. It was a six foot long wooden staff, the most simple weapon. But when used properly, one of the most effective. He was halfway through his first exercise when he heard a crunch behind him. Ryouko turned carefully, surprised to see Tenten standing there.

"Hi, Ryouko-kun..." Tenten said, looking over Ryouko's weapons.

"Hi, Tenten-chan..." Ryouko replied nervously, trying to figure out why Tenten was here. **Why did she follow me? Is she mad because I hit Neji? Is she going to hit me? I can't hit her back, hitting a girl is wrong! That's what Dad says, anyway.**

Tenten tilted her head, and took a step toward Ryouko. "Are you...afraid of me?"

Ryouko was at a crossroads here. His first thought as a boy was to say 'no way!'. His second thought was his upbringing, in which you told the truth all the time.

"Kind of...I mean, well, not so much you, I guess. You're a girl, and I'm...not. And I guess I'm kinda worried you're gonna be mad at me for hitting Neji-kun..." Ryouko said, his upbringing and his instincts working out a compromise. His upbringing reminded Ryouko. Snapping his arms to the side, he bowed.

“I’m sorry for hitting Neji in front of you.”

Tenten cocked her head again. “Are you for real? You’re apologizing for hitting someone in front of me? Well, that’s kinda cute...but still, don’t apologize for that. It’s not the first time a guy has punched someone in front of me, and it won’t be the last. Besides...” Tenten was playing with a bo of her own now, “...Neji deserved that. Thank for standing up for Lee, it was really nice of you.”

Ryouko blushed with pride. “Th-thank you!” He found he WAS scared of Tenten, just because she was a girl- the ‘unknown’.

“So, what were you doing anyway? That wasn’t like the stuff they taught us at the academy. It was really different, in a good way,” Tenten pointed to the bo, trying to mimic what Ryouko had been doing.

“Oh, that was some stuff from a couple martial arts I took before I came here. I always do them to keep in practice. I could show you, if you wanted...” Ryouko rubbed the back of his head, not sure how to react to all this attention.

“Please do!” Tenten took the same grip Ryouko did on her bo, and tried to follow along as he made different moves, and stumbled through explanation as to what the moves were, and why they worked.

“I get it! You’re a good teacher, Ryouko-kun. Um, hey...can I shorten your name when we’re talking like this, just the two of us, I mean?” Tenten asked, suddenly shy herself. “Can I call you ‘Ryo-kun’?”

“Okay. Can I call you ‘Ten-chan’ instead?”

“Sure, that’s okay. Can we do this again? You’ve got some weapons here I don’t even know about...like this thingy...”

Ryouko nodded, feeling his cheeks turning red. **What is this feeling?** “If you’d like to. I had fun, and my training was really designed to be done with a partner.”

--

A couple weeks went by. Tenten and Ryouko trained together with weapons almost everyday. The improvement in both of them was noticeable immediately. Various instructors commented on the improvements. Praise was rare, and getting it was a big deal. But all good things must come to an end.

Ryouko was walking with Tenten to the place they had trained every day for over two weeks. They were both quiet, thinking about their training. Ryouko was confused, however- did being with Tenten everyday make them boyfriend and girlfriend? And was this something you asked the girl in question? Not that Ryouko could get the guts up to. He didn’t even know what boyfriends and girlfriends did. It was pleasant, just hanging out like this. Training, sometimes talking.

“Thanks for training with me, Ten-chan.,” Ryouko said, mostly to break the silence. Tenten usually was a little more talkative. Ryouko could sense something was wrong.

“About that, Ryo-kun...I don’t think we should train like this anymore...” Tenten said evasively, not meeting Ryouko’s eyes.

Ryouko’s first thought was ‘What did I do?’ And he almost said that. Instead, he asked the better question: “Why, what’s wrong?”

“It’s...well, Neji. I like you, Ryo-kun, but I’ve known Neji longer, and he says he’ll stop being friends with me if you and I keep training together...”

Ryouko was filled with a surge of anger. His tiny fist clenched in a ball of rage. He stopped walking, eyes at the ground.

“So...this is Neji...” Ryouko wanted to rip Neji apart, but knew he couldn’t- he had promised Iruka-sensei he wouldn’t hit him again.

“Yeah...I’m really sorry, Ryo-kun...but we can keep being friends, even if we can’t train together. It’s not so bad...c’mon, cheer up, don’t be like that. Instead of being insulted, just think of it as Neji considering you a threat. Or maybe he’s jealous.”

Ryouko’s fist unclenched. “You’re right, I shouldn’t lose my temper. And I understand.” Ryouko put a hand up in a wave. “I’ve got to get to training, okay? See you in class, Ten-chan!”

“O-okay, Ryo-kun...” Tenten said, definitely bothered. But Ryouko’s reaction soon eased her worry. **He’s not upset...I thought he would be...But if he’s okay with this...**

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Ryouko wasn’t okay with this, but what could he do? It wasn’t Tenten’s fault; telling someone wouldn’t help; Neji was irritating. Nothing to be done about any of those things. All the same, Ryouko was upset about losing a training partner. And, in his mind, he and Tenten weren’t really friends, even if he acted the part. He didn’t HATE her, and he didn’t blame her. But it just wasn’t the same. Neji had beat him again, this time at something even more personal. Ryouko’s response was to study even harder.

--+

Ryouko’s ninth and tenth birthdays had come, with still very little turbulence in his life. He was still second in the class, but besides that, things were going very well. It was at this point in his life that Ryouko developed what would become a habit- studying for several hours straight, sometimes forgetting to eat, and not bothering to sleep. But no one questioned him, at least not to his face. Being by himself all time wasn’t healthy, but there was nothing Ryouko could do. There was no one who trained like him at his level, and everyone else was too busy.

But Shinobu was worried, and appealed to Ryouko’s father.

“He’s ten years old, and he’s a boy. He has no creative outlet, and he needs a friend. Every boy should have a dog. It’s only natural. And I picked out the cutest puppy, and I know he’ll love her!”

--

Ryouko closed his eyes, letting himself drift off to sleep on his tatami mat-covered floor. After a couple hours, he was awakened by something sitting on his chest. It wasn't heavy, but very warm. As his sleep-hindered eyes opened, Ryouko found two large, brown eyes staring at him.

"AHHH!" he yelled, wondering what monster was pinning him down.

"Ryouko? What's the matter?! I- oh! I see you've found her!" Shinobu said happily, picking up the scary bundle of fluff that Ryouko was currently staring at.

"Mom? What is it?" Ryouko stared at what his mother was holding, eyes wide with surprise.

"Ryouko, it's your dog! She's a Keeshonden puppy, and her name is Holly. Your father and I decided you're alone too often, and you need a companion. That's what Holly is for. Go on, pet her, I know you'll love her!" Shinobu said with a big smile. Ryouko stood up and walked over. Slowly, he put his hand out. The puppy didn't do anything- she just stared back, apparently as curious as Ryouko.

"Holly?" he repeated, making sure of the little dog's name. At his Mother's nod, Ryouko extended his hand the rest of the way and touched the dog's head. She was warm and fluffy. Not the most masculine dog in the world, but she was certainly affectionate. Holly suddenly jumped from Shinobu's arms, right to Ryouko. Ryouko caught her, still in shock from his awakening. The little puppy seemed to sigh, then proceeded to give Ryouko's cheek a lick. It was love at first site. Ryouko felt an acceptance from this animal that few humans had given him.

-

It was while walking Holly that Ryouko met three new people. Well, he knew their names, but not them personally.

"Say, good looking dog you got, kid! Right Akamaru?"

"Ruff!"

Ryouko knew that this was Kiba. He turned around to thank Kiba, finding that he wasn't alone. With him was a guy that Ryouko hadn't heard speak more than two words. One of the two words he HAD said was his name- Shino. Next to Shino was a nervous looking girl Ryouko kind of new. But he only knew her as Neji's cousin, so he really didn't know what to think of her. After all, maybe she hated him because of his fight with Neji.

"Thanks. It's...Kiba, right?" Ryouko asked cautiously, letting Holly wander over to Akamaru. The two began to tumble around. When Ryouko noticed Kiba didn't mind, he decided that he didn't either. Both owners watched their dogs at play, then continued talking.

"You're a year ahead of me, aren't you?" Kiba questioned. He took a whiff of the air. "You smell older- your chakra is stronger."

“Uh, thanks, I guess.” Ryouko wasn’t sure what to say to that. It wasn’t a greeting he had gotten before.

“Oh, yeah- this is Hinata and Shino. Our parents all know each other, or used to work together or something. I didn’t really pay much attention, ya know? More important things, like training Akamaru!”

“...He decked Neji...”

Ryouko smacked himself inwards. The kid who was always playing with bugs FINALLY speaks up, and it’s about that stupid fight! Unconsciously, Ryouko looked to Hinata. He was surprised to find that she still looked the same- no anger, no tension, just nerves. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not- maybe she was just too angry to yell or something? Who knew.

“Looks like our dogs get along. Guess that means we’ll be hanging out now, at least until they aren’t puppies anymore. They gotta get their exercise, and it’s better if they learn to behave when other dogs are around. No offense, Ryouko, but you aren’t the type of guy I’d normally hang out with.” It seemed Kiba’s strong point wasn’t subtlety.

“No?” Ryouko was a little surprised- he didn’t know a darn thing about Kiba, but Kiba seemed to know a lot about him.

“Yeah, you’re super-serious, always studying. But you know, you aren’t some teacher’s pet kiss-@\$\$\$. You’re good. I can respect that, even if I can’t understand it.”

“Thank you. You really know your animals...” Ryouko tried to think of a way to end the uncomfortable conversation quickly. Training! “I’ve got to get back to training, I just wanted to get Holly out for a while. It was nice meeting all of you!”

4 - Adventure 4: His First Mission

“I’m telling you Choji, it’s a drag. My Mom is so troublesome. Sheesh, she wonders why I sleep all the time- I don’t have to hear her when I’m asleep, you know?”

“I hear you, Shikamaru. But man, she can cook! These dumplings are out of this world!” Choji declared, happily scarfing down what Shikamaru didn’t want from his lunch. Anything his mom made wound up tasting like crap to Shikamaru. He just considered the source, and decided he would rather be hungry than fill himself on food that had come from such a source.

“You must like sleeping as much as I like eating, Shikamaru!” Choji laughed around a mouthful of dumplings. To him, they were delicious. Almost anything was, but if you got around her naggingness, Shikamaru’s mom really COULD cook!

Shikamaru had to smirk. “Yeah, I guess so. C’mon, let’s get upstairs, the clouds are great today. Man, I envy clouds!”

Choji and Shikamaru climbed the stairs, not in any particular hurry. But Choji, upstairs first, saw someone lying there.

“Whoa! Shikamaru, there’s a body up here!” Choji almost shouted, backing down the steps.

“Nah, Choji, it’s just that kid from the year ahead of us. You know, the one who studies, then passes out somewhere? Geez, why’d he have to pick here, of all places? There are, like, four hundred other rooftops in this village. What a pain.”

Choji tapped his chin. “Shikamaru, maybe we should talk to him. I mean...you’re really good at dealing with people who are worthless, like me. You’re always saying I’ve got some inner-strength or something. I don’t feel it, but you’re never wrong. How about this guy? Does he have that inner-strength, or something? I mean... I was alone, too, before you and I became friends.”

Shikamaru kind of shrugged, rolling one shoulder. “Choji, it’s different with this guy. He doesn’t really want people. Well, maybe, deep down...but the thing is, with you, I could see right into you. This guy has a little more to him, you know? More emotional baggage or something. I can’t quite figure him out. He’s a nice enough guy, I guess. C’mon, let’s at least wake him up before some sensei finds him.”

-

Ryouko woke up, propped up on a bench. “I passed out again? That’s not good,” he commented, stretching his neck. That was when he realized he wasn’t alone. Two other kids were around. He didn’t know them very well, aside from the fact that one slept a lot, while the other ate a lot. He also noticed that they weren’t bullies.

“Sorry for getting in the way,” Ryouko mumbled, apologizing without really knowing if he had done

anything wrong.

“Hey, no problem! It’s not like you bothered us, or tried to steal my food, ‘cause that would’ve been unforgivable!” Choji laughed heartily, offering Ryouko a hand up. Ryouko took it, letting the powerful boy pull him to his feet.

“Thanks. My name’s Ryouko. I’ve seen you guys in class, but I don’t really know you...” Ryouko looked from the heavyset boy to the sleepy kid, trying to remember their names. The sleepy one yawned, then sat up, as he had been laying down, watching the clouds.

“I’m Shikamaru, I’m from the Nara clan, and this is my buddy, Choji, from the Akimichi clan. I’m not surprised you don’t know us, since you’re always studying. All that work has gotta be a drag.”

Ryouko sort of blinked, then felt awkward. “I’m Ryouko, I don’t really have a clan name. We couldn’t keep it when we came here, and I forgot it. But it’s nice to meet you both.”

Shikamaru and Choji exchanged glances. Shikamaru gave a slight nod to Choji, who smiled and returned the nod before turning to face Ryouko.

