

# Origins (Naruto)

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*My OC's tale takes a new direction. More on Naruto and co's past. Please enjoy and comment.*

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# 1 - Nameless

Splash splash splash splash splash!

“Stop him!”

**I’m innocent! Why won’t you believe me?!**

The tears stained the ten year old’s face as he ran. Hot sweat and tears stung his eyes, forcing him to blink constantly.

**Because I’m not like them. That’s why. They’re all ninja, and I’m...not.**

The boy stopped running, trying to pick a direction. He could see a village to his right, but it was a long shot. Also his best and only shot. The boy took off at top speed.

The second he set foot in the village, he found himself surrounded. People were yelling at him, willing him to die.

“I mean you no harm, I really don’t!”

“Shut up! We know what you did! Out with it, boy!” the group that was chasing him cheered as one, throwing ‘get him’ and ‘die!’ in. To a young man, this was all too much. He felt his eyes tearing up again. This time, he shook the tears off.

“I won’t just die! Attack me, if you must!” the young boy’s hand found his sword’s hilt. He had his back to a bridge, so he backed onto it. The attackers could only come from two directions, rather than from all sides this way.

It was true that the boy was a curiosity. Dressed in sandals, a hakama, and a gi top, with a sword at his waist, he was dressed like a samurai. No problem, except that he was in a ninja village.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone! That’s why I ran!” the boy protested once more. His attackers still closed in. The boy drew his sword halfway out, waiting for an attacker to come close enough. The first one came, and the boy cut him.

“His sword’s blunt! It’s a training blade!” shouted the wounded one. That was before the blade smacked his fingers, knocking his kunai away.

“Too easy! Now you’re out of place! You can’t block OR attack!” declared the next attacker. This particular man wasn’t favored among his comrades- he was mean-spirited and attacked people needlessly. Now he was attacking a young boy from behind.

WHOCK!

The boy swung his case like it too was a sword. He stopped the arrogant Shinobi in his tracks by hitting him in the chest and arms in one strike. The group backed up, all of them making their own plans on how to take this boy out. The way the boy was crouched, he could attack in either direction. It was already apparent that he was fast and skilled. It was also clear that he didn't want to kill; the training blade and his targets both showed that.

Two more tried, one from each direction. One used wire to trap the boy's arms at his sides while the other attacked with a thrown kunai. The boy's eyes narrowed, as if flashing back to some battlefield. He suddenly didn't seem so young and scared anymore- he carried himself like a warrior. Using the thumb of his left hand, he shot his sword up out of his case, breaking the wires. But that wasn't what the boy had planned- the blade flashed up in front of his face from the same move, knocking the kunai down. Free again, the boy's foot sailed backward and caught the Shinobi with the wire hard in the stomach seconds before the sword's case swung around and cracked his nose. The ninja in front of the boy froze, but that was his mistake. Some instinct to survive had kicked in now, and the boy swung his sword without hesitation. His sword was blunted, except for the tip and maybe two inches below it. That was what cut across the ninja's chest, tearing his vest and sending his scrolls spinning to the ground. The scrolls in front of his heart split in two.

"I SAID I didn't want to fight! Why can't you just leave me alone? I haven't killed anyone, and I'm not going to! I just want to be left alone!" the boy wailed, though he kept his guard up. He clearly had been through this before. The next two ninja attacked, but they were rattled now. None of them were thinking clearly- if they had been, one jutsu and the kid is toast. Instead, the boy thrust his case backward into one, throwing an elbow into the other. Using his footing well, he spun and kicked, taking out the same one he had elbowed with a kick to the side of the face. Once he landed, he jumped high in the air, aiming for the one he had stunned with his case. Another ninja blocked the strike with two kunai, also kicking the boy- hard. But the boy skidded backward, still up on his feet. Kicking off hard, he flew in with an attack that the ninja just barely blocked. Once again, that annoying case proved to be a difference maker when it smacked the Shinobi in the groin.

"What the hell?! That's it, everyone off the bridge! Let's see him block this! Fire Style: Flame Jutsu!"

The attack hit the boy, but he kept moving forward. While casting the attack, the Shinobi had jumped high in the air. That left him at the samurai's mercy. SCHWING!- a cut across the arms, ending the jutsu but not seriously hurting the ninja. Next came a grab to the vest in which the samurai threw the Shinobi to the ground from five feet in the air. But jumping had proven to be the end of the fight, as the samurai was rushed. He kept fighting, throwing headbutts, knees, and elbows. The butt-end of a kunai hit him in the head hard enough to cross his eyes, while he was punched in the stomach with enough force to make him cough up blood. That left the boy face-down on the ground. A ninja group-stomp ensued.

"STOP THIS AT ONCE!" came a powerful voice. But the voice wasn't threatening. The blade clattered from the boy's hand, though he quickly picked up his long sword. Holding it at his waist, he looked around wildly, not knowing where to look.

**They're going to kill me! What did I do?! Why won't anyone believe me?! If I'm going to die, it'll be with honor!**

The crowd on the bridge parted as a bearded man in an official-looking uniform strode through them. Ryouko tensed up, ready to attack again. But this person was different- not threatening, though it was clear he was incredibly powerful.

“A boy with a sword has been giving my jonin the run-around? Haha, well, you must be quite the little escape artist. Do you have a name?”

The boy looked surprised to be addressed. “No sir...”

“Well then, why don’t you put your sword away, and you and I can talk. I promise, no one will hurt you here.”

“B-But I don’t even know where ‘here’ is!” the boy yelled, the confusion hitting him in waves now.

“ ‘Here’ is Konohagakure; the Village Hidden in the Leaves. But that can wait until you’ve been put at peace. Genma, Hayate- spread the word that this boy is not to be harmed or treated like a prisoner. He is to be treated as a welcome guest in our village. If any harm befalls him, the perpetrators will be dealt with by me personally, and the punishment will be stiff.”

“Yes, Lord Hokage!” the two said in unison, taking off with incredible speed.

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When the samurai awoke next, he found himself in a room that was furnished plainly, but comfortably. He groaned and sat up.

**Someone treated my burns. I leapt into that fire, but I was soaked with water from running so it wasn’t too bad. But then what? I fought, but I clearly lost. Why wasn’t I executed, or interrogated and tortured? Is it that old man’s doing? Lord Hokage...Fire Shadow...what on earth is this? These are ninjas, but why would they take pity on me?**

Someone was coming, so the boy laid back down, facing the wall.

“Come on now, we’re not going to hurt you. Won’t you at least face us? That’s proper manners. Unless you’re shy, of course! Come on, now.”

The voice was pleasing, and kind. Coaxing, not stern. For some reason, the boy reacted to it. He turned around and sat up.

“Ah, there we go! We’re making progress! Good, good! Now, how about you tell us your name?”

The woman asking had blonde hair, pulled into two pony tails. Her eyes were auburn in color.

“I...don’t have one anymore. When I ran, I forgot it.” The boy was suddenly ashamed, and he bowed his head. “I’m sorry to cause you all this trouble.”

“No trouble at all! Now then, let me see your face. I need to make sure my burn salve is working. The

rest of you was fine, thanks to your wet clothes, but your cheek took quite a roasting,” the woman told him, applying a cold washcloth to his cheek. The cold water felt good on his suddenly-red skin. During the fight, the boy hadn’t noticed the burn. Now that he woke up for the first time, he really felt it. But he had felt worse pain, so he didn’t cry.

“The guy that did that to you got punished. I know you would have liked to get another hit in, but trust me- I did a bit more damage, haha!” a jolly voice exclaimed. This voice caused the boy to react, too. He looked up, a small smile on his face.

“Thank you for that. I didn’t...I mean...” the boy’s face was awash with horror. “I didn’t kill anyone, did I? The man I cut on the chest?!”

“No, they were all minor injuries. Stupid on their part to attack you. I could hear you from the hospital, saying you didn’t want to hurt anyone, or fight. I wish I had been there sooner to beat the crap out of those guys! Attacking an innocent boy like that! Then THIS clown goes and beats up the one that hit you so much I have MORE work!”

“Haha, sorry about that! But you know how I love to watch you work, Tsunade!” the man with the white hair was laughing again. “Working women are such a-”

Whatever they were would have to wait, since the white haired man was just doused with a bowl of water. It was the same water that the cold washcloth had been sitting in, so it hit the man in the face with a comical ‘shlap!’ sound.

“You pervert, Jiraiya! You’ve been like this since we were kids! When are you gonna grow up?!”

“I’m sorry, Tsunade. I was just trying to ease the tension. After the losses the past couple of years...I should be over that, but I’m not.”

Tsunade’s tone darkened, although she spoke apologetically. “Don’t worry about it, I understand. Let me finish healing this boy, then we can go get a drink. We’ve all got a need to forget.” Turning to the boy, she continued.

“Alright, let me see your arms and chest. Let’s get that gi top off you. Don’t move too much, you might be burned and not know. The skin pulling won’t be pleasant.”

“How come you never wanna take MY clothes off?” grumbled Jiraiya, crossing his arms mockingly.

“Not in front of the boy, you lecherous fool!” Tsunade snarled, giving Jiraiya a hard shove. The boy’s eyes were wide, and Tsunade quickly apologized. “No, no, don’t get scared, I won’t hurt you! Him and I are just playing, we’re friends. You know, just doing what friends do!”

**I wouldn’t know; I don’t have friends,** the boy thought, though he calmed down for the woman’s sake.

“Damn, it’s caked on by blood...Okay, now promise me you’ll hold still. This is going to be a little scary, but I promise I won’t hurt you. Just hold still...” Tsunade raised her hand, but now it was humming with blue energy. The boy had never seen anything like this and he scuttled backwards on the bed to the wall

on all fours, his eyes wide as dinner plates.

“No no no, don’t be scared! I won’t hurt you, I promise. It’s just a Chakra Scalpel, see? It won’t hurt you.”

The boy, of course, had never seen anything like that before. All he knew was that it was dangerous, and he was unarmed. He DID know how to block a blade, though. He ripped his gi top off and wrapped it around his left arm. The idea behind that was to block with the cloth so you didn’t get cut too badly. You then counter-attacked with your right hand.

Tsunade laughed a little. “I forgot that you’d probably never seen this before. You must have a high tolerance for pain if you could rip that top off like that. No burns...okay, you’re fine.”

Jiraiya and Tsunade were on their way out of the room. Finally, the boy’s curiosity came through.

“Why?” he said in a barely audible whisper. “Why would you help me? I’m your enemy...aren’t I?”

Tsunade gave a friendly smile. “No, to me you’re a patient. And I will do anything to heal my patients. Besides, you didn’t attack, you only defended yourself.”

“...”

“Anyway. I’m Tsunade, and the white-haired goof ball is Jiraiya. I’ll be back to check on you later, okay? Try to get some rest. You’ve had a lot to take in, and not a lot of time to mentally process it. Try to eat something, too.”

-

The boy was alone again. He got his courage up to explore the room. Cautious, he looked everywhere, even going so far as to crawl around under the bed. While down there, he found a ball. He stared at it for a minute, unsure if he should touch it or not. Finally, he stuck a finger out and poked it. After that, he picked it up and rolled it across the room, watching it go. Cautiously, he followed it, walking past a window in the process. He hadn’t noticed it before in the darkened room. It, too, caught his curiosity, and he opened the curtains to look outside. His mouth dropped open.

What greeted the boy’s site was a mountain. On it were four faces, carved into the rock. All the men up there looked fierce and battle-hardened.

Below the faces were a group of children, about the boy’s age. All of them were punching, kicking, or throwing weapons. A couple had broken off to just play, kicking a ball around between them, or wrestling around. One boy had followed a girl around, his face red.

The boy’s eyes looked toward the ball he had found. He wandered over to it and kicked it. It bounced back to him.

“Are you having fun, little rodent?”

The boy dropped the ball in surprise. It rolled to the feet of a familiar ninja. The one that had bullied him! The boy pressed himself against the wall, staring quietly.

“I want an apology from you. You really hurt me, you know that? Hey, are you listening? What, too stupid to talk? Maybe I should just kill you.”

“Why are you bullying me?!” the boy demanded. His eyes had turned dark again, like a warrior. The older ninja didn’t seem to care. He simply picked the boy up by the collar, then slammed him against the wall, holding him there.

“I should wring your puny little neck! I think I will!”

“ENOUGH!”

It was that voice again. The strong voice. The boy turned his head to see the older man again. He wasn’t alone- next to him were the two ninja who had helped the boy yesterday.

“I thought the beating I gave you yesterday would have been enough to get it through your head to stop hurting him, but I guess not. You’re coming with me.”

“Lord Hokage! Sir, tell them! It wasn’t my fault! The little miscreant, uh...” the ninja’s eyes looked around, seeing the ball. “He threw his ball out the door. I came in to give it to him, and he attacked me!”

“That’s not true!” the boy yelled. “Let go of me, I haven’t done anything to you!” Fear was kicking in, and the man wasn’t letting go.

CHOMP!

“OWWW! HE BIT ME! I’LL KILL HIM! COME HERE, YOU LITTLE-!”

The boy had retreated to the safety of the healer from before. Tsunade, that was it. She gently pushed the boy behind her, bidding him to stay with the older man. The Fire Shadow, that’s right. Lord Hokage. The boy did, feeling a gentle hand on his head. What he saw scared him into hiding behind the older man.

Tsunade had punched maybe an inch next to the man’s head. The wall crumbled, and she didn’t seem hurt at all. This was too much for the confused little boy.

“You will understand all, in time,” Lord Hokage told the boy. “Just understand this: We mean you no harm. Forgive our fist meeting. We don’t get many samurai here. Just like you fear the unknown, so do we. Please calm yourself, and you and I will speak. And this man will be punished for hurting you.”

--

The next couple of days saw minor changes in the boy. It had taken a week to get him to talk- then that bastard came in and threatened him, and set his progress back nearly a month. He refused to take almost any food and water. It was because of his lack of nourishment that Tsunade came in again.

“C’mon, you have to eat something.”

“No, it’s poison,” the boy told her, curling up into a ball and facing the other way.

“Is THAT what you think? Kid, you’re in a village of ninja. I know you don’t trust us, but really! This door is unlocked, unless you lock it, so you’re not a prisoner. You can come and go as you want. If you tried to attack, we outnumber you. And, no offense, but you ARE still a young boy. Putting it another way, you don’t have to worry about poison. If he wanted to get rid of you, we could have done so when you were unconscious, asleep, or any other time. The food isn’t poisoned.”

That seemed to make sense to the boy because he sat up and reached for the food. He took a cautious bite of bread, then a cautious sip of water. When that didn’t kill him, he inhaled it.

Tsunade had noticed right away that the boy’s ribs were visible when he first came. He hadn’t been eating right for quite some time. He was pretty pitiful when he first came- until attacked.

**When those doofuses attacked him, he changed. He fought like a seasoned warrior, not a scared child. He’ll grow up to be handsome, I’ll bet. He’s got a cute face, and those inquisitive eyes, too.**

...

**Dan...if you hadn’t died, maybe we could have adopted this child.**

...

**No, stop that, Tsunade! Think of your patient. Okay, he’s eight years old, and he’s starved for attention. Clearly he’s been trained in at least one martial art. One thing’s for sure- he’s a survivor.**

Done with his food, the boy got up. To Tsunade’s surprise, he stood up straight, then bowed to her. His eyes faced the floor, showing that he was humbling himself.

“Thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

Tsunade was taken aback. The boy hadn’t spoke for days, but now he’s talking, eating, drinking, and bowing?

**He really just needed some attention...**

“You’re welcome. Lord Hokage is going to come see you soon. Before he comes, do you have any questions?”

The boy nodded shyly. “I just...want to know about those kids outside. Over there.” He walked to the window and pointed. “What are they doing? How can they do those amazing things?”

“Them? Oh, they’re in training to be ninjas. They’re learning how to survive using their chakra.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. I never heard of ‘chakra’ before. Seeing them do those amazing things...”



Tsunade swallowed her surprise. **Never heard of charka? Then how did he fight before this? There's more he's not saying. Like why he was alone. And the way he keeps looking at those kids...it's like he wants to make friends, but just can't. That's why he hasn't left the room. His type, the survivor type, would definitely check that door. It was unlocked this whole time. So he's chosen not to leave this room...**

"Do you want to go outside and meet some of these kids? I'll bet they'd like to get to know you."

The boy frowned, looking like an adult again. "What about that boy? He's always alone, like I was...Is there something wrong with him?"

Tsunade followed the boy's finger to a blond child. The child was alone. **Naruto? He's seen the Uzumaki boy? I can't even tell him the truth about this one. No one is supposed to know. Still, if I lie to him now, and he finds out later, that'll destroy his trust. Better to leave that one to Lord Hokage.**

"You should ask Lord Hokage that question. But the boy's name is Naruto, if you're curious."

"Naruto..." the boy repeated. "That's a strange name. Then again, at least he HAS one."

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SHOULD I CONTINUE THIS FIC? LET ME KNOW!

-NG

## 2 - Name from the Past

The boy did little but eat (very little) and sleep (very little). It seemed he was a thinker; or rather, he had a lot to think about. He was in a strange place. He was by himself. He didn't understand a lot of what was going on. He could sense some animosity against him, as well, thanks to that bully of a chunin. And then there was the obvious.

A samurai in a ninja land.

**After I was chased, I cam here. I fought well enough to not disgrace myself, and I escaped my pursuers. But now what do I do? Am I supposed to stay here? Isn't that wrong? A samurai in a ninja world...can it be possible. Our kinds exist to kill each other, don't we? But these people fed me and protected me. They even told me I'm not a prisoner. What does all this mean?**

Each day, the boy had wandered over to the window to look outside. He hadn't dared leave this room yet. It was only natural- he didn't know about anything outside that door. Inside this room, at least, he was safe, and would get food and water like clockwork. The one thing missing was...

**My sword.**

The boy wanted that back more than almost anything. It was only a training blade, and it was barely more than a wakizashi, but to him it was a source of comfort. He could defend himself with it. Especially after that bully, the boy wanted the safety of his sword.

*Knock Knock.*

"Come in."

In came the healer, Tsunade. The boy's eyes brightened- this woman was a source of safety. She had fed him, repaired his blue gi and deep purple hakama, darned his purple tabi socks, mended his straw sandals, healed his burns and cuts, and had been the one to check on him every day, sometimes with the big white-haired guy. It was only natural the boy would begin to think of her as a safety net.

Or so it began. Today, the boy noticed something was different. The white-haired guy wasn't with Tsunade, and Tsunade herself looked depressed.

"Excuse me, Ms. Tsunade? Are you okay?" This made no sense to the boy. The woman had clearly been crying, but she had no physical injuries. And if her injuries were mental, this woman was a healer, and more than capable of treating her own wounds.

Tsunade perked up a little bit immediately. It was mostly out of shock- this boy wasn't one to speak, aside from 'please' and 'thank you', and a few greetings.

**Now he can read moods?**

"I'm alright, don't worry. Now, how are you feeling today?"

-

Tsunade had asked all the usual questions. The boy had given all the usual answers. In the boy's mind, for a time, things went back to 'normal'. When he looked up again, he could tell there was still sadness behind Tsunade's eyes. He decided not to ask, as it was clearly something she wasn't comfortable discussing. It was best not to press into the matters of others. Young as he was, the boy knew that. As fate would have it, Tsunade needed someone to talk to.

"I'm sorry. Today is just difficult for me. My lover died a year ago today, and it's made me think..."

"I'm sorry for your loss," the boy told her immediately, bowing. He had no idea that she'd suffered a loss. He spoke sincerely, and that seemed to touch Tsunade.

"Thank you. You're a kind boy. I guess that's why I wanted to make sure I said goodbye, at least to you." Tsunade paused, wiping the tears out of her eyes on the shoulder of her jonin vest. The green material was stained with the tears before long.

"Goodbye?" the boy questioned, not quite understanding.

"Yes. I'm going to be leaving the village today. I don't know when I'll come back, or even IF I'll come back."