“Here. If you’re going to study like that, you should have some of these. My family makes these things...” Choji explained, handing a leather pouch to Ryouko. “...They’re used by ANBU. They’re these food pills that let you stay away for three days, it’s pretty cool! But after those three days, watch out, you crash like a ton of bricks! Faster than Shikamaru during a test!”

Shikamaru gave Choji a joking shove at the quip about his sleeping habits.

“Thanks!” Ryouko replied with a smile. **Oh man, I need a lifetime supply of these!** “See you in class, I’ve got to get home and let my Mom know I’m okay, I told her I’d be home an hour ago. (laughs) She won’t be TOO mad, I’m always like this. Thanks again!”

Ryouko took off, walking home instead of running, as he was still pretty groggy from passing out like that.

Nice guys, both of them.

As Ryouko met more people, he became aware of something, some kind of feeling. But he couldn’t figure out what it was. That’s when he realized he had met people in groups.

So that’s it...they’re friends. And they’re all nice enough to include me, even though I don’t really belong. I love this village!

--

Over the next few weeks, Ryouko received a lot of attention because of Holly. But nothing could have prepared Ryouko for what happened one morning.

“Hey...hey...HEY! WAKE UP, KID!”

Ryouko sat up groggily, realizing he had fallen asleep only three hours ago. It wasn't time to get up yet. So who had woken him up? He looked around, seeing Holly perched at the end of his futon. She casually trotted up to him, so her large brown eyes were right in Ryouko's face.

"FINALLY! Lazy kid!" Holly grumbled. Wait...HOLLY grumbled?

"You can talk?!" Ryouko uttered, surprised.

"Duh. You can listen? THERE'S a shock!" Holly shot back. "Listen kid, I've been trying to wake you up- I'm crossing all four legs here! I've gotta pee, and since you're my 'owner' (yeah, right!), it's your job to take me out. So get to it already! Up and at em!" Holly stuck her cold, wet nose under Ryouko's blanket, aiming for a spot where his robe had bunched up and left his back open.

"Yii! Alright, alright, I'll take you out! Don't do that!" Ryouko yelped, reaching for Holly's leash. She bit down on his leg, causing him to drop it.

"I don't need that damn thing, I know where we're going! (besides, it's degrading! How about I tie a rope around *your* neck and take you out to pee while others watch?!) Just get up and walk with me!" Holly let go and started to walk, a dumbfounded Ryouko following her. His thoughts wandered, as he was still half-asleep.

I'm taking orders from my dog...I've seen some weird things, but this...wow...

--

Test day. Ryouko and Neji were across the room from each other. From the minute Iruka said 'begin', the race was on. Ryouko and Neji each finished within fifteen minutes, with Ryouko's pencil hitting his desk just seconds after Neji's.

Iruka had watched them both, sighing inwardly. **Ryouko can't beat Neji, it's just not in the cards. He's not giving up, though. Maybe, with Neji as a...can't say rival, and enemy isn't it...well, whatever they mean to each other, Ryouko will keep studying. He's kept Neji on his toes, even with the Hyuuga genius in him.**

Elsewhere in the room, Rock Lee had finished. There had been a noticeable change in him, too. He had cut the long ponytail off and let his eyebrows grow wide and bushy. He was the third to finish the test, about two minutes after Ryouko. Fourth was Tenten, who seemed apprehensive about the tension between Ryouko and Neji. Her eyes had been on her paper, but it was clear her mind was elsewhere, as she and Lee usually finished their tests about the same time.

Ever since Lee met Gai, he's been different. He still can't do any ninjutsu, but his taijutsu has improved... Iruka thought, happy for Lee. I wonder...Ryouko is out a training partner...maybe he and Lee might train together...I'll leave that up to them. It seems like Ryouko's become kind of protective of Lee, ever since Neji started that fight...Maybe that's a good thing. Those two need support, and maybe than can work off of each other.

--

"The top scores...Neji, 100%...Ryouko, 98%...Lee and Tenten 96%..."

Neji looked smug, but not as much as usual. He glanced at Ryouko, who was already thumbing through his test paper, looking to see what had been marked wrong. Ryouko nodded his head, looking as though he had mentally slapped himself for making some stupid mistake.

"I'm very proud of all of you. You're studying hard, and doing very well. This class has been very impressive. As a reward, you can have tomorrow off! Go and enjoy yourselves!"

The class cheered at Iruka's announcement, flooding out of the classroom as fast as their little legs could carry them. Smiling, Iruka turned back to his work, only to hear Ryouko's quiet voice.

"Sensei? May I see my overall grade for the year?" he asked, as he did after every test. Iruka had the paper out already. There was another paper covering it, with a slit open so Ryouko could see his name and rank.

Ryouko looked, sighing. "Average is 98%...Attendance is 99%...my rank is...second. ..." Ryouko stayed silent for a moment, thinking about what he had just seen. Then he bowed. "Thank you, sensei. See you later."

Iruka heard Ryouko's sandals clip-clopping across the floor as he walked out of the room. He was clearly unhappy, but was trying not to show it. It was a foregone conclusion that Neji Hyuuga was going to come out in first place, but Ryouko just couldn't accept that. It was going to be a crushing defeat, it seemed. He had closed the gap between himself and Neji, but where Ryouko had a 98% average, Neji had 99%. Ryouko still had a chance to catch up, but it wasn't likely...

--

Ryouko was walking home by himself, getting ready to go train, when he heard the someone following him.

"Why do you keep trying like that?" the person behind Ryouko asked. Ryouko turned, seeing Neji standing behind him on the dirt path, arms crossed.

"Because I enjoy it. And being the best is my goal." Ryouko turned to face Neji completely, not trust him in the least.

"It's an impossible goal. Even if I weren't in your way, then Sasuke Uchiha would be better than you. You must know that, so why would you..." Neji let his voice trail off as Ryouko shifted, his back straighter.

"Because I'll be there, on the front line. You and Sasuke are the pride of this village. No matter how good I am, I don't have the same blood you do. So I have to be good, and better than almost everyone, to protect everyone who's important to me. This entire village is such a nice place, and almost everyone has been nice to me. They like how hard I work, and so do I."

That was a strange answer, but Neji didn't press it any further. He simply walked away, trying to make sense of what he had just been told. Ryouko just ran home, wondering how such adult-sounding words could just come to him like that.

But it was all true...if there's a war, I'll just be another name, just one more person to be killed. I...I want to be something special! I want to mean something!

This has become something more than the longing of a small boy. Ryouko was indeed just that, a small boy with big hopes, but he was also someone who was unremarkable. Or so he thought. He had won a village over with little more than honesty and love. When it came down to it, no one knew how strong he was, not even Ryouko himself. But in a time of peace, there would be little chance to prove it. Excelling in the classroom was one thing, being something special outside of it was another matter entirely.

--

Ryouko wasn't sure what to do now. He sat still, waiting for someone to tell him. Holly sat next to him, complaining about how hot it was.

"Ryouko, sorry for the wait. I just have a few questions, okay?" Iruka asked from the classroom, beckoning him inside.

"So this is him, Iruka? Interesting," said one person in the room. "How are you?" he asked, talking to Ryouko. The other one in the room besides Iruka coughed, but offered a friendly nod.

Ryouko didn't know the person who was asking. He knew the person was at least a chunin, and he had seen him around. With a backwards hitai-ate and a senbon in his mouth, he wasn't hard to remember. Same with his friend, the guy with the bags under his eyes, and a persistent cough.

"I'm okay, thank you..." Ryouko said carefully, looking at Iruka-sensei, looking for permission to answer their questions as well. Iruka chuckled, remembering that, despite his grades, Ryouko was still a young boy, and likely intimidated by a room full of instructors.

"Ryouko, I'd like you to go with these two today. This one (Senbon and backwards hitai-ate) is Genma, and that is Hayate (bags and cough). They're doing a routine patrol just outside the village. I want you to help them, and get some air while you're at it. Think of it as a treat for being so good- but remember, you'll be evaluated."

Ryouko nodded eagerly, happy to be included. He waited for further instructions.

"Bring your tools, and a weapon. Whatever you're most comfortable with. I've already gotten permission from your parents for you to do this, so don't worry about that. Just be ready to go in a little while, okay?"

Ryouko bowed, then ran off to get ready. Iruka couldn't help but smile at his enthusiasm.

"Geez, to be young again and be excited about patrolling," Genma commented, smirking. "Well, he

seems like a good kid. But it's not like you to ask us to babysit, Iruka. Especially not when there's a threat around. Those bandits are out, you know that. So why get the kid involved?"

Iruka stood up. "He's the one who apprehended the first bandit, in the academy. And, to be honest, he has self-esteem issues, and he needs something like this. He's always number two, right behind Neji, and that's not an obstacle he'll ever come, at least not easily. But he deserves this, and he'll work hard for you."

"(koff) I've seen him train. He's got drive, if nothing else (koff)," Hayate said, then added, "although he seems talented (koff) by himself."

"It's hard to tell at that age, unless they've got some kind of famous blood in them. Still, I HAVE heard about his training...does he really train until he passes out?" Genma murmured. Iruka nodded.

"I spoke with his parents. He's never worked so hard, or been so happy, until he came here. He's befriended the 'class loser', and even tolerates Naruto. Without a drop of Shinobi blood, not an ounce of our history. But his desire to belong...well, he's almost inspiring."

"Huh. Well then. If you say he can handle it, Iruka, we believe you. You're the last one to let your students take unnecessary risks. What's he supposed to be doing on this 'mission', anyway?" Genma wasn't thrilled about some little kid getting in the way all the time.

"Give him some kind of instructions, see if he follows them. Maybe let him set a trap or two. You know, stuff that you would give a genin."

Genma looked ready to protest, but Hayate coughed and nodded.

"We'll give him some room to work (cough)." Hayate had seen the other part of Ryouko's training- the part with swords. It was impressive. The boy had grace, but was also disciplined as a samurai. Hayate didn't have famous ninja blood either, but he had become a dependable Tokubetsu Jonin, and had mastered an A-ranked jutsu at a very young age. He had a gut feeling Ryouko could be the same way. Hayate didn't want to teach a squad, but maybe helping one kid couldn't hurt...

--

"Hayate, why're you so intent on helping some kid you don't know?" Genma finally asked. The question had been bothering him for some time now.

"Because of what I saw...(koff)someone who cares about this place...most (koff) of us are in it for the money, or the safety. (koff)."

Genma smirked. "You're getting soft on me, Hayate. Do you really believe a kid is capable of understanding that? He probably just wants to show off for the girls or something, you know how kids are."

"He's different," Hayate said with certainty. "He's not like the others (koff). Even Lord Hokage (koff) noticed instantly, with his busy schedule."

Genma knew Hayate was serious. The two of them, and one other, Raito, were focused on the village, and wanted to see it prosper. They had all agreed to work hard to make that happen.

“So you’re saying he’s like a little version of us...well, he DOES kind of resemble you, what with the bags under the eyes. Doesn’t have a cough, though. So how DID you get those things, anyway? YOUR way of impressing the ladies?” Genma joked, poking a little fun at Hayate. Hayate cracked a rare grin.

“Yeah, that’s it. (koff) I’m spoken for.”

Genma laughed outright. “Man, you’re whipped, already? At your age?! Ha!”

--

Ryouko waited, more than a little worried. He was going to be working with three Tokubetsu Jonin (Raito had been added at the last minute) on his first mission, which he knew nothing about. He brought along his sword, since he was comfortable with it more than any other weapon (save for two strange, curved blades. Ryouko had decided that he should be able to use his hands for jutsus, hence choosing one sword that he could sheathe over two he could not).

“I hope I don’t get in their way...I’ll just do what they say...” Ryouko muttered to himself quietly. In the back of his mind, he thought: **Hah, I bet even Neji and Sasuke haven’t had missions yet! Maybe this will give me the boost I need to be first in the class!**

Part of Ryouko also wondered if these jonin were only doing this because they had to. That same part of Ryouko wanted to win the jonin over and prove himself to them. He wanted to fit in, after all. Any boy his age would. But Ryouko didn’t seem to make friends of his own age group- he was too gun shy from being bullied. But adults were different- Ryouko could befriend them easily enough. And all it took was being a good, hard-working boy. Ryouko guessed he could handle that.

The jonin would get here soon, Ryouko knew. He tugged his surrogate uniform into place again, wanting to make the best impression possible.

5 - Adventure 5- The Odd Man Out

Whoosh! Tomp! Tomp! Tomp!

Little Ryouko landed next to Genma, Hayate, and Raito, feeling very intimidated. The Tokubetsu jonin had all been friendly, it wasn't that. But the fact he was here, working with them, it made him feel out of place. But they had included him, and even let him do some of the work.

"Remember, there are still bandits in the area, we need to be looking out for them," Genma reminded everyone as they squatted in the bushes.

"Ryouko, do you remember anything about the attacker?" Raito asked the youngest of the group. Ryouko looked slightly surprised to be called on, but was quick to answer.

"He said something about the academy being a lousy target, and he wished the boss would give him better assignments. He was wearing bandages on his face. He didn't have a headband that I could see...I think that's everything. Oh, wait, my transformation didn't fool him for long, so he's at least a genin level. But the fact that I beat him means he wasn't very good, and definitely not the strongest of this group." Ryouko frowned, thinking that his words didn't mean much, except for proving that there were other bandits out there, and they were likely to be high-ranked. That was more info than they had before, so maybe he had helped, just a little.

"Good (koff), that's something. One of us should go in the trees and watch, someone else should be a distraction...bait."

Hayate's idea led to a short but fierce discussion. Ryouko didn't say anything until the end.

"I should be the bait. They know me, and they'll probably try to get revenge. Besides, I'm younger and lower than a genin, making me an easy target." That made sense, and everyone knew it. Hayate started to speak up against it, but Genma ask to talk to him.

"You've got to forget this 'big brother' complex you have with him. You know he's right. That's the best course of action. We have to do it."

--

Ryouko walked by himself, doing his best to look lost and unconfident. That was easy- he FELT lost and unconfident. But he also understood the concept of 'for the mission', even at such a young age. Still, he had doubts. With only a couple jutsus in his repertoire, Ryouko wasn't sure he could hold out until the jonin calvary arrived. It would only be a few seconds, but in this world, even a half-second could mean life or death. It was a heavy thing for a ten year old to comprehend, but at the same time, it just made sense to Ryouko. It was a concept others could spend years pondering, but something about it just felt natural to the boy. So he walked around aimlessly, knowing the jonin were watching from the trees.

If we're attacked, then the attackers won't be jonin. A jonin would have picked up on the fact that this was a trap...right? But still, if there are a lot of them, rank might not matter so much.

Whizzzzzz!

Ryouko ducked, hands over his head. A shuriken buried itself in the ground next to his head. Ryouko scrambled to his feet, returning fire in the direction the shuriken had come from, then turning and running.

Too late.

Ryouko was starting at three large bandits. They were soon joined by a fourth, whose arm was bleeding from Ryouko's random shuriken throw. Ryouko hadn't aimed- he had just guessed, and tried to flush his attacker out. It had worked nicely, apparently.

Instantly, Raito, Genma, and Hayate appeared next to Ryouko.

"Nice job kid. Now we've got them!" Genma smirked, shifting the senbon in his mouth. To Ryouko's delight, he hadn't heard Genma say 'don't get involved'- Ryouko had every intention of fighting. He was a firm believer in a fair fight- four on three wasn't fair. So Ryouko stepped up next to the jonin, across from the one he had wounded. As if a wordless command was spoken, everyone leapt up at the same time. Genma spat a senbon, Hayate drew his sword, and Raito leapt in for taijutsu. Ryouko scrambled forward, leaping gracefully for a Dynamic Entry kick. It was a standard side-kick, but Ryouko had aimed for a specific spot. The enemy blocked, as expected, but Ryouko's heel swung around and hit the shuriken wound. The enemy leaned back, shocked by the pain, giving Ryouko time to land, prep himself, and kick. The telltale CRACK of bones breaking echoed around the forest, as Ryouko had kicked the bandit on the kneecap. It only took seven pounds of pressure to break a knee, and Ryouko had put WAY more behind that strike. Ryouko quickly kicked the bandit's weapons away from him, then held a kunai at his neck.

Genma's senbon had taken care of his bandit after a few hits to some key joints. Raito was the only one who was hurt (Later, a nasty scar would develop on his face [Yes, the origin of Raito's scar!]), as Hayate's opponent had simply given up when matched with Hayate's sword. As it turned out, this was just a talent-less group of punks that barely qualified as Shinobi.

"Let's go home, boys. This one is over," Genma said, sticking a new senbon between his teeth. As he did, he thought of something.

It's strange...Ryouko, right? Mild-mannered, but he was different in combat. Efficient, but he did no more than necessary. Most young guys go right for the kill, but he didn't do that. But even that by itself isn't so strange...it was how he worked. His taijutsu wasn't anything special, but it was placed so perfectly. Apparently, Ryouko is capable of anticipating attacks and there results very well. I'll have to tell Lord Hokage, he'll be happy to hear it. Rumor has it he's taken a personal interest in Ryouko's case.

--

Ryouko would continue like this for some time. In one area, he had managed to surpass Neji- the instructors liked Ryouko better. But Ryouko kept thinking about how Neji had stopped Tenten from being friends with him. Ryouko couldn't understand it, but he felt really bad about Tenten. When he had said 'sure, we can be friends' he hadn't really meant it. It was clear she really like Neji, and Ryouko wasn't the type to come between that. So, slowly, he weaned himself away from talking with her, and only worked with her when he was told to in class. She was distracted by Neji, so it was easy enough to pretend that nothing happened.

Rock Lee, Ryouko's other friend, was off more these days. He had met some sensei that really focused on him. That meant he didn't spar with Ryouko so much anymore. All the girls in class liked Sasuke, and all the guys in class were already in groups. It was an awkward time for Ryouko. But he didn't give it too much thought- to him, as long as he kept working hard and doing well, then things would work out by themselves.

It was a child's view of the world.

--

Very quickly, graduation day came. Ryouko and Neji had been number two and number one, respectively. Tenten had taken the number 3 spot. At the final exam, by chance, Ryouko and Neji were paired together. Each was supposed to create at least three perfect likenesses of themselves. After that, it was transformation jutsu- Neji had to turn into Ryouko, while Ryouko would assume the form of Neji. For two boys who had butted heads, this was fodder for another fight.

POOF! Neji looked like Ryouko. In a gesture of mocking, he sat down and opened a scroll.

"I see...I'm talentless, but I work hard so everyone likes me!"

Ryouko suppressed a snarl- it was his turn to be Neji. POOF! Flawless. But Ryouko had to take a shot back at Neji.

"The heavens have foretold that I will be a fate-spouting moron, and I'll blame fate for everything!"

POOF! Both boys undid their jutsu, glaring at each other. Ryouko broke the glare first, remember what Iruka-sensei had said about no more fighting. Neji hadn't been given the same warning, and he charged forward, losing control. Ryouko didn't know about the Hyuuga family curse, and he had inadvertently hit a nerve with Neji. That became apparent when Neji punched him with all his strength, sending Ryouko into the wall. Ryouko stood back up, but held himself in check. He couldn't hit back, Iruka-sensei would be angry with him. Instead, Ryouko dodged Neji the best he could, but he was getting his butt kicked. By now, they had attracted the attention of everyone in the room. No one dared get involved. There was only Iruka-sensei and a gray-haired chunin named Mizuki in the room, and they had to coordinate their plan before they moved. One boy who had already failed the exams had seen enough.

"KNOCK IT OFF!" Naruto cried, ramming into Neji, sending him spinning away from Ryouko. That turned Neji's focus toward Naruto. This time, forgetting the rules, Ryouko stepped in and cracked Neji in the face.

“Don’t hit my friend!” Ryouko said in a low, threatening voice. Everyone in the room shifted uncomfortably- Ryouko, the top of the class, was friends with Naruto, the fox demon, the knucklehead, the prankster?!

“Then don’t let others fight your battles for you,” Neji shot back. Ryouko ignored him, instead turning to Iruka.

“I’m sorry for fighting, Iruka-sensei,” Ryouko spoke respectfully, adding a bow. “I didn’t mean to, and I didn’t want Naruto to get hit, but the fact is I got in a fight with Neji. So, it’s just an explanation, not an apology, and not an excuse. You can fail me, if you need to.”

Iruka told Mizuki to watch the boys while he thought about what to do. Mizuki’s eye wandered to Naruto. Somewhere in his mind, the perfect dupe was born. He just had to bide his time...

Iruka returned. “Ryouko and Neji, you’ve both passed with full marks. Neji, starting that fight was wrong. Ryouko, egging Neji on was wrong. But...you followed instructions. You defended a friend, and that’s something we stress, so I can’t yell at you for it. Now, those of you with headbands: congratulations, you’re now genin, apprentice Shinobi...”

--

Ryouko waited outside, his headband in his pocket. Naruto shuffled out, looking depressed.

“Naruto, do you have a second?”

Naruto looked at Ryouko strangely. No one ever asked anything of Naruto unless they wanted to yell at him for something. But for some reason, Naruto decided Ryouko was safe to approach.

“Thanks...you know, for earlier,” Ryouko murmured. “For your help, I mean. I, uh, got you these. I didn’t think anyone would defend me, and it really means a lot you did. Here.” Ryouko handed Naruto coupons for free ramen, much to Naruto’s delight.

“See you later,” Ryouko said happily, giving a wave over his shoulder. Naruto looked at the coupons in his hand, then at Ryouko.

“Hey!” Naruto called to Ryouko. Ryouko turned his head to show he was listening.

“Let’s go get some ramen together sometime, okay?” Naruto offered. This was where Naruto’s uncanny ability of making friends without saying much came into play. It was as if Naruto knew Ryouko’s emotions better than Ryouko did. Naruto was lonely, and he could sense loneliness. Without knowing it, Naruto was trying to remedy the problem.

Ryouko offered a smile. “That’d be cool. Thanks.”

--

Ryouko's fortune would stay much the same. He had graduated, but for him, that didn't mean anything. Because on the day everyone got a sensei and a team, Ryouko sat by himself, wondering what he had done wrong. He wasn't going to get a team or a sensei. But why?

"But why..." Ryouko whispered to himself, near tears for the first time in a long while. "Did I do something wrong?"

As Ryouko sat at the top of the classroom thinking just that, Iruka was sitting at his desk, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He had no answer to this problem. There weren't enough people to go around, and Ryouko was the newest one here. That left him the odd man out. Of course, the fight was still in Iruka's mind. If only Naruto had passed, then Ryouko could have been paired with him, and maybe Rock Lee. Lee and Naruto would have been weak links, but by all indication, Ryouko would have covered them. (Later, of course, Naruto and Lee would become great ninja, but at the time, who knew?) And senseis...there was no way to assign genin to a sensei- being a genin was learning teamwork, and you couldn't get that with one on one instruction. So what to do about this...

Ryouko had since walked over to the window, looking out through the glass at the happy teams. Maybe even more at the groups of friends. In Ryouko's eyes, he had worked hard to be a part of this world, but he hadn't been allowed to be. Some people still gave him strange looks. It was sad, but Ryouko was happy to have left his old life behind.

-

Iruka looked up when the door slid open. With a tall, black-haired man and a woman with long red hair was a small girl, roughly eleven years old. She was wearing a school uniform, a rarity in this village. Blue skirt, white blouse, red tie, blue vest- that wasn't the norm here by any means. Everyone wore gear to fight in- unless you were dating someone, skirts were out. But such a small girl wouldn't be going into combat, so it was fine.

The girl had her red haired pulled into a ponytail on one side of her head, leaving long bangs on the other side. The ponytail was held in place by a yellow ribbon, giving the girl a look of pure innocence. She must have been a new student, so you can imagine Iruka's surprise when Ryouko spoke up.

"Masamitsu Azami-chan?"

Ryouko couldn't help his curiosity- he hadn't seen this girl in a few years, but that red hair, those wide eyes, and that uniform- it had to be her.

"Amakatsu Ryouko-kun?" the little girl piped up. The two kids walked toward each other. Iruka's heart warmed a little, but that stopped quickly.

"Oh no..." groaned Azami's mother. "Azami-chan, please remember your-"

Azami (Formerly known as Linda Mawashi) had walked up to Ryouko and looked him up and down. Then a sneer grew on her face.

"Bet I'm still better than you!" she said with a laugh, poking Ryouko in the chest. "Give me a little while

and I'll have you beat, just like before!"

Ryouko's face darkened. He ignored Azami and bowed to her parents instead.

"Iruka-sensei, may I leave? I don't want to be in the way..." Ryouko said quietly, not at all like his normal self. His voice usually had conviction and certainty behind it- this time, there was none. Only a sincere wish to leave. Iruka nodded.

"Come see me later, okay Ryouko?"

-

Once Ryouko left, Iruka looked towards Azami's parents.

"Is there a...history between them?" Iruka asked, not liking Ryouko's reaction.

"Yes...(Sigh) Azami and Ryouko just didn't get along when they trained together. They competed in everything, and Ryouko always lost. He trained hard, as I imagine he's done here, but Azami has just been naturally gifted in everything she's tried. Sword katas, empty hand martial arts, sparring matches...Azami always came out on top, and she always rubbed it in. My husband and I always thought it was just a kid thing, that they'd outgrow it. But she just teased him more, and he just took it. He never spoke up. Then he left, so it didn't seem to matter."

Iruka sighed. "That kid...he finished second in his class here...no wonder it was bothering him so much...Well, I'll deal with it later. For now, when will Azami be starting?"

--

Ryouko wandered around the village, for the first time truly depressed.

Why did SHE have to show up? She was always so mean! I like it here, but if she's here, I won't enjoy it anymore! Why is this girl haunting me? I was always second to someone! To her, or Neji, or Sasuke! It's not fair!

Ryouko looked around, finally finding a good spot to sit, where Azami couldn't reach him- on top of the Village's dam. Unless she had chakra control already, she couldn't get up here. Ryouko was still young, but he had learned chakra control right away. So he got a running start and took up off the wall, reaching the top on his first try. He sat down, overlooking the village, wondering what to do.