The boy could relate to that easily. In fact, in his young mind, he had already decided what he would do. She had done so much for him that he felt that he needed to repay her kindness, even if it was only with a kindness of his own. It was, after all, the least he could do in thanks.

"Would you like company on your journey?"

Tsunade's head snapped up. There was no hint of joking in the boy's tone. There was only a bit of admiration mixed in with the one hundred percent sincerity. In fact, as Tsunade observed the child's face, she couldn't help but think of the serious looks on Dan and Nowaki. But those serious looks had led to their deaths.

"No, I'll be okay. I have a companion. But thank you for offering. It means a lot, coming from you."

The boy shifted his weight, kneeling even more upright. "Is there anything I can do as thanks?"

Tsunade felt something. She met the boy's eyes, and it confirmed her feelings.

**His eyes...they're set in determination. For someone so young to possess this sense of duty...It's incredible. Well, if he wants to thank me...**

"Can you tell me why you left your home? Or where you came from, at least?"

Clearly, this caught the boy off-guard. He thought hard about his answer for a moment, but concluded that he owed this lady an answer.

“I came from the border of the Land of Fire. My home was a small village. Or, it was...” the boy stated, his fist tightening as he flashed back to another time. “Our village was small, and mostly peaceful. There weren’t many children around, so I had no one to play with. Eventually, I met a sage, of sorts. He taught me the art of the sword. I learned more and more from other people, and that became my playtime. It was...fun. To me, anyway.”

**So he was lonely from the start...that explains a lot...** Tsunade thought.

The boy continued. “Because of where we were positioned, our village was always trampled under the foot of war. Even when the war ended, thugs still came. No one would stand up to them. Even our police force...It seemed everyone was corrupt. Only a few dared to fight back, and I was one of them. My parents didn’t like the thought of me fighting, but they liked the idea of me growing up as a coward even less. So they let me fight. Along with the sage who taught me, we won the village back from the thugs. But by then, our leader was corrupted. He had my teacher arrested. Before he was taken away, he told me to run as fast as I could, and to escape. My parents were already in hiding. They trusted my sensei’s advice.”

**I see. So, his village getting attacked is why he ran here. It also explains why he was getting chased.**

“But...my sensei asked me one favor before I left. He asked me to be his kaishaku-nin\*. He wasn’t going to allow himself to be captured, and he wanted at least his head to escape with honor...” Now the boy’s face was tear-stained. The memories were hard on one so young; hell, they were hard on anyone.

(\*Kaishaku-nin: ‘second’. When a samurai committed seppuku (or ritual suicide), he had a Kaishaku-nin, or ‘second’, there to cut his head off upon completion of the first part of the ritual in which the one committing seppuku cuts his stomach open.)

**So he was the witness to his teacher’s final moments...No, he was involved in his teacher’s final moments. How awful...**

“I buried my sensei’s head just outside of the village. But then the bad guys found me. I had to run for it. I know I got hit with an arrow. Another set fire to the village. But there were so many swords; I couldn’t fight them all. And the way they chased me, I wound up here. And...that’s everything.”

“...”

Tsunade didn’t even know what to say. Now she felt as though she were deserting a little boy who might have just found some safety. She had to set things in order before she left, or her conscience would haunt her.

“Listen, promise me something, okay?” Tsunade began, sitting down next to the confused boy. She could see some pain in his eyes now, the same as he saw pain in hers earlier.

“Promise me you’ll become even stronger. You’re already brave enough; now you just need the strength that comes with age and experience. Can you do that?”

The boy bowed. "I can."

When he picked his head up, Tsunade kissed his forehead, just as she had done with Dan and Nowaki. As she got up to leave, she hoped that it wasn't that kiss that had doomed her brother and her lover. She didn't want the guilt of an innocent little boy dying because of her dangerous lips.

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Lord Hokage looked through the crystal ball in his office, watching the village. It was peaceful. There was no war, the economy was stable, and the effects of the nine-tailed fox had been repaired. Some scars had yet to be healed, but progress had been made for sure.

"Lord Hokage! Sir!"

Lord Hokage lifted his head to find Iruka Umino standing in front of his desk, clearly excited. It was also obvious as to why.

"I see you've expanded your wardrobe, Iruka," Lord Hokage said around a smile. **To think that this boy...no, man...was once a class clown. Now he's become a chunin, and a solid one at that, I'm told.**

"Thank you, sir! I'm so happy to have made chunin!"

"It was well deserved, Iruka. You and Mizuki stole the show at the chunin finals, I daresay. Such a fine display of textbook work."

Iruka flushed with pride at the Hokage's words. "Thank you, Lord Hokage. I'm ready to accept further responsibilities, as designated by my new rank."

"Oh? Have you considered a career path, then?"

"Well, sir...I thought I'd like to be a teacher. I know the Shinobi rules of conduct very well, and the basics are my strongest point. And...well, the kindness you showed me helped inspire this choice as well. I just came here to ask for your permission to take the teacher's exam."

"Of course you may, Iruka. You would be well-suited for that career."

While Iruka flushed with pride, a knock came at Lord Hokage's door. At his 'come in', the boy shuffled in, bowing immediately.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you, sir. I can wait," the boy offered, backing towards the door. It hadn't occurred to him that Lord Hokage might have company when he came to talk to him. As it was the first time he had left his room, the boy was immediately nervous, and now here was another new face to add to that trepidation.

"Not at all. Please, come here. It's good to see you leave that room. I was just congratulating Iruka on

his promotion to chunin.”

The boy snapped his feet together and bowed to Iruka. “Congratulations on your promotion.”

Lord Hokage laughed good-naturedly. “Iruka, this is the little samurai that gave your friend, Mizuki, such a runaround.”

“I apologize for Mizuki! I can’t believe he would try to hurt a defenseless boy!”

“He did it twice, Iruka. The first time, our little samurai had his sword, and he gave Mizuki quite a time. The second time, it was his bad luck that Tsunade and Jiraiya were present.”

The boy listened quietly, not knowing what a ‘chunin’ was, much less if it was a big deal to get promoted to that or not. He DID perk up at the name of that bully, though he stifled his anger quickly. There was a friendly aura about this ‘Iruka’, and the boy didn’t want to make an enemy of him for that reason.

Iruka seemed to notice the boy for the first time. He bent down to his level. “Hi there. I’m Iruka Umino. What’s your name?”

The boy froze. “...I can’t remember, sir. I’m sorry.”

Lord Hokage puffed on his pipe, exhaling smoke that twisted happily into the ceiling. “I’ll tell you the story later, Iruka. Or, rather, I’ll leave it up to him to tell it.”

At Iruka’s smiling face, something struck the boy. He closed his eyes.

**War...that’s right. I remember my sensei calling my name, just before he died. But what did he call me? As he was kneeling on the ground, his tanto poised...he said my name. But what was it? What was it?! It was...I can see him saying it, but I can’t read his lips! No, I can’t remember! But what he called me during training! It was always ‘little dragon’ or ‘little tiger’...tiger and dragon...Ryouko!**

“Hey, are you alright?”

The concerned voice of Iruka shook the boy from his trance. He had come close to remembering the name. This was something Tsunade had told him. Something about certain events being so traumatic that his mind sealed them away, and that it might take years to remember, or he might not remember at all. Bad memories or not, the boy wanted to remember. But he couldn’t force himself to. He just hoped it would come with time.

“I’m fine, sensei, thank you. I was just...lost in thought,” the boy finished lamely, again bowing in apology.

“Iruka, will you pardon me for a moment? I’d like to speak to you again later.”

“Oh! Uh, certainly sir! Thank you for your time!” Iruka dashed from the room, heading off to study for his

teacher's certification exam. That left Lord Hokage and the boy alone.

"Did something happen to you? Did you remember something?" Lord Hokage questioned calmly. He didn't want to press the boy into answering too quickly. It was important, especially at that age, to gain trust slowly over time. You had to build a rapport that way, especially with such a fragile child.

"I almost remembered my name, sir. But I could only remember the nickname my sensei gave me."

"Oh? What was that? Calling you 'boy' must be degrading. If it holds no ill memory, we could call you what your sensei called you."

For a moment, the boy thought of refusing. But in the end, he decided it would be hurtful to his teacher's memory to refuse to remember.

"He called me 'Ryouko', Lord Hokage. When we would attack the enemy, he called me that so the enemy wouldn't hurt my family. They couldn't if they didn't know my real name. I thought about his last moments, and he used my real name, but I don't know what it is. Even worse, I don't know why I can't remember to begin with!"

"It's alright, Ryouko. Your memories will come with time. Now then," Lord Hokage said, reaching behind his desk, "I believe, in your culture, it's customary to give a sword when you receive a new name. I think now would, perhaps, be a good time to return your sword."

Lord Hokage held out Ryouko's sword. It was one of the few times Lord Hokage had seen the boy seem at peace.

### 3 - His New Home

Ryouko laid awake that night, debating with himself about what he should do next. He had already decided to stay here in the Hidden Leaf Village. He had nowhere else to go, even if he had wanted to leave. He knew where his parents were, but it was too soon to return to them, or to even write to them. Ryouko hated the thought of leaving his parents in the dark about his new life, but for their safety, he had to. There could be no contact now.

**Not until I'm strong enough to defend them on the trip here. If we're attacked, I won't be enough. And I can't trust every ninja in this village, some still hate me. Only Lord Hokage really knows me, now that the healer, Tsunade, left.**

Little Ryouko got up out of bed, wishing he had pajamas. With only the one set of clothes, he didn't dare sleep in them. As of yet, he had no idea where to wash clothes- only where to bathe himself.

Ryouko walked over to the window, peering out into the moonlight. He had observed the city from this upstairs window in what he now knew as the Hokage mansion. Why he was staying here he didn't know. Perhaps a kindness? But no matter why, Ryouko had seen the Leaf Village every day. He could now pick out a couple shops, and that was enough for him. He could get food and clothes that way- IF he had money on him.

**What does one do for work in a Shinobi Village? And will that work mean that I have to learn their customs?**

The thought of learning Shinobi trips had, at first, made Ryouko's skin crawl. Ninja and Samurai were natural enemies, after all. But now, having spent time in the 'enemy's' midst, Ryouko knew that they weren't bad at all. They just performed their duties, the same as he did. But learning their techniques? Would anyone teach him? Was he capable of learning?

It was ordinary trepidation that children felt before starting school. The thought of Iruka as an instructor calmed Ryouko a little, but then the thought of that bully, Mizuki, around...Ryouko wanted to know something to defend himself with before he started school. He was sure that Mizuki would want revenge. It was just some instinct, some gut feeling that little Ryouko possessed.

**And my name...I don't know my real name...will people make fun of me for being 'Ryouko'? 'Tiger and Dragon'? Maybe at first, but once they learn that their leader named me, they won't laugh.**

Ryouko decided that he would ask the next person who came in to check on him to teach him something. Anything. Just something to allow him to escape Mizuki and lure the bully into a place where fighting with a sword was advantageous.

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It had been just shy of two months since Ryouko had been chased to the Hidden Leaf Village. He realized that as he woke up and dressed. His thoughts from the night before returned to him. He decided to have his morning practice while he waited for his new caretaker to come see him.

Now that he had his sword back, Ryouko's practices felt more normal. To a creature of habit like him, it had felt awkward to just practice empty hand arts. He never excluded any part of his training when he could help it. Being without his sword had made him feel defenseless. The sword's return meant that Ryouko would be brave enough to adventure outside. His first order of business would be to use what money he had on him to buy a second set of clothes and food.

It was funny to think, but Ryouko had never been poor. That didn't mean he was rich- he just never wanted for money. Maybe it was his age, but Ryouko always felt like he had enough. In his village, he had saved his money as long as he could remember. But it had gone up in smoke, with the rest of his village. This thought caused little Ryouko to make a particularly hard cut with his sword. WHOOSH!

Just then, a knock came at the door. Ryouko called out an invitation to come in, though he poised his hand near the handle of his sword, just in case it was that bully again. To Ryouko's relief, it was the white-haired guy, Jiraiya.

"Hey kid! Got your sword back, I see."

Ryouko noticed a chance in Jiraiya immediately. **He isn't speaking normally...no, he's speaking sadly, just like that healer. Could something be wrong?** Before he could stop himself, Ryouko asked aloud.

"Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

Jiraiya blinked in surprise, much as Tsunade had done. **Is it that obvious?**

"Well kid, here's the deal. Yesterday, Tsunade, the healer, left the village. Today, I'm going to leave. I made sure to check in with you, like Tsunade asked. She hated to leave you, but we've all got to do what we must, right?"

Ryouko could appreciate that, of course. He had done just that a little less than two months ago. But while his reasons for leaving had been glaringly obvious to anyone who had been there, Jiraiya's reasons were a mystery. Ryouko's curiosity got the better of him. He questioned the reason Jiraiya was leaving.

Jiraiya seemed both amused and saddened by the question. "Well, it's like this. My team was made up of Tsunade, myself, and my best friend. His name's Orochimaru. He left the village a couple months ago. I just can't let him go, not without trying to stop him. Because the way he's going, he's on his way to making a big mistake."

**Defense of a friend? That's why he's leaving. That makes sense. I mean, it's so beautiful and peaceful here, I just can't figure out why anyone would willingly leave. I wonder why Orochimaru left? And I wonder why Jiraiya thinks he's making a mistake. What could be such a large indicator of evil?**

Ryouko chose not to ask those questions aloud. This was clearly hard on Jiraiya as it was. The big guy had sat down on the bed, chin resting on his hands. Ryouko had folded himself into a sitting position on the floor. They both sat silently. Jiraiya was lost in thought; little Ryouko was getting ready to ask him the question that had been on his mind all night.

“I don’t mean to bother you, but may I ask a question?” Ryouko finally piped up, glancing to the side shyly. He hated asking people for favors, or even being saved. It felt like such a weakness!

“Huh? Oh, sure! What do you want to know?” Jiraiya was happy to find that Ryouko had finally gotten over his initial fear of almost everyone. Or, at least, he finally felt confident enough to ask Jiraiya a question. That was actually an honor for Jiraiya. A kid who never left this room felt comfortable enough to ask a question of him.

**I’d better not tell him that whole ‘legendary’ thing. Judging by his nature, he’ll clam up and never speak to me again. He’ll just bow non-stop...**

“The bully you and the healer saved me from...I’m not sure yet, I mean I haven’t officially decided, but I thought about going to the ninja academy. And, well...he’s a teacher there, isn’t he? With Ir..Iruka, that’s it. He’s a teacher with Iruka. And I’m worried that he might try to corner me again. So I guess what I’m asking is...Will you teach me a simple technique I can use to escape from him?”

Jiraiya wasn’t overly surprised by the question. For a second, he debated whether or not he should show the boy anything. Any jutsu learned at his age was taught at the academy, generally with no exceptions save for the secret clan jutsus that were passed down from generation to generation.

**This is a special case. But I can’t stick around to teach him. Orochimaru won’t wait...**

“Well, I can’t teach you personally, but I can at least give you some way to learn. It’s all in this scroll. If you get stuck, ask anyone in a green vest for help. Or, of course, old man Hokage.”

Ryouko took the scroll, bowing his thanks. Jiraiya put a hand on his head, though he didn’t ruffle his hair.

“I think you’ll fit in just fine around here, Ryouko. Don’t hide your light under a basket, though. If you stay cooped up in here, you won’t ever get stronger. But, all the same, wait until you’re ready before you do anything major. You’re still young, you’ve got all the time in the world to learn about your strength.”

With that, Jiraiya left. Ryouko was alone once more. This time, it stung as it always did, but there was a ray of hope. The scroll in his hand.

“Replacement Technique...” Ryouko read from the title. Sitting down on the tatami mat on the floor of his room, Ryouko unfurled his first scroll. It took him three seconds to untie the cord around the scroll. It took another two seconds to unroll it to the writing.

It took a millisecond to catch Ryouko’s interest.

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Later on in the day, Ryouko opened his door cautiously, peering out the red-carpeted hallway. His sandals in place and his sword in his belt, Ryouko was ready to venture out into the village for the first time. He had never gone farther than Lord Hokage's room. He passed the room now.

The Hokage's office was an enormous room, windowed on most of its sides. Well, sides isn't right, as the room was a circle shape. But that didn't concern Ryouko at the moment. He was just going to walk by, but he heard Lord Hokage call his name. Immediately, Ryouko turned toward the room and walked in, bowing at the entrance.

"I'm glad to see you're going outside. It's certainly the mark of a brave warrior to venture into the unknown, as you are." Lord Hokage had been painting as he spoke, moving his hand in graceful strokes. He finished a stroke, making a perfect line in a character that wasn't finished enough for Ryouko to recognize. Ryouko decided he had to try this some time.

"Thank you, sir. Is there anything I can get for you while I'm out?" Ryouko didn't think that he might sound like a suck-up. It was simply a mix of youthful innocence and exuberance speaking.

Lord Hokage stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Would you deliver this order for me? You're too young to bring my tobacco to me, but you can have it ordered. I'll give you the money up front, plus some for your trouble. We'll call it a D-ranked mission."

Ryouko didn't understand this 'mission' stuff, but he was more than happy to help out the man who was letting him stay in his house.

"You don't have to give me anything, sir. A place to live is enough." Ryouko felt it necessary to protest, even though he had always learned to take money when it was offered as a gift. But that felt like begging, and Ryouko hated that.

"I'm not 'giving', Ryouko. I'm paying you for completing a mission. Oh, how forgetful, you've never had one before. You see, Ryouko, Shinobi are paid when they complete a mission. The missions are either 'S', 'A', 'B', 'C', or 'D' ranked, depending on difficulty. This mission is a D-ranked, the lowest."

Ryouko felt better about accepting the money after that; something Lord Hokage had taken into consideration. No matter how stoic the boy was, his politeness gave away some of his tendencies and beliefs.

"Thank you, sir. I'll take care of it."

There was a knock at the door, just as Ryouko was set to leave. When the door slid open, in walked a man who looked very much like Lord Hokage. This man, however, had blue hair and a full beard, as opposed to Lord Hokage's black-but-almost-gray (remember, the Third is younger in this timeline, so there'll be physical differences –NG) hair and his goatee. The new man smoked a cigarette, as opposed to Lord Hokage's pipe.

“Hello...Dad.”

The man had veritably spit out the last word. Ryouko noticed that Lord Hokage had gone grim as well.

“It’s been a while, Asuma. Have you mended your ways? Are you willing to let the past be the past?”

Asuma exhaled smoke, apparently not even noticing the wide-eyed Ryouko. “I racked up a few thousand Ryo on my head, as a matter of fact. Just shows that I’ve got backbone. But we don’t need to get into that argument again. I can drop the past. Just don’t lecture me on it again.”

Ryouko’s family had been a peaceful one. The thought of an argument between a father and son was a surprisingly new concept to him. He edged toward the door, knowing that he shouldn’t be involved in this. It was a private argument, and one Ryouko knew nothing about.

## 4 - Uchiha Intervention

Little Ryouko made his way to the store as though he were walking on rice paper. Every eye seemed to turn toward him. No doubt it was because they had heard his story. Or, if they hadn't heard his story, his awkward clothing (To them) and long sword screamed 'samurai'. One having the guts to walk amongst them was strange. At the same time, the fact that Ryouko had found favor with two of the legendary Sannin and even Lord Hokage had leaked out, so no one bothered him.

Not to say that Ryouko wasn't self-conscious. He was- terribly. But as he didn't know anything about this place, he chose to keep within his comfort zone. That was a trick on the battlefield. When you didn't know your enemy, instead of guessing at his technique, you used your own technique, since you know yourself best of all. Maybe that was why his first Shinobi scroll was difficult. He hadn't learned that jutsu from Jiraiya yet, though his hand signs were getting faster. It was bound to happen. Ryouko wasn't the type to half-@\$\$ his training in any way, shape or form.