Maybe we can move again...I don't have a team or anything...Mom and Dad could always get a new job...But I don't want to leave! Why did Azami have to come here?

Tok!

A jonin Ryouko didn't know landed next to him on the dam.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry, didn't see you up here. I was just going to catch up on my reading." The jonin had

silver hair that stuck out at a weird angle, and eyes that looked as if they were ready to go to sleep. Their owner even talked like he was asleep or bored. But he wasn't unkind, so Ryouko didn't shy away.

"Are you a new graduate?" the jonin asked, seeing Ryouko's headband sticking out of his pocket.

"Yes, sensei. I'm Amakatsu Ryouko," Ryouko replied.

"Hatake Kakashi. Shouldn't you be with your team now?" Kakashi asked. He had meant it kindly- after all, no genin had ever not had a team before.

"I don't have a team, Kakashi-sensei. I graduated kind of early..."

Kakashi, looking at the boy instead of his book, could now clearly make out a look of depression on the boy's face. Kakashi thought about it for a second, then put a hand on Ryouko's head.

"Well, if you have a problem, then it's best to see Lord Hokage. If anyone has a solution, it's him, after all. Now, there's something else bothering you. Care to tell me what it is?" Kakashi thought that maybe if he helped, the kid wouldn't jump.

"A girl from my past who is the incarnation of evil," Ryouko said instantly. Then he laughed. "Only to me, though. Everyone else thinks she's a perfect little girl. But she's always been better than me at everything, and she always rubs it in. I just ignore it, but it still bothers me..."

Kakashi winced inwardly- no way he could answer that. "Well, maybe she likes you?"

Ryouko immediately denied it, but somehow, Kakashi guessed that really WAS the case. After all, he had some experience with girls in his past. All the same, it was best for Ryouko to see Lord Hokage about this sort of thing.

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6 - Adventure 6- Legendary Error

Ryouko wandered to the Third Hokage's office, thinking about all that had happened.

Azami-chan comes back into my life, and I don't have a team...but what does that mean? I'd just like to know why I don't have a team, and I'd like to know how I get one.

The Third Hokage was easy to talk to, but Ryouko was still hesitant to bother him. It was such a trivial matter when compared to making sure the Hidden Leaf Village was functioning as it should. But that sensei, Kakashi, had said to talk to the Third Hokage, and so had Iruka-sensei. So Ryouko's nearly twelve year old mind put two and two together and decided that he would try talking to him. It wasn't like he bothered the Third Hokage every day. It had been more than a year since he had last talked to the Hokage in person.

Still...someone so important...it's scary to bother someone like that. But...But he made time for me when I first came here, maybe he'll do the same now. I'm not supposed to hesitate, I'm just supposed to come to him with problems I can't solve on my own. And everyone else got a team, it couldn't hurt to give me an explanation! I won't bother him for long, then, I'll keep it short.

Taking a deep breathe, Ryouko knocked on the Third Hokage's door.

"Come in!" came the familiar voice on the other side. Ryouko gulped, then pushed the door open.

-

The Third Hokage made another stroke on his painting. It was a fine hobby, and a good way to keep your mind fresh and active. At his age, it was also a way to prevent memory loss. Not to mention it was calming. Even though they weren't in a time of war, the Hidden Leaf had it's own emergencies. Such as Naruto's demon, Naruto's pranks, Naruto's peeping on women, Naruto's disrespect...and then there was the increasingly anti-social Uchiha boy who had been heard saying that he was going to kill someone and restore his clan.

Even in a time of peace, war is breeding... The Third Hokage exhaled rich smoke from his pipe, which was when he heard the knock on the door.

"Come in!" he called, putting his brush down, wondering what the latest crisis was. Part of his sighed when Ryouko came in.

I was wondering when he would come...The poor boy looks terrified. I guess I still intimidate him. Or perhaps my position does. Either way, I know why he's here, perhaps I can spare him the pain of having to break the ice.

"You must be here about your team and sensei...no doubt you've questions..."

“Yes, sir...I’m just not sure I should be asking them...” Ryouko mumbled his reply, looking at the suddenly fascinating floor. It had occurred to him that not many others seemed to question orders or requests- they just did things, or took things in stride. But Ryouko was a curious creature, and he wanted to know what made him so different.

The Third Hokage laughed richly. “Polite as always. I’ve heard a lot of good about you. Iruka says you graduated second in the class. Congratulations...”

“Thank you, sir...”

Lord Hokage noted a small trace of disappointment in Ryouko’s voice. He didn’t even need to guess that it came from being in second place. Couple that with not getting a team or sensei, and you had your explanation for Ryouko’s somber demeanor, and also the reason for his visit.

“Well then, to your other question. Simply put Ryouko, I had to give others a team before you simply because they’ve lived here longer. You will be getting a team with the next set of graduates. **Time to test what Iruka said...** I hear there’s a girl that’s new to the village who’s very promising... Masamitsu Azami, I believe it was...” The Third Hokage also noted that Ryouko’s face paled, and his eyes darkened. **So Iruka was correct...** “Then again, it doesn’t seem right to make you wait a year until the next graduating class...perhaps we can work something out...”

The Third Hokage strode over to his window, appreciating the small breeze wafting in. Some tiny things like this really made life worth living.

“Hayate, Genma, and Raido were all in here, telling me that you’re quite the warrior for someone so young. If you’ve impressed three jonin, then I’ve every reason to believe you’re something special. I can understand your frustration about graduating behind Hyuuga Neji, but in some ways you’ve become a better person. He bears the weight of a terrible frustration himself, but how you both choose to deal with it is very different. He chooses arrogance, you choose humbleness. The best warrior is not the one speaking of his own glory, Ryouko.” This was a truth the Third Hokage had discovered long ago, and had since passed on to almost everyone he had spoken to. The number who chose to listen was decidedly small, however.

“But enough about that. I can appreciate why you’re here. So maybe we can make a deal. You see, I’m quite old, Ryouko! (laughs) I can’t do what I used to. I could use a young set of arms and legs to help me with my work. And I’m certain that the head attached to those young arms and legs would benefit from the advice this old man has!”

Ryouko’s heart skipped a beat. **Does he mean...?**

“I would like you to work with me, as my aide. But I also ask a small a favor of you...”

“Anything, Lord Hokage!” Ryouko spouted, sounding like a suck-up. Really, he was just grateful for such an opportunity that he hadn’t considered what he sounded like. Lord Hokage was old enough to understand the youthful exuberance Ryouko was showing.

“I ask you to stay in class for another year’s time. We’ve never had a situation in which someone new

to our way of life graduated so quickly, so I daresay we were caught by surprise. But I believe that you could benefit from Iruka's teaching a little more. Not to mention what you learn as my aide may suddenly make Iruka's lessons seem more practical. After that year's time, I'll take you as a full student."

Ryouko's heart was currently residing in the middle of his throat. Ryouko gulped hard, and it splashed downward towards his stomach. He bowed.

"I would be honored!"

Lord Hokage patted Ryouko's head. "Well then, I'll see you tomorrow. Once the academy is done with it's two-week break, please come after class."

Ryouko bowed again, then practically ran from the room, trying to compose himself while half-jumping for joy. It made the Third Hokage smile again. Had he once had so much energy?

Perhaps this will partly satisfy his voracious appetite for learning...and maybe even satisfy some of his hunger for acceptance. Truthfully, I had a feeling that this was how things would work out. I wish I could have told him the whole truth...it's not likely he'll get a team or a sensei, not even next year. Family roots count for a lot, and he's new here. Our world is dangerous, and it's the Hokage's job to give everyone the best chance at survival possible. His best chance will come as my aid. That, and perhaps prompting other senseis to take him along on missions, or give him special training. It's important that he learn teamwork as well. Jutsus alone do not make a great Shinobi...

...

If only YOU had listened, Orochimaru. Such talent comes along only once every few generations...if only you had this boy's loyalty...or perhaps it would have been better if he had your talent...the evil I tried to wash out of your soul doesn't exist in his...

I must stop thinking as though training this boy will atone for my mistakes with Orochimaru. But all the same, this feeling...it's as though their destinies are shared in some way...

--

Azami muttered furiously. Sitting in the beautiful park dotted with cherry trees and decorated with a large pond, she was sitting by herself on a bench, her own thoughts driving her nuts.

"How could HE be here?! Ryouko...no, no, no, I'll drive him away, just like I did before!" Azami's muttering had grown loud enough to the point where a girl who was passing by heard her.

"Ryouko-san, hmm? Seems you know him already?"

Azami's head whipped around, seeing a girl with straight, jet-black hair smiling kindly at her. The girl was a year older than Azami, making her twelve. The girl was taller than she was, and seemed to be proportioned perfectly, her frame already braced by swells of flat female muscle. It didn't make her look any less feminine at the same time.

"I'm sorry, I hope I didn't disturb you!" Azami only lost her manners where Ryouko was concerned, she really hadn't meant to offend anyone else. "Please accept my apologies!" Azami almost yelled, bowing to show her sincerity.

"Oh, of course! I'm just surprised to hear talk about any boy other than Uchiha Sasuke, that's all. Please accept MY apologies for not introducing myself. My name is Yoshimura Nami," the tall girl with the straight black hair said with a small introductory bow.

"My name is Masamitsu Azami. I'm still really sorry for muttering like that. It's just that...Ugh! That boy irritates me! I don't know why, but he just does! We've been in competition as long as I can remember! I've always beaten him, but he's never quit, until he left our dojo to come here! Gah, everything about him irritates me! The bags under his eyes, that dark bushy hair, that serious expression!"

Nami nodded, following the conversation. "Hmm...well, Azami-san, I think I know why he irritates you. It's pretty obvious, actually, given what I can gather of your personality."

"What's that, Nami-san?" Azami wasn't sure how sharp Nami was, but still- any pearls of wisdom about that irritating little punk would have been great! **Maybe she's irritated by him, too! That's gotta be it! This girl seems smart! Any girl with a brain would hate this guy!**

Nami sat down, nodding confidently. "Seems to me that you're in love with him."

(Dooooom.)

"WHAT?! WITH HIM?! IN LOVE?! YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING!!! I HATE HIM! EVERYTHING ABOUT HIM!" Azami shouted, so shocked by what Nami had said that she lost her composure.

"Opposites attract, Azami-san," Nami pointed out. "hehe, my, you must really care for him, then! My little bit of teasing got you pretty worked up! Well, it could be worse. At least you like a cute, hard-working guy! And he's mysterious, too! And you've known him longer, so you've got the inside track to get him, don't you!"

Azami was baffled by this- she wasn't in love- was she? Nami seemed to know just how to find out.

"Well, maybe I'll just take him for myself if you're not interested then!"

"HOLD ON!" Azami blurted out. She blushed- she had just proven Nami's words.

"I thought so. Well then, maybe when he grows up a little bit, we'll be rivals for him! Even if you have the advantage, I'm not going to quit!" Nami gave a peace sign, plus a smile.

"Oh please! You can HAVE the little jerk, I don't want anything to do with him! Besides, he won't stay here long. Once I beat him, just like I always do, he'll leave the village and go somewhere else, just you see!" Azami crossed her arms and set her face into a defiant expression, mouth twisted wryly.

Nami smirked, leaning toward Azami. "I don't know...I've seen him, he's pretty talented. He graduated near the top of the class, and the rumor is...the Hokage himself took Ryouko-san on as an apprentice."

Azami's eyes went completely white. "W-HAAA?! He's THAT far ahead of me? Damn it, I'll beat him! I'll find a way to beat him! I'll ruin him! I'll destroy him!"

"Are you going to tell him you love him?" Nami weeded.

"AND YOU CAN STOP THAT!" Azami shot back. All the same, despite the shouting, Azami knew she had made her first friend and second rival in the Leaf Village. **I don't like him, and he doesn't like me! Those are facts! But wait...**

"Nami-san, why do you know so much about Ryouko-kun?" Azami had a sneaking suspicion that, despite Nami's assurance that she was only teasing, she might have some interest in Ryouko. But Nami's answer again sent Azami reeling.

"It's not like it's a secret. Ryouko-kun himself has been quiet, but his unique qualities have stood out. His past, not having a team or sensei, winning his first battle at age eight...our village is very close, like a family. When something happens, we all know about it. We're a large village with a small-town closeness. So, of course, I'll know if you confess your love to Ryouko-san! And you'll know if I win his heart the same way!"

Nami ran away, laughing at the sputtering Azami. Azami took the time to think about her feelings now. But she couldn't find love among them. A small corner of her mind reminded her that she'd never been in love before, so maybe she couldn't recognize it.

Even if I DID like him, he definitely doesn't like me! Besides, I've already seen someone else. I'd NEVER have a chance with *him*, though. (sigh) Too bad. But I'll try sometime anyway, maybe I'll get lucky and he'll like me! Sigh...man, that silver hair, that mystery! I haven't even seen his face and I can already tell that he's hot stuff!

--

Ryouko sat in the front row of the class, near the door. His headband was tied around his head, and he was wearing what looked like a small exam proctor's uniform. The uniform was a simple, drab-gray colored two-piece jumpsuit. As Lord Hokage's apprentice, Ryouko had to dress the part. That, and this type of clothing was easy to move around in, whether 'moving' was moving boxes and books or learning jutsus. Ryouko liked looking professional, so he was just fine with it. He had never been sure what to wear before, and hated getting up in the morning and having to decide. A uniform was just easier.

Iruka smiled at him, handing him a test that was longer than the others kids. Ryouko was already used to this- his knowledge was tested at a high genin level, as opposed to an academy student level. Ryouko was doing well, despite the fact that Azami was one seat over. Well, there was also Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura in the same class. Naruto would invariably annoy Sakura. Sakura would weedle Sasuke. Sasuke would ignore them both, except for tossing a dry 'loser' comment over his shoulder, followed by grandly ignoring Naruto's outburst.

Kiba, Shikamaru, Ino...it seemed like everyone Ryouko had met was in this class. Neji, Lee, and Tenten were missing, but that was it.

“Hehehe, catch you suckers later!”

Naruto zipped past Ryouko and out the window.

“NARUTO! Agh!” Iruka fumed, getting ready to chase him. He looked around, then pointed to Ryouko. “You’re in charge until I come back! All of you listen to him, or it’s after school for a month! NARUTOOOOO!”

Ryouko had stood up, but didn’t know what to do. So he walked down to the center of the classroom, looking up at everyone. He looked at Iruka’s notes, and noticed he was at a history lecture. No way Ryouko could do that. Time for some new curriculum. But before he could do that, Kiba, Choji, and Shikamaru skipped out the window. Ryouko didn’t stop them, and he wasn’t going to rat them out.

“O-okay. Who knows the original use for kunoichi?” Ryouko blurted out. Silence greeted his question. That surprised Ryouko (**Shouldn’t this be common knowledge? I mean, it’s part of their culture! Okay, guess I’ll say it.**)

“Kunoichi were used to seduce enemies, usually samurai, and get them to give up information. In the end, the samurai usually died. The kunoichi were known to be able to change their appearance quickly, seduce anyone, and leave quickly, leaving her target dead.”

...

“Hey, is that from personal experience or something?” Azami snickered. “You were a samurai. Not a good one, but you were.”

Ryouko ignored her. “Also, it’s a trend that kunoichi are the medics in the three-man cell system. As Tsunade-hime brought this to the attention of the Hokage and his council during the last great war...”

--

Iruka returned, dragging Naruto back, along with the other escapees.

“Transformation Jutsus! Line up, let’s go!”

The class groaned. They had JUST done this! Why did they have to suffer for other people’s stupid mistakes. Before the class got started, Iruka thanked Ryouko.

“They’re all still here, so you did well. You’re free to go, I don’t want to make you late for Lord Hokage. Besides, you’re familiar with transformations, as you proved to me a couple years ago. Oh, that reminds me- please give this note to Lord Hokage. I can’t believe Naruto did that...”

Ryouko bowed to Iruka, leaving the room quietly. He didn’t want to be late getting to the Hokage mansion, or he would have stayed and practiced the jutsus with the others. Ryouko didn’t want special treatment, but even he admitted that he knew the Transformation Jutsu well enough.

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When Ryouko got to Lord Hokage's mansion, he found the old man staring at a couple of faded pictures. The Third was always in a pensive mood, but Ryouko hadn't seen him look at pictures before. Not these anyway. Ryouko wasn't sure they were for him to see, so he waited quietly by the door. Lord Hokage sensed his presence and waved him in.

"Ryouko, no doubt Iruka has done a good job of teaching you history...but there is a darker history to our village. And part of it falls on me for letting it happen. If you become a sensei to someone some day, you must not ever overlook the good or evil on your students. As you know, my last three students were the Legendary Sannin. That's them on the right.

Ryouko studied the picture. There was a cute blonde girl with two pigtails. Ryouko could tell somehow that she had a mean temper.

The next one in the picture was a big kid with a jolly look on his face and long white hair. On the jolly face were red lines and a mischievous smirk. That smirk seemed to have something to do with the blonde girl.

Lastly, Ryouko saw a boy with jet black hair, almost purely white skin, and a placid look on his face. Just looking at this ghostly child made Ryouko shiver- something not lost on the Third Hokage.

"Frightening, isn't he? Ryouko, that boy was talented beyond almost anyone...but he was also just as evil. I tried to deal with his evil- all the potential in the world at his disposal. In the end, I was left with the choice- let him go and risk the lives of many, or kill him and end this threat.

I let him live, and I've never stopped regretting it."

7 - Adventure Seven- Update on the Rookie Nine

Ryouko sat silently, listening to the Third Hokage tell the chilling story of Orochimaru. Even the skies darkened, as if conducting a foreboding orchestra of light and dark symphonies. Ryouko's thirteen year old body never shook- not until the end of the dark tale. It wasn't the end of the story itself; it was the premonition that the story wasn't quite finished yet. A final chapter had yet to be written.

"And what about him? Orochimaru?" Ryouko finally asked, his voice cracking with either emotion or the strains of puberty. Ryouko was small for thirteen, but his lean body was all muscle- all the same, he was rangy and wiry, rather than a mountain of muscle.

"Alive. Well...not dead would be a better answer. Ryouko, Orochimaru is a demon among humans...he's not human enough to die." The Third Hokage looked into his crystal ball, as he often did. Most of the time it was to observe the tranquil village. This time, like many other dark days in which the past filled the skies, he looked for Orochimaru. But all that greeted the Third's eyes was a thick black smoke. In his mind, the Third Hokage knew what had to happen. He looked at the boy next to him- Ryouko's face was set in grim determination, and his eyes were alive with question.

"Lord Hokage...he's going to be back, isn't he? Orochimaru is going to come back..." It wasn't so much question as statement, and Ryouko's eyes backed that up. The Third Hokage bowed his head, submitting to the unspoken questions in his own mind.

"Yes he will. And when the time comes, I will face him. Ryouko, you are different from Orochimaru. You both studied endlessly under me...but Orochimaru's studies encompassed the dark, forbidden arts. You are the exact contrast to Orochimaru. But all the same...what I've done to you is unacceptable. I've both held back AND pushed you too far. Your promise in genjutsu led me to ask Morino Ibikki to teach you. I should never have let you endure three genjutsus at one time like that...No thirteen year old boy should bear the weight of his sensei's failures..."

Ryouko spoke back sharply. "I asked for everything I've been given. It's not bearing a weight of a failure...it's bearing the weight of a kindness you extending to someone whose heart was so black he couldn't see what a fool he was. If you HADN'T pushed me when I needed it, I would have been a genin going nowhere. Now I have a prospect for the future, and a sensei whose honor I would gladly defend. I know that I'm stiff and formal, and it's hard to tell, but I enjoy this."

Lord Hokage couldn't help but feel that he had stolen the boy's childhood, and told Ryouko so. Even as he said it, he thought **A thirteen year old with far too much life experience for his age...He's got me outlining some of my deepest thoughts. But his advice is rarely off the mark. He's become more advisor than apprentice in that regard.**

"What childhood, Lord Hokage? I would have studied either way- without your guidance, I would have been a ship without a course. I would have studied the wrong stuff, and not done it correctly. That's not to say I'm anything great, I've got a long way to go before 'good'...but I'm improving, which is what I've wanted from myself. That...and, well, I feel like I belong, and that by itself is worth a lot to me."

Lord Hokage bowed his head. "Then I've got much more to teach you...but there are somethings learned only through experience. I can't teach you teamwork. So, for today, I've arranged for the senseis of the most recent graduating class to allow you to watch their teams. Kakashi and his team are up first, followed by Asuma's cell, then Gai's cell, and lastly Kurenai's cell."

Lord Hokage sat back in his chair, relaxing for the first time today. "I thought of putting you in my son's cell, but his laid-back style would, no doubt, be in direct opposition to your training. I considered Gai's team, but young Neji might have had a protest (chuckle). Kurenai's team is talented in it's own way, but they aren't a match for you. In the future, I think you would benefit largely from Kakashi and his team. For now, I have to let them work together and learn from each other. But that's not to say you won't be joining them at times. Mostly as a balance- Sasuke and Naruto haven't taken to each other, as you've no doubt noticed. But, this would happen after you became a chunin- a road you're on the fast track to. Had you been given a cell, you would have made it your first year."

Ryouko flushed with pride. He had worked hard and sacrificed a lot to get 'decent'. 'Good' wasn't in his line of vision yet, but it would be. It was a realistic goal now. With a quick bow, instead of leaping away, Ryouko now poofed away in a puff of smoke.

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The Third Hokage let his head fall.

I'm grooming the boy to someday replace me. I know full well he will not take the position of Hokage...he has sworn up and down not to take Naruto's dream. It doesn't matter to him that he's the better choice in the short team...that's admirable.

And yet, it reminds me that he's still a child. A child who is very quickly going to be forced into an adult's world. Should I perform the Fourth Hokage's Jutsu, the boy will be alone again. Ryouko may very well fall out of favor with the Village. It's not their nature to turn against someone, but Ryouko has always been a special case.

Orochimaru...our day of reckoning is coming. I will make no mistake this time. You will die, even if it means I must die with you!

That last thought gave Lord Hokage a thought: To teach him, or not to teach him?

"No...I will leave a scroll instead...teaching him the Fourth's Jutsu at such a young age is putting a kunai in the hands of a baby. He may misuse it unintentionally. Or, more likely, he'll be unable to perform it correctly, and he'll die in the attempt. But the day may come when he'll have to choose whether to use it or not...it's a heinous weapon, and beyond Hokage level...but I cannot shield him forever. The weight of that jutsu is too much for a thirteen year old. It would be in his nature to perform the jutsu to save my life, should I choose to perform it. I must not allow him that option."

Lord Hokage's crystal ball tuned in to Ryouko landing next to Kakashi. Naruto and Sakura were smiling, while Sasuke glowered moodily, and Kakashi seemed impassive. The mix of emotions led Lord Hokage to think of his own grandchild.

“Perhaps...I will take Konohamaru out of class today to go for a walk. I wouldn't think of it ordinarily, but today is such a peaceful day. It won't hurt to be 'Grandpa' instead of 'Hokage' for a few hours...”

--

Kakashi, Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura all turned to see Ryouko seeming to appear from nowhere. Kakashi was the only one not surprised by the entrance.

“You've been learning the Body Flicker Jutsu I see! Well, that'll make this more interesting!” Kakashi drawled, snapping his book shut. “The bell test. You'll work with Naruto and Sasuke, since they didn't grasp the concept the first time around. The goal is to get these bells off my waist. Notice there are only two, so only two of you can get a bell. If you're the one without the bell...you go back to the academy, and you're forbidden to return to genin level.”

“THAT WASN'T PART OF IT THE FIRST TIME!!!” Naruto shouted at the top of his lungs. “COME ON!”

Ryouko wasn't disturbed. You COULD rise past genin without ever being a genin. But he wasn't going to say anything. Instead, he looked to Naruto and Sasuke, trying to guess their strengths. Everyone knew that Naruto could use Shadow Clones, while Sasuke had the Sharingan. Kakashi was known as one of the top jonin in the village. But how to use Naruto and Sasuke's strengths against Kakashi- that was the question. Ryouko knew that he couldn't get the bells himself- Naruto would be devastated, and Sasuke's emotional stability was a question. That left little room to form a plan with.

“Come at me as though you mean to kill, or you won't have any chance.”

Kakashi's comment was meant to egg the genin on, but he only saw Naruto and Sasuke twitch. Ryouko's face remained impassive. **So his time with the Third has been well spent. We'll see in combat...**

“I've been wanting to spar you, sensei. Maybe we could sometime?” Ryouko asked hopefully. Kakashi grinned under his mask.

“Well, I don't know, I'm an old man...” POOF!

Kakashi was behind Ryouko, a kunai at Ryouko's neck!

“Can you keep up? Hmm?”

Ryouko had become a log, and was standing next to Naruto and Sasuke. He had already figured out his plan. It was simple: Naruto and Sasuke had to get those two bells. Ryouko had nothing to lose- a headband, big deal. He knew that Lord Hokage wouldn't get rid of him for something so petty. Or would he? Kakashi, with his typical impeccable timing, chimed in right away.

“I'm sure Lord Hokage would keep training you, even if you were a complete failure at this test. He's a kind, forgiving man...but, who am I to say what he'll do? (fake sigh) Oh well. I'd just hate to see your

apprenticeship end because you couldn't get a bell."

That planted a seed of doubt in Ryouko's mind, as Kakashi knew it would. That had, of course, been his intention all along. **No playing the hero now, Ryouko. Let's see if you REALLY understand this exercise.**

-

Naruto's shadow clones had failed; Sasuke's one on one combat hadn't worked. Ryouko hadn't made any serious moves yet. He looked around, trying to get some idea. One struck him- he just hoped Lord Hokage would be okay with him doing this.

Kakashi was leaning under a tree. Behind him the river, and to the side of him was open ground. Take away the one opening, and Kakashi only escape was up. Ryouko had already seen Kakashi 'Headhunter' Jutsu, and decided his plan could work even if Kakashi did that.