Ryouko's first stop was at a clothing store. He had seen what the others wore from the window, and he chose accordingly. Blue sandals, blue gi pants, a blue shirt (Ryouko chose short sleeves; his only deviation from the uniform), and a black vest that Ryouko decided he needed. His plan was to wear his hakama and gi when by himself. At school (if he went), he would wear the uniform. For his own comfort, Ryouko also chose black gi pants, a pair of black boots, and a black shirt. The second attire came from seeing children roughly his age run around in clothes that weren't uniform. Ryouko didn't care to fit in- or so he pretended. He would never discard his samurai heritage entirely, but neither would he tout it so openly that it would cause a fight.

That was just another sign that Ryouko wanted to fit in here.

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Next came the grocery store. That meant filling Lord Hokage's order as well as well as getting food for himself. As he bought what he needed, the cashier (a friendly middle-aged woman) commented on what a strong child he must be to be living on his own and taking care of himself.

"Thank you," Ryouko said, bowing as always.

"Maybe you'll see my little nephew in school. His name is Sasuke. You'll know him right away- he'll be the best in the class, just like his older brother was! Well then, please take care! Oh, and tell Lord Hokage that his order will come today!"

"I will. Thank you for your time." Ryouko bowed out of the store. He wasn't ten feet away when he heard it.

"HELP! STOP THAT THIEF!"

Ryouko spun on his heel, his groceries falling to the ground. Unconcerned about that at the moment, his

hand found the hilt of his sword. His feet started moving towards the sound of the scream. Just as he was reaching the door, a masked man carrying a sack of money came running out the door.

“Get outta my way, kid!” he snarled, waving a small knife. Ryouko’s young faced aged once more into the warrior’s face. His eyes narrowed, then met the robber’s eyes.

“Return what you stole. Now. And threaten no one else.”

The robber laughed outright. What was some punk kid going to do to him?!

“Get outta my way- ?!”

The robber lost site of Ryouko for a split second. Ryouko hadn’t disappeared- just ducked low and ran fast, his sword drawing across the robber’s knife hand. The kunai clattered to the ground as Ryouko zipped by.

“OW! You little- bwheof!”

Ryouko had dodged around behind the robber and brought his sword down onto his right shoulder. Leaving the sword on the bandit’s shoulder, Ryouko thrust it forward so that the dull blade bit in enough to create a superficial wound. With a flick of his wrist, Ryouko held the blade against the robber’s neck.

“Don’t turn around. Don’t move,” Ryouko instructed. “A flick of the wrist, and your head rolls.”

“Heh! You think I’m alone? You won’t kill me! And even if you do, my buddies have already got you surrounded!”

Ryouko looked around. The robber was right. Having fought this type multiple times before, Ryouko knew a few things about them:

**They’re cowards. They stay in a group for that reason. Individually, they aren’t all that strong. But most importantly, they have no sense of loyalty. A hostage won’t help me. He’s too injured to fight. So I’ve got to focus on the remaining bandits.**

It was amazing that Ryouko’s young mind could think so quickly in a crisis like this. Normally such a shy boy, it was on the battlefield that Ryouko’s strength would show. His eyes and movements were not that of a young boy’s, but that of a seasoned warrior’s.

Ryouko suddenly kicked his hostage’s leg, right on the back of the knee, just as he shoved him forward. The goon fell into on one of his friend’s arms. As the bandit instinctively moved to catch his friend, Ryouko’s foot was planted on the back of the hurt bandit. He sprung off and swung down, cracking the previously unhurt accomplice on top of the head, splitting it, though nowhere near fatally. Spinning around, Ryouko noticed that he had the range advantage with weapons. Using that, Ryouko stabbed low, at ankle height. As he thought, the short knives the robber’s had wouldn’t block that low. They would have to dodge. The nearest one did that, but he was met by Ryouko’s sword case. It smacked him in the nose, with a THUNK, tearing his eyes up. An elbow met his jaw a split-second later.

Ryouko jumped back, having cleared the area behind him- or so he thought. A second shadow above him forced him to turn in mid-air. He couldn't block the big fist that buried itself at his chi point, three inches below his navel. That forced Ryouko to bend over. A kick to the face straightened him up again, though not before he felt a panic gripping him as blood flowed from his cut face.

**I'm going to die...**

"FIRE STYLE: FIREBALL JUTSU!" came a strong voice. A blast of fire blew over Ryouko's shoulder, forcing his captor to let go of him. Ryouko fell to the ground, immediately retrieving his blade. In combat, he had learned that 'help' didn't always stay 'help'.

A second voice, softer but equally as menacing, called out "Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing!"

The remaining bandits dropped to their knees, screaming wildly. This struck Ryouko as strange- they hadn't been hit. Unless he had missed the attack somehow?

"Good work. Take them away," commanded the first voice.

"What about the boy, sir?"

Ryouko felt someone pulling him up by the scruff of his neck. Ryouko considered attacking, but he didn't want to make an enemy. This person hadn't harmed him...yet.

"You put him down this instant! He stopped that robber cold until all of you arrived!" the woman cashier said, waving a ladle for emphasis. "Thank goodness you came when you did, Fugaku!"

Ryouko was now face to face with the one called 'Fugaku'. He was a harsh-looking man, probably in his late thirties. The thing Ryouko noticed the most was his eyes.

**They're red, and have three pupils...is it a disease?**

Fugaku closed his eyes, giving him an air of royalty. "Very well, Uruchi. If you're certain..."

"As certain as we carry the Uchiha name!"

Fugaku went to examine the store. Before he did, he spoke one more order. "Itachi, see to the boy. Make sure he's unharmed."

"Yes, father," Itachi replied. He had been the one with the more gentle voice before. He bent down to Ryouko's level. Ryouko had since been released by the policeman. He saw that this one had the same eyes that the man in charge had.

"Are you hurt?" Itachi asked.

"I-I'm fine. Thank you. I'm sorry to have caused all of you so much trouble." Ryouko said that, but what he was saying to himself was 'why are you so weak? Why did you need saving?'

Itachi stood up, brushing his bangs out of his eyes. "It wasn't any trouble. I could see your fight, and I'm impressed that someone without jutsus could fight so well. Not to mention your age."

"Thank you for the praise. Is there anything else I can do?" **Why do people always seem so surprised that I'm a warrior at this age? Isn't that normal, even for ninjas?**

Itachi seemed distracted to Ryouko. Ryouko was normally right about these things, but he reminded himself that this was a crime scene, and that this man was on duty. It was only natural that he'd be thinking of other things.

"No," came Itachi's answer after a few moments, "We'll handle it. Thank you again. Be certain to tell Lord Hokage what happened."

With that, Itachi was gone. Ryouko stayed rooted to the spot for a moment, but then he left, too. He picked his groceries up, placed his sword in his belt, and headed for home.

**My first day outside, and THIS happens? I wonder if I'll get in trouble?**

Ryouko's eyes and face smoothed to his normal mild expression. Battle triggered some instincts in him that changed him into a warrior. But outside of battle, he was just another child, albeit with more drive than most others.

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Lord Hokage shook his head impatiently upon hearing Ryouko's report.

"I'm very proud of you, Ryouko. I am, however, ashamed that this sort of thing still happens in our village in a time of peace. You shouldn't have needed to call on your sword. And even worse, I feel as though my lack of preparation is part of the reason you were hurt."

"It's nothing, sir! Really! And I'm glad to help, and fighting as just about the only way I can! I...have a problem accepting charity. So I'm going to make every effort to repay your kindness!"

Lord Hokage smiled at the enthusiasm. "I think it's time that you learned some of our techniques. Our academy runs year-round, but the new semester won't start for a few months. So I'll find someone to teach you the basics."

Ryouko had been puzzled about one thing. Now seemed as good a time as any to ask. "Lord Hokage, why do people do those weird things with their hands? They make...symbols, I guess. But I don't understand why. Not to mention I don't know what they are."

Lord Hokage thought about explaining hand signs and how they worked, but decided that could wait until another day.

"I'll explain that to you later on. For now, though you act older, you are still a boy, and an injured one at that. I think it would be best if you were to get some rest for now. We can talk further tomorrow morning."



Ryouko's body ached, signaling that it agreed with Lord Hokage. Ryouko's tiny ribs had been creaking since the fight. They weren't broken, so Ryouko didn't complain- he was too proud.

"Okay. If I may ask one more, small question..."

"Certainly."

"Will I be getting more missions? I...enjoy them," Ryouko finished lamely. **I enjoy them because they make me feel useful. Right now, I'm a burden. A leech feeding off of a powerful ninja village. Enemies or not, I WILL repay my debt to them, no matter how long it takes.**

"Of course your will. That reminds me, stopping that robbery was a C-ranked mission. You passed that as well, despite it being unplanned. Once I've finished the paperwork, you can come get your money. Although I'll make sure that your mission are D-ranked for a while. Now then, sleep well, Ryouko."

Clearly the end of the conversation, Ryouko bowed one more time before shuffling upstairs.

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When he got upstairs, it occurred to Ryouko that he still didn't buy himself any sleepwear. He made a mental note to do so just seconds before his weary body and mind collapsed onto the bed. But it was not to be a quiet night.

*"He's over here! The child is over here!"*

*The boy heard the shouts, thankfully. That gave him time to drop his wooden bokken and take up his real sword. Well, his real steel sword that wasn't sharp.*

*The world turned black and white now. The boy put his wooden bokken across a door, using it as a door bar. That would buy a precious few seconds.*

*The boy didn't have time wonder if the improvised door bar would hold. In a leather knapsack was a head that deserved a real burial. Fastening it tight to his shoulders and back, The boy hastily tied a horse's reigns around his waist for a belt. The horses were long dead, so using one to escape wasn't an option. That left running and fighting.*

**"GET HIM!"**

*The boy ran for it, his hand always on the hilt of his sword. He slunk in the shadows as much as possible, but knew he would be found out eventually. As he sat down to rest, boy picked up the morning dew. It was just dawn now, so there was plenty of it on the grass. The boy rubbed it all over his body, covering cuts with it while hoping to give himself a little protection from the fire arrows.*

**Sensei, you said my name...what was it? What is my name? Why can't I remember? I can remember everything else...**

*An arrow shot just over the boy's head. It was time to run again. But the boy's legs were short, and he couldn't hope to beat the stride of an adult. Quickly, he had one adult opposing him. Then another. And another.*

*It was time to fight.*

SCHWING!

Ryouko had rolled over, drawn his sword, and cut at...nothing. Only air. He was safe, in his bed in the Leaf Village.

**A dream...that's all, a dream. I fought today, maybe that's why I dreamt this. Oh well...maybe I'll remember my name if I keep dreaming like that.**

## 5 - Bullies

The next morning Ryouko woke up to ruckus. Dressing quickly, Ryouko rolled out of bed and grabbed his sword. Whatever was going on in the Hokage's office sure sounded like a fight. Ryouko associated the Third Hokage with comfort and safety, and he wasn't going to allow his safety net to be hurt. Ryouko ran as fast as his little legs could carry him to the Hokage's office. Then he went into stealth mode. It's true that those who eavesdrop seldom hear good of themselves. Ryouko pressed himself against the wall outside the Hokage's office, straining his ears to listen to the conversation inside.

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"It's intolerable! To allow that samurai peasant to live here! Sir, it's unheard of!"

"That's right! He's an enemy! And you're letting him sleep in your own house! At least put him under a watch!"

The Third Hokage raised his hand for silence. Even if he was older, he still had a commanding presence about him. If that wasn't enough, Lord Hokage was already respected among his people, and for good reason.

"I will hear no more of this. The boy is no threat. As I recall, it was all of you who choose to engage him in battle. Any injuries you suffered were well deserved. Now, you will drop this subject, and you will not speak of it again."

-

Little Ryouko had heard enough. He decided to venture outside again today, this time to just explore the village and the surrounding areas. In a strange surge of wanting to protect his heritage, Ryouko had decided to wear his hakama and gi, at least until he started school. He saw no reason to conform- that was the easy way out. It was certainly no way for a warrior to act. So even if it was easier to just dress like a ninja, Ryouko was going to dress the part of a samurai. He was what he was, after all.

Walking around town hadn't gotten much easier. The glares were still there. However, Ryouko had found favor with the Uchiha family. After assisting one of them and likely saving a life in the process, Ryouko had wound up in a fight he wasn't going to win. But the fight he put up allowed the Uchiha police force time to find the commotion and get involved. Ryouko hadn't been spoken to by the patriarch of the family, but his favored son, Itachi, had gone out of his way to compliment Ryouko. Not that Ryouko knew, but that was a big deal. All he knew was that he had done the right thing, and that's what mattered to him at the end of the day.

Favor with the Uchiha clan meant that others would follow their example. At first, when Ryouko found this out, he was happy. People liked him! But gradually, he had come to understand that these people weren't thinking- just following the example of the Leaf's premier family. But that was fine with Ryouko- he'd earned acceptance as a warrior in his hometown; he'd do the same here.

“WAAAHHHH!”

Ryouko’s head snapped in the direction of the scream. Three little boys were beating on a smaller boy and his big sister.

“You dog freaks! Why don’tcha get your stupid canines to help you?!”

“Oh, bite me! Better yet...CHOMP!”

“Ow! dog bit me!” SMACK! The girl hit the ground.

Ryouko tore over, jamming the butt end of his sword into the boy’s midsection.

“Hitting a female is wrong, especially when it’s not an equal fight. There are three of you and only two of them. That one is barely old enough to fight. Now that I’m here, I will be your opponent.”

The three older boys laughed and made comments. Ryouko’s gaze never wavered. He glared at the bullies, but spoke nicely over his shoulder.

“Are you two alright?”

Kiba and his sister, Hana, were okay. But they couldn’t quite say it to the strange guy helping them. Kiba was scared, and Hana was wondering who the hell this guy was. But a helper was a helper, no matter what he looked like.

Apparently, no response didn’t matter to Little Ryouko. He knew they were alright (combat experience taught him to look for wounds, and he had found none on his way over. Any major wound wouldn’t have been amiss to his trained eye) despite hearing no response to his query.

“You three are bullies. If you so wish, you can bully this one, who will remain nameless.” Ryouko put an arm up over his eyes and nose. “Go ahead. Whatever abuse you had planned for them you may inflict on me without question.”

“Lookit this guy! He’s just gonna let us hit him?! Fine, don’t use your sword! Just hold still and we’ll leave the other two alone!”

The first fist hit Ryouko’s stomach, followed quickly by a foot. He let himself fall, and more feet and fists followed. This was nothing compared to what Ryouko had met on the battlefield, so he didn’t utter a sound.

“Hey! What’s this?! Back the hell off!”

A black-haired boy, maybe two years younger than Ryouko, had come to the edge of the playground. He carried himself like an adult.

“I’ll ask again: What are you doing? Hitting a guy that won’t hit back? I watched the whole thing.

You're lucky that this guy is noble enough to not fight back. I'm not quite the same way..."

"Oh shoot, it's Sasuke Uchiha! I'm outta here!"

"Me, too!"

"Wait for me!"

The three bullies took off. Sasuke bent down and offered Ryouko a hand up.

"You hurt?"

Ryouko shook his head, even smiling a little. "No, I'm fine. Are the other two okay?"

Hana and Kiba Inuzuka had gotten up and were walking slowly over. Hana was two years older than Ryouko, and Kiba was two years younger. Hana didn't lack spunk- if she hadn't had her little brother with her, she would have kicked the crap out of those guys. But their parents had warned her about fighting with Kiba watching.

"Thanks for the help. Ballsy move, new guy," Hana commented. As an apprentice vet, she always had bandaged with her. Reaching into her pack, she yanked off a length and reached for Ryouko. Ryouko recoiled, not sure what was going on.

"What the hell's your problem? She's helping you. Hold still," Sasuke said, eyeing Ryouko curiously. Ryouko bowed and apologized.

"I'm sorry. It's an old habit." After that, Ryouko stood still and let Hana tie a length around his bleeding forehead. He had gotten cut on a rock on the way down, but that was the only wound that bled. His nose, thankfully, had escaped being broken.

"There. Don't take that off for a while. That cut was pretty deep. Anyway, I'm Hana Inuzuka, and that's my brother, Kiba."

"I'm Sasuke Uchiha," Sasuke added.

"Ryouko. Sorry, I don't have a surname, or I'd gladly tell you. Thank you for your help, Sasuke. And you, Hana, have my thanks for patching me up. I kind of wish you had been helping me on the battlefield."

"THERE HE IS!"

Ryouko faced the new sound, groaning inwardly. The three bullies were back, and they were towing a sensei with them. Not just any sensei- that bully chunin from before.

"He did it, Mizuki-sensei! And Uchiha, too!"

"It seems we have a fight, Uchiha-san. Please leave the sensei to me, as he and I have business worth finishing."

Sasuke grinned. "Fine by me. And don't call me that. 'Sasuke' is fine. Let's finish this!"

In a matter of seconds, the three boys had ran off again. They didn't want to piss off anyone with the name 'Uchiha'. Ryouko had the pleasure of facing Mizuki.

"Alright, you little punk! This time, I'll finish you! Then I'll tell everyone just what you really are! You'll see!"

Little Ryouko's eyes narrowed. His pupils became smaller. His mouth straightened, and his gaze hardened. He was back on the battlefield.

-

**"Some child won't stop us! This village is in our way, and we're taking it!"**

**"This village isn't yours! You won't touch it! Ryouko, get ready!"**

**"Kishootsu-sensei, on your right!"** Ryouko called out, brandishing his sword at the other opponents.

**"Heh. Leave it to me. Though I'll leave most of this fight to you, Ryouko-kun. I'm afraid I'd be bullying these men. Your sword is worth more than their entire army!"**

**CRACK!**

Ryouko saw his sensei's arm become a mass of blood. He looked toward the sound, seeing something strange. It wasn't a sword, but it spit out a projectile. It wasn't an arrow...so what was it?

(Note: It's difficult to describe, but the weapon is not a gun. It operates similar to one, but it shoots hot pieces of coal, rather than bullets. Call it a crude rifle with a spring-action trigger, I guess. It doesn't have a name to my knowledge)

Ryouko's mind instantly put together what the weapon was. It had hit his sensei, therefore it would be destroyed. It's user was still focused on Kishootsu-sensei, so that meant...

-

**"Heh. These prideful fools! This is easy!"**

**The hammer was about to come down again, ending the opponents life. PING!**

A sword had stopped the firing process. The blade was jammed between the hammer and the spring that would fire the metal. Slowly, the user looked to the owner of the blade. He saw **THE scariest boy ever**. The light from the glowing embers danced on his face, making the picture that much more menacing.

**“Cowardly bastard. Attacking from a distance of thirty arrow lengths with no chance of retaliation. You don’t deserve to live...”**

**Ryouko’s foot broke the crude weapon in two. Seconds later, his sword broke his opponents face.**

**“...but neither do I deserve to kill you. You’ll live. I won’t make you my first kill.”**

Ryouko flashed back to the present.

**That was my last memory of sensei, before he killed himself! But I don’t remember my name, only sensei’s. Well, I can at least make Kishootsu-sensei proud. If only you could have run with me...you had so much left to teach me, so much left to give. It’s with great pride I wield the last blade you created!**

Mizuki, typical of a bully, was trying to intimidate Ryouko. His chest was level with the top of Ryouko’s head. He gave Ryouko a bump with his stomach, then flicked his ear.

CRACK!

Ryouko shot his sheathed-sword upward, smacking Mizuki under the chin with the pommel of his sword. In the same motion, Ryouko drove his shoulder into Mizuki’s stomach, bending him over. An upward elbow broke Mizuki’s nose.

“If you had just struck, you would have over-powered me and won. It’s amazing to me that someone like you can survive in this world. I’ve come to respect Shinobi, and I will do all I can to earn their respect. But you disgrace all of us- Samurai and Ninja. We are all warriors, though not united. But we all have warrior’s pride, something you are lacking. Take my words to heart. If a ‘mere’ child defeated you, then reconsider your worth.”

Mizuki twitched. **Heh!**

POOF!

“Substitution? Is that what it looks like? Amazing! Now, where did he go?” Ryouko looked around, not seeing him anywhere.

“Above you!” Sasuke shouted, already moving himself. He had just learned this the other day; he hoped it worked. “Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!”