"Earth Style: Mud Wall!" Ryouko barked. A wall of earth formed next to Kakashi, boxing him in tight with the tree. Ryouko jumped a split-second before Kakashi did. Naruto and Sasuke followed his lead. Ryouko's hand made the bells jingle just as Kakashi jumped straight up- Ryouko had run under him. And now he couldn't kick backwards, because Naruto and Sasuke were right there.

Wow! He's not even trying and he's outwitting us!

"Let's just rush him!" Ryouko called to the other two. He spied two Naruto clones in the distance. Time enough for one last move.

Kakashi instinctively knew he was surrounded. **Nicely played, but he's not getting that bell, not by rushing me head on...time to move!**

Ryouko's body flicker jutsu had landed him within a quarter-inch of the bells. Kakashi jumped just in time- but Ryouko was attached to his leg. As Kakashi looked down, Sasuke and Naruto leapt up each reaching for a bell.

RIIIIIINNNNNGGGG!

Ryouko let go of Kakashi's leg and dropped to the ground. He didn't drop his guard despite his obvious disappointment.

"Well, that was certainly a close one. Buuutttt...not close enough! Sorry! You know what happens now..." The weather behind Kakashi changed to reflect his mood. The four genin could only stare (and wonder how Kakashi controlled the weather) and hope that Kakashi wasn't going to strike them down.

"You used teamwork. You all pass!"

--

Next was Asuma's group. Ryouko was wondering how this team had been put together.

I guess if their parents worked well together...they can't seem to stand each other! There's the one heavy kid, Choji...the smart, lazy one...Shikamaru- yeah, that was it. Then there's the blond, diet-obsessed girl...Ino. Yeah, that was it.

"UGH! Why am I stuck with food boy, lazy bones, and...Ryouko? No offense, but why couldn't you be Sasuke?" Ino griped, pulling at her long blond hair. Ryouko really didn't have an answer for her. In the pit of his stomach, he felt both a jealousy and a kinship with the raven-haired Uchiha boy. It DID get tiring, hearing all these cute girls talk about him in reverence.

Asuma soon put paid to all these thoughts.

"Alright, listen. You three- your parents formed a great trip called InoShikaCho. You could be the same way- if you could stop bickering long enough to do agree on how to attack. Now listen, you three had no luck against me because you complained and cried. Let's see how you do against Ryouko. He's a genin, so you shouldn't be overmatched. All you have to do is corner him with your attacks. Ryouko, you'll find out how long you'd last in combat against people your own age and skill level, so you'll get something out of it too." Asuma rattled all this off, stopping only to take a long drag from his cigarette. He looked tired, as though it had already been a long day. In a way, it had- his team was great, but only on paper. In real life, they couldn't seem to get out of each other's way long enough to accomplish anything.

"This is such a drag! Some whiny girl, and these bogus tests. (Sigh) I just became a ninja so I could do whatever I want."

While that sparked another fight between Ino and Shikamaru, Choji opened a bag of chips and started eating. Ryouko raised an eyebrow, looking over the three of them over. He really didn't know what to do. If they were going to attack, then sure. But this was just awkward.

Asuma clapped a hand on Ryouko's shoulder. "They just aren't getting it today, Ryouko. Why don't you go ahead and do what you need to do? They're not in fighting shape. But take this with you, it's a scroll on chakra augmentation. I know it's not teamwork, but it'll help you out."

Ryouko bowed his thanks. "Thank you, Asuma-sensei. Please let me know if I can get my match in with them some other time."

-

Asuma had taken an immediate dislike to Ryouko. Ryouko was a favorite of the Third Hokage, Asuma's father. Asuma had never gotten along with his father, and guessed that Ryouko was a typical suck-up genin with a little extra talent. But when Ryouko showed up, bright eyed and ready to learn, Asuma decided it was petty to dislike an innocent kid because of a grudge that had nothing to do with him. Occasionally, Asuma and Ryouko had run into each other, Ryouko even springing for the jonin's drink. Again, Asuma thought 'suck up', but it seemed Ryouko had also bought for genin, or even academy students.

Just a decent kid...I guess my old man always was a good judge of character.

--

“How do they keep doing that?!” Tenten panted, looking at Gai-sensei and Lee still going through their paces. Next to her, even Neji was out of breath, though he was trying quickly to regain it.

“It doesn’t matter. Lee-kun is a failure, and he always will be.”

Ryouko chose then to make his appearance.

“Ryo-kun!” Tenten exclaimed, happy to see her old training partner. They hadn’t seen each other (aside from an occasional ‘high’) in nearly a year. Tenten was almost hurt to find that Ryouko couldn’t return her enthusiasm. Tenten had thought back to it, and realized that when she told Ryouko that they shouldn’t train together anymore, it had hurt him more than she realized. But she had been really young then- now thirteen, she could understand that.

“Hi, Ten-chan,” Ryouko replied, sounding weary. It HAD been a long day, but the fact that Neji was here made things even more tense, awkward, and tiring. **No way I’m gonna let Neji see that!**

Neji nodded coldly to Ryouko. “Ryouko-bozu.” (Bozu= ‘kid’ or ‘squirt’)

Ryouko returned the nod. “Neji-pi.” (pi=name high school girls give each other to sound cute. In this case, Ryouko is just irritating Neji)

Gai and Lee finished up whatever training they had been doing and jogged over.

“Ryouko-san, it is good to see you!” Lee practically shouted at his first friend. “I am so much stronger now!”

“It’s good to see you, too, Lee-san!” Ryouko had to stifle a laugh- Lee and Gai were nearly twins now! Matching haircuts, eyebrows, facial expressions, fighting styles, and spandex- it was clear Lee thought the world of his jonin instructor. They even had the same mannerism- that became apparent when Gai introduced himself.

“Konoha’s noble green beast, Might Gai! And you-” Gai’s finger swung towards Ryouko. “YOU must be Amakatsu Ryouko! Ah, the youth in all of you! It keeps ME young! Alright, so Ryouko-kun, I hear you know my Lee-kun!”

Ryouko had to stop and blink- was this guy serious? The poses, the exaggerated smiles and thumb up? After a moment, Ryouko understood that he WAS serious.

“Yes, Gai-sensei, I know him. It’s nice to meet you,” Ryouko replied with his typical stoic calm. “Lee-kun has told me a lot about you. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Suck up,” Neji murmured.

“Whiner,” Ekyt shot back.

“Boys!” Tenten said in exasperation.

“Ah, Youth!” Gai said, smiling obliviously. “Well, Ryouko-kun, since you know Lee the best, how about you two have a match?”

Lee backflipped happily, taking up his guard. “I may only be able to use taijutsu, but I am not easy to defeat!”

“Says who?” Neji chimed in. Ryouko favored him with a glare.

“I’ll only use taijutsu too. I can’t wait to see what you’ve learned, Lee-san!”

8 - Adventure 8: Sensei Strength

Azami wandered around the village, not entirely sure what to do. She was really hoping to catch a glimpse of the hot silver-haired jonin (and maybe even his face!), but settled for some mindless Shojō manga instead. She flipped through the pages, looking at them but not really reading them. Then she hit a hentai section. Despite warnings about it, she was curious. What made it so forbidden?

“Ugh, looks gross!” Azami wrinkled her nose at the content. Both parties looked to be naked. **That’s embarrassing! Why would anyone want to do that?! I never take my clothes off in front of anyone!**

Azami’s view on that changed when she hit a yaoi section. She blushed, seeing two boys sharing a kiss, then cuddle up. **Wow, I had no idea people did that! Two guys...does that REALLY happen?**

Then she came to a story about three guys who loved one girl. In Azami’s mind, she was the girl, and the silver haired jonin was one guy. But the other two...one was a megane type, the other kind of a nerd. Snickering to herself, Azami placed Ryouko in the nerd’s place. Wanting to see what would happen, Azami flipped to the end of the story. Her jaw dropped, her eyes widened, and her back hunched.

“You’re kidding! The NERD wins?!” she screeched. Furious, she threw the manga down, stomping it flat in a fit of rage. A few passerbys stopped to watch, but continued on the way- just some girl throwing a tantrum. Happened all the time at that age.

I hate him! I hate him! I hate him! I hate that guy! That’s it, I’m SO gonna go kick his butt into orbit!

Azami stomped off, aiming to find Ryouko. She neglected to remind herself that she really had no reason to want to kick his butt- it just felt natural.

--

Ryouko had his hands full. He and Lee had started off at an easy pace by tacit agreement- best to warm up and stretch before you got into heavy combat. Ryouko quickly learned that his ‘easy’ was very different from Lee’s easy.

“That’s it, Lee! Two more! One more! Five hundred one-hand pushups! You’re ready for combat!” Gai declared, striking a pose. Lee got up, not a drop of sweat on him. He wasn’t even a little out of breath. Ryouko suddenly felt as though he was in over his head, sitting on the ground stretching a hamstring. **Lee-kun is in better shape than most jonin!** But Ryouko’s mind put him at ease- it wasn’t ALL strength- there was speed, technique, adaptation, and sixth sense. Ryouko knew he had more sixth sense than Lee, false modesty aside. But everything else was questionable. Ryouko knew a wider variety of taijutsu, but more wasn’t always better. It added to the adaptation ability, but against one highly trained foe, it made no difference.

So they began to spar, each reading the other, flicking weak jabs and kicks to test speed and skill. Then Lee was gone.

“What?” Ryouko turned just in time to block a head-high kick. Lee was gone again, but he reappeared to Ryouko’s side. This time Ryouko aimed a kick at him, but only hit the air. This pattern continued until Lee finally smacked Ryouko in the gut, sending him skidding backward.

He’s fast! How on earth? Body-flicker? No, he can’t use jutsus...then how? No way I can match him in taijutsu!

Ryouko peeled backwards, blocking a series of kicks with his forearms, trying to find a pattern to Lee’s attacks, or at least an opening for a counter-attack. Ryouko found neither, and he was being driven back. Some long-ingrained reflex told him to get his back toward the center of their designated area. As he did, Lee had to change direction, slowing up for a split-second. Ryouko had to think about it, but finally concluded: **If I can just get a hold of him...I tried staying close, but he still blazed by me with his speed...**

Lee was crouching in front of Ryouko. The next thing Ryouko knew, he was launched into the air, his chin taking the brunt of the kick. Lee was underneath him, he sensed. In desperation, Ryouko threw an elbow back, hitting Lee in the stomach. Still in the air, Ryouko rolled over and stomped, kicking Ryouko toward the ground. Ryouko straightened himself, falling in with a side-kick. Lee uncoiled from a crouching position and cracked Ryouko on the chin. Ryouko hit the ground hard, but he had landed flat, so he rolled to his feet and attacked. Lee blocked his kick, arms forming an ‘X’. From there, he tried to throw Ryouko, but Ryouko landed on his feet and swiped- nothing. On a pure gut feeling Ryouko spun around, aiming a sweep kick behind him. He didn’t connect, but he heard the sound of spandex stretching as Lee jumped to evade the blow. Now Ryouko went on the offensive, throwing a roundhouse that Lee *just* blocked in time. Both landed on the ground, Ryouko panting, Lee standing upright.

“This is excellent! I have not sparred someone in a pure taijutsu contest like this before!”

“Likewise,” Ryouko managed to reply around gasping breaths. “We’ve gotta do this again sometime!”

Lee grinned and zipped forward again. Ryouko kicked at him, but Lee repeated his kick to the chin. This time, Ryouko blacked out for a split-second. The next thing he knew, he was upside-down and couldn’t move.

Bandages?

Then everything began to spin. That stopped at Gai-sensei’s shouts.

“LEE! THAT IS FORBIDDEN TAIJUTSU!” Gai shouted, irate at his star student. Ryouko felt the bandages release him, and he righted himself.

“That was checkmate, whatever it was,” Ryouko said, letting shock come into his voice. “What WAS that?”

Lee, despite getting reprimanded, smiled. “THAT is the forbidden taijutsu known as the Primary Lotus!

Er...I am sorry that I almost used it on you. I got over-excited, and I just learned the technique yesterday...Please accept my apologies," Lee bowed, seeming sincerely sorry. Ryouko shrugged.

"It's okay. I feel bad for the sucker you get with that move though!"

Gai perked up suddenly. "Well, who do we have here?"

The little girl with the black hair and Egyptian skin bowed. "Masamitsu Azami. I just need a word with Ryouko-kun, sensei." Azami didn't wait for a reply- she just walked over to Ryouko, looked him up and down, then-

BAM!

She cracked Ryouko in the chin.

"What the hell was that for?!" Ryouko snarled.

"I'm telling, you cursed at me!" Azami shot back.

"You sucker-punched me!" Ryouko replied. "I have every right to curse you out. What are you even doing here? I'm busy on a mission for Lord Hokage."

Azami actually went to punch Ryouko again, but smacked her first against a log. Ryouko was exhausted, but he hadn't actually used any chakra in that fight. Just a ton of stamina. He used a replacement jutsu, and let Azami beat herself up.

"What is your problem, Azami-chan?!" Ryouko asked, standing next to Tenten now. On Tenten's other side was Neji, and on Ryouko's other side was Lee. Azami thought back to the shojo manga she had read- Lee was the megane type, minus the glasses. **The nerd isn't going to win this round!**

Azami started to cozy up to Lee- something no one saw coming. Once she was safely behind Lee, she hurled insult after insult at Ryouko. Ryouko just shook his head- he wasn't going to hit a girl. Azami somehow insulted Neji too, but he and Ryouko agreed on the whole 'you don't hit a girl' thing. Tenten had heard enough and tackled Azami, giving her a hard throw, then snapping a kunai down right next to her head.

"Cut it out! I don't know what your problem is, but if you've got a problem with my friends, you've got a problem with *me*! They might be too nice to hit you, but if you keep pushing, I'm *not* going to be so nice!"

No one had seen Tenten act like this before. It was clear she was the motherly type, especially on the hot-blooded team Gai was in charge of. Apparently, she had an instinct to protect when she felt her friends slighted. Ryouko, despite himself...well, he was thirteen, almost fourteen- a cute girl defending him (even though she was really defending a group- a fact his mind just happened to forget for the time being) was seriously cool.

Azami and Tenten glared at each other. Then Azami smirked.

“So which one is it? Which one are you in love with?”

Tenten blushed. “Well, it’s...none of your business! Just...just get out of here!” Tenten hauled Azami to her feet and gave her a push in the right direction- the ‘right’ direction being away from Tenten! For her part, Tenten couldn’t tell if she was more embarrassed or angry.

“Are you okay, Ten-chan?” Ryouko asked, barely concealing a smile in his voice. He offered her a hand up. She took it, a little pink on her cheeks. Both she and Ryouko chalked it up to the fact that Tenten had just been in a fight, and she had been embarrassed about losing her cool.

“Yeah, I’m okay. How are you?” Tenten almost touched Ryouko’s chin, but held off at the last second.

“I’m alright. Lee hit me harder multiple time,” Ryouko managed a small laugh. “I apologize for the interruption everyone. If you’ll please excuse me, I’ve got one more thing to tackle today. We’ll have to spar again, Lee. You, too, Gai-sensei, Ten-chan, Neji-tan.”

Neji growled at Ryouko, but he was already gone courtesy of a body flicker jutsu.

--

Kurenai and her team waited, each of them passing the time in their own particular way. Hinata was playing with her fingers nervously, no doubt fretting about Neji, or Naruto, or her father’s incessant pushing to become stronger.

Shino, by contrast, was trying to coax new insects to join him. He had spotted a semi-rare beetle that secreted an antidote for burns. Moving slowly, he held a finger out to the insect, then paused, unmoving. The insect climbed on his finger, and Shino added yet another bug to his enormous collection.

Kiba was playing with Akamaru, throwing sticks and apples for him to find and bring back. Akamaru’s barking was punctuated by shouts of encouragement from Kiba, and then ‘good boy’ when he did something right.

Kurenai was chewing on a nail, apparently nervous. Unbeknownst to her students, Kakashi had made a request- check Ryouko’s ability for genjutsu. The only way to do that was to slap on a genjutsu and see if he held onto consciousness. Kurenai could do that; genjutsu was her specialty. But part of her wondered if it was really a good idea to hit an unsuspecting genin with full-blast genjutsu.

Lord Hokage’s personal protégé or not, he’s still a thirteen year old boy. Should I really do this? I guess...Kakashi would know better than I would. So, I guess...he’s here. Time to do this. I won’t use my ‘killing’ genjutsu, that’s too much. But Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing should do it...

-

Ryouko felt himself hit with something. The world changed slightly, a tornado of leaves blocking his view. Then things were normal. Or they appeared to be. Ryouko knew better.

Genjutsu...alright, stay calm...can’t let it reach it’s climax. Whoever this is causing this doesn’t

know me very well, or they would have targeted a soft spot. Gotta get that out of my mind, they can read that to some degree. What else...I know this genjutsu...hell viewing...but it's power level is off the charts! I've got to...ah! I can't move! Gotta force it, gotta...force...it!

Ryouko's hand inched toward it's kunai pouch. A vague part of his consciousness controlled that motion. When it registered that the genjutsu user was clamping down to stop this action, it made one quick motion, grabbing a kunai. With a flick of the wrist, the kunai was sent in the direction the chakra was coming from.

No dice, didn't hit the caster...that was a stupid risk anyway. Now to release this...Focus...RELEASE!

Ryouko shattered the genjutsu- partially. Kurenai had started to hold on tighter, increasing her strength in increments, forcing Ryouko to be pushed to his limit. She was surprised to find he had come close to throwing off her genjutsu- it was at a B-ranked level now, very impressive for the genin to still be conscious, let alone fighting.

I weakened it...but it's back on tight. I can feel a vision starting...no, no no! I can't use the 'release' technique, but I can still break this! Ryouko bit down on his lip, sinking his teeth in until he drew blood. He broke through the genjutsu for a second- long enough to see his attacker- before he succumbed to it once more.

By now, Kurenai's students were watching raptly. They hadn't been privy to what was going on, but they could guess now. Ryouko had figured out where Kurenai was, and that she was casting the genjutsu- in his haze, he didn't see that she was a woman, so when he suddenly sprang at her and took a mighty swing (He didn't connect, but he broke Kurenai's concentration enough to end the genjutsu) he didn't see it was a woman until she blocked his punch.

WHAM!

Kiba had tackled Ryouko.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?! Attacking a woman like that? I oughta-"

"Kiba! Enough, I started the fight. He was simply breaking the genjutsu I had on him, then attacking." Kurenai's explanation got Kiba off of Ryouko. The two got along because of their mutual like of animals. Akamaru and Holly had hit it off and played together almost every day.

"Sorry about that. Shoulda known you wouldn't hit a girl..." Kiba apologized sheepishly, flashing his wolf-like teeth in a grin. Ryouko nodded- he was winded from fighting that genjutsu off.

"You did very well," Kurenai assured him, patting Ryouko on the back. "You seemed to know the genjutsu I used. I know it's D-ranked, but genjutsu isn't an easy art, and very few choose to attempt it."

"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique," Ryouko recited, still panting. "I wish I had been able to throw it off. You could have killed me if you were an enemy..." Ryouko made a note to work on his 'release' technique. Another long night- Ryouko loved it.

“Well, you’re here for teamwork. So we’ll just do a quick tracking exercise, then you’re on your way.” Kurenai gave a few orders. Two hours later, her test was done, and Lord Hokage would receive a favorable report about Ryouko once more.

--

Lord Hokage sifted through the reports for the day. He set aside a C-ranked mission to the Land of Waves. Lord Hokage knew the Land of Waves and chose not to deal with them for the most part. They seemed intent on staying by themselves, unconnected with the rest of the world. That was an unspoken sentence: “leave us alone” is what it said when a land or village stayed by itself like that. But a cry for help never went ignored in the Hidden Leaf.

Last on Lord Hokage’s list was Ryouko’s progress reports. Each jonin instructor had said plenty of good things about him. Even Kakashi, to Lord Hokage’s surprise, had something nice to say. Kurenai’s report was interesting in that it recommended Ryouko for a more intense study in genjutsu.

Kurenai is a new jonin, but she makes her decisions as well as any jonin that’s been in the field for years, the Third thought, always happy to have a Shinobi from his village do well. Taking a break, Lord Hokage peered into his crystal ball. He found Ryouko quickly enough. With a somewhat sad smile, Lord Hokage looked at a boy who was going to be forced to grow up fast.

--

Ryouko worked on his release technique, among others, deep into the night. His mind finally gave him a mental butt-kicking and told him to sleep. It was 3:30 AM, and Ryouko had to be at Lord Hokage’s in two and a half hours. Plenty of time for sleep. Tomorrow was an easy day.

Ryouko thought for a moment...if today was August 3rd...then his birthday was coming up! And his birthday preceded the chunin exams by six days. It would have been a nice birthday present to test, but Ryouko wasn’t ready. He was happy as Lord Hokage’s aid and student. He hoped that he would soon graduate to ‘advisor’, but that wasn’t likely to happen overnight. All the same, his time in the Leaf had shown Ryouko patience. He could wait, and be that much better for it.

--

After two weeks, Team Seven had come back from the Land of Waves. Their report was certainly an interesting read- so much so that Ryouko felt a pang of jealousy. But he suppressed it instantly- he had learned a lot in two weeks, so he wasn’t going to complain.

“Ryouko, if I’m correct, your birthday is coming up, correct?”

Ryouko shook himself out of his trance. “Yes, sir, it is. The twenty-fifth.”

Lord Hokage exhaled some smoke. “Well, it’s only right for a teacher to give his student something...let me see...ah! I know! It isn’t new, but I believe you may understand it’s significance. You see, this was mine once. Now I want you to have it, in honor of your first A-ranked assignment.”

Ryouko had opened the box to find a black headband- that was rare, as only a couple Shinobi wore black headbands, and the ones who did were all high-ranked jonin. But it was the gift underneath it that was from Lord Hokage- chainmail arm guards.

And to think I was worried he'd make me take the day off! Ryouko thought, mildly laughing at himself.

“The A-ranked mission: Come to the chunin exams as my aide. It may sound dull, but a great many things can happen at chunin exams. In fact, this year we have a relatively new village participating. Otogakure, or the Sound Village, will have genin applying. Tensions are high, and you may be called on to break up fights. But I know you're more than up to it.”

“I won't let you down, Lord Hokage!” Ryouko declared, putting the arm guards on, then tying his new headband in place.

9 - Adventure 9- Time Slipping Away

A lot of fanfare went into the chunin exams. Ryouko was honored to be a part of it all. But things turned dark when Anko showed up. Ryouko had been monitoring progress made in the Forest of Death, trying to catch a glimpse of the renowned Sand Ninja- that's when Anko came running in.

"Lord Hokage! Orochimaru-"

Ryouko's mind stopped there. Immediately, he checked his weapons, grabbed his spares, and taped his arms up. Things were going to get nasty. The knowing glance he received from the Third Hokage was enough to warn him about that.

"We have no choice but to give in to him for the time being," the Third Hokage replied to Anko's query about what to do. Orochimaru had demanded that the chunin exams progress as normal, without evacuation or interruption.

"Ryouko...the storm has come," Lord Hokage said simply. That was all he needed to say. Ryouko nodded his head, too weary to bow.

"I'll inform the jonin."

--

The next day, things got worse. Ryouko was summoned by Lord Hokage early the next morning. Ryouko hadn't eaten yet, and he was thanking God he hadn't.

"Dear God..." he uttered. Ryouko had seen dead people, but they were the nicely processed dead people- the ones that were dressed formally and in a box, or already turned to ash. This dead body was slashed from shoulder to hip, and the crows had fed on it. Even worse, the body belonged to Ryouko's friend. "Hayate-sensei..."

Immediately, Ryouko sought out his lover, Yukao. Yukao was a purple-haired ANBU jonin. He had gotten to know her through Hayate. He didn't say anything, just silently offered his support with a rare hug.

When he looked back later, Ryouko realized that now was about the time he became a man, in mindset if not in body or age.

--

Lord Hokage sat in his chair, watching the tournament finals. To his left was Raito, to his right was Ryouko. Raito was a Tokubetsu Jonin, and a good one. Ryouko was a genin who had worked well with Raito and Genma. Now he listened to Raito.

“Does there seem to be something off about Lord Kazekage, Ryouko-kun?” Raito whispered, indicating the Sand Village’s leader. Ryouko didn’t like the guy- he just had that aura about him. Evil and powerful- the worst possible mix.

“Yeah...he just doesn’t seem to be as relaxed and calm as he’s projecting,” Ryouko admitted, glad to know he wasn’t paranoid. “Like he’s...waiting for something...”

-

The Sand Kazekage cast an eye at the two young ninja guarding the Hokage. He raised one finger, then nodded. Suddenly, two people in the crowd starting brawling.

“Ryouko, settle them down, please,” Lord Hokage asked. Ryouko immediately got up to do so.

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Everything happened so fast. The Sand Kazekage revealed himself as Orochimaru. Raito was gravely hurt. Snakes came from nowhere. The crowd was lulled to sleep by a genjutsu. And the fight began. The second great ninja war, as some would remember it. To Ryouko, the memory that stuck out was when a black barrier flew up around Lord Hokage and Orochimaru. Ryouko could do nothing to help. When he tried, he was forced to defend his home, and pray that his teacher would be fine.

Please sensei...You can do this! Ryouko’s silent plea seemed to be the only way he could compensate for not being at Lord Hokage’s side. Very quickly, Ryouko had to forget about Lord Hokage and start fighting himself- the Sand/Sound alliance had begun their attack, and innocent people were dying.

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Ryouko blocked with his forearm, then stepped in, punching. After that, Ryouko had to turn to the side to avoid a bo. His right foot met his attacker’s jaw, propelling the Shinobi backwards into a wall. A third tried to attack Ryouko by jumping over the first person Ryouko had KO-ed, but had no luck, as Ryouko threw the person in the air, forcing a mid-air collision. Jumping on top of the two, Ryouko kicked off them, knocking them into the ground below, and giving him a shot at another ninja who was about to take a free shot at the back of one of the senseis. Ryouko dispelled that threat, landing in time to stuff a charging foe in the stomach. That foe coughed up blood before falling hard to the concrete floor. Ryouko had only seconds to reach into his kunai pouch and throw two, both taking out mid-air foes.