It was a weak flame, but it hit Mizuki enough to force him to shield his eyes. His bad luck that he had ticked off Sasuke Uchiha in the process. The shovel in his hands, which had become a weapon, was going to be used to bury the irritating little samurai’s body.

Little Ryouko dodged out of the way just in time, as the fireball that was Mizuki came crashing down. The shovel, however, clattered out of Mizuki’s hands and flew toward Hana and Kiba. Ryouko took off

at top speed, just barely getting his back and sword in the way.

“Ah!” Even little Ryouko couldn’t handle that silently. The shovel glanced off his sword, saving Kiba and Hana, but had spun around and hit Ryouko in the back. A U-shaped burn appeared on Ryouko’s back. This pain was familiar.

-

**“Come here, see how a sword is made. It may someday be your job, you know. Every master needs an apprentice. Though I’ve a lot to teach you before you’re ready for this, it won’t hurt you to know the process. Now, watch, little dragon, as the flame- watch out!”**

The fire spit out a hot ember. Instinctively, Ryouko batted it away. It was too small to cause a fire, but the back of Ryouko’s hand had been burned.

“I guess fire can hurt even a dragon,” Ryouko commented mildly. Kishootsu-sensei breathed out a sigh of relief and exasperation.

**“Never forget that fire is both friend and foe. A burn can be a life-long scar. But it will become your job to protect others from it. Do you understand?”**

“Yes, sensei.”

**“Good boy. Now, come, put your hand in the stream. It will dull the pain.”**

Ryouko looked at his sensei fondly.

Kishootsu was a tall man, powerfully built. His eyes were set into a narrow gaze permanently from years on the battlefield, and his long hair was let loose on his back. It was the last thing many people saw: the swishing black hair, then the swishing sword.

Wearing a soot-black hakama and Gi, adorned with the a red kanji (reads ‘Kishootsu’, or ‘temper’) on the back, the tall man was imposing. His sword was nearly fifty inches long, making it large. But the strong arms wielding it could swing it with ease.

This man was all Ryouko aspired to be. Powerful, but with a kind heart. And then their was the knowledge.

-

Ryouko stayed upright, masking his pain. Hana knew better.

“Oh my God, that’s terrible! Hold still, okay? Kiba, go get some water!”

Kiba came running back with a bucket. Hana dumped in on Ryouko’s back.

“Kiba, go with Sasuke and get the police. No, Lord Hokage. He needs to know about that bully of a



chunin! I'm going to treat this burn. Ryouko, this'll sting a little, but it'll help your burn."

Ryouko now trusted the three, so he obeyed. To Ryouko, when someone fought at your side, they needed your trust, and you needed theirs. In this case, Ryouko was getting medical attention- something he wasn't used to. Yet he had received it often since coming here. In a world where fighting was inevitable, Ryouko wasn't bothered by the thought that 'if there are injuries, there is fighting'. Instead, he came to another realization:

**They're good people. Strong, with good hearts. That's how I judge a man...or woman's...worth. Maybe we aren't all so different after all.**

## 6 - No Stone Left Unturned

“(pant, pant). - ...!”

**SCHWING!**

“Turning your sword on a young boy? Cowardly, even for scum like you! A boy who knows little of this world, yet faces his death as a man...clearly he is worth more than you can hope to be. Attack again and death shall become your mistress!”

Ryouko knew this scene- when he was seven, he had been cornered. A pregnant mother lay behind him, too weak to move. A sword turned on her would be fatal to her and that which she carried within. If Ryouko died, his parents would be sad, but if he died a hero's death, they would understand. That was all it took. He wouldn't move out of the way, no matter what.

Then he came. A blacksmith from town. Wielding the largest sword little Ryouko had ever seen, he had cut the enemy nearly in two. It was gut-wrenching, and Ryouko would be sick to his stomach for days- but he was alive. This man had saved him.

When the dying man attacked once more, the blacksmith's sword slashed down, ending the injured man's life. It was the next scene that would touch little Ryouko, and guide his heart:

Kishootsu wasn't a murderer; he was a defender. Death was as natural as everyday life for him. Yet one thing set him apart from his fellow defenders-

He would cry for his enemy as well as his comrade.

“Death should be avoided whenever possible. Life is not something that should be freely taken if it cannot be returned.” Kishootsu shook the blood off his sword and replaced it in its sheath. His face was set in a stern expression, though a small tear of regret trickled down his cheek.

Kishootsu's eyes turned toward the pregnant mother. It seemed that this trauma had induced labor.

“You, child! Fetch a towel and washcloth, and avert your eyes! Seeing a miracle is an excellent thing, but at your age, you may be scarred for life.” Kishootsu gave a kind smile, and Ryouko hastened to obey.

-

A baby? This was a baby? So small and squishy...Ryouko was still a child himself, and he was tempting to poke the squishy little...thing. Hard to believe this was a human life.

“You, child! Have you a name?” the blacksmith asked, holding the small baby. Little Ryouko

stared at the child, not sure what to think.

Was I ever that tiny? And where'd it come from? It looked like a girl's toy...

“Yes. My name is ----- .”

“Oh? A swordsman's name, to be sure! This child...is there another name your parents thought of for you? Or one you favor yourself?”

“...Kimihiro.”

“Then that shall be the child's name. May this name reflect bravery, as yours will now. You've done me a great service today, ----- - kun. Saving a man's wife and child; saving his world- it deserves a reward. Please name your desire.”

Ryouko hadn't wanted or expected a reward. All the same, when the question was asked of him, he knew just what he would say.

“I want to be a swordsman. Please teach me, sensei.”

“So it shall be, little dragon. Return tomorrow at dawn. You needn't bring anything but the clothes on your back, and the purity in your heart.”

In one day's time, a birth of innocence and a death of evil. A show of hatred, and a show of the greatest kindness. Bloodshed was both a blessing and a curse.

--

Ryouko was waiting in Lord Hokage's office, seating on a small cushion in the center of the giant room. He had dozed off for a minute in the heat, hence his strange (but true) dream. His sword lay across his lap, ready to be drawn. It was normally somewhat rude to sit like this outside of wartime, but Ryouko had fought so many battles already that he didn't dare sit without his sword astride him.

The burn on his back ached, but he paid it no mind. Pain was a part of life. You could complain about it, or you could accept it's reality gracefully. This pain would pass, Ryouko knew, so there was little complain about.

At last, Lord Hokage came in. With him was the bully chunin, Mizuki.

“Ryouko, this man says you assaulted him. Is this true?” Lord Hokage knew the truth of the matter, but he had to keep Mizuki quiet. It was also a test of Ryouko's honesty.

“...In self-defense. No doubt it's modesty that allows him to keep quiet about the length of his weapon in comparison to my own...” Ryouko closed his eyes, opening one at the end of his speech.

“WHAT?! I HAD NO WEAPON!” Mizuki howled in such anger that Lord Hokage put an arm on his shoulder as a warning.

“The burn on my back would seem to indicate otherwise, but it’s not my nature to call another a liar...if you had no weapon, then you were swinging an awfully big ‘nothing’ at me and two defenseless children.” Ryouko took a sip of tea, knowing full well that Mizuki was getting angry. It was Ryouko’s calmness that angered him first, but it was the fact that Ryouko was telling the truth that really burned him up. Now to drive the point home.

“Perhaps asking Sasuke Uchiha, a witness who came to my aid...”

Lord Hokage hid a smile. This was the story he had heard from Sasuke, although Ryouko put it infinitely more eloquently. That was called for in diplomatic situations- agreeing with someone, but using his words to make your own point. At no point had Ryouko denied the charges brought before him. Instead, he made them all valid and in his own favor.

**Whoever trained the boy was clearly more than a swordsman...**

“Very well. We’ll let this incident pass. But I expect no more trouble. Mizuki, you are dismissed. Ryouko, kindly stay for the time being. It’s long past time we sat down and talked over tea.”

-

Ryouko took a sip from his cup, turning the earthenware mug just so. As a swordsman, he was educated in many arts. The tea ceremony was one such art. It was much too feminine for Ryouko’s taste, in truth, but a swordsman with incomplete knowledge wasn’t a true swordsman.

“Ryouko, since you’ve come here, our village has changed. We lost two of our strongest Shinobi, and we’ve seen the growth of many others to fill the void. It’s made me wonder something- when you came here, what sort of changes had become of your life. Your family, your friends...”

Ryouko took a large gulp and had to cough. “My family is well. I couldn’t bring them with me, but I know they’re alive. Hidden safely from the enemies that are still out there. My teacher...I’ve so much regret when it comes to him...I tried to tell your healer, Tsunade, but I broke into tears. His last request to me...it was to kill him. To cut his head off and take it with me. But I’d never taken a life. My hand wavered...I couldn’t do it. My sensei forgave me, but I’ve never forgiven myself. I swore that I wouldn’t take a life, unless it became absolutely necessary. And when I did, when I took my first life, then Kishootsu-sensei could rest in peace. I took a head off a body on my way out of the village. I was hoping the enemies would believe I finished sensei.”

“Your sensei’s last moments must have been difficult, both for you and him. Let us move away from that topic. Have you recalled your name?”

Ryouko looked into his teacup. “...No, Lord Hokage.”

“Well, no need to be saddened. One can’t control one’s memories, after all. Being older, I’ve lost a great deal myself! Haha! Now then, are you enjoying life here?”

“I am. I know it’s strange, and kind of hypocritical, but I feel needed here. Like I can be of some use.

And that really helps.”

“No doubt,” Lord Hokage said, taking up his pipe. He exhaled rich smoke, deep in thought. **It’s hard to remember that he is still a child sometimes. He carries himself as though he is much older. I suppose his experiences have made him older in some ways...that in itself is a double-edged sword. In combat, he is invaluable. But in life, he may miss his childhood entirely. We are allowed but one childhood, and it should be taken advantage of. I need to encourage his growth. But it’s too soon to ask him to give up his sword and live a shinobi’s life...**

“Lord Hokage...I don’t know if it’s okay to ask or not, but I’ve got this question...” Ryouko was uncomfortable asking this, but his curiosity was going to plague him until he did. “Who is...Orochimaru?”

If there was a question Lord Hokage hadn’t seen coming, it was this one. Without looking stern or surprised, the Third waved the question aside. “His tale is best left for another day. This one is too fine to ruin with dreary memories.”

Ryouko perked up for a moment. When he did, he looked like a ten year old child. With eyes ready to question the world, Ryouko asked to be excused. He had just gotten an idea, it seemed, and couldn’t wait to put it into action.

--

When Ryouko returned, it was late at night, and more than twenty hours since he had first had tea with Lord Hokage. He was coated in what looked like the remains of coal, and a headband was tied around his head. The package in his hand, however, was wrapped so carefully and handsomely that it belied it’s carrier’s looks. Lord Hokage gave Ryouko a curious stare. What had the boy been up to?

There were small cuts and burns all over the boy’s hands, face, and forearms. He was also sweating something fierce. But there was no sigh of battle...

Ryouko sank to his knees and bowed in deference to Lord Hokage. “It’s for you, Lord Hokage. It’s my first, so I don’t know if it’s quality, but it’s the least I could do to thank your hospitality...”

Lord Hokage took the package Ryouko offered. He opened it, and in his hands was a sword. Amazed, Lord Hokage pulled it out of it’s sheath. On the blade, near the collar, the word *Hokage-to* (Hokage blade) had been carved in. The blade was of quality (though not spectacular), and the sheath was made of wood, though it had steel inserts. But the work that had gone into the blade was obvious.

“The finest blade I’ve ever owned. Thank you, Ryouko. But how did you...”

“I just did what sensei used to do. I’ve never done it myself, so it took longer than I thought, but it was worth it. I’ve always wanted to make one, and I really couldn’t think of any other way to repay you...! Please excuse me! I’d nearly forgotten my training! By your leave, sir...”

Ryouko ran out of the room, his sword in tow. Immediately, Lord Hokage was suspicious. **That soot on his face was no accident...He deliberately smudged it on. That means he’s up to something...**

--

Ryouko put his sword through his belt, tied a leather pouch to the back of his hakama, and stuffed it full of weapons and rations.

**Can't believe it...but I have to. Having that dream made me realize something...It's impossible, I know, but I have to see for myself. I can't just let sensei down...I've got to know...did Kimihiro make it? The bodies will still be there, and we had only the one child birth...**

...

**I'll never believe unless I see for myself. I will return here afterward. But I've got to know. It's just something I must do.**

The last thing in Ryouko's little hand was a list. It was a sheet of guidelines Kishootsu had given him when he first started training. In essence, it was a list of how to master this style of swordsmanship. Given that this was one of the few records of his training, Ryouko treasured it. He folded it carefully and put it away. It was time to venture into the land of his nightmares. Sentiment wasn't something Ryouko could afford.

--

The village had been burned, of course. Ryouko could still see the fires being started. Where there was once a farmhouse, now there were heads on pikes. They had rotted and since been mostly devoured. The animals themselves had been eaten by the enemy, it seemed. The remains of chickens and cows were all over the place. They were intermingled with human remains.

Ryouko saw the blacksmith's shop. It was the most in-tact of all the buildings, having been built the sturdiest. One side of the building had been blown out by fire, and tools were scattered around. The anvil Kishootsu had used to make swords had been used as a grill. The coals were overturned, and the hearth had long been broken. The other three walls of the building were in tact, and part of the roof had stayed in place, though it was charred beyond repair. But, strangely enough, there were signs of use in the building. Ryouko's eyes teared with hope- had sensei somehow lived? In a child-like haze, Ryouko took off, waiting for Kishootsu to be standing inside the building. He would say 'Right on time, little tiger', just like always. He would have his sword ready to go. His wife would have made *onigiri* and skewered *negi*. She would greet Ryouko with a kind smile. Little Kimihiro, now three years old, would be playing in the background. He would wobble over to Ryouko and motion to be picked up. He would sit on Ryouko's shoulders until it was time to train.

Only it didn't happen.

The inside was as destroyed as the outside. There was broken glass all over, and bloodstains as well. Ryouko had to close his eyes, feeling tears welling up despite himself. He had promised himself that he would stay strong. Some blood wasn't going to crack him.

But something was wrong. There were fish bones all over. There was no way an army would have eaten fish with all the good meat around. Even more strange- the bones weren't decayed beyond two or three days. That, coupled with the signs of use, put Ryouko on his guard.

Clack!

Ryouko spun, his hand ready to draw as he heard the sound. But he stopped dead.

A small boy, no more than three, was standing in the way, holding the fireplace skewer like a sword. Behind him was a person, lying on the ground. It was clear to Ryouko that she was dead. At least now he knew what had become of Kimihiro's mother. But the boy...

"K-kimihiro?" Ryouko said in disbelief. The little boy opposite him- tall for his age, with jet black hair. Aside from two months of hunger, he was built like his father. The eyes confirmed it- they were just like Kishootsu's.

"Ryo-sempai?! RYO-SEMPAI!" Kimihiro threw the fireplace poker aside and ran to Kimihiro, leaping up into his chest. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

"Kimihiro, I'm so glad you're okay!" Ryouko hugged Kimihiro, still so surprised that anyone so young could have survived.

"Now that you're here, you can help my mom, sempai! She's over here!" Kimihiro tugged on Ryouko's hand, dragging him over to the woman Ryouko had seen before. "She hasn't talked in two days, but she'll wake up for you!"

Ryouko, of course, knew better. Death was permanent. But how to explain that to a three year old? At ten, Ryouko didn't really understand himself.

"Kimi-chan, did she help you all this time?"

"Nuh-uh. Some nice men brought us fish and water every day! They said daddy's alive, and they'll bring him back!"

**Oh no...it's a trap! I've got to get Kimihiro out of here!**

Ryouko picked Kimihiro up. "Come on, we've got to go. I'll come back for your mom, okay? She's asleep right now, and I don't want...want to wake her. But I've got a place for you to live now. But we've gotta hurry, or..."

Ryouko stopped. He put Kimihiro down. "Go to your mother, okay? Whatever you do, don't look this way. Promise me..."

"Ryo-sempai..."

"Promise me!"

Kimihiro didn't understand, but he ran off, doing as Ryouko said.

-

Ryouko made sure Kimihiro was gone. When he raised head, he was the warrior again.

“You. Out of the bushes. Now. ALL of you,” Ryouko ordered in a whisper.

“Now is that anyway to treat that poor little child’s saviors? This is the thanks we get for keeping him alive until you, his deserter, came? Too bad his mom didn’t live...she was a lot of fun for us. Such a pretty woman, and so skilled! What a wonderful wife she would have made! But she made a fine mistress! HA HA HA!”

Ryouko’s eyes widened, and his body began to shake. **No...no...no! This is wrong! This is all wrong! How could this have happened?! Why did it happen?! I left them...I left them, and they needed me! Because of me...because of me she’s dead and humiliated...and Kimihiro is orphaned...no. Please, don’t let this be my fault! I’ve got to fix this!**

One enemy had a chain. One had a spear. The other two had swords. It was nowhere near a fair fight.

“You used them as bait to get to me...but why?” Ryouko questioned, looking for an opportunity to attack. The spear and chain needed to go...

“Truthfully, we wanted to torture that sensei of yours. But you’ll do just as well. You caused us a lot of trouble. You and that stupid training sword. I can’t wait to see it rust inside you!”



## 7 - Punishment

Ryouko knew this was bad. He had faced those with killing intent before, but never while protecting someone. He had always been the protected, or he had been alone. This time, he had a three-year-old (who also happened to be his sensei's son) to save. Against bad odds, this wasn't going to be without bloodshed.

**But whose blood? Is this the time to kill? I've always used a training blade. It's not that Kishootsu-sensei forbade me from real swords- he encouraged them if anything- it's that I refuse to kill. After seeing the regret on Kishootsu-sensei's face...how could I handle it if he could barely deal with it? Warrior or not, I'm still a child, and I know that. But...is the weight of a murder greater than the weight of letting a three-year-old get hurt because I couldn't finish the job? No, it is not. If I let Kimihiro die, it would be like failing Kishootsu-sensei all over again...**

"Fine then. In all good conscience, I can't let all of you do this. Your souls are stained with the blood of innocents. If you wished to confront me, a simple request made from a warrior to a warrior would do. Instead, you chose the coward's path. And doing such a thing- disgracing your honor, the honor of your fellow warrior, and worse yet, involving those whose honor isn't at stake in battle- you deserve what you will get."

In a flash, Ryouko spun and drew on the enemy with the chain. The sound of metal meeting metal echoed in the valley that the once-peaceful village laid in. With ruin around, it seemed all too much like a bad joke.

The chain flew in toward Ryouko. He dodged a half-step to the side, then charged in. A spear buried itself into the ground where he had been just a split-second earlier. Not wanting to pass up such an opportunity, Ryouko swung his sword back, cutting the spear's handle at a breaking point. The wooden handle shattered, leaving the tip of the spear buried in the fertile land below. Ryouko had also deliberately baited the enemy with the chain. Sure enough, the chain whizzed in, its weighted end spinning dangerously. Ryouko used his case to block the chain. The chain wound around the case, nearly ripping it from Ryouko's hand. Ryouko pulled at the chain, then let go. Just like a child's game of tug o' war, the suddenly slack in the chain threw the user off. He recovered quickly.

"Ha! Did you REALLY think your stupid case would come in and hit me! Little idiot!"

Ryouko didn't say anything. The chain was pulled away from his case. Just as the chain was taut again, it stopped moving. The enemy narrowed his eyes. He had covered himself in black from head to toe. But he was no skilled ninja- the hood over his face obscured his vision just slightly. Still, he could see that Ryouko's case wasn't holding the chain back. Then what was?

SCWHING!

Ryouko's sword smacked the chain-user across the face. It was luck, not aim, that Ryouko took out an eye with the sharp tip of his sword. The other enemies stopped to see what had happened. Finally, one

of them noticed.

“He used his *sageo* \*!”