“Ryouko, Kakashi and I will handle this! Get to Lord Hokage!” Gai ordered, kicking an opposing ninja in the temple.

“Right!” Ryouko took off across the rooftops, but found a black-clad ANBU member in his way.

“I don’t think so. Our masters are busy, so we’ll have to entertain ourselves. I guess we haven’t been introduced properly.”

Ryouko didn’t know what the hell this guy was talking about.

“Get out of my way, whoever you are!” Ryouko demanded, but didn’t move, as his enemy reached inside his cloak. When he withdrew a deck of cards, Ryouko wondered what kind of spell was on them. But the ninja simply drew one from the deck and looked at it.

“Amakatsu Ryouko...Student of the Third Hokage...Genjutsu is rated 8, Ninjutsu rated 8.5, and taijutsu...8. Stamina- average. Luck- bad. Speed- above average, but not by much. Specialty- none. Team- none. Association- Hidden Leaf...” the masked man put the card away.

“You aren’t anything special. I should be more than enough to deal with you. Then again, why should I bloody my hands? I’ll let my companions fight you first.” The cloaked man raised his hand. Four Sound Ninja were at his side, and ready to attack. The one in the cloak closed his fist. The four charged Ryouko.

“Damn it! A traitor?! You must be the same one that got Hayate-sensei!” Ryouko declared, dodging strikes from all sides.

“I offered. But someone else killed him. You’ll have to find another reason to hate me, I guess. If you’re so driven by emotions,” the cloaked response came. Ryouko narrowed his eyes. He was kicked under the chin a split-second later. Four sets of fists tried to get a hold of him in the air, but Ryouko twisted and lashed one boot out wildly. On instinct, he aimed to the right, and clipped his nearest attacker in the knee. There was a tell-tale CRUNCH of destruction of bone, and a scream of agony. Ryouko hated those sounds, but he had no choice. If he didn’t incapacitate them, he would have to kill them. At fourteen years old, Ryouko’s hands were free of the blood of murder, and he wasn’t ready to sully them with such blood yet.

“Shut up!” Ryouko shouted. His left hand intercepted a strike and turned it into an armbar. Ryouko twisted his body, throwing the luckless Shinobi over his shoulder. Just before the man would have hit the ground, Ryouko jerked upward, yanking his shoulder out of place and destroying tendons and nerves. An attacker jumped him from behind. Ryouko spun and threw a punch to the stomach that sunk in, causing blood to spurt away from his attacker’s mouth. Ryouko’s leg slashed up and finished the enemy off with a kick to the jaw that caused several bones to crack. His leg still up the air, Ryouko didn’t waste any motion- he kicked once more, this time shattering a nose. Withdrawing his leg slightly, Ryouko kicked four more times. Chest, head, chest, head, finally finished with a fifth kick, a kick to the side that broke ribs. The last attacker of the group was thwarted with a backfist to the nose, several fast punches to the stomach, and a knee smash to the chin.

The cloaked man seemed surprised. “It seems I pegged you incorrectly. You’re stronger than I thought. I suppose I’ll have to get involved myself...”

WHOOMPF! Before Ryouko could react, Kabuto had hit him in the stomach twice, then gave him a good whack in the face. Ryouko slid across the rooftop on his side, prying up shingles in his wake. One hand reached out and grabbed one of the shingles, concealing it tight to his body as Kabuto ran toward him. Ryouko threw the shingle at Kabuto like a shuriken. Kabuto simply cut the tile in half with his hand. After studying first aid, Ryouko knew that was a Chakra Scalpel, and that it was dangerous. Given how large the chakra was around Kabuto’s hand, this wasn’t some ordinary healing jutsu either.

Ryouko looked toward the barrier, seeing the Third Hokage and Orochimaru duel. **I've got to get over there! And I can't see any way but one...**

Ryouko charged Kabuto throwing a flurry of punches and kicks.

"You're good, I'll give you that, but-" Kabuto sliced down, hitting Ryouko on the head. "-Against me, you've got no chance!"

POOF! A log?!

"What?!" Kabuto snarled. He spun towards the barrier, seeing Ryouko in a duel using genjutsu with the heaviest member of the Sound Four. The barrier flickered, allowing an ANBU agent to get through. He didn't last long in combat against Orochimaru, and was dead almost instantly.

"Ryouko, deal with the traitor! We'll try what you did, just keep him off our backs!" came another shout. Ryouko responded by turning back toward Kabuto. Kabuto was right near Ryouko already, his arm extended. Ryouko grabbed the arm and threw Kabuto- right into the barrier! FWOOM! Flames shot up, charring the log Kabuto had replaced himself with. Ryouko and Kabuto exchanged glances, then both kicked off, meeting high in the air, exchanging strikes. Kabuto managed to strike a near-critical hit that threw Ryouko's lead left hand off. That wasn't so devastating- Ryouko had put his left hand out as a diversion. His right hand was stronger, and that one hand could do plenty. That including using the Chakra Scalpel to heal his left hand. Healed, Ryouko and Kabuto clashed again. This time, Ryouko's kunai and Kabuto's hand locked in a stalemate. Both having a similar idea, Kabuto aimed a chakra-laced strike at Ryouko's stomach; Ryouko aimed a chakra-laced foot at Kabuto's stomach. The two colliding. Chakra meeting chakra caused a minor explosion, sending the two skittering away from each other. Ryouko pulled himself up to his feet quickly, holding another tile in his hands. He let it fly at Kabuto's face. Kabuto moved to destroy it, but Ryouko made a half of a dragon handsign. The tile exploded inches from Kabuto's face.

"Ah! Damn it!" Kabuto cursed, leaping away. Ryouko let him go, no one was going to recover from a blow from an explosive in a hurry. That explosion opened a hole in the building that Orochimaru and the Third Hokage were fighting on. That gave Ryouko a desperate idea. Creating a clone to stand there and cover for him, Ryouko leapt into the building, even as it was licked by flames.

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"The Seal is set! My one regret...is that I couldn't take you with me. Farewell, idiot disciple- may we clash again in the next world!" the Third Hokage told Orochimaru, a smile on his face as he fell slowly to the side, the mark of the Shinigami on his side.

"Damn you, you feeble old buzzard! Give me back my arms!" Orochimaru wailed.

CRACK!

Orochimaru had to move quickly, despite his pain. Ryouko had burrowed up from underneath him and had bad intentions with a kunai. But his passion fell as he saw the Third Hokage dead. His shoulders slumped as he saw the mark on the Third's stomach.

He went through with it...Third Hokage...

Ryouko turned around, a snarl in his voice as he charged Orochimaru.

"I'll finish what he started! You won't have any help this time!" Ryouko shouted, making the hand signs for the Reaper Death Seal, ready to seal away the rest of Orochimaru's soul. But a kunai striking him in the hands stopped him.

"Get me out of here...the operation is over!" Orochimaru hissed between teeth clenched with pain. He was talking to his four henchmen. One had six arms, one was tall and fat, another had two heads, and the last was THE meanest looking girl Ryouko had ever seen.

"No you don't!" Ryouko yelled, leaping after them. Three ANBU agents joined him in the air.

"Tend to the Third Hokage, we'll pursue them!"

Ryouko couldn't disobey a direct order, and part of him wanted to go back anyway. He let himself fall, watching as ANBU was snared in some sort of net that the freak with six arms spat out. But Ryouko's mind was numb now. The most powerful Shinobi he had known...and he was dead.

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The Third Hokage's funeral was a time of pure sadness. Ryouko stood with the two elders of the village- he was the last pupil of the Third Hokage, and was therefore placed in a delicate position. Shinobi were forbidden to show emotion, but that was hard when your mentor and one of your closest friends were dead. To make things more complicated, Ryouko had been the one who'd had to make the report about the Third Hokage's death. People seemed to accuse him of not saving the Third Hokage on purpose. He had been ordered away, that was the fact of the matter. But everyone needed a scapegoat. It was wrong, and they knew it, but Ryouko fit the bill. Maybe that was why he remained still by the Third's casket long after the funeral. He vaguely realized he had talked to some people. All through the day, his mind replayed what he knew about the Third's death. He bowed his head once more and prayed. When he looked up once more, it was raining again. In front of him were the two ashen-faced elders.

"As Sarutobi's last student, we ask you first: Fill in while we search for the next Hokage."

Ryouko nodded numbly, not knowing or caring what his job would be. He had helped the Third Hokage for over two years- he could handle filling in temporarily.

"Who do you have in mind?" Ryouko asked gravely.

"After speaking with Master Jiraiya, we have chosen the other Sannin, Princess Tsunade, as the Fifth Hokage. However, she is not available right away, and Jiraiya will be searching for her. That means that you will oversee the distribution of missions, keep reports, and make sure everything is ready for the Fifth Hokage. Think of yourself as an aide with executive privileges."

Ryouko nodded again. "I understand. I'll do it."

The female elder was harsh towards the younger generation, and showed it now. "Don't let this power go to your head, young man. You are here only because Sarutobi believe you worthy of succeeding him, if only temporarily."

Ryouko's eyes snapped up. "Let that be the least of your worries, Elder. I'm happy to help. All of us are assigning blame to someone for Lord Third's death. I chose myself, even though my brain has told me that Orochimaru killed the Third Hokage, not any of us. I will do things as he dictated, and as he taught. You'll only have to deal with my inexperience for a few short weeks."

The male elder gave his grim approval. "Sarutobi-sama spoke highly of you. Our trust is in you, and it is well earned."

Ryouko bowed. "Thank you, Elder. I'm going to get to work then. No time like the present."

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Ryouko's first order of business was to act as the executor of Master Sarutobi's will. Because Asuma was estranged and Konohamaru was still too young, that left Ryouko, the student, to handle Sarutobi's estate. Some was left to Ryouko- scrolls and books that would have left a Ryouko that WASN'T saddled with depression and grim responsibility drooling. Also belonging to him was the summoning contract the Third Hokage had with Enma, the Monkey King. Once Ryouko added his name, he could summon Enma. Even the depression-laden Ryouko grew excited over that prospect.

Thirty-six hours later, Ryouko hadn't slept a wink, nor had he tried. Instead, he distributed missions, oversaw repairs, and budgeted the best he could. There were complaints, of course, but Ryouko handled them with a trained ease.

--Six Weeks Pass--

"Hey, Ryouko-kun!" Naruto came plowing into the room, tailed by Master Jiraiya.

"Naruto-kun, welcome back. And Jiraiya-sama, it's good to see you again." Ryouko bowed. When he looked up, he was met with the evaluating glance of Jiraiya.

"Stressed over your work, kid? Don't blame ya, it's nasty stuff! But now you can rest up, we've brought the Fifth Hokage."

"That's excellent news! I've heard she has other matters to attend to. If she needs my assistance, and you happen to see her first..." Ryouko gestured vaguely, as if he was too tired to continue speaking.

"I will. For now, stay put kid. Tsunade's gonna hit the local watering holes, search out gambling parlors, heal some people, THEN get down to business. So you might be here a while..." Jiraiya paused.

"Naruto, go hurry her along, will ya?"

"Right! COME ON Tsunade-Obaasan!" Naruto barreled out the door, bubbling over with enthusiasm

and energy, as always. Jiraiya made sure he was gone, then turned to Ryouko.

“You doing alright?” Jiraiya asked quietly. Stacks of paper on Ryouko’s desk seemed to shelter him from any light. It didn’t help his office wasn’t the grand, open office the Hokage’s had- it was more like a back room.

“As alright as I can be under the circumstances. Aside from grief, I’ve really hit a wall, Jiraiya-sama.” Ryouko confided. “I’ve really got no prospects now. I’ve already, er, gathered that I won’t be the new Hokage’s aide. Too many complaints about my work. Fair enough, I guess. But that means I’ll be without a team, or any tasks. And...I guess I’m not over the Third dying...” Ryouko had been reluctant to admit that last part, but it felt good to finally say it. He kept his face stiff despite knowing it was useless to try to hide his anger and frustration from Jiraiya.

“I can’t help you with the grief, it’s something we all feel after all. As for complaints about your work- well, this place is still standing, we’re making money, and the village is getting pieced back together. You’ve done as fine as anyone could given the circumstances.” Jiraiya sat down on the desk, avoiding the dangerously teetering stacks of paper. “As for your role- you’ll be given missions now. D-ranked, C-ranked, maybe even B-ranked. Just think of it as another chance to learn, and to apply your learning. The way I hear it, you’ve won over every jonin in the village. I can’t tell you what to do, but if I were you, I would seek out a few who could teach you a trick or two.”

Ryouko didn’t have a chance to answer- a woman with long blonde hair, giant breasts (not a perverted thing, but seriously- if you don’t notice, you’ve never read Naruto!), and a diamond on her forehead.

“Ryouko, meet Tsunade- the Fifth Hokage.”

THIS FIC WILL CONTINUE IN THE NEXT SERIES- NARUTO: THE NEW AGE!
TSUNADE TAKES OVER AS HOKAGE; THE ROOKIE NINE GROW; OROCHIMARU'S MARK BEGINS TO SHOW THROUGH, AND MORE!