(\* Sageo- cord tied around a samurai’s sword. It’s used to tie the case to the belt)

Indeed he had. When Ryouko had tugged ‘childishly’ on the case when the chain had it snared, he had really just untied the sageo wrapped around the top of the case. In essence, he had tied the chain to his belt. When the chain-user had tugged, he had used force to unwind the chain- not to pull a small boy. Though Ryouko was light, the weight difference was substantial.

Ryouko retrieved his case and put it back in his belt. As an afterthought, he used his sword to cut the chain into three small pieces. The owner of the chain was screaming and holding his ruined eye.

“Enough! He’s ONE child! I’ll finish this!”

The spear-wielder ran forward, aiming the end of his broken weapon as though he still had a blade on the end. Ryouko reached behind him and pulled the chain-user in front of him. CRUNCH!

Ribs had been broken, at least. There had been more to Ryouko’s move than a simple human shield.

“Damn it, Ishikawa! Get outta the way!”

**So there’s no loyalty in their ranks...** Ryouko bounded up the chain-user’s back, using him as a ladder so that he could jump off with a head-height vertical cut. The enemy’s bo flashed up in a block.

“Ha! You can’t cut me with that useless blade!”

Ryouko was going to try anyway. If your blade was sharp, cutting through a simple spear was easy. But for a dull blade, skill was required. When you used a sword, you didn’t just cut randomly. You thought about your move while putting it into action. In this case, it was an automatic response- Ryouko childishly responded to the man’s challenge.

CRACK!

The bo snapped and Ryouko’s sword smashed his enemy on top of the head.

“You’re right. I couldn’t cut your weapon. But I COULD smash it, even with this dull blade. Incidentally, you should fire-harden your bo’s a little less. You took the moisture and flexibility completely out of the wood. That’s why it snapped like a twig.”

The last two enemies, both using swords, stopped for a moment.

“Certainly no ordinary child. He’s studied warfare in a very complete way. Our two long-range weapons are gone. But range can be a disguise for weakness...”

Ryouko hit himself mentally. **They weren’t hard to beat, even for me! Those two were just pawns to**

**see my strength! These two must be the skilled ones of the group. Their stances give away nothing. Either they have no stance, or they've concealed it. Now it's two-on-one...my best bet is 'open on all eight sides'?...**

(?- A stance perfected by famed swordsman Miyamoto Musashi)

Ryouko pulled his case out of his belt. He held both the case and the sword out at his sides, as if he were just standing normally.

"I see...you face two enemies, so you use two weapons. But you neglect one thing, child. OUR swords are sharp, and require only one hand to cut with. YOURS, on the other hand, is but a training blade. To do any damage, you need to use two hands and rely on power. You've put yourself at a disadvantage."

Ryouko's eyes narrowed further, giving his young face a look of great age and experience. "Do not presume to know both weapon and wielder, enemy-san. You may have watched me, but I'm not so careless as to give away my combat style- if I have one. Perhaps your trained eyes are searching for clues, and your trained mind is making them up because you can't see any."

It needs to be noted that Ryouko is not overly strong. His life has been about one thing- his sword. And if one devotes one's entire life to a solitary subject, one will inevitably become competent. As a boy of ten, Ryouko had studied but for three years. But in that time, he had seen a lot and was forced to grow up fast, amidst the chaos of battle. It was all normal to Ryouko.

The two swordsmen attacked at once. Ryouko kicked his foot up- PWOOF!

"AGH!" shouted one, pawing at his eyes. Ryouko had collected dirt on his sandal, and used it now to blind an enemy. Ryouko rushed by, swinging at the enemy that could still see, forcing him to back up. Dull blade or not, it would hurt! That gave Ryouko the opportunity to smack the left-hand knuckles of the blinded enemy. The right knuckles were blocked by the sword's guard. But a hit was a hit. One less hand to deal with.

"Fine! I'll just go after the other boy!"

Pwik.

Ryouko's eyes turned scary. They held no shape or tell of a child's eyes. They were the eyes of someone far older.

STAB!

"You will do no such thing to that boy. Your fight is...was...with me."

Ryouko's sword had gone straight through the enemy's body. The enemy fell to his knees, coughing up blood. Ryouko gave a violent twist, then yanked his sword back out. Had the sword been sharp, Ryouko would have killed him instantly. But thanks to his dull blade, no organs were ruptured. Just in time, Ryouko turned to block a head-level vertical cut. He dropped his case and used his free hand to brace the back of the blade. Even so, the adult's power was too much. He forced Ryouko to the ground by

pushing down with his sword.

“Oof!”

“One hand is all I need now! Hold him!”

One of the injured enemy’s came over and held Ryouko’s hands down while lying on the ground nursing injuries himself. The enemy with the sword moved closer and closer, sword poised down. Ryouko’s eyes were now that of a scared child’s.

“That’s it! Squirm, just as his mother did! HAHAHA!”

Ryouko’s foot smacked the enemy squarely in the groin. With a gasp of pain, the sword-user bent over, holding his hurt pride. Ryouko kicked again, this time to the knee. The sound nearly made him sick to his stomach- the knee was not just broken, but destroyed. One last kick destroyed the opponent’s nose. His sword clattered to the ground as he fell from injury, passed out. Ryouko used his feet to pick the blade up. Holding it steady, he called to his captor:

“My own blade wasn’t sharp, but this one is. I don’t need power to kill you with it...”

The enemy let go.

Ryouko walked over to the one he had stabbed. The man wasn’t dead-yet. And Ryouko only knew basic first-aid...

“You. The conscious one. Give me your belt.”

Ryouko took the belt and, after ripping a torn hakama off one of the unconscious, used it to make a makeshift tourniquet. Ryouko stared at the wound, hardly believing he had inflicted it.

“Why would you bandage him? After what he did...”

Ryouko shook the blood off his sword and sheathed it. “Death should not be taken lightly. Life should not be taken at all. It’s not something we can give back...that’s what my sensei said, and that’s what I believe. I didn’t want to kill him, and if I did, I’ll bear that burden. But I couldn’t let him hurt a defenseless three-year-old. I would rather bare the burden of his death, a criminal, on my soul than mourn for a boy who has committed no crime.”

The last conscious enemy sighed. “Listen to me. I hated you, and your sensei. But I can’t say I hate someone who would compromise his own morals for a child. This fight was a matter of war...”

“War? How so? This village is yours...” Ryouko was puzzled.

“No. Not while you and that boy live. You could come back here and claim this land, if you had an army. We didn’t want to take that risk. But in this light...attempting to kill a child...and then attempting to kill you, a warrior...seems horrible. And for the sins I committed against the boy’s mother...I will burn in hell. And I deserve to for all of eternity.”

Ryouko was making his way to Kimihiro, but he stopped once more. "If you're truly sorry, then at least by me, you're forgiven. If I might offer an opinion...don't sell your life so easily. A warrior should die in battle. For you, there's still a chance to repent. Do what the disgraced of old did: become a monk, pray for your sins, and steady your hand with the weapons of a monastery."

As Ryouko walked away, the enemy behind him knew he had been utterly defeated. A ten year old of sound mind had seen to that. As he replayed the battle, the enemy noticed Ryouko had done nothing special- it was HOW he did it, and the way he carried himself that made him such a devastating foe.

"To forgive...so this is a warrior's mercy. A temple might do me good. If that child...no, that warrior, can forgive me, perhaps a larger body can forgive me as well...Kekkou-ji temple is my next destination."

-

Ryouko picked up Kimihiro, setting him on his shoulders.

"Is there anything you want to take with you, Kimi-kun? I'll come back for your mommy later..."

Kimihiro thought, but shook his head. "Nu-uh. Nothing. I just want to go someplace safe...Sempai, are the bad men gone?"

Ryouko looked over his shoulder, seeing the enemy he had spoken to helping the others up. They would all live.

"...Yes, they're gone. Hang on, Kimi-kun, I'm gonna run pretty fast."

Ryouko did just that, though once poised at the top of the valley, he stopped to look once more. The destruction was evident still, and would remain so until the village was reclaimed.

"Horsey Ride!"

Ryouko looked up in surprise, having forgotten Kimihiro was with him. But he laughed good-naturedly. "Sure, horsey ride."

--

Lord Hokage watched the scene through his crystal ball, smiling a little. Though his smile became a frown quickly.

**For a ten year old to have to play the part of a grown-up...No child should be burdened with that. I knew Ryouko was different, but I never knew that he was capable of this. Acting almost as a parent to that child now- a state of mind that could not be understood even by my strongest jonin in it's entirety. It makes me wonder- what kind of training did Ryouko have? His sword, his actions, his state of mind, and his words are all befitting that of someone older and much, much wiser...Perhaps I can get him to speak to me. For now...**

Lord Hokage looked up to his visitor. “Anything, Kakashi?”

A tired-looking jonin with wild silver hair and a masked face shrugged. “There were a good twelve enemies waiting for him. I just barely got the archer in time. He had Ryouko lined up for a good shot.”

“And Ryouko?”

“Unaware of my presence. I’m not surprised- he’s still very young, and his ears aren’t fully trained. I feel bad I had to kill three of the ones he avoided killing, but they had their short swords out. I had to throw a kunai into one. Just as Ryouko was patching him up, he had his forehead lined up. Thankfully, the fourth enemy- the one Ryouko spoke to- saw me and distracted Ryouko. My assessment- however strong he seems, Ryouko is nothing more than a ten-year-old who has gotten lucky. His sword work is admirable, and his policy not to kill just as much, but he needs a lot of training.”

“As did we all at his age...” Lord Hokage replied, watching Ryouko again. “Anything else?”

“Yes. It’s Ryouko single-minded training that may be the problem. His drills are all very focused on one aspect of combat or the other. There’s no ‘flow’ to them- and as a result, his fighting style has no flow either. What he does, he does very well. But it’s what he doesn’t do that concerns me. Stopping a bully isn’t beyond him, and his youth tricks people into underestimating him. But if someone truly talented were to fight him, and ignore his youth...”

“Yes, I see. Very well. I’ll have to keep a tighter lead on Ryouko for now. Thank you, Kakashi. You’re dismissed.”

Lord Hokage didn’t tell Kakashi that he was certain Kakashi had just made the same mistake all those other enemies had- he was short-changing Ryouko.

**Kakashi’s assessment is, no doubt, right on the money. But there are other things about Ryouko he’s missed. Of course, Kakashi hates children, so his opinion WOULD be biased...**

--

“Huh? But I wanna stay with you!” Kimihiro complained. Ryouko smiled and ruffled his hair.

“It’s not forever, you know? You’ll be better here, with my parents. You’ll know lots of people here. Everyone from the village comes here.”

“But what about you? Where are you going?”

“...” Three-year-old reasoning could be dog, as Ryouko was learning. “...I’m in training. When you’re old enough, you can train, too. But right now, you need to keep growing. When you can hold a sword with one hand, high above your head, for a full minute without moving, then I’ll come back and teach you. Okay?”

“Okay. But my daddy can help too!”

Ryouko shook his head. "Kimi-kun, your daddy will be gone for a long time."

"But I saw him today! See?!"

In Kimihiro's tiny palm was a piece of black fabric with a red mark on it. The mark read 'Kishootsu' (temper). Ryouko's eyes widened, but he couldn't explain what he saw. He wasn't going to crush a three-year-old's hope- especially not when it gave Ryouko himself hope.

"Here. Go straight for one hundred steps. You'll see the town. Give my Mom and Dad this letter. And most of all...be safe, okay? Learn what you can from everyone."

Kimihiro nodded, giving Ryouko a hug. Ryouko smiled sadly, patting the boy's head. After that, Kimihiro ran off.

-

"...I'm not surprised..." Shinobu said with a smile. "He's definitely got his Father's stubbornness, that he does."

"Huh. You just go on believing that," Hiromaru shot back to his wife. "He's certainly your son."

"He is. And I'm proud. Still...I wish he could have come with us..." Shinobu replied with a small frown.

"He has a duty now, whatever it may be. He promised to come back when he's strong enough to defend us. With him, that will hardly be forever. And at least he didn't leave us empty-handed."

"That he didn't. I have to miss part of my only son's childhood, but I DO get to help raise another fine young man in his stead. It's not all bad, I suppose."

Kimihiro waved goodbye to Ryouko. It was only a faint shadow, but he could still see the older boy, standing sternly against the sun. Happy for now, Kimihiro ran inside to see his new family.

--

Ryouko returned to the Hidden Leaf, his clothes stained and his body aching. A wave of nausea suddenly struck Ryouko. He had thought about when he stabbed that man in the back. He fell to his knees and vomited violently, shaking.

**I attacked in cold blood. I...I've never lost control like that before! I know I had no choice, but...no, he lived, I have no need to feel guilty. I just need to calm down. Lord Hokage can help...**

Lord Hokage was already there, along with a healer.

"Come, Ryouko. You've fought hard today. No doubt your wounds, physical as well as mental, need tending. But DO tell me the next time you go off and fight a war!"

## 8 - The Fat Man's Fight

“I’m surprised he lasted as long as he did, emotionally AND physically.”

Ryouko hated it when people talked about him like he wasn’t there. The few in with Lord Hokage now were those types. It always made Ryouko wonder if he needed to be here or not. If he wasn’t included in the discussion, and there was no information of any importance being exchanged, why bother; Ryouko figured. To heck with this, he was outta here. Lord Hokage could tell him later- it was obvious that Ryouko wasn’t wanted. He got up off his cushion in the corner of the room, put on his sandals, and walked out.

In his travels around the village, wandering each day, Ryouko had discovered love. Well, love of tea and the snacks that went with it. Cold Soba (no damn tofu) and hot tea were such a great combination. It seemed to be a peaceful meal. That is to say, when eating it, Ryouko could think clearly. At home, in a time of war, there was no time for tea and snacks. Having time to enjoy them now gave Ryouko a much-needed nutritional boost and less-needed energy. It had become a daily ritual to sit in one of the many teahouses dotting the Hidden Leaf. It was so peaceful...and boring.

**A few battles and I’m acting like an elder. It’s not right. But, what else have I do to with my time? It’s not as if I can make friends here that aren’t adults. None of these people are swordsmen...I’ve got nothing in common with any of them. But it’s strange- I’ve never wanted friends before. I always had Kishootsu-sensei and Kimihiro for company. In this village, I’m alone; even without my parents. I mean, there’s Lord Hokage, but the demands on his time are too great to bother him with petty things.**

“All finished, swordsman?”

Ryouko had been so lost in thought that he had forgotten he had finished eating and drinking. The kind waitress had brought him back to reality. She had been leery of him, as was everyone, but she had gotten to see that Ryouko was polite and kind-hearted. She couldn’t help but notice his stoic young face, so she called him ‘swordsman’, using it like a term of endearment.

“I am, thank you. It was delicious, as always,” Ryouko told her, bowing as always.

“Well, you’re welcome. Now then, I’ve got to go get some water from the well...”

“I would be happy to get it for you. I’ve no demands on my time...”

-

Ryouko balanced the two buckets of water on the long stick between his shoulders. He had done this lots of times when helping Kishootsu-sensei make swords. It also gave most of your body a good workout. Many was the time Ryouko would carry water back and forth, only to deposit it back in the river or well it came from.



Ryouko set the water down, then found his cushion in the teahouse. It was funny to think Ryouko had found this teahouse simply by wanting to emulate the adults he knew. Most of them drank. Obviously, *sake* wasn't an option for little Ryouko. So tea it was.

"Hm?" Ryouko perked up. He wasn't sure why, but he felt somebody powerful was around. Scanning the booths, Ryouko looked for someone who could be the source of that strength. That's when Ryouko spied it.

### **A sword!**

Ryouko craned his neck to get a look at who could own it. In that particular booth there were four men. One was masked, with one eye covered. Another was wearing the strangest get-up Ryouko had ever seen (green spandex, was it?), and the third Ryouko knew as Lord Hokage's son. The fourth man Ryouko couldn't see much of- he was covered from head-to-toe in black. Amongst all the green vests, this man stood out. Ryouko instinctively felt that the sword belonged to him.

**I've got to get him to notice my sword. But wait, what if he wants to fight?! Then again, this is the first swordsman I've seen around. If he's just passing through, this could be my only chance to talk with him...**

Ryouko didn't bother to question himself as to why he was so desperate to talk.

--

"Yeah, this new chick, Kurenai. Man, I get back from traveling to cool down, and I find that hot little number in my village. Talk about a stroke 'o luck!" the man speaking, Asuma, took a long drag off a cigarette. A few embers fell on his hand and burned him, causing him to curse. The other three laughed good-naturedly.

"Could that be an omen of what will happen if you try to hit on her?"

"Oh, shut it, Kakashi. You hide behind that damn mask- at least I'm out there trying!" Asuma shot back, glaring mockingly.

"Got me there. Well, then again, the females DO like the mask..."

That sent the entire group into a fit of laughter.

"Then why're you still single?!"

"Just fussy, I guess."

"Or stupid! I've seen the ramen maker's daughter make eyes at you! And you just ignore it!"

"Isn't she...a little young for me?"

“Younger is better!”

“If you’re a criminal, yeah!”

--

Ryouko went up and ordered more tea. While up there, he asked the waitress about the four men.

“Let’s see...the masked one’s Kakashi Hatake. Quite the village heartthrob! Next to him, in the green, is Maito Gai. Goofy fellow, but friendly enough. Then there’s Asuma- the one with the cigarette. Told him to put that damn thing out in here, too...the last guy...hm! I don’t know him. He must be new...”

Ryouko thanked the waitress and sat down. This time, he made sure to walk by with his sword-side facing the group. Still no reaction from the sword owner.

“Excuse me, but there are no swords allowed here without authorization.”

Ryouko kept his sigh contained. “Hold on just a second, I have special permission...Here you are.”

The man asking took the paper. “I see...that this is a forgery, at any rate.” He tore the paper to pieces. “Hand over your sword.”

“Absolutely not. If you’d like further authorization, Lord Hokage can direct-”

The older man made a grab for Ryouko’s sword. Ryouko jerked it out of his range, giving him a warning glare. When the glare was ignored, and the man moved for him again, he was met with a steel teapot upside the head.

“Touching a samurai’s sword is tantamount to asking for a death duel.” Ryouko had used this line before, and it usually stopped people from bothering him. When it didn’t, Ryouko’s sword had prevailed in combat.

“Then you wanna take this outside? Huh? You little peasant?!”

Ryouko had heard that tone before. The people that talked like that were usually too cowardly to back up their words. So Ryouko stood up and walked toward the door. There the three jonin and their friend were waiting for him.

“Best to leave fighting to the adults, kid. You’re in the springtime of youth!”

Ryouko stared ahead flatly. “Then speak to the challenger.”

“Hold it, kid. You can’t just talk to a jonin that way, Y’know? It’s bad manners.” It was the masked one, Kakashi, this time. **Kids are so impulsive, and ready to throw their lives away without knowing what they’re getting into.**

“If I let adults do my fighting, sir, then I would never get stronger, and my village would have been

enslaved years sooner. If my manners are bad, I ask forgiveness- but all the same, I have no plans to back down.” Ryouko stalked past the jonin, getting more irritated every second. **Why do these people think they can just bully me? The adults in my village always encouraged me to stand up for myself. These adults don’t...Well, no matter, I know which upbringing I’ll follow.**

Asuma and the black-cloaked member of the group chuckled.

“I’ve heard the kid can handle himself. I’d like to see a good fight. We can always stop ‘em if it gets too rough. Besides, kids need to learn to handle themselves.” Asuma was more relaxed than his peers, so he was all for it.

--

Outside, Ryouko stared at his opponent, not once breaking his gaze. The man was taller and more blubbery than anyone else Ryouko had seen around the village. The heavyset man’s weapon of choice was a sword cane- a veritable joke in Ryouko’s opinion. Such a fat man would overtax such a thin cane, and the sword inside was hardly worth mentioning. One power strike would shatter it.

Ryouko didn’t draw his sword, even as the enemy came running. Once within range, Ryouko drew quickly and shifted his weight, adding a measure of centrifugal force to the strike. But his eye’s widened when his sword hit a thick layer of blubber and rebounded. That meant a quick shuffle-step backwards to avoid the counter-strike from the flimsy sword-cane.

“Even if you DO hit me, you can’t penetrate my outer shell!” crowed the hefty challenger.

“Outer shell? Is THAT what that is? I would have called it ‘fat’ myself...” Ryouko murmured in response. Something wasn’t right, though- this didn’t feel right. Like it wasn’t a real fight. Like his senses were dulled or obscured...

**Even if he’s fat, my draw should have cut his clothes, at least. But the strike rebounded, as though he were made of rubber...**

The fat man swung again. Ryouko brought his sword up in a block, but felt his sleeve tear anyway. **I dodged that! How did he...**

“Too slow, little man! What a joke you are!”

**Poison, maybe? In my tea? No, my body is functioning normally...so why...let’s test this...**

Ryouko put his sword in it’s sheath. From inside his gi he extracted a fan. He opened it with a flick of his wrist, sending a small breeze blowing onto his enemy. Something wasn’t right...

**His sleeves moved too soon. I’m farther away. My attack hit him, but if he wasn’t cut, then the tip of my sword never reached him. Which means that he was either too fast- unlikely, given his size- or that I was the one who was too fast...My mind’s kinda foggy...better test this...**

Ryouko looked down at the dirt. He watched his opponent’s feet move. It was strange, what Ryouko

saw- before the fat man stepped, there was a footprint. That meant that he was a good step faster than Ryouko anticipated. That was fine, but how did Ryouko deal with it? And how was this trick being done?

And then it came to him.

Ryouko drew his sword again, setting it down away from his body. He held his case in tight to his body, looking ready to block. In his right hand was his fan. It was a strange posture, but it would help Ryouko. A sword cane was chiefly used for stabbing, as a cut would break it. The curved handle on the cane also indicated that swinging it wasn't the best way to use the weapon. A straight thrust was. Ryouko held his fan out from his body, over his heart.

RIIIPPPPP!

Ryouko moved quickly, shifting a half-step to his right. His left side was now prominent. He snapped his fan shut. That didn't stop the sword can't progress entirely, but the metal frame of the fan slowed it enough. Ryouko jammed is case forward. SHUNK!

The sword cane was in Ryouko's sheath. He titled it downward to prevent the enemy from drawing again. Ryouko shuffled toward his foe, pushing the sword cane further into his case. Using the top of his head, he butted his bulbous enemy under the chin, then smashed his hand using his elbow. That left Ryouko to take up the sword cane and aim it at his defeated enemy's neck.

"...well played. You win the match."

Ryouko shoved the flimsy sword into the ground, then took up his own. " 'Match'? Threatening a life, then calling this a 'match'? You've no respect for your opponents if THIS is how you act in a challenge."

"...And you, child- your attitude is typical of your sensei. The same lack of emotion. And your use of 'Niten Kanshaku Ryu', even while strapped by my genjutsu..."

(Please note that this name was chosen because of it's literal translation (lit. 'Two Heavens Temper Style), not it's similarity to the 'Hiten Mitsuryugi Ryu' found in Rurouni Kenshin. I was going to change the name due to it's similarity, but I liked the name too much.)

"...then again, I wouldn't know the name if I hadn't known your sensei."

## 9 - At War

“You knew Kishootsu-sensei?!” Ryouko nearly dropped his guard, but remembered his training in time.

“Yes, I did. Quite a good man, e’ was. But that’s a story for another day, m’boy. Until then...Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing!”

Ryouko was blasted with a standard genjutsu. He hadn’t learned how to break them yet. Now he was about to see one of his worst nightmares come to life.

--

**Their clothes fluttered in the wind. Two icy stares, each holding a note of death.**

**It’s said that you should never meet your heroes. They’re never quite who you believe them to be. To ten year old Ryouko, that was true now more than ever. The man in black across from him was his hero. His role model. The man he himself had wanted to be. But now, he was nothing to Ryouko.**

**Nothing except ‘sensei’.**

**“Now you think I’m such a bad guy for doing what I had to do? Come now, little tiger, you hardly know the full story! Don’t judge me based on such few words. You don’t know anything about the situation!”**

**The floored child stared at the black-covered man, his eyes narrowed until they were but slits on his young face. Soon, any trace of childhood had melted away from the boy, leaving him standing as but a warrior. He opened his mouth and spoke. Sorrowful, hateful words poured out.**

**“You’re a fraud. You taught me, and you lived the life you wanted me to see. ‘Always be honest’, you said. And then I find that you’re this...this liar? How can you call yourself a man? How can you call yourself a swordsman? HOW CAN YOU CALL YOURSELF A WARRIOR?!”**

**In response, the black-cloaked man whipped out two daggers from his coat. “We needn’t fight, but you seem dead set on proving what a fraud I am. The truth should always matter, and it will always come out, sooner or later. For now, you’ll only grieve if we don’t fight, so I’ll give you what you want.”**

**Ryouko shook his head. “Not with that. With THAT,” he said, pointing at the longsword that he had first eyed in the tea shop. “This is a contest between swordsmen. No matter what else you are, you carried that sword with the dignity it deserved. If you’re going to fight me, let it be with that.”**

**The cloaked man took up the sword, then shed his outer garments. Until that point, Ryouko had**

held onto the hope that this wasn't his sensei. But now there was no way around it. Across from him stood Kishootsu. Ryouko closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to get rid of the reality in front of him.

**WHACK!**

A punch knocked Ryouko across the field. He skidded to a stop, but found his chin bleeding. No doubt- it was the 'cutting punch' that Kishootsu taught. Ryouko had learned it himself. It was to demonstrate that a sword, which cuts, is as extension of yourself, as much as an arm or leg. As blood dribbled down his cheek, staining his blue gi with red, he looked up once more.

"I know I taught you much better than that- shame on you, letting your guard down...You know not to drop your eyes when staring at an enemy. Little dragon..."

--

"Release!"

The three jonin had all tapped Ryouko's shoulder at the same time. His young face had twisted in anguish, and real tears ran down his eyes. Silently, the group escorted their young friend back to the teahouse.

Back inside the tea house, Ryouko had pulled his cushion over to sit with the jonin, their friend in black, and the 'attacker'. The power of genjutsu wouldn't be lost on him.

"You really knew Kishootsu-sensei?" Ryouko finally blurted out.

"I did. 'fore he went and died, he asked me to keep an eye on you if something went wrong. He always figgered that you'd train yourself. Tha' man could have told you the day he would die, if'n he coulda faced the truth. (Spit)"

Ryouko hated it when people chewed tobacco like that. It seemed so mannerless. But this man knew something, and Ryouko was going to listen.

"Maybe we should all introduce ourselves. I'm Kakashi Hatake."

"Maito Gai."

"Asuma Sarutobi."

"Kuuro."

"Ryouko."

That left the black-clad man. He appeared to be asleep. No one bothered to disturb him. Ryouko eyed

his sword again, but averted his gaze to listen to the story Kuuro (the fat man) was going to tell.

“Yeah, I met ‘im at a dojo ‘bout ten days from here. He ‘bout beat everyone, and got a good reputation fir ‘imself. I stepped up and tried to fight ‘im, but he was too much. And I’m no slouch m’self. No offense met t’ you, but I held back in our little fight. Y’know, to see how’n you would handle y’self. (ptoo) When I’d heard ‘bout y’ village, I figgered he’d made it out alive. The one thing I was one hundred percent sure of was that you were alive. He’d never let anythin’ ‘appen to ‘is student, that’s f’ sure. I just ‘appened to guess you’d wound up ‘ere. Bein’ th’ closest village an’ all. You did a ‘ell of a job coverin’ y’ tracks.”

Kakashi had been lost in thought, but a question popped out of his mouth. “Ryouko, what exactly happened to your village? I mean, who were you fighting and why?”

“I was never really sure. I never had time to investigate. It was all we could do to keep them from taking the village. We had only a handful of fighters, and no one to spy. Because our village stayed so isolated, we had no allies. I guess we all hoped that we wouldn’t have any enemies that way.”

It sounded so stupid now, of course. They had been run over in that last battle...

-

**Whoosh!**

**Ryouko dodged another arrow, leaping over a hurt person. Enemy or comrade, Ryouko couldn’t tell- the bloodstains marred both clothing and face. There was nothing Ryouko could do for the dying man anyway. Not in the heat of a battle like this. Ryouko had made that mistake once. He had seen a hurt villager, and rushed over to help. In battle, you couldn’t do that. One person did not an army make, but one person DID an army break. Tiny as he was, Ryouko was needed.**

**The sound of whinnying horses spurred Ryouko to take up his own. Without exaggeration, the enemy numbered at least one hundred to their fifty. Not insurmountable odds, but pretty damn close. The constant attacks had taken their toll. Now Ryouko and his village knew what was going on- the small skirmishes they had fought before were just decoys to wear them down.**

**Ryouko’s horse (a small, gentle, black mare, typically unsuited for combat) whinnied with displeasure. A calming pat from it’s rider settled it down, though, and off they went.**

**“SHOW YOUR FANGS, LITTLE TIGER!” Kishootsu shouted gleefully. He disliked war, but he was proud of Ryouko. His small acts of courage had helped spur the village’s collective courage. If a ten year old boy could face an enemy without wavering, shouldn’t they ALL be able to do at least that?**

**Ryouko looked around, seeing that the village’s natural defenses were in place. Now to get them moving...**

**Being of some standing in this tiny army, Ryouko had two retainers. Both were of no more importance than him, but it was a small gesture that made Ryouko feel like an important young**

samurai, truly worthy of the two swords. The two retainers were helpful, though Ryouko kept them out of combat as much as possible.

“Kikou, Haruchika- climb the slope and push the rocks! I’ll buy you the time!”

Kikou was the older of the two boys, and was one of the only boys left who still wore a topknot. Fierce when provoked, he would do anything to help.

Haruchika was more reserved, and a strategist. He advised Ryouko while in combat, though he wasn’t an overly strong fighter. Haruchika had a sharp mind, and he put it to good use. In fact, at age thirteen, it was he who had found a way to make the natural defenses of the village stronger.

Ryouko bent the string of his bow back. He held his arrow steady while Kikou lit it on fire gleefully. The bow was small, to match Ryouko, and didn’t have much range, but it was perfect at fifty feet or so, and that was all Ryouko needed. TWANG!

The arrow sailed into the hay bales placed near the only entrance to the village. The bale caught of fire, and soon lit others on fire. The sudden flames sent the enemy’s horses into a panic. A few threw their riders- some into the flames. Ryouko grimaced, seeing the burning men panic, hearing them scream, then smelling their seared flesh. But that would be time for Kikou and Haruchika to get to the top of the valley. Even the two teenagers could remove the wedge holding back the boulders with ease. That left one last trap.

“Ryouko, I’ll give you the time! Get the water flowing!” Kishootsu called over, drawing his sword and hacking down one burning enemy on a suicide mission. Ryouko was all too eager to ride away from that. It took him only a few seconds to remove the plug from the pipe that was dug into the valley’s wall. Ordinarily, it helped regulate irrigation, but it could muddy up the valley’s entrance in a pinch. That would slow down horses, and keep the number of enemies in the village to a minimum. That evened the odds a little.

Ryouko turned in time to see Kikou and Haruchika both cut down with arrows. Haruchika died instantly, but Kikou had time enough to pull out his dirk and leap off the slope. He landed amongst the enemies and swung wildly, doing as much damage as he could before he was finally cut down. Ryouko grimaced, but there was nothing he could do for them now. Nothing except make sure their sacrifices weren’t in vain.

In Ryouko’s sash was a short sword. That one he kept sharp, for cutting fences and rope. He drew it now- if there was ever a time killing would be unavoidable, now was that time. He would avoid it as much as possible, but Ryouko would do what was necessary to protect his home.

Suddenly and violently, he was thrown from his horse. As it ran in panic, Ryouko saw an arrow sticking out of it’s back end.

*From behind?! How- Are they using ninja?! Damn dirty cowards!*

Ryouko ducked into a house, reaching into the fireplace to rub soot on his face. Night would fall soon, and Ryouko would have to face those ninja. Being so small had it’s advantages. Stealth



and speed were two of those advantages. The other would be a disadvantage to anyone but Ryouko. That was his strength- he hardly had the upper body strength to kill, even with a sharp weapon. That meant he could use almost as much force as he wanted without concern for killing.

***But using ninjas in a battle like this?! They couldn't win with strength or brains, so they had to cheat!***

--

It was clear to the three jonin that this child had seen far more than most his age. Even here, in a Shinobi village, most children had been protected from seeing war firsthand. But this one had been on the frontline of a hopeless battle, and he had lived to tell the tale.

"Do you hate ninja for what they did, Ryouko? It's understandable if you do..." Kakashi asked carefully, trying not to tear open any mental wounds.

Ryouko thought for a second before he answered. "...no. I can't hate anyone who was just doing what they were ordered to do. It wasn't anything personal by them. If you'll please excuse me, I just...need a few minutes to think...by your leave..." Ryouko stammered at the end, bowing and hastily leaving, forgetting all about the man with the sword sitting right at the table.

The jonin and the fat man exchanged glances. The 'sleeping' stranger lifted his hat and opened an eye.

"Do you think he's figured it out yet?" the stranger asked, sounding concerned but lazy at the same time.

"Yeah, he's figured it out alright. Should we go after him?" Asuma asked, looking over at Kakashi.

Kakashi shook his head. "No. He just learned the Leaf was responsible for his village's destruction. We might very well be enemies to him now. Let's give him time. If all else fails, Lord Hokage will explain everything. Ryouko doesn't know all the facts yet..."

--

Ryouko sat down by the river, leaning against a concrete block near an iron bridge. It was the bridge he had first fought on when he came here. Maybe that was why Ryouko chose this spot to meditate on his problem.

**I love this place...it's my home. But the people I like so much here destroyed my old home... Should I be angry at them? They just did what people do in war. But shouldn't I have some kind of grudge? Shouldn't I feel cheated, or something? I don't know what to feel. I don't understand all of this. Why was the Leaf Village involved to begin with? Why would they have bothered with our village? And just who is it they were helping, and why? There's not even anyone from our village I could ask...**

**I should hate this place, and everyone in it.**

...

**But I can't.**

**I need to know more. I need to know the whole story before I decide who's at fault. All the same, I'd better watch my back from now on. If they had a reason to fight my village, they had a reason to fight me. While I look for answers, I'd better also look for strength.**

## 10 - Truth

Ryouko could see it so clearly now...how had he not noticed before?!

**Because I didn't want to believe it...but it's plain as day now...**

Ryouko had wandered aimlessly for hours, sorting out this problem in his head. But the memories he had tried so hard to forget kept getting in the way.

-  
**(the headbands...that's right. The Leaf symbol...damn it. But all I knew then was that they were enemies...)**

Ryouko faced the three ninja. The rest of the village was engaged in combat. By an estimating glance, the village wouldn't hold for more than another hour, unless something was done quickly.

**"Is there any hope of asking you to leave peacefully?" Ryouko said hopefully. His hand twitched- was it nerves, or did he want to draw his sword so badly his body was nearly forcing him?**

Ryouko didn't expect a response, and he didn't get one. Instead, the ninja discussed him as though he weren't there.

**"A small boy like this? THIS is what's been wreaking havoc on the others? I can't believe they needed our help for such a small thing!"**

**"Not that it matters- we'll just be holding on to that blacksmith and-"**

**SMASH!**

Ryouko's sword smashed the one speaking in the mouth. **"Speak of him again! I dare you! Speak of my sensei again and I'll mount your head on my mantle!"** Eyes narrowed, jaw set, chest ragged with heavy breathing- that little comment snapped Ryouko into battle mode. This surprised even the season ninja. Instinctively, Ryouko knew that was his only chance- play on that surprise. So he kept attacking, driving the ninja back. A quick glance told Ryouko that he had a good territorial advantage. Just a few more steps...

Ryouko swung once more, then kicked against a wall of the valley. Rocks tumbled down from the top. As the ninja tried to get away, their legs sunk into the mud puddles Ryouko had created earlier (see last chapter). The rocks crushed the ninja's legs. Ryouko knew that he just had to break their hands, and the threat was over. He'd have no part in killing them. He WOULD, however, do what was necessary. A sword at one of the conscious one's throats, and Ryouko would get his answers.

**"Where is Kishootsu-sensei?! Tell me now or I kill you- all of you. I'll curse your family for seven**

generations- now speak!”

-

Ryouko's dazed wandering led him to Lord Hokage's mansion. He hadn't planned to wind up here, but apparently his will to learn the truth was stronger than his desire to sort things out at his own pace. To little Ryouko, it would mean the world to know why his tiny village had been such a target. There HAD to be a reason. Not that he hadn't considered it before, but now Ryouko wasn't fighting a war while pondering why the war was happening. His mind was much more clear, despite the newly added burden.

Ryouko felt his collar grabbed roughly. He struggled to maintain his calm, nearly failing, but managing to turn around to see who had him. It was a jonin he didn't know. He certainly wasn't a friendly fellow. Using his middle finger, he pushed his strange dark spectacles higher up on his nose.

“Please state your business with Lord Hokage. He is a busy man, and is currently with his two year old grandson, who I will be teaching and bringing to glory! I will not have you disturbing the honorable grandson!”

**Oh brother.** “I live up there,” Ryouko nodded with his head toward a room near the top floor. “My business with the Third isn't so urgent that I would trouble him now. So I'd just like to get in and get some rest. So, if you will please let go of my collar...”

“I don't believe you! You're lying! You're attempting on the honorable grandson's life!”

“...No, I'm not. But if I WAS, why would I do it when the most powerful man in the village is with him?”

“So you admit it!” Ebisu declared. Ryouko couldn't believe it. Was this guy serious? NO ONE could be this stupid and pompous! It was just incredible that someone had survived this long in a time of war.

**This one must have never seen the front lines of combat...** “No, I don't. I'm not out to take ANYONE'S life. If you'd like proof, I'll show you my sword...” Ryouko drew the blade out a little bit, showing that his blade wasn't sharp. Ebisu, however, leapt back.

“You impudent little...you drew a sword! On me! The teacher of the Hokages! A Special Jonin in charge of-”

“You're special alright,” Ryouko growled. “Just answer this: Am I getting a fight from you, despite the fact I've told you I don't want to fight? Is a fight what you're after?”

“Don't presume to challenge me! You don't know who you're dealing with!” Ebisu shot back, taking up the most ludicrous combat stance Ryouko had ever seen. It looked like two peace signs made with fingers, then crossed so that they were on opposite sides of Ebisu's head.

“Not knowing what I'm dealing with never stopped me from doing what needed to be done. You picked

a fight with me. Now either put up, or shut up. Either way, put me DOWN!”

On ‘DOWN!’, Ryouko kicked off Ebisu’s stomach, propelling himself into the air with a twisting leap to break the arrogant jonin’s grip. Ryouko landed and laid his sword down once he had taken it out of his belt.

“Please don’t take further offense, but I don’t turn my sword on allies...even stupid ones who pick fights to satisfy their own egos. I just want to go inside and ask the Third some questions, and get some rest. It’s been a long day for me, and my mood is REALLY slipping. So either move to fight, or move to let me by. Choose quickly, because I’m not waiting for you for very long.”

“Don’t make the mistake of threatening me, you arrogant little punk!” Ebisu snarled.

“Then don’t make the mistake of getting in my way! You’re making up problems as you go along. Now move aside, or I’ll forget we’re allies long enough to FORCE you out of my way...”

Ebisu snapped and attacked. Like so many others, he underestimated Ryouko. He led in with a reverse-hand punch.

“HYAH!” Ryouko barked, parrying Ebisu’s hand, smashing his own into Ebisu’s gut. His other hand followed up and cracked Ebisu on the chin. Shifting his weight, Ryouko threw Ebisu, sending him skidding through the dirt and grass outside the Hokage mansion all the way to the street. Apparently satisfied, Ryouko picked up his sword and put in his belt. He had made good on his promise to FORCE Ebisu out of the way after all. You could expect nothing less from a man of integrity.

--

Lord Hokage had never seen little Ryouko wear such an expression. It was one of the most heart-wrenching pain and confusion. The stoic boy TRIED to mask it, but it shone through like a beacon in the night. There was no trace of warrior on his face- only of shame and humility, worry and fear. What Lord Hokage didn’t know was what it was that Ryouko feared. All he could gather was that it was something so agonizing that it was wrenching at his very soul.

“Ryouko? Is something the matter?” Lord Hokage, being as understanding a man as there ever was, had to acknowledge the boy’s efforts to hide his pain.

Ryouko sniffled- yes, sniffled. A warrior NEVER sniffled, in Ryouko’s opinion. How little he knew of the world. There would be many times where it was okay to shed tears. No one could mask pain all the time. You had to share your sufferings with others. No one was truly a loner.

“Sir...why did the Leaf attack my village?”

It was a simple questions, and straightforward. All the same, Lord Hokage had trouble answering it. He had seen this coming, at least a little bit, and had meant to bring it up himself. But it never seemed to be the right time to speak of it. Ryouko was but a boy, and still fragile in psyche.

Lord Hokage breathed out, steadying himself. “Ryouko, there is no easy way to tell you this. Your village

was...I never imagined it would be so hard to say...but your village was subjugated by Orochimaru.

“Orochimaru? Sir, I only know the name, not the history. If you might enlighten me...”

Lord Hokage did- it was time for Ryouko to know. “Orochimaru was the most gifted ninja I’d ever seen, myself included. His talent came along once in several lifetimes. But, as you know, power doesn’t make a person ‘good’, or even ‘strong’. For his own reasons, Orochimaru began to seek the forbidden ambrosia- immortality. That caused him to leave the village, once I found out about the many crimes he had committed. In other words, Orochimaru is the embodiment of evil. His name is so forbidden most dare not even speak it. Now, your question...why your village? Orochimaru owned your leader. He commanded him at every turn. Your village is in close proximity to ours- we couldn’t allow Orochimaru to have it. So we had to decide: save the village, or destroy it? When we were met with such stiff resistance, we had no other alternative- we had to destroy the village.”

Ryouko sat in stunned silence for a few moments. Lord Hokage continued- this part would be even harder to speak.

“Do you know why you were so hated when you first came? Why so many came to oppose you, and why so many ignored your cries of innocence? It’s all here...” Lord Hokage reached inside his robes and handed Ryouko an envelope. Ryouko took it with a silent ‘thank you’, and opened it. His hands began to shake, and his face paled further.

He saw himself and Kishootsu. Wanted posters.

“You and your sensei drove our troops back again and again. No doubt you were both unaware that your village had been infiltrated. All the same, you and your sensei became known amongst us as ‘the Tiger’s Fang and the Heaven’s Temper’.”

Ryouko could remember suddenly. **Kishootsu-sensei...he always called me ‘little tiger’ and told me to ‘show my fangs’. And his name...Kishootsu... ‘temper’...his 50-inch ‘Sword of Heavens’... Niten Kanshaku Ryu (Two Heaven Temper Style)...Why didn’t I notice?**

Ryouko handed the picture back, his face paling even further. “I never knew...But it’s so clear now...But one thing I don’t understand...why would the Leaf try to execute sensei, and then hunt me? Why not just tell us and gain our favor?”

Lord Hokage seemed surprised. “Our messages never reached you? Or your sensei? No...no, of course not...they’d be intercepted by your leader...but executing? We don’t believe in that at all...are you certain that they were Leaf shinobi?”

Ryouko strained his memory, but couldn’t think at the moment. The headbands had been hidden in the dark, and he had only seen his sensei’s face at the time. And when he was running, there was no way he would look back and remember an enemy like that.

Rather than announce that he couldn’t remember, Ryouko bowed deeply to Lord Hokage.

“I never knew of the sins I have to atone for...all the people I’ve hurt...tell me...did anyone die because of me? Do not speak to ease my conscience...”

“No. You never killed one of us. You came close, but that’s a testament to your skill, really...”

Ryouko raised his eyes briefly, then looked down again. “...Then my sword serves this village and all who inhabit it, until I’ve made penance for what I’ve done. Knowingly or not, I obstructed the flow of justice I’d always idealized...it can’t be forgiven with words alone...”

Ryouko looked up, his eyes once again the warrior’s. “Let me help, Lord Hokage. My conscience will not be eased until a number is set...”

Lord Hokage sighed, but he knew there was no other way. Ryouko wouldn’t allow him to just ‘forgive’ his ‘sins’ like that.

“Very well.” Lord Hokage cleared his throat. “You will complete twenty-five missions; some ingrained with your daily activities. After that, you will be named a citizen, and all will be forgiven.”

--

Little Ryouko felt relieved- he knew a measure of the truth. That would allow him to sleep a little more soundly, perhaps. All the same, more tugged at him.

**I never knew I was an enemy of this village...it says so much about the inhabitants. They haven’t killed me. They must hate me so much...all the pain I’d caused their loved ones, both physically and mentally. I never knew...I just never knew. But I couldn’t have known. Regardless, a sin is a sin; a trespass a trespass. I’ve trespassed against these people. I will work to make them accept me. This one will no longer be their enemy. I swore to wield my sword for good, and I will. I believe the Leaf is mostly good.**

**Sensei...are you alive? This feeling I’ve had recently...could it be true? I always believe you indestructible...could you have survived that massacre? Well, the threads of fate have been spun- if it’s destined for us to meet once more, so we shall. For now, I’ll follow the path that I believe you would like me to follow. And I’ll help raise your child- there, at least, there can be no mistake of what you desire.**

Lost in his thoughts, Ryouko nearly missed a scene that bothered him to his core.

-

“You boys get lost! Make fun of her again and you’ll be answering to me!”

A young blonde girl was standing up, defending her pink-haired friend. Both girls were young, around eight years old. A group of boys their age were giving them a hard time about the pink-haired girl’s forehead, and the blonde’s irritating meddling.

“Get out of the way, Yamanaka! You’re too close if Haruno’s big forehead is hidden!”

That earned hearty laughed from the group. For Ryouko, listening from a distance, it earned a nasty

remembrance.

-

**Ryouko sat down, crying in the dirt. His face was scraped, and his nose bloodied. The four bullies standing there just laughed at the pitiful figure on the ground.**

**“Then stop us! You don’t like us telling you the truth about your ugly face? Then stop us! Come on!”**

-

Ryouko took off down the hill at top speed, zipping past the blonde girl and the pink-haired girl. Both girls looked up in shock as a boy a little older than them suddenly came to their defense.

“You’ll take it back right now, won’t you?”

Ryouko had picked up the head bully by his shirt and lifted him against a tree, smashing him hard into the trunk.

“I won’t ask again- you’ll apologize to those girls, won’t you? Or will I force you to eat the dirt at their feet until you do?”

The boy being held against the tree laughed. “You must be kidding, you skirt-wearin’ pansy! Lookit’ this, I’m supposed to be afraid of this sword-toting creampuff?!”

“I dislike being insulted, but someone with such pitiful intelligence...I consider the source before being insulted. You couldn’t wear a hakama- they’re for warriors. If anyone here should be wearing a dress, it should be you. And correct me if I’m wrong, but you seem AWFULLY close with your friends...” Ryouko didn’t like to throw insults, but short of using his fists or sword, this was the only way to crack bullies like this. But this one was defiant.

“You little piece of dog crap! You’re defending two ugly-@\$\$ girls? You MUST be stupid to get involved with us! We’ll insult whoever we like, including those girls and you!”

At that point, the others boys kicked dirt on Sakura. Ryouko flashed back to his own dirt-covered face. In a rage, he threw what was handy- the leader of the pack he had by the shirt. He took out all four boys in one throw. As they lay in a heap, Ryouko walked over and grabbed two by the collar. He hauled them over to the girl’s feet, then shoved them so they wound up bowing.

“Apologize to them- now.”

“We’re sorry!”

“Please forgive us!”



Ryouko let those two go. They ran for it, forgetting their two friends that remained. Not that they could have helped them. Ryouko picked them both up by the collars and dropped them by the girl's feet.

"Your turn. Say you're sorry, and you can walk away with whatever dignity remains..."

"I'm sorry!" one boy instantly begged. Ryouko let go of him, and he took off. But the other boy- the leader- remained defiant.

"Never. They're ugly ho's."

SMUSH!

Ryouko pushed his captive's face into the dirt at the shocked Sakura's feet. True to form, Ryouko kept his word- that boy ate dirt for a full ten seconds. Ino was delighted, and Sakura just starting to get her sense of humor back. When Ryouko let the boy up, he let him go after a short warning.

"Mess with them again, and you won't taste dirt- you'll taste blood."

The problem solved, Ryouko bent down. He wasn't yet sure about girls- he knew they were different, and acted different, but he didn't get the technicalities. Not that it mattered to him. He was ten, and a life was a life in his eyes. Currently filling his eyes in a literal sense were two large, green, tear-filled eyes.

"Are you alright, shojo-san?"

Ino suddenly spun around. **Shojo-san? Is he serious?! BWAHAHAHA! Come on! I could see 'ne-chan', or 'jo-chan', but shojo-san?! Who TALKS like that?!**

Sakura, meanwhile, was just trying to calm down to answer him.

**He seems like a nice boy. He's not scary now...**

"I'm fine, thank you. But you don't have to call me 'shojo-san'. My name is Sakura."

"And I'm Ino. And did you SERIOUSLY call her 'shojo-san'? You're one weird kid! What's your name?!"

Once again, Ryouko had to answer lamely. "Well, uh, my name isn't important..."

"Oh yeah? It seems like you're one of those 'manners' people. You're s'posed to give your own name when someone gives you their's. So speak up!"

Ryouko exhaled hard. **She's a handful, that one. Okay, so I just tell them my name is...** "It's Ryouko. So it's Sakura-dono and Ino-dono? I'm not used to calling people by their first names, I'm afraid..."

"-dono now? Lay of the respect a little, will you? You're our age, so I'm calling you Ryo-kun. And you

can call me Ino-san. And that,” Ino pointed at Sakura, “is Sakura-chan. See, I’m more important than her, so-”

Ryouko effectively stopped listening at that point. Instead, he stood up, offering a hand to Sakura. She took it, and he helped her to her feet.

“Take care now. It was nice to meet you both.”

--

RUROUNI RYOUKO?!

“Hmm?”

“Oh...”

Two swordsmen meeting were rare, to say the least. In this day and age, when swords were taboo to all but the government, meeting another with a sword meant one of two things- instant comradeship or instant bloodshed.

One swordsman was known throughout the land. His red hair, cross-shaped scar, and small physical appearance marked him as the legendary Hitokiri Battosai. Hitokiri Battosai was famous for bringing about the era of reform, the Meiji era, by being ruthless with a blade. These days, however, he was a rouni (wanderer) going by the name of Himura Kenshin. He also used a bizarre sword- Sakabato, or reverse blade sword. The sharp side of the sword was on the back section, and the dull side was where the blade should have been. It was a symbol of a promise- a promise not to kill.

The other swordsman was much younger than Kenshin. He was barely ten years old, with thick brown hair and inquisitive eyes. Like Kenshin, he dressed traditionally. Also like Kenshin, he didn’t use a traditional sword. Instead, he used an *lai-to*, or a training blade. It was a small sword, barely larger than a *wakazashi*, and had no sharp edge. This samurai couldn’t remember his name, and went by ‘Ryouko’.

BONK!

“Oro?!”

“Introduce us, Kenshin! Where are your manners?!” a black-haired girl, apparently acquainted pretty intimately with Kenshin (no honorific at all?), gave him a rap on the head, apparently as a punishment for bad manners.

“But Kaoru-dono, this one doesn’t know him...” Kenshin answered around a throbbing lump on his head.

“Hey, little miss, you’d better settle down,” a tall, brown-haired man said with a confident air. He looked like a typical tough guy.

“Yeah, seriously Kaoru! You freak about the smallest things! I don’t think this guy’ll take Kenshin away.” A smaller boy with wild black hair toting a shinai seemed to be unable to restrain himself.

Ryouko bowed to the group. “I’m known as Ryouko. I’m the last student of the Niten Kanshaku Ryu. It’s nice to meet you all. Might I ask your names?”

Before his question could be answered, Ryouko felt a hand on his shoulder.

“A violator of the sword-banning act? Hmm?”

Ryouko’s face paled. He had forgotten. Now he was caught!

## 11 - Beggars and Thieves

It was early morning in the Leaf Village. Ryouko liked this time best of all. There were fewer people around, so he could roam as he pleased. The soldier in him had to know the geography well, and the boy in him was curious. He was but ten, although he felt sure he would soon be eleven. What was the date anyway? Ryouko decided to ask at the next store where he knew a friendly merchant stayed.

“Good morning, honya-san!” Ryouko said brightly. (Honya means ‘bookstore’)

An older man greeted him. “Good morning, Ryouko! How can I help you today?”

“It may seem strange, but could I ask you the date? I’ve lost track in all the chaos, I have.”

The old man looked at a calendar on the wall. “We’re thirteen days into the second month of the new year.”

Ryouko’s face registered a copious amount of shock. “Oh...thank you very much.”

“Hmm? Is something wrong, Ryouko? It’s not like you to get depressed about the date or something! Is today of some importance? A birthday, maybe?”

Ryouko shook his head. “No, it’s nothing,” he said with a smile. “I just realized that I’ve been eleven for almost six months. With everything that’s been going on, I never had any idea that my birthday had come and gone already.”

The old man picked up his walking stick and walked around the counter. “Might I ask your birthday?”

“The twenty-fifth day of the eight month,” Ryouko responded.

“I see...well then, is there anything I might give you? You only turn eleven once m’boy!”

Ryouko prized a lot of the books in the store. By this question, he could have any one. But his mind was elsewhere. His request was much less about material gain, and more about paying a debt.

“If you have any need of something done, Honya-san. A chore, maybe? Something I might assist with? That’s really the present I could use the most.”

The old man was kind enough not to ask Ryouko for details. The troubled look that grazed the boy’s face for a few seconds was enough. If this was what the boy desired, then it was easy to grant it. Stroking his chin thoughtfully, the old man crafted an errand.

“Well, I do have one thing... You see, my wife is sick today. We live above the store, so I’m not far. I don’t want to leave her alone. So perhaps you might pick up lunch for the two of us?”

Ryouko bowed. "Certainly. Is there a place that you would like me to go to?"

"I would. An old friend of mine makes ramen, and he has one he swears by when it comes to colds. He runs a stand called 'Ichiraku'. Do you know the place?"

Ryouko nodded. "I've only seen it in passing, but I can find it."

The old man scribbled down his order on a piece of paper. He handed it to Ryouko, who promptly tucked it into his sleeve.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Thank you again, Honya-san!" Ryouko ran out the door, eager to complete his next task.

**Helping those two girls the other day earned me one good deed accomplished. That leaves twenty-four missions. This one will be one more. At this rate, I could have my debt paid by the end of the month! Then I may be able to live here in peace.**

-

"C'mon old man, one more bowl?!"

"No, Naruto. Now go home. I can't give you ramen for free every day!"

Ryouko walked in on the strange scene of a boy dressed in all orange on his hands and knees, begging for ramen. Ryouko froze just inside the door, another memory hitting him out of the blue. This one was even less fond than his other ones.

=

**Ryouko walked along the path, past the ruined homes. Those too old and too young to rebuild lived in their burnt-out shacks. It was times like these that made Ryouko give thanks that he was so fortunate. He had family, food, and money enough to not worry. He was like a little lord, though he was never one to flaunt it. As the sole student of the village's strongest, he was automatically entitled to some respect.**

**"Can you spare some Ryo?"**

**Ryouko felt a tug on his sleeve. On the ground were two children younger than himself. A boy and a girl so filthy that pigs would recoil if put near them. It took effort on Ryouko's part to not wrinkle his nose. The two children looked expectant- they clearly knew that Ryouko must be of some importance. His hakama and gi were clean; his face was free of the soot or mud that came with menial labor; his feet were covered with zori (straw) sandals and tabi socks. Certainly the kind of child who would sit atop a horse rather than walk alongside it.**

**Before Ryouko could answer the question, a woman- presumably the children's mother- rushed out and scooped them up.**

**“Don’t hurt them! They are only children! Please, m’lord, spare them!”**

**Ryouko wasn’t used to this kind of treatment. In surprise, he bowed in return.**

**“You needn’t worry. I was about to give in to their begging, that I was. Here!”**

**Ryouko handed them each some Ryo. He didn’t count the amount, but it was sizeable enough. All three of the beggars bowed and retreated to count their spoils. Ryouko smiled and started to leave, but his sandal broke and he needed to repair it. The beggars were sure he was out of earshot, apparently, because they said:**

**“What a fool the boy is!” the woman exclaimed. “Beggars and thieves are treated the same, so it matters not what he thinks! Certainly a fool!”**

**“Yes, he was. It was a good plan, using the children like that. What use are two beggar children but as bait for a foolish swordsman?”**

**“Yes, yes- now, hand over the money, you kids!”**

**SMACK!**

**Ryouko heard it- flesh meeting flesh. The children cried out. That was all it took for Ryouko to lose his temper. Forgetting his broken sandal, he kicked open the door.**

**“You’ll return that money to the children now. My wallet doesn’t open for thieves.”**

**Ryouko’s eyes had hardened. He saw the two children on the ground. The girl was older, and she was shielding the boy. Were they perhaps brother and sister?**

**Click!**

**The man opened his knife with a flick of his wrist. He slashed at Ryouko’s chest. The knife bit into his flesh, though not deeply as the knife was old and of poor quality. That hurt, but Ryouko’s mind was on the children. His sword was out in a flash. He had no inhibitions of cutting down the man. The man would live, Ryouko knew, as his sword cut across the thief’s arms and chest. The knife clattered to the floor where it was retrieved by Ryouko. He turned his sword on the woman.**

**“You can give me the money. You’ll have no need of it in jail!”**

**Suddenly the woman couldn’t bow and apologize enough. She even told Ryouko, as he took the money from her palm:**

**“You are a kind boy; kinder than the other swordsman. May your kindness serve you well!”**

**“My kindness rarely extends to thieves. You’re still under arrest,” he snarled, keeping his sword pointed at the woman. He turned away, back toward the children. The girl wasn’t sure what to think of Ryouko, so she put her arms out in front of her brother. Ryouko smiled at the bond they**

shared.

**“Here,” Ryouko said, holding the ryo out to the girl. “For you and your brother. If you’ll come with me, maybe I can find you a home, and a family. So you won’t have to serve scum again. And you, the boy!”**

**The boy recoiled in fear. He was clearly worried about swordsman. Ryouko simply shrugged off his gi top.**

**“Take it. A child shouldn’t run around in the elements nearly naked. Colds are frequent any time of the year.”**

**The boy took the thick gi top and put it on. Ryouko nodded to the woman. “You walk in the front. If you run, I won’t chase you, but our village is small- we will meet again, and you’ll find that age will have shrunk my kindness toward you.”**

===

Ryouko snapped out of his trance, and his hand instantly went to the pocket inside his gi. He extracted his wallet and dropped money down to the orange-clad ninja.

“Eat. Young legs need to grow strong, and sitting like a beggar will hardly do!”

Ryouko bowed to the ramen maker, handing over his list. Teuchi took it, looked it over, and smiled.

“You’ve made a friend for life, there. Once you feed Naruto, he’ll keep coming back,” Teuchi intoned. He handed Naruto a bowl. Ryouko couldn’t believe how fast the contents of the bowl vanished.

“I don’t often frequent this part of town. I’m not very popular, and the apartments are close,” Ryouko mumbled, hoping Teuchi wouldn’t take those words as an insult. He needn’t have worried.

“I’ve heard your story, Ryouko. You’re hardly the terror I’d imagined! Ha ha! It’s funny, though, to think a samurai is living among the ninja. I’ve heard of your skills. Very impressive for a ten year old.”

Ryouko bowed in thanks. As he did, a robber came by.

“The money, pops- NOW!”

Naruto leapt behind the counter, hiding behind Teuchi’s apron. He was only seven at this time, and hadn’t yet been to the academy. He was as helpless as any seven year old. Teuchi immediately counted out the money.

“Here, just take it. Don’t hurt the boys.”

But bad timing fell on Teuchi- his daughter, the beautiful Ayame, age fourteen, returned with ingredients. The robber had found something he liked.

“Fine, pops, I won’t hurt the boys. But the girl- she comes with me! Come here, sweetheart!”

Ayame was still young, but she knew trouble when she saw it. She backed away. As she did, Ryouko slid into her gaze. He nodded his head toward the back door. She understood. When he had moved outside, she ran for the door. The robber, alarmed that she might live to be a witness, gave chase.

“That little samurai ran! The coward!” Teuchi fumed. He didn’t know what he expected of such a young child, but certainly no citizen of the Leaf would run!

-

Ayame ran out the back door. She found the small samurai lying in wait.

“Run, please! He’ll get you, too!” she told Ryouko. But Ryouko shook his head.

“Please stay behind me. This samurai won’t allow you to get hurt.”

Ryouko gave her a gentle push behind some garbage cans. He stepped out, hands on his sword. The robber ran out.

“You?! Where’s the girl?! Tell me or I’ll kill all of you!”

Ryouko’s face had set into the warrior version of himself. His hand was on the hilt of his sword. When the robber received no answer, he charged with his kunai raised high. Ryouko braced himself, then drew his sword. But to his surprise, the ninja disappeared. That was only for a second. The next second, Ryouko was hit hard in the back, and knocked to the ground. When he turned around, the robber had Ayame. Ryouko had been beaten. He bowed his head in defeat.

“What will it take for you to release the girl? Name your price. Anything will be given to help her.”

The robber burst out laughing at Ryouko’s speech. “Tough little punk, huh? Alright, I’ll tell you what: you tell the old man that if he pays three thousand ryo a month to me, I’ll protect his girl. Oh, and I get to marry her.”

Ryouko looked for an opening. He was close to the robber- too close for his sword to be effective. But he could grab his knife hand. The question was: Could he do it before Ayame was hurt? Ryouko dropped his sword and pulled out his wallet. He walked slowly to the robber, holding the wallet in front of him.

“Here. I want to help the old man, too. I’ll see your promises fulfilled, but please let me speak to the girl. She was to be my wife when I came of age. She was promised to me when I was very, very young...” Ryouko kept his face straight and full of remorse as he continued his lie.

“She means a lot to me. I’ll offer myself in her place. There’s a large reward on my head. You can have it, if I might be allowed to say goodbye to my fiancé.”

The robber chuckled. “How cute. Look at you, the perfect little husband! Well, fine. You can’t hurt me without your sword, and that bounty IS worth a lot...here!”



He shoved Ayame at Ryouko. Ryouko caught her and opened his arms up, as though asking for a hug. Ayame knew that this swordsman was clever, so she played along.

“Run inside, and tell your father to grab his cooking oil. It will be hot enough to burn the robber. Leave the fight to me.”

Ayame did. She turned at the door, knowing that he didn't have a chance without his sword. The robber leered in her direction. But that gave Ryouko the opening he needed.

CHACHINK!

Hit wallet, full of heavy coins, met the robber's groin. That occupied one hand while Ryouko's other hand grabbed the weapon. Spinning into the robber with his shoulder, Ryouko yanked his arm the opposite way. That didn't quite break it, so Ryouko finished the job by driving his tiny elbow into the opponent's wrist.

“RUN! GET THE POLICE!” Ryouko shouted, his fist smashing the robber's nose. Ayame nodded and herded her father and Naruto away.

Ryouko dove for his sword, grabbing it and rolling away. A knife plunged into his right arm- his sword arm. The sword fell from his grasp again. This time, though, Ryouko's left hand had his sword's case at the ready.

SMACK!

The robber was blindsided by the case. The case met his arm- the one Ryouko hadn't broken- and sent the knife clattering away. That wasn't enough- Ryouko smashed his fingers.

“No handsigns, thinks this 'little punk'. No quick escapes for you. In your state, it would take only one hand to finish you. Be thankful that the years haven't dulled my kindness.”

The robber had no idea what Ryouko was talking about, but it didn't matter. He had been beaten by a boy who did not yet shave.

-

The police escorted Ryouko back to the bookstore- two hours too late for lunch. Ryouko bowed as low as he could while remaining upright.

“I'm very sorry! There was a...problem.”

Fugaku Uchiha grabbed Ryouko's collar. “Straighten up, boy! You're embarrassing yourself! You defeat that robber, then you act humble? Be proud of your power!”

Itachi chuckled mildly. “That's Father's way of saying that he's taken a liking to you.”

Ryouko delivered the ramen, apologizing again. He sat with the old man and his wife after the police left. Teuchi soon came, with Ayame in tow.

“You’ve heard the story by now, I’m sure, Kyouko-san,” Teuchi said, winking at Ayame. “It seems my daughter has a new suitor.”

Ryouko was sipping his tea and only mildly listening. Until he felt Ayame kneel next to him.

“Thanks. I owe you one,” she whispered, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Ryouko tried to act unconcerned. His thoughts were different, of course. Especially since the girl was only three years his senior.

“I don’t like to see females get bullied. My sword is to protect, anyway. Sorry that jerk got a hold of you.”

**A kiss? Why is my face so red? And this feeling? It’s awkward... I’ve been kissed before, but never by someone close to my own age. It’s kind of...pleasant. What makes females so different?**

Ayame laughed. “You know, my father took your lie seriously, I think.”

Ryouko hadn’t thought about that. “Which part of my lie?”

“Well, actually, I think he fancies you as a son-in-law.”

Ryouko leapt up. “Marriage? Me? But I’m only eleven!” he sputtered. The others were in on the joke, and they laughed.

It would take Ryouko quite a while to calm down from that practical joke. He had never thought about females like that. They weren’t objects, he knew, but they didn’t seem quite human either. That was youthful ignorance, Ryouko knew. Somehow, marriage didn’t seem like a reality for him.

**What is it about females that make my face redden? It’s almost like...embarrassment. I must be shy. Hope I’ll grow out of it, that I do.**

-

RUROUNI RYOUKO?! Part 2

“Hey, let him go Saito! He’s a friend of ours!”

Kaoru immediately rushed to Ryouko’s defense against Saito Hajime, nee’ Fujita Goro the policeman.

“Why should I listen to the girl with the badger face?” Saito asked mildly, puffing away on his cigarette. Kaoru rushed him and smacked him a couple times before Kenshin and Sanosuke restrained her.

“This one thinks it unwise to fight with the police, Kaoru-dono,” Kenshin said.

“Hey, Ryouko, is there a problem?”

Sasuke Uchiha was walking by at that moment. He and Ryouko got along pretty well.

“There’s no problem here, Sasuke. I...huh!”

Ryouko looked back and forth between Sasuke and Sanosuke.

**Huh...Duck butt head (Sasuke) and Bird head (Sanosuke?) With their headbands on, they look really similar. Is that a good thing?**

“Sorry for the trouble. Saito tends to rub people the wrong way. Why not stop by our dojo for some tea, as an apology?”

Ryouko was happy to take the invitation. Kenshin and Sanosuke were both warriors. Kenshin wore a sword, the same as he did.

“Might I ask you for a match, Kenshin-san?” Ryouko asked, walking along with the group. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen another with a sword.”

“This one doesn’t take duels, but the students of the Kamiya Kasshin-Ryu dojo would take you on, this one thinks,” Kenshin said by way of reply. “The first student, Myojin Yahiko, could use a new opponent.”

Ryouko shrugged. “That’s okay with me. Does he fight with a real sword? My sword is real enough, but...well, I can trust you, I’m certain.” Ryouko handed his sword to Kenshin. “Take a look.”

Kenshin slid the sword out. “Oro?”

Kaoru pushed him out of the way and grabbed the sword. “Oh, a training blade?! Wow! Kenshin, it’s like your Sakabato! Do you also have a vow not to kill, Ryouko-kun?”

“Ryouko’s fine. And yes, I do. I was in a war, and saw too many lives taken. So I refuse to kill, at least until I’m forced to. I know it’s odd, but...”

“Less odd than you’d think,” Sanosuke commenting, glancing at Kenshin.

## 12 - Women?!

Ryouko sat himself down in a shady spot under a tree, his sword nestled in the crook of his arm. It was just past noon, and business in the village was really picking up for the day. Yesterday's events were still in Ryouko's mind, rattling around.

**I can't pretend that I wasn't scared. For the first time, my techniques nearly failed me. Was I just caught off-guard, or is it because my strength isn't enough anymore? War is not a children's game, and should not be treated as such. But on the other hand, to get stronger, I need to find a new sensei. Is that an insult to Kishootsu-sensei's memory? No. He'd want me to grow and get stronger. But Shinobi techniques? Those who he hated above all? But he didn't know them as I do...**

Ryouko was an independent eleven year old who didn't interact with others often. He had no one to bounce this idea off of. No one his own age, and though he was more comfortable with adults, he didn't know any well enough to ask, besides the Hokage.

**An invitation was already extended to me, to train whenever I was ready. If I have such doubts, I must not be ready. I'm going to rely on my own strength a little longer.**

"Hey now, is that any way to use your youthful energy?!"

Ryouko glanced up, seeing a green-clad ninja who seemed to be jumping for joy. It took him a minute to notice it was only a pose. Still, it was a strange greeting. Ryouko hadn't yet begun to understand that shinobi were people, too. They had their own pleasures, their own likes and dislikes. To Ryouko, they were a new ally that he didn't fully understand.

"Youthful energy?" Ryouko asked, tilting his head in question.

"That's right! Spending the day brooding is no way to live! You should live each day to the fullest! Oh, where are my manners! Might Gai here, and you are..."

**Damn, I still don't know my name...** "Ryouko."

"Ryouko, eh? As in the samurai, of course! Let me tell you, you've got to be more vigilant. Some haven't heard there isn't a price on your head anymore. Watch yourself. And if you get in a jam, remember my name!"

And Gai was off, not even waiting for Ryouko to respond. While he was certain it was good advice, Ryouko wasn't the type to be overflowing with this 'youthful energy' stuff. It just wasn't his style.

**So what was I thinking about? Oh yeah... In four years, I'll be a man\*. But Kishootsu-sensei left out so much. How do I embrace this? I know a sword and a name are bestowed, but in a shinobi**

**village I don't expect that. I'd settle for remembering the name I have now.**

(\* - Samurai came of age at 15)

Pulling himself up, Ryouko decided to take a walk along the river. The cherry blossoms weren't blooming yet, so the stroll wouldn't be completely beautiful, but close enough. Ryouko was eleven- he couldn't yet appreciate beauty, a fact he was aptly aware of.

As he walked along, Ryouko saw a lot of female ninja. There was one girl with short, black hair and giant white eyes that caught his attention. Something about that girl made Ryouko think back.

-

**"I suppose you're too young to consider female beauty. But someday, you'll understand why the charms of a female can be both the greatest blessing and the greatest curse to a man."**

Ryouko heard Kishootsu-sensei, but hoping to understand females wasn't going to happen. It's not that Ryouko was insensitive, it was that he knew war. And in war, females were sometimes impractical.

***More concerned with their clothing and hair than weapons and battle. Shinano's daughter, for example. She thinks only of boys and never about her training! And she cries so often! How do females survive war?!***

Kishootsu laughed good-naturedly at the thoughtful look on Ryouko's face. "You have doubts. It's natural for one so young. But when you meet the right female, even your stoicism and doubts will melt as the snow in spring. You'll find that one girl that you will trust above all else."

"I will never love an impractical girl!" Ryouko declared, certain of his words. "If I must love a girl, she will be strong and brave!"

Kishootsu nodded in agreement. "For you, that is best. It's your nature to think that way. Listen to me, Ryouko- Your life will be about battles. Even outside of war, do not think for a moment that the bloodshed will just stop. Once the war is won or lost, there will continue to be violence. Your sword must be a champion of your beliefs. Just what is justice to you?"

Ryouko answered instantly. "Our village free and peaceful."

Kishootsu shook his head. "No, that's the village's justice. Your personal feeling of justice will change and grow, as will you. Can you understand why I asked you such a perplexing question?"

"No."

"It's because I need you to think clearly. Someday, you will surpass me. Your potential is great. And someday, no doubt, your life will settle into something like mine. A wife, a child or two, and your sword. That, and your beliefs. My point is this- do not dismiss the female as 'useless' or 'impractical'. As you and I think differently, so will you and a girl. But there may be one. A

**'light' to your 'dark'. You're a brooding child. A female was my ray of light. Do you believe my wife to be impractical?"**

**Ryouko hesitated- he DID think so. But saying so might be offensive. Thankfully, Kishootsu answered for him.**

**"Of course you do! No one expects you to grow up so fast mentally as war has forced you to physically. But consider this- she saved my life. She took up a spear and fought an enemy that was physically stronger than her. But her thinking as a female- they are natural strategists. They will think twice before parting with anything, and then think again if it's a life. And, of course, the bravery required to deliver a child..."**

**"But they get fat when they are pregnant! It doesn't look difficult, having men cater to their every whim as they carry a child in their belly!"**

**Kishootsu couldn't help but roar with laughter at the ridiculously youthfully ignorant notion Ryouko had just spouted.**

**"I have never experienced labor, but my wife, who didn't shed a tear when she was cut from neck to navel with a sword... Suffice it to say that this pain was worth several sword wounds..."**

-

**Later the same day, Ryouko saw a young girl, crying on the ground. Ryouko's nature took over.**

**"Is everything alright?" he asked. The girl shook her head vigorously.**

**"My kimono is dirty!"**

**Ryouko kept walking, unable to help with that problem.**

***To think that I may one day love one of these impractical things! I understand that males and females mate, but how they're attracted to each other... It must be only a desperate man who falls in love!***

--

***I think differently now. I haven't grown so much, but I at least understand why humans breed. It felt...pleasant, having a female's attention.***

**At that moment, the girl Ryouko had seen before came skidding to his feet. Blood dribbled out of her mouth as she tried to get up. Ryouko immediately helped her, wondering what had just happened. He didn't have to wonder for long. The cause of the problem was standing right next to them in an open yard.**

**It was a boy about Hinata's age. He had long, brown hair and the same piercing white eyes she did. But unlike the girl, he held no trace of gentleness. Ryouko could even feel it- battle energy. From every pore of his body, this boy hated this girl.**

“Enough! Someone has interfered! Neji, back off. Hinata, you lazy girl! Get up!”

What seemed like an older version of Neji was barking out orders in a voice that was clearly used to being obeyed. Ryouko didn't have any reason to obey it, so he continued helping the girl to her feet. A well-placed rock smacked him painfully in the hand. Ryouko let go, but managed to catch Hinata with the other hand.

“The match is yours. Don't harm the girl further.” Ryouko decided that if that big guy could speak in such an imperial tone, he could, too.

“You have no jurisdiction here. If it is her fate to die, then she will die. It's not my concern.” This time, the boy was speaking. He had an irritating, know-it-all voice. “Unless you'd rather be my training partner for today, and try to spare her life?”

Ryouko picked Hinata up in a fireman's carry and walked toward the man. He put Hinata gently at his feet.

“You seem to be in charge here. If you have no objections, then I will involve myself.”

Hinata's father shrugged. “If you have a death wish. Neji won't hold back on you.”

“Nor I on him. I'm curious to see what skills belong to that overbearing overconfidence,” Ryouko shot back, sending the message that he wouldn't allow himself to be bullied. It seemed that the man in the white robe approved of that attitude, for he picked Hinata up and handed her off to a woman, presumably a wife or servant.

Neji sized up his opponent. “You're small for your age. Are the wanted posters correct? Are you really eleven?”

Ryouko nodded. “I am. Although, it's customary to give only names before a duel, not share life history. Be sure to offer me the same kindness you offered that girl.”

The last bit of sarcasm rang in Neji's ears.

“She's my cousin, Hinata. At least address a member of the Hyuuga clan properly!”

“That tells me who she is, but not who YOU are.”

“I am Neji Hyuuga. And your fate was sealed the moment you chose to oppose me.”

“I see...” Ryouko tucked his sword into his belt, stepping off the wooden porch and onto the grass. “Then it's Hinata-dono and Neji-chan, right?”

Neji growled angrily. “-chan? I'm a boy, and I'm too old to be called -chan!”

“I apologize. From here, I couldn't tell your gender.”

Ryouko didn't resort to verbal barbs often, but found they could have a good effect when used properly.

The 'art of the insult' was one he had learned by himself. Kishootsu-sensei had a naturally imposing presence and had no need to fling mud. Ryouko was small and wiry, so he took any advantage he could get.

"Are you nuts?!"

CRASH!

Ryouko had been tackled by a familiar figure.

"Sasuke?"

Sasuke got off Ryouko, glaring at Sasuke. "Listen, I know how he is. But don't get roped in by him! He's one of the Leaf's elite clans, just below the Uchiha! You can't win against him!"

Ryouko got to his feet and brushed himself off. "Well, I've promised a duel already, I have. I'll just have to take my chances."

Sasuke 'tsked' his disapproval, but knew that there was no going back. "Fine. Listen, Neji- if you kill him, you're gonna answer to me!"

Neji laughed off the threat. "You don't scare me anymore than he does! Stay out of this, Sasuke. He butted in on my duel with Hinata, and he's going to pay for it! I shouldn't need to kill him- he'll run away with his tail between his legs long before that! BYAKUGAN!"

"?! Byakugan? Or did he say bakugan? He's gonna bomb me?" Ryouko wasn't sure he had heard that right.

"Byakugan," Sasuke informed him. "It's a doujutsu, or optical technique. He has enhanced vision, nearly all the way around his body! I've heard that the Hyuga clan can use the Byakugan to do incredible things, but I've never seen it..."

"OOF!"

Ryouko was belted in the stomach, blood spurting from his mouth, as Neji seemed to slap him across the stomach. But no slap ever hurt that much...

"I haven't mastered our clan's attacks yet, but against you, this is enough!"

Ryouko drew his sword, but missed terribly. Neji was already across the yard.

"Too slow! Hahhh!"

It was all Ryouko could do to block the barrage of attacks that Neji threw at him. Block and dodge, dodge and block.

**He's fast!**



There was no opening for attack at all. Ryouko did his best to create one by knocking Neji's hand away then stepping to the inside, but Neji's other hand would instantly smack him again. Each time he got hit, Ryouko felt something inside his body go 'pop'. He was slowing down, too.

"Damn it! He's closing your tenketsu!" Sasuke shouted.

"My what?!" Ryouko shouted back, taking another useless swipe at Neji.

"Your chakra! Don't you know that?!"

"No! I don't use chakra in my attacks!" Ryouko replied, managing to push Neji back a little.

"Yes, you do! Even if you don't know it! Chakra is life energy! He's sealing off your very existence!"

**Damn it! How do I stop him?!** Ryouko's frustrated mind kicked him back to another time.

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**On the battlefield, a wound in his leg, Ryouko couldn't go anywhere. It was his last stand, it seemed. The enemy was stronger than him. There was no chance for victory. Or was there?**

**The enemy was so confident- too confident. His attacks slowed down as he savored each one. The sound of Ryouko's cracking ribs was music to his ears. The sight of Ryouko's bloody and bruised body made him laugh with glee. This was the most malicious man Ryouko had faced yet. As he lay bloodied and beaten on the ground, the enemy walked (or rather, strutted) over. He bent down and picked Ryouko up, staring into his hazy eyes.**

**"Know why you lost, kid? You just aren't good enough!"**

**Ryouko's eyes narrowed. He stabbed his sword into his opponent's groin and twisted violently.**

**"Know why you lost?" Ryouko snarled, stepping on the body part he had just cut off, crushing both hope and pride with one sandal. "You're just too cocky."**

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Ryouko kept up the most superficial guard he could. Inside him, a smile was bubbling up through the stoic frown.

**Thank you for the idea. I can't repeat that stunt, but I can apply the same principles...**